



THE CUBE

PARKER CASTLEBERRY

I WALKED TOWARD THE BLACK--THING. IT WAS ABOUT 40 METERS AWAY, AND YET IT FILLED MY FIELD OF VISION. IT WAS PURE BLACK, NO VISIBLE FUTURES AT ALL. FOR A MINUTE, IT ALMOST REMINDED ME OF MY HOUSE WAY BACK ON EARTH, BUT LARGER--MUCH LARGER. IT APPEARED SQUARE IN SHAPE, BUT I CAN'T BE SURE AT THIS DISTANCE. MY METAL LEG CRUNCHED ON THE GRAVEL-LIKE, ROCKY GROUND. I STOPPED, WANTING TO GET A BETTER LOOK. I STOOD THERE, STARING AT THE OBJECT. THIS THING BETTER BE MORE THAN A BIG ROCK, I THOUGHT, OR THIS WILL BE A COMPLETE WASTE OF TIME. I STOPPED ON AN UNCHARTED PLANET TO LOOK AT WHAT, A BIG ROCK? NO, IT APPEARED TOO SQUARE TO BE NATURAL, ALTHOUGH NATURE CAN MAKE SOME NEAR RIGHT ANGLES.

MY NAME IS WILL. I'M WHAT OTHER PEOPLE CALL AN "EARTHER," MEANING I WAS BORN ON EARTH. WITH REDDISH BLOND HAIR, GREEN EYES, FAIR SKIN, AND A 6 FOOT 4 STATURE, I'M INSTANTLY RECOGNIZABLE AS ONE. SEE, MANY YEARS AGO EARTH WAS HIT BY A METEOR IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. I WAS IN A SPACE STATION AT THE TIME, WORKING AS A SCIENTIST FOR THE GOVERNMENT, AND I USED A SHUTTLE FROM THERE TO ESCAPE. HUMANITY, OR WHAT WAS LEFT OF IT (ABOUT 10% OF THE POPULATION OF EARTH FLED IN SMALL SPACECRAFT OR WERE ALREADY OFF-PLANET), SET UP AROUND A NUMBER OF HABITABLE PLANETS. WHAT FOLLOWED WAS A FULL-SCALE WAR OVER OXYGEN, THE VERY THING WE NEED TO SURVIVE. I WAS DRAFTED INTO THE SERVICE AND FORCED TO BE A GROUND SOLDIER. I LEARNED A LOT ABOUT COMBAT, TEAMWORK, AND TACTICS DURING THAT TIME.

IN SEVERAL OF THOSE BATTLES, OVER THE YEARS, I HAVE BEEN INJURED AND NOW AM PARTIALLY ROBOTIC. MY EYE, ARM, LEG AND PART OF MY CHEST HAVE BEEN REPLACED WITH METAL ANALOGS. WELL, ONE SIDE OF THE WAR WON, THANKFULLY THE SIDE I WAS ON. THAT WAS 50 YEARS AGO. I NOW SERVE VOLUNTARILY AS THE CAPTAIN OF A MEDIUM-SIZED COMBAT SHIP CHARGED WITH PEACE-KEEPING AND EXPLORATION.

THIS STRUCTURE, OR WHATEVER, WAS HUGE. I WONDERED IF ANYTHING COULD BE INSIDE. AFTER ABOUT TEN MINUTES OF WALKING, I ARRIVED. THERE WAS NOTHING ON THE SURFACE. IT WAS BLACK, JUST AS I HAD THOUGHT, AND IT WAS SMOOTH. NOT SMOOTH LIKE METAL, AS WE THINK OF IT. JUST SO PERFECTLY FLAT YOU COULDN'T GET EVEN THE SLIGHTEST FEELING OF A TEXTURE AT ALL. IT FELT LIKE AIR, IT WAS SO PERFECT. I WALKED ALONG THE SIDE OF THIS THING, LOOKING FOR AN ENTRANCE. THERE WAS NOTHING ON THAT SIDE--OR THAT ONE. THERE WAS NOTHING ON ANY SIDE OF THIS THING. ALTHOUGH I DID FIND OUT THAT ALL SIDES APPEAR TO BE SQUARE. THIS THING WAS A GIANT CUBE; THEREFORE IT HAD TO BE MAN-MADE. ALL I HAD TO DO NOW WAS SEE WHAT WAS ON THE TOP. I PEERED UP, DWARFED BY THIS MONOLITHIC STRUCTURE, WONDERING HOW I WAS GOING TO GET UP. IT WAS QUITE A WAY. WELL, THAT'S WHAT GRAPPLING GUNS WERE INVENTED FOR. I TOOK IT OUT, TOOK CAREFUL AIM, AND FIRED THE ROCKET PROPELLED HOOK. IT ZOOMED UP, UNWINDING A THIN COILED CABLE BEHIND IT. THERE WAS A FAINT CHINK WHEN IT HIT THE TOP. IT STAYED, AND I GAVE THE WIRE A TUG TO SEE IF IT WAS STURDY. IT WAS NOT AT ALL. THE TOP MUST BE AS SLICK AS THE SIDES. I STEPPED ASIDE TO DODGE THE FALLING HOOK, WHICH HIT THE GROUND WITH QUITE A THUD. NOW WHAT? WELL, I COULD JUST FLY UP THERE; I WAS ALREADY GETTING SIDETRACKED FROM PATROLLING THE SECTOR. I DECIDED TO DO IT THE QUICK WAY, SO I PRESSED A BUTTON ON MY ROBOTIC ARM AND CALLED MY SPHERE.

IT FLEW SILENTLY TO ME. SPHERES ARE SINGLE PERSON SHORT RANGE CRAFT; THEY'RE HANDY FOR GETTING TO A PLANET'S SURFACE FROM A SHIP IN ORBIT, AND FOR MOVING AROUND ONCE YOU'RE ON THE GROUND. I CAME DOWN HERE ALONE, EVEN THOUGH MY CREW ADVISED ME NOT TO.

SOON I WAS SITTING IN A NICE COMFORTABLE CHAIR INSIDE FLYING TOWARDS THE EDIFICE. "WOULD YOU LIKE SOME ENTERTAINMENT?" THE COOL VOICE OF MY SHIP'S COMPUTER ASKED.

"NO THANKS, BUT I WOULD LIKE TO SEE THE OBJECT."

"WINDOWS OPENED."

"THANKS."

"YOU'RE WELCOME,"

AS I WAS APPROACHING THE OBJECT, I SAW A FAINT GRAY LINE ON THE TOP. IT WAS ALMOST BLACK AND BLENDED IN QUITE WELL WITH THE REST OF THE OBJECT, AND WHEN I GOT RIGHT ABOVE IT, I COULD SEE A FAINT SQUARE OUTLINED. I STEPPED ONTO THE SURFACE OF THE CUBE AND ALMOST LOST MY BALANCE. NO WONDER MY HOOK NEVER STUCK; THE TOP WAS AS SMOOTH AS THE SIDES. AFTER A HALF HOUR OF WALKING, I FOUND IT. IT WAS ABOUT 2 METERS WIDE, AND IT EXTENDED IN BOTH DIRECTIONS AS FAR AS I COULD SEE. WELL, THIS HAS TO BE SOMETHING, I THOUGHT. I BENT DOWN AND TOUCHED THE LINE. IT WAS THE SAME TEXTURE AS THE REST OF THE CUBE, BUT WAS DARK GRAY IN COLOR. I HEARD A CREAKING SOUND, AND JUMPED BACK. I LOOKED AROUND, AND INSTANTLY TOOK OUT THE PISTOL I WAS CARRYING. YEARS OF TRAINING HAD MADE THIS A SUBCONSCIOUS REACTION TO ANYTHING UNEXPECTED. I STOOD IN AWE AS THE SQUARE OUTLINED BY THE GRAY ROSE UP. IT ROSE UP ONLY A FEW METERS, JUST AS HIGH AS A PERSON. A FINE BLACK DUST BLEW OUT AS IT CAME UP, AS THOUGH IT HAD NOT BEEN OPENED IN A VERY LONG TIME. I CAUTIOUSLY WALKED TOWARDS IT.

THERE WAS AN OPENING IN THE SIDE OF THE RISEN PART. I WALKED UP TOWARDS THE OPENING AND NOTICED THAT THE DOORWAY WAS SIMPLY A RECTANGULAR HOLE. I LOOKED INSIDE AND SAW ONLY DARKNESS. WHAT HAVE I GOT TO LOSE, I THOUGHT. LET'S SEE WHAT'S INSIDE. I STEPPED INTO THE DOOR, AND FOUND THAT THERE WAS A FLOOR THERE. THAT'S GOOD. I STARTED TO GO INSIDE, BUT STOPPED. I HAD NO IDEA WHAT I WAS GOING INTO, BESIDES DARKNESS. I COULDN'T SEE A THING INSIDE. THE LIGHT FROM THE DOORWAY DIDN'T SEEM TO REACH INSIDE EVEN THOUGH IT WAS RIGHT BEHIND ME. I HAD ONLY TAKEN A FEW STEPS AND IT WAS PITCH BLACK. MY ROBOTIC EYE AUTOMATICALLY SWITCHED INTO LIGHT-AMPLIFICATION MODE. I STILL DIDN'T SEE ANYTHING. THERE WAS NO LIGHT WHATSOEVER IN THIS PLACE. WELL, THERE ALWAYS IS THE OLD FASHIONED WAY, SO I TOOK OUT MY FLASHLIGHT, AND SHINED IT IN FRONT OF ME. THE BEAM JUST STOPPED LESS THAN A METER AHEAD. NOT AS IF IT HIT AN OBJECT, BUT AS IF THE BEAM JUST LOST ALL ITS ENERGY. IT WAS LIKE A FOG, ONLY THERE WERE NO PARTICLES AND NO GAS. THE AIR INSIDE WAS AMAZINGLY CLEAN. I KEPT WALKING IN ONE DIRECTION. I TOOK ANOTHER STEP AND FELT NOTHING. I MUST HAVE REACHED AN EDGE. THEN I FELT THAT THERE WAS A PLATFORM BELOW IT. I STEPPED ONTO THAT PLATFORM AND FELT ITS EDGE. THERE WAS YET ANOTHER PLATFORM BELOW IT. I WAS ON A STAIRCASE. I CONTINUED TO WALK DOWN THE STAIRCASE FOR WHAT SEEMED LIKE HOURS, BLINDLY FEELING MY WAY THROUGH, ALWAYS REACHING OUT IN FRONT OF ME TO MAKE SURE I WASN'T GOING OFF OF SOME CLIFF. ABRUPTLY, THE STAIRS ENDED. I FELT A WALL, AND CLOSER INSPECTION REVEALED IT WAS INDEED A SOLID WALL. IT WAS A DEAD END! I TURNED AROUND, BUT AS I DID A VOICE SAID, "THIS IS NOT THE END, BUT RATHER A DOOR."

WHO SAID THAT? NO ONE ELSE WAS AROUND. I MUST HAVE HEARD IT IN MY HEAD. SENSORY DEPRIVATION IS CAUSING ME TO HEAR THINGS, I TOLD MYSELF. BUT, THE VOICE DID HAVE SOMETHING INTERESTING TO SAY. I WALKED BACK UP TO THE WALL, AND TOUCHED IT. NOTHING HAPPENED. THEN I GOT A CRAZY IDEA. I HAD USED MY ROBOTIC HAND TO FEEL THE LINE ON THE TOP, AND THAT ACTIVATED IT. WHY NOT? I TOUCHED THE WALL WITH MY METAL HAND. THE WALL SUDDENLY DISAPPEARED, AS IF IT WASN'T EVEN THERE. BEHIND IT WAS MORE DARKNESS, BUT THIS TIME I SAW A FAINT LIGHT AHEAD. SO THERE IS SOMETHING INSIDE OF HERE. BESIDES THAT LIGHT, EVERYTHING AROUND ME WAS STILL PITCH BLACK. THE LIGHT ALSO APPEARED TO BE SUBJECT TO THE LIMITATION. AS I GOT CLOSER, IT GOT BRIGHTER, UNTIL I COULDN'T LOOK DIRECTLY AT IT. IN A FEW MINUTES OF WALKING I HAD GONE FROM PURE DARKNESS TO VERY INTENSE LIGHT. THEN I FELT ANOTHER WALL IN FRONT OF ME. AGAIN, I PUT MY HAND TO IT AND THIS TIME THERE CAME TO ME A BLINDING LIGHT AND A VOICE. A DARK, OMINOUS VOICE, DEEPER THAN ANYTHING I HAVE EVER HEARD.

“I AM NEEDED AGAIN”

TO BE CONTINUED...

