

Resonance

The heavy rosewood walls of the conference hall began to quiver, and for the first time that afternoon, Charlotte Pombriant was no longer thinking about the Gate or the man trapped inside.

The movement spread through the room like a soft breeze rippling across the surface of a lake, building into a series of rolling waves that bowed the walls inwards as if some unseen giant was working a rolling pin along them from behind. The thick doors dotting the periphery of the circular room flew open, slamming into the walls and tearing out chunks of the expensive wood. Plush leather rolling chairs on either side of Charlotte burst, spewing their cotton stuffing onto the table in front of her.

The waves crashed into one another, further distorting the space until the towering domed ceiling shattered, spreading a glimmering rainbow across the marble-floored stage set in the center of the room. People began to vanish in bright, upward flashes, like a copier running with the lid open.

Above it all, a chorus of voices cried out the same refrain, reverberating in an endless tunnel of feedback that built to a piercing, shrieking crescendo threatening to rip the chamber in half.

"Hi, Bill's here."

Suppressing a growl of frustration, Charlotte opened her hand, palm away from her face, conjuring up a translucent private chat window.

CPombriant: What the FUCK Bill who even dials in to the virtual conference room anymore mute ur phone

The admonition was a little severe, even for Charlotte, but she was having a shitty afternoon and Bill had tolerated worse from her, so she sent it anyway. A second later, the window expanded into a full rectangle; the top half a reading pane containing the thread of the conversation, with Charlotte's composition space situated below. Along the left side, Bill and Charlotte's digital avatars were nestled snugly next to their

names. The avatars were accurate, if not cartoonish, though Charlotte's sorely lacked the freckles of its analog counterpart. Bill's was a pudgy man with thick glasses and more hair in his eyebrows than on top of his head.

After a moment, his response flitted across the reading pane, accompanied by the *ba-ding* of Mario collecting a coin.

WBergmann: I don't know what you're talking about.

CPombriant: dude you just said ur name out loud & thats when all this BS started

CPombriant: mute ur line already oh my god your making so much feedback

A moment later, the noise vanished. The conference room behind the translucent window abruptly settled down, then proceeded to reset itself in a hypnotic, undulating series of hexagons flipping over. Just like that, the enormous dome was restored, the gouges in the walls filled, and the leather chairs re-stuffed.

CPombriant: thx

Charlotte waved the window away, allowing herself a small smirk as people began to filter back in through the heavy doors,

bringing with them a dull, welcome murmur. She sank back in her chair, letting the relative quiet of the reconstructed conference room envelop her. Quiet was one thing, silence another entirely. Quiet was libraries, quiet was background music, quiet was Vijay's breath tickling along her neck and earlobe as he whispered awkward, anxious desires. Silence was morgues. Silence was her father's funeral. Silence was Vijay's apartment after their fight last Thursday.

Another *ba-ding* pulled her out of her thoughts.

WBergmann: You're rerunning your calculations, right?

CPombriant: Nah

WBergmann: Seriously?

CPombriant: One whoopsie and my bf is quantum spaghetti so u better believe I checked like 100x before I sent it

WBergmann: That's not how wormholes work, Char.

CPombriant: Ugh no wonder your Applied Sciences lead. Look he cant introduce me to his folks if he's dead so yea believe me my math is good

WBergmann: ...that's not how Vijay works, Char.

CPombriant: Tell me about it.

Charlotte stared at the message in her composition space for a moment, then cleared it out and sent something different.

CPombriant: Srsly can I get an update or do I gotta wait like the suckers

WBergmann: Nothing I can share on here.

CPombriant: K

Useless, Charlotte thought, waving the window away once more. Ignoring the additional *ba-dings* that followed, her thoughts drifted to late night, malt liquor-fueled gaming romps with Vijay on the Nintendo he'd built from scratch. Even sober, he was a horrible gamer, sending many a plumber to their deaths at the hands of the Mushroom Kingdom's various perils.

But at least there was a merciful sort of finality when Mario died, a silly little song signaling it was time to try again. By contrast, there was no finality to Vijay's situation; no musical rejoinder to indicate whether he'd been ripped to quarks by his own experiment or merely suspended in some sort of purgatorial quantum entanglement. Maybe the Gate had malfunctioned and spit him out into his very own Mushroom Kingdom, complete with a princess who sought no commitment other than the occasional rescue, who would be satisfied with an apartment key serving as a surrogate ring until some unspecified point in the future, who wouldn't nag him about meeting his parents.

The chair next to her suddenly creaked, reclining despite the lack of anyone to fill it and breaking Charlotte out of her reverie.

"Now you're flat-out ignoring me?" a familiar voice asked.

"Bill? What are you doing here?"

"I've been messaging you for almost fifteen minutes now. Why'd you stop replying?"

Charlotte blinked. "Sorry. Just... lost in the ether, I guess."

"Lotta that going on around here today," Bill said.

"Really? That joke felt appropriate to you?"

"Sorry," Bill flatly replied.

"Whatever," Charlotte said. Without being able to see his face, she had no idea whether he was sincere, and she was eager to get back to her wallowing. "Why the hell are you ghosting anyway?"

"If you'd reply to your messages, I wouldn't have to! I'm still officially unavailable - I just don't want anyone else trying to interface with me directly. Listen -- I need to talk to you about the Gate. Things are happening."

A soft, utilitarian guitar chord played off to Charlotte's side, and a moment later a new window opened in front of her, offering a livefeed of the lab and the two towering, laser-cut titanium frames standing at its center. Charlotte couldn't help

but think about how the intradimensional short cut swirling inside each end of the Gate matched the milky aquamarine color of the soap in the ladies' restroom.

Vijay's threaded-steel lifeline was still situated perfectly at the center of the rightmost portal, pulled taut against an automated winch offscreen, thrumming slightly in the rippling vortex. For a moment, Charlotte could picture Vijay in his oversize protective suit, plodding forward one clumsy step at a time until the vortex enveloped him like so much cheap soap. She wondered whether Vijay would have that same pseudo-pleasant smell on his suit if -- *when*, she corrected herself, *when* -- he emerged on the other side of the portal. She hoped not; each whiff of the lingering scent on her hands brought her a little closer to vomiting for the second time that afternoon.

PR had cut the general feed five minutes after the cable stopped moving, and evidently there hadn't been much change in the intervening ninety minutes. The most noticeable difference was a stapler tied to the cable, dangling above a duct tape line on the linoleum, turning ever so slightly from the vibrations in the line.

"Doesn't look like anything's--" Charlotte stopped short as something caught her eye. She touched her fingers to the window, opening her palm and widening the feed. The portals appeared to

be glowing brighter and then darkening, with each interval holding slightly longer than the last.

"Why are the portals doing that?" she asked.

"That's what I wanted to talk with you about. The Gate is starting to destabilize."

"Come again?" Vijay had never mentioned the possibility during their talks about the experiment, or in any of his copious notes on the subject.

"The Gate wasn't meant to be kept open for this long," Bill explained. "That glowing is the beginning stages of a dark energy flare."

Charlotte shook her head. "Vijay never said anything about destabilization or energy flares. He told me the Gate was a rip in space-time."

"Yeah, but that localized wormhole is powered by dark energy. Vijay built a very efficient mechanism for capturing, storing and projecting that energy. It's so efficient that the longer the mechanism runs, the greater the chance it destabilizes and allows the wormhole to expand and engulf everything in its path."

"Starting with us," Charlotte whispered.

"Precisely. And we're not sure it'll stop there. Hence our conundrum -- the great city of Chicago is going to have a tough time marketing the West Side as an industrial investment

opportunity if it's been sucked into a wormhole and, er... spat out into itself." He chuckled mirthlessly. "We still haven't wrapped our heads around exactly how that would work, but the overall consensus is that it'll be a thoroughly, permanently unpleasant experience for everyone involved."

"How long does he have before full destabilization?"

"An hour, maybe. And that's probably pushing it."

Charlotte's lip curled. *God damn you, Vijay.*

It was so like him to leave something like this out in favor of advancing his own agenda. Of course, it was that selfish, ruthless bravado had attracted Charlotte to him in the first place as he sought funding and a home for his project. But that same bravado had totally, disgustingly abandoned him in the face of advancing their relationship. She'd asked where his drive and passion were for taking things beyond separate apartments and shared keys, but more and more Vijay preferred fighting, preferred noise, preferred distance. Exploration and answers were reserved for the research floor.

Charlotte considered for a moment whether the whole Gate project might have just been Vijay attempting to create a third option besides leaving her or loving her. Maybe the dark energy flare actually *was* the preferable outcome. Charlotte didn't realize she was frowning until Bill spoke again.

"Sorry, Charlotte," Bill said. "I know this can't be easy to hear."

"It's fine. I appreciate you telling me." It wasn't, and she didn't, but it was just one of those things you had to say. Charlotte glanced at the swirling vortex on her screen. "Is he even still alive in there?" The question had to be asked, even if she could, against all the protests of her rational brain, *feel* Vijay out there, somehow.

"His vitals are still showing normal, but 'normal' in terms of quantum flux is, well..." Charlotte could hear the helpless shrug in Bill's voice.

"So what happens now? Do you just shut the Gate down with him inside?" *It would serve him right*, she thought, immediately hating herself.

"No - he'd be annihilated for sure. We're actually talking about reeling him back out."

Charlotte swallowed thickly. "You can't be serious. What about the rats?"

"What did Vijay tell you?"

"He said it was like you'd put them in a microwave and hit start." For a few moments, the creak of Bill's chair was the only indication Charlotte had that he was still in the conference. She was glad she couldn't see his face.

"Yeah," Bill finally said, his voice barely audible over the general din of the virtual conference room. "Yeah, it was something like that."

"Jesus Christ."

"Mhmm." Bill sighed. "But it's the best chance we've got at keeping this shitstorm from becoming a fecal hurricane."

"You don't sound too upset."

"I've had some time to wrestle with it. Vijay's one of a kind, but we're talking his life against the lives of everyone in the city. Maybe more."

Charlotte chewed her lip, her thoughts drifting to her last fight with Vijay, several days ago, now. Their worst yet, fueled by a mutual unspoken dread that Vijay's pending trip through the Gate would be the last they'd ever see of each other. The experience culminated in Charlotte's second black-out drunk night that year, followed by nearly a week of lonely nights in her own apartment passing in a haze of boxed Chardonnay and Oxygen made-for-TV movies. The sequence played again and again in her head, a miniaturized resonance cascade, a thrumming tuning fork that threatened to tear her mind and heart apart.

Resonance. The thought fired off some emergent notion in the back of Charlotte's mind, ricocheting around and shedding its layers until it finally revealed its core.

"Bill," Charlotte whispered. "There's too much noise."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Gate - you tested it using small animals and cadavers, right?"

"Yeah. They all came out fine. What's your point?"

"Did you ever anchor any of them before sending them through?"

"No, why would we? They were just --"

"Exactly. We can't afford to lose Vijay, so he's been hooked to the cable. But look --" Charlotte swiveled the live feed over to Bill. " -- it's vibrating like a guitar string."

"That's the force of the Gate acting on the cable."

"What if it's the other way around? The cable is vibrating in the Gate, and causing a feedback loop that's got Vijay caught in there."

The outline of Bill's body suddenly appeared in the chair. A moment later, his form became corporeal with a brief, crackling flash. His brown eyes were intense as he studied the screen.

"My God," Bill said a moment later, pulling off his glasses and rubbing a hand across his eyes as he leaned back in the chair. "No wonder he's so crazy about you. But even if that's the case - what are we supposed to do? We can't shut off the Gate."

"No," Charlotte agreed. "But you can shut off the entrance portal."

Bill's eyes flicked over to hers. "That might strand him in there."

"If we pull him out, he dies. If we shut the whole thing down, he dies. If we leave the Gate open, we all die. If we do this..." She shrugged. "Maybe it's best to just cut him loose."

Hearing the words out loud dislodged something else in her head. She pictured Vijay's face, that handsome visage pressed against hers in the depths of passion. The face twisted in anger, screaming at her about pushing too hard, asking too much. The face contorted in sadness as she emasculated him time and time again. Charlotte pushed the thoughts from her mind. Bill was rubbing his stubbly chin.

"Anything's better than what happened to those rats," he mused. "I'll run it by the team downstairs. You want to meet up in person and come along?"

"That's okay. I'm going to stay on the call."

"What are you talking about? This was your idea, and I'm sure Vijay would love to see--"

"I... don't need to see him," Charlotte cut in.

"Alright," Bill said, though his tone was uncertain. "If it works, want me to tell him anything for you?" Charlotte nodded.

"Tell him I love him, and that I never want to see him again."

Bill shot her a puzzled look, but when her expression didn't change, he nodded, then vanished in a Xerox flash.

Charlotte's hand wavered over the livefeed from the Gate for a moment, her eyes locked on the tether thrumming in the center of the swirling vortex. Then she dismissed the window and sank back in her chair, waiting for an update like everyone else.