

Portal

Prologue



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I've always been something of a loner. That's why I volunteered for the mission. Yet this empty world below scared me.

We came in over Florida. I knew it had to be Earth. But the broad facilities of Canaveral were nothing more than a grassy field, though the outlines were there, and the monuments of the early launch facilities seemed to be in good repair. Only after we landed could I see that their preservation was less than perfect.

I walked around, poking into the few remaining buildings. All were empty and silent. Gulls circled overhead; small animals moved in the underbrush at the edge of the meadow; birds sang. I found a terminal of unknown design in a building. Nearby was a small cap labeled with the words "Mindlink XV3-2044." I put it on, but nothing happened. The terminal was inactive, and I could find no way to change that. It had no screen, no keyboard—only what I took to be a holographic projection platform, and this cap. I'm not even sure it was a terminal.

Gyges has been of remarkably little help. All her expert systems, all her powerful AI functions seem helpless. So I asked her to go over ship's log.

Our trajectory went according to program. We approached 87.79 percent lightspeed within the first five years' subjective travel. Then something interrupted the program. *Gyges* is unable to analyze what. A broad swatch of datastorage seems to have been wiped. A proton flux? Magnetic anomaly? The scoop performed according to design. Speed increased to 93.45 percent C, then to 94, 95, 96, 97. Time dilation began to affect the circuits in ways *Gyges* could not determine.

We never reached 61 Cygni.

I listen to audible representations. Mostly the hiss of high-speed data, the shrill chatter of bits flowing in the superconducting circuits. Why do I do this? I do not know. There's nothing else to do.

Once I thought I heard something. I asked for slower and slower replays. I tried filtering and modulating the sounds. It was almost like music, a chant or patterned polyphony. I moved the frequency up and down.

I heard what I thought must be a name: Peter Devore.

I must have been mistaken. Yet the name was there, hidden in the chattering data, clearly enunciated. I listened to it over and over. Then I went outside again.

It was a warm spring day. A light breeze came in from the ocean. The air was clean and bracing with salt and ozone. It was so much like the day I had left this field (how many years ago?) that I felt a strange sense of disorientation. It was as if, for me, everyone and everything familiar had vanished overnight.

Gyges sampled all available frequencies, all available channels.

There was no one in the world, so I lifted the ship and moved slowly over the face of the Earth, looking for...I do not know what I was looking for.

Where Washington D.C. once sprawled beside the Potomac lay a scattered parkland with ancient monuments; the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, the Capitol building. The Pentagon was just an outline, a pentagonal berm covered with grass.

In the Library of Congress building I found a map called *Intercorp World Administrative Regions Archival Hardcopy*, with a date: 14 August 2077. The map includes what appears to be an organizational chart for the Intercorp Council and its political or administrative regions.

I didn't recognize any names. But I read an outline of 21st century history. My own departure is listed for 2004. Monday, 24 May. One of the first hypersonic salt-cycle suborbitals took me up the *Gyges* scoop. It's all there. The newsnets of the time carried live coverage of the scoops going operational. By the time I'd left Mars orbit, I was all but forgotten. So many other things seemed to be happening in the world.

In the entry for Thursday, 5 February 2076: "*Gyges* 61 Cygni single man explorer telemetry ceased as of this date. Signal attenuation indicates system shutdown. Presumed lost."

That's all. "Presumed lost." No effort to understand what happened.

I had no idea how much time had passed, of course. When the ship revived me, 200 million kilometers out, I was disoriented and puzzled. Later, when we swept in over the South Atlantic on our first orbit, I grew alarmed.

This was not the world I left, although the general geography was familiar. There was the hooked circle of Antarctica, the Western Hemisphere, the broad bulge of Siberia and the Arctic ice cap, but where were the cities? Where was the constant communications chatter? Where were the signs of traffic and human life? The planet I was orbiting was empty.

Yet the system was the same. The LP-5 colonies still hovered at the Lagrange points, but they too were silent. The moon circled overhead, but no voices came out of the Lunar bases. The geosyncs and relay satellites had certainly multiplied since I'd been gone, but nothing but unmodulated carrier waves moved between them.

Yesterday, I was laid into the complex hum of the first cryofield aboard the *Gyges* and put to sleep. For me it was yesterday, yet years have passed. I should have revived in orbit off 61 Cygni and spent a year observing the double star.

This did not happen.

Gyges held me, my cryofield, and the most advanced artificial intelligence computer Earth scientists could produce in the early 21st. She spoke and understood standard natural language. She contained the intuitive and deductive skills of countless experts in celestial navigation, the physical and biological sciences, life support, entertainment, and psychological adaptation. I anticipated no problems.

But I awoke (it seemed) moments after I'd gone into the cryofield—200 million kilometers from Earth, inward bound—and everything has changed.

Manhattan is a monument. The triangular mile-high pyramids of midtown still stand, but they're empty. The lower East Side is a vast field littered with abandoned vehicles of types I have never seen. Some of them have been open to the seasons for years. Brambles have grown over the seats and through the steering columns (at least I think that's what those whiplike extensions from just below the left-hand window must be). A cold wind was blowing.

Then, early in June, I found an entrance.

Everyone had moved underground. Of course that movement had begun before I left, but I had had no idea it would be so extensive. The world has been reforested.

It is very beautiful, but here is no one to talk to. I am the last person left alive.

Underground is nothing but desolation. Endless corridors where my footsteps echo. Condensation collects and runs down the walls. Occasionally a gust of air shows some random action of the atmosphere controls, so somewhere there's still power, but I have yet to find a machine or terminal that works. Not that I understand how to work them even if they were active. The lifts don't work, and I've had to climb access ladders or stairs.

There is no sign of violence. It's as if everyone had stepped out years ago and not returned.

The *Gyges* works very well on the planetary surface. Naturally I left the scoop in orbit, but she was designed to be rugged and intelligent. She sang to me as we flew over what was once the eastern United States (recently called, from the chart, the "Northwest Alliance"). Nothing exists but trees, as far as I can see, as far as *Gyges's* sensors can scan: trees and rolling hills. This used to be called Pennsylvania when I left, and this was Ohio. The Lakes gleam to the north, pale and blue.

I landed south of Chicago. The Loop is enclosed in a dome, the old 20th-century buildings perfectly preserved. Everywhere else, there's nothing but forest and meadow, river and lake.

I walked into old Chicago. The access lock to the dome stood open. Ancient computer printout littered the street. I found a hospital on the first level down. There were bodies in some of the beds, the first sign of human beings I have found.

The bodies were mummified inside life-support tents. They had been dead for years, and there were not many of them. I sat beside one of them for hours. I don't know what happened to them, what terrible disease they had or why they were abandoned here in life-support that no longer functioned.

On the second level I found a terminal with a small ready light burning. Nearby I found the "WORLDNET Emergency Operating Instructions."

The instructions tell me what to do if my mindlink is not functional. I don't know what a mindlink is, but I assume that it must be adapted to my own mind, and this has never happened. So I will read the instructions, and then I will try to find out what has happened to the world, where the people have gone, and if I must remain alone for the rest of my life.

Gyges tells me my psychological adjustment is in peril. I have been too long without other people.