

BEYOND THE MIST

BOOK 1 OF THE CHARA SERIES

Ben Zwicky

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This story was originally published as a serial in Jason's excellent *Sci Phi Journal* alongside some talented new writers and established names that I never imagined seeing my own name alongside. The first three chapters appeared in Issue 2, with two chapters per issue after that, so spare a thought for those readers who had to wait two months per update!

I am grateful to *Sci Phi's* readers for the many encouraging words they had to say about my work, and for the very many good new friends I've made along the way.

Joanne Watson chose an excellent name for the protagonist, I hope you like what I've done with it, Joanne!

I am also indebted to John C. Wright, whose insightful philosophical essays inspired many aspects of this story.

Endorsements

“Like a science fictional Pilgrim’s Progress.”

D. G. D. Davidson, Sci-Fi Catholic

"A journey into strangeness...

A man with no name and no memories awakens flying in formless mists. So begins a strange journey in search of answers. Are we our memories or the result of our choices? How does one rise above the primitive? What is needed for civilization? Can we really leave the past behind and start anew? This is the journey where a man solves his greatest mystery: himself."

David Hallquist, author of “The Quantum Process”.

“Sometimes you pick up a book and expect it to be one thing, and it turns out to be another. Pretty frequently that’s a terrible experience ... Ben Zwycy’s Beyond the Mist, on the other hand, fulfills its promise, even when its promise turns out to be different from what you expected ... All in all, Beyond the Mist is a great ride. It’s gifted with a pace that never bores and seldom lags at all.”

Joshua M. Young, author of “God Eaters”

Foreword

By John C. Wright

From the opening line, where the nameless narrator is passing through a mist, and does not know whether he is flying or falling, to the curtain line where he sums all he has learned in a single sentence, this is a book of strangeness and wonder.

The strangeness is the world in which the falling or flying protagonist is expected to discover: the wonder is in himself.

Old friends of the science fiction genre might recognize hints redolent of tales with a philosophical speculative bent. A WORLD OF NULL-A by A.E. van Vogt stars an amnesiac hero who discovers intrigue within intrigue against him; DEATHWORLD 2 by Harry Harrison is an unusually concise examination of the steps by which man departs from what Hobbes called the State of Nature and enters into civility and civilization; A VOYAGE TO ARCTURUS is a similarly concise examination of the steps by which a Gnostic soul, lost, tempted and tormented in a world of hostile illusions, fights its way back toward the ineffable glory that birthed it. From a genre older and more respectable than science fiction, PILGRIM'S PROGRESS by John Bunyan describes the obstructions presented to a Christian's soul fleeing the city of destruction seeking paradise, and he runs away from all he knew, ears plugged, crying out Life! Life! Eternal Life!

This book is unlike those, for it is its own creature, but, even so, the mystery of the journey of the falling man (or does he fly?) from the various temptations, traps, and dangers that threaten him, some physical and some more subtle, is the same mystery addressed in all these stories of how a lost man discovers himself.

For myself, I like books with likable protagonists, inventive, not easily deterred, whose efforts are ultimately rewarded, perhaps not in the way he first expected. How man discovers himself, defines his life, and names himself is an adventure all men share, and the mist of confusion (or is it freedom?) is one we all encounter. Enjoy.

Chapter 1 – The Mist

Am I falling or flying? I thought to myself as the endless mist rushed past my face, feeling the buffeting ripples up and down my skin but hearing nothing. *How long has it been – hours? Days? Months? Is this all there is?* I asked myself, unable to remember anything. *And who am I?*

A small plastic packet of water drifted past, travelling faster than I was, and I caught hold of it. A tube of some sort of food followed shortly afterwards.

Where do these come from? I silently asked as I consumed them, then allowed the empty wrappings to float away.

There was a faint light up ahead and I began to deliberately drift towards it.

“Away! Dive away! Avoid them at all costs!” a voice cried out behind me, and I leant away from it. “That is a ledge placed there by our cruel overlords. If you hit one of those, not only will it hurt you more than you can bear, but it will also rob you of your freedom. Seek refuge in the mist.”

“A ledge? But what are they for?” I asked, turning to see who was speaking but could see no one, only a disturbance in the mist that indicated something was there.

“The overlords seek to lure us to our doom with promises of ‘truth’ and ‘life’,” the voice explained, spitting out those two words with disgust. “Do not listen to them, they only seek to hurt and enslave you. Here there is life, here there is freedom! Here they cannot touch us.”

“Reach out for your life, find the truth and save yourself,” a different voice called from the light as it came rapidly closer.

“Don’t listen to him! Dive Away! Away! Don’t let him reach you!” the first voice screamed as the light flashed past. “That was close – despicable creatures.”

“So you know them?”

“I know *what* they are,” the first voice replied, full of bitterness. “I have heard the stories, they speak of ‘truth’ and ‘light’, ‘right and wrong’, ‘responsibility and self-control’, it is nothing but lies to ensnare and enslave you. The mist is life, the mist is safety, here we fly! Here there is no failure or shame, duties or consequences, here we are kings!”

“How can there be lies if there is no truth?” the second voice called from a distance. I looked back to see a light approaching.

“It is one of them!” the first voice wailed. “Cover your ears, dive away! You will not enslave us!”

The second voice spoke with an authoritative calm as it gained on us. “To lie is to knowingly deny the truth. How can there be lies without a truth to be denied?”

“Stay away from us!” the first voice shouted.

The light was getting much closer now and the second voice no longer needed to be raised. “Do you not have eyes that were made to see? A mind that was made to think? Legs to stand on solid ground? A soul to make a difference? The mist is not life, the mist is a prison.”

“A prison? Ha!” the first voice scoffed. “What do you know of freedom?”

The second voice seemed to grow in weight and vitality as it replied, “I know the freedom to stand and gaze at the beauty of creation, the freedom to love, the freedom to distinguish between right and wrong, the freedom to enjoy the fruits of my labour, know the satisfaction of a job well done and take the consequences of my actions, to find my context and live life to the full.”

“Here there is life, and to more than the full!” the first voice said. “The freedom to create whatever reality you desire!”

“Any such creations are purely in your imagination,” the second voice countered as the light came ever closer and split into two, revealing a human shape with lights attached to both shoulders. “You are merely playing in the mist, nothing real is produced.”

“But that’s the beauty of it!” the first voice enthused. “Total

control, none of it lasts any longer than you desire it to – as soon as it no longer interests you, it's gone.”

“To be honest,” I said, “that sounds more like a disadvantage than a selling point.”

“Humph,” the first voice snorted in disgust. “If you wish to enslave yourself to another man's reality, then be my guest.”

It was then the second voice's turn to take on a slightly disapproving tone. “While you play these childish games and entertain yourselves to death, there is a vast world out there with beauty to discover, genuine adventures to be had and worthy struggles to take part in.”

“How would I leave the mist if I wanted to?” I asked.

“In less than two minutes, we will approach a bridge across the entire chasm. I will provide you with a parachute to land safely on it and a light to help you find your way across, but this will be no easy journey.”

“After all the risks I took to help you,” the first voice accused, “all the ways I opened your eyes, you would willingly serve the overlords? Traitors like you make me sick, you are not worthy of my time.”

“Then begone,” the second voice said, “and let him make his choice.”

“If slavery awaits me, and I am not convinced it does, then I prefer that to this empty swirl of contradictions – the chance to find my place, to touch something real and meaningful; it is worth the risk. Give me the parachute and light.”

The first voice gave out a disgusted sigh and quickly drifted away.

“Here you are,” the second voice announced, reaching out and grabbing my hand; it looped something over my arm and reached around to loop it over the other, then guided my hands to two halves of a large metal clip. “Attach the large clip across your chest, and then there are two smaller ones to attach around your thighs.” I fumbled around with my hands until all three were snapped shut.

“The light is attached to one of your shoulder straps – I’m switching it on now.”

A bright white glow lit up the mist rushing around me and I could see some of my own form for the first time. I seemed to be an adult human, though I was still a lot less visible than the human shape opposite me, whose clothing was much brighter and was wearing some sort of helmet.

“Next to your left breast is a handle that when pulled will release your parachute. That will slow you down abruptly, and then two handles will appear above you, one above each shoulder. Pull on the left one to turn left, and the right one to turn right. Are you ready?”

“Yes, I have the handle.”

“Good. I will count from three and then you will pull. Three, two, one, pull!”

The straps around my thighs dug deep into my legs as the violent change in direction wrenched the air out of my lungs and tossed me around like a rag doll for a second or two, the flapping canopy lacerating the air around my ears. Gasping for breath, I looked up to see what appeared to be a network of glowing green veins in the mist a couple of metres above me, and two green ovals dancing close to my face. I grabbed at the ovals with each hand, assuming they were the handles, coughed and recovered my breath as the pain became bearable.

“Oh, that hurt.”

Once the canopy was stable, I had the bizarre feeling of my body now having weight, and the background noise I had perceived as nothing was glaring in its absence. I looked down and saw the green glow of the illuminated man’s parachute below me and to my left, with his two lights having now merged into one again with the distance.

“Now you are closer to flying than you have ever been in here. Practice turning left and right until you get the hang of it. Pulling both handles at once will swing you upwards and slow your forward speed – we will be doing that when we come in to land. Try it a little

now to get the idea, but not too much or you may lose all forward speed and begin falling out of control.”

I tried several basic manoeuvres and began to grow in confidence.

“Look below us,” called the voice from the light, “you will see a large orange light approaching. That is where the bridge is at its widest – aim to land at that point.”

“Understood.”

The mist made it difficult to judge how far I was from the orange light, which separated into a large glowing ring as I approached. Before I could judge how much to pull on both handles I hit the platform hard, pain shot up my left leg and I slid across the perforated metallic surface. My slide ended with me clinging to a very low rail with half of my body hanging over the precipice. I lay there motionless, panting and groaning as the other man made a much more controlled touchdown.

“Let go, you fool!” a voice called as its source fell past.

“Fly and be free!” another shouted.

“No more pain!” a third cried.

“Not the smoothest of landings,” said my parachute provider, now standing over me. “If you wish to fall, then simply let go. If you wish to stand, say so and I will help you up.”

“Help me, please, but my left leg, my ankle, it hurts.”

I felt a pair of strong hands pull me carefully back from the edge, then the illuminated man methodically examined the injured limb. “A mild sprain, nothing more. Some discomfort, but with a little strapping you should be perfectly mobile.”

I felt some sort of footwear and a layer of fabric removed from my injured joint, then the cool sensation of some sort of gel or liquid being applied, a length of elastic fabric wrapped tightly around the tender area and the footwear replaced. As this was being done, I caressed the perforated metal platform I was sat on, so solid and regular.

“There, now try to stand.”

I made an attempt at standing, but fell back down before reaching a half-upright position.

“It may take some time for your sense of balance to adjust, and your muscles and bones may have lost some of their strength, depending on how long you have been here. With time and practice, that will all return,” the illuminated man explained as he removed my parachute and hung the cylindrical light around my neck. I could see the glint of the metal floor for a few metres in every direction before the mist blurred all things into one. The parachute canopies were criss-crossed with rapidly fading fluorescent green lines, and he appeared to be stuffing the billowing silks into a hole in what I assumed was the centre of the platform.

After a brief buzzing, he retrieved each parachute as a small and compact bundle that he slotted back into its pack.

“They’re now ready to reuse?”

“No, they are just compressed to make them easier to carry out of here. They will need to be refolded later.” He took both parachutes over his shoulders, pressed something on the floor that switched off the ring of lights and stood to leave.

“The way out of here is narrow, but straight. Some walk their way out, some crawl, others give up and fall back into the mist – that choice is yours – but if you do make it out, then I will meet you on the other side,” and with that he turned and walked away, his light and footsteps quickly fading to a vague background impression.

The mist seemed to close in on me, threatening to overwhelm my little white light as I sat there on the platform, alone and isolated. A distant voice screamed, “Away! Dive away!” as something fell past with a rush of air.

I watched the discernible ripples in the mist from the falling body quickly diminish to nothing, then attempted to stand again. After two more abortive efforts, I was finally able to rise and maintain my balance on two ponderous limbs. I stepped forward and back and from side to side to regain the feel of bipedal motion, and despite the polite protests from my left ankle, started to think that I could do this.

“Leave us alone, you monster!” another voice shouted as it’s source fell past, and I sighed, looking down at the platform on which I stood and peering into the greyness in the direction the illuminated man had disappeared.

“I’ve made my choice,” I thought aloud, and began slowly walking forwards.

Chapter 2 – The Walkway

After about five metres, the platform abruptly ended with the same low railing that was perhaps ten centimetres above the floor and much more reflective than the supporting surface, forming a clear delineation between solidity and void.

I must have misremembered the direction he went, I thought, then began sidestepping to the left, counting out loud as I went.

All I saw were identical slightly curved sections of railing. As I moved, I was struck by how rigid the floor beneath me was. There was no discernible bounce to it despite, I assumed, being a thin layer of material stretching across such a large empty space.

“... thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. Must be the other way,” I thought aloud, retracing my steps as best I could, stepping twenty-three times to the right before finding a break in the railing. There a straight section less than a metre wide disappeared into the murkiness and a reflective arrow on the floor indicated this was the way to go.

“Well, that’s fairly clear,” I said to myself with half a smile, and set off on my way.

Soon the way back was just as murky as the way forward, the walkway I was on seemed to be narrowing little by little, and the spacious platform I had left behind grew ever more appealing in my memory.

Every so often there would be a faint rush of air as a body fell past without comment, though some hurled insults my way: “You’re nothing but a slave!” ... “What do you want from us?” ... “Smash that despicable light!”

“But I’m one of you!” I protested. “I just want to see the real world! Don’t you want to know what’s out there?” I turned and leant over the edge to call after the rapidly disappearing voices, but in doing so overbalanced and found myself beginning to fall after them.

In a panic I flailed my arms about and managed to grab the railing, ending up dangling by one arm. After some effort I managed

to secure my position by grabbing on with my other hand and then considered my predicament.

My fingers were starting to burn; the dead weight of my body was more than my arms were used to bearing. *This isn't fair; I was only trying to talk to them. I just overbalanced over the railing, it could happen to anyone. It's not my fault ...*

"Put out that light and join us," whispered a passing voice, sending shivers down my spine.

From my position and by the light of the lamp around my neck, I saw the underside of the walkway and the twin reinforcing I-beams underneath it that disappeared into the mist towards ... *something*.

"I've made my choice," I said through gritted teeth as I swung my right leg up and hooked it over the railing at the third attempt. I hung there for a few seconds and then summoned up all of my remaining strength to pull myself up and over the edge, back onto the walkway where I lay panting on my back, breaking into a laugh of sweet relief for I don't know how long.

I stood and resumed my journey with caution but new determination, ignoring the hysterical shrieks hurled my way every so often. "Traitor!" ... "Mindless drone!" ... "You won't take our freedom!"

"Is there a way out of here?" a new voice timidly asked as it approached.

I felt the rush of meeting a kindred spirit, dropped to my knees and grabbed the railing firmly to prevent myself from overbalancing as I shouted back, "Yes! Yes there is! Look for the man with two lights, he'll help you!"

"Where is he?" asked the disappearing voice.

"I don't know, but look out for him!" I shouted over the edge then knelt motionless and silent, but heard no reply. *Must be too far to hear me. What more can I do?* I gave a long sigh, then stood and continued on my journey.

A little while later, the railings began getting thicker and closer together, and a faint light ahead was becoming brighter and more

distinct. Also, any falling sounds were only ever behind me.

“Must be getting close,” I concluded, and pressed on. A few metres further on, there was a metal bar that joined the two railings, and then another, and another, giving the appearance of a ladder running along the ground.

Curious, I thought as I carefully stepped over the bars, but as I did, the walkway began sloping upwards, though I could see no joint or curvature in the floor or ladder. Another step forward and the slope was even sharper, causing me to stumble back, and the slope was immediately reduced again, though there was no visible or audible sign of the platform tipping or curving.

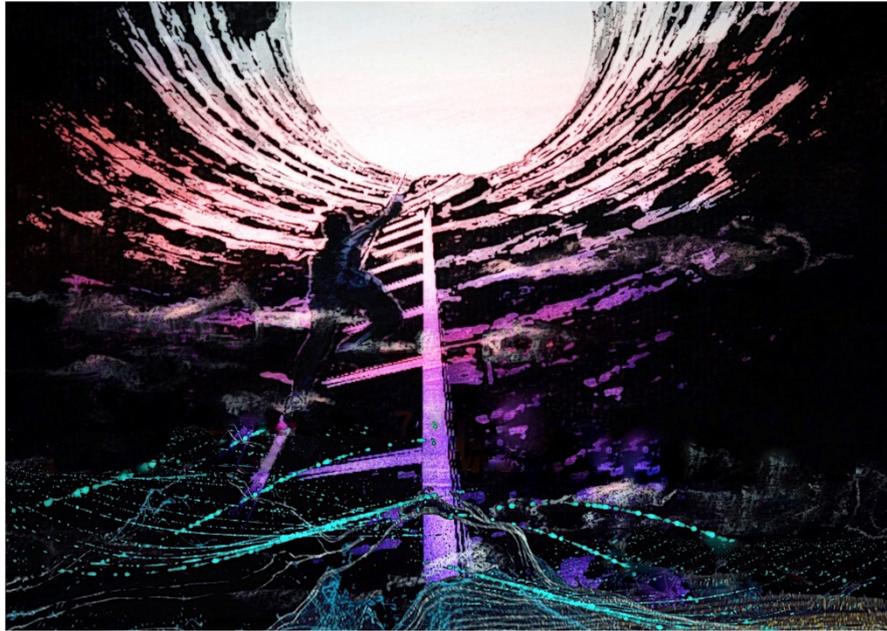
“What?” I exclaimed, and tested the phenomenon again, producing the same result of the entire walkway seeming to slope upwards as soon as I moved forwards, and levelling out as I moved back.

I looked to the side and behind me, there were no other branching paths or trapdoors in the floor, so I carried on, leaning further forwards as the slope continued to get steeper. I began placing my feet on the horizontal bars, climbing them like a ladder, which my left ankle didn't appreciate so much. This gave me the strange sensation of the slope being steeper by my head than it was at my feet, despite the ladder being straight, which I could now see more clearly as the mist thinned and the bright white light formed a sharp circle at what I presumed was the end of the ladder.

As the ladder reached near-verticality, the walkway floor ended and I could see conical walls narrowing towards the circular light, which seemed to be some sort of open hatchway. I continued to climb the now completely vertical ladder, but just before arriving at the hatchway I reached across and ran my fingers across the conical walls, finding their unyielding metallic coolness invigorating. A faintly acrid but not unpleasant fragrance was carried to me by fresh air drifting down from the opening, which was quite a contrast from the vague mugginess of the mist. Below me, I could see the end of

the walkway hanging straight down from the hatchway and disappearing into the mist.

Intriguing, I thought, then climbed the final few rungs into the light.



Chapter 3 – The White Space

As my head came up through the hatchway, everything around me was white, the brightness hurt my eyes until they slowly adjusted and began picking out details- shapes and outlines in the walls, rectangular panels with rounded corners everywhere, a round sofa with several gaps in it encircled me, and my own form was clear. My hands, appearing mature yet still youthful, the dull dark green of my clothing, the strange dull grey straps around my torso –

“Well done,” a familiar voice said. I turned and saw a man seated on the sofa dressed in a pure white jumpsuit, the only vibrant colour in the room being his lightly tanned face, dark brown hair and piercing blue eyes.

“The man with two lights?”

The man inclined his head and smiled. “Correct. Please take a seat.” He indicated to the sofa opposite him. I climbed a few more rungs, then stepped across and slumped into the sofa, marvelling at its softness and the wrinkled texture of its upholstery, which came as sweet relief after all of my exertions. I closed my eyes for a moment and gave a soft sigh, then looked across at my guide, my mind full of uncertainty.

“Who am I?”

“Whoever you choose to be.”

“Don’t I have a name?”

“Not that I am aware of, no records are kept of who you were or how you came to be here. You are free to choose a name for yourself at any point, or remain nameless for the rest of your days. You have been given a fresh start, what you do with it is up to you.”

“Do you have a name?”

“I do, but I cannot tell you since it may influence the name you choose for yourself.”

“Can I call you something, like, Lightman?”

“Of course, whatever you wish.”

“Lightman it is then,” I said with half a smile, then gazed around the room again. “So what is this place?”

“The space between.”

“Between what?”

“Between the Gravity Ring and what lies above it.”

I looked up, my eyes following the ladder to the ceiling where it met a closed hatchway. “And what does lie above it?”

“That is for you to discover, should you choose to go there. I am not permitted to tell you about anything ahead of you, only to describe what you have left behind.”

My gaze returned to Lightman. “So ... Gravity Ring, was it? What is that?”

“Much as the name implies, it is an underground ring of artificial gravity. It is designed so that once you are dropped into it, you keep falling indefinitely, never meeting a wall or other obstacle for as long as you choose to remain there.”

“But what about the bridge across the chasm? Doesn’t that count as an obstacle?”

“It is only extended when someone accepts the offer of escape from the ring, as you did.”

“But what if someone collides with it? Wouldn’t that kill them?”

Lightman gestured to the grey straps around my body “That harness you wear allows you to be subtly guided around it, and away from the walls, so no one comes to harm in that way. The mist allows those within the ring to imagine that there are no limits to where they can freely drift.”

“If you have that much control, then why give me a parachute? Why not simply guide me to the exit?”

“To place you in control of your own destiny, and so you experience the consequences of your actions. If an easy life is what you desire, then step back down through the hatchway. Your nutritional needs will be met, you will be protected from physical harm, and you will not be required to perform any work. No responsibilities, no expectations, no consequences.”

My eyes were drawn to the lower hatch and the greyness beyond it, and a sickly feeling rose in my stomach. I followed the ladder up to the upper hatchway again, intimidated by its opacity.

“And up that way is the real world?”

“Up that way there are no guarantees.”

I stared into space for a few seconds, considering what horrors that could entail, then closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “I’ll take it.”

“Most commendable.” Lightman tapped a pad in the armrest under his right hand, and the hatchway below us closed. “Your harness will be more of a hindrance than a help there, allow me to remove it.” Lightman stood and stepped through a gap in the sofa, moving behind me and taking hold of something on my back.

Several taps later, a series of light clicks ran up and down my spine and a light tension around my chest and neck was released. The harness detached itself from my legs and shoulders and a whole new range of motion felt possible, transparent covers lifted from my eyes and retracted, widening my peripheral vision. Plugs came loose from my ears, and gentle white noise was replaced with a chorus of subtle background sounds, quiet hums and the occasional muffled click from behind the panels around me.

The new freedom of movement brought with it a new uncertainty as the posture support from my harness was now absent and I began to slouch, then attempted to sit upright. “This is going to take some getting used to,” I muttered.

“I expect it won’t be the last time you tell yourself that,” Lightman said with half a smile. “How’s the ankle?”

“Better, but still a little painful.”

“All right, let’s see what we can do about that.” He moved around to the front of the sofa and tapped a panel, which caused a drawer to open next to my left foot. The drawer had a black cloth across the top of it with a slit down the middle. Lightman removed my shoe and ankle support, then placed my foot into the drawer. The

cloth tightened gently around my limb and was warm and silky to the touch.

I couldn't see what was beyond the cloth, but the bottom of the drawer felt soft. A warm sensation flowed through my ankle, then a faint breeze across the joint accompanied by a muted hiss seemed to melt away the remaining discomfort.

"That should do it. It'll still be a little weak for a while, but as long as you don't go in for any acrobatics in the near future, you'll be fine."

"Thank you. Wait, someone fell past me when I was on the walkway – he was trying to find a way out. I told him to look out for you."

"Another agent was sent to deal with him as soon as I closed the hatch."

"Another one? How many of you are there?"

"Enough to cope with demand. Now, let's prepare you for what lies ahead."

I took my ankle out of the drawer and looked down at the dark fabric. "How does this device work? Can I take a look inside?"

"Your inquisitiveness is admirable and will serve you well, but there is a good reason for the dark fabric. The radiation in this device is good for joints, but bad for eyes. If you value your eyesight, then please just take my word for it."

"All right. So what's next?"

"Now we get you dressed for the occasion," said Lightman, reapplying the ankle support, then stood and moved past me, placing his hand on a panel in the wall. The panel slid to the side, revealing a long white corridor.

"This way, I promise not to leave you behind this time."

"We're not going up that way?"

"We need to make room for the next adventurer, and equip you for the next stage. Where we're going has another ladder up."

I followed.

The corridor stretched on for about twenty metres or so, the same white panels coating the walls, floor and ceiling. It was hard to tell from this distance whether the corridor ended in a junction or a wall. Every other panel along each wall was labelled with some sort of alphanumeric code.

“How big is the Gravity Ring?”

“It has a major radius of three kilometres and minor radius of two hundred metres, if that helps you to visualise it,” Lightman said with a grin.

Six times pi is just under nineteen. Given a normal terminal velocity... “So, about five minutes to complete a circuit?” *Wait, how did I know that?*

Lightman stopped and nodded, impressed. “Depending on your body position, between four and six minutes to return to where you started. Those content to remain in the mist are basically reducing themselves to eloquent goldfish.”

The fifth panel on the left had a grey square in the middle of it. Lightman pressed his hand against the square and it turned white, then the panel slid sideways to reveal a narrow corridor.

“In here.” Lightman beckoned and headed down it. I followed, unable to see past my guide. Ahead of us was a faint whirring sound and that of a panel sliding, both of which stopped before we reached the end of the corridor after three or four metres.

“Here we are.”

The corridor opened out into a room that was a little under three metres square. In the far right corner was a ladder against the wall with a closed hatchway in the floor below and ceiling above. In the opposite corner was a simple chair, next to that a small shelf on which was a book and pair of hiking boots, above and beside that were two hooks on the wall. A large green rucksack hung on the one nearest the shelf, and on the next a green waterproof coat of some kind. There was a vaguely familiar and pleasing blend of scents in the room that I couldn't quite identify.

“Those simple shoes you are wearing will be no good to you up there; these will protect your feet and ankles on all types of terrain. The rucksack has all the supplies and equipment you will need, the manual instructs you in how to use them. Feel free to peruse it at your leisure here, but once you leave, you will need to seal it in its protective cover whenever not using it.”

“Right.” *Equipment? Terrain? Protective cover? What is up there, and what is that smell?*

“Do you have any questions?”

“Yes, what is the pleasant smell in here? It’s somehow familiar.”

“Aha.” Lightman smiled and pointed to the upper hatch. “That is a whiff of the air from up there. Scents are powerful memory triggers. That you are familiar with it means you most likely already have some of the skills you will need. Hopefully that is from your previous life, and not that you were sent back to the Gravity Ring from the next stage.”

“You can be sent back?”

“Yes, anyone found within the double ring of white markers after dark will be tranquilised, have their memory wiped and be dropped back into the Gravity Ring.”

“Oh. What could happen to a man to make him want to go back down?”

“As I said, I am not permitted to tell you about the next stage. All I am permitted to say is that the passage for moving on from the next stage is adjacent to its lowest point. That passage is always open, anyone attempting to block it is also thrown back into the Gravity Ring.”

Did I do that? Was I some sort of criminal? I shuddered at the thought. “Well, I’ll do all I can to prevent that happening to me, um, again?”

“It is not the only possibility, and whatever happened in the past, whatever brought you to this point is irrelevant. What matters now are the choices that you make from this point on. Before I leave you, there is one last thing you need to know. That light around your neck

also functions as an emergency signal. If you find yourself in serious danger, press the button quickly three times, and we will get you out of there.”

I looked down at the light and gulped. “Um, understood.”

“Good, I must leave you now. In your own time, peruse the manual, familiarise yourself with your equipment, dress yourself and head on up. The lower hatch is locked, and the upper one is open, but will lock itself behind you when you close it, so take everything with you on your way up. Good luck on your journey.”

“Thank you.”

I opened the first page of the manual and scanned down the contents page, glancing across at the rucksack and noting the various items. “Hmm, that’s the tent, sleeping bag, canteen – the cooking utensils will be inside, I suppose.”

I looked up at the hatchway, a gently pulsing dull green circle in its centre beckoning me upwards. I looked back down at the manual, but couldn’t focus on it, my eyes were drawn back up to the circular portal to ... what? *What is up there?*

I could stand it no longer; I placed the book in a clear plastic sleeve on the back of the rucksack, changed my shoes, put on the coat and rucksack and climbed the short ladder. At the top, I reached up two trembling fingers, stopping two centimetres short of the light, then closed my eyes and withdrew my hand a fraction.

I took a deep breath and opened my eyes.

“I’ve made my choice.”

I reached out my fingers and touched the circle. It turned bright green, and with a gentle hiss the hatch slowly opened.