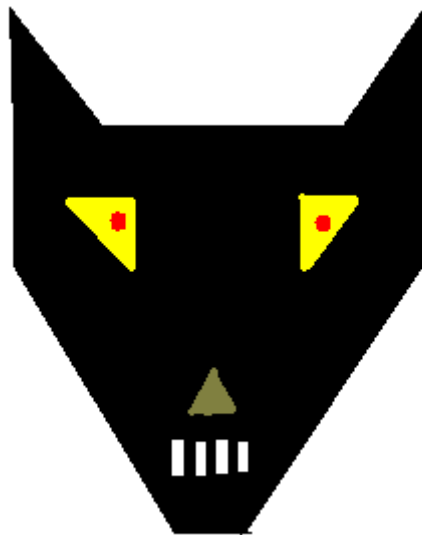


THE CHILDREN OF BABEL



**“AN OCCULT
NOVELETTE
SET IN A
SCIENCE
FICTIONAL
UNIVERSE”**

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The Children of Babel.

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Prologue

A holovision screen disappears with a blink. A proud tall man with a blue face, and a sloping forehead nods his head. He turns and walks down the aisle of a large ceremonial chamber, flanked on both sides by similar beings holding spears with pendants flapping in the slight breeze.

He pauses before a large semicircular granite staircase, which he then proceeds to ascend in a graceful stroll. At the top a female member of the species is waiting for him. She is carrying a long golden sceptre with an orb at one end; the regalia of a high priestess.

He says to her "It is done. The task is completed."

She nods her head in answer, "So be it. Then we must send the signal."

The tall man turns around and descends the staircase in the manner which he climbed it. At the bottom, he pauses and again turns to face the priestess.

She raises her sceptre above her head with both hands and cries "We the proud representatives of the Eldar race, call out to humankind to join us!"

A lightning bolt flashes down from the dome above her and lits upon the orbed sceptre she is extending towards it. The chamber is illuminated by the flashing light, which signifies the ceremony is over...

The Quest

A windowless concrete building in the countryside on the outskirts of Hope, Derbyshire in the shadow of Kinder Scout. A group of three khaki clad individuals gather at the edge of a wood in front of a featureless brick building. Damian, the leader of the group says to his companions "It won't be long now before we punish these bastards for the crime they are committing to Nature."

"Yes!", agrees Susan, "How could you stick needles in the eye of a basset hound, in order to gain research data."

"They all claim that they are doing this for the good of mankind," Damian replies, "but how come they never put themselves forward to be experimented on. It is always those who never have a voice that get the shitty end of the stick... When are they ever going to put themselves forward, I ask you."

Damian, Alan and Susan wait in silence at the edge of the canopy. Before them lies a hundred yards of rough grass, then a razor wire topped fence. They have been watching for a while and they notice that there are no guards.

"Easy does it!", cautions Damian their leader. "They've obviously not been expecting us, or there would be a committee."

Susan replies, "Well anybody we do find when we get inside is going to pay for it, that's all I'm gonna say... let's get the kit ready Alan." Alan hands Damian a duffel bag.

Alan says "everything you asked for is in here Dame..."

Damian pulls a sawn-off shotgun out of a duffel bag and hands a pair of wire clippers, and a sledge hammer to Alan.

"... and also the camcorder for Susan, so she can film what happens when we rescue the hounds."

Susan says, "looks like it's gonna be quite easy to get through the fence, but the door could be more tricky. Here, let's get this tape rolling."

They walk towards the fence. Alan cuts a hole in the fence with the wire clippers. Damian, Alan

and Susan make their way through, carefully guarding the tops of their heads against the edge of the hole Alan has made. They walk to the wall of the building, which they follow until they come to a door.

Alan announces, "No problem, all its gonna take is a few sweeps of this beauty!" He raises the sledgehammer over his shoulder, and swings it several times at the hinges of the door, and then at the lock without much effect, but on successive attempts the door lock shatters and the door falls off it's hinges onto the floor outside.

Alan says "You wait out here Susan. You keep an eye on the fence to check there is no one coming. You can film us when we come out with the dogs."

Alan and Damian walk inside. They walk down a corridor with a green floor. They check adjoining rooms looking for cages.

Alan says "Nothing in here, You'd expect we'd have heard barking by now. Wonder where they keep them!"

Finally they come to a large room at the end of the corridor.

"What are these gurneys with straps on them for?" says Damian. "looks like the sort of thing you'd find in a mental hospital. And what the fuck is this?" In the middle of the room is a painted circle. Inside the circle is a small silver dagger.

Alan picks up the silver dagger and examines it. "Looks like we've entered the set of a horror movie!" he puts the dagger back into the circle and casts a nervous glance to Damian.

Susan enters and shouts to them "There's some security guards examining the hole in the fence. You better come out and stop them before they raise the alarm!"

Damian, Susan and Alan race out onto the corridor. A moment later they are back outside. At this point one of the guards is talking into a walkie-talkie. Before they can stop them, the whole area is flooded with security lights and a siren goes off.

Damian shouts out "you two stop there and raise your hands!" he points the sawn-off shotgun at the guards, and they immediately surrender.

"Take it easy son!" says one of the guards as they back away from the hole in the fence.

Damian says "Don't move if you value your life!" and the three of them crawl through the hole in the fence. As they reach the rough patch of ground between the building and the woods they start to sprint for safety.

A faint humming noise is heard in the distance. It gets louder and louder. Until suddenly a black helicopter appears over the horizon. The three gasp in astonishment. A long barrel pokes out of the helicopter and a long black line is shot out. It hits Damian, and there is a sudden crackle of electricity... Alan and Susan are unharmed and make it to the wood.

The helicopter lands and Damian is surrounded by men who jump out of the helicopter and handcuff him.

*

After much running through the wood in the dark. Alan and Susan reach their car exhausted and panting for air.

Susan says "Where the hell did that black helicopter come from?"

Alan says "there are some funny goings on at that building. You haven't heard the last of it. That story about the basset hounds was just a cover. There's really some sort of occult conspiracy going on. Inside the building there was some kind of magic circle, and what they were experimenting on were people, judging by the gurneys we saw!"

Susan exclaims worriedly "How are we going to get Damian back... for all we know they could be experimenting on him!"

Alan says "lets sleep on it. There's nothing we can do tonight. We'll have a conference in the morning, and decide what to do then!"

*

Damian is frogmarched into the building at gunpoint by two heavies from the helicopter. They take him down the corridor past where the man shaped gurneys are, down some steps into a cellar, where there is a padded chamber. They twist his head back.

“Alright! son, tell us what you were doing cutting holes in our fence? Didn't you realize that sets off an alarm. What do you think this is, some sort of two bit operation?” says the chief gorilla.

Another one of the henchmen says “...and you better start telling the truth, because we have ways of making you talk.”

The chief laughs and pointedly exclaims “That's right Jack, we do indeed have unusual means of getting the truth out of you!”

Damian says “We were coming to rescue the basset hounds. That's what the whole story about the place was, wasn't it. I don't know what you expect, if that's the sort of cover you give for whatever sort of religious freak show is going on.”

Jack says “He's been in the green chamber Bill, I saw the wet footprints leading in there on the way down!”

“Well, Well then, been a bit nosey have you,” Bill exclaims, “so what exactly do you think is going on in here then, my little pal?”

Damian answers “Well my friend Alan saw the exact same thing as I did, and he's sure to tell the authorities next thing in the morning!”

“I don't think that that would be a very wise thing for him to do, would it?” Bill sniggers.

“Judging by the criminal damage and aggravated trespass charge he will have to admit to when the cops start questioning him.”

His pal Jack adds “and there is the small issue of the security video, we have of you pointing a gun at one of our friends!”

Damian counters “You wouldn't dare give the authorities any reason to suspect what goes on in here! I saw the gurneys. It's not hounds you're experimenting on. It's people!”

“That may be the case Son! But we have a few friends in the police force anyway, who will see that nothing gets investigated that proves too dangerous for us. Anyway you're soon to find out exactly what those gurneys were for anyway! In person!” with that Bill laughs and smacks Damian over the head with a truncheon.

Everything turns black for Damian!

*

Damian wakes up on a gurney, to find that his arms are strapped down with his sleeves rolled up. A middle aged female doctor in a white coat smiles at him.

“You might feel a little prick here! Of course that's all you are to us, anyway!” the doctor smiles again.

The doctor inserts a syringe into a vein in Damian's arm and a colourless fluid slowly mixes with Damian's blood.

Then a gas mask is placed on his face connected to a cylinder and the tap is opened. He doesn't fall asleep, but is vaguely aware. As he is wheeled down the corridor, the straps are loosened and he feels a blast of cold air on his cheeks, as he is frogmarched outside to the edge of the wood again.

Bill says “might be a good idea to stick to the wood, my son! The full moon will be rising in twenty minutes! Chin up!”

*

Damian wakes up and feels sick. He stumbles to his feet and feels sicker. He bends over double and retches onto the forest floor. The trees seem to move about him like figures in a dance. He straightens up, pauses for a moment and then gropes his way through the wood not sure which way he is going.

“Alan! Susan! Can you hear me it's Damian”

There is no answer. Merely the soft rustling of forest fauna and the wind blowing the leaves in the branches above.

He comes to a brook running through the forest. He bends down and takes refreshment. It is now twenty minutes since he was left at the edge of the wood. Whatever could the guard have meant by the rising of the moon?

He looks up at the canopy above, but it is more or less unbroken. No moonlight shines through the jagged gap, mirroring the form of the brook, which brought him refreshment.

He staggers on. The effects of the gas and the blow to his head receding. The canopy gets lighter as he stumbles down a muddy bank. The ground becomes less hazardous as he walks into a forest clearing.

He stands in the centre of the clearing just as a pale beam of moonshine skirts above the lip of the canopy and illuminates his strangely yearning face.

... THE CHANGE HAPPENS!

The muscles in his face tremble. His mouth seems to change shape. It seems to project from his skull. The lips withdraw, and his teeth grow longer and sharper. Bristling hairs sprout from all parts of his body. His ears grow pointed, and he descends to a half stooping posture, his hands become paws which seem to want to make contact with the floor in front of him. He has become a wolf.

He lopes his way through the forest howling as he goes. Every time a silver moonbeam lits upon him from a crack in the canopy, he snarls and descends on to all fours. As he moves into the thicker part of the forest, in some way divorced from the sustenance the moon gives to his condition, he appropriately becomes more human.

His transformation lasts until the moon descends below the horizon, and the warmth of the sun takes its rightful place in the sky.

He wakes up in the clearing from which his night's journey started. His clothes all torn and ragged, and his skin bathed in a cold pale sweat. His memories of his prowling state are scattered and rough, and he barely remembers the events after being shot down by the electric harpoon.

A broken man, he makes his way to the railway station, and from then to his home in central Manchester. Glad at least that he still found some money in his trouser pocket to pay for his fare home.

*

Alan and Susan are having a coffee and breakfast, at the OK café, in Levenshulme, their home town in Central Manchester. Their faces look haggard and dejected, both from the state of their emotions and from lack of sleep.

Susan's voice seems cracked as she says “What can we do to rescue Alan? We'll have to contact the authorities at some point?”

“No!” says Alan, “If we do that then we are going to end up in a deep mess, when they find out what we were doing there in the first place. And we can't risk the cops finding out about the gun Damian was waving in their faces.”

Susan perturbed says “What they did was far worse! They shot down and kidnapped Damian! We've got to take the risk of repercussions in order to save him from a worse fate.”

Alan answers Susan's question with a shrug of his shoulders, “We'll leave it to four o'clock. If Damian hasn't returned by then, we'll call the cops and explain what happened...”

As they continue to eat their English breakfast. Alan tells her everything about the gurneys and

straps, and the mysterious silver dagger which they found in the magic circle. The information does not seem to agree with Susan's constitution and reluctantly she leaves a few scraps of bacon, and a sausage at the edge of her plate.

Alan in a sympathetic gesture does the same, and resting his elbows on the edge of the table, holds his furrowed brow with the palms of his hands

*

Damian returns to his house in Tonbridge Road, not far from the spot where at this very moment his friends are discussing his fate; with such an air of dejection. His immediate instinct is to hunt for his cell phone and make contact with them, but before he can make himself at home, a loud knock on his front door breaks the morning's silence.

Before he makes the journey down his steep stairway, he takes a cautious glance through his front bedroom window, to see who is making contact with him. He notices a large black Mercedes Benz, blocking the street below, and he can just make out the edges of two dark suits, wearing black trilbys in front of his door. As he hesitates to decide what to do, they step backward in the street, and glance up at him. They are wearing dark wraparound sunglasses.

One of them removes his eye-ware, and Damian can fancy seeing the cold glare of a serpents eye, with a contracting vertical slit for a pupil. On seeing Damian, the suit quickly puts his glasses back on.

Damian withdraws from the window and makes his way down to the front door. Taking a few deep breaths of air to refresh his brain, he opens the door and asks the two curious men who they are, and what do they want.

One of the men smiles with a thinly lipped mouth and raises his trilby. Holding it above his pate for a second or two, before replacing it.

"We are representatives of the organisation you visited last night" He explains. "We have come to give you some advice... That little transformation that you went through in the woods could become a permanent problem every time there is a full moon in the sky... Something that you don't want to happen again. I'm sure you agree."

The second man sniggers and his shoulders begin to shake with mirth. He doesn't seem to have a speaking part.

"Well you see that little injection you had, has a counterpart. An opposite. A reversal. If you want to turn back the change made with the first; you have a second injection. In order to get that second injection though... you have to cooperate!"

The second man continues to snigger. Obviously enjoying his limited role.

"Those two friends of yours: the boy and the girl. We'd like to know their names and addresses so we can keep tabs on them. Just for safety's sake you see... In order that they don't start blabbing to the press or anything like that!"

A cackle comes from behind his shoulder.

Damian in a voice of total contempt says "There is no way in hell that I'm going to split on my friends! If you think that, you better have another think coming! And I bet right this very minute, they're already telling the police about what happened."

The second man finally gives the voice to the face, "We'll see you the next full moon... is it 'Damian', It's been nice doing business with you!"

With that the two men almost bend double in laughter, putting their arms around each other to steady themselves, before beginning to make their way to their car."

Damian slams the door as they retreat and goes to look for his cell phone.

*

"I'm glad you're back Damian!..." says Susan sitting on a banquette at the Grand Central

Stockport. The three of them deciding to meet undercover as far away from Damian's house as possible.

“...The two of us were getting worried we would have to spill the beans to the police in order to get you back!”

Damian says “There was something funny about those two men which came to my door. I could swear one of them had snake's eyes when he removed his sunglasses!”

Alan answers “What with magic circles, turning into a werewolf, and now men who are half reptiles, things are getting decidedly rummy!”

Susan queries “What are we going to do to get that injection for you Damian? I am sure we can't play ball with these people! As soon as we give them what they want, they'll turn back on their word, and maybe try and eliminate all three of us!”

Damian replies “We'll just have to break into that building again. They'll be sure to keep the antidote somewhere in there. The whole place is like a warren. We only saw the surface. I bet there's many layers underneath the ground.”

Susan adds “But they'll be sure to have upped the security since we left last night!”

Damian answers “That'll probably be the case! At least the moon will be slightly gibbous tonight and I won't turn back into a wolf. Nonetheless, I'll be the one that takes the risk, because I'm the reason why we have to go back!”

Alan feeling a little left out of the conversation says “We'll be right behind you as support, Damian. You can count on us!”

*

The three of them are back at the building in the dead of the night, taking the precaution to approach it from the opposite side they entered the previous night. As they expected the security level has been increased. There are now three guards patrolling the perimeter fence, and the hole they made has been repaired. The door they broke down has been boarded up, and yet another guard is on duty in front of it.

They observe the movements of the guards as they go about their duty. Two of the guards patrol the fence in opposite directions, often stopping to add a random element to the precise moment when they meet up. The third guard stands at the main entrance to the building. A much grander affair to the door which is now boarded up.

The three friends are at a loss as to how they are going to get in. Feeling slightly dejected they have no recourse other than to be patient and look for a chink in the organisation's armour, with further reconnaissance.

An hour passes by and one of the guards after talking briefly to the sentinel of the main entrance, stands in front of what looks like a closed circuit TV camera. In the slightly misty night air, a beam of red light issues from the 'camera' and enters the guards eye. There is an audible beep and the door slides into the buildings wall with a pleasant swishing noise. The guard enters. The door closes behind him and five minutes later the guard reappears outside the door again.

The three protesters take this information on board and continue to observe for another twenty minutes.

“I've an idea!” Damian exclaims suddenly. He quickly divulges his plan to his two accomplices, and creeping like a stalking lion through the rough grass waits for the pregnant moment to attack.

One of the two patrolling guards passes by Damian on the ground without noticing him. When his back is turned Damian leaps up on him, and covers the guards mouth with a hand. The two accomplices quickly overpower the guard from the shadows, and keep him silent by stuffing a rag in his mouth.

Damian looks at the name tag on the guards suit, and says to the struggling guard “Sorry Simon, but this has got to be done!”

He then reaches his hand towards the guards face, pulls apart the eyelids of the right eye, and wrenches the eye from its socket. With a terrible schlupping noise, the globe comes free, the optic nerve trailing like the tongue of a chameleon. Simon groans in complete abject horror.

The three of them pull Simon back to the tree line where his clothes are pulled free for Damian to change into. Once this is done, Damian dons Simon's peaked cap and returns back to the fence, where he continues Simon's patrol.

As Damian nears the main entrance, he pulls a handkerchief from the guards pocket and covers the lower part of his face with it. He then deliberately starts to cough uncontrollably, and bends over double, as he finally reaches the sentinel.

Quickly noticing the other guards name tag, Damian splutters in a rough croak, "Damn midges, just walked into a cloud of the buggers. Rab, I'm going to have to go inside to wash my mouth out."

Rab replies "Okay son! But fifteen minutes max, see to it!"

Still keeping the handkerchief over his face, and the eye in his right hand close to it, Damian walks up to the 'camera', which is in fact a retinal scanner, turns his palm round so that the eye is pointing into the scanner. The beam automatically recognises the eye, and with a quick beep followed by a swish the door opens, and Damian enters.

Damian looks around and sees that he is in a completely different part of the building to the area he explored last night. This causes him some consternation because he had hoped to find the reversal serum in the green chamber with the magic circle.

Luckily, on the other hand, he is relieved to find that the entrance chamber he finds himself in, is completely devoid of other people. With this thought in mind, Damian walks into the left hand side of a corridor which traverses the chamber, suspecting that it continues in a circuit around the front part of the building back to where he started.

He keeps the handkerchief over his face, in case anybody appears out of the many rooms which lead off from the corridor. None of the rooms appear to have much prospect of harbouring the antidote, as they appear mostly to be offices or private studies for the people who work there during the day, with the occasional wash room or cleaning closet.

The idea Damian had of the corridor running around in a circuit, is confirmed after he makes two right turns to end up in a place which he believes to be directly in line with the entrance and its associated chamber.

'This must be where the secret part of the building starts' thinks Damian to himself, noticing a flight of stairs to one side of the corridor. Remembering that he descended into the bowels of the building the night he was overpowered, he takes the stairs to the next lower level, hoping to connect somehow with the green chamber.

The next level has a similar layout to the level above, but this time there is another separate corridor leading to where Damian believes he will find the padded chamber, and from there to the green chamber. 'At least, I'm bound to find a few more clues in the parts of the building which are difficult to reach.' He looks at his watch to find seven minutes have elapsed since he entered the building. 'Damn! I'm only half way to the point where Rab will start to get suspicious.'

Damian continues along this corridor until he comes across a tarpaulin stretched across the floor serving no particular purpose. He shrugs his shoulders and carries on regardless. A MISTAKE!... The floor opens up beneath him, and the tarpaulin bags him, as he falls into the hole. Shoes clatter down the corridor in front of him from waiting side rooms, belonging to his old friends Jack and Bill, with some new accomplices.

Damian is carried back to the green chamber in the tarpaulin bag. He is then unrolled onto the floor, and manhandled into a gurney where he is strapped tightly in. He struggles furiously both in the bag and in the gurney, but to no avail; resistance is useless.

Bill bends down over Damian's face so close to him that Damian can smell his halitosis.

"Have you thought about cooperating, or would you like some more treatment to persuade you?" Bill enquires.

Damian answers "I don't know what you want, but whatever it is you're not going to get it!"

Jack passes a rough sack to Bill. Inside it, something is moving.

Bill continues "What we need to know are the names and addresses of your friends, Damian. Until you tell us, things are going to get a bit rough for you! Another little acquaintance of yours is going to get the treatment, if you don't tell us!"

Damian worriedly asks "What! Who is it you're going to give the injection to?"

Bill answers "Not so much an injection, pal. A more ghastly fate I couldn't imagine! Hand me that acid, Bernard."

Another of Bill's flunkies hiding in the background brings a plastic pail from a cupboard at the other end of the room. Damian notices that Bernard is very careful to hold the bucket upright, and not spill any of it onto the floor. He then realises exactly why the guard is being careful, when he reads the label on the bucket: 'Concentrated Stannic Acid: Extremely Corrosive!'

"What are you doing?" Damian worriedly asks. His lips turning pale.

Bill opens up the rough jute sack, and dipping his hand inside pulls out to view, by the scruff of its neck, a white laboratory rabbit.

"Jennifer!" Damian cries, recognising his pet lab rabbit, which he rescued from a terrible fate, only to apparently face an even more terrible one.

Bernard and Jack tie up the feet of the struggling rabbit with ribbon, while Bill strokes back its ears, with mock loving affection.

"Okay! This is your last chance! Tell us the names and addresses of your accomplices."

Damian cries "No! Please don't hurt Jenny!"

Bill dips the poor animal a centimetre above the foul liquid. Inadvertently, the struggling rabbit touches the acid momentarily with one of its hind legs. There is an instant frazzle, followed by a squeal, and a puff of black smoke.

"No!" Damian cries.

Another of the guards goes over to a hook, where is kept a large rubber apron, and some heavy duty gloves. These, he gives to Bill, who quickly dons them, momentarily passing the smoking rabbit to Jack.

Bill warns "This is your last chance, Pal! If you don't give us the information we want, then the rabbit gets it!"

Damian yells "I can't split on my friends, can't you see? Please don't hurt Jenny!"

Bill with a shrug of his shoulders drops the condemned creature into the bucket of acid. There is a prolonged flurry of movement, mixed with high pitched squeals, which gradually is replaced by the sound of a saucepan boiling over as a thick red froth spills over the side of the bucket. The air is filled with a thick black smoke, which smells like the outpouring of a crematorium.

"Why did you have to do that!" Damian screams. He then proceeds to sob uncontrollably, his chest heaving at the straps which confine him. The guards leave the sobbing to run its course, obviously wanting to have Damian's full attention, before they start the next level of the torture.

"Why! Why! Why! Poor Jenny!" he cries again

Bill says to Bernard, "Okay, it looks like its time for Mister Pepper!"

Bernard laughs and goes over to an aluminium chest, where he pulls out a two foot long wooden club, thick at one end, and covered with what looks like rusty barbed wire. He hands this to Bill, who remains standing wearing his rubber apron and gloves.

"Wh! Wh! What!" splutters Damian.

Bernard says to Bill, "I'll just go the kitchen to fetch the seasoning."

Damian is momentarily confused. Which is only heightened when Bernard returns carrying a large pepper grinder, such as you would find in an Italian restaurant.

Bernard says "Mister Pepper is going to be pleased with his new victim, Bill"

Jack and the other nameless guard both laugh uncontrollably, whilst Bill remains stoic, with a large grin on his face.

Damian in a hoarse whisper entreats "What is this Mister Pepper, you keep talking about?"

The four guards remain silent to Damian's entreaty, whilst Bill holds the club out horizontally. Bernard then starts to grind pepper over the rusty barbed wire.

A look of pure dread overcomes Damian, as finally the penny falls.

"No! No! Not Mister Pepper, I'll tell you anything, just no Mister Pepper..."

Bill merely smiles contentedly

"...My friends are Sally Dibden of 31 Cringle Road, and Alan Walters of 33 Cringle Road. Just please, no Mister Pepper!"

Bill announces "Thank you, my friend. Now that you have given us the information we wanted, it is time to dispose of you in a most interesting manner."

The nameless guard walks over to one of the cupboards on the wall, and after some rummaging about fetches a rubber tube attached to a funnel. This he gives to Jack, whose shoulders shuffle up and down in merriment, on receiving the gift. Meanwhile Bernard is looking in a different part of the room, and produces a brown lab bottle, with a label of a fox attached. He unscrews the top, and awaits further orders from Bill.

Bill enlightens Damian with the words "You will find that this time the transformation only takes a few minutes, and this time the effects are permanent."

Jack pushes the end of the tube down Damian's mouth into his gullet. Again Damian tries to struggle with no effect. He bites the tube as it enters his mouth, but the nameless guard steps forward to hold Damian's mouth open with his fingers.

Bill nods to Bernard, who pours the liquid from the bottle into the funnel, which Jack is holding at shoulder height. The liquid pours straight down Damian's gullet into his stomach, which tries to tighten and expel the bitter liquid, without any success.

Immediately Damian starts to feel woozy, as the room spins around him. He finds his arms and legs are paralysed with the effects of the potion. The straps are loosened, and the gurney is wheeled down the corridor into a lift, where it is soon taken to the ground floor of the building, and out into the open air, via a route similar to the one in which Damian entered.

By the time Damian is taken outside, his body has shrunk considerably, and his clothes flap around him uselessly. These are removed by the guards, who lift Damian onto the floor. He is now covered in bristly red fur, and his face has elongated into a pointed snout.

As the guards retreat into the building, a bushy tail sprouts forth, from the base of his spine. A short time later, and the transformation is complete. He runs out onto the rough grass in front of the main entrance, follows the edge of the fence counter-clockwise, to where his friends are lying hid at the edge of the wood.

Alan and Susan, having gleaned something of his fate, from the commotion at the main entrance gate, try to grab his attention, but although Damian still has enough human attributes to recognise his friends, and understand their entreaties, he finds that the call of the wild is too much for him to bear, and scampers off, into the thick wood.

*

Early the next morning, the sun's gentle rays break through the canopy to where Damian can be found sniffing the ground, hunting for small animals to satisfy his hunger. The human part of him yearns to seek out his friends, but at this moment his present need is to fill his stomach.

The morning passes, and the sun climbs higher into the sky. From afar, a bugle call penetrates the Pennine air, and Damian pricks up his ears. Some part of him recognises danger in the sound, and he penetrates deeper into the forest.

Twenty minutes later a group of hounds are busily picking up the scent where Damian left off. They bark to one another, and to their masters who are waiting in the fields, waiting for Damian to be flushed out by the hounds. Damian himself is caught between this group and another who

approach from a different direction. Very quickly his options are limited, and he is forced to the margins of the wood.

Another bugle call pierces the air, as the huntsmen smell victory. The field where Damian is being forced into, by the two packs in the wood, is filled by baying hounds, and gnashing horses bearing stern huntsmen.

Eventually, Damian is forced out into the open, by hounds snapping at his heels. The lead huntsman dismounts from his steed, and holds his hounds back. Damian stands at the centre of a circle, surrounded by hounds, as the huntsman steps forward with a silver dagger.

"Listen to me, vermin!" he cries to Damian "You have overstepped the mark as to what is acceptable, in this society, which we run for our own good. We, the descendants of Nimrod, proud servants of the Annunaki, hereby condemn you to eternal suffering. As you perish from this dagger, your soul shall not rest. Instead you shall be caught in a never ending cycle, your soul always seeking out a vulpine host, where you shall perish either by hound or dagger."

The huntsman raises his dagger in the air, with his right hand, and with his left reaches up to tear the skin of his right cheek. Underneath, a scaly green visage is revealed, and his eyes turn yellow in the daylight, where can be seen the vertical slit of a snake or lizard.

"Here ye now! Fox. It is, as it has always been, and always will be. The strong shall shackle the weak, and force them to bide by their will. By the mysteries of Bel Marduk, I condemn you to this fate."

But suddenly, from nowhere, as the huntsman's arm arcs through the air to dispatch Damian, time seems to stand still. A shaft of light descends from heaven, and fills the ring with eerie illumination. Damian seems to de-materialize in front of his foe, and instantly finds himself in another place, once more fully human, if disoriented.

*

Alan and Susan look up into the sky in amazement. After an unsuccessful morning searching for Damian in the woods, they panicked when they heard the huntsmen coming, and now this! Standing awe-struck at the edge of the field, they see Damian disappear in front of their eyes.

Alan cries "What the hell was that!"

Susan is unable to form an answer, and merely gawps at the situation unfolding in front of her.

*

Damian finds himself in a large white chamber. The walls and ceiling form a hemisphere, at which he finds himself in the centre. Behind him is a chair fixed to the floor, and directly in front of him is a large medieval style helmet, with apparently no eye holes to see out of.

It seems natural to Damian to sit down on the stool, and pull the helmet down over his face. As he does so, he finds that he can see into the room, as if he were not wearing the helmet at all, and in front of him is a large hologram of a head, which seems to belong to some unknown species.

He stares at the blue sloping forehead of the giant head, and jumps in his seat as the lips part and it begins to speak.

"Damian" it calls, "We have been waiting a long time for you to come. You have been chosen to fulfil a quest, which needs to be completed by a person of great wisdom. It is indeed your own self, which satisfies this condition."

"The beings which you have just escaped from, are known to us, as the Children of Babel. They are the offspring of the Annunaki; a race which has been at war with us for many aeons. The Annunaki are responsible for all your religions and control every aspect of your lives, remotely, from a distant galaxy, using the Children as their agents."

"The Children can transform themselves into the reptilian forms of their masters. But unlike the

Annunaki, they require human souls to maintain their human form, and they need to perform elaborate mystical ceremonies, to pass in and out of other universes, via portals in space and time, to communicate with their masters.”

“The Children like their masters are fundamentally evil, and it is your mission to wipe them out from this planet, like the plague they are. Unfortunately the Annunaki, themselves are too powerful for humankind alone to destroy; and one day you must join us, who are known as the Eldar, to wage war against them and any further kin of theirs. But, that day will be long in coming, and we must focus our attention, at this moment, to the here and now.”

“The Children gain most of their power by entering a domain known as the Underworld. It is your task to enter this Underworld and defeat them in their own world. To do this you will need several items to help you.”

In front of Damian appears a silver rhomboid of unusual design floating in space, entirely unsupported. Damian reaches out to grasp it, and when his fingers fold around the artefact, the magic which held it in its place disappears and it falls into his palm..

“You will require this device to enter the Underworld. The precise method by which you use it cannot be communicated to you. This is something you must learn for yourself; perhaps with the help of others. Also its power to open a portal into the Underworld will cease at precisely midnight tonight, so you must not be tardy in your investigation as to how it works.”

“You will also need two other objects, which you will find underneath the chair you are sitting on. Again, it is beyond my powers to tell you of the exact situation, which you will need them for. However I can tell you that knowledge of Greek mythology will help you in your task. This is all I can say to you, at this moment. We will probably never meet again, and therefore I wish you good luck.”

The hologram vanishes, and Damian disoriented, grabs hold of the seat of the chair he is sitting on. After a moment or two in which he tries to recapture his bearings, he reaches up to remove the helmet, but finds it is no longer there.

Remembering the words from the blue head, Damian turns around to look underneath the seat, and finds to his own bemusement: a small bottle of black liquid, and some kind of hinged mirror, like a ladies compact.

Opening up the mirror, he finds on the lower section, an intricate mosaic of a cobra ready to strike. Seeing this reflected in the section above, Damian finds his blood turns cold.

As soon as he snaps the mirror shut again, there is a flash of light, and Damian finds himself in his own back yard, stark naked. The sun has yet to reach its highest point in the sky. It is still morning.

*

Alan's mobile suddenly starts vibrating in its holster. He pulls it out and is amazed to see the message, 'Incoming call from Damian', appearing on the screen. Only a few minutes ago, He and Susan had witnessed Damian in the form of a fox, vanish into another dimension.

“Hello! Is that you Damian?”

“Yes, sure is.”

“We just saw you disappear, a few moments ago, how come you're phoning us. Are you in a different universe?”

“Well, I probably was, this morning. But, for the last few hours I've been having a bath, and preparing something to eat at Tonbridge Road.”

“Oh! Right. Well in that case we'll meet up again in the Golden Prague, around twoish, if that's all right with you?”

“Sure is!”

*

The three of them are sitting around a table in the Czech pub. Susan is examining the artefact, rotating it around in her fingers, trying to understand its purpose. On the table in front of Alan is the bottle of black liquid, and the antique compact.

Susan says "It seems indestructible, but there are tiny lines in it where you can turn pieces, much like the Rubik's Cube. It seems like some sort of puzzle. Maybe, a space age intelligence test."

Damian answers "I noticed that too, but if you rotate the pieces in the wrong order, the pieces seem to snap back into place, the way they were. It seems to have its own power source by which it does this."

Alan picks up the bottle of black liquid, holds it up to the light, examines it, shakes it, and then puts it back down on the table.

He says "Some kind of chemical, no doubt. Judging by the amount of occult stuff we've been through, so far, I bet it has some kind of alchemical purpose."

Susan replies "Perhaps, but we shouldn't jump to any conclusions at this stage..."

"..Lets have a look at that compact again!"

Alan hands her the hinged mirror. She opens it up examines the fine mosaic, ponders its meaning, looks at her reflection in the upper section, and then snaps it back shut, and returns it to the table.

She says "If it wasn't for that antique mosaic, I'd say we could have bought something similar from Longsight market."

Damian answers her, "I agree, but nonetheless it would be more fitting to use the tools we've been given to complete the quest."

He adds "Susan, you know that cousin of yours, Peter, who lives in Heaton Chapel, and is an expert at the Rubik's Cube. Perhaps he can help find out what these objects are for. I would think he would especially be able to work out the meaning of the rhomboid. That would be right up his street."

Susan says "Sure! That sounds like a great idea. Say, you return home to recuperate after your ordeal, and Alan and I will pay a visit to Peter."

*

Susan rings the doorbell, and five minutes later Peter appears with a large spliff hanging out of his mouth. He takes a deep puff, and blows a smoke ring into Susan's face.

Susan takes no notice, and responds, "You'll destroy your mind, smoking that stuff!"

Peter replies "I have an IQ of 130, and discern no noticeable deterioration of my mental faculties after partaking cannabis."

Susan counters "funny, how the medical authorities, all seem to disagree with you."

Peter answers "that's because they deal with statistics, and I am not a statistic."

Susan and Alan shrug their shoulders, and walk inside uninvited.

The bedsit is messy, and covered in discarded clothes, and empty food carton's. Struggling to find a seat, Alan and Susan eventually perch themselves on Peter's bed facing his computer. Apparently he was just finishing a game of backgammon when the pair arrived at the shared entrance downstairs.

Peter goes into the kitchen, leaving Alan and Susan alone to discuss amongst themselves.

"I wonder how his Asperger's is affecting him, nowadays" asks Alan.

Susan replies "Well, he seems to like playing games on his computer. I know he's a dab hand at chess, because he spends hours studying all possible openings and end-games"

Alan adds "That sounds like just the sort of mind we need to solve our puzzles."

Peter comes back into the room, munching on a banana. He spots the rhomboid which Alan has taken out of his pocket, and asks what it is. When Alan invites him to play with it himself, if he wants to, Peter takes the bait.

“Yes, definitely some kind of Eldar artefact” muses Peter.

Susan, a bit shocked, replies “What do you know about the Eldar?”

Peter answers “only what I know from searching the databases of Milnet, over in the old US of A.”

Alan warns “You could get caught, doing that sort of thing, then where'd you be?”

Peter replies “I think it's unlikely, they'd be much interested in following up on the likes of me. Besides, I'm very careful to cover my tracks.”

Peter continues turning the object in his hands, rotating various parts of the artefact and watching them snap back into place. Meanwhile Susan has taken out the mirror, and the bottle of black liquid. She tries to interest Peter in them, but he is much too engrossed with the rhomboid.

Peter eventually announces “I'm going to have to call on the powers of the Asperger's support group. This puzzle is too difficult for one mind alone, I need help. We are due to meet at four o'clock. You can stick around here until it's time to set off, if you want. I'll just continue with my backgammon until then.”

Susan says “Alan and I, will just have a stroll in Cringle park. We'll come back at 3:30, and follow you there. Meanwhile, you can either continue your backgammon, or study the artefact a bit more.

*

As Susan and Alan walk out of Peter's shared house, they notice a large black Mercedes parked outside the White Dragon tattooist. As they walk down the A6, towards Levenshulme, it follows them at 50 yards distance, clearly not too worried about being noticed by them.

“I don't like the look of that car” says Alan.

Susan replies “I bet it's something to do with the Children of Babel.”

The car continues to follow them as they take a left turn, towards the park. When finally they reach their destination, the Mercedes stops, and a telephoto lens pokes out of the darkened passenger door. This remains trained on them, as they sit on a park bench.

Alan speaks “We could get rid of them, on the way back, by walking over Heaton Moor Golf Course.”

Susan answers “I don't think that's a good idea. They could be waiting for us to leave the main roads, so they can finish us off, whilst we're off the beaten track.”

Alan agreeing, says “Yeah! You could have a point. At least they haven't made a move against us, while we've been walking where the public can see what's going on.”

They continue to discuss the mysterious black car, and the various artefacts given to them by the mysterious Eldar, until it is time to make their way to York House, where the Asperger's support group is being held

*

As they make their way into the room, they notice the meeting has already started. Peter is playing with the silver rhomboid. He looks very tired as he wipes the sweat of his brow. Susan shows the other objects to the rest of the group.

In time the objects circulate around the group, and reach Peter, who relinquishes the rhomboid with something approaching relief. Clearly he is very tired, and in order to gain some refreshment lies down on the floor, with his head on a pillow.

Very soon after this, the other members of the group, who have handled the rhomboid, also feel

very fatigued, and have to relinquish it to gain some rest. Barely twenty minutes into the session, and all the members of Peter's group are lying on the ground, with their eyes closed.

Alan and Susan are very disturbed by this turn of events and try to wake Peter from his slumber.

Susan says "Peter! We need your help in solving the puzzle. We only have until midnight tonight before the portal into the underworld is closed completely."

Peter answers in a mumble, "Sorry, there is no use. Clearly the artefact has special powers to overpower anybody who tries to understand it. I'll have to wait until tomorrow before I can think about it further."

Alan says "What I need right now is a strong cup of coffee!"

Susan cries out "What did you just say?"

Alan answers "I need a coffee!"

Susan shouts "That's it! That's what the black liquid is. It's concentrated coffee."

Susan picks up the bottle of liquid. Opens the lid, and smells the contents.

"Space age Camp Coffee!" She yells.

She immediately goes into the kitchen where she makes a dozen cups of coffee, from the large boiling water dispenser. These she puts on a large tray and takes back into the conference room. After getting the group members to drink from the steaming mugs, they are soon revived from their slumbers, and get back to work on solving the rhomboid.

While another participant is playing with the artefact. Peter, who has been recently revived cries out, when he sees the object being manipulated in a certain manner. Takes the object in his hands, and carrying out a certain permutation which had come into his mind, transforms the object into a silver cube.

The cube seems to glow from within. Peter places the object on the floor as it has become too hot to handle. Immediately a strange glowing hologram appears above the cube: a pair of blue lips begin to move, and an alien voice begins to speak.

"Greetings companions of the chosen one! Well done on completing the first part of your quest. You must now place this object in the centre of a magic circle. The chosen one must stand before it and raise his arms to the heavens in order to be transferred to the Underworld. Be warned, only one can fulfil this task!"

*

The three meet again at Susan's house. Not trying to hide any more as they realise their cover is blown. They discuss the days events amongst themselves.

"I'm sorry, I had to give them your names and addresses. You've no idea what they were going to do to me!..." Damian whines.

"...You should have seen what they did to poor Jenny!"

Damian's hands reach up to his face and he bends over convulsed in a series of sobs.

Alan reaches out and pats Damian on the shoulder. "Don't worry big man, we can work this one out together! We've already solved half the puzzle, we've been given. All we need now is to find a way back to this magic circle."

Susan says "That could be difficult, as the building will be humming with extra guards, if we go back tonight, and in any case it would not be sensible to move about at night when they are watching all three of us. They would not hesitate to eliminate us!"

Damian recovering from his sobbing adds, "If only we could find a way of getting to that magic circle!"

Alan suddenly announces, "I think I know a way of getting to that circle, and it's easy as pie!"

"How's that?" Damian queries.

"Just follow me into the basement." Alan answers

As they follow Alan down into the nether regions of the house. He pulls out a piece of string and a stub of chalk from his jacket pocket.

"How long is a piece of string?" Damian queries.

"Well I don't know about that, but I do know that the circumference of a magic circle, or any circle for that matter, is equal to its diameter multiplied by pi" Alan answers.

With that he stands on one end of the string, and tying the stick of chalk to the other end traces a circle as he slowly turns around on his pivot.

"An act of genius!" Susan shouts.

"Voilà! Your magic circle" Alan announces.

Damian says "Well! All we need now is for me to enter this magic circle with the cube then, I guess!"

Susan replies "Not so fast, we need to think about what the head in the white room said. We need to consider where Greek mythology enters into this."

Alan says "What do you mean?"

Susan answers "Just wait for me a few minutes while I get something from my kitchen!"

With that she leaves the two of them alone, while she goes to collect and bring back to her companions.... a bag of dog biscuits.

Damian quizzically asks, "What am I expected to do with a bag of Bonios?"

Susan replies "Hopefully, you'll find out nearer the time."

Realising that the major part of their quest is before them, the three of them stop for a minute or two, to appreciate the gravity of the task set out before them. Damian, particularly feels very humbled, only to break the silence with the observation, "Well I hope there is a mobile phone transmitter in the Underworld, for us to remain in contact!"

"Bound to be!", adds Susan, "How else do the Children of Babel communicate with the real world?"

Damian fixes his bluetooth headset into place, takes the silver cube and mirror, in his hand, and steps forward into the newly created magic circle. Once more a silence descends onto the three companions, as he places the transformed object onto the floor in front of him, and stretches his arms to the heavens. A lightning bolt flashes down from the ceiling and a moment later he is transferred into the underworld.

*

Damian's phone rings as he stands in the middle of what looks like a Greek temple.

"I think I've landed in the Parthenon of Hell" he answers into his mobile phone.

Susan is talking on the other end. "What else do you see around you" she says.

"Well apart from the temple, I'm in the middle of a vast wasteland. There are fires burning around me on all sides. Far into the distance there seems to be a great big hole. I think I can see stairs descending into it. I'll take this torch from this pillar and take a closer look."

Damian picks up the torch, and makes his way to the hole in the distance. As he arrives he can see clearly that there are definitely stairs leading into it.

"I'm going to make my way down these stairs. It's pitch black in here. Lucky I took the torch with me." he says.

Susan replies "Be careful!"

Damian follows the spiral stair into the darkness. Holding the torch in front of him at arms length to light up the way in front of him. As he descends deeper, he notices that it is getting a bit brighter, and eventually he enters a round chamber, which is lit by torches such as the one he is carrying.

He says "I think I've entered some kind of entrance chamber. There's a single exit in the far wall. Wait! I think I can see some kind of movement. I can hear some kind of growling."

Suddenly a three headed dog appears from the single exit. Damian is stunned.

"There's a god-damn monster guarding the exit!" he cries. "Some kind of three headed hound of hell! Luckily it's on a chain so it can't reach me, but how in God's name am I supposed to get past it?"

Susan replies "That's what the biscuits are for. You've just met Cerberus: guardian of the Underworld. Leave a trail of biscuits, and find some way of breaking the chain at a distance."

Damian answers "Quick thinking, Susan. I'll use one of these rocks to break the chain, but first I'll leave a trail to the left hand side of the chamber. There I'll leave the bag, and old Cerberus can munch away to his heart's content."

After leaving the trail. Damian picks up a rock and hurls it at the point where the chain is fastened to the wall. Luckily, Damian is an expert fast bowler and he hits it first time, and the chain shatters into many pieces. Cerberus follows the trail to the side of the chamber where the bag is waiting for him.

Damian says to Susan "It's worked. Old Cerberus is busy, and I can go down the passage now."

Susan answers "Just remember, you still have the mirror. You'll need it to solve some puzzle further on down the line."

Damian says "The passage is well lit by the same sort of torches you see all over the place round here. It seems to be going down a slope. I'll just leave my torch here on the floor, so I can use both my hands if I need to."

He continues down the passage.

Damian tells Susan "I can hear some kind of chanting down here. It's getting louder, the further down I go."

Seeing that the passage opens out onto some kind of lip overlooking a main chamber. Damian gets down into a lying position, and creeps his way onto the lip.

He whispers "I'm going to have to maintain some kind of silence down here, or the bastards will hear me."

Susan answers "Okay Damian, keep us informed as soon as you can!"

Damian shuffles along on his belly to the edge of the lip. What he sees before him shocks him deeply. Below him is a multitude of lizard headed acolytes, praying to a giant mother lizard presiding over a ceremony, in front of a great altar. She is about to perform vivisection on a strapped down macaque monkey on the altar.

Horried Damian leaps up and grabs an antique chandelier, hanging down from the Gothic hall in front of him. He swings down onto the altar in front of him. The great mother lizard cries out spitting acid saliva onto him from a gnashing teeth filled maw. The acid burns his flesh, but he knows what he must now do.

He grabs the knife from the altar, and with a few quick slashes releases the monkey from its bindings. The animal terrified scampers off, into the corner of the hall; leaving the two protagonists to decide their fate together.

The multitudes of acolytes, by now are swarming towards the altar, gnashing their teeth, and ready to strike with their own ceremonial knives. Damian realises that if he is to escape with his life he must act now quickly.

Susan cries out over the phone "Damian, what's happening? What's all that noise about? What are you doing?"

"Saving the world, that's what!" Damian replies through gritted teeth.

And with those words, he plunges the knife deep into the mother lizard's throat. The open wound starts spitting acid, blistering Damian's forearms, which he pulls up to guard his face. Fire starts to envelop the mother lizard and with a cry she explodes into a cloud of dust.

As soon as the mother collapses into a dust cloud, all the other acolytes in the chamber begin to scream in agony, and like their leader they begin to burn with an eerie flame. Moments later, they too explode into a shower of dusty fragments, sharing the great mother's fate.

Damian says over the phone "It is done, the Children of Babel are finished, I have destroyed their source of power, and every last one of them that drew from that power source."

Susan replies "Way to go, Damian! But you still have to get out of there alive."

Damian answers "I'll make my way back, the same way I came here. There appears to be a stone staircase leading up to the passage where I entered."

He climbs up this staircase, and makes his way up the lit corridor, retracing his steps. He comes to the entrance chamber, and picks up the torch which he left when he went in. Holding it up he says to Susan "Cerberus is still happily munching on his biscuits. Bonio must be a good brand!"

He crosses to the other side of the chamber, and begins to make his way up the spiral staircase leading to the wasteland of burning fires. As the light grows dimmer, he begins to feel a cold chill, and says to Susan "There seems to be a hissing noise behind me, I can feel some kind of presence behind me. Clearly not everything was killed when I destroyed the great mother."

Susan replies fearfully "Whatever you do don't turn round, Damian. Remember the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. When Orpheus turned round, after rescuing Eurydice from the Underworld, he lost Eurydice forever."

Alan who has been listening intently to one side of the conversation grabs the phone of Susan and cautions "Open the mirror above your shoulder, and pointing directly behind you. If I am not mistaken, the thing following you is a Gorgon!"

Damian does what Alan advises, and a scream issues from behind him, which suddenly seems to stop dead completely, in its tracks.

He says "Whatever it was, it seems to have become petrified in stone. I guess it was that fabled gaze of the Gorgon, which can turn anything to stone, reflected in the mirror. I'll just walk backwards a few steps, and feel behind me..."

"...Yes, I can definitely feel some kind of statue behind me perched on the steps. And these things growing out of its head must be snakes. I guess that's why they put a picture of a striking cobra on the lower part of the mirror!"

Damian walks on up the spiral staircase, never once looking back behind him. He reaches the Greek temple, across the fiery wasteland, still clutching his torch.

He continues "There is some kind of door appearing in the temple, a rectangle of pure white light!"

Alan, still on the phone replies "Yes it has appeared in the circle, over here. The silver cube seems to have vanished, with it appearing."

Damian answers "Well, I better walk through it then, and see you on the opposite side."

He tentatively pokes his hand through the portal. It appears to Alan and Susan on the other side, quickly followed by the rest of his body. He falls into the arms of his friends, who hold him tightly. Susan peering over his shoulder says "I see you have brought with you a new mascot!"

The little macaque monkey jumps through the white portal, a moment before it disappears, scrambles up Damian's back, and sits on his head. The three of them laugh profusely in disbelief, knowing finally that it is all over.

Epilogue

We are on the bridge of a large space cruiser. There is much activity going on. On the main screen is showing a picture of rows upon rows of hibernation chambers. Each one occupied by a human being preparing for a long trip.

Two men are standing in front of a railing looking onto the screen. The screen changes, showing a similar, though not identical picture of many human beings reduced to a state of suspended animation.

One of the men, the captain of the ship says to his first mate "All the primary passengers are ready for the journey. It won't be long now before we join them: a few weeks in Earth time. When

we do so, the whole ship will travel completely unaided to the distant star of the Eldar.”

The first mate replies “And there we will meet for the first time, the originators of the great signal which was spotted on Earth, early on in the twenty first century. We will wake thousands of years old, but when we do so, it will be as though we had just spent a night sleeping...”

He adds “... Although the Annunaki survive, their progeny on Earth: the Children of Babel were destroyed many centuries ago by the legendary Damian. One day we will meet the Annunaki themselves in battle, with The Eldar race beside us. Until then, it is time we leave Earth.”

The captain replies “It is going to be a long journey physically, but it will seem in a blink of an eye, that our place in the universe will change radically. We will age, and reach the point of maturation of our species. We will never go back, we have reached THE POINT OF NO RETURN...”

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