

Cradle Earth

Rough Draft 2.1

A story written by Erica VanDrunen and her brother Dave

for an Earth2 inspired project called Cradle Earth

*"The heart of the sun lies within the womb of the earth. The faulty rhythm of its beat forces
the earth to tremble.*

*Only through eight moons, at the sun's tips Can the tensions of fury be released,
And the power of eight suns flow through the earth."*

Elysium to Cradle Earth

Chapter 1

Amidst the mad rush, the mundane faces and the grey business attire became a blur. That's when reality hit him.

The docile nature to the workforce was simply to exist.

John Victor was a young professor of the Department of Geology in Elysium, he could not allow himself to fall into the same pattern as so many of the others around him. He had to maintain interest in the planet, it was the only way he had a sense of purpose in his mere existence.

He made up his mind right then. He would retire from the workforce and volunteer in areas of his own interest to avoid becoming another stagnant addition to society. He had a few phone calls to make, he was sure he had made enough friends to at least put together a support team for when his remaining funds ran out. A person still needs to eat, at a bare minimum.

Glancing up, John relished the sight of the bright blue expanse. The blazing sun and the heat of the summer had just begun, and every academy was emptying itself of carried ambitions and its mentors.

Yes. This was the perfect time to shift his niche in life. The students wouldn't miss him over the next few months and the faculty would have time to find a replacement.

An elbow jabbed into his ribs, breaking his train of thought.

"Sorry!" said the stranger who quickly disappeared into a blur of grey.

An odd, but pleasant thing to hear after being violated in collision from total strangers paying little mind or attention to what's around them.

Despite the commotion, the beauty of the business was the energy created from within it. The

industrious people had a unified drive that whispered of human connection, even though there was little interaction.

A serene voice glided through the air, gently landing on any ear that would hear

“You are healthy. You are strong. You are successful. You are happy...”

Affirmations that could be clearly heard, if they were not stopped short by headphones or Bluetooth ear pieces.

Not that it mattered much, most people were listening to music or their own affirmations, singing or speaking to themselves to boost their moral in their own way. Others being multitasking geniuses and working as they walked, the drive of their own success being the thing that makes them happy.

For John Victor though, observing his surroundings was the mental break he needed from the whirlpool of thoughts bouncing around in his head. Taking in the view of the Elder trees, arrayed in various patterns around the city, the large umbels of cream-colored flowers.

The trees were planted to help with air purification, though there are some that have taken to making wines and medicines as to not waste what the tree is capable of.

Purple and blue wildflowers cloaked the rooftops of various buildings to attract pollinators, and waterfalls in various locations offered a relaxed ambience which was quite effective for those who cared to listen.

John took a long deep breath and with his lips pursed together, he exhaled slowly. For the first time in a long time, his future was behind a shroud of uncertainty. It was time to find a sense of purpose elsewhere.

The smell of food started to dance with the fragrance of the flowers, causing his stomach to growl ferociously. He put his earpiece in and spoke into it.

“Call YummyBowls”

An digital voice responded in his ear

“Hi John, same order as last time?”

“Yes!” John responded

“40 Essence will be taken from your account. Same address?”

“Yes!”

“Your meal will arrive in 10 minutes. Thank you for your service.”

It was easy ordering dinner when you ate the same thing every day, something else John decided should change as well.

When John arrived at his building he was greeted by a steel door. He placed his feet on the colored tile and a retina scanner protruded from the wall. Once he had completed his ocular scan, the steel door opened automatically to receive him inside.

Walking through the hallways he passed a myriad of bright colored doors before coming to his, which was painted teal. John placed his hand on a pad on the wall and leaned over to put his eye in front of yet another ocular scan. Even though this one was coupled with a fingerprint scanner, it left little more comfort that someone motivated enough would have any more difficulty getting in.

After shedding his coat and throwing his keys on the counter, John flopped heavily into his couch and looked around. His living space reminded him of a large hallway that was partitioned by the furniture to try to define rooms with separate functions. The couch divided the space between the kitchen and the living room. At the far end he had a fitness room which was used more as a multipurpose room, though at least there was an exercise bike in it. A teleportation unit about the size of a bar fridge sat in the corner beside the bike. His bed sat along the back wall in the middle of the hall, underneath the only window in the room.

Not that a window matters when you're looking at a brick wall.

His teleportation device beeped. It was an awkward looking device that allowed teleportation of small to medium sized objects. It was signaling an incoming teleport.

Good, that must be dinner.

John rushed to the bedroom, tossed his suit into a basket, put on a pair of loose fitting trousers and a light hooded sweater.

Comfort clothes

One long beep...his meal had arrived

After quickly washing his hands and face he went over to grab his food. YummyBowl always made good food to satisfy his quirky taste buds.

John sat on the couch to eat, pulling up a small table to place his noodles. He sighed and talked to the bowl as if it were going to provide some guidance.

"What am I going to do with my life"

He pulled out his phone and noticed there was a missed call and a voicemail.

"that's odd" he exclaimed. "I usually leave my ringer at full volume, I must have accidentally turned it off."

The bowl said nothing in response

John placed his phone on the table and pressed the visual voicemail display. A hologram popped up out of the display and showed an image of a man. The man had a neatly trimmed beard, with black and white streaks, a glistening bald head and a face full of glowing, perfectly white teeth which he showed off through an ear to ear grin.

"Hi John, this is Gerald. I'm the CEO of Serbatek, a small company that works under the umbrella of Telzac..."

Ah yes...Telzac, the designers of the future. They have already launched a chain of satellites around the planet connecting us with wireless technology. Heck, even the transport device that he ordered lunch through was one of their patents.

“At least it's not a lawyer....that would start the summer off poorly” John stated out loud

The message continued “ ... I have an exciting opportunity for you over your summer break, but please, no pressure. There is an Island called Cradle Earth that is rumored to have rare resources in the ground and I need a professional to look into it. I will provide you with everything you need, consider it a paid vacation. I look forward to hearing from you.”

The message ended. *Cradle Earth?*

With a mouthful of noodles, he instructed his phone

“Locate Cradle Earth”

The phone responded, “Cradle Earth is a coral island around 8km² located east of Australia, It is inhabited by around 389 indigenous people.”

John thought to himself, ‘*Ok...That doesn't sound too bad, though I feel the information is lacking and might be slightly filtered.*’ Though he was unsure why

John finished the last of his cilantro and jalapeño bites from the sweet and salty noodles. He asked the phone again

“What are their main resources now?”

“Oranges, fish and sandalwood” the phone chattered

Great...its poverty stricken

John asked, “How many pubs are on the Island?”

“One. The Orange Coral Hotel and Pub.”

The idea of a nearly non-civilized island with a pub.... *now that sounds like something I can enjoy*

“Tell me about Serbatek” doesn't hurt to do a little digging

“Serbatek is a company that works for Telzac and is located in the Earth2 Capital in Vanuatu.”

An awkward pause of silence, John frowned and asked, “that’s it?”

“there is no more detail regarding Serbatek” was the reply.

John didn’t even get Gerald’s last name and couldn’t get any information regarding him. A few things seemed slightly off, but John easily dismissed the feeling.

This is a great opportunity; I get to do something new and exciting in a nice and quiet location. I might just retire for good there after this job.

“Show me the location on the map please”

The phone lit up the room, it was getting fairly dark now. An image flooded the space in front of him with a blue and green satellite map. The Earth2 Capital was more north-west of Cradle Earth, He’d never been there but it seemed like an interesting place from the pictures he’s seen. At least the company wasn’t too far from the designated location in case they needed some fairly large equipment...he doubted they would have a teleporter large enough to handle everything he would need.

He instructed the phone, “Remind me tomorrow at 7am to call Gerald.”

“OK, I will remind you at 7am to call Gerald”

John shut off the phone and walked over to the transportation device, he pressed a green button on the side and activated the garbage disposal. He tossed the dished into the violet fury which was streaked with stark white veins of lightning. The utensils were sucked into its black hole and gone from his world. He imagined a gushing stream of garbage pouring out through the other end due to the millions of people sending unwanted items to the same place. Whoever worked in that sector would probably have to deal with an unrelenting and unpleasant odor of decomposition. At least everything these days was made out of organic material.

It was getting late, he needed to get ready for bed. Overall, he had a pretty good feeling about

this Gerald person.

The light in the washroom was horribly bright and exposed every flaw on his body. He looked in the mirror and winced. A good rest was required to get rid of those nasty bags under his eyes, but he rubbed some caffeine ointment under his eyes to help. Whatever, he just needed to look reasonably alive when talking to Gerald.

“Music on” he uttered

an interesting piece played, ‘Procession by Nightwish’... Seemed fitting.

John crawled into bed, a dim blue light from some piece of technology lighting up the room....he drifted off to sleep dreaming about the beers on the beach he was about to enjoy.

The dim blue light changed to a drastically bright blaze, stirring John out of his deep sleep. Some people need an alarm of sound to wake up, he needed light...as unpleasant as it was.

A beeping sound came from the corner...breakfast was incoming.

John reluctantly crawled out of bed and washed his face with ice cold water.

A long beep

A chocolate shake, a bowl of fresh pineapple chunks, and oatmeal bar and a steaming hot cup of tea arrived in his teleportation device. He immediately took it out, placed it on the table and devoured it.

Its going to be an interesting day... he could just feel it

As soon as he finished his breakfast and catching up on events he missed on his phone overnight, John jumped in the shower and doused himself in cold water. He turned the water off and pressed a silver button on the wall, a large fan turned on blowing warm air...naturally styling his hair while drying him off. The fan reminded him of the old drive through carwashes that blew

the car dry when it was done being washed.

He jumped into a suit, stark navy with a white shirt under his jacket to change it up from the dreary grey he usually wore. He placed his phone on the table and called Gerald... *7am sharp*

The screen popped up to a man adjusting his shirt collar and smoothing his black and white beard
Glad I was more punctual than he was

“Hi John” Gerald flashed a big smile, “Thanks for calling me back. Have you considered my offer?”

John reciprocated the smile. “Hi Gerald, thanks for getting in touch with me. How did you...know about me?”

“One of your brilliant students is my grandson. I did some research on your background. Its quite something.”

Yep. Everyone’s background can be found on the net nowadays if you know where to look.

“Thanks, Uh....so if I was to go to Cradle Earth, where exactly would I stay? It seems to be an unpopular destination, even with a hotel.”

Without hesitation Gerald answered “ We have a hut for you already. It has a clean water supply, mosquito nettings and a working septic system. You will have a vehicle you can use to travel on the Island.”

“Is there internet?” Even though Telzac has an array of satellites, there still needs to be equipment on the ground.

“At certain locations, and certainly at the arrival port”

John asked, “What resources are you looking for?”

“The resources are rumored among the locals to be beneath the ground. There are frequent earthquakes on the many islands in the area and we believe these are caused by some sort of anomaly on Cradle Earth. It is possible John, that this resource is something that hasn’t yet been

discovered by humanity.”

“I find it hard to believe that there is something new to discover” John retorted

“You are entering a place that hasn’t been overly contaminated by human manipulation in regards to technology and advanced science. The people on the island are very superstitious and will gladly welcome you...especially with your name. They have had a few religious encounters on the Island from men named John, and there are those who still look forward to the return of John.”

If I was hired because my name is John, that’s the most absurd thing I’ve heard of

John couldn’t help the sarcasm. “Uh, okay...earthquakes and a John god... sounds like the place I want to be.”

Gerald chuckled, but responded in assurance, “As for earthquakes, just do what everyone else does and find shelter and wait for it to pass. There isn’t a lot of infrastructure to really injure anyone anyway.”

“Hmmm,” John nodded slowly and asked, “So, what’s in it for me?”

“ADVENTURE!!!” Gerald howled and punched the air with exhilaration. “Live life in its natural state, with no constant advertising, no media specifically selected for you, and no robots telling you what to feel and do. I will also pay you better than the last job as well as find a suitable replacement for you”

Man... this guy is making it impossible to refuse this offer

Gerald continued, “All I ask is that you research, dig and keep me updated daily of your findings.”

“How do I update you if I might not have internet access?”

“You should have internet at the hut, otherwise just go to the Orange Coral Hotel and Pub. I’ll cover whatever food and drink you order from there.”

“What would I need to arrange beforehand...if I was to go?”

You would need to book an appointment with the Travel Pharmacy and get the required injections

for the area. Then pack your bags and go.... of course let me know first.”

Johns brow furrowed, “Is there a rig already set up? Do I have a crew?”

“The best we can do at this time is send you a portable rig, we will have to send it in parts and have a crew assemble it there. When you let me know if you’re going or not, I’ll start the shipping process...or not. You can drive around yourself, maybe train people as you go. Unfortunately, we cannot send in a professional crew as Cradle Earth is not too fond of outsiders.”

“But I’m an outsider too!”

“Trust me, they will welcome you with open arms.”

Oh yeah! Cause I’m John.... we’ll see how much weight that bears when I’m there.

Gerald looked at his watch and motioned to someone that was out of view “I have another appointment scheduled in a few minutes. Please let me know of your decision by noon. If no one can answer your call, leave a message stating yes or no.”

By noon?

The call ended. The time on the phone was 9:23, he had a few hours to mull it over.

John changed into his shorts and t-shirt and then crawled onto his exercise bike. He threw in his earpiece and requested a call to Travel Pharmacy.

He was greeted by “Travel Pharmacy, how can we help you today?”

“What shots do I need to get to go to Cradle Earth?”

“Sorry, Where?”

“Cradle Earth, an Island east of Australia in the chain of Vanuatu.”

“Just a second...”

The background music of piano etudes plays pleasantly while John waits.

“Thank you for holding, I’ve managed to reach the airport on Cradle Earth. The anti-virus injections you would need to get are for Tinba, Nimda, and Nachi for a total of 450 Essence.”

“Thanks” said John, “I will call back later.” He hung up after the receptionist said goodbye.

John started to feel anxiety creeping in, he tried to close his eyes and breath deep in a meditative form, but it was too much...there was no calming the feelings he was getting.

He dialed Gerald's number. No one picked up, so he left his answer “Yes!”

Within 5 minutes of his phone call he had booked his appointment with Travel Pharmacy and had teleported there. The Nurse set him on a cold plastic black chair, looked over his medical records and then gave him the necessary injections.

John went back home where he ordered a massive lunch and started packing. He realized his suits wont be the most practical thing for the island.

He quickly jotted down a list – *khaki pants, long sleeved white cotton shirts, bug spray, sunscreen, hat*

He ordered what he needed through Amaxiom and everything arrived within the next 20 minutes.

He certainly didn't miss the wait times they used to have.

The call came at 11:23am, after he was all packed and the apartment was all cleaned. It would be nice to return to a clean home once the expedition is over, even if it was just to sell it.

Gerald appeared on screen, pleased to see John's travel bag. He asked, “Injections all done?”

“Yes, and I'm also all packed.” John stated the obvious.

“Wonderful. Before you go, send me your medical bills and you will be reimbursed. Also, your flight is arranged, your flight number is 274614237789921.”

John put the number into the notes on his phone. He figured he could get at least a few hours sleep in before he left, so that's what he did.

When noon had arrived, John took a sharp breath, grabbed his suitcases and teleported to the Elysium airport. After his ocular scan and passport confirmation, he had his code number

checked and verified. The medical reports were sent ahead of time from the Travel Pharmacy. He was ready to teleport to Cradle Earth.

Due to the infrastructure around the Telzac teleportation system, the world government put in place for international travelers transport to be restricted to airports alone...although government officials can authorize additional locations for military or political purposes, go figure.

John caught a glimpse of immobile planes sitting out on the pavement. Each aircraft sat between faded, painted lines. They were stored for emergency situations in case anything ever happened to the teleportation system.

After a submersion of ultra high frequency electricity and Auras of varying color, he arrived at the airport in Cradle Earth.

People were dressed in old fashioned jeans and baggy t-shirts. Some seated on the floor selling merchandise, while others wandered around at a leisurely pace. He couldn't tell if they were locals, or perhaps stranded tourists.

Between people and merchandise, rubbish filled the gaps. Tattered rags, old plastics, broken appliances and rotten food was the main attraction. Obviously not a well used hub for travel.

The airport had very few workers, but you could tell them apart as they were dressed in olive green military uniforms. A couple of them approached John and motioned for his documentation. Once they saw his passport they beamed with delight...one even shouted to the crowd nearby motioning them to come meet him.

"Welcome to Cradle Earth, John! Its been a long time, but we have been waiting for you to return."

The Outsider

Chapter 2

A guide led John through the mob of desperate sellers. Their attentive eyes and obnoxious chatter in a language he couldn't understand were directed at him.

Suddenly, he was uncomfortable and certain that this was all a mistake. His presence unintentionally, yet blatantly screamed he was moneyed.

His white shirt was in mint condition. Brand new khakis detailed with many pockets. His face was clean shaven and hair neatly trimmed. The robust suitcase held firmly in his fist. Behind him was a small, but fierce group, in military uniforms and who held guns. It all gave it away.

With the currencies he received at the Elysium airport, he ended up buying some food from the vendors. Just in case he had no food at the place he was staying at. Plus, the peer pressure.

Then an extraordinary sketch at a vendor caught his interest. There was little time to admire it, but as soon as he spotted the name *N. Tesla* on the page, he quickly purchased it. Nikola Telsa was a legend, an inventor and a futurist back in the days. Outside the airport building was a large paved lot, a few planes, and even fewer vehicles. The military group remained inside while the guide took him to a yellow Wrangler YJ jeep. Keys were placed in his hands.

"You drive. I will guide," said the guide who had never introduced himself and climbed into the passenger's side of the jeep.

The acute nostalgia for his former driving days hit him hard when he sat in the driver's seat. He nearly grinned when he turned on the ignition.

The road was paved and not in too bad of a condition, but because it was well used by pedestrians, he drove slowly. Many locals, mostly children, moved excitedly to the side of the road for the jeep to pass through, and greeted John with smiles and waving hands.

Warmed by the friendliness, he couldn't help but respond back with kind smiles and waves.

He glanced over to the guide who just stared straight ahead with subtle emotions. John asked, "What is your name?"

"Tam, sir."

"No need to call me 'sir.' Please call me John." Tam gave a curt nod.

I gotta break the ice, John thought, but he soon was distracted by the surroundings.

Many sandalwood trees reached the sky with their greenery. These ones in particular were young, so recently planted. Upon maturity, they were to be sold to licensed sandalwood agents.

There was a small marketplace near the side of the road. To John's relief, no one ran towards the jeep or insisted him to purchase anything. It seemed it was more of a community, local market. When the locals saw John and the Jeep, it was a slight element of surprise but they knew Tam and waved.

They also passed by the Orange Grove, easily spotted by its many clusters of bright colored fruits. Cradle Earth was packed with many rich resources and many happy

islanders.

So, why are the civilians in an underprivileged state? Why is it that at the airport, the people desperately wanted his money, yet away from the airport, the people seem sincerely content without money?

Tam interrupted his thoughts. "The road will split soon. Take the right to go to the guest house."

John took the right fork.

Soon, they passed by a village of huts. The walls of such basic buildings were braided with sturdy, dried grass, and the slanted roofs were covered with many layers of palms. With all the coastal weather and earthquakes, and perhaps a lack of government support, maybe the villagers had no choice but to live a simple life.

"Turn here," Tam pointed to a small dirt road off the paved one that could have easily been missed.

He arrived at a single-story house that didn't look much different than the huts he had passed, but it was bigger and supported by high stilts. A ramp leading from the ground to the door of the guesthouse was held up by posts. It gave John a feeling of ease to know his things would be safe from a probable flooding event.

An isolated, small outhouse, sat on the ground away from the guesthouse.

The large area surrounded by palm trees and coconut trees, with a couple orange trees, was also secluded.

Tam jumped out of the vehicle and asked, "You okay on your own now?" "Yes, I am fine.

Thank you."

After Tam left, John unloaded the jeep, and brought everything inside. He was glad to see the mosquito nets hanging over the bed, and especially the large one that hung around the kitchen table where he could eat and read his phone in peace. The braided walls had many gaps for the little bloodsuckers to enter through.

The draft was nice though. There were no windows, but enough daylight filled the room through the gaps, so it wasn't needed.

He taped the sketch he purchased today onto the wall.

The wifi password code was nowhere around. Annoyed, he decided to do his internet catch-up at the pub and made a mental note to contact Gerald to get the password.

John rummaged in his suitcase and took out the printed map of Cradle Earth. The island was shaped like a lobster claw, the north end had pincers that slightly opened with a bay inside.

He taped it next to the Tesla drawing.

The pub was only a few minutes drive out west. Walking was doable but it opened the possibility of chatting with the locals and he wasn't ready for that.

Food, beer, and the internet was all he wanted right now.

* * *

Situated near the coral cliff of the ocean, a stone building boldly rose about three stories high, with whitewashed walls that brilliantly brought out the glittering blue of the ocean. The domed roof and arched entry ways were also white, keeping the place cool on hot blazing days. The walls were thick enough to withstand harsh winds. It reminded John of some ancient Greek home structures he once saw on the internet.

The hotel was surrounded by tropical flowers, palm trees, and a small pool. It was a spectacular view.

Why was he not placed here?

Someone certainly invested money into this building.

In the foyer, he saw two people at the desk dressed in royal blue uniforms. After greeting him, one showed him to the pub, which faced openly towards the ocean.

The breeze was gentle and he could smell the saltwater.

After ordering a cassava wrap with BBQ beef, fries, and a beer, he quickly dialed Gerald.

“How was your arrival?” Gerald asked.

“Not bad...I really do stand out here, though. Are you sure the islanders are cool with me being here?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“Yeah, the workers at the airport mentioned that they have waited for my return?”

Gerald chuckled and said, “They think you’re a reincarnation of the last John who was there before.”

“Oh...did you know the last John who was here before me?” “No, but you can check out

this famous John on wikipedia.”

Then John remembered, “Speaking of which, I do need a wifi password at the bungalow.

Would you by any chance have it?”

“That I do not know, but I will look into it. I’ll contact the owner today.”

John sipped the cold beer that had a sliced orange on the rim. He widened his eyes in astonishment.

“You okay?” Gerald asked.

“This tastes incredible!” He exclaimed. The subtle sweetness, bitterness, and tanginess, fizzed with joy on his tongue.

“Well, have as many as you want. Just remember to walk if you have too much.” “Oh, yeah, forgot about the driving drinking bad combo...”

John had to ask, “Why did I get a bungalow instead of this amazing hotel?”

Gerald clicked his tongue in disapproval. “The islanders would like you better if you slept under a similar roof. The hotel is mainly for government officials and rich tourists. They’re not really much to their liking.”

John nodded slowly in understanding, savoring the orange hint in his beer.

“I do have to go,” Gerald said. “Just so you know, the hotel knows to bill everything to Serbatek. Your rig truck will be ready for you at the airport tomorrow morning. You can contact me tomorrow evening to update me on everything, or to let me know if you need anything else. I hope you have a good rest of the day.”

“Thanks, I’ll contact you tomorrow then.”

Once the call ended, his food arrived. The BBQ strips of steak in the cassava wrap was a bit too gamey for his liking, and the oven-baked fries were thin strips of sweet potatoes that were slightly overcooked. It was all washed down by a delicious drink so it didn't matter. He ordered another drink.

He browsed through his social media platforms and news, but quickly got bored of it and turned off his phone.

Walking out towards the ocean view with his second beer, his boots sank into the white coral sands on the beach brimmed with coconut palms. He truly was in paradise.

The sun was starting to sink into its beautiful array of warm pink and orange tones. When he drove back to his bungalow, he noticed an overcast of clouds.

A sense of foreboding started to kick in.

He had to get the rig from the airport tomorrow. *Did he have to walk there?* He wondered if he was able to drive his jeep there, then get it later. *No, that's stupid.* He wanted the jeep and the rig to be where he was staying. *Would the locals bother him if he went for a walk?* The airport security were there to protect him from the mob when he arrived, but he had no protection walking alone on the island. The locals along the road seemed friendly but he was in a jeep, and with Tam.

Back at the bungalow, it started to rain. He noticed there was a rainwater system with a filter. The water from the tap surprisingly tasted good.

The outhouse was clean, but had no light except for the natural light that peered through the cracks of the wood. He would have to use a lantern when it got dark. There was a fresh roll of toilet paper and a big bucket of dry soil with a plastic cup beside the

toilet. The soil was a good way to keep the stink under and out of sight.

Back at the guesthouse, the buzzing of insects drove him under the mosquito netting with his suitcase. There was no place to store his clothes and belongings, but it was probably better in this case. If there was an earthquake, his things would be safe.

After getting ready for bed, he fell asleep in no time.

* * *

An alarm jolted John out of his sleep. It wasn't until he saw the light of dawn peering through the cracks in the walls, the shocking amount of creepy crawlers nestling on his mosquito net, and the faint smell of oranges, that he remembered where he was.

Tam was sitting outside beneath a palm tree, snacking on breakfast. John yawned, then said, "Good morning, Tam."

"G'morning, John. You sleep okay?" "Yeah...you?"

Tam nodded, then tossed John a couple oranges, and explained, "I do some work with the Orange Grove and get paid plenty in oranges."

"Oh, nice!" John grinned. "Thanks!"

"No problem. Ready to pick up your other car?"

The concerns from yesterday about having to walk alone melted away. John responded in relief, "Yes, yes. Let me grab my stuff."

He grabbed a water jug and his flat pouched-wallet flat that went beneath the belt of his

pants.

Tam asked, "We walking?"

"Is that okay? Or should we drive..."

Tam smiled for the first time. "It's okay, John. Today is nice."

They had passed by a flock of parrots sleeping in a tree. Every now and then geckos scuttled across the road.

Tam asked if John had a family. John shook his head. "No. You?"

"My wife and we've got four children." He said proudly. "My wife is the housekeeper at the hotel when guests arrive."

"How often do guests arrive at the hotel?" "Oh, not too often."

The two passed by other walkers, who waved and smiled, but didn't approach him. John felt at ease.

He said to Tam, "I need to go to the pub tonight for internet and food. Have you tried their food?"

"My wife cooks better."

John chuckled. "I believe that. Does she make good beer too?" "No beer. We do Kava."

"Never heard of Kava." John nearly asked his phone to research Kava, but remembered there was no wifi where he was yet.

"It is better for you. Tastes like mud but you feel better after. You should try it sometime."

Mud flavor versus delicious beer with a fresh orange crisp...hm.

When they passed by a large hut shaped like a triangular, long tent, and assembled with wood frames and thick roofs made of dried grass, Tam pointed out that after work, the social gatherings and kava drinking took place every single day.

Later, there was a mound of whole to half eaten fruit that sat a few meters away from the road. Sitting on the grass, it buzzed with a few flies. Then John did a double take. A massive crab about three feet tall, with monstrous pinchers, gorged away at the fruits.

Tam chuckled and explained, "It's a coconut crab...it likes fruit. We give him our daily offerings. They're now an endangered species. We want to keep them away from the beaches, where the majority of coconut trees are, in case of illegal hunting."

John gulped. He was certain it was an alien from another planet. "Uh, why...why do you people have these ugly monsters as pets?"

"It's the largest terrestrial arthropod in the world. Like I said, they are endangered species. We protect them because they are nearly wiped out."

Fair enough.

The walk was otherwise pleasant until they arrived at the airport. The sellers flocked towards John, insisting aggressively for him to buy from them. Some even tried to take his hand, shove a fruit or a cloth of some sort, demanding him to take whatever item they had.

John's heart raced pretty fast, panicking how quickly things escalated. Tam yelled at them to back off and told them, "He is not a tourist!" The crowd simmered down and went back to their vendors.

Taking a deep breath in and out, John slowed down his heart rate. The distress from

people grabbing him, made him wish he was safe back in Elysium. There, it was considered an assault to do something like that.

Tam apologized. "I'm sorry, John. It's how it goes at the airport market, especially when they see an outsider. They see tourists, they see money. Some of them were once tourists but ran out of money. Some others are banned from their communities and are trying to leave this island, so the airport makes sense for them."

"I see." John asked, "Uh, if I need to buy some groceries or household items, where can I go that's safe?"

"There is the community market, the one we passed by near Orange Grove. Just tell people you're not a tourist and they'll leave you be."

At the desk, the security gave John the keys and led them to the outside parking lot.

The truck-mounted drill rig sat outside, its body painted in white and bold blue. The drilling mast rested horizontally on the top, eagerly waiting to be lifted up. The brilliant and simple set up was convenient for one person.

"You ready?" John asked Tam. "Can I drive?"

"No way."

Tam sounded disappointed. "I'm ready."

The truck started even louder than the jeep and was bound to attract even more looks from the locals.

John said, "I wanna swing by my place first. Eat some food. Use the washroom. Not sure how far you are from the guest house, but I'm sure you'd probably wanna rush home. I can drop you off."

"Your place is fine. The walk is only a couple minutes from you." "You live in the village near the guesthouse?"

"I do, but I don't think it's a good idea to drop me off there."

He probably had a valid reason.

After their pit stop, they headed back to the main road near Orange Groves, and headed south. There was a site John wanted to try. On the map, it seemed no one lived in the area and the land was not disturbed.

When they reached past a bustling village, the locals stared at John's new truck.

Tam put his head out the window, smiling and waving to the audience, to which the locals responded with a subtle wave and a faint smile at the rare beast the two rode upon.

John saw the tank was on full for fuel. He asked Tam, "Where can I fill up if I need fuel?"

"There are only two fuel stations on the island. One at the airport..."

"Noooo..." John groaned in dismay. "And the other at an ATV shop."

John began to cheer up again. "That will do! You'll have to show me where that is tomorrow."

Soon they were off road onto rougher terrain. There was enough clear space among the grass to drive. When they came upon a large open area, John knew he found the site he spotted on the map.

He opened the control panel and pushed the button to raise up the mast. The truck had an automatic drill pipe manipulator, reducing a lot of the manual labor that would have been involved. The water tank for the hydrostatic pressure was already filled. The setup and leveling took less than an hour.

“You bored, yet?” John asked Tam.

“No, but I’ve never used a machine like that before.”

John responded, “It doesn’t require a degree. I did this job straight out of high school.”

Tam bit into a mango, with its skin and everything, minus the pit.

“There’s no school here...” He responded in between chewing, “I mean, I do know how to read, but I learn better by watching.”

It was quarter past ten according to his phone. If he wanted to drill down thirty meters it would take nine to ten hours. He decided to do a test run instead.

“Well, Tam, I’m going to just drill ten meters for a test run...it’ll take a few hours.” “That’s a long time. How deep can the drill go?”

“Three hundred meters at least.” “Crazy...uh, how deep is a meter?” “You’re joking.”

“Uh, no.”

“Three feet and just over three inches.”

Tam raised his brows and slowly nodded. It was possible he didn’t know what a “feet” was either.

“I’m okay waiting here for a few hours,” Tam said.

“You can go if you want.” “No...this is fascinating.”

When the core drill pulled out the sample after a few hours, the sun was past its midday high and started to move towards the west.

Heading back to the bungalow, a heavy silence shrouded Tam that John had to ask if everything was okay.

“You can’t bring the core samples into the guest house.”

John wasn’t expecting that. He pulled into the hidden driveway towards the guesthouse which was barely wide enough for the truck.

Tam jumped out and waited for John to grab his things, then explained, “I heard that the Cursed Place is probably a radioactive area, not far from where we were.”

John felt his face drained. “Why did you not say anything earlier?”

“I thought it was okay...we were far enough, but now...I don’t know...I don’t know if it’ll be radioactive or not. I just thought about it now. ”

Shit. He didn’t have any equipment or medication for radiation exposure.

Tam said, “I’m just saying putting the rocks inside the bungalow might be a bad idea.”

They both stared at the long pipe that laid horizontally on the side of the truck, folded into different sections, but completely sealed within.

Then John nodded, “You’re right. Thanks for letting me know. I’ll order in a radiation detector before I even take the core sample out.”

He could see on the guide’s face there was more. “Tam, please tell me if there’s anything else I should know.”

Tam cleared his throat and said, "Yeah, the Cursed Place, the locals would not approve of you working on, or near the area."

"Oh?"

"We need to stay clear of that area at all costs." "Uh, okay, I'll stay clear of the area then."

Tam asked, "You need me tomorrow?"

If it wasn't for the guide, he wouldn't have known about the possible radiation contamination and the Cursed Place. Although, it would have been better if mentioned sooner.

"I could really use your help for at least a week if that's okay. Come mid morning." "I'll be here."

Tam disappeared and John went inside to clean himself with a bowl of water, soap, and cloth, and put on a fresh change of clothes.

Eyeing the pipe holding the core sample from his doorway, he hoped that it wasn't going to be an issue. Uranium in coral skeletons were not unusual and he was an absent-minded idiot for not being completely prepared.

His stomach rolled with turbulence. It was pub-and-update-Gerald time.

The Storm

Chapter 3

John took off his boots and socks, and dug his toes into the white sand. The beach at the hotel was the perfect getaway place. He sipped the beer hinted with sweet citrus

while he bathed his face in the lowering sunset and enjoyed his own company.

Serbatek had agreed to send in radiation detectors, protective gear, medication in case of some exposure, and a MRI scan so John could observe the core sample's grains, porosity, pore fluids, and their interactions. Gerald also agreed to find a research facility.

If the samples were safe to observe, he would do so at the facility. He was looking forward to discovering Cradle Earth's story layered in rocks. This was some special kind of island.

"Hello? Can I join you?"

John was startled and turned to see a man with a toothless grin, who seemed to be in his seventies, dressed in faded jeans and a baggy shirt. He hugged a bottle of beer to his chest with one arm and waved at him with the other.

"Uh," John said awkwardly, "Yeah, I guess..."

The grin stayed on the weathered face, eyes brimming brightly, probably from the booze, as he sat down beside him in the sand, his barefoot already exposed and digging into the sand.

"My name is Mallow. I hear that you are John?" "That is right."

"There once was a John that lived among us...he was tall and had a white face...like you."

"Oh?"

"He promised a new age where all the rich people depart planet earth, leaving their goods and property to the islanders."

Mallow took a swig and continued, "My grandfather was in the Army. He wore

military clothes and painted his face in war colors, but there was no violence. John taught to never desire money, so my grandfather believed money to be a curse. Yet, I thought the promises of riches from the rich were ironic. He believed in cargo and the cargo travelers were, at the time, highly respected.”

John asked, “Cargo is still happening here?”

“Illegal cargo mostly. The government and the rich use teleporting. The raiders are the ones that do the illegal transporting by ship. There’s no security system out in the oceans.”

“Raiders?”

Mallow nodded grimly and said, “I’m afraid, John, you must be careful of the raiders.”

John frowned, “Why would they even bother with me?”

“You are both after the same thing.”

Was Mallow talking about the rare resources?

The elderly stranger shook his empty bottle in disappointment, and slowly stood himself back up.

He said, “I must go.”

“It was nice talking with you, Mallow. Is it okay if we talk again?”

The toothless smile came back. “We can talk again if we meet again. Now, I must find some shelter before the storm comes.”

Suddenly, his voice dropped down to a serious tone as he walked away. “The Devil Wind took my wife...split her in half like the palm tree torn by the devil itself.”

With an apparent storm coming and raiders lurking about, John too better head home.

* * *

True to Mallow's word, a storm did approach quickly and John knew it was going to be severe. He recalled the man mentioning his wife's death.

John almost doubted that the winds did split her in half, but he also knew the winds could split a tree in half. There was enough devilry in the winds itself to rip the lands. Perhaps it did happen.

Poor Mallow.

The wind started tooting, like a train in the old movies, then progressed dramatically into a screeching howl that never stopped. The house trembled upon stilts and rain started to pour.

Looking out the door, a waterfall of rain fell off the brims of the rooftop. A little rain leaked into the house, but it was impressive how much water stayed out.

John reminded himself that he could teleport himself out if it got bad. Gerald had given him the password code earlier at the pub, which was already entered in all of John's laptop, teleporting device, and phone.

Then the light flickered and everything went dark.

Shoot.

No power meant no teleporting.

He started to panic, fumbling around the house for the flashlight he had seen once beneath the kitchen sink. The familiar shape embraced his hands as he pushed the button, relieved to see light once again.

The guesthouse was really shaking this time. He feared the stilts below him would give way. The wind nearly tore the door out of his hands as he glanced below. Water was pooling fast.

He flashed his light towards the drilling rig truck that proudly boasted fine. John was grateful that the core samples were safe and dry within the tubes.

His jeep! The water was starting to cover the bottom part of the tires.

Should he drive to the inn quickly? Would it be safer? Would it have power?

His mind wheeled. The non-stop screaming and squealing of the wind was unbearable and he could see trees around him bending in half...*how is the hut still standing?*

The hardhat! He remembered seeing a hardhat beneath the sink and grabbed it. He had to get out of here. He'd surely die if he stayed.

He grabbed some bottled water and food, and threw it in his suitcase. Placing the hardhat on his head, he was ready to drive out to the inn before devastation. Yet, when he opened his door, the wind slammed it out of his hands, and he saw the high winds and a heavy surge of flooding.

Hurry!

He swiftly went down the ramps and his feet waded through the layer of sludge that rose with the water. The water was halfway up the tires.

Go, go, go!

Suddenly, the glass from the front window of the car shattered from a strong gust of wind when he approached the car. He quickly lowered his head in time, the hard hat

probably saving his life.

When he started the car, barely moving through the rising waters, the headlights glared further down the path. A few trees had fallen across the path, completely blocking his escape.

He swore under his breath.

Glancing back at the guesthouse, it still stood. He had to go back. Fervently, he prayed to some good, powerful god out there that hopefully protected people, since John himself certainly was no god in this scenario.

He quickly got out of the vehicle with broken windows, and the water rose to his knees... the car might be a goner in a matter of minutes. He carried his suitcase above the waters, but his heart thudded as he could feel debris and thick branches sweeping past his leg.

When he reached the ramp, there was no hesitation in his steps and he slammed the door shut as he went inside. The wind was still screaming and shaking his core. The torrential rains thudded against the building.

This was the best he could do. He prayed, and waited, and each minute felt like hours.

When twigs hit the house, he moved towards the centre in case large ones pierced through. He still kept the hardhat on, in case the roof collapsed. He braced himself, muscles in high tension, in case the structure gave way.

A part of a tree hit the roof, scraping the thick matted grassed layers and rain poured in. He just sat in the centre, with his flashlight on, suitcase by him, while he silently screamed for it to all be over.

* * *

“John?”

The winds were now silent but still persisted in his mind like ringing tinnitus that he'd sometimes hear when sleep deprived. He had no sleep. His body was still curled up on the floor, hardhat still on, the suitcase next to him.

Someone was calling him. “John? Are you alive?”

John was so relieved to see his good old companion Tam running to his side, although slightly embarrassed he was in a fetal position and finally moved onto his feet. He raised his brows and nearly shouted, perhaps due to feeling deaf from the all nighter hellish whirlwind.

“Tam! I'm so happy to see you!” Tam grinned, “Me too.”

“That storm was insane!”

“Yeah, they come and go. Always be prepared.”

John's hand reached for his hardhat and took it off. He knew storms happened. He knew the severity of what could happen, but it was nothing anyone could prepare for. His watch device showed no signal. The power was still out. It could be out for a while.

The aftermath of the chaos made him shake his head in bewilderment. His dented jeep, covered in tree debris, mud, and broken glass, was knocked against the palm trees that still stood their ground.

Tam noticed John's sorrowful eyes and piped up, “Don't worry, John. The jeep will still

run.”

The rig truck was standing with surprisingly no broken windows.

John noticed that the outhouse was still standing too, and situated on a higher slant of the area so it wasn't badly affected by flooding.

The power lines were damaged by the broken trees. It might be days without power here.

John asked, “How often do storms like these happen?”

“Generally they happen between December and March.” “It's July.”

“Yeah, it's becoming more frequent...not just hurricanes but earthquakes too” “Mm. So, how many storms were there last month?”

Tam squinted his eyes, trying to remember. “I think, maybe a couple little earthquakes and a few heavy rains, but they weren't as extreme as this one.”

“Does Cradle Earth have a disaster management plan?”

Tam shrugged. “We help each other out. That's why we all live in homes that can fall apart and be rebuilt. That's why we're okay with what we have because one day all we have could just disappear. We only get running water after heavy rain, so that's a good thing for us.”

The water pooled just above the lower part of the ground, swimming with bouncing insects, grime, and debris. If he could install the water purification, that would help the villages even more. With no doctor, assuming that there was no doctor on this island, the clean water would decrease illnesses, risks of infection, and possibly death.

John remembered he had a large supply of bottled water and canned foods in the hut.

“Did you need water or anything?” John asked Tam.

The sky was clear as if the horrors it created last night was nonexistent.

Tam shook his head. "Oh, no. We are all prepared. You will need it. There are many more storms to come."

Great.

Tam patted John's arm, indicating to him to put on his boots before walking down the ramp. He said, "We need to push your car away from the trees while it's still muddy, or it'll be stuck. I'll grab some more people to help clean up later."

"I don't want to bother the villagers."

"You can't move the trees all by yourself. Take help whenever possible."

It wasn't long when the locals greeted him with handshakes and friendly smiles, some of them knew the English language and introduced themselves. Of course, John couldn't remember everyone's name. They all helped haul large trees off the path, push the jeep away from the trees on the slippery mud, and threw other debris out of the way.

There were no miserable faces. Rather, they seemed to enjoy helping.

A strange but good feeling stirred from within his heart. He was respected and looked after as if he was one of them. No longer did he feel like an outsider. It was that moment he knew that he was where he was meant to be.

After the clean up, everyone left. Possibly to help the others. John offered to help, but Tam had objected and mentioned he'd return soon.

Feeling slightly faint from hunger and a lack of sleep, John remembered he got some coconuts from the airport. He rummaged through the drawers in the kitchen and came across a handmade cleaver.

Pushing a button on his phone, he instructed, "Find me a video on how to open a coconut."

Silence.

Oh, yeah, no internet.

He found a large steel bowl and cautiously, but eventually with more force, thwacked the coconut with the cleaver. The liquid spilled out and he dumped it into a cup. He did the same with the other coconut.

When he drank the liquid, he felt immediately refreshed.

After eating the inside meat of the two coconuts and several other fruits, he headed outside towards the heap and Tam was walking up to the property.

"Okay, let's see if this thing still runs," John said with some optimism.

They both brushed off the broken glass from their seats, decorating the floors with small squared pieces of seemingly harmless crystals. It would have to be cleaned later. As long as it wasn't on the ground outside.

John popped open the hood and saw nothing was damaged, then started the car. The engine purred loudly.

"What's the plan for the rest of today?" Tam asked.

"I'm hoping that Serbatek was able to teleport some stuff in before the storm came. We'll go to the airport first, then to the site where a research facility will be built...*if* there's internet at the airport. I need the directions."

Tam raised his forehead, "A research facility is being built? On this island? How did you get money for that?"

“I didn’t get money...I just mentioned that I needed a laboratory for the core samples.”

“The boss is definitely loaded. Maybe we should ask for a wage increase.”

John caught the guide’s smirk and responded, “Ha, I wouldn’t push it if I were you. Not until we find exactly what the boss is looking for.”

“Which is what exactly?”

“Nobody seems to know. That’s why I’m here.”

The road was in rougher shape with scattered broken parts of trees, bits from people’s homes, and other debris. Tam and John had to stop a few times to move a tree out of the way. It was quiet on the road today.

Tam explained, “People clean up their villages first. We do the road last since nobody really drives.”

John nodded, then asked something completely out-of-place. “Do you know anything about the raiders?”

He could have sworn he saw fear flicker in Tam’s dark brown eyes. “Raiders?” Tam frowned.

“A fellow, named Mallow, warned me about the raiders yesterday...saying that they were after the same thing I’m after.”

Tam suddenly relaxed. “Mallow? The crazy one? I wouldn’t listen to a word he says.” “He seemed intelligent to me.”

“He is a good man, but he is crazy. He is so old. He lost his home...he lost his wife. He drinks too much. We let him have shelter whenever he asks, which is usually when the weather is bad.”

John drove into the airport's lot, towards the back this time, away from the main entrance. He hoped the security would recognize him by now and things would go rather quickly without any fuss.

There were a couple of guards at the small entryway and they did recognize John.

The supplies had come in. John packed the gear into the vehicle and received a notification on his phone.

Gerald had pinpointed the location of the site. John asked if Tam was cool with coming along.

"Yeah, I'm cool." Tam responded.

They noticed a disheveled man running across the pavement towards them, waving his arms in frantic motions.

Tam rolled his eyes. "Not again. Quick, let's take off."

John recognized the vendor who sold him the Tesla drawing. "No, I bought something from this man."

Tam eyed the oncoming man suspiciously, then said, "Let's talk to him in the safety of the jeep. You can still talk to him through the window."

John sighed, unsure if Tam was getting paranoid or if safety was truly a concern. "We have missing windows, Tam."

"Oh, yeah."

They went inside the jeep and John started the vehicle.

The vendor's hand went to the gaping window of the car, his sweaty palms sliding down the John's sleeve.

“I need the drawing back! Please, I’ll give you even more money for it! I want it back.”

The face of the man was of fear and distress. It was also covered in markings, newly healed scabs and fresh bruises.

“I can give you more money, sir,” John started digging into his pouch with his free arm. He just wanted the vendor to let go of his grip.

Tam yelled, “Just drive, John!”

“No!” The vendor shouted. “No money...I need the map!”

Map?

With sincere concern, John told the vendor, “I will return the drawing to you first thing tomorrow morning.”

The grip finally let go of John’s arm. He could have sworn he saw a tear.

Tam said nothing as John drove towards the site north of the island, the poor, battered creature just standing there, getting smaller until he made a turn off.

Finally, John asked, “Who would beat a poor soul like that for a drawing?” “Maybe he’s just crazy.”

“No, he was severely beaten because someone wanted the drawing. He’s afraid for his life. That doesn’t make him crazy. He’s one of your people, is he not?”

Tam sighed. “He is banned from the community for theft. He’s no longer one of our people.”

“Well, I’m not going to let someone die for a piece of paper.”

John felt somewhat flustered at the lack of empathy Tam expressed toward the vendor. It must have been more than some petty theft to be cut off from the people.

A beautiful large lagoon could be seen through the trees right of him, and eventually he headed more left which led him towards the open ocean. The location which Gerald pinpointed on the map led them to an old abandoned building. Well hidden among the mangroves that faced towards the coral cliff near the ocean.

There was an overgrown, old pathway that led to the large structure. It looked like an old, but sad version of the Orange Coral Hotel and Pub. Completely covered in overgrowth, but still standing.

Tam's eyes widened. "I had no idea..."

"This is perfect," John smiled. "This will be the Tech Development Centre."

The doorway was arched and attached to a thick wall layered in flat stones. The wooden door stood ajar. Once upon a time, the entire building was painted white, a glorious vertical, three-dimensional rectangular building. The skyscraper of Cradle Earth. Now buried in vegetation overgrowth, hidden among the forest of the island. Forsaken and forgotten.

Tam followed John inside, bewildered and muttering to himself. Then he asked, "John, how did Gerald know about this place?"

John didn't answer right away, eyes completely engrossed in the empty rooms of this place. It was in good condition, despite the cobwebs and dust build up in the room. Looking back to the door, he noticed the dust swept across the floor was very recent.

Scratching his sleep-deprived face covered in black stubbles, John spoke his thoughts aloud. "Someone was here after the storm. Before then, the door was sealed shut. Maybe Gerald sent somebody to open the door for us."

“But Gerald, or someone, would have to know the area well to find this.”

John shook his head in disagreement. “Not at all. With satellites, anything can be found... on the surface.”

“Oh.” Tam didn’t go any further into the dark part of the building. “We need lanterns.”

The room was quite large, and low, and the light didn’t fill the entire room. The walls were damp, and surprisingly cold, when John tried to find a switch, but couldn’t. There was no light shining onto another opening, but he did see a part of the stairs leading up.

“Let us wait until we have lanterns,” Tam insisted.

John really did not want to wait, but knew walking in the dark was a bad idea.

Finally, he said, “You’re right. We’ll come back tomorrow with the rig truck and every possible thing we may need.”

He would need a clean-up crew at some point, but it was good for now to get started.

Privacy was another issue.

“Uh, Tam, maybe tell no one about this place...for now.”

The darkness cast a shadow on part of the guide’s face. It was an eerie moment.

Fear in the vendor’s eyes flashed back to John’s memory. He had to gain everyone’s trust to get anywhere with this project.

John looked into the Tam’s eyes and asked, “Can I trust you?”

It was evening and there was lots to do. He had to make an order of groceries to get transported to Cradle Earth. He could use a pot of noodles. Lots of it.

Thankfully, he packed a couple and turned on the kettle.

He observed the drawing on the table and realized that it was a design for something he had never seen before.

Click.

The kettle switched off and he poured the hot water into the noodle bowl to let it steep.

Not only was the sketch a design. There were numbers. The vendor was right. It was also a map.

There were eight points with coordinates. He asked the phone to find the coordinates and his jaw nearly hit the floor when the phone showed the map, pinpointing Cradle Earth. The location wasn't far from his original drilling site. It was exactly where the Cursed Place was... the place Tam made him promise not to go.

If someone was after the coordinates, he has to change the numbers. He knew that someone was not Gerald, so that was a start.

John had pulled out his laptop and uploaded the photos he had taken of the *N. Tesla* drawing. He opened up a program and made adjustments to the sketch. With a few modifications, he emailed a company he knew that dealt with custom print services 24/7.

After a half hour or so, an incoming beep from his portable teleportation device sent in the similar document. John rolled it up, and slightly wrinkled it. It was a perfect likeness.

Satisfied, he turned off the teleporting system and placed it back in the suitcase. He doodled in his notebook possible outcomes of the design.

He shook his head in bewilderment. To build this massive and complex design, it would take years and a lot of investment. It was a structure designed to draw energy from the ground, he was certain. *But what was the source of the energy?*

Time flew and it was already dark. The lantern sat on the table next to his chaotic mess of papers. He took photos.

Then he hid all the documents in his suitcase, except for the faux map. He locked the case.

He forwarded Gerald the photos of the map, design, doodles, and then called him to relay the heavy updates.

“Wow,” the CEO of Serbatek was certainly thrilled. “I will send these to some pros to look over, I mean you’re definitely a pro, but I want to see if this project is worth investing in. Of course, it’s worth investing! Although we have to be sure...I’m so excited.”

John hated to interrupt his enthusiasm. “Just so you know, there are two problems. One, apparently someone is after the map. Two, the coordinates of the map is exactly where the Cursed Place is and I’m not even allowed on the property...or else, the locals will disapprove.”

Gerald raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Hm, okay, that’s not so good. I will see what can be done. Maybe mingle in with the villagers a bit more. Get them to like you and know you’re not a threat. They need to trust you.”

That’s what I’m trying to do.

John needed more information about the Cursed Place. Perhaps he needed to find Mallow.

Gerald looked at his watch and said he had to go. He assured him, "I'll look into everything for you."

* * *

Next day came, and John gave the *N. Tesla* drawing look-alike to Tam, then took off with the rig truck to the soon to be Tech Development Centre. The truck carried several flashlights in the storage box.

When he arrived, John was able to find the hidden light switch and the loud hum buzzed as the electricity kicked in. Fluorescent strips on the ceiling blazed coldly onto the floor. Windows were sealed with boards, trapping in stagnant air in a hollow space.

Above the main floor, all the rooms were completely unfurnished and emptied. The walkways and stairways were bare. John could almost imagine that mirrors and decorative art once hung on the walls.

"Hello?" He called out through the central hollow opening that reached to the top of the building, banister facing banister on each level.

His voice echoed and John could have sworn he heard soft thumps whispering throughout the building. He headed down the stairs to the main floor and got to work.

The radiation detector showed the levels from the core sample were really low. John used thick gloves to take the rest of the materials out of the pipe for inspection. In

the main room, he placed the segmented parts into a large box divided by wooden sections so he could mark the pieces by depth.

The pipes on the drill truck were designed to cushion the samples to protect them from being shaken on rough terrain, which would have otherwise impacted the MRI scan.

John's phone rang, the Cradle Earth Airport showed up on display. It was Tam informing that had given the parchment paper to the vendor.

Tam said, "He was happy he got the drawing. Just took it. He said that some private buyer offered lots of money for it. I guess he was just looking for a way off the island."

Oh, it wasn't just some private buyer. Only a criminal would threaten and beat up an elderly man who was just trying to make a simple, honest earning at the market, so he could leave this place. Not to mention, the vendor didn't want John's money.

"Thanks for doing that," John said to Tam. "Have the rest of the day off." On the other end was a sound of relief. "Okay, thank you."

John was about to say goodbye when Tam invited him to a social gathering in the evening, insisting it was important for him to go.

"I'll come get you tonight," Tam said, without giving John any chance to say no. Then said goodbye and hung up.

John looked dumbfounded at his phone. "Uuuuuhhh, okay, I guess I'm going to mingle."

The Cursed Place

Chapter 4

The sun was sinking and left behind beautiful splashes of pink, coral, and orange. The guide took a short cut and led John through the trees towards the sound of faint laughter. Dusk was near and so was trying the kava drink Tam kept telling him about.

Fresh roots from mature trees over five years of age were prepared everyday in the villages, which included pounding, grinding, and grating.

“The roots are so tough!” Tam explained. “We use a heavy pole to pound into a large vessel to turn it into a soft pulp. Then we put it in a big bowl with cold water, and it’s mixed until it becomes muddy, then it’s strained...it has to be strained well with palm fibre. We make enough for our village every night.”

“You don’t drink it like tea?” “No, it is not cooked.”

John asked, “Why go through all that effort? Sounds like a lot of work.”

“We have what we call ‘kava time’ and we all set aside other activities to help with that.”

“Oh...so if you weren’t working for me, you’d be helping out with making kava?”

Tam nodded and grinned. “It’s meant for all to enjoy and I hope that you will too.”

Soon, they arrived at the large tent shaped hut that could be seen from the main road. A small fire was lit in the centre of the gathering. The eyes quickly went to John and the people waved, few went up to John to shake hands and greeted him. He was soon seated with the others near the fire on a log, where someone gave him a coconut shell filled with this muddy liquid

The smell was odd. It smelled as bad as it looked.

Tam caught his grimace and laughed. He urged John to try it.

It tasted like mud with strong earthy tones. His tongue went a little numb, but after a while he could see why it was an enjoyable drink. He felt relaxed and any anxious feelings faded slowly. It wasn't a drink for taste alone, that was certain.

He gave everyone the thumbs up and they all cheered and carried on their chitter chatter with each other.

One man sat by John and asked, "Are you here to save us?"

Some of the chatter died and John realized they wanted answers from a mysterious stranger that appeared onto their land.

"What is it that you need saving from?" John asked. They all seemed so happy here.

"We have no doctor. No education. No way off the island and no way of getting things in..."

"We are poor!" Someone filled in.

John disagreed. "No, you are not poor. You are all rich with resources, rich with joy, and you all have each other."

Someone else piped in. "Are you *the* reincarnated John?" "Uh...I'm just John." *Good answer.*

Tam jumped in the conversation, probably in an attempt to shift the conversation.

"We have bad storms that are happening more often...and that's what you're looking into, right?"

"Yes!" John said so sincerely, "And I hope to build a water system this summer too,

so everyone has access to clean water. That alone can prevent a lot of sicknesses.”

Then a low rumble shook the ground and everything went silent. It lasted for maybe thirteen seconds, but it was definitely an earthquake.

John looked at Tam in shock, but someone shouted out angrily, “It’s the Cursed Place!”

Someone else sat by John and said, “The Cursed Place is causing the tremors and the storms. Until that place is gone, we can be well.”

“No,” another person argued. “We must leave it alone.”

The same man beside him retorted, “We have left it alone for many years and things have only gotten worse.”

The kava spell must have kicked in the entire village, since no one said anything after that.

John really wanted to ask for more detail, but felt it was best to discuss it with Tam tomorrow. Random chitter chatter came back as if life was back to normal again.

Then a woman leaned into him and whispered, “I just hope that you can save us from the evil beneath the ground.”

The night wore on and a yawn snuck up on John. He should try to head back and hope that he won't get lost. He headed away from the mingling crowd.

“Leaving so soon?” Tam ran up behind him. John nodded, “Yeah, I’m beat.”

“I’ll walk you home. It’s dark. “I appreciate that, thanks.”

As soon as the light from the village faded, it was nearly pitch black. Tam took out a small flashlight and shone it on the path in front of them.

“Tam, you have to tell me about the Cursed Place,” John interrupted the silence.

A sigh. "I don't know what to say really...it's an ancient place from thousands of years ago. Hasn't been touched for hundreds of years. Some of us fear that if we provoke the area, the gods will become angry and destroy the island."

"What gods? I mean, what is the story?"

"Ummmmm, I'm guessing the gods that protect the place? I really don't know the story." Tam sounded pretty apologetic. He must be telling the truth.

John eyed the light waving in front of them, almost half expecting some monster, maybe a coconut crab, to jump into the path.

"The man at the fire tonight made a point when he said that the Cursed Place has been left alone for years, and things are getting worse." John said, hoping to sway Tam's perspective.

He continued, "I need to investigate this place...find out what is causing the issues, and why this place is believed to be cursed. I need answers for the people from a scientific and logical standpoint."

"Hmm." Tam was hesitant and uncertain.

When they arrived at the guesthouse, Tam bade him farewell.

* * *

Next morning came and John decided to go investigate the Cursed Place, without Tam knowing.

Gerald said through the earpiece of his phone, "It is too risky."

The morning light created streams of rays into the hut, while John munched on his breakfast. The combination of humidity and the dust that floated in the air had stuck to his skin. The bugs buzzed outside of the large mosquito netting.

“What else am I going to do?” John responded. “You cannot send in a crew without knowing if this place is worth investigating. I can find out for you.”

“Well, I got good news...the Tesla drawing is authentic. Unfortunately, I cannot find any historical documents in relation to the Cursed Place.”

“Tam knows nothing either. The locals believe that it has something to do with angry gods.”

A sharp breath of frustration came from the other line. “We’re going to end up pissing everyone off anyway. I might as well send a crew in.”

John didn’t like the idea. “Before we do anything like that, let me check this place out. I’ll film and document everything.”

“I really appreciate that, John. Just be safe. Make sure the film and documentation is kept between you and I, though.”

After they ended the conversation, John immediately packed up some gear, food, and whatever else he may need for a random emergency scenario. Since he would be alone, better safe than sorry.

He remembered Mallow’s mention of the raiders and the vendor’s unfortunate incident of being beaten for the map. Digging through the kitchen ware, he packed a couple of sharp knives and a cleaver in a kitchen towel.

A pang of guilt pierced his gut. Hopefully the poor man from the airport made it off the island before the criminals discover it wasn't an authentic map. John had made it known to Gerald in hope to find out who was interfering with the project. If Gerald could find the criminal, then perhaps the vendor would be safe.

John wrote a short note for Tam and put it on the outside of his locked door.

Hi Tam, gone out for errands. Have the day off. Thanks, John.

The fuel was still full in his jeep, but the windows were still shattered from the storm. *It is what it is for now.* At least, there was a decent breeze.

He headed towards the last site he drilled, seeing a few locals on the road and waving at them.

There was no one to be seen on the rough terrain towards the site and when John arrived, he took out his compass. He had to go north east to reach the coordinates. The navigation system on his phone showed where he was, but when John zoomed in the screen to see if there were possible clearings, it looked as if he might have to walk on foot to get to the Cursed Place.

He drove until he could drive no further. The trees closed in and the vegetation was getting too thick.

A large camouflage tarp was thrown over the jeep. To prevent critters crawling in and to keep the vehicle hidden from a wayfarer.

Only less than a half kilometre to go if he continued on foot north.

Screeching and whistling from parrots echoed throughout the jungle. John's eyes

combed through the surface as he walked to make sure no critters were nearby, especially the freaky looking crabs.

Suddenly, a loud scream shrilled in the air and John jumped.

Then he saw a bright green bird with hues of blue and yellow, and a curved bill, displaying its colours in an old Banyan tree up ahead.

The roots had joined the long thick branches that had grown quite spread out, overtaking and smothering other trees. The roots grew up as new pillars. In reverse, the branch root resembled insidious tentacles sucking life from the ground.

“Aaaaahhhh!”

The parrot screamed again, looking intently at John, a blatant warning meant for him.

His heart quickened for a second as he stood there frozen watching the bird. Parrots had their own sounds but were also mimickers. This one sounded like a human scream.

When the parrot flew away, he caught his breath and adjusted the heavy backpack weighing him down. He knew the tree was associated with the god of death, Yama. The Banyan tree originated from India and was traditionally planted outside villages near where dead bodies were cremated.

He continued on and soon stumbled upon what was once a village.

Unlike the huts on the island, these structures were built with stones. Deep fissures, erosion, and crumbled rocks, showed signs of distress from years of unrelenting weather. Most of the walls had scattered on the ground and roofs once supported by long beams of wood were now smothered in vegetation that had grown over remnants of the

past.

Nothing seemed left behind. No furniture, no bowls, and no tools. This place was completely abandoned.

A stone rounded into a perfect sphere sat central in the village, untouched by overgrowth, rain, or wind. Upon the stone, was a small sculpture of a scarab beetle. John's eyes widened in amazement.

He took out his phone and selfie stick, then put the camera into video. Pushing the record button, he begun.

"I am located at the Cursed Place. Behind me is the Banyan tree. Yet in this abandoned village from a very long time ago," he circled the camera around to record the fallen structures, "There is this magnificent statue of the scarab beetle upon a stone, aka a giant ball of dung, that has not been tampered with. It's in perfect condition."

John zoomed the camera onto the beetle.

"This comes from ancient Egyptian mythology. A symbol of rebirth."

He touched the beetle with his finger, causing the outside coat of what looked like stone to brush off as dirt. There was a streak of shining emerald green where he came in contact with.

Stunned, he had to turn off the camera, and focus.

He pulled out his small tool kit that had a brush and dust pan. He swept the grey dust into a bag for later observation, and continued to clean the beetle. Having swept down the whole structure, the sphere was made of pure black obsidian stone.

The volcanic glass glistened from the light of the sky, but the beetle upon it

shimmered beautiful green. This alone would be enough for the raiders to want the map. His pulse quickened, both from excitement and fear upon this discovery. He decided it was worth taking photos.

When he put his camera away, he decided to venture further. The beetle's head pointed east according to his compass.

A whiff of sulphur went past his nose and he soon came upon a hot spring. The water was coated in hovering steam, and its surrounding rocks were tainted orange from the dissolved iron.

Inside the pool, the gentle slope of stone eventually dropped off into a deep dark cavern. There was no bottom to the pool and it was hard to know if the water was once used for sacred uses, or for making bodies disappear.

John shuddered. Perhaps it was time he headed back.

Turning his video on again, he said to the screen. "Here is one freaky but cool looking hot spring..."

Facing the camera on the water, he kept a safe distance. "There is no end to this water hole...and it seems to be..."

The water wasn't still, but it wasn't boiling. "Pulsating..."

He squatted down to bring the lens more vertical to the surface of the water and zoomed in. The water responded to some kind of drum beat.

Thud-thud. Thud-thud.

He couldn't hear it, but when he put his hand on the stones that edged the well, he felt it.

The rhythm. As if the earth had a steady heartbeat. A life-force hidden beneath the ground.

He put the phone on the grass, grinning over the camera and took out his compass.

Holding the compass, he circled around the phone. "There is a strong magnetic field here.

The needle points only towards the well, regardless of what direction I faced...I just hope my compass needle doesn't get damaged while I'm here."

Before he packed everything away, he took some photos of the pool and the rocks surrounding it. He might order an underwater drone to put in the well for next time.

It was time to go.

Soon, he heard the parrot scream.

Someone is here!

He cautiously put his bag on and moved quietly towards the tree, finding a hiding spot behind the ruins.

It sounded like a man cursing at the parrot in the local language. From a distance, John peered from behind a broken wall and saw someone shooing the bird.

Mallow?

It was drunk Mallow stumbling through the tall stretched out roots. *Why was he here?*

This was his chance before the man entered any further into the area. He ran up to Mallow, at first confused but his eyes lit up in recognition.

"John?"

"Hi, Mallow," John forced a friendly smile. "So good to see you! Come have some

beer with me at the hotel. It's on me!"

Eager to join John for some beer, Mallow's face switched from perplexing to fascination when John led him to the jeep, ripped off the camouflage tarp, and drove him away from the site towards the Coral Orange Hotel and Pub.

When they arrived, Mallow stared at John. "You okay?" John asked.

"I've never been in a car before...it is so fast!" Mallow exclaimed with joy.

John did drive faster than usual. He opened the car door for Mallow and told him to wait at the beach while he ordered beers.

Adding fries to the order of beers, he was almost reluctant to send the videos and photos to Gerald, but he did. It was what he was paid to do.

Now...time to dig some information out of this Mallow fellow.

* * *

The Prime Minister of Vanuatu and the CEO of Serbatek met at an empty warehouse, which belonged to the main office of Serbatek on the island of Vanuatu. The two stood beneath a dim fluorescent strip of light that hovered over a small round table with a bottle of whisky, two shot glasses, an ashtray, a box of Cuban cigars, and a couple of chairs.

"Why this miserable place?" The corners of the Prime Minister's mouth, over his golden teeth, lowered in disgust.

Gerald exclaimed with confidence, "Secrecy! What I'm about to tell you will change

everything.”

There were no phones allowed at the meeting, in case of hackers. The body guards waited outside the warehouse. Any cameras in the building were searched. There were none.

The Prime Minister, Leo, also known as Joker, owned Vanuatu and the surrounding islands, including Cradle Earth. He was shady but managed to slip through the shadows to maintain his reputation. He owned the vessels steered by raiders who transport illegal cargo in unchartered waters, hiding from the monitoring teleportation system and satellites.

Last night, Gerald had learned through an undercover agent that the dead body of the vendor was washed ashore on the beach of Vanuatu. His escape off Cradle Earth was short-lived and most likely, and unknowingly, because the map was discovered to be false. The homicide investigators left the case alone and Gerald guessed fear was their motive. Especially if Joker was behind it all.

“You were after the map,” Gerald stated. Joker’s mouth twitched.

Gerald continued, “I have everything you are looking for, Joker.”

The Prime Minister looked at his watch, poured whisky in the shot glasses, sat down and lit a cigar.

Then he answered, “I’ve the time and I’m interested. Tell me what you know.”

The Rebirth

Chapter 5

John woke to the guesthouse shaking. For a second he thought he was having a nightmare where the islanders tried to force him to leave for trespassing the Cursed Place. Then he realized it was just an earthquake.

It stopped, but started up again and more aggressively. The ground rumbled loud and low.

Kitchenware fell off the counter onto the floor. John wasn't sure if the structure was going to hold.

After about a minute it stopped again.

If the earthquakes get any worse, he'd need to be ready to run to the truck for shelter.

It was quite early in the morning, but John couldn't go back to sleep despite his exhaustion.

He probably had one too many beers, but it was worth it.

Mallow thought John was searching for wild sweet potatoes, like he was. John did recall seeing the large heart shaped leaves. The sweet bold white flowers had pinkish-purple tinged centers, where the white pistol ascended from, and the plant originated from the Americas and made it across the Pacific to Oceania as a staple food of Cradle Earth.

"I like them raw," Mallow said, "But everyone else cooks them...bah, too sweet for me! I need to keep my teeth strong."

Baring his teeth, they were indeed surprisingly healthy and strong. John nodded, "There were a lot too, especially in that area."

"Yes, it must be our secret place! I don't know if you were aware, but we were just outside of the Cursed Place...people wouldn't like that."

Then Mallow assured, "We're not cursed though."

When John asked if Mallow knew anything about the history of the Cursed Place, he did.

"No one, not even the John my father knew, would dare enter," Mallow explained.

"Ancient traditions were to be respected, my father once told me. Legend has it that thousands of years ago, a different species...not human, nor animal...just a completely different species, used to live on the island. They just left and disappeared one day.

Cradle Earth was part of one big continent before the islands all separated...you know, with the ocean, erosion...and stuff."

This guy wasn't crazy at all.

Mallow took a long, savouring swig from the delicious orange tinted beer. "Legends say that humans would bring them gifts from around the world."

John pondered a bit, then said, "Why would a different species live on Cradle Earth and what made them so special to humans that they would honour them with gifts?"

The elderly man increased his wrinkles tenfold on his forehead and responded, "I don't know."

John was just grateful for this man and that his English was so good.

The white sand felt so good beneath his bare feet and he was glad Mallow crossed his path earlier.

John would have to look at the videos again and see if the structures were by any chance built for something different than human.

Yesterday was definitely an adventure.

John hoped that Mallow had a safe place to be with the frequent earthquakes happening.

His phone buzzed, a notification from Gerald showed up on display.

Meet me at the airport at 1pm sharp.

John instantly regretted sending visual mediums of the site to Gerald and stared at the message before replying, *Sounds good, I'll see you then.*

* * *

It was 9am when Tam called his name out from at the bottom of the ramp. "John, good morning! Did you feel the earthquake?"

"I sure did!"

When John descended the ramp, Tam shook his head gravely, "It woke me up too early!

This is not good. A god is angry."

John gave a wary glance, "What god is angry?"

"Yama."

Almost skipping a beat, John asked, "Yama?"

Tam gave a subtle shrug. "The god of the Cursed Place. Yama is the curse causing the problems on the island."

John nearly rolled his eyes. With the wifi access, he loaded up the wikipedia on the

phone for Yama and showed it to Tam, who responded, "Uh, I can't read English."

"What language can you read?" "Uhhhh..."

John told the phone to speak the description out loud.

After a while, Tam furrowed his brows in confusion. "So, Yama is some god from India?"

"The god of death. The big tree..." John suddenly stopped short.

Tam frowned. "You went to the Cursed Place, didn't you?" "Wh-what makes you say that?"

"The big tree."

John narrowed his eyes, and said, "Then that means you've been there yourself too."

Tam rubbed his face vigorously with the palms of his hands, then whispered fiercely. "No one can know!"

Relief came over John, except for when he admitted that the boss knew.

Tam threw his hands in the air. "We are going to get blamed for these earthquakes! You... no, /will lose my home."

"Look," John said calmly. "I don't know what's going to happen, but Gerald has respected the villagers. No one else has to know and no one is going to get blamed for the earthquakes."

"Why are you so obsessed with the Cursed Place?"

John blurted out without thinking, "Because the coordinates on the map are exactly that specific location."

Tam was taken aback. "So...it's a map for what?"

Taking a deep breath, John wondered how he was going to explain to someone who had no understanding of metrics.

Then he said, "The numbers on the map show exactly where this design is meant to be built. This design, or structure, which can take years to build, is meant to draw up something from beneath the earth's surface."

Tam nodded slowly, then shook his head. "What is meant to be drawn up?"

Scratching the back of his neck, John was ready to end this conversation. There was so much to do.

"I think it's some kind of powerful resource...that's what I'm here to find out and I'm not entirely sure. I have to go back to the Cursed Place."

"Then I go with you. Just don't tell anyone."

To John's pleasant surprise, he responded, "Uh, that's perfect actually. It won't be long. I'm meant to meet Gerald at 1pm...at the airport."

"That's weird," Tam raised an eyebrow suspiciously.

"I agree. Like I said, I've no idea what's going to happen. I might as well show you what I've discovered in case something weird happens."

Tight for time, the two took off in the jeep to the Cursed Place.

The parrot in the Banyan tree greeted them with a bloody murderous scream and John showed Tam the strange dung beetle statue and the crumbled homes, which John noticed recently had larger and taller doorways, what remains of them. Excluding Mallow's imparted knowledge, he made a remark to Tam that the homes were structured for extremely tall people some time ago...or perhaps people once had very tall hats.

The guide was certainly engrossed in the surroundings and jumped to every racket nature made, saying, "This place is cursed."

John smiled, pointing at the beetle statue. "I disagree. There is no curse here. There's rebirth meant to happen. In order for rebirth, something had to die," he pointed at the Banyan tree.

He continued, "Hundreds of years ago, there wouldn't be the tools needed to dig deep into the earth, but we have the tools today..."

Dig deep into the earth...the bottomless hole in the hot spring!

Tam wrinkled his nose. "I still don't see why a beetle that rolls its own poop is sacred back in the old times."

John went ahead to the hot spring. It bubbled and boiled today.

"That's strange," John thought aloud. "It didn't bubble the other day."

Tam's eyes widened and confessed, "I actually didn't go in...inside the Cursed Place... just up to the tree."

"Well, now you've seen it. It's a special place. Abandoned for many years. The earthquakes must have caused the high temperatures in the spring, which means...Cradle Earth is in danger."

"I told you this place was cursed."

"No, no...the fault lines are under high pressure...Cradle Earth is going to go under at some point. That explains the increasing earthquakes. Something is trying to rise to the surface."

Tam backed away from the hot spring and said, "Are you saying that the island will

disappear...not because we angered the gods, but because there's something trapped below the ground."

"That's exactly what I'm saying..."

They headed back to the camouflaged vehicle and John put the tarp back in the trunk.

John dropped Tam off on the main road, then made his way to the airport.

* * *

Military swarmed the airport as if there may be an impending war. The atmosphere was tense and unnaturally silent. John felt his throat tighten. He stopped in the parking lot and kept a distance.

He texted Gerald. *Is everything okay? This place is overrun with soldiers!*

Five ton military 6X6 cargo trucks were being loaded with wooden boxes straight from the loading docks. Letters in red paint were stamped on the boxes. *Serbatek*.

"What?" He caught his breath.

In the distance, a man in a stark red suit gestured to John to come closer. The top of the head gleamed in the sunlight. It was Gerald.

John drove up close and stepped out of the jeep, confused. "What the hell is going on?"

The grin of perfect teeth.

"We have all the professional crew and equipment you need!" Busy bodies made haste about behind him.

John frowned, "I don't understand. The villagers..."

His voice now quieter, Gerald explained, "I'd to pull some strings. The only help I can get is from the Prime Minister. He never cared for this puny place before, and now he wants to make Cradle Earth a wealthy civilization."

"The people don't care about money."

"Because they don't know any other way to live, John."

Gerald clasped his hands together in all seriousness. "We still need to find out what exactly is beneath the island, and we cannot please everyone if we need to dig."

No, this can't be happening.

John protested, "I was hoping to get the villagers support before invading with a crew....it looks like you brought an army."

"They are too superstitious to support." "But the earthquakes..."

Gerald interrupted, "You have given me amazing information, John. I want to give you everything you need to make this project happen...what do you need?"

"It can't be built in a day."

Gerald nodded, "Exactly. I will do anything to keep you and have you quit your teaching job."

"Oh."

That would mean a steady, well-paid career for at least almost a decade. John combed his fingers through his oily mass of hair and thought aloud.

"This project will take at least ten years. I will need to do things for the people in return...like build a clean water system. They need shelter that's more durable. Jobs and schools...that'll distract them from...us. Oh, I need a drone that can go underwater in

intense heat. I mean, I can go on...

“How will there be money for all this? What if it’s all for nothing?” Gerald placed a hand on John’s shoulders.

“It can all be done...rebirth of Cradle Earth will happen. I feel it in my bones.”

* * *

Tam wasn’t happy at all with anything.

“My people would kick you out,” He stated matter-of-factly.

“I understand. I will leave and live somewhere else on the island.”

“The island, especially the Cursed Place, has been untouched for years...and suddenly we’re invaded by authorities with guns. Our freedom and privacy will be taken away.”

John shook his head. “That won’t happen. My only intention is to make this place better for everyone. The crew will only be on the worksites, not in the villages.”

Tam tossed an orange in the air, deep in thought for a second.

Then said, “Like you, I want to know what’s so special about this place. I trust you, John. I hope you can trust me too. Keep me in the loop and I’ll keep you in the loop as well. I can’t be seen with you by anyone, but I can meet with you in private.”

“You don’t have a phone.”

A sly smile crept on Tam’s face. “Can you get me one?”

* * *

The golden teeth flashed in the sun and John tried hard not to squint.

“Please meet you, Prime Minister,” he reached out his hand which was received enthusiastically.

The Prime Minister’s dark brown eyes brimmed with excitement. “I’ve a lot of faith in you. Please, call me Leo.”

It was a beautiful location near the hot springs. The temperature was safe enough today, but John mentioned to Leo that the water was boiling the other day not long after the earthquake. He shared his theory that the structure from the *N. Tesla* design might relieve pressure from the faults, hence less earthquakes and making the island a safer place to live.

Leo looked pleased and went off to chat with Gerald. Perhaps to talk about what John had just mentioned.

He took out his phone.

Crap, the battery is dead. He totally forgot to charge it last night.

Suddenly, a crew member bumped into his arm and the phone flew out of his hands. “No!”

John shouted, gaining everyone’s attention as the phone flew towards the hot spring.

To his relief, it landed on the rock near it. Then it lit up. It was charging.

“What the...”

Everyone, including Gerald and Leo, gathered around.

John was flabbergasted. "My phone was dead and now it's charging."

He instructed for someone to put their phone or some device that would charge on the rocks. The person that bumped into him held up her phone and placed it on the rock.

Heads hovering over the phone, they saw that the bars on the phone started charging.

Gerald laughed with delight and put his phone on the rock. Sure enough, it also charged.

Nearly joining in the laughter, John broke into a smile and looked into the eyes of the confused crew and the Prime Minister.

"Everyone, we have this incredible source of power and we are going to be the first to find out what the source is!"

* * *

Tam decided to give the orange beers a try. John ordered a full case. They both leaned over the banister overlooking a tall, bleak building.

"You chose to live here?" Tam asked.

John nodded. The old hotel, now a tech development lab, was well underway.

Tam pulled his nose up in disgust, "But the Coral Hotel is better. Plus, my wife works there."

"Exactly. You said that we meet in private. This is a better place. Besides the entire crew and army is living at the hotel. I like peace and quiet."

John gestured Tam to continue following upstairs the flight of stairs and eventually

they got to the top, opening a door that led outside. It was a flat patio, without any railings of any sort.

They both sat down in the centre of the rooftop, the white grainy material reflecting the light of the moon.

“So Tam, there is a powerful source of energy beneath the hot springs.”

Tam slowly sipped the beer, smacking his lips as if trying to decide if he liked it or not.

John rolled his eyes. “Come on, it’s better than the mud you all drink.”

“Hey, that stuff is sacred...you gotta respect the sacred.” “So, do you think the Cursed Place is sacred?”

Tam chuckled. “It was said to be cursed for probably a thousand years... “I think it’s sacred. Free energy, a gift from a magical source.”

“So by energy, you mean electrical power?” “Yes.”

The view from the top of the building was incredible. The edge of the island dropped off into a cliff and the lit up ocean from the moon showed that the vast expanse of waters stretched out to no end. The silhouette of palm trees against the ocean line swayed gently in the wind.

“That’s insane,” Tam said.

“Yeah. You know what the scary part is? The whole world might want to claim this island.”

“Noooo....really?” The sarcasm came through.

“Yes, really. And it almost happened. One of the crew secretly filmed our phones

charging on the rocks and released it on YouTube.”

“Oh, I bet your boss didn’t like that.”

John rubbed the itchy beard budding from his face, making a mental note to shave.

He replied, “Not at all. Whoever did it was fired.”

Gerald was under a lot of stress after the video leaked. He told John that Telzac got wind of the video, and admitted to him that they had no direct involvement with the project. He acted alone, using his position with Telzac to benefit his interest in Cradle Earth.

“Please, ignore their phone calls and emails,” Gerald said. “I’ll deal with the heat. I don’t want anything to hinder your work.”

The Prime Minister had told the media the video was a hoax and that he decided and authorized a lock down on travel to and from the Cradle Earth, announcing it was to protect the locals.

John stated to Tam, “This structure...we’ll call it the Arthkay, will not only release pressure and reduce earthquakes, the island will have unlimited, free power, once the project is completed. Plus clean water. Your kids can go to school. In a decade, Cradle Earth will have a successful economy.” Tam asked for another beer, then held his beer up to John, head bowed.

“You must truly be god.” Then Tam gave a sly smile, “But I have to see it to believe it.”

John laughed.

All went quiet until a breeze brushed past them like a soothing whisper. Their gaze went out to the ocean, mesmerized by the alluring reflection of the moon.

John knew Gerald, Leo, and the crew had their faith in him. Perhaps one day the villagers will too.

Tam did.

Satisfaction settled within him.

Life is good because life will be good.