

**ONCE THEY SEE YOU
NOWHERE IS SAFE.**

**ERIC
MALIKYTE**

ECHOES OF OLYMPUS MONS

Olympus One colony students Hal Leon and Akio Sato have made history. Their invention, a camera that images dark matter, has had its first successful test; but what it reveals may put human life on Mars in jeopardy.

Hal believes that the strange animalistic silhouettes hidden in the dark matter web prove his theories. The wiry, inhuman forms appear to look to the sky at some invisible threat before they're wiped away by a wave of nothingness that resets the dark matter web to normal, until it all repeats again—a never-ending cycle.

That is, until something else appears in the dark matter web, and students and colonists alike start dying under mysterious circumstances. Can Hal and Akio figure out what's causing these grisly murders, and does the dark matter camera somehow hold the key to the mystery?

**ECHOES OF
OLYMPUS MONS**

**A NOVEL BY
ERIC MALIKYTE**

ericmalikyte.com



ECHOES OF OLYMPUS MONS
Copyright © 2018, by Eric Malikyte
All rights reserved.

|

Sunrises on Mars are always strange to behold. I watched a small white globe cut through a cobalt-blue haze over Olympus Mons, cascading its light dimly across the red planet's dusty surface. I'd been living here almost three years, and the sight never ceased to captivate me. The most morbid part of me imagined what it would be like if I tore off my protective suit and felt the Martian elements for myself. If I didn't die from being flash-frozen first, I'd lose consciousness within little more than fifteen seconds. Hardly enough time to feel the dusty breeze on my icy skin, no? People on Earth don't know how lucky they are, how much they take for granted.

So, until humanity could find the means to terraform Mars, I'd have to enjoy my Martian sunrises from within the confines of the EVA suit.

Within minutes, the sky transitioned into its usual butterscotch tone, and the experience was over. A new Sol had begun.

A familiar jingle rang through my helmet. Akio was calling.

"Answer," I said.

"Yo, Hal," Akio said. "Just wanted you to know Wolfrik knows about your unscheduled walkabout. He's pissed!"

"I'll bet he is." I frowned and turned for the airlock. My heads-up-display was telling me I only had three minutes of oxygen left anyway. "Thanks for the warning."

"Uh-huh, see you at home."

I was always very thorough when hacking the airlock logs and removing myself from the security footage. Someone must have overheard me talking to Akio about my morning walkabouts in the corridor. Whoever it was had snitched on me—most likely fearing that I was going to end up another lost human popsicle—otherwise there'd be no way Wolfrik could have known about it.

I had to wait a few seconds for the airlock to compress, and for decontamination procedures to finish up. A red light on the far wall turned green, telling me that it was safe to remove my suit. I popped the latches one by one and strolled into the EVA staging area. Most of us found the official term boring. Walkabout always seemed far more fitting, especially after some Australian student named Connor Wilson had gotten cabin fever, suited up, and walked off into the Martian sunset. The last thing he'd said was: "Goin' on walkabout, be back maybe, tell my mum I said hi." At first everyone thought it was a joke, until he'd been gone long past the time that his air supply would support him for. They're still trying to find his body with the satellites. The sandstorms probably buried him long ago; Olympus Mons is a massive area to search for something so small. Since then, no student at Olympus One has been authorized to go out on an EVA without the supervision of a trained Milkyway Unlimited employee. Mars is a desolate, angry world. Never know when, or if, you'll come back.

I removed several layers of insulation and cloth that could almost be considered armor, before I heard the hiss of the door opening and footfalls at my back.

I turned to face Wolfrik; his face was contorted, his eyebrows furrowed, his beady blue eyes stabbing at me. I smiled.

"Why do you smile?" he asked. *Why do you smile?* His German accent always cut through when he was angry.

"I had a nice walkabout."

He folded his arms, probably in an attempt to keep himself from choking me. "Tell me, Geraldo. Why is it that you do not seem to believe in procedure, or safety?" *Tell me, Eralto. Why is it that you do not seem to believe in prosheture, or shafety.*

This was serious. He'd used my legal first name.

I sighed. "It's not that I don't believe in it."

"Then what?" *Then vhat?*

I shrugged. Maybe honesty was my best bet? "Look, I just needed to get out for a little while. See the sunrise without three fucking feet of transparent polymer in the way. There's a world out there and I'm going stir-crazy in here."

As long as he didn't know I hacked the door logs and the security cams, I should be able to get off without much more than a stern warning and a slap on the wrist.

He sighed; the hard look in his eyes did not soften. "Yes, it would seem that your family is no stranger to madness."

"Excuse me?" My fists tightened; my teeth clenched, sending pressure through my skull.

He jerked back, flinching as if he feared I'd knock his fucking teeth out. I was real tempted. When I didn't, he paused and considered me. His eyes softened momentarily. Then, he shook his head, sighing.

"Fine," he said. "If you go out again, and something goes wrong"—he jammed his wrinkled finger into my chest—"it is your own fault. I will hold no responsibility for your actions. Is that understood?"

I gritted my teeth and nodded. Wolfrik turned for the door. I could have let it end there. But something snapped inside of me.

"So, just like it was with Connor Wilson?" I said.

He turned around, his face contorted. "What did you say?"

"Your solution to my walkabout fascination?"

"This was different."

"I don't think so. You acted in your best interests to keep the investigation team off your back so you could keep your job. It's nice to know that you'll extend me the same courtesy should the same happen to me."

His eyes narrowed; his pale German skin turned a ripe, apple red. "Get out of my sight and get to class!"

I could feel Wolfrik's eyes stabbing holes through me as I made my way to the door. The doors hissed, and I passed through them. I should have kissed his ass and begged for forgiveness, considering he has the power to end my career in academia with a few careful words to the right people.

I stopped in the hall. Echoing footfalls from passing students filled my ears as I remembered her lying in that hospital bed the night she overdosed. My mother had an IV coming out of her good arm. Doctors had no trouble finding the vein.

I remembered the lifeless look in her eyes, and the piercing glare from my father as he held her limp hand by the bedside.

I remembered what his eyes said: "*Your sin did this.*"

2

Planetary Physics was lasting about three hours too long. Professor Brown droned on about Martian terraforming theories... you know, if we actually had the ability to kick start Mars's core. Not much point to mowing the grass if your atmosphere gets blown away by the solar wind.

The problem, of course, is that there is no known technology that can force Mars' core to generate a powerful magnetic field again. And even then, there's the possibility that Mars just doesn't have enough mass to sustain an atmosphere. Whatever transformed the planet into a desolate hellhole billions of years ago did a damn good job of it.

I caught myself drawing angry stick people shaking their fists at the solar wind.

The ADHD is strong with me.

I slid my personal tablet out of my pack and began to work on the blueprints to my and Akio's magnum opus, what we called the dark matter camera. I tapped my stylus on the metallic edge of my tablet, staring at the design I'd made. Akio's suggestions from the night before hung over my work like sticky notes. She wanted to redesign the case, fearing overheating, and as much as it pained me to admit it, she was right.

I felt someone kick my left foot. It was Gila, an Israeli botany major. The whites of her eyes were like polished marble against her eye-shadow, to merely call her cute would be an

insult to her beauty. She and I had spoken only a handful of times in the past. Most people knew who she was by the Armada tattoo she had on her neck. Apparently, she was a huge gamer.

She leaned in, her pale brown eyes focused on my blueprints. "What's that?"

"Oh, just a little something I've been cooking up," I said.

"Yeah? Looks complicated."

I grinned. "You might say someone who majors in botany might find it a little complicated."

"Come on." She frowned, kicked me again. "What is it?"

"All right, fine. Theoretically, it can detect concentrations of dark matter and three-dimensionally map them."

"Mars has dark matter?"

My eyes drifted from Gila to where Professor Brown was standing, droning on about nanobots or some other bullshit. She was sufficiently distracted with the details of manipulating her lecture program through the tablet interface. I leaned in to Gila and kept my voice nice and low.

"Uh, yeah, dark matter's everywhere," I said. "Well, sort of. It's more that what we *call* dark matter is everywhere."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, back in the early twenty-first, it was thought that dark matter and dark energy made up ninety-nine percent of the visible universe. Dark matter was thought to be made up of something other than baryonic matter, and dark energy was this mysterious energy that permeated the entire universe. We went decades believing in a thing we only knew existed through numbers and equations."

"So...it doesn't exist?"

"Not in the way we once thought. The two are in fact aspects of the same force, existing outside our perceptive reality, but occupying the same space. Richard Roth discovered that shortly after the third world war. His gravity well experiments proved that not only were dark matter and energy the same, but that they permeated the whole universe, and the effects could be felt through every dimension. When the discovery was made public, it was Roth who eliminated the term 'dark energy' all together."

"So...it *does* exist?"

"Yeah, but we can't really do much with it. We can tell it's there, and some researchers are developing ways to harness it as fuel for faster-than-light engines, but progress is quite slow."

"If no one can use it, why make a camera that can see it?" She grinned.

"Do you know what causes evolution?"

"Natural selection."

"No, that's the *process* of evolution, not the *cause*. I mean what causes complex life and consciousness to evolve in the first place. What makes a thing decide to become a thing."

"Decide?" She shook her head. "Sounds like you're looking for God."

"Negative." I grinned. "I'm looking for the origin of consciousness, a mechanism through which information is transferred through quantum entanglement."

"Well, I don't know what that is."

"Right, well, no one else does either. I—well, Akio and I—think that dark matter has something to do with how life started on Earth—"

"Is Akio your girlfriend?" I could almost feel her heart beat from where I sat.

"What? No. We're just roommates."

She smiled. "Go on."

"Anyway, we think dark matter is what drives evolution. If we can prove that—" I sighed, strangling my stylus. "—then..."

"Then what?"

"Then I can—"

"Oh..." She froze. The whites of her eyes became widened ovals.

"What is it?"

I looked forward, and the professor was staring right at us.

"Harold," the professor said. She always fucked up my name. "That is a fascinating anecdote on dark matter. Would you care to tell me what it has to do with the study of planetary magnetic fields?"

She'd tapped right into the audio controls in my desk to listen in. Sneaky bitch.

"My name is Hal, Professor, and *gladly*." I stood up and gestured with my hands as if to ask to take her place at the front of the classroom; Gila gave me a worried look and shook her head, as if she knew what I'd do next. "It's a stretch, but, based on the fact that we have equations that utilize dark matter as an energy source for FTL engines, and if dark matter is everywhere—as Richard Roth proposed—then we should be able to use the same technology

that would allow for FTL speeds in space craft to reignite Mars' core and get it spinning again. This is, of course, something that could be achieved much easier through magnetic induction, but you asked how dark matter relates to our class's subject matter."

"And why do you think that harnessing dark matter would produce enough energy to reactivate the core?"

"Given the fact that an object that is moved up to or beyond the speed of light has infinite mass, this isn't too much of a stretch from my point of—"

"We don't have the technology to harness dark matter, *Harold*," Brown said. "This class is about applying current technologies and proposing real-world solutions to the problem, not *science fictions* like the one you propose."

"Yes, and we see just how well real-world solutions work out. As I recall, the attempts to create a planet-wide magnetic field generator on the surface resulted in making the Schiaparelli crater three times larger—and three times as charred—instantly vaporizing its inventor, no less."

"Accidents happen sometimes. Just because people die testing a prototype technology does not mean it isn't viable. By your logic, we should have ignored every important scientific discovery made by Marie Curie before she died of radiation exposure."

"It sure would have made the cold war more pleasant."

The class erupted in laughter. The professor fumed at the collar, and poor Gila buried her head in her arms trying to hide her embarrassment.

"It is mankind's folly and arrogance to assume that we can do things better than nature itself," I said. "It would be better to use technology to revive the core than to try to supplement a working one on the surface with technology that's proved to be unreliable. Surely, even you see that?"

"Even me? What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?"

I shook my head. "Nothing, I'm only saying that, while it's a noble pursuit to try to solve Mars' magnetosphere problem solely with our technology, we've already seen that it's far more difficult than we initially thought. It was once thought that living on Mars was a 'science fiction' that would never be realized, and yet here we are."

"I think you've derailed this lecture enough already, Mr. Leon."

"And here I thought I was contributing a worthy debate topic."

"And now you can leave."

Perhaps I should have listened to Gila?

I'm an idiot. Professor Brown had been looking for a reason to throw me out of class again. That made three times that I'd been thrown out of a lecture in two different classes, and the disciplinary committee—headed by Wolfrik—would be breathing down my neck about it. Although, with the most extreme consequence they could throw at me, the expense to send me back to Earth would be more than my degree multiplied by many thousands, and I'd argue exactly that.

The rumor mill would be spinning again after this. I'd got a bit of a reputation around the colony for being a pretentious asshole, and it's not entirely unfounded. My father would be so *proud* of me. The fact of the matter is, I imagined that living on Mars would mean far less human interaction.

It hadn't exactly worked out like I imagined. Most colonies on Mars are forced to conserve space, and Olympus One was no exception. Even though I was an undergraduate at university level, the school component of the colony comprised most degree programs beyond high school. There were only one hundred people on-site, and even so, the colony could feel surprisingly cramped. I could feel it, walking the corridors. How at any moment, one disaster, one mistake, could send us all to our deaths.

Technology had advanced quite a bit since the first settlers came to Mars, with their weak canvas HABs and their rovers, but the danger here was still quite real. They had to rotate the use of each airlock into the colony after one of them imploded from overuse. There was a microscopic hole in the material that sealed the hatch from the Martian elements beyond. Three students and one professor died in that one. Then there was the smallpox scare that caused a whole sector to get quarantined—some idiot had thought it'd be interesting to see how smallpox would grow in Mars' low gravity.

Hell, you had to sign about thirty legal wavers before they'd even let you on the space elevator, let alone the ship.

It was only 10:30 in the morning; I had the entire Sol to myself. I decided to rush back to my apartment and get some more work done on the dark matter camera. Akio had class till 14:30, so she wouldn't be home for quite some time—I'd have a head start on the prototype.

I waved my palm in front of the keypad and the door to my dorm room; the lights blinked green and the door hissed open. My kitchen was a mess: plastic reusable plates, a half empty bottle of "gin," and what remained of last night's feast were scattered all across the bar

where I'd passed out. I grabbed the gin and took a long swig; my eyes locked on the lab and the prototype.

It was scattered in several components on the workstation (which comprised what any ordinary student would call their living room). Wires ran everywhere, leading into a small hydrogen power cell Akio had "liberated" from a rover that was under maintenance. You might call it overkill for a glorified interferometer, but this way the camera would never run out of power if we had to leave it on the surface for an extended period of time. Most automated tech sent out to roam the surface was solar powered; all it would take was one sandstorm and the solar cells would be useless. Akio had originally proposed using a hydrogen cell as a joke, but when we considered long-term surveys of the surface where we might not have easy access to the device, it became clear that no other battery would do.

I shuffled past the other prototype cameras, each in various stages of development. One was to function as a helmet. We'd built it using a headset for one of those augmented-reality games that so many students get distracted by. There were a few that bore some resemblance to the final prototype design we'd come up with; some had bulkier cases, botched wiring jobs (which, despite what Akio says, were not my fault), inferior interfaces, and corrupted operating systems.

Stretching some gloves over my hands, I dropped my goggles over my eyes and got to work.

Once the screen was attached to the casing, I reached to power it on...but hesitated. The obvious, minute danger of testing an experimental hydrogen-powered device aside, I knew that Akio would want to see it. I wouldn't have been able to get this far without her.

My hand dropped back to my side, and I looked around my—our—messy living space.

She had been irate about the state of the kitchen in the morning before my walkabout. If she saw it like this when she came home, I'd end up with a soldering iron burning through my abdomen for sure. I attempted to kill some time by cleaning house, washing the dishes, and throwing dirty coveralls into the laundry vat...but those activities only managed to kill an hour. I grabbed my tablet and sent Akio a coded message.

Hal: *I have a surprise for you when you return.*

She was likely in class, so she probably couldn't respond immediately. I toyed with the idea of hunting down Gila's profile on the shared drive and harassing her about what Brown had done after I was booted out of class, but before I could go through with my plan, I heard a message notification ring on my tablet.

Akio: **GASP* You're going to propose. And after all this time!*

Hal: *Ha. Ha. Can you get out of class early?*

Akio: *Unlike you, some of us value our education and opportunities at Olympus One.*

Hal: *I guess I'll just activate the prototype alone, then.*

Akio: *You finished it?!*

Hal: *Can you get out of class?*

Akio: *And tell Prof. Thornhill what exactly?*

Hal: *Stick your finger down your throat and yak on the floor or something.*

Akio: *Oh, talk dirty to me, baby.*

Hal: *Just figure something out. You have thirty minutes.*

Akio: *Fine, fine, jeez.*

I waited impatiently for thirty-five minutes, putting some old Rush recordings on to keep me company.

Akio shook her head upon entering our dorm room.

"You know, if I didn't know better, I'd swear you were actually a bear," she said. "Think of it, first bear on Mars."

"I did clean, you know," I said.

"Yeah—" she took a careful look at the slight improvement I'd made on the kitchen—"you managed to clean *half* your mess up."

"You came to see the results of our experiment, didn't you?" I picked up the device, careful not to disturb its connection to the hydrogen fuel cell.

"Yes. What the hell have you done to my baby?"

She rushed up and grabbed at it. Her body was small, almost boyish, and her personality matched. She eyed the machine closely, rolling it around in her field of vision, the way a mother might examine her young for lice.

"Looks like you took my suggestion to heart about the casing," she said.

"Yeah, well, seemed like an exploding hydrogen cell would be bad for my health."

"Oh, please, the new cells only have a one-percent chance of exploding." She stuck her tongue out at me, then returned her focus to examining the prototype. "And it seems like you didn't completely botch my wiring, despite your enormous fingers."

"Fuck off."

She smiled and set the prototype back in my hands. "So, should we do it here?"

I shook my head. She wasn't going to like what I was about to suggest. "We're going outside."

She stared at me for a second, her face twisted like a cat freshly doused. It was almost cute.

"You know," she said, "I always defended you when others called you a reckless sociopath, and a pretentious asshole... but now—"

"We don't know if it'll work, Akio. And even if there's only a one-percent chance, if anything were to go wrong, and the fuel cell ruptured, the entire colony would be at risk. Remember the douchebag who released smallpox into the colony?"

"Shit, we don't want to be that guy."

"Yeah, we don't want to be that guy." I grinned.

"Did I mention how much I hate you right now? Because I hate you."

"Let's suit up."

4

Daylight was dying in the west behind us; Olympus One's bulbous, round buildings and interconnected tubes and junctures were silhouetted against the dim blue haze of the sunset. Our own silhouettes bobbed and mixed unevenly with the dusty surface as we carefully made our way to the spot where we'd test the camera.

"Turn it on," Akio said.

I turned my whole body to face her, now garbed in her own EVA suit; Phobos was completing its last orbit of the day behind her.

"Here goes," I said.

I opened the camera shutter, pressed the power button.

The machine, cupped in my hands, sent vibrations up my arms. It was almost soothing. The serrated vents on the side gave off a slight glow, giving hints at the internal structure of the interferometer. The lens extended, and the digital display in front of me showed the mirrors and magnifiers shifting into position inside the camera. The hydrogen fuel cell stayed cool on my belt, thanks in part to Mars' sub-zero temperatures. The data started to pour in.

"Anything yet?" Akio asked.

"Not sure," I said. "The data could take some time to compile if the concentration isn't dense enough..."

"But, if we did it right, it shouldn't matter where we are, or how much dark matter there is, right?"

"I see what you did there."

"I know, clever, right?"

I nodded. The data finally seemed to finish compiling, and the three-dimensional image began to render.

It was like looking at the known universe at a distance. The image known as the "universal web" came immediately to my mind. We were but tiny specs at the center of a massive, glowing web of violet energy, with filamentary networks that stretched into and out of everything. Individual strands of dark matter connected each and every glowing cluster of energy, like strands in a widow's web. There were thousands of those clusters, stretching up into the night sky, a lattice-work of chaos that blotted out even the brightest stars in the panorama. It was a network that stretched through and permeated every dimension, every world, every nook and cranny of the universe. Created from detecting the slight—microscopic—variations in atoms and molecules in our physical reality caused by matter intersecting with dark matter. And we were the first ones to ever see it.

I looked up and smiled.

What was displayed on the screen seemed to jive with some of the reports from the data taken from satellites that had been retrofitted to detect dark matter in space, but those couldn't actually image the dark matter, and they certainly couldn't do the image before my eyes justice.

For the first time since coming to Olympus One, I felt a fire burning inside of me.

"It worked," I said.

"Wow, really?" Akio said. "It's like I haven't been standing here watching you this whole time."

Akio quickly grabbed the machine, spinning me around awkwardly in the process. Her eyes went wide and took on the glow from the monitor inside her helmet. I stifled a chuckle.

"Wow," she said. "I imagined it'd look different."

"We're the first to see it," I said.

"Wicked." She grinned. "We're gonna be stupid rich from this."

"Oh, and just what do you expect to do with money on Mars?"

She stuck her tongue out at me, and I took the machine back.

"We should head back just in case Wolfrik changes his mind about my extra-colonial activities," I said. "I don't want to chance him seeing the machine before we have a chance to patent it..."

"Has anyone ever filed a patent from Mars?"

"Not that I know of..."

I wrapped the cable up and powered the machine down, making sure to save the data gathered. I couldn't wait to get it back inside and take a deeper look at the holographic snapshot. Akio started walking ahead of me.

It's funny how genderless we all look inside a space suit. Most of Akio's features were obscured, but her dainty walk gave her away. The way she always remained dignified with each step...like a cat always seems regal after recovering from a falling on its face.

I remembered my mother getting dressed up for date night. Father was late coming home from work. The makeup she'd used to cover the black eye was convincing, but my mind painted it back into place. Even in her shame, she wanted to feel dignified.

"Hal," Akio said, bringing me back to reality. "Are you going to show it to your dad when you get back?"

"Yeah," I said. "If it leads where I hope it leads."

"If we can use the data to prove our hypothesis."

"I have a feeling it will."

"Darwin would fucking love us."

"Maybe."

"No maybe about it." She turned around, her face lit up under the harsh crimson light inside the airlock. "It's not every day that you discover the mechanism behind evolution. I imagine he'd extend his hand, bow, and say something like, 'righteous job, dudes.'"

"Dudes?"

The chamber pressurized, the light on the door flickered from red to green.

"I watched a lot of cartoons as a kid," she said.

"Obviously."

"Like you didn't?"

"Cartoons were of the devil."

"No way!" She covered her mouth like it was a surprise that my childhood had been sheltered.

"I'm already thinking about how the panorama fits our theory."

"Me too, I can't get the striations that connect each of the clusters out of my head."

"You think that's how information passes between celestial objects?"

She nodded. "It could be, yeah. Like electrical impulses passing from the brain to various parts of the body?"

"We need to be careful not to get too far ahead of ourselves, though. We need to collect as much data as possible."

"Duh."

We were halfway through undressing when she looked up at me, her eyes softened.

I avoided her gaze.

"What?" I asked.

"Don't you think it's cruel?" she asked, trying to hop one leg into her coveralls.

"Don't I think what's cruel?"

"Trying to destroy someone's faith?"

I shrugged. It was more complicated than that. Something I couldn't put into words. "Not like he'll believe it anyway. He'll think it's some devilish trick. Hell, I bet he doesn't even believe we're all really here on Mars, like it's some stage in Hollywood or something."

She nodded. Akio came from a loving family, a sane family most likely. I doubted that she could relate.

We finished getting dressed, stashed the suits where we found them, and hacked the logs on the doors and lockers to make it look like we were never there. I'd erase the footage from the cameras later to complete the job.

When we got home, Akio broke the silence by saying goodnight and retreating to her room. I was too restless to sleep, so I loaded the three-dimensional snapshot onto my tablet and began inspecting it.

The image was, essentially, a panorama of the Martian surface surrounding myself and Akio, with the holographic dark matter network overlaid on top. The sky was a haunting deep purple; the silhouette of a dust storm raged off in the distance, clawing at the frigid air, fighting for life on a world where there was none. The land was almost black beneath our feet, save for the lights on the camera and our suits that illuminated the red Martian soil.

The web was composed of violet striations, which seemed to have thicker concentrations out in the distance of the image. I zoomed into each striation, each cluster, which had striations and branching filaments of their own, curving, bridging, flowing through the planet as if they were the strings on which it dangled.

There seemed to be larger concentrations around (and through) Akio, as well as through my own body. The dark matter around Akio seemed to be spinning, reaching into the air, while the concentration around me was dull, faded. I dragged it around a full 360 degrees.

Something, however, caught my eye. I zoomed in several times. I shook my head, rubbed my eyes.

It had to be a misread of the data...

There was a violet humanoid shape several feet away from where Akio and I were standing in the image.

Maybe the shape was nothing more than a data fragment, or a repetition of the same violet dark matter formations seen around my and Akio's bodies? That would be the most likely explanation; but, something, maybe intuition, told me that wasn't the case, that it was something else entirely.

For one, the violet silhouette's arms and legs were in a completely different position than mine or Akio's. That wouldn't be the case if it was just a ghost image caused by the camera stitching the photographs together to make the panorama.

It was almost as if that violet silhouette was taunting me, daring me to take a trip down the rabbit hole.

And down the hole I went.

The dark matter concentrations around Akio and me reminded me of a research project I'd done last semester on non-local consciousness. There are some quantum physicists who theorize that human consciousness is not merely an effect of the brain. That the human mind exists in the same place as the body, but in a different dimension. My research project was about the idea, and the theory, that consciousness is made of dark matter.

I still remember the argument vividly.

"I just can't accept this, Geraldo," Professor Jameson said. "Your argument for this is heavily biased and it shows."

"And yours isn't?" I asked.

"I'll admit, I don't like the theory one bit, but I would have been willing to give you a higher mark if you'd at least tried to remain unbiased when discussing other theories that contradict your own. You have an almost religious fanaticism when it comes to this."

That set me off. "Seriously? Religious? I was unbiased when I mentioned the other theories. You're using your opinion of me as an excuse to tank my grade on this paper."

"That's a pretty heavy accusation, Geraldo."

"Hal."

"Hal,' you need to realize that not everyone shares your view on this, and you're going to get laughed out of every class you bring it up in, especially if you use 'remote-viewing' and 'near-death-experiences' as evidence. Hell, I would have been slightly more accepting if you came out and said ghosts were real, and you were the reincarnation of Albert Einstein!"

"I didn't use those as evidence." I crossed my arms. "If you actually read the fucking thing, I used them as an example of good areas that might benefit from further study, considering it's not a huge stretch to imagine that dark matter and quantum entanglement probably have some relationship. If a particle can describe another particle's spin from any distance, who's to say that humans don't have some latent ability to do the same? There are cases of mothers feeling the exact moment when their child dies, and the same is true of twins that experience traumatic events."

"And this somehow means that consciousness is non-local?"

"I'm not the only one who believes in this, you know?"

"Really? Where are these mythical creatures?" He looked around me at the class behind me. "Are there any in here? No? Okay. Looks like you're alone after all."

"I'll prove it someday."

"You won't, not if you continue to try to force-fit the data to your viewpoint. You're just as bad as a twentieth-century creationist who thinks the dinosaurs lived with men."

I slammed my hands on the table. "And you're as blind as someone who thinks the Earth is *flat!*"

I heard chuckles coming from behind me and felt the piercing stare of other students looking up from their terminals to see what all the drama was about.

Professor Jameson glared at me. "Get out of my class."

I smiled. "Gladly."

Professor Jameson and I barely spoke after that. And no other student tried using non-local consciousness as the subject of their paper in one of his courses again.

But, if the dark matter camera were to continuously photograph concentrations around the human body, then perhaps the theory held more water than my professor thought? If the silhouette was reproduced in subsequent tests, things would get even more interesting.

Perhaps it would be *me* who got the last laugh in that particular argument?

I decided to bring these things up to Akio in the morning.

My eyes drifted, lazily, to the clock, and I saw that it was getting late. I moved some papers and boxes off of the couch, and plopped down for a quick nap.

Thanks for Reading Chapter 1!

