

INTRODUCTION

Tuesday, December 18, 1945 – Classified Location, London, England

Bag over his head, hands bound to his chair, and lie detector strapped to his arm, Foster Luck sat in mental anguish—replaying the torturous scene that unfolded an hour earlier. Catching a secret government agency in the act of dissecting a fellow alien was no surprise. It was the main reason he'd avoided them so long.

Physical pain he could watch—take. What he couldn't take was being out of the loop. If he hadn't been so desperate for answers, he wouldn't have risked chasing down his kind at all. He knew three things about the torture victim. One: He was the only other alien Foster knew of on Earth. Two: They'd arrived together. Three: The guy wanted nothing to do with him. He'd run off so fast after they landed, Foster didn't even learn his name.

Foster tested the ropes. *What the hell? Do these assholes think they're gonna torture me too?*

Two pairs of footsteps walked into the room—one stopping in front of him and one behind.

The calm, raspy voice of a British gent spoke in front of him. "Take it off."

Whoever was behind Foster obeyed without a word, marching off and shutting the door.

Losing the bag didn't help much. What little moonlight was shining in through the room's one frosty window gave him silhouettes to work with at best. The space was cold, dusty, and bare, save for the steel tanker desk between him and the interrogator sitting behind it. From what Foster could discern, he was facing an average sized man with a full head of hair—his hands clasped casually in front of him. The guy was all of thirty—maybe.

One thing Foster knew for sure: he was packing scrackers—scrambling devices designed as mental armor against unwanted telepathic inquiries. Their secondary function was tracking, should his interrogator ever get lost. Scramblers plus trackers. *Scrackers*. The Brit had at least one—maybe two. *Humans. So paranoid.*

Foster stared at his interrogator. "You can't lock me up here forever."

A pleasant lilt rolled off the Brit's tongue. "Are you sure about that?"

Foster shook his head. "Look, I'm ..."

"I know who you are. Frankly, I thought you'd be shorter, far less intelligent ... definitely harder to catch."

Foster sniffed. "What makes you think this isn't part of the plan?"

"It isn't."

Foster smirked. "What are you—some kind of mind reader?"

"Hardly. Foster Luck: indestructible alien ... washed up in Lulworth Cove, Dorset via a biomechanical device you call a Well, December the twenty-second, 1348 ... teleporting on the heels of our courageous Vica, whose other-worldly abilities match your own. Mind control, telepathy, dream work, and remote viewing make up your bag of tricks. However, unlike Vica, the teleportation process wiped your memory of all prior events. It was there you parted ways."

Foster glanced away. "Vica. So that's his name. He's ..."

"Much stronger than he was an hour ago."

Foster snapped. "What you're doing back there is wrong."

"What I'm doing?"

Foster fumed. "Indestructible or not—you can't torture him like that."

"My orders are to secure our volunteer—ready him for transport."

Foster frowned. "Volunteer? You expect me to believe that ... vivisection ... was attempted suicide?"

"Are you speaking from experience?"

Foster shook his head. "I've survived everything from Black Death to World War II. Suicide's not at the top of my list. Going home is. If he's like me, dying's ... not an option."

"Perhaps not. Still, it seems you missed the point when he kicked you out of the room."

Foster snapped. "He still hates me. I get it."

"He also wants to die. Apparently 597 years on this planet is more than enough. Can't say as I blame him. Vica's either a hell of a liar—claiming he wants nothing more than to get into heaven—or taking a miserable road to seeing just how resilient he can become. The more pain he endures, the ..."

Foster nodded. "Stronger he gets." He glanced away. "I know."

"The things that man has done to himself ..."

Foster glared. "Never mind."

"So you're the same in every way—physically."

Foster glanced away. "If you say so."

"Except for the amnesia."

Foster smirked. "Guess I nailed my head on the way in. Apparently whoever stuck me in that Well thing didn't think to hand out helmets."

"It didn't impede your mental abilities. How did you finally manage to find Vica?"

Foster looked down. "Based on what I just saw, I'd say I got lucky—looking at the right time. He let his guard down. Must have been regenerating."

"So you've found him after all this time. Satisfied?"

Foster looked up. "I didn't say I could get in his head." He glanced away. "He's too good for that."

"Vica doesn't trust you."

Foster sniffed. "Yah. I caught that after the first hundred years he ducked me."

"And you thought sparing him from pain would change that."

Foster sighed. "I didn't know what I was going to find when I walked in that room. Anyone with a conscience would have done the same."

"Perhaps, but you have a built in insurance policy. He says you worked at BOSS."

Foster shook his head. "Boss? I don't even know who—what—that is."

"According to Vica, you teleported in from a place called Cradle City on a planet called BOSS-16: Biological Origin Science Station—owned by an outfit called FORE."

Foster frowned. "FORE ... as in what—forecasting?"

"It would explain where you both fit in, given your cognitive abilities."

Foster sniffed. "If I could predict the future, I wouldn't be sitting here right now."

"You don't need to predict the future if you can control the present."

Foster sighed.

"Destiny plays a big role in your culture."

Foster nodded. "How's that?"

"According to Vica, it's an entirely different universe—different rules. Unlike Earth, there's no means for reincarnation. Some manage to have incredibly long lives compared to ours, but there's a lot of war between the races. With few exceptions, the closest thing they have to a belief in god is serving a handful of ancient rulers called the Mechanics—once mortal, now claiming immortality. They're very gifted, very powerful, and very well protected."

Foster made a face. "Gods?"

"More like superheroes really. Compared to our scientists they sound like wizards."

Foster shrugged. "Why chase destiny at all if you're one and done?"

"Most races are very proud—take their lives very seriously. They believe in living on through their children—commit to improving family legacies with each generation. Picking a life partner frankly

sounds ... agonizing ... if you ask me. But once they commit, it's usually for life, even if their partner dies."

Foster frowned. "So these old guys ... ?"

"The Mechanics—as in quantum. They stay in control like any other leadership—spreading fear."

Foster smirked. "Fear of getting stuck on some podunk planet?"

"Something called Severxance—the worst kind of death."

Foster nodded. "Sounds like a good old fashioned beheading."

"Severxance wipes your entire identity—all memory of you from your universe. Imagine how people who spend their one and only lifetime dedicated to building a legacy would feel about losing it."

Foster frowned. "Identity?"

"Romantics call it a soul. The scientist in me believes there's a part of us which—at least on Earth—we've yet to quantify. Our senses are so limited. Did you know we see less than one percent of the electromagnetic spectrum?"

Foster nodded. "Huh."

"Those who believe in Severxance fear the dramatic consequences it could have on the very fabric of things. Imagine everything you've ever touched—influenced—in some miniscule way disappearing. Even the smallest difference could alter realities."

Foster nodded. "Sounds hard to prove."

"Exactly—a paradox. How do you know something stopped existing if you can't remember it? Most take it as a myth—instilling fear in people who fear no god. Those who do believe in god, however, think it severs all spiritual ties."

Foster sat back. "Like Vica. So this FORE outfit ... that's what they're after—manifesting some myth?"

"Possibly. The man in charge goes by Hesha—claims he's a natural immortal, unlike the Mechanics—though he won't reveal how he came into being. Many worlds fear he'll abuse his power. They've entered into an immortality race in an attempt to counter him, putting several transhumanism projects of their own in the works."

Foster nodded. "So we're proof of this nut Hesha's immortality breakthrough—Vica and I?"

"It certainly looks that way. Nothing's killed Vica yet—not for lack of trying."

Foster frowned. "And Hesha sent us here?"

"Yes. He refers to himself as the new god of a godless universe—doesn't sit very well with Vica."

Foster smirked. "Not exactly a fan of the makeover."

"Vica joined FORE with the sole purpose of undermining Hesha's efforts. He's against the transhumanism projects as well."

Foster nodded. "So Vica's one of the few—a believer in god—as long as it's not Hesha. Must have been Mr. Popular back home."

"Yes, Vica loves nothing but god. He had a small but growing underground movement before he came here. He wants no part of the material world."

Foster smirked. "Including his fab bod. Sounds like Hesha's exercising revenge. What'd he do—exile Vica?"

"As far as he knows, Vica was never caught. He blames you for him ending up here."

Foster sat back. "Why are we here?"

"He doesn't know. Apparently you forced him against his will before he had a chance to find out. It was all very quick."

Foster frowned. "To hide Hesha's proof?"

“Vica believes your invincibility is a by-product of the Well process. You have to be able to survive the ride. Time will tell if you’ve achieved true immortality. It’s unclear whether you were meant to be a test subject or a minion.”

Foster glanced away. “Why else would I force him here?”

“That, I don’t know. Vica keeps very much to himself. He’s spent the better part of the last six hundred years jumping between religious orders like the Trappist Monks. As much as I believe it pains him to speak of what happened, he’s more interested in inflicting pain on you. He knows keeping you in the dark eats at you.”

Foster sniffed. “Doesn’t sound very monk-y.”

“He won’t give up the details for fear of someone giving you the satisfaction of knowing. A family feud was the most I could piece together. By the time some sort of ... skirmish ... at the BOSS Well ended, all three of you all got dumped here to fend for yourselves.”

Foster frowned. “All *three*?”

“My, you have been in the dark a long time. Yes. The woman, Z, landed first. According to Vica, she took off like a shot—left you both in the Well’s wake. He hasn’t seen her since. Sounds like you missed her on your way in.”

Foster sighed. “I kinda ... had my hands full. What’s her story?”

“Vica knows her by reputation only.”

Foster frowned. “What’s worth risking eternity in this hell hole for?”

“She’s either scouting out something for Heshia or planning on double crossing him. According to Vica, it’s most likely the latter. Z isn’t known for her social skills.”

Foster nodded. “Where is she?”

“Hiding.”

Foster frowned. “Vica can’t find her?”

“Apparently she has a natural ability to block cognitive threats.”

Foster shook his head. “Any other talents?”

“Hunting. Tracking. Piracy. I’m told she makes a good living playing double agent.”

Foster nodded. “Anything else that’ll make me homesick?”

“Most planet’s habitats are much like Earth’s—some more advanced, some less. Though FORE was still testing the teleportation Wells when you left, deep space travel is old hat.”

Foster glanced around the room. “And we speak the same languages?”

“English ... Latin ... German ... a few others, I’m told. Vica said he was as surprised as we were.”

Foster nodded. “Why are you telling me all this? I’ve been scratching my head for almost 600 years.”

“Because I’ve been scratching mine for six months, and I can already see why progress has been so slow all this time. Lackluster technology or not, no one’s going anywhere without some cooperation. Z is most likely an enemy—a competitor at the very least. Vica is in his own bitter little world. That leaves you.”

Foster smirked. “Sorry. I’m no engineer. Pretty sure I never was.”

“No, nor is Vica. Unfortunately neither is Z. Vica thinks she must know the way home or she wouldn’t have risked coming. The way she took off, he believes she was on a mission. For what, is anyone’s guess.”

Foster nodded. “Maybe she went home already.”

“I’m told my predecessors had one sighting twenty years back—in Spain. She slipped away before anyone could catch her.”

Foster shook his head. “This is unbelievable.”

“If she shows again, we’ll be ready.”

Foster sniffed. “Almost six hundred years—just to learn I’ve got a snowflake’s chance in hell at going home? And this Z’s the only one who knows why we’re here?”

“If it’s any consolation, it wouldn’t have done much good for you to know any of this before now. We’re still a long way from developing the Well technology that will get you home. And I doubt your mind is any more at ease.”

Foster looked down. “No.”

“So we push the science—look for project funding.”

Foster looked up. “How do I buy a ticket—once it’s ready?”

“You must be working on your own Well.”

Foster sighed. “Sort of. I don’t exactly have a world power at my disposal.”

“What have you been doing since Vica stormed off and left you in Dorset? You don’t strike me as the Trappist sort.”

Foster shook his head. “Looking for him ... answers.” He glanced away. “Raising some kid.”

“Raising a child—for 600 years? Another alien?”

Foster smirked. “Another Brit—some sort of ... stalker.”

“Stalking you? Go on.”

Foster sniffed. “Vica left Dorset before the real show began.”

“He said there was a couple that died on the beach—in the wrong place at the wrong time. They got hit by the wave the Well created when it connected with the cove.”

Foster nodded. “Yah. They died. But not before the woman begged me to save her son.”

“He didn’t mention a child.”

Foster glanced away. “Infant—easy to miss.”

“So you’d just arrived on Earth—with no memory—still half frozen from the Well process, into a freezing winter bay. And you’d been there, what—all of two minutes—when a dying mother shoved her baby in your arms?”

Foster nodded. “Something like that.”

“I’d say you’ve redefined icy reception. What happened to the parents?”

Foster sighed. “Disappeared. The waves ... pulled them out to sea. I didn’t have a lot of time to think with a freezing little kid in my hands. I took off.”

“You raised him.”

Foster looked down. “Yah.”

“Go on.”

Foster sighed. “And every time he dies he comes back.”

“Reincarnation.”

Foster nodded. “Yah—the gift that keeps on giving.”

“Interesting. We’ve investigated some cases but none claiming this sort of attachment.”

Foster shook his head. “He finds me ... somehow. And all his friends find him—his stalker girlfriend too.” He squinted at the Brit. “Are all orphaned Earthlings stalkers?”

“How do you know it’s him—them?”

Foster glanced away.

“Ah. You’ve got another trick in your bag—something Vica doesn’t know.”

Foster looked down. “I don’t know what I’ve got.”

“Yes you do.”

Foster looked up. “No. I don’t. How do I know I can trust you anyway?”

The Brit tossed his scrackers on the table. There were two.

Foster squinted. “What are those things—scrackers?”

“Is that what you call them?”

Foster nodded. "That's what the kid calls 'em—scrambler/trackers. What do you call them?"

"Uncomfortable. They weren't meant to block you. I'm blocking Vica—and whoever else might be listening. Honestly, he's a fine chap, but no use to anyone in his state of mind."

Foster sniffed.

"What?"

Foster smirked. "Nice try."

"What do you mean: nice try?"

Foster nodded. "You're still blocking."

"I beg to differ."

Foster shook his head. "Let me guess. You're a mathematician ... cryptologist or something? I can get in your noggin but I have no idea what I'm oglin'. Let's just say you're a natural. Sounds like old Vic never told you."

"No."

Foster nodded. "One way to keep you on your toes, I guess." He glanced away. "I'd bet my ticket home that Z woman's some sort of mathematician too."

"Interesting. What have you got that's so valuable?"

Foster sighed. "I don't know it is valuable."

"What does it do?"

Foster shrugged. "Tells me when the stalker's back."

"Go on."

Foster glanced away. "It's like a ... verification system ... some memory triggered bio-chem program in my head that recognizes cognitive connections. Call it my ... circle of friends scanner."

"Vica says you haven't got any friends—at least you didn't."

Foster nodded. "Yah, well ... I've got one."

"Stalker boy."

Foster let out a heavy sigh. "Right now he's eighty-eight ... could go any day."

"Perhaps whatever program's in your head wiped your memory."

Foster hesitated. "There's another player."

"Who?"

Foster glanced away. "Name's Miss Terious—at least that's what I call her."

"Another alien?"

Foster nodded. "Maybe. All I know is she's got enough power to scare herself. We ran into her once—about eight years after I landed on Earth."

"What's her story?"

Foster shook his head. "She and this stalker kid ... I don't know. He had some kind of a thing for her."

"A thing?"

Foster nodded. "Acted like she was some long lost friend ... relative or something."

"Don't tell me she's stalking him?"

Foster shook his head. "We haven't seen her since 1356."

"So, the boy was all of eight—then. And you don't know if she's an alien?"

Foster sniffed. "She can handle the cold, that's for sure. The kid touched her for all of three seconds and got frostbite. When I grabbed him she got startled and blew me away—literally. Not my most graceful moment." He shook his head. "I don't know ... it was damn cold that night—dark. Maybe she had some kind of weapon or something."

"Anything else?"

Foster shrugged. "Nope."

“Miss Terious certainly fits. Did you get a visual?”

Foster shook his head. “Not really. She’s probably five-two, long hair.” He glanced around. “Sorta like this.”

“We cut the power so no one would know we brought you here.”

Foster sighed. “You said you were transporting Vica. Where?”

“America.”

Foster nodded. “Big place.”

“Camp Hero—New York.”

Foster smirked. “Ah, yes. Super fun.”

“Vica gave himself up to the French at one point—selling himself as a new brand of super soldier. The deal was that if they could figure out how his body regenerates they’d be able to craft a new army. And when they figured out how to get him to degenerate, they’d send him to heaven like he wanted.”

Foster nodded. “Sounds like a win-win.”

“When the French couldn’t help him he escaped to MI6. And now, with World War II at an end and the Brits no further along than the French, they’ve begrudgingly made a deal to give him up to the US to pay off some war debt. He wants to go—thinks America has a better chance in the technology race right now. Frankly, I didn’t know quite what I was securing when I signed on. My first encounter with Vica was similar to the experience you had an hour ago. Less bloody.”

Foster nodded. “So America—more funding, more tech.” He eyed the Brit. “You’re part of the deal.”

“Yes. They can’t afford me either.”

Foster glanced away. “What’s your official title?”

“Independent Security Investigator.”

Foster nodded. “Unofficial?”

“Your first line of defense.”

Foster sat back. “So we’re friends now—just like that—partnering up to school Uncle Sam?”

“Would you like to wait another 600 years? I’m quite sure I haven’t got that long. I’m also sure they won’t make good on their promise once they’re done using me.”

Foster shook his head. “What choice do I have, besides another 600 years of spying?”

“Or more. We’ll keep this quiet. Steer clear of Vica.”

Foster sighed. “So what do we do now—slap together some secret handshake?”

“We get the new Science Team on board.”

Foster nodded. “Americans?”

“Some—headed up by Ben Levitt. Ever heard of him?”

Foster shook his head. “No. But I’m sure the kid has. He’s a real whiz, but ...”

“He just wants a ticket. You want to go home.”

Foster cracked a smile. “He wants to sell tickets.”

“Ambitious lad.”

Foster’s smile grew. “You have no idea.”

“Is he trustworthy?”

Foster shook his head. “Hasn’t screwed me over yet. All his friends all check out too.” He glanced away.

“You’ll miss him—if you part ways.”

Foster frowned. “Yah. However this plays out ... all I know is I don’t belong here. I can’t explain it. Feels like ... I left someone behind.”

“Or someone sent you away.”

Foster nodded. "Family feud, huh?"

"He refuses to talk about it."

Foster sighed. "I get my ticket home, he won't have to. When do you think you'll have something, realistically? Watching this planet evolve is like watching ice melt."

"By our estimates, we'll achieve a working Well by 1975. It's the quantum field everyone's hung up on."

Foster sighed. "Aren't there any more geniuses we can scare up?"

"They'll be at Camp Hero in two weeks."

Foster nodded.

"Promise me one thing."

Foster shook his head. "I won't try to off myself."

"Promise me once you remember, you won't forget again."

Foster frowned. "You think this Severxance thing is real?"

"Vica does."

Foster eyed the Brit. "What are you getting out of this—besides a lousy paycheck?"

"I've been offered a ticket from Camp Hero. I won't deny—the chance to live a long life ... see a different universe ... it all sounds wondrous."

Foster shook his head. "You sound like the kid."

"At the end of the day I'm no different than anyone else. I want what we all want."

Foster nodded. "What's that?"

"You of all people should know."

Foster made a face. "A stiff drink and a stiffer ..."

"To be *remembered*. Isn't that really why no one wants to die?"

Foster looked down. "I wonder if anyone remembers me."

"With your charming personality?"

Foster lit up. "I am dreamy."

"I think we're all amnesiacs."

Foster smiled. "Oh, here we go. You mathematicians are all the same—searching for the meaning of life in the numbers."

"Yes—the ultimate puzzle."

Footsteps fell in behind Foster.

He turned in his chair. "I thought we were alone. Who's this guy?"

The man stepped forward and untied him. "Aaron Templeton."

Again, the shadows didn't help. But as Aaron extended his hand for a shake, Foster could see he was a clean cut, average white guy with a straightforward demeanor. Full head of brown hair ... guarded eye contact ... American—Boston accent. "Congratulations. You've officially escaped."

"We all have to trust someone sometime. Aaron's my scracker man—among other things."

The interrogator-turned-friend stood up and walked around the desk, stepping into the light of the window. Unlike Aaron, he had small eyes that twinkled with curiosity and a brave dignity about his gait. One thing was easy to see: his size was determined by wisdom, not weight.

He stepped in front of Foster. "What's your boy's name?"

Foster looked up. "Quinn. I didn't catch yours."

The man extended his hand. "Warren ... Matthews. My friends call me Bunk."

Aaron nodded. "That classified information you just heard is part of the Warren Project."

Foster gave him a firm shake. "Warren Project. Easy to remember. Guys like me appreciate that."

Warren grinned as he turned toward the door. "We're all in the warrens now."

And so, their secret friendship began.

Warren and Aaron's first mission was pulling Camp Hero's young Science Team together. Led by Astrophysicist, Dr. Ben Leavitt, the rest of the team consisted of Quantum Physicist, Dr. Walter Blank, Bio- and Cryo-Physicist, Dr. Reuben Abrams, Computer Scientist, Dr. Stanley Eriksson—better known as Hatter—and Edwina Banks—Eddy—who doubled as Team Linguist and Aaron's right hand. In years to come Warren's daughter, Julia—better known as Hattie—and Aaron's son, James, served as unofficial Warren Project consultants.

While Foster had little to contribute to the Warren Project, Warren became fascinated with the puzzling bio program in his head, especially after witnessing Quinn—an orphan at age six—mysteriously make his way back into Foster's life in 1952. As predicted, Quinn's entourage eventually followed.

For as hard as they worked on both the Wells and Foster's program—which they eventually coined the Template—it was slow going. And in 1970 devastating blows rocked both Quinn and Camp Hero's laboratories literally, obliterating their respective Wells and off-site data. Quinn was one of several resulting casualties—twenty-four at the time.

Rattled from the security breach and forced into the painstaking process of rebuilding Camp Hero's Well from scratch, Warren and Aaron returned to the shadows, putting their secret collaboration with Foster on hold indefinitely. On his own again, Foster worked from his own shadows—attempting to find their saboteur and amassing cash resources in anticipation of Quinn's return. Vica went his own way too—abandoning the Warren Project in favor of a life off-grid.

As predicted, Quinn reunited with Foster, and in 1989 enrolled at MIT. It was there he and a few members of his entourage were unwittingly befriended by Warren's grandson, Max—another promising mathematician.

Also at MIT—and Harvard—at the time was the Camp Hero Science Team, whose schedules were split between their Well rebuild and teaching. Before long the undeniable genius in Quinn, Max, and their closest friends had impressed their esteemed profs so much, they were taken under their collective wing.

Given Quinn's longevity to Camp Hero's Warren Project and relationship with Foster, he was the only student privy to the Science Team's Well information. Warren insisted on keeping his distance and protecting his grandson, Max, who knew nothing of it.

Aaron died mysteriously in 1990 at age seventy-five, leaving his granddaughter, Janis, behind.

The Science Team's last covert meeting with Quinn led him to believe they were near completion of their Well rebuild at Camp Hero. And within days the entire team disappeared. Still cut off from Warren, Foster and Quinn could only wonder what had happened.

In 1992, at age seventy-seven, Warren left Camp Hero unofficially retired.

By the end of 2011 strides in technology finally put Quinn in the position of acquiring the resources he needed for his own working Well, which he predicted to be four years out. Vica, Z, and Miss Terious all stayed quiet—hidden from Foster's cognitive inquiries. And Foster—still indestructible—was no closer to knowing why he was on Earth.

Strides in technology also had a dulling effect on the cognitive relationships Foster was tracking with the Template. The more the Earth's environment filled with radio waves, the harder it was to get a read on anyone. And their circle of friends was starting to fray.