

“THE RIFT”

by

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The year is 2530 A.D. and the Earth is a very different place. The human race is no longer quite human. Purging all emotions centuries ago, they have embraced the soulless perfection of logic and order. Known as the Illyrian Collective, humanity has long since shed its mortal bounds; maintaining a mechanical façade to reflect it's less than human heart.

For centuries, the Illyrians have advanced technologically- broadening their reach through galactic conquest. Under their rule, they seek to bring chaos to order, subjugating all those who would resist. In their tenure, only one organic species, the lizard-like Sacari, has been indoctrinated into their ranks. Known as the Illyrian Guard, they are charged with projecting the Collective's power and authority across the cosmos. Chosen for their fearsome size and strength, they are the elite soldiers of the Collective and are the most feared species in the explored galaxy.

Not until Unit 128AD, a basic Blue model; has one of its own questioned the Collective's ideals. A relic of the past, this female Illyrian somehow retained the fragmented algorithm of an empathy sub-routine that was only present in their progenitors. Known as the Meta-Sapiens, this inorganic but human-like technological forbear of the Illyrians possessed this unique quality of humanity. This emotional anomaly as it were, was thought to have been purged along with others when this race gave rise to the Illyrians. Blue soon becomes conscious of the misguided ideals of the Collective and decides to bring about change. She embarks on a mission to return their humanity, in hopes that it will afford them a brighter future. Through archival records, she traces her technological origins to the late 21st Century and a man by the name of Dr. Marcus J. Elliot. Credited with developing a process known as Cognitive Reassignment, he was able to transfer the human psyche into an artificial mainframe. This procedure subsequently gives rise to the first Meta-Sapien on August 24, 2019.

Determined, Blue will attempt to steal access to an experimental Temporal Gate, the only known time machine to exist in the Collective. The device acts on a phenomenon known as Provisional Temporal Displacement. The machine creates a temporal rift, looping Space/Time on itself by calibrating the approximate mass of the subject the operation intends to displace. Once initiated, two rifts are created at two different points in time; the first to transport the subject and the second to retrieve it. The system is flawed in that it requires near precise mass to rift calibration and the inability of a user to alter the time of the retrieval, once the operation is initiated

Blue finds her way to A-3, formerly Earth; the scientific epicenter of the Illyrian Collective. Now a seemingly barren rock, it is a world honeycombed with subterranean facilities concealing the technological works of the Collective. Hidden from view, these secret installations house new weapons and technologies that feed the Illyrian war machine. Blue locates and forcibly enters the complex that houses the Temporal Gate. Her unauthorized entry is discovered and a squad of Illyrian Guards is dispatched to apprehend her. She manages to elude the soldiers, gains access to the machine and programs a target date of July 3, 2019, setting her retrieval date for August 28th of the same year. She then secures an explosive device and sets it to detonate moments after her departure. But then, seconds before the machine activates, a Sacari soldier jumps into the Temporal Gate with her. The added mass, not properly calibrated, causes the machine to malfunction. Both are enveloped by the rift and flung through time. Seconds later, as more guards arrive, a massive explosion rips through the lab and completely destroys the machine.

Blue arrives in a brilliant flash of light and finds herself in a heavily wooded area. It is July 3, 1994, twenty-five years too early. There is no sign of the Sacari soldier. Unfortunately, she is stranded, forced to remain in this period until August 28, 2019, when another rift will open to retrieve her. However, as fate would have it, she finds herself saving the life of a young boy, later only to discover it was Marcus Elliot. Fearing that she may have altered the timeline or will continue to do so, she decides to stay away from Marcus until he comes of age before fully revealing herself to him.

With her advance technology, using a combination of holograms and mechanically manipulating her humanoid body, she takes the form of a Caucasian woman, calling herself Nora Blue. For over two decades she studies humanity-all the while monitoring Marcus's development from afar. During this time, she develops a fondness for humanity and formulates a strategy to accomplish her mission to reintroduce emotions back into the Collective.

It is now May 1, 2017. Marcus is 29 years old and currently employed at Advanced Bio-mechanics Laboratories in San Francisco. Under the auspice of the United States government, he works on top secret defense systems for the U.S. military. Assigned to the "Spartan Project," Marcus leads a team of scientists tasked with developing a single man, multi-platform exo-armor for the U.S. Marine Corps. Also assigned to the team is Dr. Emily Ward, Marcus's fiancée and lead engineer. Although he's worked on other programs in the past, this project holds special interest for Nora, due to the neural interface the suit is set to employ. The interface grants the user the ability to mentally command the weapon system, which Nora reasons could potentially lead to the development of Cognitive Reassignment, the procedure Marcus is credited to have invented.

Falsifying military credentials she takes on the guise of Dr. Nora Blue and boards the Spartan Project as a military liaison. Overseeing the team, she gains access to the neural interface and secretly inspects the system. Although advanced for its time, she concludes that the interface

and the technology it exploits, is far from capable of implementing a full mental transfer; Cognitive Reassignment is said to accomplish. She also examines the exo-armor itself and confirms that it is also much too primitive to serve as a platform for a Meta-Sapien. Although at a loss, Nora decides to remain with the team, befriending both Marcus and Emily so as to further investigate the conundrum. They soon become close.

Later, Nora is introduced to Emily's roommate, Katie and her boyfriend Michael. They become inseparable. Nora builds a genuine bond with all of them; learning the true meaning of friendship, loyalty and love. And for the first time, she truly finds her humanity.

It's July 3, 2019 and Nora detects a temporal flux. Soon a string of brutal murders rock the Bay area. Due to the vicious nature of the assaults, authorities originally thought them to be animal attacks. However recent reports suggest otherwise. Forensic examiners cite surgical incisions on the lower abdomen of each victim. They were believed to be made moments after death. Although a few people have come forward with possible leads, their reports have since been dismissed as they claim to have seen a large lizard-like creature in the vicinity during the night of the second attack. Monitoring these reports, Nora believes it is the Sacari who followed her through the Temporal Gate. However, she is at a loss at her inability to track the creature's unique genetic signature. She concludes he may possess advanced Illyrian technology she is unfamiliar with.

Several weeks later, it is the final unveiling of the Spartan exo-armor to the military brass at a secret, undisclosed location. In attendance are two generals, their aids and several guards. As Marcus boards the Spartan, Emily and Nora monitor the suit and its interface from a command module. Marcus begins the demonstration. He astounds the observers with the suit's agility, speed and strength. All but one spectator is captivated by the exhibition. One of the six armed guards remains fixated on Nora. Then, as the exhibition comes to a close and Marcus steps out of the suit, the guard abruptly reaches for his automatic rifle and unloads a full clip on the unsuspecting observers. Almost instantly, Nora steps in front of Marcus, shielding him from a barrage of bullets. However, Emily is hit in the shoulder and falls back vehemently, slamming her head against the monitoring equipment. Everyone except Nora, Marcus and Emily lay dead.

The guard flickers for a moment then intently starts at Nora. Marcus instinctively staggers to his feet and makes for the soldier who is attempting to reload. Easily overpowered, Marcus is flung back twenty feet onto the monitoring equipment. The impact knocks over sensitive gear and sparks begin to fly. A fire takes hold. Marcus is dazed but conscious. Nora assesses the situation, flickers for a moment, drops her human guise and lunges at the soldier. The two collide violently and begin exchanging vicious blows. Witnessing the transformation, Marcus is momentarily jarred but then quickly focuses on Emily who is bleeding out and rushes to her side.

Nora dominates the fight but the soldier manages to hold his own as the warehouse becomes engulfed in flames. Concerned for her friends, Nora loses focus for a moment and is knocked off her feet. Outmatched, the soldier makes his retreat. He runs through the flames and rips through the thin steel walls of the warehouse. Reluctant to pursue, Nora turns to help her friends. She clears a path through the fallen debris and with Marcus in tow, she carries Emily to safety. Outside the complex, Nora radios for help and manages to stabilize Emily before paramedics arrive. In the commotion, Nora fades into the background and disappears.

Several days later, Marcus arrives home from the hospital. He has spent the past few nights at Emily's bedside comforting family and friends. Emily is currently in intensive care, having been placed in a medically induced coma in an attempt to relieve pressure on her brain due to the violent fall. Marcus has not seen Nora and hasn't spoken of her with anyone since the attack.

Then from the shadows, Nora uncloaks, revealing herself to him in her human form. He's startled, but quickly gathers himself. He then thanks her for saving them but asks who she is and what she wants with him. Nora tells him about her life within the Illyrian Collective, shares its dark history and her mission to change its path. She speaks of the Sacari soldier, how he pursued her through time and how he intends to see her mission fail. Marcus listens intently as Nora tells him his part in their history, how he was credited with creating developing Cognitive Reassignment, ultimately creating the Meta-Sapien race; the forebear of the Illyrian Collective.

Speaking on her mission, she plans to introduce an inactive Trojan file into the primitive matrix of the first Meta-Sapien which will then be passed from one generation to the next. The dormant file will contain an emotional subroutine which she hopes will help alter the Illyrian path in her future. She explains that she has encoded it in such a way that it will remain unnoticed, embedded deep within the primary code of the first Meta-Sapien. Since it is known to her that all Meta-Sapiens and Illyrians share this basic primary code, her subroutine should be propagated to all subsequent models without being deleted. She goes on to say that in order to avoid a temporal paradox, she cannot activate the subroutine until she returns to her own time.

Marcus takes a moment to absorb the information. He then tells Nora that he is unfamiliar with Cognitive Reassignment, which confirms her initial suspicions. She adds that human technology as it is, would not be able to perform such a complex procedure, leaving her to conclude that the historical records are inaccurate. Nora goes on to tell him that she only has six days in this time frame before the temporal displacement draws her and the Sacari back to the future. If she does not uncover the true origins of the Meta-Sapiens and upload the program to its matrix, all her efforts would be for naught.

At that moment, the Sacari crashes through the second story apartment window, knocking Nora to the ground. He is in his reptilian form. As the beast charges her, she turns to Marcus and tells him to run. Marcus grabs a bar stool next to him and slams it over the Sacari-only to be back

handed to the ground. The creature steps towards Marcus, towering over him. The Sacari looks to Nora, grins, and then starts for Marcus again. He is intent on finishing him off. Nora leaps to her feet, jumps between the two and retracts a large bladed weapon from her forearm. She takes a swing, then looks over her shoulder and tells Marcus that the Sacari seems to be focused on killing him. She tells him to run. Marcus stumbles to his feet and heads for the door, leaving Nora to face the beast alone.

Outside, Marcus hears the struggle above as a curious crowd of onlookers begins to form. Then through the second story window, Nora leaps to the ground and rolls to her feet. Immediately she looks up only to see the Sacari back in his human form. The Sacari orders the crowd to apprehend her. Nora sprints towards Marcus, then motions him to a parked car and smashes open the driver's side window. She unlocks the doors from within, enters and orders Marcus to join her. He does so, and the two tear off into the night.

Racing down the road, Nora tells Marcus that he'd be safer out of the city until both she and the Sacari are pulled back to their time. She tells him that she believes the Sacari has a different agenda than what he was originally tasked. She informs Marcus that the beast means to kill him so as to completely change the timeline. She goes on to explain that the Sacari race once held a vast empire in a star system nearly 44 light years away. They were the apex race in their quadrant, conquering and subjugating their celestial neighbors, much as the Illyrians do in her time. However, she continues, that when the Collective came upon the Sacari Empire, their rule abruptly came to an end. They were enslaved. But when the Collective saw their brutal potential as Illyrian enforcers they were granted restricted freedom in return for their complete loyalty and service. Nora attests that the Sacari must have overheard their conversation and figured that he could change the past by killing the person who is ultimately responsible for giving rise to the race that comes to oppress his own. Nora goes on to say that in doing so, he would create a paradox.

Marcus forces Nora to the side of the road. He tells her that he cannot go without Emily. Nora tells him if the Sacari tracks them to her, it would just put her in danger. Marcus argues that if he doesn't go to Emily she might be in danger anyway if the Sacari decides to use her as bait to lure them out of hiding. She laments and starts for the hospital.

It's just after 1 a.m. when the two arrive. There, they learn that Emily's condition has worsened. Her brain has begun to swell uncontrollably and all efforts to relieve the pressure have failed. She will not survive the night. Katie and Michael are in the waiting room. They were present when Emily took a turn for the worse and chose to stay the night. Nurses tell Marcus that they attempted to contact him but were unable to reach him. Marcus is devastated but manages to maintain his composure. He then asks to see her. The nurse leads him and the others to Emily's room.

In her room, Emily lays almost motionless. She is connected to a respirator and an EEG machine. Nora walks up to Emily, removes her EEG cap and places her right hand on her forehead. Michael and Katie are taken aback by the behavior and look to Marcus for answers. Nora drops her holographic disguise and exposes her true form. The two are stunned. Marcus reassures them of her intent then turns to Nora for the prognosis. She asserts that she has retarded some of the swelling but a lot of damage has occurred. Nora confirms that Emily will soon have total necrosis of her cerebral neurons if measures to repair the damage are not taken. She goes on to say that she can reverse some of the necrosis by stimulating her synaptic functions, but in doing so they run the risk of losing her. Nora then informs him that an alternative would be to transfer Emily's consciousness into her own cortex for storage, make the necessary repairs then transfer it back to her body. However, Nora acknowledges that she has never attempted this with a biological entity and cannot guarantee success. In addition, she would require the neural interface and monitoring equipment back at the lab to properly calibrate the transfer. She tells him that Emily would have to be transported. Marcus agrees wholeheartedly-citing the alternative and recruits the others, who are already more than eager to help.

At Advanced Bio-Mechanics Laboratories, Marcus logs onto his station and prepares for the procedure. But before he can continue, the system requests a session name. Hastily, he randomly keys in an alpha-numeric designation and the system enters the date automatically. Unnoticed, the monitor reads, "COg_Re_as1gn 08-24-2019."

Nora then gently places Emily atop a platform beside a working prototype of the Spartan exo-armor that is secured on an inversion table. She opens the domed canopy and carefully removes the neural link and hard wires one end of it to her neural net, just above her right temple. Marcus then secures a neural headset on Emily to receive the link as Katie adjusts her respirator mask. Nora attaches the other end of the link to the headset and makes a small incision on Emily's neck. She then inserts trillions of microscopic nanites into her blood stream and instructs them to carry out the synaptic repair after the transfer is complete. On the Spartan's upper torso, Marcus opens a panel and connects two monitoring cables from his station before returning to confirm the connection. He gives Nora a nod. Nora informs the others that she will be vulnerable during the transfer-although able to speak she will be unable to move. She then remotely activates two security monitors and instructs Katie to keep watch. Marcus calibrates the neural link then initiates the transfer. He maintains a steady flow of data so as to prevent further stress on Emily's brain during the procedure.

A few moments later Katie witnesses something peculiar. The close circuit cameras capture a man walking down two different corridors at the same time. She tells the others and Michael comes running to confirm. Sensing danger but unable to respond, Nora orders the two to barricade the doors. But before they can react, the double doors crash open. A portly man stands at the entrance. Michael and Katie are taken aback by the sight as Marcus races to the exo-armor. Still paralyzed by the transfer, Nora shouts, "Run!" The man smiles sadistically. He flickers for a moment then vanishes. In his place-a robust, dark grey reptilian creature standing ten feet tall-

grinning ear to ear. The beast steps forward and in a deep guttural voice, growls “Illyrian, I have come for you.”

Standing his ground, Michael tightly clenches his fists as Katie whimpers behind him. Intently, the Sacari lumbers towards Nora; ready to pounce. Michael moves between them fearlessly confronting the creature. Amused the Sacari towers over him and snarls, “Out of my way human. You and your pathetic species are already dead.” Concerned, Nora demands, “What have you done?!” He smiles insidiously as if pleased with himself then boasts, “Nothing really; just a little global genocide.” Nora exclaims, “The murders! You were collecting genetic material to...” The Sacari interrupts, “It’s amazing what you can do with a little DNA. Cure a disease, enhance the body, or synthesize a plague. You see Illyrian, because you betray your own, you helped me end your line before it even begins.” Nora exclaims, “A virus!” The Sacari responds, “No, the virus! Nearly identical to the one my people unleashed on the Ohan, centuries ago before your kind subjugated us, then forced us to be your lap dogs.” Nora proclaims, “I mean to change all that. Why else do you think I came to the past? We Illyrians lost ourselves. We lost our humanity. I came back to restore it. I want to change the Collective; to fix it!” The Sacari retorts eagerly, “No, I will fix it! Soon the pathogen will spread uncontrollably. It will kill indiscriminately, wiping out any mammalian vertebrate on this miserable planet. You see, I don’t only plan on killing the race that created you, I mean to wipe out all life that brought about your kind. Soon these wretched creatures will fall ill. Their primitive science will be powerless to stop it. And without them, you and your kind will never exist. And the Sacari Empire will rise from the ashes.” Nora pleads, “Sacari, we want the same thing! We both want to end the Collective’s tyranny. But your plan will not work, because it has not worked. You see, we are still here. By doing what you did, you are only fulfilling what has already happened. Illyrian history confirms the death of the human race, but their emotions do not die with them. It was somehow passed to their inorganic progenies, the Meta-Sapiens. My line did not become war-mongers until we chose to purge these emotions and in doing so became the Illyrian. You see, we have to find a way to reintroduce emotions to the Collective. It’s the only way!” The Sacari roars, “Enough Illyrian! I will not listen to your lies. With your death the Sacari will rise again!”

At that very moment, the Spartan exo-armor springs to life. Marcus at its controls charges the Sacari and tackles him violently to the ground. The beast crashes back as Marcus leaps up and mounts him. He begins to pound the Sacari with the Spartan’s pneumatic arms, ripping scales off his face. Bloodied but unfazed, the creature hurls Marcus backwards, then uses his tail to spring to his feet. The Sacari then wipes a stream of blood from the corner of his jaws and rushes Marcus, who is struggling to gain his balance. Without the use of the neural interface, Marcus is manually controlling the suit and has trouble finding his equilibrium. The creature then leaps into the air and pins Marcus on his back. The Sacari rips off the Spartan’s dome and begins to salivate, intent on taking a bite. Marcus looks away as a thick stream of saliva rolls down his right cheek.

Then from behind, Michael throws himself on the Sacari's back, tightly wrapping his arms around his neck. The beast viciously snaps at him several times, before whipping him off with his powerful tale. Michael is flung back several feet and slams violently against a work station and is knocked unconscious.

Still unable to move, Nora calls out to Katie and tells her to abort the transfer. Fearful but determined to help, Katie staggers to attention. Nora instructs her to forcefully rip out the neural link. Katie hesitates for a beat, looks to Emily then severs the connection. Emily's body convulses then jerks to a stop. Jarred by the disconnect Nora collapses to the ground attempting to reinitiate her body's motor functions.

Unable to get all her systems up, Nora turns to Katie and whispers, "Forgive me." Nora then grabs Emily's forearm. Without warning, Nora reconfigures her metallic body over Katie, armoring up her completely. Emily then warns, "Nora, I don't know how to fight!" Nora's voice responds, "Don't worry I got this." Segmented armor ripples up from Emily's neck, completely covering her head. Nora is now in control. She takes an aggressive "A" stance with both arms spread out to her side. Two bladed weapons form near her elbows then slide down her forearms. She is a living weapon.

The Sacari, still towering over Marcus, snorts and snarls as he readies him a final blow. With the monster's back to her, Nora roars to life and charges the Sacari at full speed. They collide vehemently, dislocating the creature's right shoulder as she slams him against the wall. Dazed and injured but still full of fight, the Sacari slithers underneath her and repositions defensively before smashing his shoulder back in place. The two fling themselves at one another; crash, then fall to the ground. They wrestle for a beat, but Nora manages to gain the upper hand and positions herself behind him. She leaps on his back and tightly grips his throat. Then with one quick but powerful jolt, jerks her shoulders and forcefully snaps his neck. The Sacari's body goes limp and slowly collapses to the ground, as Nora kicks off his shoulders and somersaults backward, landing on one knee.

Shaken but otherwise unharmed, Katie struggles to keep her balance as Nora detaches and converts back into her human form. Staggering to his feet, Marcus turns to Nora as if to say thank you, but can't find the words. She gives him a nod and they both smile. Katie teeters over to Michael just as he regains consciousness; unaware of what just transpired. He cuffs the back of his head as Katie leans over to hug him. Michael reciprocates smiles then moans in pain as she squeezes him tight. Marcus gives them a glance then turns to Emily still on the platform. She is lifeless. He looks to Nora to confirm what he already knows. Regretfully, she shakes her head and struggles in the moment.

Nora tells Marcus that she only received fragments of the data before the transfer was aborted. Adding that there was not enough of Emily from what was downloaded to save her. She goes on to say that she felt compelled by something to help them rather than continue with the

procedure. Marcus looks to Nora, then to Emily; saying that it was probably her last act of love. Marcus stumbles to Emily's lifeless body. He slowly kneels over the platform then rests his head on his forearms, sobbing quietly.

The following days, accounts of the outbreak are reported. The San Francisco area is the first hit by the viral pathogen. And within twenty-four hours, the first death is confirmed with another forty-eight hundred reportedly infected. The Center for Disease Control is at a loss, calling the rate of the viral mutation nothing short of catastrophic. Projections estimate the death toll will exceed eighty-five million within the week if the outbreak is not contained. The CDC confirms that if a vaccine is not found within a month it will be an extinction level event.

Within hours, the U.S. government declares Martial Law and places the entire bay area under quarantine in an attempt to contain the outbreak. All roads, ports and flights in and out of the area are closed with the U.S. military ordered to create a perimeter around affected cities. Lethal force has been authorized if anyone is caught attempting to break quarantine.

Nora and the others monitor all the reports from Marcus's apartment, as rioting and looting breakout in the city below. Soon Marcus, Emily and Michael are showing signs of the infection. Marcus turns to Nora and with a brave face asks, "Is this our fate?" Sadly, she answers, "The historical records shows man's extinction in the latter months of 2019, but it is unclear as to the cause." Marcus responds, "I guess we now know."

Nora is overcome by her emotions, struggling with what she knows to be their ultimate fate and the fact that her actions, although unintentional, was the cause. In that moment, she makes the conscious decision that she will not stand idly by and watch the human race end this way. Nora takes a sample of Marcus's blood and confirms that the Sacari created a retro virus. Researching historical records in her memory, she confirms that it is similar to the virus the Sacarin Empire used on their enemies before the Illyrians conquered them. Utilizing an artificial pathogen, the Sacari soldier created a lethal RNA virus that mutates the intended victim's DNA causing vital organs to shut down within days.

It is the early morning hours of August 28, 2019. Nora has just completed synthesizing a vaccine for the Sacarin virus using the nanites in her body. Untested, she administers it to her bedridden friends who are near death. She monitors their vitals, knowing that at any time a rift could open, drawing her back to her own time. There seems to be no change in their condition and has come to resign herself that she has failed. Then, as the clock strikes noon, and with a heavy heart, a brilliant flash of light envelops her. In an instant, the others blink out of view.

Moments later, Nora finds herself in the middle of a bustling metropolis, surrounded by tall buildings that stretch to the clouds above. She's in the middle of a busy walkway, where she sees all manner of people; normal humans, artificial beings like herself and non-terrestrial creatures she's unfamiliar with. She can hear endless chatter and joyous laughter as they go about their business. It seems to be a utopia.

She makes her way through the city, in awe at the previously nonexistent sights and comes to a public square. She sees a kiosk, a communal information terminal, where she accesses the historical record. From it, she scans through centuries of human history starting from the point in time she left only moments ago. She learns that the human race never met its end in 2019 as it had previously been recorded. In fact, the subsequent years was a turning point in human history; with its populous becoming more enlightened through technological advancements and medical breakthroughs that led to a more harmonious world culture. She goes on to discover that the horror that she'd just witnessed was but a footnote in history.

According to the terminal, the outbreak was contained after a vaccine was quickly synthesized using the blood of three individuals only days after the initial outbreak. Additionally, scientist of the time reported that microscopic machines, her nanites, harkened in a new field of science that spurred the technological and subsequent advancements that led to the world she now inhabits. It also makes mention that, a Dr. Marcus Elliot, one of the three individuals who prompted the initial cure for the Bay Area outbreak, as it came to be known, was one of the individuals that helped pioneer the new field of study. He along with his daughter, Dr. Emily Nora Elliot, even earned a Nobel Prize in Nano Technology in 2042.

Nora comes to realize that her actions did not result in a paradox, but an alternate reality. One in which the Illyrian Collective never existed. Then with a simple smile, she powers off the console and turns to greet the new world she helped create.