

The Fourth Level Series: Book 2

THE EMERGENCE

The Earth is ready



Mariner Pezza
with
Cheryl Kemeny

Albert replied, "First Level Technology would be equivalent to your stone age. The second level is what you would call Newtonian Mechanics. This would include simple machines like your internal combustion engine. The beginnings of awareness occur at the Third Level. The civilization suspects the four forces and the three fundamentals, Space, Time, and Matter, are linked.

Knowledge of the equation that connects the four to the three: $3!=4$ is the basis of Fourth Level Technology. Of the eight billion people on Earth, you alone, Jack Neufield, have learned this precept. We must determine why that is."



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***THE FOURTH
LEVEL SERIES:***

BOOK 2:

THE EMERGENCE

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Chapter 1: The Getaway – Janey

They say the first few days in prison are the worst. I can attest to the truth of that. One must undergo the transition from freedom to subjugation. Learn to submit. And forcing the newbs to wear orange has a role to play. It gives the other convicts a target. Someone to hurl their invective at. But the walk through the prison was different this time. There were no jeers, catcalls, or obscene gestures, though Jack and I were wearing that horrible color. Oh sure, they all still stared as their hands clasped the bars. But their eyes were vacant, and their gaze came from empty faces. One inmate even flipped us a peace sign. It was strange. Even stranger was the behavior of our escort – Ms. Alysha Civil, Special Assistant . . . She was *Chatty Cathy*. Pull the string and watch her talk – non-stop. And she wasn't talking to Jack, and she wasn't talking to me. Her incessant blather was addressed to Albert. *Who is Albert?* That question rather thoroughly permeated my brain. For sure a General he was not.

He was dressed in an army general's uniform. Though he didn't play the part very well. High-ranking officers expect their orders to be abjectly obeyed. And their comportment reflects this. They exude an air of authority. Albert did not display this. His “air” was more like . . . reserved amusement. Like he was enjoying the diversion. His uniform was light tan, probably the summer style, and not all that cluttered with badges and bling. But the shine off the three stars on each shoulder caught the eye. Overall, it looked quite authentic. However, some oddities stood out. For example, from under his hat peeked several strands of longish hair, and, in one hand, he sported a cane, obviously for show. In no way did he appear impaired. Also, there was something about him that seemed familiar. But I just couldn't place it. Jauntily, our little party strolled through the cellblocks.

Alysha's chatter was pure ingratiation. She was a natural-born brown-nose, “I can't tell you how thankful I am that the Military is removing this . . . lunatic

affair from my portfolio." A strategic pauser, she was always careful with her words. "My responsibility is National Security. I can't be dealing with oddball anomalies . . . UFOs, and such. You have a division that deals with this, don't you, General?"

"Oh, yes. These kinds of incidents are of special interest to us." The alleged General's eyes revealed the slight glint of a sparkle. Like he was enjoying himself.

I walked close to Jack because we were close. He was my life- partner, my significant other. We grew up together, being neighbors. I lived on the horse farm down the road and hung out at Jack's place, the barn specifically. They were always doing such seriously interesting stuff there. And that's where we built the "thing" – with Mr. McEvey, of course.

"Everything's going to be OK." Jack said after he almost fainted upon seeing Albert enter the picture. And what was the picture? Well, I had just undergone two water-boarding sessions, and Jack was slated to be next. We were at some special annex at the Federal Correctional Institution – Danbury. *Why don't they put the name "Danbury" first?* Our nemesis was Alysha Civil – chief torturer extraordinaire. And she enjoyed her work.

Alysha was on the fast track coming from a parentage of government functionaries. She looked like an ancient statue excavated from an archeological dig in Athens or Rome. Her features were classically perfect; eyes and nose flawlessly sculpted, but her mouth was a bit thin with the upper lip often up curled to one side, revealing the temperament that usually accompanies a sneer. And it's hard to carve hair in stone unless it's pulled tightly back, which hers typically was. She wore her standard dark-gray suit that matched her countenance – dark and severe. Only one thing was different, she had changed. She was *Chatty Cathy*.

Ms. Civil cackled all the way to the front doors. Relating her life's story, how great she was – to Albert, always to Albert. She whisked us through the many checkpoints and locked doors, smiling and small talking the guards. They smiled and small-talked back. In due course, we exited the front doors.

The General's vehicle was parked out front. It was a Humvee done up in desert camo. That was it. No driver, no entourage, just the Humvee. I thought Generals were supposed to be the real deal; make a big splash wherever they went. But then again, I knew that Albert wasn't a General. We said our goodbyes, waved, and Alysha quipped, "Now I don't wan'a see you-all coming back here." A pure W.T.F. statement.

Albert drove, Jack rode shotgun, and I hopped in the back, though there was enough room for a whole army upfront. We did not engage in personal conversation during our little stroll through the prison for two reasons. First, *Chatty Cathy* didn't give us a chance. And second, because there was something very strange going on, and I kind of assumed Albert was breaking us out. But normal conversation resumed once we drove past the front gate. Though "normal" may not be the most accurate word.

"Albert, I thought you went away. How come you're . . . here?" Jack was the first to speak.

"If you will recall, Jack, I did specify that a smaller facsimile of my original configuration would remain. I am as such." Albert's response was about as weird as anything I could think of. And it only got worse.

"But you're here, on Earth. What about . . . you know, non-interference?"

"My strictures prohibit me from allowing a member, even a quasi-provisional one such as yourself, from being harmed. Especially by a nascent civilization." Albert's voice was perfectly modulated. Spoken without hesitation or any indications of an emotional state. There was a power there that did not fit the man. Though it was an exact fit for the complete bizarreness of the content.

"Albert, allow me to introduce Janey Riley." Jack half-turned with one arm up and looked at me, smiling. I sensed he was enjoying my total befuddlement.

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Jane . . . finally." He reached over the seat, and we shook hands as he continued to drive.

"Janey, this is Albert . . . uh, Einstein. But he's not really Albert Einstein."

Why didn't I notice the resemblance sooner? Jack continued, "I know we have a lot of explaining to do."

It was then that I heard the sirens in the distance.

Jack asked, "Albert, are those sirens for us?"

"Yes, Jack. I am quite certain they are."

"What did you do . . . steal this vehicle?"

"Yes, but that is probably not the reason for their employment at this time." We turned onto a two-lane, semi-major road. A couple of yellow lines ran down the middle, with many trees and smallish ranch-type houses spotted here and there. Albert floored it, and the Humvee leaped forward, "Please allow me a quick explanation. At the prison, we reorganized the electromagnetic thought patterns of those individuals in our immediate vicinity. The purpose was to render them amenable to our departure. Implementations of those procedures are no longer in effect. Hence the sirens."

Jack responded to this gobbledygook. "So they came to their senses and freaked!"

"That would be an accurate approximation, Jack. I suggest you apply the seat restraining mechanisms. They probably will be needed." We did.

More sirens added their voices to the chorus. It was at least a quartette, and they were singing our song, though the scream of a cop car is not on my list of all-time favorites. The windows were open, and the strains entered from all sides. But within my head, an old tune blared a little louder – *Who is Albert*, and now it was coupled with – *What is Albert?*

Jack commented, "Maybe we should avoid the main roads. There'll likely be roadblocks. We're dealing with the Feds here, and they have unlimited resources." We were, at this point, strategizing on how to avoid capture. More sounds joined the chorus, and Jack looked up, "Shit! It's a helicopter. How did

they get one up there so fast?" After some more upward gawking, "Albert, where are we going?"

I could see the speedometer. We were doing about 60. A dangerous speed for curvy back roads. Albert traced a rectangle in midair halfway across the front seat. A semi-transparent display of a street map appeared. I think it was a holograph. I saw something like that in an "Iron Man" movie once.

The streets and towns were labeled. Our prison was located in the lower right corner, and from it, a red line emanated. Presumably, it represented our distance traveled. In the upper left corner was a big blue X. Our destination.

"They've got us pegged. For sure, they'll set up roadblocks."

"I suggest you consult the map, Jack, and deduce probable locations for said 'roadblocks.'" Jack slid over and studied the map. Albert's driving bordered on the reckless, passing every car we met. I hung on for dear life to the overhead handles.

"We're coming up on New Fairfield." A cluster of colonial-style buildings came to view. A post office, a supermarket, and a red brick village center. Albert slowed, and we negotiated our way through the town, generally heading north, "We've got to get off this main road. Turn left here on 39, then we'll take Bigelow north to Pine Hill." Albert heeded Jack's advice.

It was midmorning in mid-September, not much traffic, and we were on another country road; two lanes, maybe a bit more residential. And there were trees, lots of trees. Albert was driving crazy again, using the whole road, swaying from lane to lane, even around blind corners. It was extremely distressing. But we were making progress, and the red line on the map lengthened.

"Albert, what's our destination?" Jack and his buddy, the General, worked well together like they had a history of doing so.

"An old rock quarry no longer in use. I parked a . . . vehicle there, in an equipment warehouse. That is our objective."

I wanted to question the term "vehicle." Like get a definition, but I didn't. There was no time for explanations.

Albert nailed it on the straightaways. These Humvees can really go, and corner too. Also, they stick to the road like glue, maybe because they're seven feet wide. The whoop-whoop sounds got louder. Jack's head exited the window and looked up, "Shit, now there are two helicopters! And one's right on top of us!"

That's when the shooting began. I took a quick look. A soldier was hanging out the door with a rifle. Bullets began ricocheting off the roof, and the hood and I cringed with each impact, "Albert! They're shooting at us!" Jack felt the need to state the obvious, "Why are they shooting at us?" We quickly rolled up the windows.

Albert began zigzag-ing in a random manner. I hung on as though my life depended on it and tightened the seat belt.

"They know this vehicle is bullet-proof; the metal, the glass, and even the tires are solid rubber. Therefore, I assume their objective is to induce panic, force us to make a mistake, and possibly, drive off the road."

Jack resumed studying the map, "If we can only get to Bigelow Road, then we'll have a chance of making it all the way." The automatic fire resumed. The impacts sounded and felt like cannonballs. And we didn't make it to Bigelow Road. A couple of minutes later, we hit a roadblock. A ribbon of spikes had been laid across the road, and a patrol car was parked to one side. A police officer was crouched next to it, weapon drawn.

First, they must not have been aware that our tires were solid, and second, the police cars must carry that spiky stuff standard equipment. But in New Fairfield, Connecticut? They'll use it, what . . . once in fifty years? I figured we'd just drive right over it as we waved goodbye to the cop. Albert went around.

There was a stonewall perpendicular to the road. It was about three feet tall and two feet thick. Pretty substantial. The thing about this part of the state

is, there are rocks everywhere. The glaciers deposited them, or so the geologists say. But what's interesting is – the rocks were mostly medium-sized. Pickup-able by one or two strong guys. So, what did our forebears do? They cleared the fields and cleverly fit the stones into rock fences. They were all over my parent's farm. Strike that. It's probably not their farm anymore. Anyway, they were everywhere, and one was right in front of us. Albert veered left, missing the spikes, and crashed through the stone wall doing about 70. Rocks and boulders flew like pins on a bowling lane. The cop was so stunned, she did not fire her weapon. And we did not wave goodbye. But she got in her car, turned on the siren, and floored it. Now we had a tail. Make that three tails, two in the sky, one on the road.

We continued driving crazily up the road as Jack inquired, "Why didn't you just drive over the spikes? The tires are solid rubber."

"The strip would have entangled in our wheels and impeded our forward progress." Albert's answer was a good one, in my opinion.

The helicopters seemed to have pulled back and were firing less frequently, even though the area was becoming more rural. Jack was studying the map again, "They'll probably be setting up a major barricade, up ahead somewhere. One we can't go around. There's Bigelow Road." He pointed to a street up ahead. "Turn left there." We did.

Bigelow Road was narrower and curvier. It seemed to be located on the top of a ridge with a major drop-off to our right. Albert slowed down a little. Jack continued, "In about a quarter-mile, we'll hit Route 37 again. Turn left there, go about a hundred feet, then turn right on Pine Hill. About a quarter mile up is the Quarry. We're close." He resumed studying, the choppers resumed firing, and Albert resumed zigzagging. "If I were them, I'd put the roadblock here." He pointed to the short stretch on Route 37. We were close, and Jack was right.

This time the blockade was substantial. They used cop cars. Four of them doubled up across the road. Behind them, a small army was deployed with guns drawn. Mostly handguns but a few rifles as well. We stopped about a hundred

feet away. One cop with a bullhorn stood and bellowed, "Exit the vehicle and put your hands on the hood – now!" Albert touched the map, and it changed to an aerial view. *What, did he have a satellite up there?*

"We have to go off-road, Jack. Pick a route."

Jack intensely examined the picture and said, "Go left down that dirt road. It's a business of some sort."

It was a construction company's yard with several buildings and large excavating equipment scattered about. Jack guided us through, over lawns, down paths, and then into a clearing near a wooded area. The sirens started again, like the howling of wolves, or maybe hyenas, "Keep heading north. If we can make it past these trees, there are fields up ahead." He pointed to the patch of forest before us.

We had bypassed the roadblock. But from the sound of the sirens, a whole battalion of cops followed us, and off-road too. We entered the forest. It was young in that the trees were smallish – some only 3 to 4 inches in diameter. Maples mostly, a few were just turning color – yellow and orange. We mowed them down flat. Bulldozed a road right over the smaller saplings while detouring around the larger trees. These Humvees can take one hell of a beating. And so did we inside. Albert was a good driver, though. He never lost his cool, and we made it to the fields.

They were cornfields, ready for harvesting. We initiated the reaping process a little early, as we ripped across that field doing about 60, leaving a cloud of corn and dust in our wake. I saw the farmer off to one side, standing by a tractor near a silo. He just stood there, gaping. Again, we didn't wave.

In the distance and past some trees, I could see the road. It was about a quarter mile away. Several cop cars were there maintaining a parallel course. Behind us, three or four police vehicles broke out of the woods and started plowing through the corn also. In their wake, a huge cloud of dust billowed. There would be no need for a harvester this year. And the farmer no longer stood and stared. He was jumping around like a crazy man.

Jack was still intently studying the map, and Albert stole a glance once in a while as well. They agreed on an easterly course towards a more heavily wooded area, but generally, in the direction, we needed to go. The cops were still on our tail, and the choppers were closing in as well. We entered the forest, barreling through bushes and thickets, swerving around the big trees and flattening the smaller ones. Then we slid down a small ravine and splashed through a stream, bouncing, and crashing over the rocks. It felt as though our guts were being ripped out – both the vehicle's and ours. The good thing was the little river stopped the cops. And the thick foliage above stopped the gunfire.

After traveling a short distance, we stopped and took a few moments to catch our collective breaths. Jack was the first to speak as he studied the aerial layout, "Why are we stopping? The rock quarry should be right up ahead." We all stared at the map. We were almost on top of the big blue X. But we had to cross the road.

"We should rest here for a minute or two, allow our pursuers to gain some distance beyond our objective." Albert pointed, "We can emerge back onto the road at this point, travel this short stretch, and then enter the Quarry here."

"Sounds like a plan, Albert. Just like old times. Tearing up the backside of the Moon. Shooting the rilles, cruising the caves." I surmised they had had some work history. *But on the Moon?*

"But if I may remind you, Jack, you were driving then. And, as per my non-interference directives, we tore up nothing and caused zero damage. Nonetheless, they were good times. I think we can proceed now. Sufficient time has elapsed."

Slowly we resumed our forward progress. Picking our way around the impenetrable areas, plowing through bushes, skidding down a small gulley, and finally, up and onto the road. Albert's plan worked. No one was in sight until a helicopter dropped down a short distance away. It hovered a few feet off the ground, kicking up a hurricane of dust as the trees violently gyrated.

It was a standoff. We both maintained our position, just staring and testing each other's will. In a way, the scene was reminiscent of gunfighters in a spaghetti western. We were the Good, they were the Bad, and the Uglies had driven up the road. Who would draw first, that was the question? The only thing missing was the music. All we heard was the loud throbbing of the airframe before us. Then the helicopter guys blinked. I guess they just couldn't stand the suspense. The guy with the rifle hung out and began firing again. Loud pings erupted on our front grille, the tires, and the windshield. It was time to have a little faith in our vehicle's armor.

Jack did not diminish my anxiety when he inquired, "What if they shoot a missile at us? Like in Colorado?" I hated to admit it, but he brought forth a good point.

All Albert said was, "Open the sunroof, Jack."

"What the freak for . . . to let the bullets in?" Another good point was raised by my significant partner.

"Hear me out, Jack. Once the sunroof is open, stand up and point the cane at them." He handed Jack his cane. It was a standard cane, orangey wood, nicely polished with a carved bone handle and a rubber cap on the base.

"What?" Jack reiterated his incredulity.

"With the cane, you will control them. Just drag and drop them away, so we can pass."

There were no more questions from Jack. He obeyed. That's not to say I didn't have about a zillion.

"And do it quickly, Jack. We don't want to get shot or blown up."

Meanwhile, we were still under rifle fire. Not so much at the cab. More like the tires; I think they were trying to shred them.

Jack unlatched the sunroof, hastily stood up, pointed the cane at the chopper, and with a quick wrist motion, flicked the base of the cane upwards and

away. The helicopter also went – upwards and away – immediately and fast. I had a hard time believing my eyes. Upon looking twice and scanning the sky, I saw in the distance a black speck. I had to assume it was our prior adversary.

Jack re-entered the cab and gently returned the cane to its place beside Albert, who commented, "I should have instructed you to perform the cane-action slowly. No matter, they survived. Now we can proceed."

My assessment of Albert was expanding. He was no longer some kind of magic mapmaker. He was considerably more.

We proceeded down the road, accelerating rapidly and then decelerating just as fast. Traveling from point A to point B as rapidly as possible. Not a word was said, though I'm sure whole encyclopedias were thought. We came to a dirt side road. "No Trespassing" and "Violators Will Be Prosecuted" signs decorated the trees near the entrance. They were old and partially rusted. This was our destination. Journey's end. But our travail was not over. The other helicopter flew by.

"Did he see us?" I asked.

Jack looked up and said: "Can't tell."

"We have arrived. They can no longer impede our departure." Albert said this in a matter-of-fact manner but seemed relieved. We turned in and immediately encountered a chain-link fence, padlocked with multiple chains and locks. Albert handed Jack a wad of keys and pointed to the barrier. Jack got out, fumbled around for what seemed like forever, then opened the gate. After we drove through, he closed and locked it again. Why can't they impede us now, I wondered? What's in the quarry that's going to solve all our problems? *What kind of vehicle?*

We drove a considerable distance down the dirt road. Weeds had taken root, certainly a sign of disuse. A spacious clearing eventually came to view. It was a huge excavation pit surrounded by grayish-white cliffs. To my eye, the stone was granite. What else? That's what Connecticut's made of. It terraced

down in steps to a small blue lake and then scaled back up on the other side. Huge semi-rectangular blocks of stone haphazardly littered the horizontal surfaces, joined by the occasional piece of rusting mining equipment. Everything looked frozen in time. As though one day, the word was given to shut down, and everyone just dropped their tools and left. They probably hit water, most likely underground springs, and the fight just wasn't worth the effort anymore. Hence the big pool of water.

My parents, when they remodeled the kitchen, chose granite countertops. It was a similar color, a composite of gray and white. Very pleasant and unobtrusive, unlike some colors – like orange. Maybe they came from this place, though the quarry appeared long abandoned. I wondered when the “No Swimming” signs were set up. There were several positioned next to the swimming hole. Anyone would know that almost all teenagers would interpret this as an invitation. It's called the Law of Opposites, as any shrink will confirm. But it applies only to teenagers. I know. I was one once, and not too long ago, if I may add. And I also know that I could have been one of those kids down there enjoying one of the last good days of summer. Though I'm quite sure I would have worn a bathing suit.

They had rigged up a rope swing on a decrepit derrick that hung out over the water. One young man saw us and put on a show. He ran with the rope, swung out, grabbed his knees in a cannonball position, and splashed into the water. The level of difficulty was low, but the fun factor seemed high. Obviously, they did not fear us. Humvees are driven on the street quite routinely these days. Though ours must have looked quite beat, with bullet pockmarks all over, plus it was making odd noises and left a trail of smoke. For certain, we did not look like the local constabulary. We could have passed for fellow fun lovers. I rolled down the window and waved. A couple of the kids waved back. I seriously wanted to join them, take a quick dip. Then I remembered. I was wearing orange. *Everyone knows who wears orange.* I didn't want to scare them away. But the distant gunfire did. And if that didn't, the helicopter swooping in clinched it. The kids took off, without dressing, probably to watch the scene surreptitiously from the woods.

The chopper was hovering not too far in the distance, no doubt engaged in a running commentary about our activities. Directing the cavalry to our position. It must have been the cops we heard before, probably shooting the locks off the gate. We kept on driving, winding our way around mountains of rock, past piles of indecipherable equipment, and past various buildings and sheds. The sirens resumed in the near distance, and they sounded like they were coming fast. Our course pretty much traversed the entire mining complex. In the back was a rusty old warehouse with large sliding doors. We parked in front. This was it. The spot that the big blue X marked. Now what? I almost didn't care, having just been severely rattled.

Albert got out first, then Jack, who ran around and opened my door. I was fumbling with the seat belt. If the vehicle had caught fire, I would have fried. Jack unfastened the mechanism and helped me out. We walked over and stood by Albert. He seemed unfazed by the screams of the rapidly approaching authorities and the steady drone of the copter.

It was difficult to hear what he said, "Jane, have you ever wondered about 4,3?"

Jack flung his hands in the air and underwent a few small convulsions. Then he turned and, with a pleading gesture, said, "Now?"

"Yes, Jack. The question is of extreme importance. You know that, and you know why."

I was flabbergasted. In about two minutes, we would be surrounded by a brigade of angry cops. And what does Albert do – he asks me if I've ever wondered about 4,3? It was totally and completely out of this world. But apropos, I guess, considering the present company.

"Ok, ok. Jane, just answer the question and answer it quick." Jack looked back the way we came expecting to see the enemy rounding the corner.

I did as I was told: "Yes, I have Albert."

Jack interrupted, "Just tell him what it is!"

Which prompted Albert to warn, "Don't tell her, Jack."

So, I told him, "The three fundamentals of the Universe, Space, Time, and Matter, in different combinations, comprise the four forces. Then I began to elaborate: "Space and Time make gravity, and the weak force is . . ."

"Thank you, Jane. You have answered the question satisfactorily. I must inform you that you have the option to come with us or not. But if you do, there are certain strictures . . ."

Jack interrupted again, "She's coming!"

To which I added, "Where Jack goes, I go."

"Then, so it shall be." Albert turned his attention back to the situation at hand, "Jack, will you please help me with this door?" Albert had concluded the conversation, much to my relief. The boys cracked open the door a couple of feet. *I wondered how old Albert was. He looked to be in his early forties.* Then we slipped in without a second to spare. The Cavalry had arrived, and that was pretty much the last I saw of them.

Before us floated a big black sphere. *Floated?* It was about the size of a garage, maybe 20 something feet in diameter. And it was black. The blackest black I've ever seen. And no light seemed to reflect off it either – no glint, no sheen, nothing. It just hung there a few inches off the ground, seemingly absorbing – everything. Though, upon further inspection, the darkness within was moving like it was alive. Various gradations of darkness looked to be boiling. It was stranger than strange. An opening appeared, and a stairway extended. It, too, was black. Evidently, this was to be our ride. *Somehow, I knew it would not be an Uber.*

Albert stood to one side, swept his arm in a gesture towards the entryway, and almost bowed. Like a perfect host, he said, "Shall we leave all this behind for a while?" I could hear the bullhorns bellowing outside, something about us coming out with our hands on our heads. I felt like taking a quick peak but didn't. We boarded the vehicle and did, most definitely, *leave all this behind.*

Chapter 2: The Black Sphere – *Jack*

Before, my aspirations were low. All I wanted was to see Janey one more time. I had hit bottom and had nothing. No money, no friends, no home, and even no rights – my crimes were Patriot Act violations. My only asset was my knowledge, specifically 4,3. And that's what the Feds wanted – big-time and bad. And they were willing to do very bad things to get it, specifically to Janey and me, in that order. But if I told, I lost Albert and everything he represented – like First-Born technology. I still don't understand why the Air Force shot me down in Colorado. But I didn't talk. I would have sung for sure when they made me watch Janey get water boarded. Sang the greatest song ever sung. But the stupid fucks gagged me because I was too, er, vociferous, shall we say? That saved my ass because Albert came: "My strictures prohibit a member, even a quasi-provisional one such as yourself, Jack, from being harmed." Now I'm sitting on top of the world. Literally.

We escaped from prison; I won't bore you with the details. Wild mad-cap escapades have become rather routine of late. First, there was the hell-bent rush home from the hospital. Next, the wild cavorting through the Colorado Mountains. And, in between, racing around the Far-side. Though that was pure fun. No one was nipping at my posterior there.

So, Albert sprung us from prison. And it was no big deal for him, though made more difficult by the non-interference constraints. Funny how he made me wield his cane this time. Maybe to minimize the intrusion, which probably covered his butt a little. The point is we earthlings are too low to be messed with. At least, not yet.

And speaking of low, I was high. Not on drugs, but on life. And soon to be high in the sky as well. One of my most fervent hopes and dreams had come true. I was back with Janey and about to step into a genuine starship. Onboard Albert, his larger edifice, there were hundreds of them, parked in the Hangar. I tried to wrangle access to one; after all, I am some kind of a Continuum member. And

members have usage of the ship's amenities – right? I mean, whole cities were built there for the members. Albert quashed that idea, rather unceremoniously, in that, I was only a quasi-provisional. And frankly speaking, I'm damn lucky to be any kind of a member. I guess Janey is one now, too, having answered the requisite questions "satisfactorily." An opening formed, stairs dropped down, and we entered a Black Sphere: "Good for short interstellar distances only." Or so Albert had said.

When one thinks of starships, an image of Star Trek's "Enterprise" may come to mind: the fantastic bridge, the huge view screen, counters full of instrumentation, plus a Vulcan. We stepped into what could have been anybody's living room, only it was circular. There was a round area carpet upon which were placed three nicely upholstered swivel chairs. They looked comfortable and were arranged around a coffee table. Off to one side was a food service bar with a coffee-type machine and a small refrigerator tucked underneath. What one would expect in a break room. Oddly, everything was some shade of gray, even the walls. A soft light suffused throughout, from no apparent source.

After we entered, the stairwell sealed shut behind us. It simply melded into the walls. Albert had previously orated on the subject of hull material. It was a condensate, something that Einstein had postulated, the fifth state of matter – a super liquid, "Both permeable and impenetrable, ideal properties for an outer sheath." Oh, by the way, it was currently unfashionable, given that it was heavy, what with the filaments of degenerate matter – pure neutronium. However, I would venture to say – we were safe, certainly, from any terrestrial weaponry.

Janey held up well during the prison break, considering she didn't know Albert or have the same confidence in him that I had. And there was no time for explanations.

But apparently, she had deduced much: "Well, this clinches it . . . we're dealing with some seriously advanced extraterrestrials here." She motioned around. Our surroundings were so fantastic; they were ordinary, except for the lighting.

I looked at Albert for the go-ahead: "You are qualified to respond to Miss Jane's observations, Jack. I shall prepare the refreshments; coffee, tea, water, whatever you like. The restroom is to your right." A doorway appeared.

"Anything but water for me . . . I've already had my, ah, fill . . . but green tea would be nice. And I think I'll go powder my nose." Janey stepped to the lavatory. I stole a peek inside. It was designed for humans

I looked at Albert. He knew what I was thinking, "We chose the appropriately sized vehicle for this endeavor and retrofitted the interior for you and Jane. Would you care for some coffee, Jack?"

"Yes, please. Cream, no sugar." I try to limit my sugar intake for reasons of fitness. Though my lifestyle of late has not been particularly healthy – what with my recent demise. "I presume we'll be returning to the Ship?"

"Yes and no, Jack. Our destination is a lesser version though it remains parked behind the Moon."

"How much less?"

"My current diameter encompasses 2.87 miles. Considerably less than my former configuration, though essentially the same, minus all the extraneous habitats. However, one remains . . . your farm. I know we have much to discuss, Jack, but we must first conclude our pressing business here." A holographic screen appeared, showing our immediate environs. A swarm of police was positioned outside, and more were arriving. The uniforms were crouched behind their cars, weapons drawn.

Janey returned and joined the party. Albert served her tea and me coffee as we eyeballed the scene:

"More magical maps?" she said.

"Yes, Jane, one of my specialties. Would you care for a more expansive view? One that could also be termed . . . magical?"

We both acceded as we sipped our drinks. The display vanished, and all the walls became transparent, including the floor, except for the carpet. We saw the interior of the warehouse, clusters of rusty equipment, a loft area, and the upper windows. It was as though we were actually in there. Except, it was visual only, no sound. Ole Author C. was right: "Any sufficiently advanced technology will . . ."

All Albert said was, "Shall we depart?"

"But they're going to see us!"

"Yes, Jack, but not much. The exterior of this vehicle is cloaked. All they will see is a little blurring, a slight shimmer in the air once we break through the roof." Janey was all eyes.

We slowly lifted off the ground. There was no noise, no sense of acceleration, no bass rumble like you see in the movies. It was strictly a visual experience – 360°. I glanced past the carpet and saw the ground slip away. Slowly we levitated past the loft and then momentarily hesitated as our craft impacted with the roof beams. The steel twisted, members were torn loose, and the tarred sheet metal roof bent and gave way as we inexorably pushed through. But it was quiet. No external sound was heard. Outside, the noise must have been terrible. And once through, the gloom of the warehouse was replaced with bright mid-day sunlight. The brilliance decreased like we were wearing self-tinting glasses. I looked at Albert. He ignored me.

At about 100 feet, we stopped and hovered. I looked up – the helicopter was right on top of us. All the cops just stood slack-jawed staring. They must have seen something, but what, "a shimmer in the air"?

But there was no shooting. Maybe they were too stunned. We moved aside, avoiding a collision with the airship, and then rapidly elevated. But not too fast. I'm sure Albert wanted us to enjoy the view. And we did. The quarry gradually receded, and the lay of the land took shape. The rolling hills, the bodies of water, the Village of New Fairfield. It's funny how the bright blue-green

swimming pools stand out. Soon we were high enough to see the Hudson River snaking its way to the Atlantic.

Janey and I were spellbound. Twisting and turning in our swivel chairs, trying to take it all in. The sensations were overwhelming, the sense of height, the breadth of view. But at the same time, very civilized, occasionally we sipped our tea and coffee, unruffled by noise or motion. And during all this, we felt perfectly safe. Even Janey and she didn't know about Albert, not yet. Our ascent continued.

Janey commented, "I assumed our vehicle would be some form of transportation. Maybe even a spaceship. But never in a million years would I have expected something like this." After her announcement, Janey took another sip of tea, and Albert joined us, settling into the third chair. On the coffee table was a round glass ashtray, very modern. Albert retrieved his pipe from an inside pocket, banged it out, and then refilled it.

The City of New York was clearly visible. And as we ascended, it gradually faded to a patch of gray squeezed between a sea of blue and an expanse of green. Here and there, patches of white cloud obscured the scene. Gradually the whole East Coast became visible, then Canada's too. Our rate of climb seemed to accelerate because quickly the whole Continent was observable, assuming its place on the curvature of the Earth. The lighting within our craft gradually diminished back to the level of low ambiance. But it was considerably more than the darkness of Space, which we had entered. The Earth was a large blue and white ball beneath us. Massive and overwhelming. The Sun was off to one side, its light artificially dimmed, but the stars blazed brightly, and the Moon was a small crescent in the distance. We had exited the Earth.

For how long, I wondered. But this time Janey was with me. I reached over and placed my hand over hers. In turn, she clasped mine. To be honest, I really didn't care if I ever returned. Dealing with the hassle of the Feds, prison, the Patriot Act, etc. I had moved beyond all that – mentally. There was a great big Universe out there. Plus, Albert and the Pra'at. *Did they leave?* And lest we forget – The First-Born – the prime movers of all this. *Were they gods?*

"Your tour-guiding talents have not diminished with, er . . . your size, Albert."

"Why, thank you, Jack. Jane, would you care for some more tea? Perhaps a bagel with cream cheese?"

"A bagel with cream cheese?" she was still adapting. "Yes, toasted please . . . and do you have . . . onion?"

"Certainly, Jane." Albert went about procuring same.

"And could you serve that with some . . . 'explanations' please?"

"I shall provide the bagel, Jack, the explanations."

So, I told Janey everything. Starting from the beginning – the escape from the hospital, my rescue in Space. The Ship, what and who Albert is. The Continuum, the Pra'at, and the First-Born. The story ended with the downing of "my conveyance" and my voluntary "check-in" at the prison.

Janey was wise enough not to interrupt. Even after my oration, she remained silent, just munching her bagel and sipping her tea. I assumed she was processing, fitting all the pieces together.

When she finally spoke, all she said was, "Life is expensive in the Universe?" I had briefly touched on the subject. "I thought it would be plentiful."

Here Albert rejoined the conversation, "There are 379.472 billion galaxies in our Universe, Jane, and each one has up to a trillion stars. The ratio of intelligent life per galaxy is approximately one in a million."

Janey was flabbergasted, "Most galaxies have no intelligent life, none at all?"

"Yes, Jane. However, lower life forms are considerably more plentiful; plants, ambulatory animals, but not what we would term – civilized life. It is interesting that your galaxy, 'The Milky Way,' has been endowed with two such species, the Pra'at and Homo sapiens. Although technically, I should not include

humans, not yet. However, you two may change all that. The definition of the term 'civilized' involves, at minimum, knowledge of '4,3'. What some societies call, The Law of Connections."

"But why isn't there more life?" It was curious that Janey would obsess on this point. Maybe because she was a nurse. Her job was dedicated to preserving life.

"That is an excellent question, Jane. The answer lies in the laws of probability. For our discussion, we shall focus on the carbon-based model, the most prevalent. The odds of a gamma-ray burst are high. In our Universe, two to three hundred occur per Earth year. And they are galactic sterilizing events. These detonations keep 90% of the Cosmos barren."

"But the remaining 10% is still a very large number."

"Yes, Jane. It is. However, among those remaining, there is a low probability that the necessary conditions for life will randomly arise. For example, take your planet – the Earth. In reality, it is a double planetary system, with the Moon orbiting the Earth, stripping away just enough atmosphere to prevent any significant heat build-up. What you would refer to as – 'the greenhouse effect.' The chance of similar type events happening elsewhere is astronomically low. Add to that the dozens of other parameters and phylogenesis becomes a rarity. Thus, life, as you say, is 'expensive' in this Universe."

I was somewhat taken aback at the direction and depth of the conversation. Sure, Albert and I had ventured into the deep on occasion. But not this fast. I had to infer that Albert and Janey would have no compatibility problems.

"Your Builders, The First-Born, why didn't they seed some planets? Create more life in the Cosmos – to compensate?"

"Your question exposes a quandary, which many of the First-Born still struggle with. It involves a concept we call 'The Natural Way': the manner in which our Universe was intended to be. Intended by who or what is the corollary.

Another is: should we intervene in what may be the natural course of development? The answers to these questions are still being . . . divined. But those who emerged first chose the path of non-interference. A governing philosophy that employs artifacts such as myself as a means of implementation."

A brief note on our travel progress: The Earth was getting smaller and the Moon bigger. Based on the rate of size differential, I projected our estimated time of arrival – at maybe an hour. We should have been sitting back, oohing and ahing, just taking in the view. But the fantastic panorama was taking second place to the conversation.

"Except when there are conflicting dictates, like if a member is about to be harmed." I was specifically thinking of my recent application of the cane to the helicopter.

"Yes, Jack. Like with the cane and the helicopter." I wondered how Janey would deal with all this telepathy business.

Janey was still hung up on the scarcity of life issue: "By your numbers, Albert . . . can I call you Albert?"

"Yes, Miss Jane, please do, if I may call you . . . Miss Jane?"

"Of course, Albert. By your numbers, if one in a million galaxies have intelligent life, and there are 367 billion galaxies . . ."

Albert completed her thought: "There are approximately 300,000 sentient, sapient species in the Universe. Many would not consider that a low number. How to congregate became the salient problem. Traverse the vast distances separating . . . us. Eventually, intergalactic means of transit were devised. And the needs of the more garrulous species were fulfilled. Ideas and understandings were shared. And the Continuum was instituted to disseminate that knowledge, gradually, as the incipient civilizations attained the capacity to assimilate. Hence, I am here, as Jack previously explained."

"I think I'd like to learn more about these First-Born."

"Yes, Miss Jane. You should want to learn more about the First-Born, and I am sure you shall. Do you mind if I smoke?" Albert's pipe was already in hand.

I knew Janey minded. She hated cigarette smoke but was known to make exceptions.

"No, please go right ahead."

I wondered what Albert's game was. He fired up his bowl in a big display and ejected another masterpiece of smoke. Several big, beautiful rings followed by a series of smaller ones chug-a-lugging like a train across our view. The ventilation was good, a slight breeze even, and it whisked the little cortege away. It was an interesting diversion. Almost hypnotic, perhaps the intent.

Our attention returned to the Moon. Its imposing presence dominated most of our field of view. It was a dull yellow in color, except for the areas in shadow. Details began to resolve, primarily the roughness of the surface, the darker regions, and the huge craters. As we watched spellbound, a spacey instrumental faded in. Long strings of chords overlaid with harp-like arpeggios. It was very soothing. Janey and I just looked at each other.

Albert simply said, "I thought you might enjoy some music."

"And how did you arrive at this particular selection, Albert?" I inquired.

"I googled 'space music.' This piece seemed appropriate." A female chorus regularly replaced the violins. It was very ethereal. We listened for a while, quite mesmerized. And it truly synced with the vision before us.

"We shall be arriving shortly." As Albert said this, our craft veered right, and we proceeded to encircle the Moon on our left. The features became very eye-catching. The pockmarked jaggedness and the dark plains, called Luna Mare. Then we entered the shadow. The Earth was behind us, about the size of a coin tossed in the air.

"I have to admit, I really don't know much about the Moon," Janey revealed.

Facts were Albert's forte: "The Moon is about one quarter the size of the Earth — 2,159 miles in diameter. And is, on average, 238,000 miles away, increasing by about one inch per year. In the beginning, it was only 14,000 miles distant."

"How did it form, this dual-planetary arrangement?" Janey was harkening back to the scarcity of life issue.

"Early in the history of your Solar System, four and half billion years ago, as the dust accreted into orbital masses, a small planet, roughly the size of Mars, collided with the Earth. The debris coalesced into what we have today – a double planetary system. It's interesting to note that Pluto has a similar, smaller, companion planet – named Charon. Both are tidally locked to their larger partner."

"Tidally locked?"

"Yes, Jane. The force of gravity gradually reduced the spin rate of both the Moon and Charon, resulting in only one hemisphere, the near side, permanently facing its larger counterpart. The opposite half is our destination. What is commonly referred to as the Far-side since it is never seen from Earth."

Our distance to the Moon had decreased to a few thousand miles. We were traversing the twilight zone – that section between full daylight and full night. The long shadows were the color of Space, a deep impenetrable blackness. As we proceeded, the light dimmed further. However, even in full darkness, the landscape still glowed from the presence of earthshine and the all-pervasive starlight. The craters and rim mountains were eerily visible.

Albert resumed his oration, "The dark regions you saw coming in are ancient pools of basaltic lava. The brownish color is caused by the addition of iron, which welled up from the molten core three billion years ago. The force of gravity here is one-sixth that of Earth and insufficient to hold an atmosphere. Therefore, there is no wind nor weathering, and the effects of meteoric impacts remain, eternally. And for those of you concerned about life . . ." Here Albert

took a few puffs, depressed his head slightly, and looked up at Janey: "There is none on the Moon."

As he said this, we watched as three large saucer-shaped craft flew past. Fairly close, within a few hundred miles. They were identical to the ship I saw hovering above the Pra'at Moon Base. Metallic in color, one, a couple of miles in diameter and festooned with all manner of appurtenances; dishes, hexagonal shapes, orifices, and what could be . . . guns. So much for our pleasant little Sunday drive.

"Except for the Pra'at, of course." Janey and I just stared, wide-eyed with mouths agape, as Albert expelled voluminous quantities of smoke.