

The Rooms

It was the first few minutes of the new kilo-hour, and a fresh school-cycle had begun. Ms. Greene was showing her class a map of the universe: she switched on the classroom hologram-projector, and a three-dimensional block of pale, mostly yellow light flickered into being above the ovate table where her thirteen pupils sat.

“This cube is our classroom,” said Ms. Greene. “See these rectangles?” She traced them with her pointer. “Those are the bookshelves against the wall. And the table?”

“That’s where I’m sitting,” said a boy, pointing.

Ms. Greene nodded. “And the invisi-doors are outlined in purple: one behind me, one in front of me.” The block of light rotated slowly above the students.

“I’ll zoom out now, and we’ll get a larger view,” said the teacher. She touched a button on her pointer, and the yellow block grew smaller. Now the children could see that connected to the two purple rectangles were two thin orange lines running outward from the block. The lines were connected to other yellow cubes, cuboids, long hallways, and assorted irregular forms, which in turn connected to others via more purple doors and orange lines. As the blocks and lines kept shrinking and pulling toward the center of the hologram, more and more connections were revealed. Soon green vertical structures appeared at the edges of the map, shrinking and drifting toward the center along with everything else.

“Those are the staircases,” said Ms. Greene. “Green, like me.” She smiled. “I’ll pause here a moment.” She clicked her button. The frozen hologram now included perhaps ninety or a hundred tiny yellow blocks, all interconnected by orange lines and green staircases. The blocks in the center were all situated on a horizontal plane, but the staircases at the edges connected to rooms above and below the plane.

“That’s the room that’s my home,” said Peter Elister, excited.

“I can see mine, too,” said another boy.

“Very good,” said the teacher. “I think you all probably live within this area. Try and find where you live.” The children gabbled with one another, pointing at the map.

“Remember that the orange lines aren’t real,” said Ms. Greene. “They represent connections by invisidoors. The lines just connect the rooms so we can see more clearly how our universe is structured.”

Mara Murgatroyd held up her hand.

“Yes, Mara?”

“So when I walk through an invisidoor, how do I know how far I’m going?”

“Very good question,” said the teacher. “People argue about that. The truth is, no one knows for sure, even the smartest scientists.”

“But the rooms have to be right next to each other, right?” said Peter. “I mean, sometimes I stand in two rooms at once.”

“Yeah, I do that too!” said Mara. “I have one foot in each room, and my head’s halfway through the door, so I can see one room with one eye, and the other with the other eye.”

“We’re going to talk about Mara’s question later in the cycle, actually,” said Ms. Greene. “Chapter 58, the early cartographers. Our ancestors once thought the rooms were right next to each other, too.” She looked over the class. “Has anyone read ahead, and can tell us how they found out they were wrong?”

“I can,” said Cedine Lenaux, shooting up a hand. “Some of the rooms overlapped.”

“That’s right,” said Ms. Greene. “And two rooms can’t be in the same place. So the mapmakers needed a new model to explain the world.” Cedine beamed. Mara and Peter rolled their eyes.

“We’ll keep zooming out now,” said the teacher, and the congeries of rooms and stairs and lines began shrinking and drifting toward the center again. New connections kept appearing at the edges, and each small detail kept diminishing, until eventually the hundred rooms of the paused image were now nothing more than a small dot of light amid hundreds of closely-crammed dots ... and now, each second, those hundreds of dots were joined by hundreds, and now thousands, more.

“You can’t even see the rooms anymore,” said a girl.

“How many rooms are there in all?” asked Peter.

“Hundreds of millions that we know of,” said Ms. Greene. “The robot scouts keep exploring new ones every hour, and the information they collect gets sent over the cables to our holograms for updating.”

“My dad repairs them, the robots,” said Mara.

The zooming out stopped. The hologram was now a greenish-yellow blob in which even the individual dots were no longer discernible.

“That’s the universe?” said Mara.

“The part we’ve explored so far,” said Ms. Greene.

“But how’d it start?” said Peter. “Everything, I mean.”

“Another good question,” said the teacher. “We’ll be reading about it in a few centi-hours in Book A8: There’s a dialogue between two characters called Jolly and Molly, in which they argue about whether the universe has always existed, or whether it was created.”

“Created by what?” wondered Mara softly.

Ms. Greene seemed not to hear her. She switched off the hologram and walked around the table. “Now. I’d like you all to turn to page one hundred twenty-three and start reading our next two chapters. I’ll grade your quizzes in the meantime.” The children took their books from their sacks and flipped through them. “You’ll have twenty minutes.” Ms. Greene went to her desk, turned over a sandglass, and sat down to her work.

The children studied quietly. Peter, disappointed that hologram time was over, glanced from Mara to Cedine and back again, trying to decide whom he liked more. Cedine had dark hair and Mara had red hair. Cedine was a little prettier, he thought, but he liked how Mara talked and what she had to say better. The three of them were friends, and their homes were not far from one another. They often walked to and from school together.

All the children began reading:

Chapter 43

The Brief-Lived Cult of Gen Molib

In the seven thousand, four hundred and thirty-first recorded kilo-hour, a charismatic preacher of the upper mid-chambers, a venerable elder man of faith by the name of Henri Gen Molib, began to teach a new set of doctrines that were greatly disturbing to the Triad and Council. Claiming to have received arcane knowledge of the true nature of reality in visions while sleeping, Gen Molib did not question any of the Greater or Lesser Maxims, much less the Dictates or the Axioms, but

along with those began to preach certain strange beliefs which soon found adherents among his assembly.

At the foundation of his tenets was the conviction that a person or being called the “Griffin” ruled all events of the world. Whether this apparently nonsensical name was meant to refer to a physical entity or to a bodiless god is not clear from the spotty historical record. Gen Molib also held that, parallel to our universe but forever insulated from it, there existed another, in which all the events that transpired in our lives also occurred, but in the exact opposite sequence, so that in effect time ran backwards there. Hence, while our world moved certainly forward toward ever more perfect achievement, knowledge, and happiness, as expostulated in the First Dictate, the parallel universe of which Gen Molib had gained a glimpse was doomed to descend gradually from a state of supreme virtue to one of corruption, viciousness, and despair. This second universe was, the preacher claimed, ruled by a being called the “Sphinx” – another strange word whose etymology, if it has one, may be forever lost to us.

Over the first few centi-hours of his teaching, Gen Molib’s following grew rapidly, far beyond his local assembly, stirring the alarm of the Triad, which began to contemplate violent suppression of the puzzling heterodoxy. Things may indeed have come to blows, had not a new philosophical division and debate suddenly struck, electricity-like, from the halls of the Lyceum out across the world into every household and assembly chamber: that between the Exteriorists and the Interiorists. The issue of Gen Molib’s bizarre claims quickly fell out of general discussion and interest...

* * *

It was several centi-hours later, and Mara, Peter, and Cedine were walking home from school. Mara was wearing her best dress and blouse, a cream-colored outfit, while Peter’s and Cedine’s clothes were blue. The three of them stepped through an invis-door outlined by oval light fixtures at the end of a corridor, and emerged into a library. By the same means they reached

a waterfall room, another corridor, a fusion reactor room, and an aquaculture garden. Every person they passed they knew, and they waved to and greeted each one of them.

During class, they'd learnt about the passionate, sometimes furious early debates between the Exteriorists and Interiorists that had transpired so many kilo-hours ago. They had all listened to Ms. Greene with rapt interest (though with more than a little confusion as well) as she explained the disagreement between those who held that the universe possessed a form that could be viewed, at least in theory, from outside the rooms, and those who held that the only true form of the universe consisted of the interior dimensions of the rooms, along with their connections via invisidoors.

"Which side do you think's right?" Peter asked his friends.

Mara shrugged. "Not sure."

"My parents are Interiorists," said Cedine, nose slightly in the air. "All their friends are, too. It makes more sense, don't you think?" She looked at Mara. "What do *your* parents believe?"

Mara looked straight ahead. "I don't know. I haven't asked them."

"I haven't either," said Peter.

"Well, you should," said Cedine. "You too, Mara. Most people are Interiorists, you know."

"Do you guys want to hang out at my place?" asked Mara. "My dad just bought some new board games for me."

"No, I have to practice my lute," said Cedine. "My mom wants me home right away this deca-hour."

"I'll hang out with you," said Peter.

"Great," said Mara. "My dad bought me *Spectrum* and *Magic Race*."

They were walking down a hallway with many invisidoors spaced periodically along their righthand side. Lost in conversation, guided by habit and half-attention, they slipped through one of the doors about midway down the hall.

"He bought me some toy soldiers too," said Mara. "They have orange and blue uniforms. I've been building a bunch of little rooms for the armies to fight over."

"Building 'em out of what?" asked Peter.

“There’re always a bunch of robot parts at home,” said Mara. “I’ve been stacking the battery packs to make walls. The soldiers fight in the hallways and rooms.”

The children kept chatting until Mara stopped in her tracks and looked around. The others stopped too. They were walking down another long corridor, but this one was silent and empty – which, as far as they could remember, had never been the case during their walks to and from school.

“Is this the right way?” asked Mara.

Cedine and Peter glanced around.

“Sure it is,” said Peter.

Mara looked doubtful.

“This is right,” said Cedine. “We have the staircase up ahead, and then after a few turns there’s the hall where our home-doors are.”

Mara shrugged, but still seemed uncomfortable. The children resumed their way.

They slipped through another invis-door at the end of the hallway, then came to the foot of a tall spiral staircase. Normally, there was much coming and going here, and the sounds of many ascending and descending steps could be heard – but right now, there was complete silence.

Uncertainly, they started climbing.

After they’d made a few turns, Mara, who was in the rear, abruptly spoke, halting the others:

“I really think we’re going the wrong way.”

“Do you want to go back?” asked Peter.

“This looks right to *me*,” said Cedine.

“So why is no one here?” asked Mara, throwing out her hands.

“Maybe it’s quiet here sometimes, and we just never noticed before,” said Peter, not sounding very confident in his words.

“Did we make a wrong turn?” asked Mara.

“I don’t think so,” said Peter.

Cedine was impatient. “Let’s keep going. If we’re wrong, we’ll find out. Come on.”

Mara frowned.

A few more turns of the stairs... and Mara stopped again.

“Hey,” she whispered to the others. “Just stand still a moment.” Peter began to speak, but she shushed him.

The three listened.

Soft footsteps were coming up the stairs.

“Let’s ask this person if this is the right way,” whispered Mara.

The steps approached. Soon a young woman appeared. The children didn’t know her. She had brown hair she kept in a bun, wore plain gray clothes, and carried a briefcase that glinted dully, as though it were made of metal. She stopped near the children and regarded them with a somewhat aloof but not unfriendly expression. There was something vaguely strange-looking about her that each child struggled half-consciously to place.

“Hello.” Her voice was smooth and seemed cheerful. “Going home from school?”

“Yes,” said Mara. She’d forgotten about asking her question.

The woman smiled. “Are you lost?”

There was a pause. “We think so,” said Mara. “These stairs look like how we normally get home... but no one’s here.”

Mara kept staring at the woman’s face. There was something... *off* about her features.

“We think we can find our way,” said Peter.

“Okay,” said the woman. “But remember to find a help button if you can’t. Good hour.” The children shifted aside, and with another smile the woman continued past them up the stairs.

“I’ve never seen her before,” said Peter after a moment.

“Did she look kind of funny to you?” asked Mara.

“How?” said Cedine.

The children considered.

“Her eyes were kind of big,” said Peter.

“That’s it!” said Mara.

“I’ve never seen the kind of case she was carrying,” said Cedine.

“I wonder where she’s going,” said Mara.

A moment went by. “Well, forget about her,” said Peter. “I say we go back and find out where we made the wrong turn.”

“Yeah,” said Cedine. She and Peter began to descend, but Mara stayed, looking up the stairs.

“I want to keep going,” she said.

Peter glanced at Cedine, then at Mara. “Why?”

“I’ll just go to the top of the stairs,” said Mara. “I want to see where the woman’s going.” Before the others could object, she was rushing upward.

Mara’s shoes tapped lightly on the steps. After several turns of the spiral, she came to a long hallway. No one was there except the woman, walking away at the far end. She turned left and vanished.

Mara hurried after her, noticing that there were no oval light fixtures on the walls, meaning there were no invisidoors here. This place was unfamiliar to her – she and her friends had definitely made a wrong turn, probably at that hallway with so many doors spaced along it from a few minutes ago. But Mara was more curious than ever now. She realized that her steps were going to make too much noise if she were to keep up with the woman, so she slipped off her shoes and began to jog, carrying them.

She came to where the woman had turned left, an angle of the hallway. Mara peered around it. Along the right side of the next corridor were spaced many large potted ferns every few meters. Far away, the woman was bent over one of them: she was sliding it aside, making a slight scudding noise that traveled down the hall. She straightened up, then disappeared into an invisidoor that the fern had blocked. Mara saw two hands appear from the wall, grope around slightly, then find the pot and slide it back to where it had been. The hands disappeared.

Mara turned the corner and kept walking, eyes fixed on where the hands had been. She homed in on the fern the woman had moved, noticing grains and clumps of nutrient-sand that had spilled from the pot onto the floor. There were no light fixtures outlining the invisidoor behind it.

Mara set her shoes beside the wall. Down the hallways, she could hear Peter calling her name. Soon she heard footsteps at the top of the stairs.

Mara slipped her slender body around the potted fern. Cautiously, she moved through the invisidoor, face first.

It was another hallway, this one more dimly lit than the others. Only a few sparsely-set halogen lamps shone dully from the ceiling, while the floor, crisscrossed by dark grid lines, glowed with a faint, pearlescent, rosy light. The far end of the hall, several dozen meters away, opened onto a better-lit area, of which Mara could see only a small section.

She took a few hesitant steps. Somehow, the silence that pervaded here seemed even more absolute than that of the previous corridors – almost as if it were a kind of mysterious presence, rather than an absence. Mara kept

staring at the far room, looking for any sign of the woman. All she could see was a blank, cream-colored wall.

Along the left side of the hall were spaced a number of arched, shallow alcoves, each illuminated by its own small halogen lamp. There was nothing in the first alcove... or the second. The third contained a marble statue of a man's torso, without legs, arms, or a head. The fourth alcove was empty. The fifth contained a dodecahedron made of dark, polished stone, and the sixth a single white rose in a pastel pink vase. Mara studied each object closely, half intrigued, half baffled. All the remaining alcoves were empty.

She drew close to the room. She felt uneasy, but intensely curious. An ineffable humming seemed to circulate through the air, dipping up and down in pitch gently. Mara peered around the corner, looking to her right.

It was a mainly bare, well-illuminated, off-white room. Some meters away from her, the woman sat on a clear glass chair at a glass table with her back to Mara, briefcase open on the floor beside her. Spread across the table was an assortment of what looked like colorful gems and crystals. The open briefcase contained many others.

The woman reached down her right hand and took a dark red crystal from the briefcase. She placed it on the table and began rotating it slowly. As she did this, with her left hand she began rotating a green jewel in the opposite direction.

The woman's head tilted up. Mara followed her gaze.

Above and in front of the woman, a field of blackness seemed to appear out of nowhere. She turned the green jewel further. Mara saw a patch of fuzzy light appear in the middle of the field. It seemed to be an aggregation of thousands and thousands of white dots. Mara studied the image. It seemed far crisper and more detailed than any hologram she'd ever seen. The patch of dots was disc-shaped and rotating slowly. The dots were so crammed at the disc's center that they seemed to be fused into one bright ball, bulging out slightly. The disc had two or three curved veins or arms running through it, from the center to the edges, where the dots and some kind of dark cloudy matter seemed especially thick.

Mara had never seen anything quite as fascinating as the image. It appeared to her like some kind of bright, angelic object hovering in a dark pool of water.

She heard a footstep behind her.

In a flash Mara turned round. She had only enough time to get the impression of a tall, bearded figure in a gray suit spraying something into her face before she passed out.

* * *

When she came to, Mara thought she was in bed, and might be late for school. She cracked her eyes open, and the memory of what had happened seized her.

She found herself strapped down across the forearms, waist, and legs on a padded table. Above her face loomed a hollow half-sphere of a clear, glass-like material.

She raised her head and looked around. Mara was in a small room, smaller than the one where she'd been knocked unconscious. Three people were moving among banks of controls and equipment, monitoring screens and adjusting dials. Mara saw that one of them was the woman she had followed.

The nearest figure, seeming to notice her head movement, approached her. It was the bearded man – tall, with gray hair and a lined brow. As with the woman, his eyes seemed just slightly too large for his face. His pupils were a deep brown. He stared at Mara steadily. She stared back, frozen. The man didn't smile, and he held himself unnervingly stiff and still, like some kind of automaton – yet somehow Mara didn't feel any coldness in his expression or bearing. Unaccountably, she sensed a calming influence from him, and her surge of anxiety subsided.

"She's awake," the man said softly. The two others – the woman, and a young man – approached and watched Mara from behind him.

A minute or two went by. "Who are you?" Mara at last asked the tall man, her voice weak and cracking.

The man walked a few paces around her. He took his time to answer. "I'll tell you, since you'll not remember any of this."

He sat down on a chair to Mara's left that she hadn't noticed.

"I am, simply put, the maker of this universe you live in... and the maker of many other universes, too," he said. "I look after everyone: your family, your friends and classmates, the people you greet in the hallways, the people who live in the far-off rooms. I work here and monitor everything,

manage everything, with the help of my assistants.” He gestured toward his companions.

“I was the one who set up this world,” he went on. “I make sure the water flows, the plants grow in their vats, the reactors hum, the cables send energy and information from room to room. The technicians of your society may think they control and regulate these things – but ultimately it is I who do so, for I can control all matter in this world with my equipment.” The man indicated the room around them. Mara began to feel light-headed, though still calm. The man’s voice was very soothing.

“And more than that,” he went on, “I can, when I wish, compel any thought, any feeling, any action, by anyone in this universe, from the most humble soul to the greatest. For this flesh you see,” he said, pointing to himself, “is not my true being.”

He paused, looking past Mara toward the wall opposite him. Mara could not look away from his eyes.

“In every world, in every universe,” he said, “to understand my creation from the inside out... I keep a body – a copy, a version of myself.” He looked again at Mara and smiled an odd smile – aloof, yet still kind.

“You, Mara Murgatroyd, are one of the few persons among my many universes to have found the nook, the hidden corner, where I reside. They never pose me any danger, curious souls like you,” he said cheerfully. He stood up. “I like to reward such adventurous ones by letting them know the truth about their universe... for a little while, anyway.” Mara only stared wide-eyed at the man – not afraid, but bewildered, not quite able to take in what he was telling her.

The man’s smile dissipated. He loomed over her. “You’ll be returned – unconscious, with your shoes on – to a hallway near your home, to awaken shortly thereafter, as though you fell asleep on the way. The only thing you will remember is following my assistant until you lost interest and turned back.” Mara watched the man as he turned away and placed one hand on a lever attached to a neck-high hulk of steel machinery.

“Wait,” she rasped. The man looked at her.

“I just... want to ask you something.”

“You’ll not remember the answer,” the man said. “Or even the question.”

“I know,” said Mara, her heart in her throat. “But I have to learn, if only for a moment... Is your name the Griffin?”

The man kept his impassive look – or tried to. Mara couldn’t be sure, but in his eyes, she thought she caught some faintest hint of recognition at the name... and even, somehow, of alarm.

The man seemed to gather himself, brush off the passing emotion. He paused before he said:

“I’m afraid it isn’t. In this world, I call myself the Sphinx.”