

# **The Fabric of Reality**

Benjamin Kelly

[www.benaminkelly.net](http://www.benaminkelly.net)

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Editor: Haleigh Rucinski

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# Chapter One

Gil awoke to a particularly loud boom and lay thinking about the woman from his dream, waiting to see if the warning alarm would sound. She hadn't been one of his colleagues, or anyone he'd ever known. He couldn't see her face for the misty haze surrounding her. But the way she had felt in his arms still lingered in his mind, making him wish he could fall back asleep and hold her a while longer.

Every attack didn't trigger the alarm. The protective system had enough resilience to absorb some hits that were powerful enough to rattle him out of bed.

"Bloody bastards!" *You can never give me a moment's peace. Not even long enough to finish a dream.*

The reality of being alone always hit him hardest during the middle of the night. His companions had gotten away and no longer faced the constant threat of death. He wouldn't go back and change his decision to stay behind, even if he could, but he'd happily give almost anything for someone to talk with. Solitude had taken on a whole new meaning in the year since his colleagues escaped.

He had been particularly fond of a young woman named Amanda. On the eve before everyone slipped away, she had professed her love for him in no uncertain terms. Had the escape gone according to plan, he would have married her. But that wonderful night when he saw her last had been reduced to a fading memory.

*I wonder who Amanda married. I certainly wasn't the only one interested in her. She probably got with—no. I have*

*to stop torturing myself over things I can't change.*

The space-time disturbance in the corridor was pulsing again, translating impulses from the other side into tangible electromagnetic waves in Gil's universe. The energy danced across his skin like static electricity, making the hairs on his arms stand at attention. Every time the disturbance entered an active phase it triggered the dream, as if someone were beaming a transmission through directly into his mind.

The ancient castle where Gil had taken up residence housed a junction point between multiple universes, or dimensions. Despite the collective scientific knowledge of he and his colleagues, they had never conclusively determined the nature of everything that came together in that place. They dubbed them Realities for convenience.

No one had come up with a solid theory for the castle itself, either. It appeared in the earliest known cave drawings in the region, that were from a time before human kind had developed sufficient skills to build such a structure. One hypothesis proposed the castle to be the last remaining artifact from an advanced civilization that evolved prior to the homo sapiens currently inhabiting the planet.

Another speculated that some alien race had built it for an undetermined purpose. That idea had gained traction after the discovery of the space-time disturbances. Some of the disturbances allowed passage to other Realities, and were labeled Doorways. Others, like the one making his skin crawl, only gave glimpses of what lay on the other side and were accordingly named Windows.

Red and green LEDs flashed on the Alternate-Reality Junction Locator sitting on his nightstand, indicating activity occurring in the Window. Gil glanced at the screen, but the data gave no clue about the nature of the energy pulses, just like always.

The warning alarm didn't sound. The protective Barrier Sphere system still functioned normally, keeping all threats out of the compound. Apparently, the attack hadn't hit a vital area. His latest adjustment to the Emitter frequency still had his enemy off balance. They'd stumble upon a way to defeat his tweaks eventually, but for the moment he remained safe. Gil rolled over and adjusted his pillow but knew he'd never get back to sleep. After half an hour of tossing and turning, he climbed out of bed and got dressed.

The Window continued pulsating, calling to him like the faint voice of a desperate friend lost in the distance. It struck him as odd that he thought of it that way. But along with the sensation of tingling on his skin, he got the notion a sonic component lay just beyond the limit of his hearing. His instruments couldn't detect any auditory information coming from the other side.

He held his breath and strained to catch any sound that could have been a human crying out to him, but the constant din of the Brotherhood's bombardment drowned out whatever faint call there may have been.

Despite all his analysis, he hadn't managed to pin down a single particle that had come from outside his universe. He had begun to consider that the Window might be like a drum skin and whatever hit it on the other side didn't pass through, only made it vibrate in his Reality.

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Baron Volga pawed Alesia in a way no gentleman would dare touch a lady before wedding her. But then, no one had ever accused him of being a gentleman. With her mistress standing behind ready to pounce if she ran, and the baron blocking the only path out, Alesia had no chance of getting away but she silently vowed not to make it easy for him.

Hateful snickers of young girls came from somewhere

out of sight. They were obviously enjoying the spectacle of Alesia's humiliation. When it was their time, they'd regret standing idly by without a single word of protest, the same way Alesia regretted not helping those who went before her.

She jerked loose from his grubby, wandering hands. The mistress grabbed her arms to keep her from bolting and shoved her back toward the baron. Tobacco-stained teeth showed through his devious grin when he chuckled. She wrenched herself free from her mistress's grasp, but the baron stood ready and caught her before she could run. The ravenous lust in his eyes made her cringe.

Alesia thrust her hands toward his face, fingers poised to rid him of his sight, but the mistress clasped her wrists an instant before she could dig in her nails. He yanked her to him, planted his face against the side of her neck, and inhaled deeply. A low moan rumbled in his throat, sending a shiver crawling down Alesia's spine. He dragged his tongue from her shoulder to her ear, leaving behind a trail of sticky saliva.

The sickening smell of his putrid breath wafted up from the slimy deposit, turning her stomach. She stiffened her body, pulling away with all of her strength, but he held on even tighter, laughing with delight. The more she resisted, the rougher he became. She bucked and twisted but he countered her every evasive movement with the ease of a man who had extensive experience taking women against their will.

A few strands of long oily, hair swung down from his balding head, falling across his face. She fought to get a hand free, intent on ripping the greasy locks from his scalp, to no avail. Between the firm grasp of her wicked mistress and that of Baron Volga, she was unable to escape. Alesia shuddered as the tears she had been holding back began to spill.

As if signaling to her that he thought no more of her than an animal, he quickly delved his fingers into her mouth, rolling her lips back, exposing her gums. He grinned, looking excessively pleased and grunted his approval. She snapped her teeth down hard, but he jerked his hand away just in time to keep from losing a digit.

Baron Volga released Alesia and brushed his hair back into place. The mistress cleared her throat, extending a hand toward him. He plopped two gold coins into her palm, turned on his heel, and waddled out the door of the orphanage. The old woman grinned joyfully and hurried off, clutching her loot.

A wave of nausea rolled through Alesia's trembling body. The room swam before her eyes. Darkness encroached on her vision from all around, and the floor rose up to meet her. The mocking giggles of her peers echoed in her pounding head. Alesia gazed up at the smiling faces staring down at her from all sides. Her cheeks burned red hot. The baron's attack would have been bad enough with no witnesses to taunt her, but they had seen everything and would, no doubt, make her relive it over and over for the time she remained with them. All at once they dragged her into a chair, then left, with the fading noise of their unintelligible chatter trailing behind them.

Her heart sank, spiraling uncontrollably into a dark abyss. In a few short days, she would be married to a man old enough to be her father, condemned to years of servitude. Her life would consist of endless days enduring his harsh temperament, catering to his every whim, and endless nights of breathing his foul breath while being violated in unthinkable ways.