

Dreaming Towers, Silent Mansions
by
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<start transmission>

We're through.

Visual matches the probe data: we're on a wide ledge of green stone with steps going down, with structures – buildings – all around us. The air smells, uh, thick. Rich, even.

The portal's stable but featureless from this end, just as the footage showed. It looks like a funhouse mirror hanging in mid-air. I'm going round the back now... yep, it's identical from both sides.

Hassan is going to try throwing a small projectile back through the portal. He's using a stone he brought from Earth. He's going to throw it – now.

Right.

The stone bounced, as predicted. He's picking it up. It appears unchanged.

He's about to carry out the test on the other side of the portal. And...

Same result.

We'll repeat this exercise with any local objects we find, in case that makes any difference.

Until then... looks like the theories were right, Control. This is a one-way trip.

<end transmission>

Though she had reviewed the original footage more times than she cared to remember, nothing prepared Charli for the reality of being on another world. Her mind kept trying to make connections, to draw parallels. Speaking to control when they first came through, she had wanted to say 'the air smells like it did

when we were on honeymoon in Tahiti'. She was glad she hadn't. An experienced explorer (if such people still existed in the 2020s), or someone with a military background, would never have come out with something so unprofessional. But then she wasn't trained for this. None of them were.

She still had no idea what the common factor was that defined their small, disparate, group. Over six thousand volunteers had come forward when the Foundation went public with its discovery; how come only five – and why these five – were found to be capable of passing through the portal? Everyone else had been repelled before they got within a metre of it. No one claimed the five of them were the brightest and best amongst the volunteers. The only thing they had in common was that none of them had close family, but that was a prerequisite of being accepted on the volunteer program. Only the lonely, as she kept thinking; she knew that Rory would have laughed at that, and said something like "Don't romanticize self-selection, Charli."

A chance to train and bond together would have made her little team (as she couldn't help thinking of them) more comfortable with each other, but given the portal's limited lifespan, the decision-makers had kept the 'softer' aspects of the mission's preparation to a minimum.

She wondered if any of the others had noticed the scuff mark on the edge of the portal platform when they arrived. If they had, no one mentioned it.

<start transmission>

We've nearly finished building the garden enclosure. The waste composter's up and running, and Ranjit's revised the soil requirements downwards slightly. As he says, the less mass you send now, the more time we've got to ask for whatever we forgot. Rainfall and temperature remain constant; Shelley says we've got ideal growing conditions.

<end transmission>

Now she had been here for a couple of weeks, Charli found herself faintly disappointed that Alpha-One appeared so normal. (She disliked that designation, with its arrogant implication that there would be other sites, that opening a portal into this impossible place wasn't a fluke.) The cloudy sky could have been anywhere on Earth, the air composition was normal (that initial whiff notwithstanding) and the buildings were human-scale. As Rory had said when the first probe went through, the city looked like it was made for, and presumably by, human-sized entities with bilateral symmetry. As for who, or where they were now, that was anyone's guess.

The colours of the structures that spread out to the horizon ranged from sandy yellow to mid-green – again, ordinary enough - but the stone did have a disconcerting translucency. She kept thinking 'alabaster' – reaching for those comforting analogies again – but she was an administrator not a geologist, and whatever the towers were made of, she doubted anyone back on Earth had a name for it.

She hated the silence though, and did her best to drown it out, either by playing her music or by talking to the others. At night, when the tears came, she turned her head into her pillow rather than have the sound of crying drift out of the open doorway. These people were her responsibility; such stupid weakness would damage the group.

<start transmission>

Good Morning, Control. Frivolous news first: the chickens have started laying. We're having an omelette for supper. Just the one so far; we'll have the share it.

The drone sweeps are almost complete; Andresh has created a detailed map extending out from the portal in a two kilometre radius. Hassan still hasn't found any evidence of life, at least nothing our instruments can detect; we're glad we don't have to worry about alien bugs, though Ranjit isn't sure how this Earth-

like atmosphere is being maintained without an obvious ecosystem. Perhaps we'll find something further out.

Ranjit hasn't had much luck analysing the portal from this end. There's no loose material here to throw back, so he chipped off a sample from an internal wall. The result was the same as with the terrestrial stone: it simply bounced off.
<end transmission>

'Why you let him do it?'

Charli tried not to mentally correct Andresh's grammar. 'Because we needed to know if local material could get back through the portal.'

'Is sacrilege, Charlotte.'

She knew Andresh used her full name out of respect; correcting him would be counter-productive. 'I appreciate that you feel that way about the city, but no harm was done. And I'm sure you want to get home as much as the rest of us.'

'Of course I want to leave. We should not be here at all.' With that, the team's archaeologist-cum-architect stalked off to his room, leaving Charli alone in the echoing space they had designated as the team's 'common room'.

Andresh had initially voiced his opinion that their presence broke some profound law of the universe over supper the previous evening. Ranjit had humoured him and Hassan had stayed silent but Shelley had appeared to take his side. 'Appeared to' because Shelley was beginning to step up her play for the men's attentions; Charli knew her type and with three men and two women, Shelley needed to make sure she came out scoring on top in the relationship stakes. Unfortunately, so far none of the men had seen that as a priority.

Charli was tempted to tell her that she could have all three for all she cared, but she knew that wouldn't help.

<start transmission>

Control, we found the initial probe; the one that disappeared. Well, what was left of it. We think it malfunctioned and ran off the portal platform. It actually fell all the way to the ground. Interestingly, although the probe was smashed up completely, there was very little damage to the area where it came down. I suppose we should have expected as much given that the ground's made of the same material as the towers are.

<end transmission>

'I'm not saying someone actually *pushed* it!' This was the closest Charli had seen Ranjit come to losing his temper. She found herself increasingly empathising with him, possibly because he was the nearest they had to a scientist – to the role Rory should have had. But not that near: he was a physics teacher. He had only applied for the programme as a way to enthuse the kids in his class about science. Ranjit never expected to end up on another world.

'I'm sure that's not what Shelley's saying either,' said Charli, keeping her tone calm and conciliatory. 'I think what she's getting at is that my report back to Control included conclusions that aren't entirely,' Charli smiled tightly, 'foregone.'

Shelley said, 'We all saw those marks on the edge. The probe was pushed.'

Charli continued, 'I agree that that's what it looks like. But the later probes were monitoring the platform and immediate area constantly after that and they saw nothing. We've found no evidence to indicate we aren't alone here. So, until and unless we do, the only logical explanation is some sort of spontaneous mechanical fault. If anyone can suggest any other *plausible* explanation, then please, just say.'

No one did. The meal continued in silence, until Hassan, opening his dessert package, smiled and said, in his gentle, lilting voice, 'Hey, these peaches taste of peach. Finally the boffins are getting it right!'

'Oh,' said Shelley, 'that reminds me. We've got shoots!'

Andresh and Hassan, the non-native speakers, looked momentarily confused, until Shelley leaned forward slightly and said ‘Lettuces! They’ve come up. In the garden.’

Everyone smiled at the news that they were one step closer to the self-sufficiency necessary for long-term survival. Shelley basked in their appreciation of her gardening skills. Charli felt a certain sympathy for the other woman: she was the only team member whose main function here had only been her hobby, not her career, back on Earth.

It was – nominally – midweek, so no after dinner games were scheduled. With the evening rain shower having passed, Charli decided to go for a walk. Shelley was flirting furiously; perhaps when she got back one of the men would have succumbed to her whiles, and everyone else could relax a little. Not for the first time, Charli thanked their good luck that the male contingent of the party didn’t contain any alpha-types who would feel the need to fight for what Shelley was happy to give freely.

She considered fetching her lamp from the roof, where it had been charging all day ready to light her room at night, but decided against it; there was still an hour before night fell, and she wasn’t going to be long. Days here were just over twenty four hours, with eight hours of darkness, perfect for human circadian rhythms, something which Charli had initially found a little creepy but which she was now grateful for. A well-rested team was going to work better together.

She had several set walks, circular routes through the stairways and passages of the city, but this evening she just wandered. Not that she was covering new ground. All of them were intimately familiar with every room, every staircase, within easy walking distance of their camp.

She found the statuette in a dead-end room, just lying on the floor, as though someone had dropped it there. At first she thought she was imagining it; the room was lit by a single window, and the light wasn’t good. But when she looked closer she found a human figurine, only about ten centimetres high, made of the same material as the city.

She crouched down beside the object. Closer, she saw that it had more of a glow to it than the surrounding rock, although that might have been a trick of the light.

She reached out to pick it up.

It disappeared.

It didn't crumble to dust, she didn't drop it, it just... went away.

At the same moment, everything around her became crisper, sharper. Afterwards, the rush reminded her long-ago forays into recreational drug use, back when she was studying for her psychology degree. At the time, it caught her up utterly.

The next time she was aware enough to check, she found that three hours had passed. She straightened slowly – she had ended up sitting on the floor – and looked around. The room was dark, but not as dark as it should have been given that night had fallen. She could still see enough to take in the perfect beauty of the room, the way every angle, every wall, was correctly, perfectly proportioned.

She took her time getting back to camp. Despite the lack of light she felt no fear, merely a mild disappointment that she could not appreciate the view fully at night.

Hassan was still up. 'We were going to send out searchers soon,' he said in his slow, calm way.

'Thanks, but I'm fine. Better than fine.' She almost told him what she had found; Hassan was the most likely to understand, with his air of peace hard won from his past as a child of war. But she was not sure how to begin to describe her experience, and so she said nothing, and went to her room where she fell asleep at once.

She never normally remembered her dreams but this one was vivid: in it, Rory was calling out to her from some sort of tower, trying to warn me about something. She struggled to get closer, to hear his warning, but whatever doom it was engulfed her then, and she woke up sweating and terrified.

<*start transmission*>

Control, we have a medical emergency.

It's Andresh. When he didn't turn up for breakfast I went to his room and found him lying in bed just staring at the ceiling. We can't find any sign of injury or illness. He just appears to have fallen into a coma.

Hassan has put him on a drip. We're not sure what else we can do.

<*end transmission*>

Everyone was scared. Each of them responded in their own way: Shelly with wild theories and demands for attention, Hassan with solicitous calm, Ranjit with an increasingly desperate search for the logical explanation. Charli observed their reactions, knowing full well that she should bring everyone together, should provide support and guidance in this time of crisis, but somehow disinclined to do so.

The suffusing beauty she had felt on picking up the statuette remained with her, though now tinged with unease. More than once, she found herself thinking: this place is too much for us. Had she believed in God, she might even have used words like 'holy' or 'divine'.

Andresh died the next night. No one was with him, and when they checked in the morning he looked exactly as he had when they left him, only dead. Hassan, after examining his body as best he could, said sadly, 'It is almost as if his life just ebbed away.'

'That's crazy-talk, Hassan.' Shelley's warm tone belied her words; Hassan was finally responding to her overtures. 'But if that's how it is, it's our duty not to despair, isn't it?'

Hassan nodded solemnly, taking Shelley's last comment at face value.

There being no way of burying or cremating Andresh, they carried his body down to ground level and left him in one of the rooms there. Charli suggested each one of them spend a while alone in the room with him, to say

their farewell. It was a manufactured ritual, and they all knew it. Shelley was in there for only a few seconds; Ranjit for slightly longer; Hassan longer still, no doubt praying for their comrade. When Charli's turn came she reached for the gold crucifix Andresh wore. As she put it outside his shirt she whispered, 'I think you were right about this place.' For all the good that did now.

Charli did not feel grief as such; she hadn't known Andresh well enough for that. She did feel a kind of unfocused fear, because losing one of the group brought home the gravity of their situation. At the same time, she found herself increasingly disconnected from their small, mortal, problems. Being amongst such alien beauty gave her a strength she never knew she had. To walk on stone crafted by a powerful unknown race, to breathe the rich air – and it was rich, in every breath now – to hear that silence, which was more like distilled peace than an absence of sound: this was what truly mattered. She had been too busy worrying about who was happy and who wasn't, and stressing about what would happen when the portal closed, to revel in the wonder of being here, in this amazing, impossible place.

She didn't mention the figurine to the others. The time wasn't right. They had enough to deal with.

Shelley and Hassan got together three days after Andresh's death. Charli was distantly relieved that Shelley was being kept distracted.

Ranjit's response to Andresh's death was to throw himself into his work. He spent most of this time up at the portal platform, trying to find a way to get them home.

<start transmission>

Ranjit's come up with an idea about modifying the portal from this end and we reckon it's worth a try. His theory is based on lasers, and will probably mean more to you than it does to the rest of us. I'm going to give him the headset now so he can describe what he needs...

<end transmission>

‘What do you mean “team shrink”?’ Charli snapped.

‘Just what I said,’ retorted Shelley. ‘That’s your qualification, isn’t it? Your key skill.’

‘Oh, and yours is ...?’ Charli would never have let Shelley goad her like this a few weeks ago, never have let their discussion move onto an argument and into a full-scale row. ‘Because I’m not sure what use a spin doctor is to us out here.’

‘PR exec,’ said Shelley tightly. Good, thought Charli, I’ve got to her. See how she likes it. Then she added, ‘But you’re meant to be our beloved leader, even if that was naked nepotism.’

‘Why yes,’ said Charli, ‘my position is connected to having been married to the project’s chief scientist, I won’t deny that. Because I lived with Rory I had – still have – a higher level of knowledge of the portal than the rest of you. And I’m also more qualified to manage people than anyone else. If you didn’t like that, you shouldn’t have volunteered for the project. Most people have slightly less drastic mid-life crises than trying to run away to another world.’

‘It’s a pretty dysfunctional response to grief, too.’ Before Charli could defend herself Shelly continued, ‘What I was saying about your position is true though. Given that you are our leader, how come you’re spending so much time wandering round the City? You’re meant to be there for us, aren’t you?’

‘I am, if anyone wants me. They don’t. And it’s not like anything I – or any of us - can do is going to change things. We need to accept our situation.’

‘You’re losing the fucking plot, Charli,’ said Shelley, and walked off.

The insult did not hurt as much as it should have.

<start transmission>

Control, I'm afraid that Ranjit hasn't succeeded. He also injured himself in the attempt. I think he threw himself at the portal. He's bruised, perhaps concussed. Hassan has sedated him. We'll report any further developments.

<end transmission>

Charli knew about denial; she had studied its mechanics, and had seen it in operation in the many teams she had managed throughout her administrative career. Part of her knew Shelley had a point; she was neglecting her duties. But why not? Ranjit had devoted himself to work, Shelly and Hassan had each other. Why shouldn't she enjoy the city she was coming to love?

She only realised her ulterior motive when she found the next figurine.

Again, it was in a location that had been empty before, this time near ground level. Charli didn't hesitate: she sat down and reached out eagerly.

The rush this time was not quite the same. Less intense: more familiar. Almost as if something already inside her was being enhanced. And the afterglow was different: instead of the sense of reverence and beauty she felt an incredible peace, and a surety that she could bring harmony to those around her, if only she could get them to see the wonder they walked among. When she recovered enough to look around her, the colours of the City seemed brighter and her body felt more alive. And the silence sang to her.

She rushed back to the camp; this time she should tell them, and it would bring them together, and even if, as Charli had now come to suspect, there would never be a way back, it wouldn't matter.

There was no one there. Charli didn't panic: she was beyond panic. Ranjit would still be at the portal. Shelley and Hassan were probably out and about somewhere. They'd come back when they were ready.

<start transmission>

Control: Hassan's disappeared. The three of us are going to look for him now.

<end transmission>

'When did you last see him?' Charli had to force the concern into her voice, fighting the calm veil that had descended over her.

'This morning. He said he was going out for a walk. Like you keep doing, you know?'

'Charli! Shelley!'

They both turned at Ranjit's shout, drifting up from the platform outside the common room window.

'I've found him.'

Charli wasn't surprised that Hassan was unconscious. He'd collapsed on a high platform, a step away from a steep slope.

Shelley stayed with him. The next day Hassan died, as Charli knew he would. Shelley insisted that she and Ranjit help her carry his body back to base camp. Ranjit looked to her for guidance, and after a moment's thought she agreed. The flesh was nothing, but she may as well humour Shelley.

It wasn't as though Charli spent much time at the camp anyway. She spent her days, and some nights, walking the city. She knew now that it had not been 'built' in the same way humans build things. It had grown here. Or coalesced. There were no words in her limited human vocabulary to express the concepts nibbling at the edge of her consciousness. This was like waiting for an inevitable revelation, but the more she tried to analyse the feeling, to pin it down, the faster it receded. Which was why she needed to keep looking for the figurines.

She still tried to reconnect, when she remembered. She knew, intellectually, that Ranjit and Shelley were her responsibility.

She also knew that Andresh's and Hassan's deaths were her fault. The others had no idea. Shelley was panicking about alien diseases, but whatever killed Andresh and Hassan wasn't a disease. It was a condition twenty-first century science had no concept of, like dying of a broken heart. She had actually

thought she might do that, when Rory went. She could barely remember that pain now.

She needed very little sleep these days, but whenever she did rest she dreamt constantly. Not about Rory again; the dreams almost felt as if they belonged to someone else, and they evaporated when she opened her eyes.

<start transmission>

Control, there's only me and Shelley left now.

Ranjit jumped off the portal platform. He left a note. It said, 'I'm so sorry I couldn't get us home.'

That's all.

<end transmission>

Charli decided to move up to the camp Ranjit had made at the portal. There was an element of guilt in her decision, she observed coolly: she knew she should have seen the signs in him, spotted that he was low enough to kill himself. That was her job. Had been her job.

When she told Shelley she was going to the portal, the other woman screamed at her. 'You can't!'

'Are you worried about your garden? You can still tend it, if you like.' Not that Charli was concerned with food much anymore.

'Sod the fucking garden. You see everything around you as puzzles to be solved, Charli, but we're *people*. Were people. Most of us are *dead* now. You don't care about anyone or anything, do you?'

'I cared about Rory.'

'Really?'

'When he died,' Charli paused, able now to look at the gap her husband's death had torn in her without feeling the pain, 'my heart died too.'

'So you're sure he's dead?'

‘What do you mean?’

‘I saw his file. I saw quite a lot of files, some of which I don’t think you ever knew about.’

‘What? How?’

‘Oh, the how was just ... I persuaded someone. That’s my talent.’

‘Your talent... yes. Yes it is. Whore.’

‘What?’

‘Your archetype. You use affection, attention, and of course sex, to get what you want—

‘—why you—’

‘--yes, because Andresh was an ascetic and spiritual seeker, Hassan was a healer and mediator. Ranjit was a logical explainer, a teacher; he despaired because nothing made sense and he had no one to explain it to anyway. Of course! That’s it: archetypes. It’s all about archetypes.’

‘I have no idea what you’re on about, Charli.’

Charli looked at Shelley, coming back to the present conversation. ‘It doesn’t matter. Not to you. What did you find out about Rory?’

‘The Foundation would never let him go through. He was too valuable. After all, he’d come up with the design in the first place. In a dream, apparently.’

Charli thought back to her old life, so distant now. ‘He was concerned they might not let him go. But he said he’d persuade them. And then he disappeared. Killed himself.’ That betrayal, so unexpected, so complete; she’d nearly died of it too.

‘Disappeared, yes. Killed himself, no. They found his car, his apparent suicide note, but not his body.’

‘I know that. The river was in flood—’

‘I think he came here. He built the portal, so of course he could come through it, but because the powers that be thought he might be able to build another, he knew he would never be *allowed* to go through. And he cared about the portal more than he cared about you, Charli. So he faked his death and came

through. When he got here, he trashed the probe that would have filmed him leaving the platform. It all fits.'

'Yes,' said Charli slowly, 'it does.'

'What? You call me a whore then agree with my theory? What the hell have you become?'

'I'm not sure. You work it out, if it matters to you. I'm going back to the portal. I'm going to bring this back to everyone, this revelation.' Because the alternative, the seductive, dangerous alternative was that she would just keep searching for the figurines, and never stop.

Shelley shouted after her, '*What* revelation?'

Charli ignored her.

She fired up Ranjit's computer more out of curiosity than because she expected to find anything of use. Somewhat to her surprise she understood what he had been trying to do at once.

The key was light, or rather EM emissions. Solid objects couldn't pass back through the portal, but radio waves could. What she needed to do was convert herself to light.

It sounded crazy, but six months ago a portal to another world sounded crazy.

But it had been beyond Ranjit's abilities. *Ah, so that had been the final straw, the reason he jumped.*

Was it beyond hers? Her mind was so much sharper, so much bigger, than it had been.

But she needed more. She needed to find and absorb another statuette.

Except there wasn't one to be found. She searched for the best part of a day, climbing the steepest steps, descending down to the shadowed ground, looking into every room she passed.

As she ascended the staircase back up to the portal platform, she heard something. A tiny sound, too faint to identify, but enough to disturb the perfect silence. She hurried up the last few steps.

Her camp had been destroyed. The modulating laser, Ranjit's laptop: all smashed.

As Charli stood there, staring at the devastation, Shelley stepped out from behind the warped mirror of the portal. She was holding the hand-gun the team had been issued in case they had, despite the evidence of the probe, found any hostiles. Charli had forgotten about the gun. They had all had basic training but, on Charli's recommendation, Hassan had been looking after the weapon. Thanks to his unpleasant childhood in Africa, Hassan both know how to use a gun, and would be unwilling to do so lightly.

'I found one too,' said Shelley conversationally.

Charli flinched to hear the silence broken. 'One what?' she made herself say.

'You know what. A statue.'

Charli said nothing. Part of her, the part that had arrived here, felt vindicated; in occasional cold logical moments, when she stopped to think, she had worried at the lack of corroborating evidence for her experiences. Save for the dead team members, she might have thought she was going mad.

Shelley advanced on her. 'Stop pretending, Charli. You've obviously found more than one. You've changed so much. I want to know what you know, what you're planning.'

'No.'

'I'm the one with the gun, Charli.'

'So you are.' Charli rushed her. It wasn't a conscious decision, and her mind caught up a fraction of a second later, and was appalled.

The gun clicked.

Charli barged into Shelley. Neither of them knew how to fight. They were just grappling, wrestling. Then Charli managed to knock the gun out of Shelley's hand; Shelley's gaze followed it, just for a moment, then caught as the gun fell.

Everything seemed to slow down. Charli knew she was fated to push her, and that Shelley was fated to step back. Once. Again, because she was off-balance now. Then again.

And then there was nothing to step back onto.

She didn't make a sound as she fell. Charli experienced brief gratitude and respect towards her for that.

The gun must not have been loaded. Hassan had probably emptied it, when he saw how things were going.

Charli looked around. She was unsurprised to find a figurine lying in front of the portal. It hadn't been there earlier. She reached out for it.

This time, the rush knocked her unconscious instantly.

<start transmission>

Control, this is the last message you'll get from me. Don't bother to reply.

We shouldn't be here. I know that now. This city – what we perceive as a city – is not somewhere we are ever meant to see. Not while we're alive, anyway. That makes it sound like heaven, but that's not it. This isn't hell either. More like a dimension of the spirit. No, still too mystical. Though I keep thinking of that biblical quote: "In my Father's house there are many mansions."

Part of us lives here. Part of all of us. All humans. And I think it manifests, possibly in response to our physical presence, possibly spontaneously. It's about archetypes, you see. The five of us who came through were each the epitome of a given archetype. That didn't make us extraordinary people, just the ideal representative of a particular personality.

And sometimes those archetypes manifest here, in a reduced, symbolic form. I found some of those representations. I ... took them on myself. The archetypes they corresponded to didn't survive. Just gave up life. I do wonder if those statuettes represented actual people, back on Earth, and whether those individuals died too. I think they probably did, in which case, I'm sorry.

The last statuette I found, I think that was “mine”. My archetype, anyway. Certainly I’ve experienced an exponential increase in my mental capacity. I’m definitely more-than-human now. Food, sleep, bodily functions, these are no longer relevant. I dream all the time now. And the towers aren’t silent anymore.

For the record, I did want to get back to Earth, at least before that final statuette. I had such wisdom to impart. But that’s changed. We weren’t meant to come here, but we did. And what I’ve – we’ve – become isn’t something that should ever be allowed to return.

None of this is testable, of course. But I’m going to ask Rory, if I find him. He’s been here far longer than me; he’ll have taken more statuettes. Of course, if this city really is infinite, I’m unlikely to run across him. But I’ll keep looking. After all, I’ve got all the time in the world.

<end transmission>

- END -