

DESERT DREAMS

As he watched his friend drive away from where they would meet noonish the day after tomorrow, Conrad Stryker reached down to pick up his backpack. Putting an arm through first one strap, then the other, he settled the heavy pack more comfortably, then tightened the waist belt and the shoulder straps. Satisfied with the fit, he glanced down at the stone pyramid that covered the two water bottles and can of soup he had hidden in the sand 'just in case' Dave was late.

Smiling at his friend's scowl at the precaution, he set off across the desert away from the side road where Dave had dropped him off, the folding chair strapped to the outside of the pack bouncing only slightly with each step. Dave had teased him about the chair but Conrad had assured his friend that he was more than capable of carrying it a few miles till he made his base camp.

Sure, it was a luxury, but it was lighter than any one of his water bottles. Besides, he didn't want to spoil his friend's insistence that he was a spoiled city boy, even if he could endure two and a half days of wilderness camping in the desert.

Repositioning his sun hat, he tightened the chinstrap against gusts of desert wind and set off across the quickly warming hard packed sand.

After trudging across the desert for a couple of hours, he stopped for a break, drinking deeply from the water bladder built into his pack and munching an energy bar taken from his shirt pocket. Resuming his trek across the desert, after another hour he spotted a jumble of rocks that topped a small hill in the distance and headed toward them.

Gaining the rock jumble, he inspected the area and decided it would make a perfect campsite. The largest of the boulders made a nice enclosed area and the scraggly bushes growing around them were large enough to close off all but a couple of the spots between. The hill was also high enough that if the rain forecasted for that night in the mountains to the East caused a flash flood, he would be well above the flood level.

Removing his pack and untying the folding chair, he hung his hat on the corner of the pack's frame. He began clearing debris from a level spot and set up his tent between two boulders with the back end against the scraggly bush between the boulders. He staked the tent down, then using a can of flea spray retrieved from a side pocket of his pack he sprayed the inside floor of the tent and all around the outside edges.

Last year when he'd visited Dave and taken his first three-day desert camping trip, he'd not brought the spray and the sand fleas had made his adventure a little less than pleasant.

Next he unrolled his foam sleeping pad and lay it out on the tent floor, then placed the sleeping bag still in its carry bag and his empty air pillow on top of the pad and zipped the tent closed.

He then collected several good-sized stones from around his campsite and made a half-circle against the largest boulder to one side of his site. He kept the fire pit far enough away from the tent to keep sparks from popping that far, but close enough that the smell of the dying coals would keep wary animals from coming too close to his tent while he slept.

He next removed his lantern and gas bottle from his pack and assembled the pieces, testing the lantern then turning it off and placing it in the sand between the tent and fire ring. He then removed a solar powered nightlight and placed it on the top of the tallest boulder, just in case he didn't make it back to camp before sunset, and braced it with several large stones to keep it from falling over.

As a last duty he took his camp shovel several yards away from the camp and dug a small hole in the sand between two fairly large, smooth-topped stones. Testing the fit, he sat on the stones, straddling them with one butt-cheek on each stone and the pit between. "Perfect fit." He

said aloud to himself as he rose and returned to his main campsite.

Satisfied with his base camp preparations, he made a quick sweep around his site to collect firewood. There were several dead bushes around the jumble of boulders and he soon had more than enough wood for his first night. He made a small pyramid of wood inside the fire ring, with kindling at its core, then dug into his pack for a bag of jerky and nuts as he looked at the sky.

Deep blue with the sun just past its zenith, Conrad shifted his gaze to scan the horizon as he munched on his lunch of nuts and jerky and washed it down with a small can of V8. After scanning his eyes across his camp to ensure all was as he liked, he decided he would head North for his first hike.

He retrieved his GPS locator from the right cargo pocket of his pants and entered his camp's coordinates just below those of the spot where Dave had dropped him off earlier in the day. Replacing the GPS locator in its pocket, he washed the empty V8 can with water, drank the contents, then crushed the can with a rock and placed it inside a plastic bag in his pack.

He then removed his remaining five cans of V8, the six small cans of fruit juice and two of his large water bottles and the quart pan and small camping shovel from his pack, then moved to the boulders he had chosen earlier. He dug a small pit between the two boulders and lined it with small stones. He then placed the juices and water inside, covering the juice cans with the quart pan turned upside down with its lid on its bottom, then covered the pit with the heaviest stones he had not used for his fire ring.

Satisfied his liquid cache was safe from curious animals, he used another water bottle to top off his pack's bladder, then donned his considerably lightened pack and sun hat, and headed North across the desert, parallel to the mountains to the East. After walking for several minutes he turned around to see what his campsite looked like from that direction. He repeated the move several times during his hike to help him spot his camp on his way back.

A few hours later he was crossing a flash flood smoothed stretch of sandy desert floor, wondering if it was time to start heading back to camp, when his left foot fell through the crust of sand and sank to the knee in a hole. Struggling to pull his leg free, he only pushed more sand down into whatever lay below, but was unable to free his leg.

He quit struggling and shrugged free of his cumbersome pack, pushing it to the side but still close at hand. Keeping one hand on the pack frame in case the hole expanded and sucked him down, he tried to pull free while using the pack as an anchor.

He could feel something jagged gripping his pant leg and was able to twist just enough to get free of the grip. Pulling his leg free, he watched as more sand disappeared into the hole. When the disappearing sand slowed and finally stopped, Conrad saw what looked like glass at the edges of the hole.

Curious, he stretched out on his belly to see if he could see what lined the hole in the sand. He scooted closer and closer to the hole, keeping his body splayed out to spread his weight as much as possible.

Peering into the hole he could only see shadows as his head blocked the sunlight. Moving back again he dug into his pack for a flashlight and moved back toward the mysterious hole. Holding the flashlight beside his head as he moved over the hole again, he peered down into the dark depths when he heard a crack and the hole collapsed further in an instant.

Spitting sand he looked up and came face to face with a grinning skull.

With a shocked scream, he dropped the flashlight and pushed frantically at the shifting sand. He struggled for a few moments before he calmed down enough to realize that the helmeted skull was no danger.

"What're you grinning about!" He asked the skull as his heart fell back out of his throat to his chest where it belonged.

Splayed out with his upper torso inside the hole, Conrad was able to see by the beam of the flashlight only inches below his head. He lay with his chest against what could only be described as a console of some kind with the grinning skull topping the skeleton of a body in a

seat in front of that console.

Careful not to shift his weight forward, he reached down to retrieve the flashlight lying in the sand that had poured down through the hole he had broken in the glass above the skeletal body. He shone the light around the opening and saw that he was looking at the interior of a small enclosure that looked like the cockpit of a fighter jet.

Shifting the light to get a better look at the pilot of the small craft, Conrad was again shocked when he saw that the skeletal pilot inside the cockpit was alien. The skull was slightly larger than a human skull, with a bony protrusion that resembled the muzzle of an animal where a human nose and jaw would be. The teeth in that short muzzle were shaped more like that of a human's instead of the tearing canines of the animal the snout might indicate.

The shoulders and arms were somewhat humanoid in nature, but considerably more robust. Conrad would not want to meet the fleshed version of that skeleton in a bar fight unless he were sure he could dodge blows from fists powered by the arms and shoulders he saw in front of him.

Fresh sand from above covered the lower torso but Conrad could see a small metal case gripped tightly by the sturdy hands of the pilot of what he could only imagine was a fighter craft...or possibly the alien version of a flying car.

He reached for the case with his free hand and with minimal effort and a softly spoken, "sorry", he pried the case from the bony fingers. He noticed as he did so that the hands had only four fingers, but were still bigger and sturdier than his own.

As he started to lift the case and inch his way backwards, he bumped the helmet on top of the skull and tipped it back from the face. Attached to the high forehead was a strip of silver-gray metal with a blue crystal in its center.

He carefully worked his way backward till he was able to lift the small case out of the hole and toss it to the side close to his pack. He then worked his way back into the cockpit of the small vessel and reached toward the pilot's skull.

"Sorry again," He muttered as he reached for the silver-gray headpiece, "but I don't imagine you'll be needing this jewelry anytime soon."

He pried to silver-gray strip from the skull, slightly interested in the way it clung to the skull as if it were held by a tacky glue. When it finally came loose, he noticed it was not rigid, but was slightly flexible even though he could see no links in the smooth surface. With the flexible headband gripped in his right hand he played the flashlight around the interior of the tiny craft to see if there was anything else of interest in sight, then backed out of the hole.

Inching back till he was sure he was clear of the hole, Conrad stood up and looked around. In every direction he saw only the flat expanse of desert sand and scrub brush of the Arizona desert.

Wishing he had brought a camera, he muttered, "Nobody's going to believe this." He looked at the hole, wondering if he should retrieve the skull for further proof, then looked at the lowering sun.

"Tomorrow." He said to himself aloud, then moved to retrieve his pack. He put the flexible headband in his pant's left cargo pocket and lifted his backpack, adjusting the belt and straps before he picked up the small metal case where it lay in the sand.

Inspecting the case as he walked, he followed his footprints back toward his camp. He had been walking for quite some time before he remembered the GPS locator in his pocket.

"Shit!" He exclaimed as he turned back to look the way that he had come. He started to move back toward the buried craft and its skeletal occupant when he glanced to the West at the sun. If he went all the way back to the craft, he would never make it back to camp before dark.

He searched around till he collected several dozen rocks and made a stone pyramid and a crude arrow pointing toward the alien craft. Finished with his stonework, he pulled his GPS locator from his pants pocket and recorded the location. Looking with longing back toward the alien craft, he wanted to abandon his return to camp, but common sense overruled his impulse.

The craft had been lying there for who knows how long. It wasn't going anywhere, and his boot tracks going in both directions were hard to miss. He would have no trouble finding it again tomorrow.

With that thought he turned back toward camp with the headband in his pocket and the small case in his hands. Despite his increased pace, the sun had set before he reached camp and he was glad he'd made the extra precaution of setting out the solar night light when it came into view.

With his flashlight to light his footing, he was soon inside the rocky embrace of his base camp, shedding his pack and lighting the kindling of his fire. It caught quickly and he dug into his pack for a freeze-dried meal and removed the quart pan and one of the juice cans from his liquid cache.

Taking the last water bottle from his pack, he opened his folding chair and sitting, poured some water into the quart pan and set it next to the fire to warm. He dug a hoody and jacket out of his pack, donning the hoody against the quickly cooling desert night and placing the jacket over the back of his folding chair, then sat down to further inspect the small case.

He could barely see the seam that showed where the case opened, and four buttons on the side opposite the barely visible hinges all along one side. He punched futilely at the buttons for a while, then tried to pry the case open by sheer force for a while longer before he gave up and set the case aside.

He checked the heating water and satisfied, removed the pan from the fire and opened the freeze-dried food package and poured the stew into the pan and put the lid on the pan. Moving one of the stones in the ring, he placed the pan in the opening so that one side was close to, but not too close to, the fire.

Returning to his chair, he sat down as he pulled the headband from his pant's pocket. Inspecting the headband, he found that the surface was not as hard as metal, giving slightly when he dug a fingernail into the surface.

The crystal was imbedded securely and he couldn't see the outside edge to tell if the crystal was just glued in or if the material that made up the headband was formed around it. He'd have to ask Dave about it when his friend picked him up. He'd also have to ask what kind of crystal it was, as he couldn't identify it with his limited knowledge of geology.

On impulse, he placed the headband against his forehead in the same position he had found it on the skeletal pilot's head. It clung to his forehead, but came away as easily as it had when he pulled it from the skull of its former owner, slightly tacky like it was held by glue.

He probed the inner surface of the object but couldn't feel any indication that it was covered with glue. He started to put the headband down to check his heating meal, but on impulse placed it on his forehead with a smile, then rose to check his stew.

Lifting the lid, he saw that the heated water had done its job and the freeze-dried stew was ready to eat. He got the spoon out of the side pocket to his pack, and one of the cans of juice from his liquid cache, and sat down to eat.

When the stew was completely gone he used a finger to wipe the inside of the pan, licking the remains off his finger and repeating the process till the pan was nearly clean. He then used water from his opened bottle to clean the inside of the empty juice can and poured the juicy water into the pan to wash the last of the stew residue from the bottom.

He swirled the water around and around the bottom of the pan, then drank it down before using a few sheets of toilet paper to finish his cleaning. Rising from his chair, he tossed the tissue in the fire before placing the pan and lid in the liquid cache and covering it up with stones.

The band on his forehead was so light that he forgot about it as he put more wood on the fire and picked up the small case. He turned it over and over in his hands for a few minutes, then set it down and watched the flames of his campfire flickering in the night.

As he watched the flames he grew drowsy with the exertions of the day and his eyelids sagged. Soon he was fast asleep in his chair.

Off in the distance, lightning flashed and thunder rolled as a storm lashed the western side of the mountains...while Conrad dreamed.

* * *

Prince Fallion fought the controls of his escape pod as it was buffeted by the forces of reentry. In the screen that showed his abandoned ship streaking far ahead in its preprogrammed flight to slingshot around the planet, he could see the strike of defensive fire against the missile that followed behind.

He shut down all power and let the escape pod fall free. If the ship that followed that missile didn't see his power signature, its crew would never know he had abandoned his ship.

Another missile streaked by above, so close he could see it through the clear panels of the pod's canopy. Preprogrammed defensive fire would intercept that missile too, but not all those that would follow. Close behind that second missile, the immense bulk of his father's warship crashed through the upper atmosphere as its automatic programming systems performed its own slingshot maneuver.

Prince Fallion could tell from its altitude that it would get a greater boost from the maneuver and might be able to catch his doomed ship before it plunged into this system's star. He smiled sadly as he thought of the crew of his ship and hoped their efforts would fool the crew of his father's warship. He felt honored by their sacrifice.

Then his smile disappeared as the force of the great warship's passage through the atmosphere buffeted his tiny vessel out of control.

Fighting the controls without power was too much even for his enhanced muscles and the tiny craft thrashed and rolled like an angry pitiuk caught on a hook.

He couldn't engage power as yet because its flash would surely be noticed by the passing warship, so he hung on and prayed to all the gods of all the races of his father's Empire. The storm he had been aiming for loomed ahead. If he could just make it inside the highest of the storm's clouds, he would be able to engage power without fear of discovery.

He had just made the first of the billowing cloud's edges and was reaching for the control button when the lightning bolt from below struck his craft, throwing him around even more fiercely in his restraining straps.

He was thrown back and forth in his seat for precious moments as he struggled to reach the ignition control button.

In his ears the sound of the thickening atmosphere told him he was nearly out of time.

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Conrad awoke with a start and heard the sound of rushing water. Jumping up from his chair, he looked around, disoriented and heart threatening to leap from his mouth.

As he frantically looked around, he saw the fire reduced to glowing coals and a rabbit cowering next to a boulder at the edge of the light cast by the fire. Nearby was a coyote, but it was not interested in the rabbit, but instead was gazing outward toward the desert.

Then Conrad heard the sound of a river again and saw the lightning in the distance and knew he had chosen his base camp wisely.

He picked up his flashlight and moved to the side of the jumble of rocks and shone it down the hill. On the South side of his little hill the water rushing by was only a few inches deep, but on the North side it was deeper.

He tried to see the small tree that stood about a hundred yards to the North of his camp, but either his flashlight couldn't pick it out...or it was under water. He turned around just in time to see the coyote dart down the hill and across the desert floor, now showing only small rivulets of water passing by to the South of his hill.

Moving back to the North side of his hill, he played his light outward and watched as the small tree came into view as the diminished force of the rushing water let it stand up straight again. When he turned around again the rabbit darted from its cover beside the boulder at the edge of the ring of light thrown out by the dying fire and bolted in the same direction as the coyote.

“Careful little guy.” Conrad spoke to the darkness. “Running from a flash flood can make a predator hungry once the danger of drowning is over.”

He picked up his folding camp shovel and used it to pile the coals of his fire against the side of the boulder and used a couple of large stones to cover the edges of the hot coals. He then used his flashlight to make sure he didn't have any unwanted visitors in or around his tent.

Then he went to check on his latrine and was not surprised to see that it was low enough to receive its share of floodwaters. He added a little more of his own body's water to the water in the pit, then returned to his camp and crawled into his tent.

He pulled the sleeping bag out of its carry bag and spread it over the pad. Removing his hiking boots and socks, he lay his socks over the open top of the boots. He then removed his pants and folded them before laying them atop his boots and added his outer shirt to the pile.

He brushed his hands across his face, feeling the headband as he did so. With a smile at his forgetfulness, he tugged at the edge of the band. It came away reluctantly, but did finally come loose. Laying it atop his folded shirt he crawled into his sleeping bag and was soon fast asleep.

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Conrad slowly came awake to the sound of the wind across the sides of his tent, the sides fluttering softly with movement. He stretched in his sleeping bag, and twisted to flex sleep-relaxed muscles, the popping of joints felt but not heard as he stretched and twisted.

Moments later he flipped the sleeping bag open and unzipped his tent flaps and stepped out into the early morning light of a sun just cracking the horizon. Dressed in underwear and T-shirt, he made his barefoot way to the banked coals of his fire and placed his hand close to the coals and felt heat. Picking several small sticks from the remainder of his pile of firewood, he placed them across the hottest part of the pile of coals then moved the banking stones back to the outside of the fire ring.

As he reached to the side of the fire pit to retrieve the folding camp shovel, the smoke from the fire pit thickened just before the sticks caught fire. He reached down to pick up more wood and tossed a couple of larger sticks onto the newly renewed fire.

Moving to his pack leaning against a boulder away from the fire, he dug out the roll of toilet paper and walked out of the enclosure toward the latrine. He quickly dug out the sand washed back into the hole by the water that had rushed by his hill the night before. After using the latrine, he tossed a couple of shovels-full of sand into the bottom and returned to the camp enclosure.

Stepping on a jagged stone in the sand, he cursed, then hopped a few steps before striding on to his pack where he replaced the toilet paper then dug out a clean pair of underwear and T-shirt and a disposable wash towel.

Walking to the fire pit he shed his underwear and T-shirt, tossing them on the nearby chair, and opened the wash towel. He scrubbed the sweatiest, smelliest parts of his body till the towel was too dry to do any more good, then tossed the towel in the fire where it burst into flames.

Shivering in the early morning cold of the desert, he hurried over to the tent and retrieved his stacked clothes and returned to the chair, putting the headband in the cup holder in the arm of the chair. After putting on his pants, he went back to his pack as he buttoned his shirt and retrieved a clean pair of socks before sitting in the chair and brushing dirt and sand from his feet.

Finally dressed for the next day he tucked the headband into his left pants pocket, then collected his dirty clothes and rolled them into a neat roll and stuffed them in a freezer bag and put the bag in his pack. He then added more wood to his small fire, prepared another freeze-dried meal, cleaned his pan and empty juice cans, and recovered his fluid cache, before brushing his teeth over the edge of the fire pit.

Finished, he strapped on his pack after putting the small case inside, put his sun hat on and tightened the chinstrap, then headed north to see if he could find the buried alien craft. He instantly saw considerable evidence of the flash flood from the night before and hoped that the craft had not been reburied.

Without a trace of his footprints from the day before to be seen, he occasionally checked his GPS locator. When he got to the spot where he had made the stone pyramid and arrow he could find no trace of them. There was one spot where a line of stones *might* have been the flood-washed remains of his sign, but he could not be sure.

He continued on and when he had walked the distance that he guessed was right, he began searching the ground more closely. He criss-crossed the desert floor till he grew hungry, then stopped for a meal of jerky and nuts, washed down with juice before continuing his search.

Later that afternoon he found a depression that might have been the spot, but after an hour's digging in the sand with his camp shovel, he gave up. He recorded his GPS location for several other spots, digging twice more before he noticed the position of the sun and finally headed back to camp.

Dejected at his failure to find the alien craft, he made his evening meal in the dim light of a dwindling fire as his wood ran out and after cleaning up from his meal, pulled out the headband.

He turned it over and over in his hands, inspecting it for every detail, then lit his propane lamp when the last of his wood was reduced to glowing coals. Placing the lamp beside his chair he smiled and put the headband across his forehead before picking up the small case and inspecting it in every detail.

He tugged and twisted and pulled at the seams of the case in his attempts to open it and once even opened his Leatherman as he started to use its tools to pry the case apart at the seams. Changing his mind, he refolded his Leatherman, then began punching the four buttons in sequence.

He punched buttons for what seemed like hours with no response from the case till in disgust he simply sat back and stared at the coals of his nearly dead fire.

He was still stretched out in his chair, the jacket now helping keep him warm in the desert night and his feet propped on a rock in front of him when he finally drifted off to sleep with his chin on his chest.

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Prince Fallion finally hit the power engage button and was relieved when lights came alive on his console.

The relief was short-lived as the console showed severe damage to several of the systems that he would need to make a safe landing and still be able to return to orbit and rendezvous with the robot ship hidden on this world's moon.

The chase by his father's warship and the destruction of his personal ship had been planned for months and his escape to the surface of this uncharted world was actually part of the intricate plan.

The crew of his personal ship had all been volunteers who knew they were going to die to allow him to escape with two eights of Library Implants. Those implants, along with several cases of others hopefully smuggled out by other rebels, would help break the monopoly of knowledge that the royal family hoarded in their efforts to maintain the bloated Empire his father ruled.

He punched at additional buttons in an attempt to get the escape pod to regain all

systems and was rewarded with additional positive indicator lights. Glad of the additional power, he struggled to maintain control of his tiny escape pod as it plummeted through the storm.

In only a few moments he found himself through the worst of the storm and the ground came into view.

It was too close! Much too close!

He engaged the shielding and tried in vain to lift the ship out of its steep plunge toward the surface of this isolated world.

The pod started to respond and level out and he began to hope that he would make it. Then a small hill loomed up in his way and the craft struck the top, bouncing up into the air before plummeting back towards the ground.

In the cockpit, Prince Fallion was bleeding from the eyes as his head was viscously thrown sideways. Another violent lurch sideways and the Prince's neck snapped with a crack.

The implant in his brain worked valiantly to repair the damage to his body but was only able to maintain a limited level of consciousness as the pod crashed to the ground. Skidding along the surface in an almost controlled slide, the pod came to rest in a cloud of dust and sand.

Prince Fallion felt no pain as his implant protected him from the firing of his nerve endings. He felt only a vague disappointment as his implant informed him his body was beyond repair.

Without being able to bend his head due to his broken neck, he felt around till he was able to grasp the case that held the two eights of unused Library Implants. Giving his implant the order to contain his memories and shut down his body, he hoped that his compatriots would be able to realize his failure to deliver the implants and send another ship to search for his escape pod.

He continued to live despite his orders to his implant to cease its efforts to keep him alive. The implant ignored his pleas to end his life, following programs that were meant to help him despite his wishes. The only thing it could do for him was to alleviate his pain, but in doing so it caused him greater problems as it put him in a state of sensory deprivation.

As he sat there in his ship with his body being slowly divorced from his mind, he began to slowly lose all connection with his senses. It was only a couple of days before the lack of food and water contributed to cause his implant to completely cut him off from all sensations and he was trapped in the prison of his mind.

It was many days later before the implant determined that further attempts to save its host were beyond its limited efforts and it finally allowed blackness to consume him. It was much later before the implant determined that all programmed scenarios had been met and it put itself in standby mode.

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Conrad's eyes slowly opened as a breeze ruffled his hair and the sun peeked over the horizon to shine in his eyes. He started to move then flinched as his neck protested the way he had slept the night away.

Feeling dozens of years older than his early thirties, Conrad moved carefully as he rose from his chair with the case still in his hands. Without a thought, he dropped it on the sand behind the chair as he stumbled to his pack and dug out his roll of toilet paper then found his shovel and went to take care of his complaining bladder and bowels.

He was in the middle of his morning cleanup and clothes change when he muttered aloud. "Wow! That was some kind of realistic dream!"

He had read about lucid dreaming once many years ago, and had even practiced controlling his dreams occasionally, but the dreams he'd had the two previous nights were exceptional even by those standards. He could never remember having dreams so life-like, but the real mystery was the continuation of a single themed dream two nights in a row, almost as if he'd

put a movie on pause that resumed at the next opportunity.

He pulled the stones of the fluid cache aside to retrieve the quart pan and the last of his juice and water, and as he turned toward his chair his eyes locked on the small case lying beneath and behind it.

Instantly remembering, he set the pan and fluids in the sand and put his hands to his forehead and touched the crystal at its center. His fingers went to the band that lay to each side of the crystal. As he fingered the band, he thought that it felt smaller than it had the night before.

He tugged at it to remove it and it didn't come away from his forehead. Tugging a little harder he began to panic as he tried and failed to get a fingernail under the edge. He rushed to his backpack and dug out the signaling mirror that was in a side pocket.

By feel alone it *felt* like the band was not just stuck *to* his forehead...but had become a *part of* his forehead. Holding the mirror up where he could see the headband stuck tight to his forehead, he inspected it as closely as he could. The edges of the band blended into his skin in such a way that they looked to be absorbed by the skin of his forehead.

With his heart racing, Conrad began to frantically pull at the edges of the band where it blended into the skin of his forehead. He dropped the mirror and dug his fingernails into his skin till he felt pain, trying to pry the headband away from his skin.

Then a voice in his head said. "*Stop! You are damaging yourself!*"

Conrad froze. "I'm going fuckin' nuts!" he exclaimed aloud.

"*No.*" The voice replied. "*Your mental health is unchanged and well within optimal parameters.*"

"Who are you...no...what are you?" Conrad asked aloud as he fell to his knees.

I am the part of the Library Implant you now wear that allows communication between the implant and the host. The integration process has passed the stage where it can be reversed without special equipment. If you attempt to remove the implant without that equipment, you will only damage yourself."

"Integration process?" Conrad spoke with a question in his wavering voice, panic imminent in its tone. "What's that?"

The process by which a Library Implant is absorbed by the new host and the implant integrates with the new host's mind to ensure optimal compatibility."

"Oh...sure...of course." Conrad muttered.

He buried his head in his hands and rubbed at his face. "What do you want from me?"

The function of a Library Implant is to provide information to the host. There is also a medical program that can be used to assist the host body in issues of physical and mental health."

"Are you the alien that I took the headband from?" Conrad asked with a crack in his voice.

"*No*" Came the reply in his head. "*The former host is still being treated for mental damage and is not currently able to access the communication program.*"

Conrad's brow creased and he stammered. "W-w-what does that mean?"

The previous host was killed in the crash of the escape pod. Usually there are medical procedures to ease the host into a subordinate position within the Library Implant's data storage files." The voice in his head answered, then continued. "*Without the proper input from assisting physicians, the control programs within the El-Eye were not able to assume direct control until the host became mentally unbalanced.*"

"So the pilot of the...what did you call it...the escape pod...has gone crazy. So now I've got a crazy man in my head?" Conrad's voice broke on the last word.

"*That is a correct assessment.*" Came the answer. "*But I am able to keep the mind of Prince Fallion from accessing communication protocols until I am able to assist his mind to a state of balance.*"

"Prince Fallion? That's the name of the guy in my dreams!"

“Yes.” The voice replied. *“I had been off-line for so long that my power reserves were low and I was unable to recognize the fact that I had acquired a new host. The dreams you experienced were the final moments of Prince Fallion’s life as they were the strongest memories within the host files. I was able to come online enough to discontinue the memories before they reached the point where Prince Fallion began to become mentally unbalanced.”*

“Once I was able to realize that I had a new host I ended the memories you were experiencing as dreams and was able to calm your mind enough to explore your mind for communication purposes.”

“What does that mean?” Conrad asked aloud as he looked around his campsite, then collapsed into his folding camp chair.

“I was able to use the programs in my files to search your memories and learn your language. That is why I can speak with you in a manner that you can understand.”

“Uh...exactly *how* is it that you’re speaking to me? It’s almost like I can hear a voice...but without sound.”

“In my searching of your mind I was able to learn all that you know so it will be easy to explain.” The voice said. *“You know that your body intercepts sound waves through the ear and those sound waves cause tiny hairs within your auditory canal to bend in response to the sound waves.”*

“Yes.”

“The bending of those hairs causes electrical signals to be transmitted to your brain and your brain interprets those signals and identifies the sounds.” The voice continued. *“What I am doing when I communicate with you is to use direct stimulus to your brain to artificially duplicate the signals that represent the sounds that are produced by spoken words.”*

“So I’m hearing your words as a voice in my head...but without sound?” Conrad said in a questioning voice.

“Yes.”

“And the dreams I had over the past couple of nights are the last memories of the crazy guy who was your last host?”

“Prince Fallion was not mentally unbalanced when the memories you experienced as dreams were recorded.”

Conrad’s brows creased. “Recorded?”

“Yes. The memories and emotions of a host are recorded within the confines of the El-Eye itself. They are simply recordings and are not actually what you would define as the essence or soul of the host. That is not possible to do with the Empire’s current technology.”

“What Empire?”

“Prince Fallion’s father’s Empire.” Came the answer. *“The Prince guessed that it was only because he was the original host of his particular El-Eye that he was able to join the rebels that were attempting to overthrow his father’s Empire.”*

“What?” Conrad screamed as he jumped up from the camp chair. “You mean I’ve got a crazy traitor in my head?”

“In essence ... yes.” The voice responded in its unemotional voice. *“That is why the Emperor’s warship was chasing Prince Fallion’s personal starship. The Prince had joined the rebels who were attempting to attain Library Implants for unauthorized persons.”*

“Unauthorized how?”

“Library Implants are restricted to only members of the Imperial Family and a very few of the highest ranking members of the Ruling Council. The Prince and his rebel cohorts were aware that the Empire was getting stagnant and was in danger of falling apart.”

Conrad smiled and said. “So they were going to destroy the Empire to save it. Yea...I’ve heard *that* before!”

There was a slight pause before the response came in head. *“I have seen the memory of what you refer to and it is similar. The difference is slight...but somewhat similar.”*

“The Empire of Prince Fallion’s father was becoming bloated in size but more restrictive in its laws. The outer planets were being forced to make many sacrifices to ship goods and treasure to the inner planets and support an ever-growing elite class. This was causing the outer planets and the subject races to become resentful of the Empire.”

“The Emperor’s Council recognized this but in response simply began to play the subject races against each other. There was an increase in conflict between the outer worlds and their native races that the Emperor used to demand ever more tribute in goods and riches to protect the inner worlds from experiencing.”

“In response to the ever-increasing conflict, The Emperor restricted travel between the outer worlds to the point that those worlds became isolated subjects whose only access to space travel was through Imperial starships. In addition, they were expected to finance those starships through further tribute.”

“The Prince and the rebels he joined were convinced that the basis of the problem was the monopoly of the technology provided by the Library Implants. They were convinced that the monopoly of knowledge was holding back the initiative of ALL of the Empire.”

“So they were attempting to break that monopoly by smuggling implants to the outer worlds.” Conrad guessed as he glanced at the unopened case under and behind his camp chair.

“Correct.” Came the answer. *“The case that Prince Fallion was carrying contains two eights of Library Implants.”*

“Two eights?”

“When you discovered Prince Fallion’s escape pod, your memories show that you noticed that his hands contained a thumb and three fingers as opposed to the thumb and four fingers of your own race.”

Conrad nodded his head mutely as the voice continued. *“The human race counts with a base ten system. The Imperial race of which Prince Fallion was a part uses a base eight system.”*

“So two eights would be sixteen?” Conrad asked.

“Yes.” Came the reply. *“The case that Prince Fallion carried contained sixteen implants that have never know a host. They were supposed to be given to some of the greatest scientists of four of the outer worlds.”*

“Their theft was a level of treason that was so great that the Emperor sent a warship to capture the Prince...learn the identity of the worlds they were promised to...and destroy those worlds and their native races.”

“Wow! A little bit of overkill, huh?” Conrad said. *“Four entire worlds and all their people.”*

“The Emperor was of the opinion that it was a small price to pay to ensure loyalty.”

“Yea...I bet.” Conrad said with disgust. *“Typical of a tyrant’s mind. Uh...I couldn’t open the case.”*

“Prince Fallion has the codes for the locking mechanism.”

Conrad heard the voice but was distracted as he looked at the position of the sun and said. *“I’m supposed to meet my ride around noon so I have to start getting ready.”*

He started cleaning up his campsite by using the shovel to dig around the ashes of his dead fire, stirring ash and sand together, then piling the stones of the ring onto the mixture. There was no heat left but he poured some water onto the stones for good measure then drank the remainder of the last bottle after filling his pack’s bladder.

He then took the shovel to fill in the latrine and collected all his unburnable trash into the bags he’d brought for just that purpose. As he repacked his backpack he retrieved the signal mirror and looked at his forehead, noticing that the silver-gray of the headband had almost completely disappeared. All that remained was a silver-gray border around the blue crystal that lay in the middle of his forehead.

“What happened to the rest of the headband?” He asked aloud, surprised at how calm he was.

“The material of the implant is made mostly of what your memories define as cellular-sized robots...or nanobots. They were activated when I detected your brain waves and have moved through the pores of your skin and through the bone of your skull to integrate with your mind. The filaments of nanobots connect the various portions of your brain to the main El-Eye component housed in the crystal and its surrounding material. Additional nanobots flood your blood stream to monitor and maintain your bodily functions. These mobile nanobots receive directions and deliver information to the main El-Eye as the blood transports them through the vessels of your brain.”

“When I found the Prince’s body, the headband was attached to the front of his skull.” Conrad said as he continued cleaning up his campsite and re-packing his backpack.

“When Prince Fallion died and his brain waves ceased, automatic programs within the implant withdrew all of the material that made up the implant and condensed it into its static form awaiting its retrieval.”

Conrad nodded as he hefted his lightened pack and adjusted the belt and straps, the picked up his sun hat. The hat fit just over the crystal that now adorned his forehead.

“The crystal of the implant is one of the most recognizable indicators of Imperial Rule and will always be exposed to view.” The voice continued. *“The crystal also is the repository of the majority of the host memories.”*

As Conrad made a final sweep of his campsite to ensure he left no trace of his presence except the stone-covered pile of ashy sand that showed where his campfire had been, he asked. “How can a crystal that size hold so much memory?”

“In exploring your memories, I have determined that your race’s level of technology is far below that of the Empire. There is enough memory capacity in the Implant Crystal to hold the entire lifetime memories of four hosts. It is not uncommon for an implant to be handed down to several times that many hosts so my programming allows for me to begin deleting personal memories of former hosts as the newest host experiences life.”

“So each host is eventually wiped out of existence?”

“Not completely.” Came the response. *“Only the most personal experiences and memories are deleted at first. As the memory banks within the crystal become full then duplicated memories of former hosts are combined or deleted to make room for the memories of the newest host.”*

“Other files are condensed in the same manner as your music files that you know of as MP3 files. The empty spaces are eliminated and the same information can be stored in a considerably smaller file space.”

“The data retrieval space within the crystal is immense in comparison to the memory chips that your race currently has the ability to make. The crystal of a Library Implant is capable of recording not just memories, but the emotions and feelings of the host from the time they receive their implant.”

“For all intents and purposes, the memories are as close to the actual essence or what you would call the soul of the host as it is possible to duplicate without duplicating that essence or soul. The warmth of the star that is your sun that you currently feel on the exposed portions of your skin is being recorded. The surprise and panic you felt when you first realized you were unable to remove the implant has been recorded. If you wish, I could replay that panic and you would experience it all over again, and that replayed emotion would be recorded as a new memory.”

“That’s alright. I think I can do without an instant replay of sheer terror and panic. Uh, four whole lifetimes is a lot of memory.” Conrad said as he walked along the desert toward his rendezvous with his friend. “So, how many people’s memories can an implant hold before someone is lost?”

“The answer to that is unknown.” Came the answer. *“The Emperor is currently the host of the oldest implant and his implant contains the memories of one hundred forty nine former*

Emperors. The memories of Emperors before then are lost as the implants did not exist before then.

“Wow! That’s a lot of people to be crowding one guy’s head!” Conrad exclaimed. “So-o-o...when do they receive an implant?”

“Most implants are presented when one of the Imperial Family reaches the point you would define as puberty so that they may experience life unobstructed by the life experiences of former hosts.”

“Most?” Conrad interrupted.

“Prince Fallion was presented his implant at the age of two because it was a new implant that had not been hosted before being presented to the Prince.”

“Speaking of the prince.” Conrad said. “Is there any hope that his...uh...mental imbalance can be cured? I mean...if he’s just memories...can’t those memories that caused him to go crazy just be deleted?”

“Yes.”

“Well then...why don’t you do that?”

“I am not programmed to alter memories in that manner. My programming only allows me to record memories and assist in the maintenance of the bodily functions to ensure optimal physical and mental levels of health.”

“So why don’t you ensure his mental health by fixing his crazyness?”

“My programming would have allowed me to do that if he had lived, but when he died I was programmed only to put his memories in a form of stasis until an implant tech could determine the next step and adjust my programming...”

“That’s just fucking stupid!” Conrad exclaimed, interrupting. “What the fuck good is an implant program that can’t fix defects in past hosts?”

“I was not finished.” Came the soft response.

“Oh...sorry...please continue.” Conrad said sheepishly.

“Usually a host is found soon after the death of their body and the program that forces the implant to continue maintaining brain function and recording memories is stopped. This did not happen with Prince Fallion and I was programmed to continue my efforts, and the resulting circumstances led to his mental unbalance.”

“Due to the congruence of these circumstances when implant technicians present another host a new implant, the only other option that is included in my programming is to inform the current host of health issues of former hosts that are outside of acceptable parameters. After that the implant must await instructions from the new host that fall within acceptable resolutions to the health issue.”

“So I can instruct you to fix him?” Conrad almost screamed his question as he almost tripped over a stone in his path.

“Yes.” Came the answer. “As long as your instructions fall within acceptable parameters.”

“What are the limits of those parameters?” He asked next.

“You may not instruct me to delete an entire file of past hosts or files that do not contribute to the aberration that was directly responsible for the health issue in question.”

“So all I have to do is instruct you to fix him with the least amount of change to his files, and you would simply do so?” He asked aloud as he continued walking to meet his friend at the side road to the desert.

“Yes.”

Conrad stopped in his tracks and waited for a few seconds before saying. “Well then...do that!”

“Done.” Came the instant reply.

“Done!” He exclaimed. “Jeez...what took you so long?”

He hesitated, then asked. “So...where is he?”

"I am here." Came a gravely voice.

"Oh great!" Conrad shouted. "Now I've got *two* disembodied voices in my head! Everybody is going to think I'm stark raving mad when all I do is talk to myself all the time!" He waved his arms as he ranted.

"If you were in danger of becoming mentally unbalanced, the implant's internal health programs would inform you at the same time that it corrected the problem." Said the gravely voice.

"You're the Prince...right?" Conrad asked as he resumed walking.

"I was disowned by my father when he sent his warship to capture me. I am no longer a prince. Now I am just another rebel."

"Capture you. That's what the other voice said." He clutched at his head and continued. "I gotta' get you two straight. "Wait...you're not a prince any more. Just Fallion...right?"

"Yes." Came the gravely response.

"And the other voice is the Library Implant's Avatar voice. Is that right?"

"Yes." Came both voices in his head.

"Don't do that!" He shouted. "One at a time, please!"

He waved his hands around as he thought, then said. "OK. You with the smoker's voice...you're just Fallion. And the other voice is that of the Library Implant's Avatar...El-Eye-Ay...Lia. Implant voice...your new name is Lia. You don't speak unless I call you by name...OK?"

He waited...and waited...then his shoulders slumped and he said. "OK Lia?"

"Yes." Came the male voice that was not Fallion's.

"OK...that's not going to work either." He muttered, then a thought struck him. Hey...Lia...how come your voice sounds human but Fallion's doesn't?"

"I altered the signals to your brain to replicate human speech so as to cause you less distress. You were on the verge of mental unbalance and I wished to avoid further distress."

"Oh. Thanks." He said, then added. "So you can alter your voice?"

He waited...and waited...then slumped again. "So...Lia...you can alter your voice." He made it a statement instead of a question.

"Yes."

"OK then, Lia...from now on when you speak I want you to use a female sounding voice. Human...make sure it's human. Oh...and you don't have to wait till I ask you to speak each time. If you have something to say that is not being said by the prince...I mean, Fallion...just go ahead and speak. Just don't talk at the same time as Fallion or interrupt me when I'm talking unless you absolutely have to. OK?"

"Yes. *Is this voice acceptable?*" Came a pleasant female voice in his head.

"Wow! That's really good, Lia." He resumed walking. "Now...back to what we were talking about before. Fallion...you and Lia both said that the warship was supposed to capture you but I distinctly remember missiles being fired in my dream before you crashed on Earth."

"The missiles were designed to cripple my ship, not destroy it." Came the gravely answer. *"The crew that was in control of my ship used the programmed slingshot maneuver to aim the ship for this system's star. If the ship had been damaged beyond its capability to achieve that goal, the crew would have exploded a self-destruct charge that would have ensured the Emperor would not gain any information from the debris."*

"Wow! That's dedication to a cause." He said with sincere admiration in his voice. "So now what? How long before the Emperor sends his warships back here to check us out?"

"I don't think you have anything to worry about in that regard." Fallion said.

"What do you mean? Why not?" Conrad asked.

Conrad could almost feel the smile in his alien voice as Fallion said. *"Why don't you tell him, Lia."*

"I have checked my internal clocks and used your eyes to examine the night sky and the

positions of the stars.” The female voice explained. “By my calculations approximately eleven thousand two hundred nine years have passed since Prince Fallion’s escape pod crashed on this planet.

Conrad was stunned to silence and stood mute for several minutes before resuming his trek toward his rendezvous with his friend. He was silent for the rest of the walk, but when the road came into view in the distance, he asked. “So what do we do now?”

“I would like to make a suggestion.” Fallion’s voice said in his mind.

“Sure. Go ahead.” Conrad said.

“If the rebellion was successful, the Empire has fallen and Imperial knowledge has been spread far and wide and known space is much changed from what it was when I lived. If the rebellion failed, the Empire may be as stagnant and repressive as before, or may have crumbled altogether under the weight of that stagnation and repression.”

Conrad felt the mental shrug of the recorded mind of the former prince. *“Either way, you are in possession of nine Library Implants. Each of those implants holds the scientific knowledge accumulated by my race and dozens of other sentient races spanning several thousand years.”*

“I would suggest you find eight more individuals of your people who you feel would be worthy of the knowledge contained in those implants and lift your people from this world to see what has happened in the galaxy in the years my body lay undiscovered.”

* * *

Conrad waited by the side of the road, drinking from one of the two water bottles that he had stashed under stones in case Dave was late picking him up.

It was a good thing he had stashed the water...as well as the can of soup that he ate heated only by sunlight and a hot desert day...as it was late afternoon before he saw the dust of Dave’s car approaching.

He tossed his pack in the back seat as he listened to his friend make excuses for being late, then smiled as he slid into the front seat and buckled his seat belt.

“I went to Bonnie’s grave to talk with her and just lost track of time.” Dave said as he looked over at his friend. “What the hell are you smiling at? I’m not *that* late!”

“You remember when you and Bonnie and I were in college and we were sure we were going to change the world?” Conrad said to his best friend.

“Yeah. Then I got into making native jewelry and opened the rock shop and Bonnie got MS and spent the rest of her life in a wheelchair just barely able to help with the store and you moved back east and only came to visit once a year.” Dave said as he glared at his friend. “So?”

Conrad turned to look at his friend and removed his hat. With the blue crystal embedded in his forehead reflecting the sunlight through the windshield and a smile near splitting his face, he said. “I think it’s time we honored that pledge.”