Whence We Came

Meta Puzzle

Author: Scott Mooney

The hand grips your forehead. The grip tightens. Someone curses, frustrated.

You open your eyes for the first time.

You're lying on a table, with a man looming over you. He's dressed in some kind of old-fashioned, official-looking uniform.

He sees you looking. "No, no, no, go back, go back!" His other hand is shaking from effort, clutching something hanging from the chain around his neck.

"Who... are... you?" you manage to get out.

"Shhh," he says. "You're dreaming. You need to wake up, and find the Machine."

"Why...?"

"It's your dream, remember? To find the Machine, and use it to find Earth! Your home!"

"Earth...?"

The man sighs, and reaches for something else on the table behind him. You get a glimpse of the room – there are filing cabinets everywhere, and an old box open on the floor. Aging pieces of paper are scattered around it.

The man turns back around, holding a long syringe. "This is my last bit of needletree sap. You've exhausted my supplies, Elite. Not that you'll remember that, in a moment. Just before I anchor you back in the future." His hand pulses around whatever is on his necklace. "I've said this before, but it's really a blessing that you stumbled across the Envoy's hidden message. I wouldn't have had this idea without it."

He draws closer, needle brushing your exposed arm. "Now, focus on your mission, 'Captain'. You want to find the Machine. The device that let my moronic apprentice Hale teleport all over the world three years ago, before she went ahead and lost it, and herself along with it!" He breathes, and his agitation diminishes. "I've been searching for it ever since, but I've scoured the planet, and still can't find it. You'll use all the amazing technology you have available in the future to find it on Earth, then I'll stop anchoring you there and you can tell me where it is in the present. Simple enough, right?" He smiles amiably, and flicks the end of the needle...

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aegan shrieks as a vacuumite suddenly jumps into existence in front of her. She backs out of the cockpit, grabbing a light-barrel as she passes the holster near the door –

"Faegan, it's Tif!" says the creature. Faegan could almost feel her augments going into overdrive trying to translate the bizarre tongue, but she relaxes nonetheless.

"How did you do that?" she whispers.

"I found the Machine. Or, it found me." Tif reveals a blue orb in her hands. "I think we set it off somehow when we landed. It caused that flash, and sent me who knows where. And the others, from the looks of it."

"Why?" squeaks Faegan.

The vacuumite does something like a shrug. "It would make sense if something was already distorting spacetime when we got here, but I don't know. If a wormhole did suddenly open, I would guess that the Machine swapped places with one of us. Either Elite, or -"

"Not me." Wentworth clambers into the cockpit, a layer of fine dust covering his carapace.

"Glad you made it," says Tif. "Then the captain must have been transported to wherever this thing came from, before it lodged itself in my suit and knocked you and me away a few kilometres."

Faegan's eyes go wide. "So he could be anywhere on the planet. How will we find him?"

"Using these." Wentworth opens a panel on the side of the cockpit. "Been working on these since Tavir. Collecting information. Everything we've learned is here. Found more clues here too." One of his arms pulls out a collection of what look like strange maps.

He lays them out on the table, and glances at Tif and Faegan. "Solve it."

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