

△△△ **Server Authentication**

A Signal

The night sky appears as a cold, endless velvet darkness. It absorbs all artificial light, leaving the subtle exposure of a faint spread of stars, planets and dust.

"I will see you some day soon" she whispers to the void. Staring at the sky she notices a flickering across what appears to be three stars. She looks again to see if they do it again but they don't. She waits for ten minutes to confirm. "Must have been me" she assumes, thinking the patterned flicker was an optical illusion.

The rain drips slowly from the dark sky, tickling her nose. She moves back inside the house and closes the door. "Time to sleep" she thinks to herself as she crawls under the sheets and turns off her desk lamp.

Drone Day

"Have you ever created a device to track the sky?" she asks her friend Devin.

"You mean a telescope?" he responds with slight confusion.

"Well kind of, but something that can float in the air and be controlled remotely"

"Oh - a drone maybe?" he asks.

"You have one?"

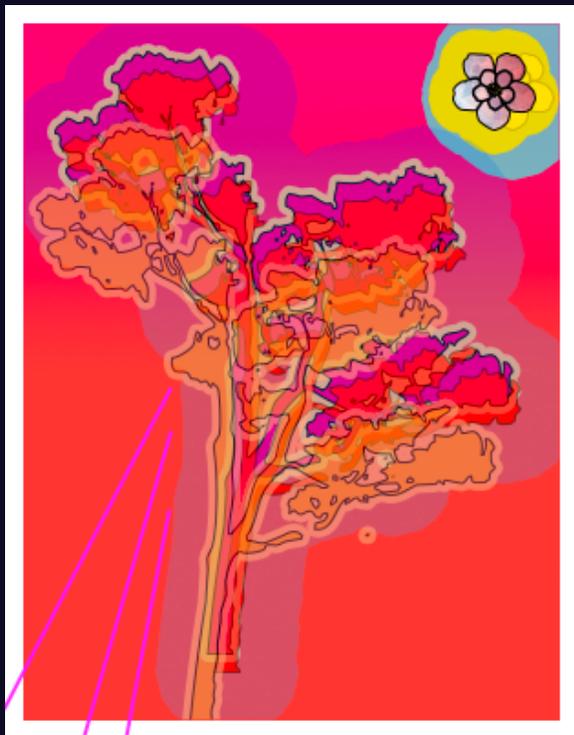
"Yeah, there's one we can get from Elena"

Devin flags a Robo-1000 taxi down and signals her to get into the taxi with him. She gets in and the taxi heads down to the city.

The taxi stops at Elena's fix-it shop - they both get out of the vehicle. It drives off while playing a strange melody with a robot-sounding voice singing "thank you for the ride, have a good afternooooooooooooooo..."

Devin knocks on the door and Elena answers. "Hi Devin!" they exclaim.

"We need a drone for low-altitude tracking. Is there one available?" Devin asks. "Yep, give me one minute!" Elena disappears and quickly comes back with a bag. "Here you go - you don't have to return it, keep it!" they smile.



"Wow, thanks!" Devin smiles. She smiles back and gives Elena a custom stamp.

"Thanks for the drone - much appreciated" she adds.

"Oh wow - thank you for this stamp! I will add it to my collection" Elena beams.

They both walk towards an almost empty parking lot with the bag. Devin pulls out the components, one by one. "Here you go!" he says, giving her the remote and the drone.

"Thanks!" She puts the drone on the ground a few feet away from where they were standing and starts trying to maneuver it around in the air. At first, it wavers around in a drunken motion but she figures out the navigation control and has it flying steadily.

"How far can this go up?" she asks Devin.

"400 feet, I think?"

"Fully charged?"

"Ya"

She takes out her watch and starts a timer. "Let's see how long this survives."

Almost 20 minutes later, the drone drops to the ground.

"20 minutes is definitely not enough time to track the sky!" she laughs. Devin scrunches up his face and heads over to pick up the drone.

"What can go higher than this?" Devin wonders out loud.

"Oh! A high altitude balloon?" she responds. "But no remote control?"

"Yeah no remote control", he sighs.

"Hey, I gotta go - I'll message you later this week" Devin says, as he looks at the notification on his phone. "Wanna keep the drone?"

"For sure, see you later!"

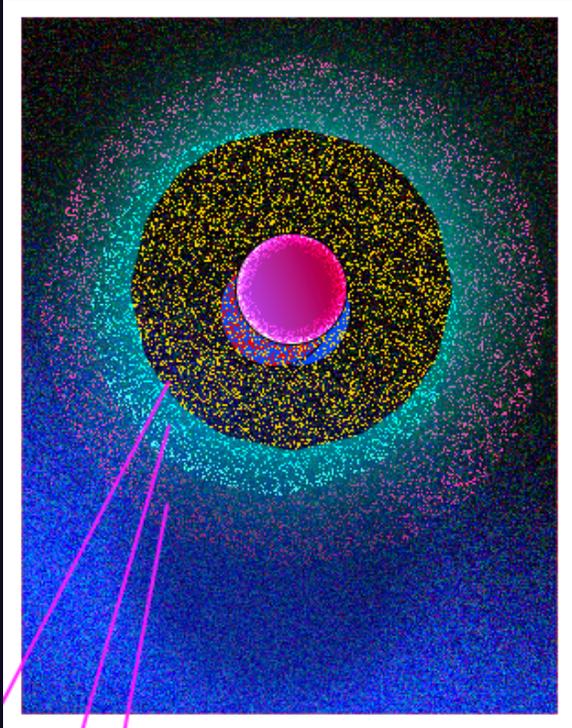
"Later!" Devin waves.

She puts the components back into the bag and decides to head home. She calls for a Robo-1000 taxi and sets the destination address.

A New Request

The next day, she decides to visit Elena to see if they know anyone with a high altitude balloon she could test with.

She calls a Robo-1000 and enters the fix-it shop's address. It whirs through streets and alleys, adjusting how high it hovers above the ground every so often.



It stops in front of the shop and she gets out. It whirs away, playing that familiar robotic melody.

Knocking gently on the door, she waits for someone to answer. "Hi again!" Elena smiles. "How can I help you today?"

"Hi - I'm looking for access to a high altitude balloon. Do you know who I could talk to about that?"

"Hmmm" Elena ponders. "I believe there is a group that does testing with these balloons out in the desert west of here about 100 miles. Here you go - this is the location - tell them I referred you" Elena

sends over a map location to her phone.

"Thank you so much" she says.

"Not a problem - what are you making if you don't mind my asking?" Elena replies.

"I'm trying to track particular positions in the sky with a device that can be high up in the sky" she responds in a determined tone.

"Oh I see - interesting! Do you need a camera? I have some spare cameras I can give to you if you want?"

"That would be great! Thank you!" she sighs happily.

Elena hands over a small camera. "This should be able to take enough pictures. Good luck!"

"Thanks again!" She hands a new stamp over. "I made this one two weeks ago"

"Wonderful - I love these so much!" Elena squeals.

She puts the camera in her bag and exits the shop. Looking ahead into the distance, she turns westward.

Desert Journey Deluxe 1

She dials for a Robo-1000 taxi and imports the address Elena sent. About 52 miles later, a message suddenly pops up on her phone. "This is an emergency. The city center is under lockdown. Please do not re-enter the area until further notice."

"There appears to be another incident" she thought to herself, putting the phone away. She looks out the window of the taxi, watching buildings travel vertically in her vision.

An "incident" is when a section of land is considered under attack, in emergency health measure or similar situations. People who are within these sections are given strict instructions as to what to do during lockdown.

She started to feel her eyelids get heavier and heavier. Leaning against the window with her head, she begins to doze off.

After what seems like only a few minutes of napping, she wakes up in a sudden jolt. "You have arrived at your destination." the taxi's voice system directs.

She gets out of the vehicle and the thank you melody fades as it drives away. Rubbing her eyes, she blinks a few times against a cloudless sky and a hot, dry sun. She rummages in her bag to find sunglasses - she catches the shape of the lens with her fingers and puts them on.

Hearing some people talking, she turns towards the sounds - she sees a group of people in outfits that appear to protect their skin from the sun. She can feel the heat seep into her skin and starts to sweat and feel a burn slowly seeping in.

"Hey! Over here!" one of them waves to her. She tries to walk briskly but the heat feels hotter and hotter. A couple of them run up to her with a protective outfit and immediately help her step into it. "Don't worry about sweating under this, you'll thank us later" one of them pants.

After they put on her suit and zip it up, she immediately feels relief. Her sweat begins to quickly cool off and a light suction forms on the inner suit against her skin and clothing, removing any excess moisture. After the suction completes, it disables itself and the suit relaxes around her body. She realizes all her sweat has disappeared. She follows them into a geodesic dome that appears from out of nowhere, showing a faint outline of each panel's edge.

"What is this made out of?" she asks.

"It's graphene-based" one of them answers. "Let us know why you're here" another curiously inquires.

"Oh, Elena referred me here - I am looking to test out a high altitude balloon and .."

"Oh! Of course, of course! By the way, you can take your protective suit off now - let's bring you in to rest until evening when the sun is gone."

She removes her protective suit and thanks the group. "Thank you for helping out! As a token of my gratitude, I have a stamp to gift you." She hands over a new stamp and the group gasps and claps.

"Much appreciated - thank you, thank you! We will add to our ever-growing collection!" one responds with an excited smile.

They guide her to head to the center of the dome, into a small pyramid-shaped tent made of what appeared to be paper panels in wooden frames.



Everyone sits cross legged inside the pyramid. "We'll stay here until the sun goes down. Remember to hydrate and keep cool" someone from the center says. Everyone begins chatting with those near them.

"What brings you here today? Which high altitude balloon are you interested in?" a person says. She turns to her left to follow the voice and sees someone sitting immediately beside her.

"Oh, I am looking to test putting this... um.." she pulls out the camera from her bag. "This camera. I want to take pictures or video of a specific region in the

sky at night."

"Uh huh uh huh uh huh." A few people sitting in their immediate area stop talking and resume after a few seconds of silence. "It sounds like you might also need a remote control or do you want this camera to land wherever it lands and you will get it?"

She thinks about it for a moment and responds. "A remote control would be ideal to have."

"Oh .." the same group goes silent for a few seconds and resumes chatting. "We unfortunately do not have remote controls at this location. You will have to retrieve it wherever it lands. Will that be acceptable?"

"I think that is my only option. Do you know who might have a remote control I can test with?" she asks.

They are silent again, but in larger numbers, passing the silence and chatter throughout the seated group in a wave formation. "Not currently."

She nods in mild disappointment but stays optimistic for what she does have.

One person stands up and exits the pyramid. A few moments later they re-enter with a bag. They walk towards her. "Here are your high altitude balloon components. When it is safe to go outside, you can load up the application we've sent to you just now and it will give you instructions on how to set it up and track it. If you find it, it's yours to keep. Good luck!"

She checks her phone and sees the instructions. She thanks everyone and sits back down with the new bag leaning against her personal bag.

Desert Journey Deluxe 2

A few hours later, people start standing up. She also gets up and watches others carrying their multiple bags out the pyramid room into the geodesic area. She follows them with both her bags all the way outside - the sun was gone and a coolness began to slide into the air.

As others put on their suits, she followed with the same actions, zipping up her own suit. She feels a warmth hovering between herself and the suit, regulating the temperature. She watches everyone spread out to find their own space and doing the same, she walks a bit ahead to an area that is available. She takes out thousands of tiny thin square-shaped panels, each no larger than the palm of her hand. Opening up her phone she loads the application for the high altitude balloon.

The application loads a single button labeled "Setup". It warns her to step backwards until it determined there is enough clearance. She walks backwards carefully until the warning disables itself. She looks back at her phone to see that the "Setup" text changes to say "Build". She presses it and watches all the

squares quickly connect and morph into what eventually forms into a high altitude balloon.

"Connect all devices now." her phone instructs. She walks over to the balloon to attach the camera. Once sturdy enough, she steps back and watches the button on her phone change to "Release". She quickly opens up the camera application to enable logging and location tracking. She heads back to the balloon application and presses "Release".

As the high altitude balloon rises, the sky melts into a darker shadow. The stars begin to shine more visibly to the naked eye. She switches back to her camera application and sees images being taken and recorded. Once the balloon disappears from her vision, she requests a Robo-1000 in order to follow the balloon. An error message returns on her phone. "No Robo-1000 available at this time. Please try again later."

"How odd" she thought to herself. She's never seen this service have any outages. Trying again and again for another ten minutes, she continues to get the same error message back. Frustrated, she decided to collect up her bag and the larger bag, walking in the direction of the balloon.

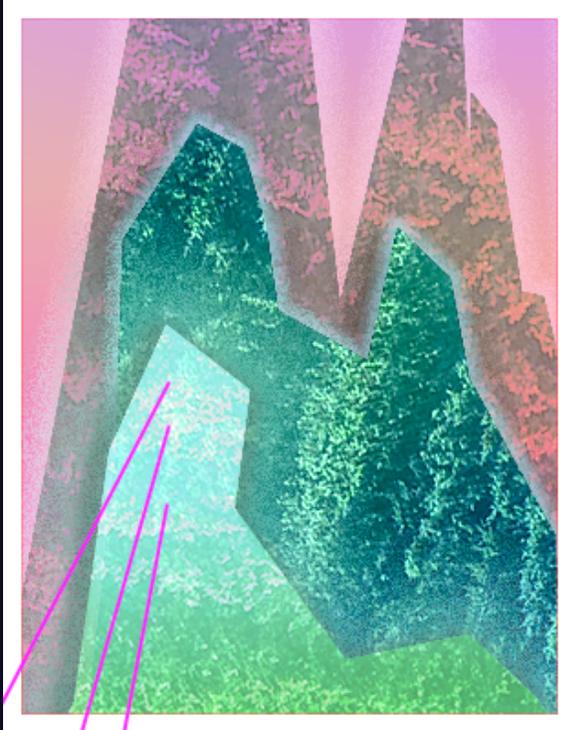
No Contact

She tries to message Devin to see how he was doing and give him an update on her situation. No response. She tries to do a video chat with him and it also has no response. No error message either. She looks around at the darkened sky and the faint crimson red sunset in the distance, against two planets with purplish hues. She looks back at the invisible dome and watches it all shrink further and further away.

Turning around, she continues to walk towards the location coordinates. With a lack of light, she digs in her bag to find a headlamp to wear over her suit.

The winds around her begin getting stronger and stronger. She tries to walk forward but can feel the pressure pushing her back and sideways at various points in time. She can feel the sand particles hitting her suit over and over in waves - sometimes slower, sometimes faster.

At certain points of varying wind pressure, she scrambles to find cover behind boulders along the edge of extremely steep sandstone cliffs. She sees a cave nearby that she could run to. When the wind lowers in speed, she runs to the cave. Once she is in the cave, she realizes that she could be trapped in this location for a while, waiting for the winds to subside. She checks her phone for the temperature in the cave, noting that it was a little cooler than room temperature. She removes the suit, puts it aside and rests for a few hours before checking the wind status. A few hours later, the wind is still too volatile. She notices that her phone battery is getting low and turns it off to conserve power. Out of her bag, she takes out another device that opens, exposing a miniature printer and a screen with a small pen. She turns on the screen and sketches a new stamp design.



After she finishes work on the stamp, she puts the devices away back in her bag. Remembering that she has a snack she brought along, she quickly eats it all in a few bites. A few minutes later, she hears a difference in the wind speed and puts her suit back on, walking out to the cave entrance to check. The winds appear slow enough, so she goes back into the cave and gets her phone, placing it in between a few rocks and letting the sun charge the battery. She goes back inside and waits an hour before checking on the phone's battery status. An hour passes and she heads over to the rocks. As she looks at the rocks, she realizes her phone is gone.

She looks around to see who might be nearby that took the phone. There doesn't seem to be anyone visible within her range. Slightly concerned, she tries to remain calm and think about what to do next. Realizing that it was likely unsafe to stay at this cave any longer, she packs everything up and heads out, walking in the direction towards the sun.

Emerald

Hiking through the endless sandstone cliffs, cloaked in dry heat, she encounters a shimmering construction. The shape materializes into a large pyramid composed of glistening emerald.

She approaches the entrance where a tall, open doorway leads into a hall of green refraction and marble flooring. A pitter-patter of footsteps echoes around the corner. She runs toward the sound, turning left, right, and right again. A few more turns and the sound cuts out. She stops. The area is a silent grid of endless emerald tunnels. She realizes she is lost. She decides to hug the right wall to locate an exit.

A chirping noise echoes nearby. A phone ring. It sounds like hers.

She tracks the sound into a darker tunnel, illuminated only by the faint bioluminescence of the emerald edges. The darkness presses in. She rummages in her bag for the headlamp, clicks it on, and sweeps the beam across the walls. The chirping sounds again but much closer now. She accelerates, turning sharply until she ends up in a dead end.

"My phone." She sees the device lying on the floor. She reaches for it, but the air resists. An invisible viscosity shields the device. She pushes harder, but her hand cannot breach the space.

Whispers drift from the darkness. The footsteps return. Two eyes reflect the beam of her headlamp.

"Who are you?"

The voice does not come from the room. It resonates directly inside her skull. Her heart rate spikes. The voice seems to originate from the eyes staring back at her. She holds her ground.

"Who are you?" the voice repeats.

The figure steps into the light. It moves on all fours, a quadrupedal body with a human head. It stops. "Is that your device?"

"Yes. I cannot access it. Can you help?"

The being considers her. "We can make that happen. There is one variable."

"Which variable?"

"We are currently traveling at half the speed of light. If we retrieve the device, we accelerate closer to the limit. This will decouple you from the past."

She blinks, processing the physics. "You are saying we are traveling faster through time. I am not in the year I think I am."

"Correct."

"How much time has passed?"

"As you enter the ship, you advance a decade for every three steps you take. You have taken 969 steps. Approximately 3,230 years have elapsed relative to your entry point."

"3,230 years." She states the number without emotion. It is too large to feel.

"More has passed now, of course."

"I need a moment to process this."

"By all means."

She sits. The phone remains behind the shield. "Why do you need the phone?"

"The device contains a specific density of minerals. We require them to recharge the propulsion system. Ideally, we do not extract valuable items from passengers, but this resource extends our travel time."

The entity offers no apology. It is a statement of utility. She looks at the phone, then back at the dark tunnel. Everyone she knew is gone. The battery is dead. The timeline is severed.

"Take it," she says.

Facets

The eyes turn around and walk away into the darkness. She sits down and rests for a few minutes, crying at moments before taking a few deep breaths and getting back up. Also walking towards the same region of darkness, she follows the path they left in until she sees an opening with three tunnels, each lit up with a soft glow. One path is a tunnel covered in mosaic tiles of quartz glowing in white, the second path is a tunnel covered in diagonal tiles of platinum glowing in a soft blue and the third tunnel covered in shards of ruby glowing in a deep pinkish-orange.

"Which should I choose" she asks herself, walking back and forth between the tunnels. The glistening of the quartz catches her eyes. She turns off her headlamp and puts it away in her bag. "Quartz" she says and heads into the leftmost tunnel.

She feels a slight rumble on the floor she's walking on, covered in a layer of pumice stone with edges of bright green moss forming as she walks further in.

Looking back, she sees no entrance anymore, but a solid wall of quartz. She panics slightly but decides to stay focused and continues forward through the tunnel. Wondering if each of her three steps now counts as an additional 10 years, she keeps a rough idea of how many more steps she has taken. "It makes no sense to go back" she says to herself, thinking that taking an additional set of steps in order to test the newly formed wall would waste even more time. Finding any reason to move forward, she continues through the tunnel until it becomes too bright to navigate.

Blinded by the light facing her, she slows down and tries to walk backwards, towards the light. She feels a tight pressure, like a wall against her back - pushing with more force until she suddenly falls back and feels a sudden pull, like a vacuum.

Falling back, she lands on a soft layer of moss and white sand. Looking around, she sees that she is now in a large, dome-shaped area, covered in white square tiles. She sees a window nearby and gets up to look through it. In the vast darkness she sees stars and galaxies fading in and out. She realizes that now that she appears to be in space, she can get to the stars even closer than a high altitude balloon or any other method on Earth.

She looks around the area, looking for any clues to where she could leave to get access to the navigation controls of the ship. She hears a throat clearing and a shuffle of movement. "Hello?" she asks cautiously.

"Uh, hi" a voice responds. "Did you just get here? I'm a bit confused on hours versus days maybe .." He seemed somewhat disheveled.

"Yes, I .. I was on Earth for what feels like a couple of hours ago but there was some sort of human-like being on all fours, similar to.."

"Yeah I know what you're talking about. I encountered them too."

"I was in the middle of an experiment and a storm came in, my phone ran out of power and then someone here stole my phone. I followed all the way to this pyramid ship .. thing."

"Yeah, sounds similar to my story. I was in the middle of solar charging one of my machines and wasn't paying attention to it for a few hours."

"I see" she said. "I guess we're in the same timeline now?"

"I guess so" he smiled. "Want to join me?"

"Sure."

They walked together further into the opposite end of the area and as she was about to get her headlamp, he interrupted. "Ah, no need for that - I got you covered". He takes out a tiny flashlight and attaches it to the center of his chest. It sprays a wide beam of light for them to both see where they are going.

"Follow me" he says.

She puts on her headlamp anyway and walks behind him cautiously, looking around to see if she notices anything moving around them. "So what experiments were you making?" he asks.

"I was trying to test tracking the sky with a camera and a high altitude balloon. But I needed the balloon, so I encountered these people in suits - I have one in that bag." She points to the one he is carrying. "But as we were setting up our balloons to test, that's when things went wrong" she sighed. "How about you? What machines were you recharging?"

"I had some modified dune buggies I was experimenting with - I mostly build utility vehicles"

"Oh that's interesting - have you ever worked on flying vehicles?"

"Yes actually - that was the experiment I was doing on those dune buggies!"

"Ha that's great! Did it work at any point?"

"If you are asking if they went in the air, no unfortunately not yet. Still exploring and developing."

She nodded as she listened and they kept walking until they encountered another door. "The door here is a bit different" he said.

"How so?"

"Well, there won't be any gravity once you walk through here. So you'll be floating but you can follow me carefully to the next exit." He took a light and attached it to the back of hat and put that on. "You can track me with this light. It's very dark out there."

"Oh okay. Uh, will it be safe?"

"It'll be fine. Follow me and do what I do with my movements - there are parts where there is air pressure pushing into different directions to get to different places. And you have to know where to turn to get the right directions to the right places. Ready?"

"Ready."

He opens the door and looks behind at her. Then he turns back facing the door and jumps out to a completely infinite, black space. It felt like a void. A shiver shoots up her spine but she takes a deep breath and follows him through the door, jumping where he jumps and turning where he turns.

What seemed to be a few minutes of navigating the void, he reached another door that appeared ahead. He reached out to the door handle with his right hand and reached out his left hand for her to grab a hold of. She grabs a hold of him and they end up back on gravity. She closes the door behind them and they walk ahead on a soft off-white carpet.

"How did you learn how to navigate that place back there?" she asks.

"I've been here for a while now. A long while. I've lost track of time, but I know what I know so far I guess" he says.

"I see."

They walk down a long hallway that seems endless. After what she felt was about thirty minutes, they arrived at another door at the end of the hall. He opened the door and they entered another long hallway, this time with multiple doors on both walls. She turns around to close the door behind and as she turns back she realizes that he's suddenly disappeared.

"Hello?" she says. "Hello?!" she yells louder. Nobody responds. Heart rate slightly increasing, a panic sets into her body. She didn't know his name, she didn't know where she was and she didn't know what was happening in this place she was in.

Falling Upwards

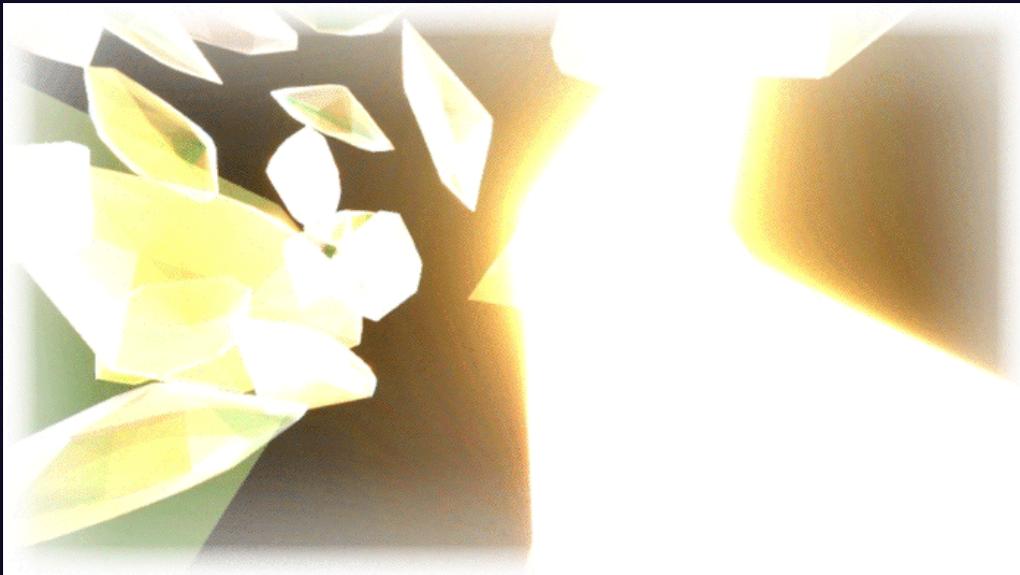
She tries opening one of the doors closest to her on her left side. It is locked. She tries the one on her right. Also locked. She walks forward and tries five more doors on the left and five more on the right. All still locked. Frustrated, she starts running ahead and tries some doors further down the endless hallway. All locked. Exhausted and frustrated, she collapses to the side of the left wall and leans against it with her back. She removes her bag and leaves it lying by her side. Catching a breath and feeling less pressure on her shoulders, she takes another deep breath and feels herself tilting towards the wall - the hallway was moving. In fact, from her perspective it was rotating.

Distracted by the rotation, she focuses on steadying herself as it turns. The hallway stops moving and she turns to look for her bag. It is nowhere to be seen. She tries to calm down but moments of anxiety creep up each time thoughts about what has happened set in. After a few minutes, she gets up and decides to try and head back to the door into the darkness and hope for the best. She runs back to the door she initially entered from and turns the handle. It is unlocked. Relieved, she closes her eyes and jumps into the darkness, letting the path take her where it ends up taking her.

She feels herself being pushed in different directions and doesn't bother opening her eyes since she assumed she would see nothing.

Lasting for what seemed like forever, she moved around endlessly, as if she was floating in some kind of a meditation chamber.

A bright flash appears with an array of reflecting shards of floating diamonds, trails of glistening dust particles dancing in their wake. The diamond shards grow bigger with rapidly moving lights circling the body like electricity. She thought these intense visions were only in her closed eye state and decided to open them expecting the void but when she opened, she continued to see the same visuals. As she gasped and inhaled in, her inhale felt like it extended further and further as if she could expand her lungs larger and larger. Weightlessness set in and she didn't feel any sense of her body or self anymore. She was still inhaling from the initial moment, eyes absorbed by the intense yet warm light reflections of the shards as they collected in greater amounts, increasing intensity and temperature.



"Welcome home" they said in a harmonic hum.

