

Al Clark

by Jonathan G. Meyer

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*Dedicated to my family,
For which, if not for them,
I would be nothing.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AL CLARK

Standing at the top of a grass covered hill, with a sweet smelling breeze at his back, he reveled in the bright morning sunshine of a perfect spring day. Jagged heights filled the horizon as the sun hoisted itself up and kissed the mountain tops.

In the valley below, a small idyllic village was shaking off the night and was well into the process of beginning a new day. The faraway villagers appeared to be enjoying the day as much as he.

Someone was running up the hill towards him, yelling something—a couple of words over and over; maybe a name, maybe a warning? He cupped his ears with his hands to better hear what the person was saying, but the sounds came muffled and distorted; carried away by the wind.

The person got closer and closer, arms and legs pumping, and the words began to get clearer until just on the verge of understanding, the scene turned a blinding white and then quickly—faded to black.

Chapter One

He awoke gradually, a little at a time, swimming up from the abyss.

His eyes opened to near total darkness, and all he saw was a small spot of light directly overhead. A tiny star surrounded by a velvety darkness. A single bright dot in the void that grew and expanded to fill his vision until he blinked, and it returned to a tiny pinhole of light.

He could see just enough to determine he was lying in a box not much larger than his body. The soft glow from the pinhole over his head allowed just enough light to see cold dark metal surrounding him. Somewhere far away an alarm was sounding. His head swung back and forth frantically trying to understand, and fear grabbed at his heart as a disturbing realization surfaced. *Where am I?*

Desperately he raised his arms and pressed hard on the surface above him. He felt a slight shift to his right, so he concentrated his efforts on that side. His fear made him strong, and with surprising speed the lid flew open on concealed hinges and bounced off something—only to slam closed again. For part of a second, he managed a glimpse of a small gray room and an oval metal door just a few feet beyond the end of the box.

A second attempt to free himself, using less effort, was rewarded with the lid swinging to the side and remaining open. The distant alarm outside the metal box changed to a loud screech as the man eased himself into a sitting position and tried to make sense of his surroundings.

It was a small and utilitarian room, a cubby hole with barely enough room for the silver metal box. The lighting was minimal, leaving details fuzzy, but it appeared this room was designed specifically for the box. Behind him, a control panel with insistent flashing lights and that annoying alarm blared on the back wall.

His eyes began to adjust to the low-level lighting and allowed a closer look at the unfamiliar place he found himself. The box was in the center of the room with barely five feet of space surrounding it. A dull gray color dominated.

The annoying alarm fed his dull throbbing headache and was quickly turning it into a raging pain in his head. He reached around and inspected the control panel. To one side was a switch marked ALARM RESET. He reached up and pressed it, and the room fell into silence. That was much better. Now he could think.

The room was unadorned. The door, the control panel, and a small pair of cabinet doors on the wall opposite of the steps were the only features. On the side of the box there appeared to be lettering. Unfortunately, the letters were faded to the point of being unreadable.

His attire consisted of an off-white uniform of some kind; with long sleeves, creased trousers, and small golden buttons. A pair of black deck boots completed the outfit that could be considered military, or maybe medical. The clothing was not in the least

familiar to him. He checked his pockets one by one, and found them empty, with no clues leading to answers.

Waking in a box, disoriented and confused, not knowing where you were or how you came to be there—is the stuff of nightmares. None of this made sense. He stared at the door, puzzling over where *here* was and had a revelation that took this bad dream to a whole new level. Try as he might, he could not recall his name. *Who am I?*

He struggled to remember anything about himself and came up with nothing. The memories were just not there.

The man climbed out of the box and found three small steps leading to the floor. Out of the bottom of the box, several dull colored pipes could be seen disappearing into the floor. He wondered if the box was some form of life support system.

The sound of his boots echoed in the small space when he stepped over to puzzle over the small cabinet doors. There was a keypad to the right of the doors beside a glowing red indicator light. He punched in a few numbers, but nothing happened. The doors were locked and would not open without the proper code.

He turned and stood in front of the oval hatch that served as a door, and triggered a sensor, causing it to slide silently into the wall. When the door opened, a slight breath of fresh air blew past his face. He stepped over the threshold and looked left, and then right, to discover a long, empty corridor going both ways; dimly lit, and circling slightly upward out of sight. Ten feet tall and ten feet wide with a curved ceiling, the passageway had six-foot portals placed on both sides every fifteen or twenty feet.

The corridor and doors were a neutral gray color, with a faded orange stripe above the doors on both sides; now dull and without luster. His guess attributed the striping to an indication of sections or areas.

Next to each entrance were faded peeling letters, such as LQ26...LQ27, with even numbers on the left and odd numbers to the right. He turned around and looked closely at the lettering on the door he just came through. It was barely readable, and appeared to be Albert, or Alvin maybe; Al—something—Clark, with the number 25 below it.

If this is Al Clark's room, does that mean I am Al Clark?

He decided that going left was as good as going right, so he moved to the first door to his left, marked LQ26, and pressed a small button on the right side of the hatch. The barrier slid silently into the wall revealing a dark room. As he walked inside, there was a soft 'click,' and hidden lighting lit up a room much larger than the one he just left; although there was no wasted space. The room was tinted a faded yellow with a curved ceiling that started above the door and arced down to end at the far wall.

The presence of a door inside told him there was more than one room. In the first room was a double bed, a table, and a small desk with a computer terminal mounted on the wall above it. He crossed to the terminal thinking it might help with his questions, but pressing the ON button had no effect. In the center of the simple room stood a multi-purpose round table and two chairs locked in notches to the floor.

The other room was a complete bathroom with a stand-up shower, a small sink, and a toilet. The apartment had everything one might need to fill the basic requirements of a couple. With a few modifications, maybe a small family. Both rooms were empty, with no sign of personal belongings or previous occupation. It looked as if these rooms had been unoccupied for many years, with no brightness to the color, and no shiny surfaces to reflect the light.

Above the sink in the bathroom was a clouded metal mirror that showed the reflection of a man in his early forties, six foot tall, with short brown hair and haunted blue eyes. It was an ordinary looking stranger's reflection that did nothing to tell him his identity. He didn't remember hitting his head, but there was a tiny drop of dried blood in the middle of his forehead. He wiped it away with his hand.

A little overwhelmed, he went back to the main room and sat down on the bed to think. These accommodations did not look worn; these rooms looked unused and old. No scuffed corners or marks of wear on the floor. There were no papers that littered the room; no books on the desk, no bedding covered the bed, and the bathroom appeared old and never used. These living quarters were all ready to move into and never occupied. *Why build all this, and never use it?* A short time later, he got up and returned to the corridor. He left the room and was standing outside when there was a soft 'click,' the overhead lighting returned to its long held off state, and the door closed automatically. He wondered, *Where are all the people?*

He made his way down the passageway, tripping the lighting into other rooms and found similar quarters; each tinted a different soft color. Some had three rooms, but all were empty and forgotten. Eventually, he found himself at a large hatch blocking any further travel down the corridor.

Beside the door, a large sign declared: ACCESS TO BLUE SECTION and SPOKE 4 LIFT. Directly below the sign was a small control panel with a card reader slot and two indicator lights; a green light labeled OK TO OPEN was lit, and a red one with text that read DO NOT OPEN, was not.

In the center of the hatch was a small round window with thick plastic or glass that he wiped with his sleeve, allowing him to see into a round room about twenty feet across, with a faded ten-foot red circle painted in the center. On the far side of this transition space was an identical door and window; leading to another corridor.

The card slot told him a key card was needed to open the hatch and gain access to the space beyond. After thinking for a moment, he turned around and hurried back to end up at the other end of the corridor. This one section of the passageway, from large exit door to large exit door, was easily a thousand feet long, so it took him a few minutes to get to the opening at the other end. When he arrived, he found a key card was needed to gain access to this door also. He was trapped in this section of the passageway and had traded his small man-sized prison for a larger one; with rooms.

Now...Where in this place can I get a key card?

Thinking back, he could remember only one location where he might find an item as important as a key card. The locked cabinet in 'Al Clark's' room. He needed to return to the place where he started and attempt to access the storage compartment. It was the best option available.

Back in the room he woke up in, he stood before the keypad next to the cabinet and considered the code required to unlock the cabinet doors. It was probably four or five digits; something memorable for the owner. Depending on what it secured, and the person that programmed it, the code could be devilishly complicated or as simple as 1234. He tapped in 1-2-3-4. That wasn't it. He tried 1-1-1-1. Not it either. He attempted several different combinations, and none of them worked.

The only thing he knew for certain about this place was the lettering on the door: *Al—Clark-25. If A = 1, and C = 3, if you added twenty-five to the end, the combination would be 1-3-2-5.* To his amazement, when he tried this solution there was a faint 'click,' and the two cabinet doors popped open. A small smile crept onto his face as he opened the doors, and he thought, *I would never have bet on that to work.*

Inside, there was the key card he needed; complete with a cord to hang around his neck, a small set of old-fashioned looking keys, and a handgun in a holster. He reached up and took down the weapon. When he wrapped his hand around the grip, it felt comfortable and familiar in his hand.

Slowly, pieces began to come back to him. A puzzle of fragmented thoughts pulled themselves together, and he realized that he knew what this weapon was. It was a modulated laser pistol, commonly referred to as an MLP.

With this, someone could blow tiny holes in anything that wasn't hardened metal. Mostly for security, it was the weapon of choice for air-tight facilities—and he knew how to use it.

Still smiling, he hung the card around his neck and put the keys in his pants pocket. The pistol's power pack was depleted and needed recharging, but he clipped it to his belt thinking there must be somewhere around here where it could be charged, or the power packed replaced.

He had no idea who he was, or where he was, and believed the card would help lead him to some understanding. The small plastic rectangle could very well be his ticket to the answers he so deeply needed.

Chapter Two

He exited the room, turned left, and walked back down the corridor to the hatch that required a key card. Along the way, he pulled the little plastic rectangle from his pocket and took a closer look at it. On one side was emblazoned a single word *Excalibur*. On the back was a place for a name. However, it was not filled in. Seemingly random letters and numbers filled out the bottom. The card was a generic card that could be programmed to allow the recipient access to specific areas, except this recipient had not bothered to fill in the name. Efficient and nonproprietary, this access card provided few clues.

The card worked, though, and it opened the hatch into the room at the end of the corridor separating the two passageways. Once inside, he noticed a similar control panel on the inside of each hatch and another in-between the two doors. The openings had faded signs stating: ACCESS TO ORANGE SECTION, and ACCESS TO BLUE SECTION. The central control panel sign was labeled: SPOKE 4 LIFT. The doors leading to the passageway had the accompanying safety lights, indicating if the door was safe to open.

He passed on through what he was beginning to believe was an airlock, into the other passageway and found it very similar to the one he just left; except the stripe above the doors was a soft blue. Most doors were labeled LQ...something, with the numbers increasing as he went down the corridor. A few doors were labeled UTILITY, which usually contained cleaning supplies and assorted equipment. When he came to a door marked MESS HALL, he grinned. Almost everyone knew what a MESS Hall was—food! He walked in, and the door closed silently behind him.

It was a fairly large room, and designed for food consumption, with room for seventy-five to a hundred people to eat at the same time. All along one side was a counter with recesses to display a variety of foods. In a back storage area, he found sealed boxes full of various packaged meals, and a user-friendly device for heating the pre-made packets. He warmed one at random, and quickly opened it; squeezing the food labeled Meatloaf and Potatoes into his mouth. The taste was bland. Still, it helped him to feel better.

The water from the tap behind the counter ran a little grayish for a minute or so until it turned relatively clear. He stuck his head under the faucet and sipped from the bottom of the tap. The tepid drink tasted a little like metal but quenched his thirst.

The water must be a closed system and continually recycled.

With his need for food and water satisfied, the man moved out of the mess hall and headed towards the door at the end of the corridor. He would remember this place: Blue Section = Food.

He continued his explorations until he reached the end of the blue section. Again, there was the transition room between the corridors. The inside of this chamber was identical to the one between the orange and blue sections. In this case, it was an airlock for access to the blue section, the green section, and spoke lift three.

The hatch to the green corridor did not display a green light. On the control panel was a bright glowing red light that warned—DO NOT OPEN. Through the round window of the hatch leading to the green corridor, the reason for the ominous crimson light became apparent. Beyond the sealed barrier a large section of the passageway was missing, leaving the passage beyond open to space. The corridor had a hole passing through it; where stars were visible.

The stars told him he was in space, possibly in the centrifugal gravity ring of a space station, or a large ship. It did not matter that the passageway lights were out beyond the window, the starlight told him all he needed to know. Thirty feet past the door was a large ragged hole through the center of the corridor. There was no going beyond this point without a space suit. Now he wondered just how many sections were damaged.

Was this place abandoned for a reason?

He returned to the orange corridor, back to where his day started and contemplated what he knew. He had awakened in a box in a room labeled A1...*something*...Clark. His clothing consisted of a uniform, and somehow he knew how to use an MLP handgun. The station seemed empty of people, appeared old, but at the same time unused. The ring must still be rotating, or he wouldn't have gravity. There was food and water in the mess hall for a large number of people, and in the areas he had been through, there was living space for at least two-hundred people. To add to the mystery, he had not found a single working computer.

It took him almost an hour to get to the end of the orange corridor. He took his time and investigated areas he had run by before and noticed several places he'd missed in his rush to get information. There were several doors marked UTILITY, and some keyed doors marked MAINTENANCE. His card worked on these doors also, and inside he found electrical equipment, HVAC equipment. A few had workstations with tools neatly displayed and secured.

In the orange section, he found a security office, with several interconnected rooms and even a holding cell; waiting for its first jailbird. On a long table in a back room, he discovered a place to charge the power pack for his pistol.

From a line of fully charged cells, he swapped the dead battery pack in the weapon for a charged pack and watched as the power indicator went from red to green, indicating a full charge. He checked the safety and pushed the switch from red to green, placing it in the safe mode. Being armed, for some reason, was reassuring.

His card had not failed to open any doors except the one that would put him in a corridor open to space. He did not even *try* his card on that door.

When he finally reached the airlock at the other end of the orange section, he went through to the passage marked YELLOW SECTION. Nearly identical to the other passageways, he followed it to the next airlock and found that insistent red light on the panel leading into the green part of the ring.

Okay, there are four parts to the ring: orange, blue, green, and yellow. Only the green section was open to space. That would mean there must be four 'spokes.' It was time to see where the spoke lifts would take him.

His explorations were beginning to wear on him. It had been a long day, but he was determined to get as much information as he could before he slept. He didn't like the idea of trying to access a spoke lift when one of the doors showed a glowing red light, so he returned to the airlock between the yellow and orange section that was red light free.

The center control panel was labeled: ACCESS TO SPOKE 4, and on it was the standard red and green indicator lights. Below the control panel, bold lettering cautioned, STAND OUTSIDE RED CIRCLE. He was standing outside the circle. Still, he hesitated for a second before sliding the card through the slot. Somewhere above him came a series of *thunks*, and in the center of the ceiling two halves of a circle retracted to open a passage.

Through this hole in the ceiling descended what looked like a large capsule. A conveyance like no transport capsule he'd ever seen before. Although he could tell it was old by its dull coloring and cloudy windows, it was still a thing of beauty. Twelve feet tall and eight feet around, it was smooth and streamlined. A triumph of technology. The entire middle section was clear plastic, except for a man-sized access door.

He cautiously stepped into the capsule, and the interior lights '*clicked*' on. The inside of the compartment was empty, except for the simple controller on the wall with a button for the door and a card slot to activate the lift.

In the center of the capsule—was a tree. Four inches around and topped with four short branches at shoulder height. Age had turned it a dull green, with yellow highlights that created what some might call sculpture in a stark environment.

He wondered, *is it form or is it function?*

The door closed automatically as soon as he used the card and a dull vibration could be felt through the floor as the capsule started slowly rising, gaining speed as it went. The pale silver walls of the spoke slid rapidly by, and as the capsule shot up, he noticed his card beginning to float from his chest. He had an idea of what was coming next, so he grabbed for the tree.

This feeling was something he knew. It seemed he was familiar with zero gravity. The tree was the perfect handhold to keep him from floating around and causing himself harm. *Functional as well as beautiful.*

The ride to this point had been smooth and silent, but as he approached the top of the spoke, and the lift started slowing down, the vibration intensified as if it were struggling. He was just beginning to worry when the capsule slid out of the spoke and ground to a halt—into nothing.

His eyes gradually adjusted, and he spied far away lights slowly moving in the distance; both in front and behind. To his side were stationary lights similar to the other

beacons. A door closed below him and allowed the distant lights to appear more distinct. When his eyes adjusted; he could see well enough to determine his whereabouts.

He appeared to be inside a giant metal ball, as seen from the inside, easily one hundred feet across. The lights he saw were the indicator lights of the other spoke lifts as they rotated slowly around. On each side, the vague outline of two stationary doors beckoned.

To delay his search did not enter his mind. It was now time to get some answers. With one hand holding the tree, he reached out and pressed the button to open the door. Bright lighting quickly ramped up outside the capsule until he could see the immense open space at the center of the huge wheel. The *Hub* of the ring. He floated out of the capsule and turned, to find a boy hanging onto a recessed handle; just floating there with wide open eyes staring straight at him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan G. Meyer was born and raised in the St. Louis area, and has been an avid reader throughout the course of his life. He is the middle child of a family with seven children, and because he was the odd child out, he spent a lot of time alone with a book. All books can take you to new places, and he used them to travel to many. However, he ultimately prefers the worlds of Science Fiction. Sci-Fi has always been one of his passions.

The books he creates are a throwback to the cheap pulp paperbacks he bought as a teenager. Books that one could carry in a back pocket. They are adventures that portray nostalgia for the past, excitement for the present, and a fervent hope for the future.

This book is the first in the AL CLARK series.

Also available:

AL CLARK- Avalon (Book Two)

AL CLARK- Thera (Book Three)

Also available:

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