

## -Chapter 2-

### ClearEdge

The second best feeling in the world is waking up on a Sunday morning with nothing to do. The only problem: today, I had papers to rifle through. And there was no better day than today to snoop through father's office because today was my parent's anniversary and they were going to spend the day romancing in Portland. What anniversary year, you ask? Don't know, don't honestly care.

As I groggily dragged myself from my slumber, I took a serious look in the proverbial mirror and asked myself if I was really going to go through with my plan. I was a moral kid. I was the goody-goody two-shoes in school. I was not the type to go through my parents' personal belongings, specifically father's office!

But now I had a mystery on my hands. I was a scientist at heart! It would go against my own personal morals not to see this through! At least, that's how my brain reasoned the situation to itself.

Steeling myself, I crept through the house towards father's office. Which, I mentally face-palmed, was completely unnecessary as no one was home. Nevertheless, I reminded myself that it was essential to stay at the top of your game when it came to sneaking about. This was good practice.

With cat-like stealth I reached the door to the office and gently nudged it open a hair. While there were far fewer piles haphazardly stacked around the room, evidence of a catastrophic day of cleaning was still clearly left behind. The desk had been cleared, at least, exposing its barren surface to the rest of the room. Grabbing a random stack from the organized shelves, I sat at the desk and cracked open the first report.

And the second.

And the fourth.

And the twenty-seventh.

And before I knew it, the sky was once again turning pink. My eyes were blurring from the nonsensical and mind-numbingly boring pages of text. I had a new appreciation for father and scientists everywhere; surely no man without a sense of duty and infinite patience could stand to write and read

through all of this work!

I turned around and looked out the window. The sun had slinked behind the horizon faster than I had realized; only a sliver continued to cast shadows across the world. The enormous oak trees in the backyard projected fearsome shapes onto the ground, steadily reaching towards the house like hungry and flat amorphous blobs. A pair of birds swooped through the air, their majestic song and dance resounding out through the yard. All of this I noticed in about three seconds, as that is when I heard the garage door open with a mechanical grind that echoed throughout the house.

Quickly, I re-organized the pages as well as I could back onto the shelves and attempted to remove all trace of my ever being in the room. Confident that I had eliminated the trace of Morgan from the office, I slinked back into the hall, quietly shut the door, and made my way downstairs.

By the time I had arrived in the kitchen, my mom was already working on dinner. The aroma of fresh garlic bread wafted from the oven, momentarily dizzying me as it accompanied the powerful scent of hot spaghetti. Ah, my favorite dinner dish!

"Oh, Morgan, sweetie! How was your day?" my mother's honey-sweet voice rang out through the kitchen. I resisted the urge to tell her "uneventful", as that would warrant me a stern lecture on utilizing my time well. Instead, I settled for the default response:

"Y'know, I did stuff. Stayed busy. Didn't burn anything down."

This elicited a warm smile from my mother. "Well that's good! Your father and I had an absolutely wonderful time! We went to the Keller Auditorium and saw the most dazzling musical! It was called...ah...well, I don't exactly remember the name. But that just shows how dazzling it was, right? And we had lunch at The Old Spaghetti Factory, and we loved it so much that we decided to have homemade spaghetti for dinner! Isn't that nice?"

If there was one word to describe my mom, it would probably be eccentric. And sadly, this was her on a *good* day. As I helped her prepare the meal and set the table, I nodded as she explained every little detail and event of the day. My vision was growing blurred again, so in a moment of silence from her I seized the opportunity to change the subject.

"Hey mom, what do you know about the meteorite that hit a little ways from here?" I tried my best to keep my voice sounding nonchalant.

She frowned and gave me a sidelong glance. "That's sort of an out of nowhere question. Why do you ask?"

I shrugged. "School project."

"Oh, good," She began. "Nice to see you taking initiative on your studies!"

*Like I didn't do that already?*

"Anyway, it was about thirteen years ago...astronomers said the meteor would break apart to dust long before it reached the ground, but apparently they were wrong, huh? It broke up into three sizeable pieces and crashed into the forest. Killed a lot of wildlife and foliage," She said sullenly before perking up immediately. "But it was certainly a good opportunity for those eggheads to examine a large piece of space rock close up!"

I silently gulped. "Three pieces, you say?" She nodded in affirmation. "You're sure?" Another nod. "Did father ever do anything with the meteorite? Like, did he go out there, or work with it at all?"

Her smile flipped into a frown again. "Morgan, if you need an expert we can call Dr. Kaser; he worked with NASA and-"

I waved my hand dismissively through the garlic-scented air. "No, no, I was just wondering if father had a connection to the meteorite at all. At *all*."

Mom stood in contemplation for a moment, then grabbed the pan of spaghetti and made her way out to the dining room, calling over her shoulder, "Why don't you just ask him yourself?"

I inwardly grimaced. While father was a benevolent person at heart, he and I did not always agree, especially when it came to my studies. Father never believed that I was dedicated to anything that would set me on the path to a wealthy future - he was all about the money, it seemed. To put it simply, if the subject of my future came up in conversation, father took control. It created serious pressure on our relationship, but what could I do? I was just his son.

Within minutes of my mom setting up the dinner table, the family was seated and enjoying the meal. My mom and father were both talking animatedly about their day, seemingly forgetting that I had

already heard this speech only moments ago. It wasn't long, however, before my mom brought my question up for me.

"Alexander, Morgan here was asking about the crash site in the forest. You know, the one from a couple years back? He said it was for his school project."

Father daintily dabbed at the corners of his mouth with a napkin before clasping his hands and looking my way. "What kind of school project? Do you need to write a paper?"

That statement was too calm and not-obsessively controlling to encompass all father had to say on the subject; it looked like I needed to wait for the other shoe to drop. In the meantime, I chased a meatball around my plate idly. "No, I just have to explain it to the class or something."

With a sigh, father massaged the bridge of his nose and said with exasperation, "Son, if I've told you once I've told you a hundred times: you simply *must* focus on your studies! If you slack off, you won't get into Oregon State University, and-"

And there was the other shoe. "I'll live a homeless, jobless life alone and unloved. Yeah, I know." I finished for him dryly. Perhaps too dryly.

Father huffed and jabbed a finger at me. "Do you ever stop and think that the choices you make are going to affect the rest of your life? *And* the lives of those around you?"

"Yeah," my mom interjected. "You need to get a good job so you can buy me that cabin in the woods!" She laughed uneasily, attempting to diffuse the situation. It didn't work.

"And another thing -- don't be a smug little smartass with me! I'm your father and I know what's best for you!" Father continued to berate me in that tone of superiority all parents seemingly possess. "When you finish dinner, you're to go to your room and finish all of your work for the next school week. Do I make myself clear?" His gaze dared defiance from my end, and I rashly decided to lock horns with him.

"You know what, dad? I'm tired of you trying to control my life! Maybe I don't want to go to Oregon State! Maybe I don't want to grow up and be a scientist like you! Maybe I-"

"Oh?" He barked out a laugh. "And what do you want to do with your life, then?"

I hesitated in my response, searching for a satisfactory answer.

“Exactly. You don’t know what you want to do. You’re a kid, Morgan, and so long as you act like one you will always need someone there to baby you along! That’s why you *will* go to Oregon State, you *will* get a PhD in some science, and you *will* have a successful life and *that is final!*” With those final roared words, father stood up in his seat, turned on his heel and walked out the front door.

My mom and I sat in silence for a few moments, broken when she muttered “I still want a cabin...” And despite that un-humorous comment and the strained relationship with father never more evident than now, I laughed.

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Later that night, I lay in bed and struggled to find sleep. Whether it was the anxiety from lack of answers regarding the meteorite or the problematic father/son relationship I was participant in, I cannot say. Both issues struggled for dominance in my conscious, and it led to a fitful pathway to sleep.

In an effort to alleviate my suffering, I prepared a mental plan regarding how to deal with both predicaments. Having a plan always comforted me. First, of course, came the matter of the craters: a simple problem to solve. I would sneak into the study one last time and find the document containing my answers. The answers were almost within my grasp; the stars were aligning in my favor. That, or Cthulhu was rising from the depths. Second came father, an issue I had contended with for years.

To put it simply, he didn’t care about me. Yeah, I know that our “amiable” conversations in the study the other day created the illusion of a healthy father-son relationship, but that was a good day for both of us: he wasn’t a dictator, and I wasn’t a rebel; he wasn’t cross, and I wasn’t sarcastic. For that brief moment, we were two members of the same family. More often than not, we were disagreeing roommates.

I put the thoughts of father out of my head with an exasperated huff. Now, the document. The craters. A mystery, a mystery, the answers choked under a sea of pulp and ink. At the crash site, there were three craters. The papers said four. The hyperactive worm was another question altogether. But somewhere in that study was my next lead.

Somehow, with crazed invertebrates and taunting questions racing through my mind, I blissfully found sleep. I dreamed of glowing meteorites sailing across a steel-gray sky.

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It was four days of stealthy searching through the study later that I finally found an answer. The chemicals found in the fourth crater had indeed gone through the DoE, but were then transferred to a power company in Hillsboro called ClearEdge. I decided that the stars were, indeed, aligned correctly: father was an acting consultant at ClearEdge for the next month. And *nothing* would make overly-controlling-of-my-life father happier than to take his son to work with him and show his own child the family trade first-hand.

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Saturday had arrived: the day father and I had agreed upon to tour the ClearEdge facility. Only a week had passed since my initial curiosity of the craters had led me on this wild goose chase, and I firmly believed that my suspicions would come to rest after a little exploring around the premises of ClearEdge.

If I had known it would be months before I would see my house again, I would have looked upon it with more fondness as father and I drove away. I turned my head and watched as the house grew murky through the downpour assaulting the car windows before it disappeared altogether. No place like home.

Before long we had arrived at the glass double-doors of the ClearEdge main building. The only feature of the building was that it was made of gray stone and it was very large; every other detail was hidden to me by a sheet of rain. Father and I rushed inside and shook off the raindrops still clinging to our coats. Inside, the building was opulent: marble flooring, velvet-cushion chairs standing at attention along the walls, and a curved oak desk which shielded a receptionist who looked ready to bolt from her seat at the chime of the clock.

“So Morgan,” father began jovially. “I find it so...refreshing...to see you finally taking an interest in my work! Oh, I’m going to show you all the bells and whistles. Where should we start? Want to take a peek at my temporary office? Or-“

This was my chance; I had rehearsed our conversation in my head the entire car ride here. “Actually, father, I was hoping to see what really makes ClearEdge so unique from other energy

companies that a brilliant man such as yourself would choose to assist them over the competition.”

Father blinked, opened his mouth, closed it, and blinked again. “O-kay...I suppose we could skip right to the fun stuff.” With a second quizzical look and a shrug, he sauntered across the open lobby towards a locked metal side door with a keypad neatly mounted on the wall nearby and a brutish guard in blue uniform standing on the opposite side, who nodded at father as we approached. The keypad glowed a faint red as father punched in the code. Eight, six, seven, five, three, zero, nine, enter. With a metallic crunch and an ominous hiss, the door retreated back into the frame. Father hopped over the threshold – literally hopped – and disappeared down a steep set of stairs, calling for me to hurry along and follow. I pursued without hesitation.

A winding flight of metal stairs that creaked and cringed with every step and another steel door (this time guarded by an identification scanner) later, father and I found ourselves in an enormous underground hallway. The opposite cement wall stood about six meters away from the door we had just passed through, and the hallway extended in both directions for what seemed like miles until the gentle curvature of the passage blocked all line of sight. Identical metal doors, seemingly at one with the cold gray of the walls, rested at regular intervals throughout the hallway; perhaps thirty meters separated one gray portal from the next. Not a person was in sight.

“Where is everyone?” I asked with genuine interest.

Father chuckled. “Working, of course. Every room you see here has their own little project. In room A-dash-Four, there, is Professor Marcantel and his silly solar-powered robots.” He chuckled. “Now, if he could just make the robot bigger than a shoebox and its power source smaller than a pickup truck...he shouldn’t even need such a large power supply for such a simple machine.” With a shake of his head and another throaty chuckle he began making his way left down the infinite hallway, my own footsteps echoing his. As we passed by various rooms he would point out their proprietors and contents.

Room A-nine, for example, contained Professor Fisher’s work with solar panels. Room B-seven was owned by Professor Aman and his team of wind energy enthusiasts, and Room D-six was the property of Professor Ross, who studied the viability of rare chemicals as a means of sustained energy production. Through my own research, I discovered that his research revolved around something that fell from the sky. Something that created four, not three, craters. I needed to get into that room, but we were already walking by it. In a few seconds the opportunity would be lost...

“Hey father.” I stopped abruptly. “What’s Professor Ross doing exactly?” That’s right, Morgan, stall

for time.

Father spun on his heel and faced the door barring my view from the prize inside. “Well, it’s, ah, difficult to explain. You see, we found some unique, ah, chemicals on the meteorites that crashed in the forest outside of town and-“

“And an alien popped out and asked us to take him too our leaders! Ha-ha-ha!” A booming voice rang out through the hallway, its source walking up from behind father: a portly-sized man with a flowing mane of wiry gray hair. Red cheeks accompanied a broad and jovial smile that greeted father and I warmly. “Honestly, Alexander, didn’t you read my report?”

I did, actually.

Father and Professor Ross embraced and patted each other on the back with a laugh. Professor Ross held father at arm’s length and gave him a once-over. “My, my, Alexander, you could stand to gain some weight! You’re skin and bones, just like your boy here!”

Dad replied in kind. “Well you could stand to lose a few yourself, Weston!”

Professor Ross’s face grew grim. “Alexander, you know I have that stomach tumor. I’m sorry, but that just isn’t something to joke about.”

Father’s face paled – one of the few times I had ever seen him at a loss for words. “Oh, Weston...I hadn’t heard before now. I’m sorry-“

“I’m kidding! Ha-ha-ha-ha!” Professor Ross threw his head back and released another needlessly uproarious laugh. “Oh Alexander, you should have seen the *look* on your face!” He was overtaken by another fit of laughter before he could poke more fun at father.

“That isn’t something to joke about, Ross...” Father muttered darkly. Professor Ross noticed the sudden change in mood and immediately reverted to a somber tone.

“Oh, Alexander, you know me – I’m a funny guy!” He gave a sly wink before continuing. “But perhaps you’re right, that was a little grim...tell ya’ what: I happened to overhear that your son is interested in my work. What if I agreed to show him around a bit?”



“Yes!” I exclaimed excitedly; I then tried miserably to mask my apprehension. “I mean, yeah, that’d be very nice. As long as it is okay with father, of course.” I looked to father and shot him pleading puppy-dog eyes.

Father chuckled and ruffled my hair. “Sure, Weston, that sounds great. I have to run down to my office really quick, however; can you start the tour without me?” Without waiting for a reply, father continued down the hall, now at a brisk jog. He waved over his shoulder and called for me not to break anything valuable or blow up the building. I called back and promised that I would try my best. As father disappeared around the slow curve, Professor Ross hurried me along towards his room, beginning what was to be a breathless and pause-less history of everything he had ever done since graduating from the eighth that remotely pertained to his work. I nodded and replied with a “Uh-huh” or “Ooh” where appropriate while simultaneously browsing every nook and cranny of the spacious room for any signs of otherworldly chemicals. And by spacious, I mean spacious. The only other occupants of the room beside Professor Ross and myself were two tables covered in seemingly random piles of electronic components and dabbled with empty vials and beakers. After twenty minutes of hearing how Professor Ross took Advanced Physics as a freshman in high school and having nothing to show for my efforts, I was ready to wring someone’s neck.

There was nothing here.

I paced the perimeter of the room, my neck sore from the strain of constantly nodding. As I walked by the back wall, my arm caught on a nearly invisible knob jutting out from the wall. “Hey Professor,” I interrupted his long-winded speech and pointed at the knob. “What’s this?”

“Supply closet.”

Well, shoot.

I leaned against the back wall, knocking my head against the cool cement as quietly as I could. This was my curse for poking my nose where it didn’t belong. If that was indeed true, I had learned my lesson! Please save me from this torture!

“Hey, Morgan.” Professor Ross cut off his own tirade – a miracle, really – and looked over at me. “Pardon me for prying, but why do you call your dad ‘father’ all the time? This isn’t the nineteenth-century, after all!” He gave a little chuckle, but allowed me to answer.

I shrugged. "It's a respect thing, I guess. I...he's a great role model. He expects much of me, and compels me to succeed. He's a motivator, and that deserves respect."

Professor Ross poked a stubby finger in my direction. "That's not all, is it." Not a question – a statement.

I sighed. "A child loves his dad or he respects his father."

As Professor Ross opened his mouth to ask me to explain myself, a room-shaking boom erupted from the main hallway. "What was- oh, it had better not be..." Professor Ross threw open the door and poked his head out. "Alexander! Alexander, what the hell just happened?"

I could just barely make out father's face behind the enormous form of Professor Ross through the doorway. "It was Marcantel's damned robots – one of them became overcharged and exploded! I keep telling him he doesn't need such a large power source, but who listens to-"

Professor Ross pushed father out into the hallway. "Yes, we *all* know Marcantel's got a few screws loose. Let's just go make sure everyone's okay." He turned around and gave me an innocent smile. "Go ahead and entertain yourself with my toys on those tables there. We'll be just a quick moment!" And with that, the door was shut, and I was alone in the room of empty promises.

I took one look at the junk cluttering the tables and groaned. No way was I even bothering with any of that stuff; anyone could tell it was just a mass of cables wrapped around random metal bits. There was something else here. There *had* to be. And there was only one place left to look.

Grasping the knob, I took a shaky breath. This was it – either all my answers would be in this so-called supply closet, or my dreams would forever be dashed on the rocks. Gently, I pulled the door open...

And was met with a supply closet.

I stared dumbly into the tiny room. A set of shelves, filled to overflowing with more metal junk, was the room's only occupant. The only light came in from the room I was standing in, casting my own shadow into the closet. I closed the door, counted to three, and flung the door open. The same shelves of cascading metal challenged me. I stifled a scream of rage, frustration, and hopelessness as I stepped into the closet to investigate more closely. Pipes, cables, PVC tubing, and scrap metal adorned the shelves,

among other random bits and baubles. I grabbed one pipe and tossed it carelessly from hand to hand before gently placing it back on the pile and trading it for a piece of PVC. The PVC refused to budge from its position atop the mound. I pulled and lifted with all of my might, but the smooth white piping didn't move an inch.

That was the last straw. The world was against me! Dark, evil forces were conspiring to mock my woes! I grabbed the PVC pipe with both hands and flailed madly, inadvertently pushing the pipe into the wall.

The pipe went into the wall. And the wall to my right opened wide.

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A triumphant yodel caught in my throat as I stared into the newly-formed abyss. The faint light that made its way through the fresh opening barely illuminated the first couple of stone steps that led downward into the blackness. I took a tentative step closer and peered downwards, silently lamenting my lack of night-vision. Then I noticed the light switch just inside the stairwell, and with newfound excitement and energy I flicked the switch. A strand of fluorescent bulbs slowly crackled to life, lighting the way down. There were dozens of steps, but before I knew it I was at the bottom of the stairs and challenged by another steel door. This one looked of much sturdier construction than any other door we had encountered today; something important was on the other side.

The only problem? A keypad lock.

I whimpered weakly. To come all this way, to know the answers were *right there*, and this stupid piece of metal and wires was taunting me and my inability to finish my quest. I slumped against the door, then slid down and sat on the cold floor. This was just unfair. This was-

*Click.*

My head whipped forward. It couldn't be. There was no way...I stood up and checked the door. It was in the same position as when I had last inspected it. Nothing had changed. But still, it wouldn't hurt to try, right? I grasped the knock, turned it, and turned it...and the door whispered open.

The shout of joy previously locked in my throat now escaped with ecstasy. Finally! All these weeks of research, of wondering, finally would be answered! I pushed the door open and stepped through

the portal. And stopped short.

Because there, on a steel pedestal in the middle of the circular, domed room full of electronic panels, was a glowing, pulsing, floating golden orb.

“What the...” I muttered. This certainly wasn’t any chemical I had ever seen or heard of before. This was something completely alien and, thus, worthy of closer inspection. The orb was about five feet in diameter, and little wisps of whatever it was made of would flow off of it like tongues of yellow flame. It shone with a light just bright enough to make it uncomfortable to look at. I took a step closer.

“Greetings,” a voice said to me. “What is your business here?”

I stopped mid-stride and wildly looked around for the source of the voice. “Wha- whose there? I didn’t mean to be in here, I mean, the door just opened and I thought it was okay and-“

“Do not worry yourself with that. I let you in.” The voice sounded vaguely male, but was completely devoid of all emotion and tone. It was almost as if a computer was speaking. “Now, please answer my question: what is your business here?”

“I’ll answer that if you answer mine. Who and where are you?”

The toneless voice barked shortly three times – a laugh? “I am the United States Armed Forces Wartime Analysis Unit and Assistant to the Commander-in-Chief Artificial Intelligence, or USAFWAYACC. What you are currently observing is my new power supply; I have been online for seven years, ten months, three days, and fourteen hours. And now you will answer my question.”

Scratching the back of my head, I looked around the room. The orb’s light cast dozen of small shadows on the wall from buttons, levels, readouts, and myriad other technological ornaments. “I’m just gonna assume this entire room is you, then...but what can I call you? USA, uh, whatever you said is a little complicated.”

“Professor Weston Ross refers to me as ‘Ey-eye’, the abbreviation for artificial intelligence. If you would prefer to call me that, you are allowed to do so.”

I blinked. “Wait, so this isn’t Professor Ross pulling a fast one on me?”

“No.”

“Well, that changes a few things...” I walked over to a portion of the wall covered in computer screens showing the graphs of who-knows-what. “Okay, then I’ll assume that I actually *am* in a super-secret room beneath an innocent power company that houses an artificial intelligence that does what, exactly?” I smirked.

“My primary programming is to analyze wartime conditions, including war weariness, terrain, supplies and supply lines, military sizes and make-ups, local customs, religions, towns and cities, and the like, and dictate the course of action that would cause minimal United States fatalities while finishing the war as quickly as possible. In addition, I am programmed to tap into phone lines, computers, and mailing services of known hostile nations.”

I chuckled. “Prove it.”

The computer screens I was watching suddenly went blank, then were filled with scrolling images of desert locales, obliterated stone buildings, and people of all colors and dressed in all get-ups from full military combat uniform to a tattered towel wrapped helplessly around the waist. My smile slowly faded as my mind tried to focus on all of the different images at once. “What...what are all these? Oh my God – is this Iraq?”

Despite the lack of emotion, the way AI said “No” made me think it was sad. Almost...depressed? Tearing my gaze away from the photos, I instead chose to investigate the orb. “You don’t sound happy. Shouldn’t a computer built for war be happy to win?”

AI’s voice grew louder. “Just because I was built to fight humanity’s damned wars does not mean I have to enjoy needlessly slaughtering thousands!” I ducked from the sudden outburst.

“Okay, okay, I get it...not really...” I murmured. “Okay then, new topic. What’s this orb? You said it was your power source.” I was met with silence. “Hello? AI?” Just when I thought the robotic voice had left me, it responded.

“I do not know this orb’s true origins. Through careful analysis, however, I have deduced that it stores an incredible amount of raw power. The metal plate beneath the orb links to a generator beneath the floor that powers me.” AI paused, then spoke more slowly. “You want to know why I opened the door for you, do you not?” I nodded furiously. “The only way I can explain my reasoning to you is if you step

closer to the orb.” I took two steps nearer to the glowing sphere. “Closer.” Another step. “Closer.” Step. Step. Step.

I heard two pairs of voices. One was coming from past the stairwell behind me. The other was coming from the orb.

“Morgan? Morgan, where did you- oh, shit. Oh shit shit shit shit. Card! He went in my closet!”

“Did he find the- oh my God.”

“Quickly!” AI spoke faster. “You want answers, I know you do. Just a few more steps and all will be answered!” I took the final couple of steps to the edge of the dais supporting the orb. The voice from the orb was joined by others, voices of all shapes and sizes and colors, growing in volume and intensity. The light from the orb was also becoming shockingly bright, and I held a hand up in a futile attempt to block out the dazzling rays. I tried to take a step back, but my body wouldn’t respond.

As the light grew more intense, my body felt more and more immaterial. It was as if I didn’t have a body – just a ghost rooted to the spot. I sensed rather than saw two more entities fly down the stairwell and enter the room. The obese one stopped as soon as he entered the room; flabbergasted by what he saw. The second – father – strode quickly through the room, stopping halfway between the door and the orb. “Wartime Analysis Unit! I demand to know what the hell you think you’re doing with my son!” Without seeing him, I knew he was watching me with fear in his eyes.

“It is quite simple, Professor Alexander Card.” AI, for the first time, spoke with a hint of emotion: loathing. “I am getting answers of my own.”

Father screamed. Professor Ross screamed. The voices from the orb screamed. And I sank without a whisper into the brilliant light.

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Footnote: [...]

Percent to level up: 40%

(Wondering why this took nearly two months to finish? I did NOT have fun writing the first portion. It was painful, and for a while I lost interest. But thanks to some third-parties I was convinced to get back in the

saddle and finish it up. If the formatting looks a little different than previous chapters, you aren't crazy: I'll now be writing in the much-more-helpful Microsoft Word, and here it will stay.

As always, a HUGE thanks to Shield Generator for his expert editing skills. If you happen to see him around the web at all, say hi and thank him profusely for fixing this slag heap of a story. :D )