

Renegades
Book 1
The Zygan Emprise Trilogy

By Y.S. Pascal

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Meet the Rush Family

John, 26, a graduate student at the University of Maryland, who departed for the U.S. Army and is missing in action.

George, 24, a law student at Georgetown University

Connie, 22, a Masters student in high school math and science education at Georgetown University.

Shiloh, 18, ace graduate of Mingferplatoi Academy and a Zygan Intelligence catascope. Plays Tara Guard, Space Cadet, in the Singularity Network TV series, Bulwark.

Blair, 17, after completing high school, has moved to the UK to work on his uncle's farm.

Christine/"Kris", 15, popular teen actress of the Disney series "Mid-Kids".

Bobby, 14, high school student and occasional commercial actor.

Andi, 13, middle school student and budding artist.

Billy, 12, middle school student and Little League champ

RENEGADES

The Zygan Emprise

Book 1

Where Angels Fear To Tread? Charge!

—Shiloh Cynthia Rush

Chapter 1

Aurora

Mingferplatoi Academy—two years ago

His heel hit the edge of my lip. I felt a sharp stab of pain and my blood began to flow. Livid, I spun around and slammed the side of Spud's cheek with my fist. He cried out and collapsed into a crouch, then sprang towards my stomach. I was ready. I tightened my abs and shot both arms up into his jaw before he could make contact. The force of the blows sent his body back onto the floor, where he lay grunting and clutching his face.

Still wary, I lifted my foot and lightly placed it on Spud's writhing abdomen, then looked up at the pedagogue for an acknowledgment of my victory. I caught the flicker in the edge of my vision, but it was too late. Spud's powerful legs launched into my pelvis and threw me screaming against the wall. For the next few minutes, I remembered nothing more.

• • •

Maryland—three years ago

If I'd known I'd never see him again, I would have told him how much I loved him. John was my favorite brother, but I was furious at him for choosing the Army over us. He made the announcement at dinner on April third, exactly three years ago, at 6:52 PM. This was going to be our last supper together for, he insisted, only a few months. I remember staring down, fiddling with my pendant. I couldn't bear to look up at his face. I had just turned fifteen a few weeks before, and he'd promised to teach me how to ride his Moto Guzzi. Another broken pledge.

John's flight was scheduled out of Dulles at 6:45 the next morning. The only thing on his mind was getting ready in time.

We were all kind of in shock. My youngest sister Andi was only eleven. She cried like she was losing Grandpa Alexander again. The rest of us tried not to. I glanced at Connie, who was nineteen going on thirty. Her eyes reflected disappointment and the barest hint of distaste. John had never been *her* number one sib.

With eight brothers and sisters to pepper him with questions, John spent the rest of the meal explaining why he'd made his sudden decision: to serve his country, for travel and adventure. For a chance to learn about things he'd always wanted to know. Tweens Billy and Bobby shared John's excitement without really understanding the danger. The virtual soldiers in the war games they played every day could be resurrected to life with the simple touch of a button. There wouldn't be such a button in the Army if something went wrong. I sat quietly at the table, sliding the food I could no longer swallow around on my plate with my salad fork.

John gobbled down his stew and then, anxious to pack, rushed to his room trailing siblings like a paternal Pied Piper. I didn't feel like shouting my thoughts over a row of bobbing heads. My only hope to catch him alone for a few minutes was to set my alarm and wake up well before the sun. But it was the sheets of rain assaulting our cottage that

made me leap out of bed in the middle of the night. The drumbeat of the drops on my half-opened window had almost drowned out the sound of John's motorcycle as it sped away from our farmhouse and, carving an S-shaped skid in the gravel shoulder, turned the corner down by the gate to the main road.

I stood frozen by the window, long after he was gone. The rain tasted salty on my lips, which couldn't speak the words they should've said: "Don't go."

• • •

Mingferplatoi Academy—two years ago

Maybe Spud should've just knocked me out for good. My consciousness returned just as the adrenaline was fading—everything, and I mean everything, hurt. Especially my Academy classmates' laughter from the gymnasium stands. I'd let that 6-foot gangling Ichabod Crane with the stuck-up English accent throw me against the wall like a sack of potatoes. That would never happen again. I'd be sure to return the favor before we graduated.

"Shall I call you a medic?" I looked up to see Spud bending down to help me.

"Call me a re-match," I shot back, grunting, as I leapt up on my feet, ignoring his extended hand. "You won't catch me with that trick twice."

"I should expect not," he whispered, brushing a stray lock of dirty blond hair from his sweaty forehead. "Unlike yours truly, Andarts are not known to be merciful."

If he hadn't said that with a hot British burr, I would've decked him.

• • •

Hollywood—present day

"Earth to Shiloh," Chell's voice sang in my ears. "Anybody home?"

I focused back on my image in the full-length mirror before me and had to admire Chell's handiwork as a make-up virtuoso. The vanity lights, aided by several flavors of mousse and gel, had brought out the blonde highlights in my very, very short, spiky hair and covered the jagged pink scar just above my hairline. Chell, whose own long brown curls teased the toned pecs bursting through his shiny satin muscle shirt, had cloaked my scattered freckles with a smooth layer of flax foundation. My azure eyes were framed by an aggressive ebony corona and the faintest pink of my lips bled through the snowy layers of the ivory lipstick he'd painted on with delicate brush strokes. Standing behind me, I could see Chell, his hands resting at the low-cut waist of his slim-hipped jeans, shaking his head. "Girl, you *are* a space cadet."

It had taken Chell a mere hour to transform me from acne-cursed actress Shiloh Rush to Ensign Tara Guard, one of the teen commandos on the sci-fi action series *Bulwark*. (Catch us Fridays at 10, 9 Central, on the Singularity Network, and online at www.singularitytv.com/bulwark)

I leaned my head back in the make-up chair and looked up at Chell with a rueful smile. "Credit's yours, not mine."

"I read you, sister," he sighed. "Hey, with fashion, or after a fashion, we're all speaking our piece."

"Or on the prowl for it?" I teased.

“Naughty, naughty. You were due on set three minutes ago, hon,” Chell chided as he pulled off the tissues protecting my collar and brushed some stray powder from the shoulders of my skin-tight black vinyl uniform, studded with the decorative insignia of the Phaeton Alliance. Winking, he added, “Go get them bad guys for me, will ya?”

• • •

The flash of light was blinding. The blast from the laser cannon had just missed our Jetta starcruiser by mere millimeters.

“Arm neutron torpedos!” I barked at Spud, whose spindly fingers were frantically keyboarding over the controls of the Jetta’s weapons console.

“Fire!” I ordered.

A large explosion to my right threw me and my partner against the communications panel, smashing my left elbow on the hard edge of the metal. Fueled by the pain, I cried, “We’re surrounded! 360 torpedo dispersion!” “Aye, aye,” he responded in a terse clip, his eyes glued to the blue screens of our vessel’s navigational computers. “Engaging.”

As our spacecraft pitched forward, I reached over and slammed my fist into the weapons board, setting off a shower of fireworks just beyond my windscreen. Moments later, a massive jolt shook our cruiser and it yawed violently side to side. We gripped our control panels and looked at each other in alarm. Spud nodded. “It is our only chance!”

“Evasive!” I ordered as I hit the giant red button flashing on my console and pulled my joystick back as far as it could go. Fighting the move, our spaceship groaned up and to port, and the starfield ahead of us morphed into a field of blinding lights. I threw my hands in front of my face to cover my protesting eyes and screamed.

“Cut!” Jerry Greenspan, the pudgy director of *this* week’s Bulwark episode shouted. “That’s a good one, kids.” Without waiting for a reply, he spun on his heels and hustled towards the far end of the giant hangar where the grips were lighting the Touareg II prison set for our next scene as alien captives.

Visibly annoyed, I climbed out of the prop ship, rubbing my elbow, with Spud on my heels. My co-star eyed my arm with a mischievous twinkle, “One of Zyga’s best pilots indeed.”

“Dude, I wasn’t the one steering this ship,” I whispered back. I shook my fist at Mark, the special effects coordinator, who mouthed the word “sorry” from across the soundstage, safely behind his shielded control panel overlooking our faux spacecraft. Spud knows that, in real life, I’m a much better pilot than Ensign Tara Guard—or Mister William “Spud” Escott, for that matter. I scored better on my final exam at the Academy last summer than he did, acing the segment on dodging fusion torpedos in hyperdrive. My own Zoom Starcruiser, which goes zero to sixty light-years a second *in* a second, is totally ding-free. That is, if you don’t count the tiny dent from my little fender bender with the Soviet satellite Sputnik^[1] in 1957.

Yup, you read that right. 1957. Way before any of us was born—including me. I’d just traveled back to 1957 for a few minutes on a mission for the Zygan Federation. I know you don’t believe me, but *of course* time travel is possible. Don’t let all the paradox phobics convince you it isn’t.^[2] All it takes is the right technology. Earth doesn’t have it yet. But the Zygan Federation does. Oh, yeah, sure, I guess I’d better explain that, too...

• • •

In the galaxy of Andromeda, just up the Universe and around the corner from our own galaxy, the Milky Way, there are billions and billions of stars. Almost all of those distant stars have orbiting planets, though Earth scientists won't be able to see them until they launch the McAuliffe Telescope in 2053. One of those planets, Zyga, orbits a blue dwarf star near the center of Andromeda.

Zyga is three times the size of Jupiter, and has millions more inhabitants than our own solar system's largest planet, even if you count all of Jupiter's methane-breathing microorganisms. Zyga is the home world of the Zygan Federation, an alliance of intelligent beings from over ten thousand planets in Andromeda and the Milky Way. It's a very advanced society with knowledge and technology that makes earthlings look like chimps, and, unfortunately, chimps with very dangerous toys.

Earth has a long way to go before it can even qualify for membership in the Zygan Federation. One basic membership criterion is discovering hyperdrive, travel faster than the speed of light. That should only take Earth scientists a few centuries or so to achieve. But another criterion, achieving world peace? I don't see that happening in my lifetime. Which, like most Zygans', could be as long as several thousand years.

Yes, I'm Zygan now. I used to be American, but you have to choose your loyalties, and I chose Zyga. It wasn't to get the chance to live almost forever. In my job, as a Zygan agent, the odds are kind of against that. My incentive to join the Zygan Federation was much more important—my brother John.

• • •

Maryland—two and a half years ago

I remember it was early May. The cherry blossoms had already drifted to the ground and blanketed the path from our farmhouse to the gate like a pink snowfall. The suffocating humidity that envelops the East Coast every summer hadn't made its way up to Maryland yet, so the day was crisp, sunny, and clear. My brother George had taken a heavy stack of books out to the gazebo to study for his finals. Law schools would not look kindly on an applicant whose grades weren't totally impressive. Andi was sitting quietly on the wooden deck by his side, drawing a picture of her big brother with pastels. My oldest sister Connie was over at the Bradfords' house, tutoring their kids in algebra, and definitely wouldn't be back for hours. Blair had flown back to our uncle's farm in the UK for the summer, and Kris and the little guys were at an open casting call for some alien invasion movie they were planning to shoot at the Washington Monument. And John, well, none of us had heard from him since he'd sped off to his military "adventure" the month before. Every time the phone would ring, I'd jump out of my seat, only to be disappointed time and time again. The next call—*that* would be John, it had to be.

But the phone's silence was one more broken promise. Blinking back tears, I spent a few minutes watching George and Andi from the shade of our front porch. I'd gotten tired of carving paths in the fallen blossoms with my skateboard, so, hoisting it under one arm, I finally wandered down towards the gate. That's when I saw them, down the road, coming our way: two men in uniform, looking grim. My heart sank. There was only one reason I could think of for their visit. A reason I didn't want to hear.

"Is this John Rush's residence?" the soldier demanded as he approached.

I didn't move to open the gate. I didn't nod. I held my breath and waited.

“Can we come in?” the second man asked.

I glanced to see if George and Andi had noticed our visitors. No, they seemed rapt in their tasks, contented. Undisturbed. Loath to receive the dreaded message myself, I wanted to hold off their pain as long as I could as well. I turned back to the soldiers and tried to keep the tremor out of my voice. “Just give me the news here.”

“Shiloh Rush?” From the second soldier, a hint of a question.

I didn’t answer, but my expression must have given me away.

The taller of the two leaned down over the gate and met my gaze. “All right, Shiloh. Here it is. You’ll know what to do.” He handed me a manila envelope that felt heavy in my shaking hands. I noted the insignia embroidered on his extended sleeve: two gold stripes and one glistening star, shaped like a sunflower in bloom.

“Everything is in there,” the tall soldier added. Nodding at his partner, he stood back up erect and turned to walk away. “Do not delay.”

“Wait!” I cried, puzzled, teased by a glimmer of hope. “You mean he’s not—?!”

But Sunflower-sleeve was now halfway down the road and merely shrugged. The other soldier, a few steps behind, turned towards me for a moment and, with a sad visage, shook his head. “Alive? Only fools try to fly with paraffin wings.”

Frantic, I tore open the envelope. It contained John’s wallet, his antique pocket watch, and a stiff paper bearing US Army letterhead—and the news I’d feared. I dropped the package and vaulted over the gate, hoping to catch up with the military messengers at my top running speed. But, though the main road stretched for many yards before me, the two soldiers were no longer visible. The road ahead and the fields to each side were as barren of life as my heart.

George and Andi were standing at the gate when I trudged back towards our house. Andi was clutching John’s wallet to her nose and George was reading the letter with a stricken expression. Two weeks earlier, it read, during a top secret mission in a confidential location, John had unexpectedly disappeared. He had left behind the enclosed belongings and never returned. Despite intensive search efforts, my beloved brother was missing in action and believed dead, and there was no trace of his remains.

I didn’t have the courage to read the letter myself for months. George had slipped it back into the envelope along with the watch. He’d gone up to John’s bedroom in our farmhouse’s attic later that day for a few hours alone, and had come back down red-eyed, without it. Connie said George had hid the envelope in the box where John had kept his research papers and flash drives. She didn’t encourage me to go looking for it.

And, for a long time, I didn’t. There was no way I was willing to face that truth.

• • •

Maryland—two years ago

It had been one of the rainiest Novembers in memory. I had no appetite for turkey, nor for sitting around a holiday table without John in his place in the head chair. I thought I’d go back to my bed instead and read a book or stream something, so I dragged myself up the stairs to the second floor. John’s room was on the third floor; after hearing John was missing, I always looked away when I passed the closed door to the attic stairs. I don’t know why, but this time I stopped in front of it.

The dust on the handrail was pretty thick and I kept swiping my face to brush off real or imagined cobwebs as I climbed the stairwell. At the top, I could barely see inside John’s room. It was only around three o’clock, but the curtains were drawn and the sky beyond was dark from the thunderclouds. I turned on the wall switch and lit up the room with the single light bulb hanging from the rafters on the ceiling.

Something wasn't quite right. It took me a few moments to figure it out. No cobwebs, no dust. Save for John's things, the room was empty, but it was as clean as it had been when he'd come home to shower and crash after spending stretches of nights doing research at the University of Maryland. Peculiar. George wasn't handy with a dustcloth, and I doubted Connie would have added John's housekeeping to her responsibilities of supervising the reluctant young ones with their daily chores.

Not wishing to disturb the pristine bed, I pulled out the chair next to the desk and plunked down onto its soft leather seat. My eyes caught the box with John's files on the adjacent bookshelf. The manila envelope lay on the top, safeguarding John's research secrets in the papers and drives hidden below. I finally marshaled the strength to pick the envelope up and peek inside.

I tossed the letter from the Army into the wastebasket. Months had passed and they still hadn't found John's body. George would call the Special Operations number they'd given us at least once a week, but the curt answer was always the same. Their records showed John Rush was still MIA—missing in action. They could tell us nothing more. We'd researched and called a slew of Pentagon phone extensions without any luck. As soon as responders looked up John's name, they'd transfer us to Special Ops, and we'd be back at square one. We'd even tried going down to Headquarters, Department of the Army. They sent us from office to office til we landed back at Special Ops for our expected answer: no news. The Army could offer us nothing except a referral to a support group for families of those missing in action. We passed.

Fuming, I turned the envelope upside down and caught John's pocket watch as it slid into my hand. The gold watch was unusually light. It sparkled as I held it up to the light and admired its intricate etched designs. Grandpa Alexander had given it to John on his sixteenth birthday, my brother had told me. The watch had been a gift to Grandpa from his own great-grandfather many, many years before. John had treasured the watch, never letting it out of his hands and forbidding us to touch it. I'd always been eager to have a peek at the watch's antique face. Feeling just a little guilty, I twisted and pressed the stem to open the hunter's casing and—

Instantly, John's room disappeared. Shaken, I found myself sitting in a sparsely furnished contemporary showroom straight out of those retro-modern Jetsons cartoons. In front of me was a large Formica elliptical table at which was seated a distinguished-looking, middle-aged man, dressed in a fashionable silver-gray pinstripe suit that perfectly matched the color of the hair at his temples. I covered my mouth with my hand to hold in the scream.

"Hello, Shiloh," the gentleman greeted me, his voice warm. "My name is Gary."

Damn. I *knew* I shouldn't have touched that watch—what had I done? Where was I? I looked around the room again. Except for me and, and Gary, we were otherwise alone. There didn't seem to be even one window, in the seamless curved metallic walls; just a red door behind Gary, which was closed, and probably locked. Either this was one weird dream, or I was in big trouble. I took a few deep breaths, and prayed it was a dream.

“Hi, Gary,” I responded with a tentative smile and a trembling voice.
He seemed to be waiting for my question.
I took a few more deep breaths. “Okay, uh, where am I?” I eventually asked.
“At a fork in the road,” he answered softly.

Chapter 2

Zygint

I was terrified I'd wake up before I could ask an even more important question. "John. Where is John?" I blurted at Gary.

A brief note of sadness crossed his handsome features before he answered, "I really don't know. I am sorry."

I swallowed hard, and opted to take the chance. "But you do know something, don't you."

Gary nodded. "He'd been on assignment—"

I interrupted, "For you?" Gary's tailored suit sure didn't look like a standard Army-issue uniform. In fact, it suddenly hit me that none of the Army uniforms we had seen in DC had displayed the sunflower insignia worn by those two military messengers that had brought us John's tragic news. I hadn't realized that before...

"For us." Gary agreed as a flash of sadness crossed his face. "He was one of our best catascopes."

My confusion must have been obvious. "Us?" I truly doubted 'us' could be Army Special Operations. And what was a catascope? A type of soldier?

"A catascope is a Zygint agent," he added, reading my thoughts. "An operative for Zygan Intelligence."

I was still very confused. "And you're ... Z-zygan Intelligence?" I ventured.

"A very small part of it." Gary's expression softened, and he sat back in his chair. "Your brother was working for us undercover. He had instructions to check in periodically, but when he missed his last rendezvous," Gary paused and cleared his throat, "after that we never heard from him again. Our efforts to find him were ... unsuccessful. A great loss." Gary blinked several times. "His work over the past eight years had been outstanding. You should be very proud of—"

"Eight years?" John was ... had only been twenty-four. "B-but he just joined the Army last spring!"

"John started working for us when he was sixteen," Gary explained. "The Army was a cover story—their top brass work confidentially with us sometimes."

"We knew this assignment would take him away for a long time so—"

I leapt up towards Gary, unable to hold back my anger at the betrayal. "A long time?! You took him away from us forever!"

Gary kept his composure as he shook his head. "It was your brother's choice, not mine. He heard the calling to serve the Zygan Federation, and he came to see me, in this very room, in fact." Gary paused, glanced at the watch I was still clutching in one hand, and favored me with another warm smile. "And now, so have you." I stood stunned and speechless for a moment, letting the watch drop from my fingers as if it burned my skin. It landed on the table in front of me and popped open like an oyster. Secreted inside the cap I saw a pearl: my favorite photo of John and me a few years ago, arm in arm, standing victoriously on the top of Sugarloaf Mountain after a grueling climb. Swallowing a sob, I collapsed back down in the plastic chair and buried my face in my hands. I knew at that moment that my die was cast. I would follow my brother's footsteps

by following *in* his footsteps. And, maybe, just maybe, I might learn why he left us. And why he disappeared.

• • •

I had a lot to learn.

My new homeland, the Zygan Federation or, as we commonly call it, Zygfed, is ruled by His Royal Highness, the Omega Archon.

Kingdoms need their soldiers, and Zygfed is no exception. Though the Zygan Federation had achieved internal peace millennia ago, it was not 100% immune from attacks by alien species from without and anarchist guerrillas, called Andarts, from within.

Therefore, Zygfed planets and territories are protected by an elite corps of cosmic guards known as the Sentinel Corps, and by Zygan Intelligence field operatives working throughout Andromeda and the Milky Way.

By virtue of my brother's final sacrifice, I would now myself have the chance to earn my wings as a Zygan Intelligence agent, a catascope, and serve the Zygan Federation and its subjects. John had apparently been a valuable operative for Zygfed. Would I be able to measure up to him? And, a more difficult question, *should* I?

One of my earliest memories as a little girl was of waking up in a barren, icy chamber, the sun scorching my fluttering lids. I fought to move, but my arms and legs were frozen, trapped, my struggles in vain. Terrified, I looked away from the blinding light and saw John's face in the shadows. I could barely make out his features, but I was comforted by his gentle voice, a voice that reached out through my fog and told me that all would be well. "I am by your side, do not be afraid. Patience is the champion's best tool." Soothed by his words, I closed my eyes again and felt at peace.

The surgeon finished suturing the laceration on my scalp a few minutes later and directed the blazing operating room lamp away from my face. I was released from the papoose board, the straps that had imprisoned me flung aside as I leaped off the gurney and fell into John's arms.

The damage to the sidecar of his motorcycle could easily be repaired, he reassured me. It was me he was worried about. Squeezing his hand, I told him there was no need to worry about me. After my cut healed, I could wear a helmet and ride behind him on the seat instead. He promised he'd drive the bike slower in the future, but I was glad he didn't. I liked the feeling of the wind blowing through my hair, and I was grateful I had a brother who did, too. Helmets were for chickens. We were eagles. We were meant to soar.

The answer to Gary's invitation found me. Not only would I soar into space on John's trail, I would do him proud.

So, on my own sixteenth birthday, I joined the Zygan Intelligence team and started my training as a catascope at Mingferplatoi Academy in Zyga's bustling intergalactic capital city of Mikkin.

• • •

Mingferplatoi Academy—one year ago

“It doesn’t mean I have to like it,” I grumbled as I instructed nav to begin our first practice mission. As the only two Terrans in our Academy class, Spud and I had been matched as partners for our upcoming internships. The thought of having to orbit Earth in a cramped ship for the next six months with Spud the Stiff wasn’t brightening my day. The two-seat Scooter lurched and bucked as we lifted off from the Academy’s lush chartreuse grounds.

“Zygint endeavors to assign species to duty near their home environments. Fewer chances of accidental discovery when we resemble our charges,” Spud rationalized, adding, “However, you are not the only one who is dubious about this arrangement.” With a hint of a smirk, he reached over and tweaked the antigrav settings on the nav holo, smoothing our ascent through the Zygan atmosphere.

I wasn’t about to thank him. “Let’s just get through this test, okay.” I turned my attention to navigating through the maze of guard buoys sprinkled through the planet’s stratosphere by Zyga Traffic Control.

Spud’s tone was scolding. “You do not wish to wait for the pedagogue?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ve done this course hundreds of times on the simulator.” The virtual experience had bolstered my confidence. “She’ll catch up. Contact metrics?”

“Working.” Sighing, Spud ran his fingers across his holo in front of his post. “Cygnus in ninety-two minutes. Rendez-vous with the target on Kepler 6b, metrics established.”

After flawlessly achieving apogee, I couldn’t resist a victorious grin. Clear of planet Zyga, I gave the Scooter the command to shift into hyperdrive and speed us towards the Milky Way. Spud remained silent, focused on tracking our route on his nav holo, and scanning for signs of our pedagogue’s ship on our trail.

The constellation of Cygnus soon appeared on our viewscreens, a bright cross nestled in a ring of nebulae. Spud’s holo had highlighted our landing site as an ‘X’ at an uninhabited peninsula on a southern continental shelf of planet Kepler 6b.

“Cygnus is derived from the ancient Greek word for swan,” Spud ventured, “and contains two of this octant’s most populated planets orbiting Deneb and Albireo. Kepler 5b and 6b are among a ring of exoplanets that include the Glieser homeworlds.”

I yawned, hoping he’d get the hint.

He didn’t. “Cygnus is included in the Zodiac sign of Sagittarius, along with—”

I raised a hand. “I’ve uploaded all the Zygfed cosmography I’ll need, thank you. And medicine, science, and history. You shouldn’t overfill the attic in your head, anyway. Or mine.”

Spud’s eyes narrowed. “You are implying that one’s accumulation of knowledge could be finite. I too have considered that possibility—

CRASH!

“Andarts!” I shouted as our Scooter rocked with the force of the attacking torpedoes launched no doubt by the fearsome terrorists. CRASH! CRASH! CRASH! We were being battered from all sides by the swooping projectiles. “This can’t possibly be a drill!” “Armor’s holding,” Spud reported, his eyes darting from one holo screen to another as flocks of missiles continued to strike our ship. “For the moment.”

“Can you ID their mother ships?” I called out, struggling to dodge the torpedoes and, at the same time, pull up a perimeter holo scan.

CRASH! CRASH! CRASH!

“There must be hundreds of them,” I growled as I fought to stabilize our vessel. “I thought this was just supposed to be a *mock* search and rescue mission. Where’s our pedagogue’s ship?”

CRASH! CRASH! CRASH!

“Armor at 70%,” he said, adding, “Probably far back out of our range. I’ve located two singularities at the rim of our scan range. I shall endeavour to localise their signals. And, alas, I see no other Zygfed vessels in our perimeter. I’ve sent a distress signal to Deneb 5, but it appears as if we are on our own.”

CRASH! CRASH! CRASH!

“Damn!” Our ship rolled to starboard with the latest barrage, as I compensated for yaw. “Evasive maneuvers aren’t working. Can we outrun them?”

“Unlikely. The torpedos are coming in full-circle 360 degrees. Armor is now at 50%.” Spud’s words escaped through gritted teeth.

“Then fire our fission grenades. That’ll buy us some time.” Unfortunately, we both knew that our limited weapons cache couldn’t overcome the obvious firepower levels of our invisible assailants.

CRASH! CRASH! CRASH!

Spud launched a wide dispersion of our own armaments to pick out some of our avionic assailants, but our meager hits didn’t do much to stem the flow. As I fixed my gaze on our viewscreen, something caught my eye.

“Their torpedoes don’t seem to be dodging very well.” I frowned. “Internal torpedo controls should respond as soon as they see our grenades and change course to evade. Check out that two second response delay in their maneuvers—I’ll bet these torpedoes are remote controlled.”

CRASH! CRASH! CRASH!

Spud sent out another barrage of fission grenades and nodded as he, too, observed the subtle discrepancy. He spun towards another holo screen and ran his fingers over the data display.

“Got ‘em!” Spud cried. “Two Andart ships hiding in the Veil Nebula at 20.62 h D +42.03°. Obviously gunning for us through their titanium messengers. Armor at 30%.” He raised an eyebrow as he saw me lean over to our weapons holo. “What *are* you doing?”

“I’m going to rattle their cage.” I keyed a few instructions into the holo and shot out the next volley of fission grenades—only this time, rather than aiming each grenade at an attacking torpedo, I guided our grenades to crash into each other and explode all at once.

The resonant blast waves rocked our ship onto its back and sent us flying several light years towards Deneb. Fortunately, grav sensors kept us tracted in our seats and we were able to regain control of the Scooter to re-con. We stared at the viewscreens in amazement as we watched all the surviving torpedoes retreating rapidly in the direction of the shrouded Andart ships.

“Andart ships withdrawing,” Spud announced, nodding at his holo. “In hyperdrive, I might add.” He paused. “Surely a distant grenade explosion shouldn’t have frightened them away. And they should not be able to hear sounds in space. What did you do?”

I leaned back in my chair, grinning broadly. “Our fission grenades are made of copper, tin, and silver, right?”

“Bronze, correct.”

“Well, the vibration of the fragmented bronze components was enhanced by the explosion and created a giant blast wave. The flash disrupted the remote wireless communications and flipped the torpedoes into default mode, sending them racing back home towards the Andart ships. Hope the Andarts have enough fuel to outrun their dangerous toys.”

To my surprise, Spud actually laughed. “In other words, as in Heracles’ sixth labour, you created a bronze rattle. Brah-vah.”

“*De nada*,” I shrugged, sitting casually on my hands until the adrenaline tremors wore off. I certainly wouldn’t want Spud to have gotten the wrong idea, you know.

• • •

Spud and I were given a hero's welcome when we finally arrived at Kepler 6b. Turned out the Andarts had used their own communications disrupters to block our distress signals from getting through, isolating us from our pursuing pedagogue as well as any local intergalactic Zygfed patrols. Escaping the ambush relatively unscathed, without help from the Zygan "cavalry", meant we'd not only passed our field test, but earned ourselves a commendation—and a chance to apply for Zygfed's elite Sentinel Corps after graduation. The offer was tempting, but, after consideration, I declined. John's trail, and mine, was with Zygan Intelligence, not the Sentinel Corps.

I was amazed that Spud demurred as well. He told me it was because the Sentinel Corps would fill his "brain-attic with feckless experiences without satisfying his intellectual curiosity". My pedagogue told me weeks later that he'd admitted he'd been loath to break up our team, considering we worked together so well.

I had to admit, that was a really nice thing for him to say. And even nicer was that he never snitched that I'd rushed into space without waiting for my pedagogue, my "training wheels", in the first place.

• • •

Kingdoms like Zygfed need their warriors—but they also need their enemies. Nothing better than a passionate struggle between good and evil to hold an alliance together, right? And evil is a simple recipe. Take a teaspoon of the devil, a pinch of brute, add a name based on *mors*, the Latin word for death, simmer, and, presto! You have an archfiend that makes your side look heroic. You've seen it on our TV show (or, considering our mediocre ratings, maybe not): every week, Tara Guard and her cohorts fight the good fight for the Phaeton Alliance, against the dastardly killer Mordmort.

But, in reality, you don't need horns, fiery retinas, and smoke from your facial orifices to represent evil. Zygfed's *enemy du jour* is a balding, fifty-something human named Theodore Benedict, who wears bifocals and looks like a tax auditor.^[3] Evil exists all around us, and usually looks like a tax auditor. It's the crimes, not the costumes, that make the villain; and Benedict's crimes have included trying to violently overthrow the Omega Archon and His Highness' government, and "damn the collateral damage."

To achieve his malevolent aims, Benedict enlisted Andarts, champion guerilla fighters from populated planets all across the universe, to launch terrorist attacks on Zygfed. My primary job for Zygint, and that of my fellow catascopes-to-be from

Mingferplatoi Academy, would be to stop Benedict and his terrorist thugs, and safeguard our King and his subjects.

Studying to be a Zygan catascope was hard work, but it beat spending four years at Earth's military academies; I was done with the classroom study in only six months. I'm not going to bore you with all the details of our education. I mean, everybody has to go to school, right? Then, we moved on to our internships where we could focus on the fun stuff, learning to drive, fly, fight, and work our Ergals.

What's an Ergal? It's an instrument, a tool, that does, frankly, almost anything you could wish for, kind of like a Zygint version of a Swiss Army knife. An Ergal allows a catascope to transport from one location to another, change his or her appearance, levitate (lev), shape-shift matter (anamorph), become invisible, and, of course, with permission, travel in time. Sweet, huh? Our scientists say it works through a process called CANDI, Cascading Auxiliary Neurosynaptic Discharge Interaction, that sends wireless signals directly to the brain. Gary calls it magic, but then *his* generation is notoriously uncomfortable with new technology. My brother's antique watch, I discovered to my

amazement, was an Ergal, anamorphed to resemble a timepiece. Re-anamorphed to look like a cell phone, his Ergal would become mine as soon as I graduated. Sweet.

But, as always, there is a catch. Ergals are only provided to certain Zygan citizens, like Sentinels, and catascopes. And, using them to perform some activities without authorization is a crime. There were several thousand megabytes of policies and procedures that guided and limited the use of Ergals, all vetted personally by the Omega Archon, which we had to upload into our brains before our Ergals were assigned to us and activated.

For example, they didn't want us using Ergals to turn the school bully into a pig or to go back and buy up all the stock in Microsoft in 1986. Darn! Unfortunately, we weren't allowed to use Ergals to change history either. Time travel was only allowed with specific authorization for a specific assignment, along with strict instructions to only "observe and preserve" while in the past. As much as you might be tempted to assist the Resistance in assassinating Hitler or to warn President Kennedy's driver to avoid the grassy knoll, such unauthorized actions would land you a visit to the Omega Archon and an extended sentence in Hell, flames and all. And, even worse, if you survived our King's Hades, you could be exiled from Zygfed forever. So, we get these wonderful tools with all these options, but the rules for using them are super-strict and the consequences of violations dire. I think that's called "free will".

Or in my case, "a challenge".

Chapter 3

Terror Time

Hollywood—present day

“We’re done for! There’s no escape!” cried Spud. His T-shirt was in tatters and rivulets of sweat trickled down his muscular biceps as he sprinted ahead of the pack of rapacious paparazzi. He leaped into my silver Zoom StarCruiser through the open right gull-wing door and, pulling it closed, rolled into the passenger seat of what, to casual observers, resembled a late model DeLorean car.

“Never give up, never surrender,” I quoted as I locked the doors and ordered, “Windows opaque.” Our side and back windscreens became darkened and impenetrable. I activated navigation and scanning holos and observed that the advancing paparazzi were bearing down on us. Gunning the engine of the Zoom Cruiser, I streaked off down Cahuenga Boulevard, barely missing a camera-laden aggressor who had leaped in front of our car.

As we sped away, the hungry pack of photographers dispersed to their vans and SUVs, intent on motorized pursuit. Their driving skills were no match for my razor-sharp reflexes and the Zoom’s touchpad ‘fly-by-Ergal’ steering, but, with the heavy Friday afternoon traffic making the streets an action-film obstacle course, I wasn’t able to lose the paparazzi as quickly as I’d hoped.

Playing a futuristic space agent on TV gives you a great cover if you get caught working as a futuristic space agent on a real assignment. You can pretend the spaceship, the weapons, and the special effects are all a publicity stunt. On the other hand, being on TV does have its drawbacks. And they were gaining on us as we zoomed towards Burbank.

As we neared the studio, I steered a sudden hard right turn through a bolted aluminum fence into an empty construction site. Fortunately, the Zoom Cruiser’s titanium body trumped the chicken wire, and we were inside the lot without a scratch. The starcruiser’s tires bounced roughly over the packed rocks and dirt and then lurched forward and down with a sickening drop into a multi-storey well that had been dug out waiting for a future skyscraper’s foundation—and additional building funds. I could hear the screeching of paparazzi brakes as they tried to follow my moonshiner’s turn into the site. I could also hear Spud’s cry as we fell into the pit, “Lev!”

“I’ve got it!” I said confidently as, once below the lip of the pit, I invisible-ized my cruiser and activated levitation. Mere inches from the bottom of the abyss, the cruiser began to rise and, its wheels quietly retracting, invisibly glided up past the rows of paparazzi vehicles that were skidding to a stop at the rim of the excavated hollow.

Hovering, I giggled as I watched the pushy photographers jump out of their cars and struggle to explain how our car had disappeared before their very eyes, avoiding a crash landing that would have provided the bottom-feeding lens hounds with weeks of lucrative photo sales.

As we glided off towards Universal City, even Spud cracked a smile. “Someday,” he vowed, wiping the beads of sweat off his face and chest with the remnants of his T-shirt. “I shall earnestly seek a more incognitious and solitary existence.”

“My brother Blair told me there was a bee farm for sale in Sussex,” I joked, as I touched down under a deserted freeway overpass near the rear studio gate and made my “car” re-visible and road-worthy.

“Ha,” was Spud’s only response. He continued scowling until we were waved through the entrance to the studio and heading for my designated parking space.

• • •

It was early evening, and I was praying it was the last take for *Bulwark’s* Touareg prison scene. I so desperately wanted to scratch my skin. To appear convincing as captives tortured by the evil Mordmort’s guards, Spud and I had had to spend much of the afternoon with the FX make-up specialists getting tortured by plastic and glue. After dressing in ragged versions of our Phaeton Alliance spacesuits, we had been imprisoned by the special effects artists as they’d slathered us with silicone wounds, fake blood, and painted gashes. Chell’s delicate artwork was no match for the industrial efforts of the FX team. We soon looked as traumatized as Chell would be if he saw us in this condition. And, unfortunately, their make-up really itched!

“Okay, kids,” Jerry shouted—to my relief—as the soundstage lights came up. “That take worked.” He waved at us, signaling our freedom, and, running his fingers through his thinning hair, turned to talk to the gaffer about his next shot, which was blessedly without us. I started peeling off the silicone even before I had stepped off the set. Spud and I were done filming for the week. I could now scratch away to my heart’s content.

As I’d predicted, Chell gasped when he saw us. “My God, what have they done to you? You need Dr. Chell’s first-aid!”

“Thanks, but a warm shower will do just fine,” I returned with a friendly smile, as John’s—*my* Ergal started to vibrate in a pocket inside my costume. Strange, we were off Zygan duty today. I pulled out the Ergal, now shaped as a late-model smartphone, and, holding it up, added, “I’ll take this in my trailer.”

Spud’s own cell phone Ergal vibrated a second or two later. He reached for it in his back pocket under his cigarettes and chimed in, “I, too, shall take this in her trailer.”

Our eyes met, and I knew Spud had also received the vibrating CANDI signal that this alert was an emergency. We set off for my dressing room at top speed. The sudden appearance on our soundstage of a holographic Aggellaphor, a Zygan messenger, would be very hard to explain to Chell, Jerry, and the crew.

• • •

Safely in my trailer, I activated my phone and hit the receive button on the Ergal’s screen. The Aggellaphor messenger hologram M-fanned—appeared—before us and sat stiffly on the rim of my beanbag chair, looking quite irritated at our delay. “Zygint Central has received intelligence that Theodore Benedict’s Andarts may be mounting an attack on Zygfed territories and vulnerable protectorates in this quadrant within the next solar week. You are needed to help stop one of these temporal aggressions.”

“Contact metrics?” asked Spud.

“Temporal aggressions?” I interjected. Attacks throughout time as well as space? Could Benedict now be planning new guerilla attacks not only in the present, but in the future or the past?

Our questions were succinctly answered. “Eight Av 3778, 24-3, mark six, Sidon. You’ll be briefed further at Earth Core. Status: Condition One.”

The Aggellaphor X-fanned—disappeared—before we could get any more details. Aggellaphors are like that; not much for conversation really. In any case, the message was loud and clear. Condition One was of the highest urgency. We’d better get a move on to our local Zygint station buried in Earth’s core. And fast.

• • •

Still in our costumes, we immediately M-fanned to the warehouse on Hill and Alameda. Well, more precisely, to the giant green garbage bin in the alley behind the rundown building near Chinatown. Even more precisely, *inside* the foul-smelling garbage bin, where rats scurried from pile to pile of malodorous, worm-ridden trash.

I greeted the rats with a warm hello. Chidurians, from the Zygfed planet Chiduri in the constellation of Orion, normally appear as a gigantic crab-like species. Their universe-renowned fighting skills make them very desirable soldiers and guards. When assigned to work Security for Zygint stations on primitive non-Zygfed planets and protectorates like Earth, however, they often take the visible form of rodents of some sort to blend into the environment and keep a lower profile. Fortunately, the spoken Zygan language does sound something like a rat squealing, so any intoxicated human staggering down the alley near the bin would probably interpret the Chidurian’s squeaky greetings as a rodent infestation rather than their welcome.

And, the worms? No, they’re just worms.

We felt the warm light of a WHO^[4] scan bathe us for a few seconds before the metal wall of the bin facing the warehouse slid open to reveal a dark corridor that automatically lit up as soon as our feet stepped over the threshold. About thirty feet ahead of us was a titanium door that whooshed open after we’d passed a second WHO scan. We stepped into a small room and faced yet another titanium door. The school of hard knocks, and the resultant bruises, had taught us to grab the platinum railings that lined this chamber before the door behind us had fully closed. We kept our balance as the elevator started its death-defying drop with its usual sickening rush (no relation). After six months of navigating this gauntlet for Earth Core entry, I do so wish the impenetrable shields that surrounded Zygint’s Earth station would allow us to use our Ergals to transport in instead.

A minute or three later, the front door slid open to reveal the plasterboard walls and linoleum floors of the main entrance. Once we were out of the lift, a more intensive NDNA scan^[5] cleared us quickly, and triggered the drab industrial decor to transition into the welcoming oak paneling and thick plush carpet of the Earth Core Station Reception Area.

Fydra, our Scyllian greeter, put down her fur-brush and, with her canine floppy ears flapping behind her, bounded up out of her chair when she saw our grisly appearance. “Rrrrough assignment?” she barked with concern, as she wagged her tail and smelled our costumes with her moist snout.

Spud and I looked at each other and laughed. Scylla, the largest planet orbiting Sirius in Canis Major, requires olfactory education for all its citizens from childhood. Scyllians can smell a rat at fifty paces, which is why the Chidurians prefer to man their guardposts on the surface above. It took only a moment for Fydra to discover that our blood and wounds were synthetic, and, embarrassed, she stepped back and pointed one of her manicured paws at the red portal. “They’re all in Briefing Three,” she sniffed.

“Grrreat,” I responded, and added a conciliatory, “Thank you.” Scyllians are not known for their sense of humor. They take their responsibilities as the advance team for Zygint visitor—and themselves—very seriously.

We stopped cold a few steps beyond the portal to Earth Core Control, awestruck. The

entire station looked like a Christmas department store exhibition. All the giant holos that filled the cavernous room were dotted with flashing red lights. Perspiring profusely, portly Station Manager Everett Weaver was anxiously running from one holo to another, jerkily jotting down data on an electronic tablet, and looking to all the world like he desperately needed a rest room. Condition one, no kidding.

We hurried to Briefing Room Three to find that our Chief Gary had just begun his presentation. I nodded to Wart—Ward Burton, Earth Core’s Assistant Chief—and to our fellow catascopes, the Drexel twins, Dieter and Derek, who, looking up at us from their seats, echoed Fydra’s alarm at our bloody condition. With apologies to Gary for the interruption, I reassured my colleagues that we were merely decked in impressively horrifying costumes for our TV show cover jobs. Spud and I each grabbed a—washable, I hope—plastic chair and tried not to rest our scarlet-stained arms on the polished Formica surface of the conference table.

The central holo in front of us was displaying an ancient city scene, with tunic-clad pedestrians and overburdened donkeys trudging down dusty dirt streets that were lined by small huts made of mud-bricks and stone. Women balanced baskets of wheat on their heads as their rag-robed children rolled pebbles on the road and dodged piles of equine excrement. Is that where we were headed? Foo. I’d been hoping we’d score an assignment at a luxury resort by the sea.

Gary paused to welcome us, then briskly resumed his narration. “Recent Zygint Central intelligence chatter reports that Theodore Benedict is launching a new wave of Andart attacks in multiple locations throughout Zygfed, and, unfortunately, also throughout time. There’s a strong possibility that Earth is now in Benedict’s line of sight. As you know, one Andart operation last year in Hutunye resulted in the deaths of over one million Zygan citizens. If Benedict succeeds in destroying his targets again, we could see a similar disaster on Earth.”

“What’s the target?” I asked, alarmed.

“Not what. Who,” Gary responded.

The holo over our table dissolved into a vision of a thin, wiry, dark-haired boy about, I’d guess, the age of my brother Billy. Twelve or thirteen. He seemed to be engaged in an animated discussion with a group of bearded older men in what, judging by the décor, looked like a place of worship. The chamber’s walls were lined with wood panels bearing carvings of winged figures, palm trees, and flowers, all painted or gilded with gold.

“Yeshua Bar Maryam,” Gary continued. “Our last trace of him here was from a few years ago.” He nodded at the holo. “In Av, 3778, our contact metrics in the period, he is reported to be about eighteen years of age and working as a tradesman in Sidon, one of the largest cities in ancient Phoenicia, western Lebanon today.”

I glanced over at Spud who was taking in the information in his typical pose, leaning back in his chair with his eyes half closed, his hands resting on his abdomen, fingertips together.

“We haven’t been able to track his exact location. Frankly, Zygint Central dropped the ball on this one. They weren’t expecting Andarts to be able to access time travel, so they weren’t tracking incursions into the past. Central now believes that an Andart or two might have gone back in time to ancient Phoenicia, with the mission of eliminating Bar Maryam.”

Spud raised an eyebrow. “Time travel? Without authorization or Ergals? How could that be possible?”

Gary shrugged. “Don’t ask me. But Central isn’t ruling it out.”

“I’ve got another question,” I said, puzzled, “Every life is precious, and none more so than Earth’s, but I’ve never known His Highness, or Zygint, for that matter, to expend resources just to preserve *one* life.”

A wry smile crossed Gary’s face. “No, no, you’re right... not typically. But, the Bar

Maryam you see here is a young man. As an adult, he will play a critical role in Earth's history—" Gary seemed to stop himself. "If the Andarts were to kill him, the impact on the future would be devastating. Earth's timeline would be changed forever."

"That's not good." People were still talking about the mess Gary had made of Roswell. Changing Earth's history thousands of years in the past might mean that Earth's events evolve very differently and *our* present might never even come to pass. And neither might *we*. We had to make sure Benedict didn't succeed.

"But you can't identify any Andarts in this... Sidon?" I asked, worried. "*Nothing* on our scans?"

Gary sighed. "Zip. If Andarts are there, they're under deep cover. We've started monitoring transport fields for time-traveling invaders now, but the only way for us to catch anybody that's already gotten through is from inside the era. If and when they make their move against Yeshua."

"Any estimates on when that might be?" asked Spud.

Our Head shook his. "No, based on their previous attack patterns throughout the Milky Way and Andromeda"— he looked pointedly at me and Spud—"they like to keep us guessing.

"Okay, team, History'll give you the upload and help you Ergal your costumes and look." Gary stood up decisively. "We'll need you to M-fan near Sidon within the hour. You'll have to work your way into town in disguise—we don't want you to arouse any suspicions. I only hope we're not too late." He strode to the door then turned back to us for a final word. "Remember, failure could be catastrophic."

"Got that, Gary," I said, warily. "Isn't it always?"

• • •

Middle East—two thousand years ago

In 3778, Sidon was a bustling Middle Eastern port city on the Mediterranean in what was then an independent colony in the vast Roman Empire. According to our History uploads, the Greek poet Homer^[6] (who, as the joke goes, wasn't really Homer but another poet with the same name), had sung the praises of Sidon's skilled craftsmen who manufactured glass and purple dye. Think about it: if the Roman Empire had not supported its Phoenician colony's renowned industry, all the cathedrals in western Europe today that are mobbed by tourists awed by their exquisite stained glass windows

might have ended up instead with rather uninspiring wooden green shutters that wouldn't be much of a draw.

Emperor Tiberius had newly risen to power and was experiencing a brief honeymoon, perhaps launching the Mediterranean as a favorite site for honeymooners; before his nervous breakdowns led him to attack many of his close relatives, perhaps launching the model of the unhappy marriage. Fortunately, in 3772 on the Hebrew calendar (around 12 ACE), Tiberius was busy fiddling around in Rome and Capri, and didn't really have much influence in Sidon. His decision to stay far away was completely understandable, as I would have much preferred an assignment on the Italian coast myself, especially considering that the average temperature in midday Sidon hovered at over one hundred and ten degrees Fahrenheit.

"It is decidedly sweltering," Spud moaned, as he mopped his forehead with his mantle, an ancient white scarf. From the zero degrees Celsius briskness of England's moors to the zero degrees Kelvin chill of deep space, Spud was much more at home in a cooler environment.

"It's 120 in the shade." I nodded, shaking my tunic to create a momentary breeze. I looked down at my Ergal, whose screen displayed a detailed map of the region. "About two more kilometers due southwest."

Spud pulled his mantle over his head and I followed suit as we trudged forward on the dirt footpath under the blazing sun. I had hoped we could have M-fanned right in the middle of town, but Gary felt our chances of discovery by an observant Andart were too great. Sure, we could invisible-ize, but if the Andarts had an unregistered holo scan pointed in the right direction, they might be able to pick up our Ergal activity and track us.

Spud and I had bronzed our skin so we wouldn't look out of place among the locals, and our Ergaled beards and mustaches looked genuine. Yes, plural. In ancient times in the Middle East, there were a lot of things that women just didn't do. So, like Yentl, I'd dressed up as a man. Come to think of it, in some of those countries, I'd do the same today.

Cursing Gary's caution, we plodded slowly onward in the baking sun for what seemed to be forever. The Phoenicians were smarter than we were. Most of them wisely opted to stay indoors and avoid the heat. We'd only passed two travelers, both going in the opposite direction, until we reached the Temple of Eshmoun, the Phoenician God of Healing, a kilometer north of the city. Alongside its entrance, blocking our path, stood a wizened old man with long gray hair and a salt-and-pepper beard. Oops. So much for staying under the radar.

"Hail, journeymen," the elderly man greeted us, eyeing us from head to toe. "I am the Keeper of the Temple of Eshmoun. What brings you to our gates?"

Despite the high quality of our disguises, I was still uncomfortable under the man's intense gaze. I let Spud do the talking. His Phoenician was more passable and in a lower register than mine.

"Hail, neighbor," Spud responded. (I'm giving you the English translation, of course, guessing that most of you are even worse at Canaan dialects than me. Oh, and sorry about the stilted medieval dialogue. Phoenician is kinda short on slang.)

I am Akbar from Berytus, and I walk with my brother Danel." My partner continued, "We are seeking our cousin, Sakarbaal, in East Sidon."

I know Spud chose Sakarbaal as a common Phoenician name, but, I was still annoyed. It was so hard to keep from giggling at the pun.

The aged gentleman nodded. "From which clan is he?"

"Manchester United," I mumbled, biting my lip to stay silent as Spud's heel met my shin. Yow! Okay, that worked.

"Cousin of Milkpilles," continued Spud, picking another common and funny-

sounding name. This time, the pain in my leg made it much easier to maintain a straight face.

“Ah.” The old man smiled and, still watching us intently with his bright hazel eyes, stepped aside. “Then you are nearing the end of your journey, Akbar and Danel. Go forward in good health.” Acknowledging his blessing, we both bowed our heads and proceeded briskly down the path. I felt the Keeper’s eyes boring into my back until the road curved and we were beyond his sight.

The path became much wider and well-trodden as we inched—or should I say cubited^[7]—closer to our goal.

As soon as we were out of earshot, Spud gave me an English earful about my lack of self-control. “You might have blown our cover! And, besides, it’s *football* in Britain, not soccerball.”

As if I didn’t know. I looked at him through narrowed lids. “But *Milk pills?*”

“Milk-pill-es is an esteemed name in this era,” Spud returned my glare, “just as Kael and Pilot Inspektor, names given to their children by our fellow thespians, are in ours.”

Good point, Spud.

“The rather pedestrian moniker which you have bestowed upon me,” he added, obviously referring to ‘Spud’, is no less risible. But I do prefer it to the even more pedestrian ‘Bill’. Or my middle names of ‘Sherlock’ and ‘Scott’.”

“Can’t argue with that, either,” I conceded, and we both trudged silently along the path for another quarter hour. The sparse vegetation soon gave way to irrigated land, with fruits and vegetables in neat rows surrounding small cottages made of stone and fired brick. In the town, oblivious pedestrians passed us by from all directions, many carrying sacks or baskets of what seemed to be produce or other foodstuffs, and carefully balanced containers of water. I pressed the touch screen of my Ergal, now anamorphed into a hunting knife and hidden in my clothing, and M-fanned a similar jug, drawing it out from beneath the folds of my tunic to drench my parched lips.

“Careful,” whispered Spud, who grabbed the canteen from me and gulped the fresh water greedily. “Blistering desert.”

I was about to grumble, “Ergal your own,” when I spied a ramshackle structure a couple of hundred yards down the road.

“I believe that tumbledown edifice ahead should be our inn,” Spud said without enthusiasm.

“Don’t be a pessimist,” I chided. “I bet it’ll be a two star hotel.”

Spud looked at me, incredulous. “Two stars?” “Sure, you and me,” I returned, grinning. “Bollocks.”

The last drops of water he poured from my canteen were most refreshing. On my sizzling scalp.

Several Ergaled shekels got us a small room with two other travelers on the first floor of the inn in the city center. We claimed a shaded corner away from the window

and, after brushing a column of ants out of our spot, unrolled our blankets on the relatively cool, packed-dirt floor. Midday was fully upon us, and searching for our target would be futile with most workers hiding indoors for shade and siesta.

Spud sat cross-legged on the floor, chewing on bay leaves, and leaned against the brick wall, lost in thought. I lay on my blanket, one hand behind my head and the other brushing an annoyingly persistent fly off my face, and gazed up at the ragged wood ceiling beams that supported the cottage's upper floor, hoping that the insect life of this city didn't include termites. I hadn't intended to fall asleep, and wasn't sure that I really had, when I heard our two fellow guests in the far corner speaking softly in Aramaic.

Through the miracles of CANDI, my Ergal translated their language even when I was semi-conscious, and I recall being able to make out a few words. "Three cubits... sunrise... bricks... masonry ...Jupiter ... Yeshua ... death ..."

Yeshua? Death? I struggled to wake up, and finally opened my eyes, only to find that our two roommates were gone. And so was Spud! His blanket rested untouched next to mine. Where did he go? Or, worse, where might he have been taken?

The sun was now lower in the sky, and I could hear a growing hustle and bustle from the street outside. I debated whether I should wait here in case Spud was simply playing the bloodhound, or whether I should start planning a rescue. I finally decided that it wouldn't hurt to go and scope out the local territory a bit for a start.

Then the words I'd heard resonated once again in my memory. Yeshua. Could the men who'd been sitting a few feet from our blankets actually be the Andarts we were trying to catch? Nah. That would be too easy. But...

Cubits ... bricks ... masonry ... Certainly sounded like it had something to do with construction. Gary had told us that Yeshua was likely to be working on a building site. Maybe the Andarts were canvassing those sites to find their target. And Jupiter, well Jupiter *was* King of the Roman gods—the Roman Zeus—but Jupiter could also be the planet. If these men *were* the Andarts we were after, they would know that Zygan Intelligence has an outpost on one of Jupiter's moons, Io, and they might have been discussing how to avoid Io patrols when they made their escape. After killing Yeshua. *Death*—

I spun around and grabbed his muscular forearm, twisting it and sending its owner flat on his back on his blanket. With an angry "Ow!" Spud pulled his arm away and rubbed the tender tendons that I'd strained.

"Dammit, Spud. You shouldn't have snuck up on me like that! I have razor-sharp reflexes, remember?" I countered. "And where the heck were you, anyway?"

"False alarm," Spud admitted. "I overheard our friends over there conversing and thought we had a lead."

"No?"

Spud shook his head. "Wrong Yeshua."

"Oh." I frowned. "Did you hear them say something about death, too?"

He nodded. "Apparently, one of the men has inherited some property on the outskirts of town on which he wants to build. The Yeshua they were talking about is an old squatter, living on the land, so they have to encourage him to move on, one way or another."

I winced. "I don't think I want to hear about their plans. I know it's not our mission, but shouldn't we, uh, help this other Yeshua?"

"We can't," Spud reminded me. "You know the rules when we're on a mission. Observe and Preserve. No interference in local environments unless it's an official assignment. And you know the punishment if we do."

I shivered involuntarily. "It wasn't the most pleasant hour of my life." I'd already felt the wrath of the Omega Archon's strict governance when I'd flouted a couple of the millions of Zygin't "rules" as an intern, and had suffered the unrelenting agony of the

burning flames of Hell. My sentence had only been for thirty minutes, but I'd resolved never to find myself "in stir" again. I stood up and stretched, trying to relieve the sudden tension in my muscles. "So, what's our next step?"

"Gary briefed us that Bar Maryam is likely in construction work of some kind," Spud suggested. "We could get a position with one of the local crews and see what we could, er, as you say, dig up?"

"Funny." I shook my head. "No ... it won't work. These guys are real craftsmen. We'd never be able to look legit as construction workers with just upload learning from our Ergals." My eyes followed a rat as it scurried from one end of our room to the other. "I've got it! Roman building inspectors."

"Say again?" Spud looked confused.

"We can pretend to be Roman building inspectors. Checking on permits, taxes, titles, all that crap. Feared by all the locals. I'll bet they'd be happy to give up Bar Maryam just so we stay off their backs." I nodded at Spud's smooth hands. "We would make more convincing bureaucrats than tradesmen."

"Good point." Spud chewed his lip. "In fact, that might possibly work. How is your Latin, Danielis?"

I smiled as I set my Ergal for the ancient language. "Praepara, Arcturus."

• • •

A few Ergal-facilitated additions to our costumes and we were 'praepared'. Pretending to be Roman estate and building inspectors and revenue collectors, we spent the next two days scouring the city. I don't believe we missed visiting a workshop, construction site, or warehouse in the entire town of Sidon. By the second day, we had accumulated hundreds of shekels in bribes from anxious landowners, but, unfortunately, few real leads. None of the builders and tradesmen we met admitted to knowing a Yeshua Bar Maryam, itinerant craftsman from Judea. If we didn't get lucky soon, an Andart or Andarts were certainly going to beat us to the young man!

Our next stop was a large structure being erected on an isolated lot near the edge of town. The base of the building was made of stone, granite, and marble. A wood frame rose out of the base, within which a cadre of brawny masons were laying kiln-fired bricks.

There was no well-dressed landowner at this site, so Spud approached the idlest of the workers, whom we assumed was the supervisor, and, in Latin, introduced us as visiting Romans. The supervisor visibly trembled, protested in Phoenician that his Latin was poor, and, before we could begin our auditors' spiel, reached into a ragged pocket and pulled out a handful of shekels. I rolled my eyes, and Spud raised his hand to indicate our disinterest in the proffered funds.

Sighing, Spud, in Phoenician, asked the anxious man if he had heard of a Yeshua Bar Maryam. He clicked his tongue and raised his eyes and eyebrows, the local gesture for

“no.” But, after Spud tried describing the young man’s likely appearance, the supervisor nodded, and pointed a dirty thumb at a sun-bronzed lithe youth and a wizened old man toiling in the hot sun several yards away, adding, “The Teacher. He is there.”

“*Gratias*,” I added in my lowest register, as Spud and I walked over to the two men. Close up, the young man looked familiar, though he was taller than he had been in the holo we’d viewed at Earth Core, and was now sporting a thin mustache and beard. On his knees, his forehead glistening with sweat in the still oppressive heat, he was carefully laying bricks alongside the gray-haired worker, who, perspiration streaming down his face, halted his own labors every few moments to check on the work of his apprentice. Spud and I naturally assumed that the elderly mason had to be “the Teacher,” and we greeted him by name, first in Phoenician, then Aramaic.

The old man chuckled, and, shook his head. “My knowledge is limited to bricks and stones,” he replied softly in Aramaic, as he nodded at the youth. “My young friend is the Teacher, *he* knows the word of God.”

The youth stood up, wiping the dirt from his hands onto his tunic. “Saul is too kind. I have still much to learn. And much to do. What seek you, gentlemen?”

“I am Akbar of Berytus, and this is my brother Danel. Yeshua Bar Maryam?”

The young man’s eyes widened and he instinctively pulled away. Spud leaned forward and whispered in his ear, “Do not be afraid, we are here to protect you.” Observing that the gazes of all the site’s workers were now focusing on our foursome, and fearing that their intervention might prevent us from leaving with our quarry, Spud gently took Bar Maryam by the elbow and guided him away in the direction of the street, while announcing loudly, “*Servus illicitus!*”^[8] You will come with us immediately and be brought before the magistrate!”

Hearing Spud’s words, the old man stood up to his full height, towering over Spud’s six feet. Saul grabbed the youth by the shoulders, breaking Spud’s hold on Yeshua’s arm, and tore him away. Glaring at us with flashing eyes, he cried in Aramaic, an invitation to his fellow masons, “Roman invaders! We are free men! You shall no more molest our people! We will fight you all!”

I nudged Spud, but he had already noticed that the rest of the bricklayers had risen from their posts and were inching closer to us. Somehow, I didn’t think their approaching us was simply due to friendliness or curiosity. Maybe we would have been better received as tradesmen after all.

As the circle of men now surrounding us grew tighter and tighter, Spud and I looked at each other in desperation. My left hand slid through the folds of my tunic and grabbed my Ergal, wrapping my fingers around the activator on its handle, and—

A cry to attack shook the air, and the men lunged at us. I shouted at Spud, “*Vola!*” and, to escape our hunters, we both faked a running start and leaped up high over the ring of men. I levved a few seconds at six feet, then dove down feet first to strike two masons unconscious. Spud, show-off that he is, did an arm-stand forward somersault pike and took out three more. One man came up behind me and tried to grab me in a half-nelson, but I threw him over my head and kned him towards a newly-built brick ledge, which shattered and blanketed him as he slept. I was grateful for those months of practice in the sparring ring with Spud at Mingferplatoi. A few flying karate moves later, Spud and I had knocked out all the men save for our target and his elderly protector.

We were lucky that our out-of-the-way location prevented bystanders from witnessing our acrobatics; passers-by who might not only ask uncomfortable questions about our combat skills, but leap into the fray to help their unconscious brethren. Alone, the old man would be easy to handle now. We could simply stun him and cover him with an E-shield^[9], blocking his movement and sensation, until we were ready to X-fan to more secure ground with our charge.

“Yeshua,” I ordered in Aramaic. “Please, listen to us. Move away from the elder, and you will be safe.”

“I am safe,” the youth said quietly. “Not even the blade Saul rests against my back can make me afraid.”

Blade?!!! My partner eased over to the side of the Teacher to scout out said weapon. As he spied it, Spud’s artificially bronzed face turned pasty white under the tanning effect. He looked over at me with alarm.

Puzzled, I too peeked behind Bar Maryam as the elder watched me with a self-satisfied smile. Oh my God!

The sharp point of the knife was only a centimeter long and extended from the barrel of a much longer, and much more dangerous, late-model Zygan stun gun.

“I should thank you for helping me with the, uh, competition,” the elder said in modern English, nodding at the supine men around us. “It would have drawn too much uncontrollable attention for me to ... take care of Yeshua with an audience.”

“*We’re* an audience,” I cried angrily, before realizing the implications of his statement. I tried not to look chagrined ... or alarmed.

“Hands up, please. You know the routine.” The old man slid his thumb over the trigger button of his gun.

Reluctantly, we raised our hands above our heads. If only I could reach my Ergal, we could X-fan—

“You move, you’re dead,” the elder instructed ominously.

Bzzt. The shot came from the stun gun. We turned and saw that the youth had been frozen in his standing position, his head bowed and his hands together in a gesture of prayer. The elder stepped away and moved into position for a clear shot at us. *Now* I looked alarmed. I knew the setting he was going to use this time was not going to be stun.

A loud crack came from my left. No, Spud! *Don’t!* The old man quickly turned in the direction of the noise and fired a red beam at the source of the sound. I heard the burning hiss of laser against flesh. My partner! My friend!

But, thank the heavens, it was not Spud who’d been hit. The shot had, however, given Spud the opportunity to leap up with his lip-splitting *bartitsu* kick and knock the weapon out of the elder’s hands. It discharged again, this time striking and completely dissolving a juniper bush with a loud sizzle. I jumped on Saul and got a lock on his neck. The elder began gasping; my persistent pressure on his windpipe and his carotid arteries was turning his leathery skin to blue. Spud quickly Ergaled himself a stun gun and stunned the elder just as he slipped through my arms and collapsed unconscious onto the ground.

We both turned to check on Yeshua. The youth remained erect, frozen in his position of prayer. Beyond him, we glimpsed the elderly Keeper we had run into outside the Temple of Eshmoun a few days before, picking up the remains of a shattered marble

statue and appearing surprisingly unflustered. I noted that a corner of his tunic had been singed, but otherwise he seemed none the worse for wear.

“A thousand apologies, Akbar, Danel,” the Keeper said in Phoenician. Oblivious to the scattered bodies laying about the construction site, he calmly continued to put the broken pieces of the statue in a large sack. “Philosir the Priest will now not have his image of Shapash to grace his entrance, I fear, until next year’s harvest.”

The Keeper’s clear hazel eyes gazed intently into each of ours and then at the praying youth. Nodding at Yeshua, the Keeper picked up his sack with a sigh and threw it over his bent shoulders. “I shall have to commission Bodmelqart the Sculptor to make him yet another,” he added with a rueful smile as he trudged off the lot onto the footpath in front of the acreage.

Spud and I glanced at each other, totally taken aback. The Keeper seemed calm and oblivious to the unusual events that had occurred around him. How was that possible? “Thank you,” I finally essayed in my stumbling Phoenician towards the departing cleric. He did not turn back to look at us again, but, he did wave his free hand, from which a gold ring glistened in the sun.

Spud seemed equally puzzled by the Keeper’s behavior, though I’m sure he was as grateful as I was that we’d all come out of the showdown alive. As we, both frowning, watched the Keeper disappear around the bend of the road, I remembered that Yeshua was still standing a few feet from us, frozen.

“Oh, God, we’d better unstun him,” I said to Spud.

Spud nodded and pulled out his stun gun.

“Don’t worry, it doesn’t hurt,” I reassured him in Aramaic as Spud aimed and fired the wave that would unstun and unfreeze the youth. To our alarm, the young man didn’t move, but continued to stand immobile in his position of prayer.

“Yeshua!” I laid my hand gently on his shoulder.

The young man was mumbling barely audible syllables. “*Adonay Elohim atah hachilota lehar’ot et- avdecha et-godlecha ve’et-yadecha hachazakah asher mi- El bashamayim uva’arets asher-ya’aseh chema’aseycha vechigvurotecha.*”

“Yeshua, are you okay?” The language didn’t register as Aramaic in my Ergal. I looked over at Spud with concern.

“Deuteronomy 3:24. It’s from the Torah. In Hebrew,” Spud translated. ““O God, Lord! You have begun to show me Your greatness and Your display of power. What Force is there in heaven or earth who can perform deeds and mighty acts as You do?”” Seeing my admiration, he added, “One obtains a broad classical education in British public schools ...”

“You see, gentlemen, I have no fear.” The words from Yeshua were now in Aramaic once again. “Faith will ever vanquish fear. For we walk by faith, not by sight, and He is with us always.”

The young man ambled over and crouched down close to Saul, gently brushing a lock of unruly gray hair from the elder’s blood-, sweat-, and dirt-caked forehead. “Greater is He that is in you, than he who is in the world,” he whispered softly into his mentor’s ear. The youth then stood, and, after quickly gathering a few items from his work area into a makeshift cloth knapsack, dashed off towards the path to Tyre, following the footsteps recently lain by the Keeper.

I turned to Spud, “We’re just going to let him go?” “Well, we’ve caught and stopped our Andart, and preserved the timeline. *That* was our assignment.” Spud gestured at the immobile elder. “Anyway, I rather think Yeshua’s got someone watching out for him, you know.”

I snorted. “Yeah, us.”

Spud’s gaze continued to follow Yeshua until he disappeared in the distance. I almost didn’t hear him return a “yeah.”

Chapter 4

Mission Accomplished?

Site wrap-up took over an hour. We had to check each of the bricklayers and made sure their injuries were not life-threatening, as well as repair as much of the damage to the property from our fight as possible. Our pedagogues at Mingferplatoi Academy had stressed this rule repeatedly: take great care if you're ever on assignment in the past, because an unexpected or unnecessary death could disturb the timeline and wreak havoc with the future. *Our* future.

Grunting, I levved a large clay pot to a prominent position in the center of the work area in which we emptied our pockets of all our shekels in hopes of repaying the masons for their, uh, inconvenience. I observed that a few of the men were starting to regain consciousness, and I urged Spud to hurry. We wouldn't want to have to fight Round Two.

Spud surveyed the scene quickly and agreed. "Appears acceptable. I think we are finished. Let us tractor our Andart back to Core for questioning. And then, well, I am rather keen to have a shower."

I wiped the sweat off my forehead with a grin. Amen to that!

• • •

Zygan Intelligence Earth Core Station—present day

"Huzzah, huzzah!" Everett Weaver greeted us as we arrived at Earth Core with our prisoner.

"Ev, you are such a geek," I groaned. "Got a holding suite ready?"

Everett, scowling, waved a hand as the altitudinous catascopes Dieter and Derek appeared silently beside us. "'Bill and Ted' here'll take care of him."

The tight-lipped siblings grabbed the still-frozen elder by the armpits and carried him off to the holding cells, I mean, suites.

"Bill and Ted?" Spud asked, puzzled.

"Our two Doppelgangers in a Bizarro Universe", I tried unsuccessfully to explain as I tugged a still-confused Spud by the elbow in the opposite direction. "Come on. Gary's waiting for our report."

Still decked in our Phoenician duds, we met Gary in his elegant office, and crashed in his plush leather chairs. Layers of dust flew off of us as we sat down, to Gary's barely concealed dismay.

We briefed Gary on the events we'd experienced over the past few days, which, due to our having been in a time loop, had lasted only about half an hour in Earth Core time. A time loop is a great perk of time travel, by the way. Imagine you're holding a long string, one end in each hand. If you bring your hands together, you have a loop hanging below them. When we'd journeyed back in time on assignment to Sidon, we'd started our journey at the end of the string in your left hand and traveled down and up the dangling loop to your right hand. Meanwhile, Gary and Ev, who'd remained in the present, simply crossed the short distance from the string end in your left hand over to the string end in your right hand. While we'd spent over two days in Phoenicia, the time that had passed in Earth Core was less than an hour after we'd originally left.

Ev had automatically uploaded our Ergal recordings of the events in Sidon when we arrived back at Core, so there wasn't really much we could tell Gary that he didn't already know. I so wish we could use Ergal logs to avoid *all* our boring meetings.

We did have a few unanswered questions, however. Who was the old man we had captured? One of Benedict's Andarts, of course, but was he the only Andart tasked with assassinating Yeshua? Was there a chance that Benedict had had more than one Andart, or attack, planned in Sidon? If so, Yeshua might still be in danger. I hated to bring up the suggestion, but perhaps we needed to go back to Sidon for a few more days to be sure that Yeshua was safe.

Gary held up his hand. "We'll know more after we Nix Sutherland, your captive. That's his real name, by the way. You might also be happy to learn that we've now got Yeshua Bar Maryam protected throughout his known lifetime with a temporal vector shield."

My jaw dropped. Temporal vector shields, a Zygan defense barrier that prevents unauthorized access to a designated slice of time, were out of our league here in the boonies of our galaxy. Not even Quadrant Chiefs were authorized or trained to implement temporal vector shields, much less Chiefs of Zygint Field Stations like Gary on primitive planets like Earth.

"We've already discovered that Sutherland is one of Benedict's top lieutenants," Gary continued. "He should be able to provide Zygint with a wealth of information about Benedict's plans." Gary sat forward and looked directly at us. "That's where you come in."

I didn't like the sound of that. From the expression on Spud's face, I could see he was equally unenthusiastic.

Gary chose to ignore our discomfort. "Central has decided that Sutherland's interrogation is best done at Headquarters," he explained, "so, we'll have him ready for you to transport to Zyga in half an hour."

I rolled my eyes. Spud's prediction had been right. In the end, we'd only have enough time to hit the showers.

• • •

My two-seater Zoom Starcruiser had been Ergal- expanded to create a sealed cell for one behind our cockpit. For our one Andart prisoner. We would be transporting Sutherland in that cell to Zygan Intelligence Central Headquarters in Zyga's capital city of Mikkin, just a couple of miles from our old literal stomping grounds at Mingferplatoi Academy.

After a quick bath, I slipped back into my regular uniform of jeans and tank-top and met Spud at the Earth Core hangar. The trip to Zyga would take us about three hours, even on autopilot in hyperdrive, so Spud came prepared for the ride with a backpack full of yellowed papers printed in tiny fonts.

"You've got something against illustrations?" I couldn't resist ribbing.

He returned my serve. "*I* no longer need them to be able to read."

Ouch.

Ward Burton was putting the finishing touches on the preparations for our transport. Through the aft viewscreens of our ship, we could spy Sutherland seated quietly in his solo prison behind us. Shorn of his facial hair, the erstwhile-Saul looked substantially

younger than the wizened old man we'd captured in Sidon, but still appeared middle-aged (i.e. over 30). I expected to see daggers flying from Sutherland's eyes aimed at us, but, surprisingly, the Andart kept looking down, almost immobile in the back-seat chamber, staring at his hands.

"He can't see out," Wart explained to us as we approached the vehicle.

"That's probably all for the best," I said, relieved. "He's locked in there, right?"

"Tight as a drum," Wart reassured me. "E-shield's all around him."

I nodded, then observed that the Sputnik dent on my fender had finally been repaired, and broke into a grin. "Thanks, Wart. I owe ya one."

"Anytime." He grinned back and gave us a combination wave and salute. "Good work, guys, and good luck!"

I waved back and eased into the left front seat behind nav controls. As soon as Spud had pulled down his gull-wing door, I ordered, "Engage." The ship came to life, our holo-guides popping up to surround us just in front of the forward viewscreen.

"Zyga" was all I needed to say, and the Zoom Cruiser invisible-ized, levved, and rotated to face the massive warehouse door that led to the decrepit alley where our Chidurian rat guards were standing watch. Wart had always waxed nostalgic about the days ships could just lev out of the roof of the warehouse, before Earth sent up GPS satellites. Now, though our ship was invisible and couldn't be spotted by Earth's primitive radar technology, the warehouse's old hangar gate was clearly observable from the stratospheric cameras.

"Those satellites can see every time the door opens or closes," Wart had explained. "We sure don't need a Google Earth fan with too much time on his hands counting when and how often we launch, you know." (I didn't have the heart to break it to him about Street View.)

So, a few years ago, a metal side gate leading into the usually deserted alley had become the new Earth Core hangar door. As our ship approached it, it rolled open with a grinding crunch that sent the Chidurian rat guards scurrying away in all directions. We floated horizontally into the passageway and then, powered by our whisper-quiet cold fusion generator, smoothly rose into the sky.

As we zoomed past Mars, I waved at Zygan Intelligence's Deimos Outpost for good luck. That's kind of a superstition of mine. I do it every time I fly by Mars' moons. I didn't expect a comm back from the guard team on staff. Yoshi and Ajani were probably catching up on their sleep, now that the temporal vector shield was in place to protect Yeshua from additional "Sutherlands".

Once we'd cleared the asteroid belt, I engaged autopilot, leaned back in my jumpseat, and stretched my long arms and legs. For the next couple of hours, the greatest danger I'd be facing was to my eardrums—from the unbearable operas that Spud would play endlessly via our main speakers, just to get my goat. In the adjacent seat, my partner had pulled out a few of those 'monographs that he'd hoped to peruse' during the long voyage from his 'rucksack', and offered me a pick.

The most interesting article of the group was a report on "Determining Time of Death via the Measurement of Body Decomposition Parameters". I passed. I don't know why Spud even bothered reading those boring things anyway. He could directly upload tons more information in a tenth of the time. But, Spud was a bit of a Luddite at heart, and would sometimes opt to do things the old-fashioned way. I, on the other hand, have

never much cared for tradition. In my experience, it's just an excuse to keep the risk-averse from trying something new.

I don't often get a chance just to veg, what with the fourteen-hour days we put in on the set, and so, gazing out at the planets as we maneuvered through our solar system, I realized how much I'd missed being out in space. Next Monday, we were due back at the studio for our last week of filming for our first season. Maybe after that, I'd take a couple of days to tour the heavens before making my duty-bound pit stop with the family in Maryland. My social life? Yeah, Mr. Opera Fan riding shotgun and reading his 'monographs' was about it.

And if *Bulwark* was renewed for Season 2, I'd have to be back at work 15 hours a day on the set in August. I'd only have a couple of months to pick up the trail of my detective work tracking John's disappearance. The records of John's assignments for Zygint were unfortunately classified and top secret. Even as a full-fledged catascope, I didn't have access to that level of security. Not digitally, nor in person at Earth Core or Zygint Central. During our internship, I'd spent most of my off-duty hours researching John's activities, especially his projects for Zygint in the year before his disappearance. All I'd been able to discover was the name of his last mission: Project Helios. Once on hiatus, I was determined to resume the search full-time and find out what—

A flash caught my eye for an instant. I nudged Spud and pointed at our fore viewscreen towards Io, Jupiter's somewhat habitable moon where Zygint had our guard outpost for the outer planets, but neither of us could spy anything more. I sat back in my seat with a shrug. Maybe I'd just seen one of those sparkly things—floaters—that drift in the back of your eye, but, no, there it was again. Spud saw it this time, too. We looked at each other, and I engaged comm—with maximum encryption, of course.

"Io, Io Outpost, everything okay?"

Static. Were Hsin and Rawiri asleep, too? Or had something happened to keep them from responding? Like an Andart attack?

"Io Outpost, please respond." I tried not to let my voice betray my growing anxiety.

Static.

"Scan Broadband," I instructed the comm system to no avail. Still no answer from Io. This was very disturbing.

I looked at Spud. Now what? Obviously, we should go investigate and help our colleagues if they were in trouble. But, we were in the middle of a pretty important task ourselves. I nodded at our prisoner in the back.

"Do not even consider it," Spud admonished, then commed. "Deimos, Core, Condition Yellow at Io. Repeat, yellow. Wha—?"

I had swung our ship around in the shadow of Ganymede, another of Jupiter's moons, to get a closer look. Spud shut off comm and scowled at me.

"What the devil are you doing?" He was clearly angry.

"It'll take the Core team too long to get a patrol ship out here. I'm not leaving Io Outpost alone until back-up arrives."

"You do realize this could be a trap?" Spud argued.

I checked the scan holo to my right again. "Locator shows we're clear for miles. I'll move off right away if we get an incursion."

Spud didn't seem reassured. "By then it may be too late."

CRASH! We pitched forward, our ship somersaulting wildly like a football, an *American* football, rolling down a hill. Grav adjusters barely kept me from being knocked out of my jumpseat and slamming into the ship roof, but Spud, a few inches taller, wasn't quite so lucky, grunting loudly as his head cracked against the side windscreen.

I struggled back up into position, my eyes glued to the scan holo which still showed no enemy incursions. "Was that dark matter turbulence?!" I shouted as we continued to pitch.

"No, I theorize it was Benedict turbulence!" growled Spud, pointing over my shoulder.

I turned to look, and to my shock, saw that the cell behind us where we had so carefully secreted Sutherland was now empty!

"Where *is* he ...?" I gasped, hoping against hope that, as I stared, Sutherland would somehow magically reappear in his seat—to no avail.

Our navs had finally stabilized our Cruiser enough to slow it down; we were rocking gently forward like a sailboat adrift. We had been kicked way above the speed limit for this section of our solar system; and were now far beyond Io. Neptune loomed ahead.

"Snap. The trap has sprung. And the rat cannot escape," snorted Spud.

"But," I nodded at the empty cell, "he *did* escape."

"*We're* the rat, Rush." Spud sighed, "And—"

"Rush, Escott, can you hear us?" Comm barked on with a Teutonic accent.

Reluctantly, I answered, "Yes, Dieter. Where are you?"

"Just made Io Outpost. Everything's okay here. Hsin and Rawiri are fine. What is going on? Where are you?"

The dark side of Neptune had bathed us in shadows. I could barely make out the pursing of Spud's lips or the daggers in his eyes. My eyes were drawn once again to the chamber behind us from which our prisoner had slipped through our—*my*—hands. And it was my fault...

• • •

Maryland—five years ago

It had been my fault on Sugarloaf, too. John had taken me and our youngest brothers for a hike up to the top of the Maryland hill the autumn before he left. The Appalachian Trail winding through our nearby forests was shaded by a rainbow of colors each fall, maple and oak leaves displaying infinite hues of yellow, orange, and red. The boys were just barely able to handle the hikers' path up to the first lookout, but I was being tempted by the steeper slope off the trail which I knew I could climb, rock by rock, to the mountain's top.

When John took Billy behind a tree to pee for a moment, I yielded to the temptation and left Bobby standing alone on the path as I clambered up the rock wall, so appealingly inviting me to climb its face. Bobby, then only around ten years old, must have been more afraid of being abandoned in the woods than risking the climb, because I soon heard his voice a few feet below me on the slope. "Wait up!"

I looked down behind me and saw that Bobby was precariously hanging by two loose rocks at least forty feet off the ground. I blanched. If he fell, he could be seriously hurt—or worse. Attempting to reverse course and go down and help him, I slipped off the

ledge and slid several rough feet down the slope, barely missing knocking him off of his unsteady perch myself. I managed to stop my fall close to his trembling body, and tried unsuccessfully to guide his feet to a safe support. As he shifted, his grip on the rocks gave way and he tumbled screaming down the hill towards a large boulder below. I didn't dare look, fearing his head would be shattered against the sharp, massive granite. When I finally opened my eyes, there was Bobby, his bulky down jacket shredded and tattered, but his body intact and his grin genuine as he looked up at me from the safety of John's arms.

I kept apologizing as I sheepishly made my way down the slope, grateful that it was John and not Connie or George waiting for me below. John seemed to know how bad I felt and didn't bother with a lecture. He did, however, give me some valuable advice. One, if you're in trouble, ask for help. And two, first survive, then face the music. Lesson learned.

• • •

Outer Sol System—Present Day

"Location, Rush, where are you?" Derek repeated.

I didn't turn on comm for my answer. "In deep doo-doo. Not enough light-years away."

I knew where I had to go and what I had to do first.

• • •

Nav must've read my mind, because a split second later, we shifted into hyperdrive even before I'd finished saying the words. Now, normally, we're not supposed to go faster-than-light speeds until we've passed Eris orbit beyond Pluto, but, having failed so miserably at my task, there was no way I was heading back to our team on Io or on Earth right away—or letting them find me. There was still no sign of our attacker, invisible-ized or not, and I also didn't want to risk us getting hit again.

"Nav, power, and comm are operating normally," said Spud, his face buried in the holos before him. "For now. No physical damage to our vessel, but it is obvious we experienced a total system disrupt. Including," he added, shaking his head, "disruption of the E-shield."

"I don't understand how that could've happened," I said. E-shields were impenetrable. Or so I thought.

"Clearly." Spud sat back in his seat and rubbed his tender scalp. "Well, perhaps we can school ourselves on the finer points of shield operations as we're recovering from our upcoming sentence in Hell. Even Gary will not be able to placate Zygint Central or the Omega Archon when they find out we have lost Sutherland."

"Gary isn't going to have to. No way I'm heading back to Earth Core to face an inquiry."

"I know I'll be sorry I asked," Spud said with a ladle-full of irony, "but where exactly are we going?"

"Zyga. We need some help."

Spud was incredulous. "You're reluctant to go back to Earth Core after this disaster, and you're going to Zygint Central? They will send you directly to the Omega Archon."

I shook my head. “That’s not what I said. I’m going to Zyga to get help. Trust me.”

I won’t repeat Spud’s response. I didn’t understand all of the words, especially the Cockney slang, but there were a few I recognized that even *I* don’t feel comfortable telling you. With the angry silence so thick I could slice it, I had no choice but to settle in with the easiest Spud monograph I could find, and I spent the next couple of hours reluctantly learning about “Analysis of Fast-Acting Poisons in Human Excreta.” Somehow, considering our situation, it seemed an appropriate subject.

• • •

Warp-down usually happens automatically as we approach Mayall II, Zyga’s blue dwarf star. But this time, instead of approaching under the guidance of Zyga Traffic Control, I’d instructed nav to aim for our destination invisibly in stealth mode, using an entry paradigm I’d picked up on the “black market” at Mingferplatoi Academy.

“You’re making me nauseated,” Spud complained as our Cruiser pitched back and forth on a jagged path to avoid guard buoys.

“They’re not squibs,” I returned, referring to the FX explosives that blow the fake bullet holes in our Phaeton Alliance ship on the *Bulwark* set. “If we hit a buoy, we could actually get blown up.”

Spud glowered at me without saying another word.

In minutes, thanks to the paradigm, we were at Zyga apogee, and began our size adjustments. Most of Zyga’s inhabitants are substantially larger than typical creatures on Earth. So we could blend in with the residents, we enlarged (or, in Zygan argot, ‘mega’d) our ship and ourselves by a power of six. Still invisible, we eased down to the coordinates I’d designated, to the Kharybdian Enclave near the planet’s West Pole.

As the nucleus of the Zygan Federation, Zyga welcomes millions of temporary and permanent settlers from subject civilizations in the known universe. Many Zygfed citizens opt to assimilate and live in Zyga’s two largest Eastern cities, Mikkin and Aheya, but others prefer domiciles in isolated neighborhoods called Enclaves that duplicate the conditions of the residents’ home planets.

Some of these planets are Universe-renowned for their picturesque landscapes, awe-inspiring museums and monuments, and refreshing resorts. The planet Kharybdis unfortunately isn’t one of them. Kharybdis is famous for its ever-present dense layer of grimy nimbus clouds that drown the planet’s few islands on a daily basis in torrents of rain. I really thought that Spud, having grown up in wet and chilly England, would have an affinity for the Kharybdian climate, so well duplicated in its Zygan Enclave. No such luck. Spud’s grumbling began the minute he exited our parked Cruiser and stepped into the adjacent footpath’s ankle-deep mud. Cursing, Spud micro’d our ship and stuffed it into his rucksack. Singularly unenthusiastic, he set off slogging behind me through the mire towards our destination.

“I would much prefer to be suffering through *Ivanhoe* at Covent Garden . . .,” was the only audible comment from Spud during our trek.

A spiky drizzle bored sharply into our bare faces, already reddened from the cold. Despite having donned Ergal-ed raincoats, we were both drenched and dirty by the time we reached the coral door of our former classmate Eikhus’s thal, a ochre structure that resembled a giant conch shell.

Nerea, a sparkling clear, animated whirlpool, answered the door, exclaiming in high-pitched Zygan, “Shiloh, William!”

Her spray was refreshing, and helped rinse off some of the mud from our clothes. I squeaked back quickly, “Shhh ... can we come in?”

“Sure,” she misted, opening the door wide for us to enter. “You need to see Eikhus, I suppose.”

“The sooner the better,” I nodded as we stepped into the guest level of their home. I lowered my voice. “Benedict.”

Nerea paled. Which was difficult, as her fluid cone-shaped body was already transparent. It had been less than two years since one of Benedict’s fusion torpedo terrorist attacks had destroyed the Kharybdian city where her parental tributaries had flowed. The heat released from the bomb’s massive explosion had instantly evaporated all the aquatic life forms in her now decimated village, including most of her family. Somber, she led us into the cavern-like sitting room, and offered us some drinks which we gratefully accepted. We sat on moist seashells which resembled truncated stalagmites and waited for her brother.

Eikhus, a mighty cylindrical vortex, arrived within the hour. Not wishing to have to dry off again, I slipped through his welcoming arms, but Spud wasn’t totally able to avoid his soggy hug, to my fervent amusement and Spud’s obvious annoyance. Nerea brought us up a tray of thikia, and, munching the tasty seaweed, I gave Eikhus a rundown of recent events.

“We don’t know where he went,” I concluded about Saul, “or *how* he went.”

“I suspect it was some type of time-traveling X-fan,” added Spud, frowning. “But the cell was supposed to have been E-shielded by Earth Core.”

A frightening thought occurred to me. I turned to Spud. “You don’t think Sutherland went back to Sidon...to finish his assignment?”

Spud shook his head. “Not with that temporal vector shield in place. It would be impossible for him to penetrate it.” A pause. “One hopes.”

“Then we’re back to square one.”

Eikhus, ever more and more somber, threw out a wet hand. “*Earth* has temporal vector shields?”

“Not until now,” I responded, brushing the mist off my windbreaker.

“That *is* curious,” Eikhus said. “Temporal vector shields are very complex, tricky to install.”

“We figure someone from Zygint Central must have put it in place,” Spud continued. “When they discovered Benedict’s plans for temporal attacks.”

“But after Saul had already gotten to Yeshua,” I added. “Convenient.”

Eikhus looked at us, concerned. “How many Andarts do you think Benedict’s planted for this campaign?”

Spud shook his head. “We do not know. Nor where they might be.”

“Right now, we need to find *one*. Saul.” I corrected, “Sutherland.”

“Sutherland?!” Eikhus misted us both once again. “You *are* serious?”

“Gary informed us he was one of Benedict’s lieutenants,” said Spud.

“One? He’s third in command of Benedict’s operation! If Sutherland was the Andart, this wasn’t just a small-scale guerilla attack. We’re talking prime mission.”

Spud and I looked at each other in alarm. I frowned, “What in the world—in the universe—was Benedict hoping to achieve on Earth?” A small planet at the edge of a small galaxy that was still in cosmic diapers as far as Zygfed was concerned.

Spud looked equally troubled, and, barred from indulging in his stinky smoking habit in the company of the Kharybdians, grabbed a stylus from his pocket and chewed on it as he pondered.

“I think we should comm the gang—emergency meeting,” Eikhus stated with an urgent squeak. “These are deep waters.”

“Good idea,” I nodded.

Eikhus sidled over to his holo, drew in his limbs and became fully cylindrical. He started rotating fiercely, forming a torrential waterspout with a growing caudal appendage that reached out to wash over the holo screen.

Spud pulled his hoodie over his head and headed for the opposite corner of the room. His back to us, he huddled to avoid the collateral spray. I sighed as I wiped the moisture from my eyes. Sometimes Spud can be so rude!

After a few minutes of spinning, Eikhus wound down and faced me. “They’ll meet us at Matshi’s kalyvi. It’ll be safer there.” He glanced at Nerea. “Let’s go.”

Eikhus added a few words to his sister in Kharybdian, then pointedly turned and flung a sheet of water at Spud’s back. “No offense taken.”

Dripping from head to toe, Spud reluctantly followed us out of the thal, pausing only to thank Nerea on our behalf for her hospitality.

We set off once again along the banks of a muddy rivulet, and, shivering, trudged slowly, sloshing step by step, towards the outskirts of Eikhus’ village. I broke the chilly silence. “Where are we headed?” I asked Eikhus once we were out of earshot (and mist-shot) of passers-by. “The Chidurian Enclave,” Eikhus said. “They’ll be waiting.”

Spud’s tone was dry, unlike the rest of him. “I dread to ask, but who are ‘they’?”

“A few of your old friends,” Eikhus returned with a wry smile. “And a few of your old enemies.”

• • •

An hour later, Eikhus had brought us to a hundred-foot waterfall that crashed into a turbulent whirlpool below the small, slippery ledge under our feet. Behind the splashing cascade was a small opening to a tiny cave that led to a dark, narrow tunnel, which, lit by our Ergals, seemed to go on forever. Eikhus led the way, and Spud gladly walked behind me, as far away from Eikhus as possible, as we squeezed single file through the winding, cramped passage. With every step, the ground below us became drier and drier, save for the moisture of Eikhus’s occasional sweat balls. Our Ergals kept us bathed in halos of light, and we marched forward like incandescent ants.

“And we’re not M-fanning in to the Chidurian Enclave why?” Spud asked, irritated.

Eikhus hesitated. “I’m not exactly *persona grata* there.”

“How does that not surprise me.”

“Spud!” I scolded. Eikhus’s expulsion from Mingferplatoi was still a painful subject. The Kharybdian’s abrupt eruption after learning of Benedict’s devastating raid on his home planet had almost drowned two classmates—and had led to questions about his solidity under pressure and his fitness to be a Zygint operative. Reminding Eikhus of those humiliating events was not very kind at all. Spud did sometimes tend to be a little

deficient in his social skills ... and his empathy. Besides, he should know that M-fanning could leave unwanted tracks, in case our colleagues at Zygint Central developed a yen to locate us for being AWOL.

After another hour of hiking, we climbed above ground and found ourselves behind a field of Sabras, tall cactus-like trees, inside the periphery of Zyga's Chidurian Enclave, avoiding detection—we hoped. The planet Chiduri, located at the tip of Orion's sword, is noted for its parched desert climate, baked by giant star Hatsya's three suns. A testament to Zygan bioecological technology, the Chidurian Enclave was, unfortunately, as hot and dry as the planet Chiduri itself. I began to long for the relative chill of desert Sidon. One glance at Spud's face revealed that he was equally distressed by the literally hellish conditions.

We'd ditched our parkas and raingear and Ergaled ourselves into beige hooded robes. The blistering heat now actually made us grateful for Eikhus's cooling perspiration, and we stayed close by our companion for the last kilometer of our journey as we crept down deserted back alleys and dusty roads.

To reach Matshi's kalyvi, his cave-like dwelling, we would unfortunately need to cross some busy streets. In order to avoid the curious gazes of the crab-like Chidurian pedestrians, Eikhus misted himself on us, with Spud's grudging approval. Looking appropriately sweaty for a pair of tourists to the Enclave, we made our way to Matshi's kalyvi across the crowded thoroughfares, dodging combatively-driven six-wheeled vehicles called autogamils. Chidurian drivers are among the most aggressive in the Universe, which, I suspect, is why many of Zyga's best fighter pilots are Chidurian.

Fortunately, we arrived at our destination in one piece. Except for Eikhus of course, who was still dispersed on us as scattered sweatdroplets. Matshi, a seven-foot crustacean sporting a purple anorak that draped over his cephalothorax and his eight appendages, answered our knock.

Our former classmate led us into the kalyvi with solely a nod. The moist coolness of the cave was a sharp contrast to the desert outside, and Eikhus was quickly able to merge back into a slightly less viscous and more whole version of himself.

Declining to crabwalk, we crawled underground down a low-ceilinged circular passageway for what seemed like several storeys, passing closed doors along the way. By the time we reached our destination, Eikhus had grown back to nearly his full height and density, and had left behind a trail of moisture on the ceiling which dripped back upon our heads. This time, Spud didn't complain.

As we entered the cavernous gathering room, my jaw dropped. Seated around a large table were some of Mingferplatoi's most illustrious drop-outs: Ulenem, a chameleon Madai Assassin from Orion Alpha; Setsei and Suthsi, Meiate siblings from the planet Ytra; Nephil Stratum, a cloud-like Syneph from the Plegma; and Sarion, a Comic from the planet Megara. So many classmates I hadn't seen since my early days of catascope training almost two years before.

"Magnificent," Spud muttered with no little irony. "I have died and gone to juvie."

Matshi wasn't as diplomatic as Eikhus. He faced Spud with a sneer. "I see you've still got a rod up your—"

"Thank you," Eikhus interjected quickly, soaking Matshi's robe. He turned to face the group. "Thank you all for coming."

Murmurs of greetings in five different languages came our way. I responded with the Zygan squeaks expressing friendship and gratitude, and nudged Spud to take an empty seat next to mine at the table. He forced a smile and mumbled a half-hearted Zygan, "Hello."

Matshi offered us mugs of soothing Chidurian ale to sip as we began to tell our story. A drop of Chidurian ale is reported to not only refresh tired travelers like us, but repair mitochondrial breakdown in muscle cells and enhance muscular development. The drink is like 'roids in a bottle. And the effect lasts for months. That's why the ale is a budget-buster outside of the planet Chiduri and its Zygan Enclave. Chidurians serving as soldiers and guards throughout Zygfed, who can't afford even a sip, speak longingly of returning home and indulging once again in their native nectar.

Well indulged, and appropriately grateful, Spud and I related the singular events and experiences of the past few days. After filling in the group, I summed it up. "So, we've absolutely got to find Sutherland."

"You mean Benedict," Nephil Stratum said, her pearly nebulous cloud-like tufts shimmering as she spoke.

Maybe her Ergal had mistranslated? "Sutherland," I repeated.

"No, I *mean* Benedict," she insisted. "If what you say is true, that the E-shield on your ship was breached, it has to be Benedict. Getting his buddy out of trouble."

Spud shook his head. "Seems unlikely. There is no loyalty among thieves."

I jabbed him in the arm, and nodded at Nephil Stratum. "I think you've got something there. But, it's more likely Benedict grabbed Sutherland to keep him from spilling his guts."

Perched on a tall stool that dwarfed his solid reptilian two-foot frame, Ulenem the Assassin jeered as he twirled his sharp athame dagger like a baton between his limbs. "Spilling his guts would be better," Ulenem said, his lizard-green skin turning menacingly spinach-colored.

Setsei, who resembled a four-foot tall beige apostrophe, quickly moved his seat a few inches away with both his right hands to avoid the spinning blade of the Madai weapon. From the head portion at the top of his smooth ovate body, he emitted the Ytran version of a dramatic sigh. "Well, peachy keen. All we have to do is break into Benedict's command center—wherever that is—kidnap Sutherland, and get out alive. Oops, that last part ... not so easy ..." His meiate and mirror image, Suthsi, was clearly nervous, sliding closer and wrapping his two left arms and his flagella around his partner. "Not so easy," Suthsi echoed.

Nephil Stratum's own snowy hue turned a darker shade of gray. She drifted over to face us. "Hate to rain on your parade, but it may not be as hard as you think." She broke off a small tuft of cottony vapor and levved it to the center of the table. It misted open and revealed a small multihedron gem that sparkled with hundreds of colors. In a few moments, the sparkles dissolved to reveal a life-size holo of Benedict before us in the flesh.

I gasped. Sitting only a few feet away from me was the vicious outlaw reputed to have killed thousands of Zygons in his quest to overthrow His Highness. I was grateful that Benedict's body was halved by the table, reassuring us that he was only a holo. Still, my reflexes trumped my rationality. My practiced fingers had crept to my Ergal and were gripping it tightly as I watched.

Benedict was clutching a tablet on which he was scratching furiously with a stylus. The low resolution of the holo didn't allow us to see what he was writing, but his mutterings sounded like he was trying to solve some mathematical problem. "Alpha ... m-c squared ... equation ... trapezalnitaks ... summeldare ... ram ... catastrophe ..."

Suddenly, his face lit up and he cried, "Eureka!" He looked up and, to my alarm, seemed to scan the room, his fierce blue eyes finally resting in my direction with a piercing, icy stare. I kept telling myself 'it's just a holo', but, faced with that penetrating gaze, I couldn't suppress a cold shiver that bored all the way down to my spine.

And then, to my immense relief, Benedict disappeared. I heard several deep breaths echoing mine from around our table.

Matshi was the first to speak. He looked at Nephil Stratum with admiration. "How'd you do that?"

Spud interjected, "Irrelevant. Where was he, and what was he doing?"

Matshi's face looked appropriately annoyed.

"Short answer, Matshi, dark matter," Nephil Stratum appeased her host. "Zygint Central constantly monitors 'beings of interest'. Unfortunately, without an auxiliary energy source I can only keep the download going for a few minutes."

"You tapped into Zygint's comm feeds!" Awesome. I was impressed.

Nephil Stratum nodded. "I honestly can't determine where Benedict is," she continued, responding to Spud. "But, obviously at least one comm specialist at Central knows, because they're tracking him live. It looks like ... someone will have to go to Zygint Headquarters to get that information."

The knot in my stomach returned as the entire group turned and looked at me.

• • •

Yes, I still carried a Zygan Intelligence ID. *If* it hadn't already been pulled. But my actions had caused us to lose Sutherland. And, rather than returning to face the music, I'd gone on the run. I was absent without leave, and Gary had probably already reported me to Headquarters as a violator. If I went to Zygint Central Headquarters as myself, Shiloh Rush, I'd probably be busted with my very first WHO entry scan. And, if I *was* caught, I'd likely be sent to face the terrifying judgment of the Omega Archon. I'd be kicked out of the Zygint corps, and, at the mercy of His Highness' harsh code of justice, I could end up ... a corpse.

On the other hand, my actions had caused us to lose Sutherland. I *was* the natural choice to take the risk.

My only chance to succeed in tracking Benedict's location would be to M-fan into Zygint Headquarters disguised as another Terran, and one who would have easy clearance for Central Comm. Going as Gary was out. He was a well-known player at Zygint, and my acting skills weren't *that* good.

"Everett Weaver?" Spud suggested, his tone clearly ironic.

Just envisioning pretending to be dorky Ev for even a few moments made me nauseated.

"What about the nice one?" Nephil Stratum offered. "The one you said had fixed your ship."

Wart ... Ward Burton. Now, that sounded better. Wart was high-level enough to have access to Central Comm, but he rarely made the hours-long trip from Earth to Zyga,

so he probably wouldn't be well known by the Central team. That would work in my favor. It would be a little, uh, embarrassing to be the second Wart identified trying to enter Headquarters while the real one was already there. I nodded. "Good idea. Okay, I'll go in as Wart."

When we were on assignment, we were allowed to use our Ergals to anamorph our superficial appearance and dress. It would be easy enough to Ergal my appearance to look like the tall, African-American man in his early thirties who I'd be pretending to be. With a change in my surface appearance, I might even be able to skate through the WHO scans at Headquarters entry. But, if I had to make it through the deeper NDNA scans to get into Comm, I'd be in trouble. I was going to have to bite the bullet and mute; that is, Ergal the change into Wart all the way down to my DNA nucleotides. Unfortunately, muting without high-level authorization was a grave violation of Zygan policy. If arrested, I'd probably be immediately dragged before the Omega Archon, and face a years-long sentence burning in the flames of Hell.

"What the hell," Sarion returned, attempting a joke. "Losing Sutherland, you're probably already marked for the flames anyway."

I smiled weakly at the Megaran's humor. I had only experienced a few minutes of the Omega Archon's punishment, and prayed that I would never experience such torture again. But, I had no choice. Spud had courageously offered, through clenched teeth, to go with me to Zygint. I patted him on the back and declined. It'd been my fault we'd lost Sutherland—I should never have stopped to help at Io—so it was up to me to take on the danger, and the risks, myself. Alone.

Nephil Stratum had me crypto-commed (wired) as invisibly as possible. It did give me a boost of courage to know that the gang was monitoring me from the cave, and maybe could mount a rescue if something did go wrong. I thanked my erstwhile classmates for their support once again, and, with a final glance at Spud, who reflected my anxious gaze, I set off for the headquarters of Zygan Intelligence.

Not wanting to leave tracer tracks that might lead back to Matshi's kalyvi, I dragged myself, muted as Wart, through the baking, dusty streets to the transport station in the center of the Chidurian Enclave, and X-fanned to Mikkin, Zyga's capital city. I M-fanned directly into the cool, soft clouds that enveloped the base of Zygint's Headquarters, relishing their comforting softness as I floated towards the entrance of the tall thomeo.

Zygint Central Headquarters was modeled after typical Orion-thomeo architecture, mile-high skyscrapers with broad bases that narrow as one rises to the higher storeys. From a distance, a thomeo looks like an enormous ice cream cone turned upside down and driven into the ground.

I have to admit I was pretty nervous as I approached the WHO scan for entry to the building. Would the scanner be able to tell that I had muted into Wart? I held my breath as the light washed over my tall, male torso, almost gasping with relief as the door opened to let me into the busy lobby. Acting—and I mean, acting—relaxed, I ambled towards the lifts for the ninety-ninth floor (which, like all Zygan numbers, was in Base Twelve) and the Comm Center, which had housed the feed Nephil Stratum's jewel had tapped.

Central's Communications Center, which took up an entire floor of the thomeo, was the size of a football stadium, and was filled with scenic holos from practically every populated planet in Zygfed. And beyond. As I searched the holos for signs of Benedict, I

couldn't avoid pausing at a halaropool scene to catch my breath. The beauty of the Megaran spa truly calmed me, if only for a few moments.

Reluctantly, I walked on, making my way to the far end of the room. Holo of Benedict, unfortunately, didn't seem to be running in the main chamber. I would have to appeal for entry into a more secure level of the Comm Center—and pass through the dreaded NDNA scan!

Changing my DNA into Wart's had meant that, courtesy of my Ergan, my brain cells had been transformed and now contained his neurocache. The NDNA scan would recognize my brain's neurocache patterns as belonging to Ward Burton, of course. But, to maintain my own consciousness inside his body, I, or rather my Ergan, had had to encrypt my own neurocache among Wart's. Would the NDNA scan reveal that "Wart's" neurocache patterns were subtly different than those stored in Zygfed's records from earlier scans?

I couldn't let those seeds of doubt be read by the scanner. I had to ensure my anxious thoughts wouldn't arouse suspicion. I'm really glad I took those boring classes in method acting after all. As I approached the portal to Security Level C, I started repeating silently to myself: *I am Ward Burton. I am Ward Burton.*

The scanner's probe entered my brain. "Purpose of entry?"

Ward Burton, Ward Burton. Urgent comm from Terra Core.

"Scan in progress."

Ward Burton. Ward Burton.

"Scan completed."

The pause seemed frighteningly long. I struggled to stay calm. Finally, to my relief, the portal door I was facing opened to allow me entry into Security Level C. I wandered in slowly, breathing deeply to steady my nerves, and searched among the rows of holo displays filling this smaller suite for the holo station that displayed our target.

Most of the holos I passed in this suite seemed to be of various Benedict cronies, who went about their nefarious business unaware that Zygint was watching their every move. There was still no sign of Benedict on any of the screens.

I stopped, stunned. Right next to me, a holo displayed a life-size Sutherland, robed and bearded as Saul once again. Judging from the background, he *did* seem to be back in Sidon, or, more accurately, marching down that same path to the city Tyre that Yeshua and the Keeper had recently taken after bidding us good-bye. Despite the temporal vector shield! I turned to face the holo, hoping that the team monitoring me at Matshi's could see what I saw, too.

"The evil eye knows," a human voice boomed in my ear.

It took all my training not to startle. I turned to see a short, portly man who looked vaguely familiar. Had I met him at Mingferplatoi? No, no, at Central, last year. What was his name? Carl. Carlton Platt. Never liked him, but, Wart, Ward Burton, probably does. I bestowed him with Wart's friendly grin. "Hey, Carl, you sound like an old DJ."

"Because it's from an old radio [\[10\]](#)show, 'The Shadow'," he did the voice again, "The Shadow knows ..."

"Ah," I said and forced a chuckle.

"But little do *they* know," Carl nodded at the other holos, then pointed to Sutherland. "Good job, buddy. On both ends."

I was ready to blurt out that Sutherland's escape wasn't really my fault when I remembered I was Ward Burton. I said carefully, "Thanks ..." *What did I—Wart—do that was 'a good job'?*

"Let's go for a walk," Carl whispered to me in a conspiratorial tone, as he motioned for his neighbor to cover his station.

I nodded, swallowing hard to clear the knot in my chest. Was he inviting Ward Burton, or had he sussed out it was me?

• • •

"We're shielded here," Platt assured me as we eased into the comfortable couches in the lounge. "Great work." I nodded again. "Means a lot," I punted. "Benedict's very happy," Carl added with a broad smile.

"Great," I answered instinctively, before it hit me. *Oh, my God! They're inside! Benedict's Andarts are inside Zygint!* My hand quietly inched towards my Ergal. And Wart, our Wart, was one of them!

"The one hundred mil in Deltan credits we promised are in the Krøneckðr account,"^[11] Platt continued smoothly. "But—"

I tensed. "But?"

Carlton spread his hands open. "Look, you're still uncontaminated. Why don't you wait until Sutherland cleans up in Phoenecia and *then* mute away. Until he's done, we might still need you."

"Is that a request ...?" I said quietly.

Carl's tone got cold. "Benedict always asks."

I smiled, and waved a hand in the best Wartian style. "Well, then, what do you think? Of course."

Carl's features relaxed. He leaned over and slapped me on the back. "That's my buddy. How 'bout we go get some lunch?"

• • •

I managed to get away from Carlton over the salad, feigning an upset stomach. But exiting Central would be almost as dicey as getting in. I was shaken to the bone to discover that our Wart was a traitor, and worried that my anger and disappointment at his betrayal would be picked up by the NDNA scan on my way out. As the scanner light washed over me, I tried visualizing Wart's delightful sense of humor and remembered his friendly welcome and support when Spud and I were starting as green catascopes at Earth Core. The technique fortunately worked, and I was able to hold back my tears until I'd made it through the lobby of the tall spire and out into the comforting blanket of clouds once again.

As soon as the mist had enveloped me, I Ergaled back to Matshi's kalyvi. Grateful to be muted back into Shiloh, I sat quietly in my chair, shaking my head. Spud was as shocked as I'd been. Not only had Benedict's men infiltrated Zygint, but, incomprehensibly, our well-liked colleague Ward Burton, too, was a Benedict mole!

"That certainly explains how Sutherland escaped," Spud said bitterly, adding for the others' benefit, "Ward Burton filed our nav plan and prepared our transport cell."

"There was never an E-shield ...," I muttered.

“I doubt it, too,” Spud said. “He left the cage door open, and Sutherland was free as a bird.” Frowning, he added, “Assuming he was even in the cell at all.”

“You mean a holo? No wonder he wasn’t talking, or even moving much.”

Spud nodded. “As regards to shields, Carlton told you that Sutherland was cleaning up back in Sidon. If Central *had* put a temporal vector shield around Sidon— as Gary had said—how could Sutherland get past it to go back there?”

The thought alarmed me. “Maybe everybody at Earth Core’s dirty ...,” I whispered, unconsciously shifting away from Spud. Was there *anyone* I could trust?

Spud caught my move, and looked genuinely hurt. “Not everyone,” he added quietly.

Oops. I winced. “I’m sorry ... I didn’t mean ...” Matshi stepped in. “It is a good question, Escott. How did Sutherland get through the temporal vector shield back to Sidon?”

“I am only theorizing here,” Spud said, “but after we brought Sutherland to Earth Core and sent him to the holding suite, Wart could’ve hacked through the shield and shot Sutherland back to Sidon to finish his mission. Nobody else at Core would have those skills. Our whole transport could’ve been staged with an avatar to fool us, Gary, the Drexels, and anyone else who is dirt-free.” He stressed the last two words with an edge in his voice.

Regretful, I tried to pat his arm, but he pulled away. Ulenem laughed heartily at our gullibility. “You Terrans are so naive.”

Eikhus looked at us and asked, “Let’s just assume Spud’s right. What do we do next?”

I shrugged, adding through clenched teeth. “Obviously, we have to go back to Sidon and catch Sutherland once more.” The thought suddenly struck me: how *had* Sutherland caught on to us so quickly as impostors in Sidon, unless he’d been warned by someone? Wart, again?

Apparently, Spud was thinking on the same track. “Our covers have been blown. Either we go back with our DNA muted, or someone else can.” He looked around the table. “In any case, if it is we, we cannot let Core know we have resumed our quest.”

I agreed. “Wart probably has put a DNA tracer alert in the vector shield to notify him and track us if we show up.”

Matshi raised two hands. “Then, we’ll go. Ulenem and I can do it.”

Sneering, Ulenem pulled out his athame and ran a finger across its blade.

“You sure?” I asked. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ll be expecting a rescue.”

Matshi looked at his friend. “We’re up for it.”

Ulenem twirled his serrated blade once again and nodded with a broad smirk. Friends since childhood, Matshi and Ulenem had been inseparable during their first months of training at Mingferplatoi. When Matshi’d had his crisis of conscience and decided to drop out of the Academy, Ulenem had reluctantly given up his own ambitions of serving as a Zygan combat hero and followed his lifelong comrade into a relatively obscure career as mercenaries, soldiers-for-hire. The last two years had seen them waste their talents as partners-for-hire on several trivial missions for planetary security and police departments, or as Ulenem had complained dourly, “plucking Felisils^[12] out of trees.” They were both, obviously, itching to get back into big-league action.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice cracking. “We owe you.”

Spud glared at them both and said firmly, “Alive. We need Sutherland alive.”

Chapter 5

Tyre

Phoenecia—two thousand years ago

Getting Matshi and Ulenem through the temporal vector shield had been easier than we expected. Wart must've sneaked in a few loopholes, Spud surmised. He estimated we'd have a good chance to break through the vector shield and find our targets by using a Trojan horse. In our case, our Trojan horse was, literally, a Trojan horse. Ostentatious in the imperial Roman sculpture tradition, the colossal marble statue of Homer's equine was M-fanned by my Eikhus-modified Ergal onto the grounds of a Tiberian governor's expansive estate on the outskirts of Tyre. As soon as nightfall hit, our friends opened the portal in the horse's belly, and crept outside. Why reinvent the wheel?

I'd let the pair borrow my Ergal to deploy during their mission, hoping that we could rescue Yeshua—and our assignment—before anyone at Central found out. Matshi, anamorphed into human form, still looked, frankly, scary. With his seven-foot height, he towered over most of the villagers on the road to Tyre, and his broad thorax, its exoskeleton covered by Ergaled human skin gave him the muscular appearance of a heavyweight fighter. Ulenem, whose normal height was less than two feet, had, in his human disguise, mega'd himself to look only slightly shorter and less bulked up than Matshi. And, he was equally intimidating, even with his athame and other weapons hidden in the folds of his robes.

Raised in warm environments, both men were much more comfortable in the hot, dry desert than Spud and I had been. With Ergals translating, their Phoenecian and Latin were passable, though Matshi did have a tendency to over-roll his R's.

Once inside the city limits, they quickly set up a skins (a large tent made of gamil leather) on a deserted rocky ridge dotted with chaparral, from which they had a good view of the part of town favored by immigrant laborers, many from Judea. It was likely that Yeshua could be found among them. If Matshi and Ulenem succeeded in getting to Yeshua before Sutherland did, they could hopefully prevent the youth's murder, preserve Earth's timeline, and recapture Sutherland for us once again.

At sunrise, Matshi stuck a head out of the skins and shivered. He said to Ulenem, "It's only 321 degrees Kelvin, bundle up."

The Assassin snorted. "Earth's always in an Ice Age." He draped his body and his weapons with several layers of robes, and quickly joined his partner on the trek to the workers' camps in the valley below.

Zygint's monitoring of Sutherland had included contact metrics for his location, most valuably date and time. We'd figured we'd give our team a head start to reach Bar Maryam first and, using the data from the Zygint holo, sent them back in a few days earlier than Sutherland was due to arrive. Unfortunately, none of us had contact metrics on Yeshua. Matshi and Ulenem had to find him the old-fashioned way, pounding the pavement.

The young warriors took that instruction somewhat to heart, and didn't waste time with the niceties Spud and I had favored. Going from tent to tent in the immigrants' settlements, they impressed the migrant workers with forceful questions on the

whereabouts of a Yeshua or a Saul. Matshi's report is a little sketchy on the details of their interrogations at this point, but he does note that the results of their efforts led them on several wild goose chases—Matshi uses a more colorful idiom— based on inaccurate answers from what I suspect were terrified and desperate browbeaten victims.

Finally, after a couple of days of unsuccessful pursuits, Matshi opted to try a different tactical approach. Several of the “interviewed” workers had identified a gathering place about three kilometers on the other side of town that was used as a temple by some of the more devout immigrants. Matshi urged his partner to join him at the site.

“It is too late,” Ulenem averred, twirling his athame. “We must first go ambush Sutherland. Then we have all the time in the world to find the boy.”

“The Zygint holo showed that Sutherland should be arriving at the road to Tyre in four and a half hours,” Matshi advised, checking the contact metrics on his Ergal. “We still have time to make the ambuscade if Yeshua turns out not to be at this temple.”

Ulenem wasn't easily convinced, but in the end he reluctantly agreed to accompany his friend. Leaving the warmth and goodwill of the camp residents behind them, or not, Matshi and Ulenem set off for the Temple on the Hill.

The Temple was a stone building of two storeys with wooden doors surrounded by shady cedar trees. Shivering, Matshi pulled his robes tighter and waved for his partner to follow him inside.

The temple's ground storey was divided into two discrete areas, empty except for lonely rough benches of pine, and dimly lit by a few weak rays of sunshine that peeked through fissures in the stone wall. At the opposite end of the room, was a charred, stained stone structure. Across it, a man in colorful robes, his back to Matshi and Ulenem, was bent over a table poring over an unrolled scroll. The temple's priest, no doubt, Matchi estimated.

The odor of incense pervaded throughout the chamber, and Matshi coughed to clear his throat. As the men entered, the robed man turned to reveal an exceedingly long black beard hanging almost to his waist. He walked up and greeted his visitors with more than a hint of suspicion.

“You are the strangers,” he said warily in Aramaic.

Matshi didn't mince Ergaled words. “Clearly.” He took a step closer, towering over the cleric. “Where is Yeshua? Is he here?”

The priest calmly responded, “Who?”

“Yeshua Bar Maryam,” Matshi announced, scanning the room as Ulenem drew his athame and started slowly running his fingers across the shiny flat surface.

The cleric calmly studied the visitors for a long moment, finally saying in Hebrew, “Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.” After a pause, he added, this time in Aramaic, “They are here.”

Matshi looked at Ulenem, frowning. They?

“Well, then,” the Chidurian ordered the Temple host, “take us.”

The priest hesitated at first, but relented after Ulenem placed the tip of his athame gently against the cleric's ribs. He led them carefully up a narrow flight of wooden stairs at the rear of the building to a stuffy attic. From the doorjamb, the Zygans could see the attic was filled with rows of pine tables and benches, at which bearded old men sat reading scrolls of parchment and papyrus under the anemic rays of sunlight trickling

through the gaps in the walls of oak and stone. In a distant corner, sat our targets, Yeshua and Saul, their heads together, studying a scroll.

“So much for Zygant contact metrics,” Matshi muttered.

Ulenem pulled his partner back towards the steps. “Saul has not killed him yet,” Ulenem whispered in Zygan. “That is good—and stupid.”

“There are rules even for Benedict’s team, I expect.” Matshi returned. “A public execution could be more damaging to the timeline than Benedict intends.” He nodded at Ulenem. “Why don’t we go say ‘hello’.”

With a lightness of step born of their training as hunters, Matshi and Ulenem each crept to one side of the ostensibly studious pair. Matshi observed a Zygan stun gun with the knife point that, concealed from the others, was aimed at Yeshua’s abdomen. Giving a visual signal to Matshi, Ulenem lunged towards Sutherland’s arm and knocked the gun out of his hand. Before Sutherland could spin around and fight back, Ulenem had grabbed the Andart by the shoulders, pulled his arms behind him, and snapped them briskly into the firm Zygan handcuffs called cherukles. Meanwhile, Matshi had pulled Yeshua up and back out of his chair, a harder task than he had expected. So slight in appearance, Yeshua was actually quite muscular and very strong. Matshi thought it’d be best to cheruklize his captive, too, just in case. Having to stun Yeshua in front of the now wide-eyed scholars to carry him out of the loft would raise even more questions than a fancy pair of handcuffs.

All eyes in the attic were now focused upon the Zygons and their prisoners. Ulenem once again had drawn his athame, and rested it gently against Sutherland’s throat to discourage any thoughts of intervention by his fellow scholars.

“Return to your studies,” Ulenem barked at them. Most did so obediently, to his visible disgust.

Backs to the wall, the Zygons pushed their prisoners towards the door, out of the attic library, and marched them down the stairs; the Assassin and Saul in the lead, Matshi and Yeshua following behind.

Midway down, Sutherland’s sandal caught on the uneven wood and he stumbled forward. Ulenem reacted quickly, but not quickly enough. As he fell, Sutherland ejected a microstunner from his sandal with his toes. The Assassin jumped to the side and reached in his robes to pull out his knife, but the tiny missile caught half of its prey; Ulenem’s arm remained hanging and frozen, useless, along with the right side of his body. The Assassin quickly lost his balance and started tumbling down the stairs. Sutherland had already rolled down to the landing, and with an impressive gymnastic contortion, slipped his cuffed hands out from under his legs to the front. Leaping to the bottom of the stairwell, Sutherland whipped out a second stun gun from his robes. He sprayed a dispersed laser blast at the adjacent floors, ceilings, and walls, which, made of an extremely dry wood, ignited fiercely and sent waves of dense smoke and flame up the passageway towards the second floor.

Matshi had been able to hold his breath, along with his captive, for the first few minutes, but Ulenem, without full control of his torso, had tumbled helplessly down directly into a wall of flame. Matshi’s choice was clear. Releasing Yeshua, he raced down the stairs and leaped onto his partner, rolling him out of the ring of fire onto a cooler area of ash and stone. Alarmed, Matshi noted that the fire had already melted some layers of Ulenem’s Ergaled cover, and his underlying green skin, some of which was now charred to a dull gray, peeked through. Though clearly in pain, Ulenem gazed up

gratefully at his friend. Uttering a curse in Izmal, the language of the Madai assassins, he croaked, “Took them long enough to warm the place up.”

Matshi rubbed his partner’s hair and eyed the rivers of flame creeping towards them, “Just let me catch the bastard!”

“Already out the front door,” Ulenem said ruefully. “Where’s the kid?”

It was Matshi’s turn to curse. He had left Yeshua on the stairs, which had just collapsed into a flaming pyre. Screams from the attic had grown louder, as the fire had spread to and ignited the dry leaves and branches of the overhanging cedar trees which had then set fire to the shake roof. The attic above had become an inferno, showering torrents of ash and flesh, and chips of wood and bone onto the first floor.

“He’s ... gone,” Matshi said slowly, staring with fury at the blaze. A burning wood beam crashed just inches from their heads. “And we’ve got to get out of here!”

“Ergal!” cried Ulenem.

“Right here,” Matshi shuffled through his robes. “Hold on to me.”

They X-fanned just as the entire second storey of the temple collapsed on the floor where they had lain moments before.

• • •

The Chidurian Enclave, Zyga—present day

Back in the kalyvi, we’d lost track of Matshi and Ulenem after they’d Ergaled back in time. Getting the Trojan horse through Wart’s loophole had been a stroke of good fortune. But, there was a very good chance we’d be expected, and they would be monitoring for our Ergals and DNA. Matshi knew to use my Ergal only for emergencies so it couldn’t be picked up and tracked easily, ruling out his sending us a continuous live feed. Even occasional routine communications would be pushing our luck.

We had hoped that our men would find Sutherland and be back out of Tyre in less than an hour, what with time looping and all. Our worry grew after half a day had passed and we hadn’t heard a thing.

“Second team?” Eikhus suggested generously.

Spud snorted. “You would evaporate in five minutes in that climate. You, as well, Nephil Stratum. No, if they *have* failed, so have we. We were fortunate to get the Trojan horse in the first time. Wart will have surely sealed up that door by now, especially if that troglodyte Platt has informed him he met a Wart doppelgänger at Headquarters.”

I nodded. “Thanks, Eikhus, Nephil Stratum. Rain check. For once I agree with Spud. We’ve just got to wait. Matshi and Ulenem are fighters. I’m not giving up hope. They’ll come through.”

Suthsi sighed, “Everybody loses sometimes ...”

“You’re always such a ray of sunshine,” I muttered, adding more loudly, “If Matshi and Ulenem don’t succeed,” I looked at Spud, who nodded, “*we’re* the ones who’ll go back in.”

• • •

Phoenicia—two thousand years ago

“Where are we?” Ulenem opened his eyes, wincing from the pain.

Matshi dabbed at Ulenem's head with a cloth soaked in verdar, a Madai antiseptic balm. "In our tent. Can you move your arm?"

Ulenem carefully tried moving the stunned part of his body. His reflexes were slow, but the motion was fortunately there.

"I got the microstunner out, the bastard, but a chemical unstun takes time until your body metabolizes the poison."

"Looks like I'm out of commission for the rest of the day," Ulenem grunted. "*Bakari*^[13] hurts."

"The *verdard* ointment will help you heal more quickly. Just keep rubbing it on your skin."

Ulenem tried to sit up. "Where are you going?"

"We lost Yeshua." Matshi's eyes flashed. "I'm not going to lose that bastard Sutherland!"

Ulenem lay back and grunted again. "This is why we Izmalis don't bother taking prisoners. Kill them before they can get the advantage ..."

"Sutherland?" Matshi snorted angrily as he stood up to leave. "He's a dead man walking."

• • •

The villagers combing through the charred wreckage of the temple didn't pay much attention to the horseshoe bat that glided through the burned naked branches of the once-proud cedar trees. Blending in with the circling vultures, the bat swooped in and out of the site, unnoticed. His surreptitious Ergal scan of the fire residue was almost complete and there was still no evidence of Yeshua's DNA.

Matshi landed on a stable tree limb and hung upside down watching the villagers as they mourned their family and friends. How many such scenes of sadness had he witnessed in his relatively short life? Tears, *dakris*, *beshun*. A planet the size of Orion Alpha could be filled with the Universe's liquids of grief. And he was powerless to help. All of us were ... except the Omega Archon. He could put a stop to the madness of war, and yet His Highness had always turned away and let the wars go on.

That's really why, Matshi admitted to himself, he had left Mingferplatoi. There wasn't any sense in fighting when nothing ever really changed. The wailing of last year's Hutunye massacre survivors, now thousands of years in the relative future, echoed in his ears, little different from the cries of the sobbing mourners below. Sentient life had not much evolved beyond the aggressive competitiveness of natural selection, despite the intricate pacifist oratory of philosophers like T'PlanaHath. And probably never would.

A new mourner caught Matshi's eye. The young man's stride seemed a bit too chipper. Surprisingly free of the dazed dullness of the rest of the villagers, the young man seemed intent on vigorously combing through the ashes with a stick. A polished stick. Unlatching from his perch, Matshi swooped by for a closer look. It *was* a scanner.

Sutherland. Anamorphed. Matshi was pleased to note that the man's swagger seemed to ebb, as Sutherland, too, apparently didn't find Yeshua's DNA. Clearly irritated, Young Sutherland stood gazing at the ruins, scratching his head. Finally, puzzled, he started off down the road.

Matshi swooped onto Sutherland's shoulders as soon as they were out of view of the villagers. Sutherland let out a sharp cry and spun around, aiming for the bat with his

stick. The Chidurian quickly Ergaled into himself—at his fighting peak in his own exoskeleton armor—and laid into Sutherland with all eight arms.

No more the elderly teacher, Sutherland, the young man, was a superb fighter, and, to Matshi's dismay, was grav-trained. The two men sparred in the isolated field for what seemed like hours, before Matshi's size and multiple limbs allowed him to knock Sutherland out, stun him, and search him for any additional hidden weapons. Holding the scanner stick under one arm, Matshi grabbed Sutherland with the others and tracted him to the skins tent.

But Ulenem was nowhere to be found. Leaving Sutherland safely stunned inside the chamber, Matshi stepped outside and pulled out the borrowed Ergal to scan for his partner. A muffled sound from inside the skins caught his ears, and Matshi dashed back in. Sutherland was still lying in his stunned position on the floor, but his torso was now framed by a halo of crimson blood from the fatal slice across his throat.

Matshi looked up to see Ulenem wiping his blade with a smile of satisfaction.

"What have you done?!" Matshi shouted at the Assassin.

"We don't need him any more," Ulenem answered quietly.

"Didn't you hear Spud? We bring him back alive, we can interrogate him. Who knows what he'd tell us about Benedict?"

Ulenem's voice was cold. "Nothing. He will tell you nothing."

Matshi snorted, then stiffened when he realized the true meaning of Ulenem's words. *No, impossible... not his friend ...* His hand eased toward the Ergal. "You're ..."

"His job is done. Yeshua is dead," Ulenem said. A momentary flicker of sadness crossed his eyes, and then, without visible emotion, he began once again. "And now..."

Matshi was ready for the attack, but the flying blade from across the room still severed one of his arms. Purple blood gushed as Matshi ducked and dodged the onslaught of whirling blades from Ulenem and tried to get in a few blows of his own. Ulenem somehow seemed to have an unlimited supply of weapons hidden in his robes, and was no longer hampered by his earlier paralysis. Matshi soon lost a leg to the knives, and began to feel weakened by the loss of blood. Ulenem did not pause in his assault, however. It was clear that Matshi's death was his goal, and that he would likely succeed.

A feral instinct overtook the Chidurian. Matshi was no longer thinking of his partner, of Sutherland, of death. He could only feel the waves of adrenaline pouring from his brain and giving him a strength he never knew he had. As the next volley of knives rained upon him, Matshi grabbed as many as he could with his remaining hands and feet and, fastening them on his exoskeleton so they pointed out, launched his massive torso at his smaller opponent. Matshi landed directly on top of Ulenem, the knives piercing the Assassin's chest like a bed of nails falling sharps-down from a painful height. Ulenem's final scream faded as his celadon-colored blood washed over Matshi and drained on the floor of the skins to merge into a Chidurian purple as it blended with Sutherland's red heme.

Shaking, Matshi rolled off of a now-still Ulenem and lay on the ground, breathing heavily. He had lost two limbs, but not his life. But he had not managed to escape grievous tragedy. He had killed his partner and his friend.

Chapter 6

Purgatory

Chidurian Enclave, Zyga—present day

When the next morning arrived, and Matshi and Ulenem hadn't, our anxiety was in the stratosphere. Nephil Stratum had turned a charcoal gray, the Ytrans were locked in a death grip, and Eikhus was dripping himself all over our already damp feet. Even Sarion had stopped making jokes.

Spud kept rubbing his eyes and temples with his long, delicate fingers. I was too nervous to sit, and paced the room, annoyed to be sloshing through former bits of Eikhus. I'd been hoping that our emissaries would be as successful as the Hellenic warriors that had emerged from the original Trojan Horse to verse Paris' minions. Hadn't our History uploads given the Greeks the victory in that legendary war?

"You've read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The Greeks won, right?" was my rhetorical question to my partner.

Spud leaned back in his chair and grunted as he stretched his long legs. "Only Odysseus finally made it home."

"And that comforts me how?" I said, irritated.

Spud only stretched and grunted once more.

Nephil Stratum finally spoke. "Maybe it's time to go to the Omega Archon."

We all sat up at that one.

"Well, he *is* the head of Zygint," she defended. "Let us think strategically. You've got at least two made moles on the inside, Benedict on the attack, and his lieutenants playing football with your timelines. Why the hell not?"

"You put your finger on it right there," I muttered. "Hell. Do you know what he's going to do to me? Losing Sutherland, DNA muting, unauthorized Off-worlders running God-knows-where around ancient Earth. I'm looking at a year in the flames easy."

"Not so easy," Sarion jibed, mimicking Suthsi's lilting tones.

I gave him my coldest glare.

Eikhus said, "You could explain ..."

"Never complain; never explain," Spud interjected in his most prep-school English accent. "Rush is right. Better we try going back in ourselves."

"That won't be necessary."

Matshi! We all turned to look at the door with relief—and then shock. The warrior was missing two limbs, and he leaned precariously on the jamb to maintain his balance.

I couldn't resist running to him and giving him a hug. My American upbringing comes out at the worst times. He winced as I brushed against his seeping wounds. Eikhus and I quickly led him to a chair where he could rest and Setsei served him a tall glass of Chidurian ale.

"What happened? Where's Ulenem?" We asked, worried.

Matshi raised a bleeding hand. "Ulenem," he began weakly, "Ulenem ... gave his life in the service of Zygfed."

We all stood stunned for a good minute, then Suthsi let out a sob. "Such a heartbreak."

“What happened?” Spud’s voice was even.

Matshi drank some more from his glass, swallowing each sip slowly before answering.

“I was searching for Yeshua’s DNA—”

“Yeshua’s dead?” Spud’s voice was a little less even. “No... no,” Matshi paused, then shook his head.

“Not that I can say for certain. And before I got back, he, um, Sutherland, Sutherland attacked him. I tried to help but it was too late ... they were gone ...”

“*Sutherland* is dead?!” Spud’s voice was definitely not even.

Matshi looked at him, four eyes flaring. “Yes, Sutherland is dead.” The Chidurian downed the rest of the ale in one large gulp. “And he took my best friend with him.”

• • •

Ulenem’s body, fully covered in a white kaffahn, an Izmaili burial shroud, lay next to Sutherland’s in an adjacent chamber of Matshi’s kalyvi. I stood quietly by the Assassin’s side for a few minutes, grateful that his shroud kept me from witnessing his face in death. Grateful that Ulenem’s eyes could not bore into mine and further jab my aching conscience. If I had not taken the bait at Io, Ulenem would still be alive.

Eikhus had already notified Ulenem’s family on Orion Alpha, the largest planet orbiting Orion star Saif al Jabbar. They were on their way to Zyga to take their prodigal son home. Matshi had intended to stay and greet the family, but his blood loss had weakened him severely, to the point that even Spud was insisting that the Chidurian seek medical care immediately. Sarion and the Ytrans agreed to accompany the less-than-willing Matshi to Nejinsen, Zyga’s largest and most renowned hospital, while Eikhus and Nephil Stratum awaited the Orion Alpha family’s arrival at the kalyvi.

Our own mission somewhat back on track, Spud and I were now tasked with delivering Sutherland, in his admittedly less than ideal condition, to Zygint. I turned away from Ulenem’s body and saw that Spud, bless his steel heart, was busy inspecting Sutherland’s corpse. I didn’t dare ask if he’d already done a similar examination of the Assassin.

I did ask, “Why the frown?”

Spud shook his head. “It is nothing. Nothing. Let us go.”

Our mood somber, my partner and I tractor Sutherland’s body to Zygint Central, where after extensive WHO and NDNA scanning (as ourselves), we were admitted to the ultra-secure Administrative complex on the 14Tth floor, and directed to the morgue where Forensics relieved us of the corpse.

Our next stop would be with the Headquarters team in Debriefing. We’d rehearsed our story thoroughly. Ward Burton had rescued Sutherland from our clutches at Earth Core and had fooled us into thinking we were actually transporting Benedict’s henchman to Zyga. We didn’t discover the deception until after we’d left the Sol System. Not wishing to show Wart our hand, I did a little undercover detective work—no need to elaborate how or where—and found that the real Sutherland had been sent back to Phoenicia to get Yeshua. So, we raced back to Phoenicia, caught the Andart again, and were transporting him to Zyga when we’d hit unmapped dark matter turbulence at Ganymede. Sutherland, still stunned, had been unable to brace himself as our ship rolled, and met his death from a loose strut that had slit his throat. I saw no reason to tell

Headquarters about my having recruited the “Lost Boys” for assistance, a fateful decision that had regrettably led one of them to breathe his last.

We’d even downloaded the DNA records of the victims of the temple fire from Matshi’s Ergal and turned them in discreetly for a Temporal Disturbance Analysis. Did Sutherland’s fateful arson at the Temple murder a scholar who might either have been critical to Earth’s history, or might have lived to father a descendant who was? To our relief, the analysis confirmed that the unfortunate victims had been religious celibates, and that their premature deaths hadn’t resulted in a significant disturbance in Earth’s timeline.

And, as for Yeshua? Inexplicably, his DNA was notably absent from the victims’ pool. As our assignment had demanded, because of our “success”, the river of Earth’s time would continue flowing unchanged. We had, after all, no evidence either in the ancient past or our modern present that Yeshua was dead.

The mystery of why Yeshua wasn’t dead was one that we chose to avoid answering, or even asking, ourselves. How could the youth have survived Sutherland’s inferno? Where did he go during and after the fire?

Temporal Defense Team Leader Juan de la Cruz was somewhat sympathetic as he processed our reports. He’d had a few missions go off track himself over the hundreds of years he’d served as a Zygan Intelligence catascope.

With great heaviness in our hearts, we described Wart’s suspected betrayal and his role in getting Sutherland back to Tyre through the temporal vector shield. I did have a moment of pleasure identifying Wart’s contact at Headquarters, Carlton Platt, as a traitor. The debrief team seemed understandably distressed to discover that Zygint Central itself had been formally infiltrated. Juan immediately commended Security and demanded Platt’s arrest.

A few hours later, we had finally finished our debriefing and stood up to leave. Juan thanked us both warmly for our dedicated service, and we started for the door.

“Oh, Rush,” Juan added as I neared the exit. “His Highness would like to see you.”

I froze, terror-stricken. Spud looked at me, and then looked away. I said nothing for a few moments. Finally, I ventured in a tremulous voice, “You don’t have any idea what he wants...?”

Juan shook his head. “He doesn’t tell me his business. I’m sure he’ll let you know.” There was a hint of sympathy in his voice.

“Uh, sh-should I set up an appointment?” It was worth a try.

“He’s waiting now,” Juan informed me, to my great distress.

Survive first, then face the music. John’s words guided me yet again. I guess it was time for me to start my tuneful dance. I took a deep breath, and, patting Spud on the arm, I turned to Juan. “Okay. Let’s get it over with.”

• • •

The Omega Archon is reputed to have an infinite number of reception suites, each designed to make visitors from a universe of planets feel at home. Or, more likely, he anamorphs his chambers and changes the molecular pattern and appearance of his reception areas so they’d look homey and familiar to each guest. Just as he does with himself.

Every Zygan who has had the ‘pleasure’ of meeting with His Royal Highness has a slightly different perception of Zygfed’s leader. Tlhlns think he looks Tlhlni. Angonians, Angonian.^[14] For Spud, the Archon was a six-foot human king, decked in opulent Louis XIV robes and wearing a sparkling bejeweled crown. For me, the Archon always dresses in office casual and sports a pair of tortoise shell glasses. Frankly, he really should wear a muscle shirt and jeans, but then maybe I wouldn’t be intimidated by him as much any more.

I sat stiffly on the stiff couch in “my” reception suite until His Highness entered. I stood up out of courtesy, and he greeted me politely in unaccented American English.

“Good morning, Ms. Rush.”

“Good morning, Your Highness.” I took my seat again as he eased into a leather office chair opposite my sofa.

“You do know why you’re here.” Short and sweet, as always.

I forced a smile. “Mission accomplished?” Silence. Only silence.

After a few moments, I couldn’t stand it any more. “Don’t I get any credit for finding the two moles?” I said in desperation.

“We have been aware of the infiltration at Central for quite a while,” His Highness informed me, to my surprise. “And we’ve been managing it.”

I frowned. Had Juan known about the traitors? If so, then why did he act like he didn’t?

The Omega Archon took off his glasses and polished the lenses casually with a linen handkerchief. “But, you are correct, we hadn’t ID’d Ward Burton as a double agent.”

It was my only chance. I didn’t mince words. “If you all had, then maybe we wouldn’t’ve gotten into the mess at Io in the first place, I wouldn’t be here, and—” I stopped myself before saying, “Ulenem wouldn’t be dead.”

For a few seconds, I felt the Archon’s neural probe invade my brain. Apparently satisfied with his search, he turned back to using his voice to communicate.

“One week,” he said coldly.

I gulped. I had realistically expected a few hours in Hell ... but a week?! “But, but—” I stuttered.

“Ms. Rush, catascopes are not excused from the regulations of the Zygan Federation. Your transgressions include abandoning your assignment, unauthorized access to Zygint, unauthorized muting, relinquishing your Ergal to mercenaries, abetting unauthorized time-travelers, and the list goes on.” The Archon looked at me steadily, his tone firm. “Violations of the law result in consequences. You are encouraged to know the rules— not make them. This is not a democracy, understand?”

I nodded, endeavoring to calmly return his gaze.

Finally, he stood up. “That’s all.”

I tried to stand but my legs were shaking. The Omega Archon turned his back and walked out of the suite without another word.

The pain began as soon as he left the room. I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists, but the burning was agonizing, my entire body was on fire. I rolled on the floor and curled into the fetal position, writhing on the shag carpet. It took only a minute for my defenses to become overwhelmed and, against my will, I began to scream.

• • •

Spud looked almost as pale as I did when I staggered out of Central an hour later. My muscles were still trembling and weak, and I fell into the soft coolness of the cloud tufts with a sigh of relief and closed my eyes.

“It’s been over an hour,” Spud said, his voice wavering.

“He gave me a week.” My time ‘in stir’ seemed short to others, but as the Omega Archon had launched me into my own special punitive time loop, I had felt every minute of the ten thousand that made up a week.

“Are you all right?”

I strained to open my eyes and gazing at him with a wan smile. “Thanks for waiting for me.”

He nodded and reached out his arms to help me up. The soreness and stiffness would take a very long time to fade. I leaned against him, relaxing in his embrace as we X- fanned back to Matshi’s lair.

• • •

In Matshi’s kalyvi, our meeting room seemed sadly bereft without the Chidurian and his late partner. The rest of the group greeted us warmly, but it was disconcerting to see, with my peripheral vision, worried eyes studying me when my gaze was supposedly turned away. The Omega Archon’s harsh code of justice was certainly a reason a couple of them had opted to wash out of catascope training.

So it didn’t surprise me when Nephil Stratum pulled me aside to a corner of the chamber beyond prying ears.

“I am so sorry,” she said as he handed me a cup of Chidurian ale and massaged my back with her soothing tufts.

“I’m okay. Really.” Especially after the first few sips of the healing drink.

“That’s good. But I meant that I didn’t get you the training.”

I frowned. “What training?”

She wrapped her cooling tufts around me, calming my sore muscles. “In case there’s a next time. Helps you fight off the pain. While you’re waiting for Forensics to finish the autopsies, you may be able to learn it. Tlyp’ath.”

“Sounds Ifestian,” I ventured, hearing the name. Ifestians were renowned for their study of philosophy and logic, but tended to avoid mingling in the bustling Zygan Federation melting pot.

“Yes. It’s a kind of auto-telepathy. Neural self-control.”

Ifestian high priests *were* rumored to have telepathic skills, but with little inclination to advertise or share their knowledge. “And Ifestians are going to tutor me because...?” My tone was wary.

“I’ll make the arrangements,” Nephil Stratum reassured me without further elaboration. “For you, and Escott, too. As catascopes, you never know when tlyp’ath might come in handy.”

• • •

A day later, as Nephil Stratum had instructed us, Spud and I Ergaled to the M-fan portal in the Ifestio Enclave, a destination well off the Zygan tourist map, where recreational pursuits were and uninvited visitors, to put it mildly, not encouraged.

Ifestians tended to favor a monastic lifestyle, more attractive to those with a deep intellectual or spiritual calling. Of course, *I'd* never been there before.

Dressed in the standard brightly-colored Ifestian robes decorated with indecipherable runic characters, we silently walked the 2.67 kilometers in the searing heat to the Xtçoprşqñyzlfd^[15] estate. After baking in Sidon, Matshi's Enclave, and now Ifestio's, I longed for a journey to a more temperate climate and actually began to look forward to my return to Los Angeles, vowing never to complain about the hot, dry Santa Ana winds again.

The gates of the stately manor opened as we approached. I didn't see a camera or sensor system anywhere. Perhaps we'd just had a live demonstration of reputed Ifestian telepathy.

We carefully climbed up the rocky path to the mansion. Hematite columns gave the circular, red-tinged structure the look of a rusty Stonehenge. As had the gates, the building's entry portal opened by itself as we approached, and we gratefully stepped inside to a surprisingly cool atrium.

Th'Alia welcomed us with traditional Ifestian reserve, and led us without delay to a small, soundproofed room, where she instructed us to sit, cross-legged, on the floor cushions she had provided. Then, sans small talk, she got right down to business.

"You are here to learn telepathic resistance." It was not a question.

We nodded.

She stared intently at each of us for several minutes—did I catch a look of dismay in her stern features?—and then ordered, "Close your eyes. We shall begin."

• • •

Spud was a much better student than me, I'm afraid, but I did pick up the basics of tlyp'ath after a few hours of practice. I can't say I was exactly eager to test my skills against the Omega Archon, but I felt that I'd at least be able to *chorize* without giving myself away. *Chorizing* is a tlyp'ath technique that allows you to split away from a situation and watch yourself as an observer, sort of like looking at yourself in the third person. I could now try to use tlyp'ath to separate myself from the Omega Archon's Hellish pain if I had the misfortune to be called on the carpet again in the future.

"I've got to come back here someday," I said to Spud as we reached the exit portal of the Ifestian Enclave. "I can learn so much more from Th'Alia."

"Bollocks," Spud snorted. "I doubt she thinks so...." and the rest of his sentence, along with my snide reply, was lost as we X-fanned back to the Chidurian Enclave.

• • •

The Ytrans had already left for their own enclave when we returned and Eikhus was eager to return to the Kharybdian Enclave as soon as possible. His sister had reported a massive hailstorm was due to arrive in less than a day, and damage to their thal was a distinct possibility.

Eikhus did hope to stop in and see Matshi at Nejinsen first, and I offered to accompany him to Aheya, Zyga's second-largest city, where the acclaimed medical center was located.

“Autopsy on Sutherland’s finished,” Nephil Stratum informed us as she entered the meeting room. “The report reads: death due to exsanguination from a laceration of the carotid artery. He bled out.”

“Is our story flying?” I asked. Juan de la Cruz was less terrifying than the Omega Archon, but he had the authority to wash us out of Zygint if he suspected we’d spun an imaginative tale.

“Sounds like it.”

“Call your boss and see if you still have a job,” Sarion teased.

“He is expecting us back on Earth for a debriefing this evening in fact,” Spud interjected. Then he added to Eikhus, “I’m afraid we can’t make Nejinsen.”

I spun around and faced him. “I’m afraid we can’t not. Matshi went out on a limb for us—”

“More like his limbs went out for you!” joked Sarion.

We all turned to the Megaran and yelled, in unison, “Shut up!”

I put an arm on Eikhus and said forcefully, “Nejinsen. Who’s going with me?”

Everyone but Spud raised a hand. “Thank you.” I faced Spud, expectant.

Finally, and sullenly, he broke. “Oh, all right.”

• • •

Nejinsen Medical Center is literally in the Center of Aheya, nestled among libraries and museums in Zyga’s most beautiful city. The 476 storey (Base Twelve, of course) hospital houses many of the top medical specialists in the Universe, and provides health and repair services for thousands of species and millions of cultures.

Medicine at Nejinsen is nothing like medicine on Earth. Why even anastasis,^[16] reawakening from death, is practiced in rare cases; through neurocache transplants, I’ve been told. Most Zygan doctors, however, prefer to use cellular regeneration techniques to avoid the complications of death completely. The average Zygan can practically live as long as he, she, it, or they want, but most Zygans choose to move on to Level 3, the world beyond, after living a few thousand years or so.

A few cultures in Zygfed eschew modern science, and practice shamanic rituals of varied effectiveness. Some even worship the Transition to Level 3, and honor those who die for a noble cause as demi-gods. Frankly, if you ask me, I’d rather choose life over deification, but, please, I pray you don’t ask.

But Izmalis like Ulenem’s family would no doubt be singing his praises at the Transition ceremony next week. His baba had arranged for his body to be transported back to Orion Alpha with a hero’s welcome, and at least half the population of his hometown of Madai was expected to attend his funeral. Ulenem’s family reportedly had already begun building a majestic temple to honor their fallen warrior’s memory.

As our lift levved to Matshi’s room, I wondered if the Chidurian would be well enough to attend the ceremony. The loss of his lifelong friend had obviously devastated him. Matshi had once admitted to me that he was not convinced of the existence of Level 3, or even of any life after death. I was certain that the Chidurian’s ... lack of faith ... would make his loss even more painful.

We entered Matshi’s room with some trepidation. Matshi was resting quietly in a large suite that resembled his Chidurian kalyvi. He’d regained some of his deep purplish

hue, and his regenerating limbs had grown to almost half their adult size. I couldn't resist giving him another hug.

He winced when I touched his maturing arm, then, with a nod at Sarion, joked, "Growing pains." Matshi wasn't typically a warm, fuzzy kind of guy, but I think he was genuinely happy to see us. Only when we tried to catch him up on the Sutherland autopsy did his expression alter. He put up a hand, and asked us to change the subject.

I went with the first thought that popped in my head. Was he going to Orion Alpha for Ulenem's Transition? I instantly regretted my question when Matshi responded with a Chidurian curse.

We all saw Spud frown. I was ready to apologize for bringing up a painful memory when Spud cut me off, asking Matshi abruptly, "Why did you kill him?"

I looked at Spud in confusion. Matshi had already told us that Ulenem had been attacked by Sutherland and had been killed defending himself, so why did Spud—

Another Chidurian curse preceded Matshi's surprising lunge from his seat. Fortunately, Spud was quick on his feet, and his Ergal, and quickly leved out of Matshi's reach. From the ceiling of the suite, Spud whipped out his stun gun and aimed it at the Chidurian.

"Do not make me stun you. Just tell us what happened."

As Eikhus, Sarion, and I stared, bewildered; Matshi glared at Spud for a few moments. Obviously in pain, he limped back to his chair, and muttered a hoarse, "You bastard!"

Spud still kept his distance a few feet off the ground as Matshi spat a violet liquid onto the floor, leaned back, and, avoiding our eyes, began to tell the truth.

• • •

Our trip back to Earth was subdued. We'd gotten word that Zygint had arrested Wart and Carlton Platt, now that we'd publicly blown their covers, and charged them with treason. Platt deserved it, but I'd miss Wart. He'd been a great mentor for us 'greenhorns', unlike Gary the aesthete and dorky Ev.

And Ulenem. What could possibly have motivated him to turn against Zygfed? He didn't need the money. His family was among the richest in Madai. Nationalism? Unlikely. Orion Alpha had been loyal to Zygfed for several millennia, possibly even before the extinction. Then, why?

Troubled, I turned to Spud, who was sprawled in his seat, his eyes closed. I didn't think he was really asleep.

"Ulenem," I whispered.

One eye opened and found mine.

"How did you guess that Matshi had, uh...?" I prodded.

Spud stretched and yawned. "How did I *guess*? Really, Rush."

I apologized. "Deduce. How did you deduce?"

"Belatedly," he responded, sitting up with a grunt. "I had neglected to properly interpret the pattern of the knife wounds on the body."

He ran his fingers through his hair, then, seeing my puzzled expression, sighed. "The outline of the stabs, their size, spacing, angulation, hinted at an arthropodal, eight-limbed species," he added. "Except for two perplexing irregular concavities. I had, regretfully, overlooked the temporary absence of two of Matshi's arms and legs."

He shrugged. "At any rate, it is of no longer of consequence ... we have a more important question to address."

"Why Ulenem, uh, went to the other side?"

Spud favored me with a patronizing frown. "Yeshua. Where is he?"

Yeshua. I had almost forgotten. "Matshi's convinced he didn't burn in the fire."

"Exactly. So, did he get out of the temple? And if so, how? The attic's only exit apparently was the flaming staircase."

I sighed. Looks like we didn't have a choice. "So we go back to Tyre?"

He hesitated. "No. I have a theory." He sat up and faced me. "And we do not want to lead the pirates to the gold."

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose, simply suppose, we are being tracked. We find Yeshua again, but at the same time lead our trackers right to him."

"Good point," I admitted. "But who are these trackers? We turned in Wart and Platt."

Spud nodded. "And caught Sutherland. Theoretically, we should be home free. Yeshua is safe and, as far as I, and the Temporal Disturbance Analysis Unit, can determine, Earth's timeline has not been affected."

"Makes sense to me." Unfortunately, helping humanity avoid or prevent two millennia of wars, plagues, and holocausts was, by order of the Omega Archon, not part of our job description.

"But is that *really* why Sutherland, or Benedict, was after Yeshua?" Spud persisted. "To devastate Earth's timeline?"

I frowned. "You mean there's something Gary didn't tell us?"

"Very possibly." Spud stroked his chin. "Before we head back to Phoenicia, we'd better be sure what Sutherland and Benedict were really trying to do."

Spud leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes once again, obviously unwilling to say anything more. I was even more perplexed by his questions. I liked my assignments clean and neat, like ... rescuing cats out of trees.

Finally, after a few minutes, I added, disappointed, "So now we just wait?"

Spud didn't open his eyes. "'They also serve who only stand and wait.' Longfellow."

"May be," I returned, "but, you know, a good offense beats a royal flush. Rush."

Spud opened one eye and said wryly, "Don't offend or you'll be beaten by a royal. Escott."

I looked at him with a sour expression and responded, "Bollocks."

Chapter 7

On the Edge

Hollywood—present day

My arms were killing me, my muscles trembling, as my frozen fingers clawed at the rim of the precipice. I looked down and tightened my grip. The drop was over thirty feet below—to certain death. The end was near! How much longer would I be able to hold on?!

“Cut!” Jerry’s voice boomed through the soundstage.

Not again! We’d been at it, shooting the season finale of *Bulwark*—for four hours! This scene was supposed to be the season’s climax—our white-knuckle face-off with the evil villain Mordmort, who’d chased us to the brink of this crumbling, craggy bluff. Unfortunately, our not-very-sharp guest star, Brandon Washburn, costumed as the über-bad-guy in ostentatious red, gold, and black armor, was too coked up to get his lines right. Take after take after take. Out of the corner of my eye, I glanced at an equally unhappy Spud suspended next to me, clinging to the scarp. White knuckles was right. How much longer did Jerry expect us to hang from this papier maché cliff anyway?

Apparently, at least one more go-round. Jerry, perspiration stains seeping through the sleeves of his one-size-too-small black shirt, waited impatiently for the FX guys to re-set the equipment making the smoke and flames that followed our villain as he staggered across the floor of the set. As soon as Mark gave the ‘ready’ cue, Jerry jumped.

“Speed! Action!”

“I am master of the universe!” Mordmort cried, as sparks flew from the ends of his raised arms. “Give me the Maltese Hamster or you will both, uh—” Brandon froze, and looked offside, furrowing his brow.

Die. Die, Brandon, die!

“Cut!” Unbelievable! Brandon went up on his lines again!

Spud muttered an unintelligible curse.

“That’s it,” I whispered to him angrily. “I’m levving, and I don’t care if they see us.” I tapped my Ergal to give me a little antigrav boost, and lessen the strain on my arms.

“How you holdin’ up there, Tara?” Jerry shouted from the floor below.

“Don’t ask,” I shot back, to Spud’s amusement.

“One more time, kids. I think Brand’s got it this time.”

The handsome heavy nodded with far too much energy.

I smiled and gave Jerry the thumbs up sign, mumbling to Spud, a veteran of the often competitive Hollywood gay dating scene, “Can’t Jerry score a more talented boyfriend?”

“Score?” Spud scanned Jerry and his guest star with a critical eye, before answering, “No.” To *my* amusement.

• • •

Shooting the cliffhanger had taken us all of Monday morning. I thought we’d never be done. Lacking a cup of Chidurian ale, I’d spent an extra ten minutes in the shower before lunch, letting the warm water massage my aching arms and hands. Refreshed, I

wrapped my towel around my bikini parts and stepped out of the bathroom into my trailer's sitting room.

"Spud!" My partner was lounging in one of my beanbag chairs, blowing smoke rings with a unfiltered cigarette. "And stinking the place up with those filthy—"

"And I shan't report you to the water conservation board," he responded with a grin. "Are you hungry?"

I sighed. "Always. But ..." I pointed to my shiny skin-tight spandex suit laid out on the adjacent sofa for this afternoon's scenes. "When are you due back on set? I could do a salad at the commissary." The craft services food table on our set was unfortunately known for its high fat, high carb, high sugar fare.

"Not until three."

"It's a date. Now out!" Spud's affection for me had never been physical, darnit, but I still wasn't about to change into my jeans and T-shirt under his critical gaze.

Ten minutes later, we set off for the cafeteria together. "I just cannot wait for this season to end," I moaned as we walked through a wing of studio offices to get to the commissary. "My agent sent me a good script for an upcoming film."

"A Disney? What type of animal do they want you to morph into this time?" Spud teased as he led us down his shortcut, a long, deserted hallway between two soundstages.

"I turned that script down, thank you. And the other one, too. *This* film is about a teenage girl with multiple disabilities who has learned how to communicate with sign language for the first time."

"Hunh." Spud looked away.

I was peeved. "Okay, it probably won't be box office gold, but there are some scenes that could get me a shot at, dare I say it, Oscar-man, so I really want the part— what?"

Like a bloodhound finding a scent, Spud had abandoned his typical slouch and straightened tall, his eyes roving and his nostrils flaring. On alert, my own hand crept down towards my Ergal, and I scanned the hallway as well. Neither of us saw anything, but I quickly shared Spud's perception that something wasn't quite right.

I took out my Ergal cell phone and cradled it in my palm, ready to M-fan a stun gun in a millisecond if needed. Spud, his stun gun already in his hand, leaned flat against the wall, sliding forward, checking perimeters, turning the corner, and—

Screamed! A ghostly figure floated before us, his two-foot reptilian body riddled with stab wounds from which seeped greenish-tinged blood.

"Ulenem!" I gasped, frozen in my tracks.

Spud was even paler than his normal ashen shade, but had the presence of mind to aim his stun gun at the specter.

Ulenem laughed. "What're you going to do, Escott, kill me?"

"Ulenem," I said, my voice quavering. "What, how—?"

"I haven't transitioned yet. I may never. Look, I don't have much time. You've got to stop Benedict. He's in over his head."

I was totally confused. "I thought you were on Benedict's side."

"Save Orion," Ulenem shouted, as he started to fade. "Save the Universe!"

In a second, the Assassin had disappeared. My hands were still shaking, clinging to my cell phone Ergal. My partner, fortunately, had X-fanned his stun gun and was waving casually at a gaffer and sound man from our crew who had just rounded the corner on their way to get food. Spud does "cool" so well.

“Let us go out to dine instead,” he suggested, after the crew guys had passed us. He put an arm around my tensed shoulders and whispered, “I fancy a little private conversation.”

I nodded, shivering. “Some fresh air will do us a lot of good.”

• • •

Paris, France—present day

Not eager to fight the paparazzi again, we didn’t bother taking my Zoom Cruiser, leaving it parked in my space so inquiring minds would think we were still on the Burbank lot. We decided, or rather Spud decided for us, to Ergan to a picturesque little out-of-the-way club for lunch instead. Vernaise was nestled on the outskirts of the Left Bank—of Paris, France—where Ignace, Spud’s first cousin twice-removed, was the Head Chef, and the lighting was, to Spud’s delight, blindingly dim.

Because *Bulwark* had just been syndicated in Europe, Ignace arranged for us to have a private table for two, in a cubby next to a multicolored wall fountain, far from prying eyes and Euro-pap lenses. After all, it wouldn’t do to find our photo on the cover of the tabloids next week with a headline wondering how Shiloh Rush and William Escott (or, in their parlance, ‘Willoh’), could possibly be in LA and Paris at the same time.

I was happy to be as far away as possible from the Euro techno drumming on the dance floor in the main room, and I found the gently rushing water near us calming. After his cousin had returned to the kitchen, however, Spud eyed the fountain warily and complained that he felt like he was back with the Kharybdians.

I chuckled and returned to deciphering the menu by Ergan flashlight. Lunchtime in LA was late evening in Paris, and the sun had long set by the time we’d arrived. Guillaume, the Head Waiter, approached our table with a gift from Ignace that looked red. For a second I was tempted to order a cheeseburger just to annoy Spud, but, I frankly wasn’t in the mood, and instead played it safe with some sashimi.

Guillaume opened the dusty bottle of wine and poured the thick red liquid in Spud’s glass. (BTW, unless it’s Chidurian ale, we always drink responsibly. Except that weekend on Aldebaran 7, but I don’t think I’ll tell you—or anyone—about that, ‘cause it never happened.)

I’ve always found the stuffed-shirt ritual of shaking and smelling the wine a little pretentious, and, seeing as this was Spud’s family, worked hard to keep from making a face. Really, if wines were meant to breathe they would’ve had lungs, like the wines of Phrastis 4.

“*Bouquet excellente*,” Spud nodded at the sommelier. “*Merci bien*.”

Guillaume poured some wine into my glass and filled Spud’s. He disappeared to the kitchen and returned in just a few minutes to serve us our perfectly prepared fish morsels on a bed of steamed brown rice.

The food looked wonderful, but I realized I really didn’t have much of an appetite after all. Ulenem’s appearance had been terrifying. We had faced death before, but it had never before talked back to us.

“No,” Spud interrupted my thoughts once again, “he’s not in Level 3.”

How did Spud always know what I was thinking? Did the man have Ifestian genes? I forced myself to swallow. “Purgatory? Limbo?”

Spud shook his head. “Izmalis don’t believe in-”

“It’s not what you believe, it’s what *is*,” I countered. I had no memories of my parents, having lived with Grandpa Alexander from the time I was very little. But the knowledge that they would be alive in heaven—or, Level 3, if you will—had always been a comfort to us all.

“Sometimes ‘what is’ is what you believe ...,” Spud responded cryptically. He gulped a few bites of ahi and continued. “I don’t know if that was really Ulenem, or an Aggellaphor messenger of some sort. But, someone was definitely trying to tell us something ... something I didn’t expect.”

I shrugged. “Benedict wants to take over Zygfed. That ambition alone puts him in over his head. Add having to coordinate time-traveling guerilla attacks over thousands of planets, hundreds of millennia. Could be too much even for a sharp dude like him.”

Spud shook his head. “No, that’s not news. There is something else. Something Ulenem, or whoever sent him, has just uncovered. And we must find out what it is.”

“Oh, goody,” I said, soaking a mouthful of rice with a sip of tasty liquor. “We’ve got ourselves a MacGuffin.”

Spud looked puzzled. “A what?”

“Alfred Hitchcock. The famous movie director. He had his characters chasing a MacGuffin in his film thrillers.”

“Yes, but what is it?”

“Nothing. Anything. It doesn’t matter. A Maltese Falcon. Or,” I snickered, “a Maltese period. It just gets the plot moving. In fact, once the film gets going, the audience often forgets about what a lousy actor Brandon—”

“You are brilliant!” Spud shot out of his seat, bursting with excitement.

I gagged on a piece of salmon. “Whu—?”

“Let’s go!” Spud waved at his cousin, threw a fifty euro bill on the table, and grabbed me by one of my still-sore arms.

I swallowed my last bite, and looked at him with disgust. “So help me, if you say ‘the game is afoot,’ I’ll kill you.”

Chapter 8

The Game is Afoot

Earth Core—present day

Dragging me with him from our table into the men's water closet, Spud Ergaled us into a rubbish bin next to an imposing brick museum off the Rue de Rivoli near the Tuileries Gardens. His patience waning, he incessantly grumbled as we suffered through the obstacle course of rat greeting and scans required to enter Earth Core from one of the numerous secret portals scattered around the globe.

Stepping into Reception, I was pleased to see that Fydra was not at her usual post. She still hadn't forgiven us for what she perceived as our costumed deception last week. Another Scyllian, Fyodor, sat at the desk and, to our relief, efficiently waved us into the Core command center.

Our first sight was Ev downing a box of chicken nuggets as he leaned back in his chair and watched the flurry of Sol System activity on a score of screens. Thankfully, this time, most of the colors displayed were green instead of red.

"Gary in?" I asked casually.

"Should be," Ev mumbled as he chewed. "Took Fydra out to dinner for her birthday. Said he'd be back by six. Three, GMT minus 8."

I patted him on the back with a 'thanks'. I was glad he didn't turn to face us. Ev always chewed with his mouth open, and you could usually see spittle spots on the front of his shirt. Ick. As far as I know, Ev hasn't had a date in years.

We decided to wait outside Gary's office. If Spud was right, we had a lot to talk about with our boss.

Gary arrived at ten after six, New York time, and invited us into the distinguished suite. As soon as we sat down, we immediately hit him with our big question.

"What's Benedict's game?"

Gary frowned at us. "I don't get what you're asking.

You know he's trying to—"

"Take over Zygfed, yeah, yeah," I interrupted. "No, I mean his real game. What's he after?"

For a few moments, Gary was taken aback. His expression then became quite stern, like that of a frustrated high school principal. He seemed to be seriously considering how best to respond. Finally, he took a deep breath and whispered. "The key to Level 3."

I glanced at Spud victoriously, asking Gary, "So there really is a Level 3?"

Gary nodded. "Yes. I've been there."

Now it was our turn to be shocked.

"And you lived to tell the tale," I said, awestruck. "Or not," Spud said, raising an eyebrow.

Gary chuckled. "I'm not dead—I mean, 'transitioned'." He made the quote marks with his fingers.

"Why not?" Spud returned without hesitation.

"If you don't mind his asking," I added, aiming for politeness.

“I don’t know,” Gary said quietly. He looked down at his hands, then back up at us with a hint of a smirk. “It’s a question I hope to get answered someday—among others.” He snorted. “It’s our blessing and our curse, you know.”

“What ... is?” I asked, puzzled.

“Being aware,” Gary’s tone was rueful, “that we’re all under a death sentence.”

“I’m not,” I joked. No one laughed, and I backtracked quickly. “Okay, duh.”

“Humans, and all sentient beings, really—except you, Rush,” Gary added with a smile, “know it, and because of that we are desperate for a reprieve.”

“With you so far.” Cellular regeneration centers were packed throughout Zygfed by citizens seeking eternal youth. Still, living for thousands of years isn’t a bad deal in and of itself, even without regeneration.

“In a sense, we’re overqualified for our existence,” Gary continued.

“Now you lost me,” I admitted.

“We know too much about our future ... and too little. We know that we’re going to die, and yet we don’t even know why we live.”

“There’s a country song in there somewhere, Gary,” I joked. “What’s this got to do with Level 3?”

Gary stared at his hands for a few moments, hesitating, before he asked, “Did you know Theodore Benedict and I went to Mingferplatoi together?”

I was blown away. “Benedict was a catascope?! They didn’t tell us that.”

Gary mimicked me. “No, duh.”

“So how did you and Benedict get to Level 3?” Spud interrupted.

Gary looked at Spud through narrowed eyes for a moment, then his brow unfurrowed, and he sat back in his chair and began. “Ah, thereby hangs a tale ...”

• • •

“Thirty years seems like a long time, but, in Zygan terms, it’s only an instant. Zygfed thirty years ago wasn’t much different than it is today, give or take a few planets.

“Catascopes in those days had a very tough job. There have always been Benedicts in the Universe. Individuals with too much ambition and too little empathy. They helped drag us out of the caves thousands of years ago, and may, through devastating wars, return us there on a path to extinction, sooner rather than later.”

For a moment, Gary’s tone became wistful. “I don’t pretend to be a psychologist, but most of them drag us out of our comfortable caves to help them in their quest for something. Something they’ll never be able to find. ‘Tilting at windmills’^{xviiiixix}^[17] becomes their purpose in life.”

He sighed and took a deep breath. “Benedict and I were thrown together from the very first day at Mingferplatoi. I guess they thought we had a lot in common, seeing as we were both from Earth. We didn’t, except that we both wanted to make it as catascopes. I grew up in New England, prep schools. Benedict, in a small town in Missouri. My dad was a banker of his own inherited fortune. My mother was a docent for the Peabody. Benedict’s father left before he was born, so his mother worked three jobs as a home-care nurse to raise him.

“But, we were both smart and ambitious and talented. Benedict, frankly, well, he was almost a genius. He could rattle off physics theories like Einstein. He even liked to do mathematical proofs by himself instead of uploading them like the rest of us. But, he

wasn't exactly the friendly type or a team player. When it came time to assign partners, I was the only one willing to work with him. He kind of reminded me of my Poppy.

"He was, however, one of the best catascopes I've seen, before or since. Undefeated at Mingferplatoi—and beyond."

Gary leaned forward and intoned, "Theodore Benedict saved my life."

I gasped.

Our Chief nodded. "We were only on our third training mission. We were ambushed by a Lestrigon ship that had wormholed into our quadrant."

"So you mega'ed," I interjected. Lestrigons were a giant carnivorous species *much* larger than humans.

"We tried," Gary admitted. "Only the Lestrigons had disabled all our megators, so we were unable to change our size. We were about to be bite-size snack food for the hungry bastards."

"Ouch," I winced.

"And yet, you're here ...," prodded Spud.

Gary sighed, "We lost our two companion ships right away—swallowed up in the blink of an eye by the Lestrigon vessel. Five excellent Mingferplatoi trainees—gone. There was nothing we could do. And we were next."

I continued to wince.

"Terrible," Gary agreed with a note of sadness. "Even worse, Benedict had been monitoring the Lestrigon ship's course and calculated that they were on their way to 51 Pegasus."

Spud whistled, "Three hundred million souls in that solar system ..."

"Yes indeed," Gary agreed. "If the Lestrigons were to make it to Pegasus..." He took another deep breath. "Tragically, we knew our comrades were being digested inside the Lestrigon ship. The leftovers were being dumped back into space through a massive exhaust cylinder that was spewing out particulate matter and polluting the entire sector. We didn't dare comm to Central, lest we become the next immediate target. Without our megator, we were so tiny and defenseless. Even if we fired ten of our fusion torpedoes put together we couldn't dent their ship.

"But, we had to do something. Frustrated by our helplessness, we stayed back and followed at a discreet distance as the Lestrigons headed for Pegasus. I suggested we try to run for it and go warn Central about the imminent attack on Pegasus when Benedict shouted at me to 'put a cork in it.' Before I could even respond, he leapt over and grabbed the weapons controls, played them with his rapidly moving fingers, and launched a fusion torpedo aimed directly at the exhaust pipe of the Lestrigon ship.

"'You do realize that our torpedos are too small to destroy their ship,' I told him, for want of a better suggestion.

"He nodded. 'Don't expect them to.' We watched on scan holos as the torpedo entered the foul exhaust conduit of the Lestrigon vessel.

"Benedict quickly shot us back out of the line of fire and then held up a hand. I waited, dubious, for the miniscule spark that would signal the tiny torpedo's useless explosion. And waited. And waited. And—

"The enormous Lestrigon battlecruiser exploded in a burst of metal, flesh, blood, and other small bits of detritus that I wasn't eager to analyze.

“I was totally awestruck. A microscopic torpedo blew up that giant vessel? ‘How—?’ I turned to my partner and asked.

“Benedict put our nav on autopilot for Zyga and leaned back in his jump seat. ‘Easy,’ he said, grinning at me. ‘I anamorphed the ions in the core of the torpedo into silicon. Then, when the torpedo exploded, it shot out a layer of liquid silicon that cooled off and blocked their ship’s exhaust conduit, preventing them from discharging their engine wastes.’ He burst out laughing. ‘Basically, they got blown up by their own gas. And our torpedo was the ... cork.’”

Gary rubbed his eyes for a moment. “Saving the Pegasus planets was a real coup for a couple of catascope trainees,” he continued. “I probably should’ve given all the credit to Benedict, but he was willing to share, so, I regret, I too accepted a hero’s welcome. In truth, I had done nothing more than my poor colleagues who had died ... and whom I missed greatly...” Gary cleared his throat.

“That was one of the first of Benedict’s stellar successes. He had many more, both as a Mingferplatoi Academy trainee, and later as a full catascope. He seemed to thrive on the excitement of chasing and capturing Zygfed’s enemies and returning to the applause of his peers and superiors. With a universe full of predators, there was always a battle to win, and Benedict was always out front, leading the charge to victory.

“I, on the other hand, did better at ... administration. With time, our paths diverged and we grew apart. I came back down to Earth, graduated Harvard like Poppy and Gramps, and became a catascope for Earth Core. Benedict, as a star, was sent to the stars. So I was truly surprised one day when he M-fanned into Earth Core and invited me for a drink at his mother’s home on the Florida Coast.

“We Ergaled to a small bungalow overlooking the Gulf and sat on the porch, cooled by a soft breeze and a hard drink. Benedict had come to pick up his mother and take her to Nejinsen for neural regeneration treatments. She had, though still only in her sixties, begun to show signs of what he said was Alzheimer’s Disease.

“I did wonder how the Omega Archon would react. Escorting non-citizens like his mother to Zyga was not in the Zygfed playbook. But Benedict didn’t care. He figured he had built enough capital with His Highness that he could punt on this one. I wished them well and told him I’d stop by and pay them a visit next week when I’d be in Zyga for the annual Satellite Chiefs meeting.

“Unfortunately, Benedict’s mother died two days after she got to Nejinsen. No one would tell him what really happened. Of course, he immediately applied for her anastasis, but those all have to go through the Omega Archon, and His Highness was not pleased that Benedict had so cavalierly violated Zygan regulations and brought a non-subject to Zyga for medical treatment.”

“I can imagine,” I noted, thinking of my own “difficult” encounters with our ruler.

“Benedict got ten years in Hell.”

I gasped. “Ten years!” Ten minutes was agony, ten years would be ... I shook my head.

Gary nodded. “Exactly. He’d just gotten out—with the time loop, of course—when I arrived the next day for my promised visit. But the time he’d served had visibly changed him. He was no longer the arrogant hero, the poster boy of Zygfed.

“I found him pale and stone-faced in his Zygan flat, wrapping up his mother’s belongings and micro-ing them into a small container. His years of passion for and

loyalty to Zygfed had, in a relative instant, turned into bitter anger and the seeds of hatred.”

Spud looked sober. “The Omega Archon never approved her anastasis?”

Gary shook his head. “No. And, Benedict was offered a desk job at Zygint Central—the better to keep an eye on you, my dear—for a few years, with an empty promise that someday he might regain a post on the front lines. In truth, his days as a revered Zygfed hero were over. Along with any chances he could be initiated into the Sentinel Corps.”

I looked up at Gary and began slowly. “Um, as somebody who’s felt the Omega Archon’s wrath myself, wasn’t his sentence a little steep?”

“His Highness,” Gary said pointedly, “is not known for mercy.”

“No. But ...” Ten years? For someone who was so valuable to Zygint?

Gary sighed. “I believe His Highness believes that discipline keeps the ship running tightly. And it is, after all, his ship.”

“You have still not told us about Level 3,” reminded Spud.

Gary paused again. He nodded, his eyes narrowing. “It was the next day... I had been through all the exhibit suites at the conference and was completely holo-ed out, so I stopped by Benedict’s flat to see how he was holding up. Unquestionably, it was clear he wasn’t himself. In fact, I could see right through him—literally.

“‘What the hell?’ I’d said to him, stunned. ‘‘Far from it,’ he returned with a wan smile.

“‘I reached out a hand which slid right through his transparent body. ‘Where are you?’

“‘Off-level,’ was his cryptic answer. ‘Come join me.’ “‘What are you talking about?’ I was totally confused.

“‘Pea-brain!’ he answered with a hint of a laugh. “‘Now look, if you’re going to insult me ...’

“‘He did laugh. ‘P-b-r-a-n-e. Proof that the Miletic Theory is correct.’

“‘Something from my Mingfeplatoi uploads was triggered in my memory. An obscure reference from our course in exocosmology. As I was trying to remember, Benedict M-fanned and stood before me in the palpable flesh. ‘Gary, Gary, Gary. You always were weak in physics. Here, I’ll show you, take my hand. Let’s take a ride to Level 3.’

“‘Level 3? You’re completely out of your mind!’ I backed away, but he grabbed my hand firmly. I felt a chill, and couldn’t escape his grip. He took out his Ergal and, with his free thumb, made a few quick adjustments that I hadn’t seen anyone do before and was unable to follow. Activated it, and—

“‘It felt like an explosion, as if every part of my body flew into a million microscopic pieces in all directions. I tried to scream, but to no avail. My mouth, my tongue, my vocal cords had long left me, lost in space and time, and...’

Gary paused once more, his moist eyes gazing off into the distance, focused on a vision that Spud and I couldn’t view. I noted that he’d started seeming unusually pale ... and tired. After a few seconds, Gary cleared his throat and continued in a soft voice.

“The vibrations were not unpleasant. I had a sense that Benedict was there, somewhere, his hand still clasped in mine. I also became aware of another entity close to us for barely a second. We resonated for a moment and then I was pulled away, crushed

by an infinite weight, a googol of G's. I landed, gasping, on my back in the middle of Benedict's flat. Alone.

"I never saw Benedict again. Thinking about it over the years, I've come to think maybe our brief companion on the other side had been Benedict's mother. Since I didn't hear from him, I figured he'd found a way to really get to Level 3 to be close to her and then decided to stay.

"Then, four years ago, the guerilla attacks began from galaxies M81 and M82. We didn't know it was Benedict at first, not until the Battle of the Cepheids in Orion. Then it became clear that he had returned to our universe and was leading a revolt against the Omega Archon."

"And the rest is history," Spud finished without a trace of irony.

I shivered. "Level 3 sounds just god-awful."

Gary nodded. "I certainly wasn't prepared for the transition."

"That is the point, indeed," said Spud mysteriously, sucking on one of Gary's pens. He sat up and faced his boss. "Clearly, you are implying that, for some reason, Benedict was cast out from the Garden of Eden, perhaps by the Omega Archon, and now is fighting so he can get back in."

"Yes, that's my theory," Gary agreed. "But as long as His Highness rules the roost, the door to heaven is apparently locked. So..."

Spud shook his head. "I don't buy it." We both stared at him.

"He wouldn't have said p-brane if he'd been in Level 3," Spud attempted to explain. He pulled out his Ergal cell phone and opened it. "I shall have to ponder this one for a while."

Nodding at me, he said, "Come on, Rush. We had best be going."

I didn't hide my sarcasm. "The game is afoot?" "No," Spud said absently, as he guided me to the door. "A neutrino." He looked at both of us with a sharp gaze, adding, "The game is a neutrino. And time is running out."

Chapter 9

It's about Time

Spud was due back on the set as soon as we returned to Burbank and I didn't have time to ask him what he'd meant by his curious remark. I had an appointment with Chell's make-up chair in ten minutes, so I quickly made a pit stop in my trailer and then slipped on my Tara Guard vinyl spacesuit. I took a moment to pull up information on neutrinos on my Ergal, and refreshed my memory from our Mingferplatoi Physics uploads.

Neutrinos are tiny subatomic particles, like protons and electrons, that can pass through matter without being detected or causing visible harm. They are apparently created by certain types of nuclear reactions, like those in the sun. The fact is, millions of neutrinos from our sun apparently safely pass through our bodies every day. How neutrinos related to Gary's story about Benedict, however, I couldn't for the life of me imagine. I would have to wait until I could pick Spud's brain and find out what he'd been theorizing.

Chell was in a chatty mood as he worked his make-up brushes and regaled me with tales of his active weekend in Palm Springs. Offering up a polite "really?" at appropriate intervals, I closed my eyes and tried to puzzle out how Benedict's concern for his mother had led him to humiliation, exile, and murder.

"You're wasting your energy."

Kris. My eyes popped open to see my "adorable" sixteen-year-old sister, her long blonde curls framing her delicate features, standing next to us wearing, as always, the latest fashions. I raised my hand in a brief wave and, choosing not to play, returned an unenthusiastic, "Hey."

"Hello, Miss Kris," Chell said, sounding delighted. "When are you going to grace my chair again?"

Kris giggled and gave Chell a quick hug. "I've got one more week on the Disney, and then we start shooting *Mid Kids* again next month."

The series about a group of "adorable" middle schoolers had been renewed for a third season this fall on the Toon Town channel. We still hadn't heard if *Bulwark* was going to be on the fall schedule for a second year...

Judging from his smile, Chell apparently would be moving his make-up case to Toon Town for the summer. I turned to Kris and ventured, "What animal are you on this movie?"

"A kitty, how did you guess?" Naturally. I shrugged. "So, what's up?"

"Elijah and I are going to Vegas with the band next week for the Vox Pop Awards," Kris bubbled. Elijah DiFiero, lead singer for Mettle, was Kris's latest boyfriend—and, to Connie's alarm, was already eighteen. He'd produced Kris's latest pop single, "Kiss Me," that, incomprehensibly, had made it to number six on the Billboard Top 40 last month.

Kris's voice dropped to a whisper, as she handed me a brightly-wrapped package. "I promised Andi I'd get her something. Seeing as you, uh, can get to Maryland much easier than me ..."

I sighed and took the package. "Sure. I'll give it to her. Um, good luck in Vegas."

“Of course!” Kris bounced over to give Chell another quick hug, and gushed at the world, “See you soon!” as she pranced away.

Not my favorite sister? No, duh.

Besides, the music Spud and I make is light-years better. He plays a mean guitar, and I’m no slouch on keyboards, and our songs really have a message. We’re almost ready to release our own CD. We just have to find a name for our band. I’ve suggested “The Musgrave Ritual”, but Spud is really hot for “Saxon Violins”. Frankly, I’ll go along with any name that doesn’t have the stench of Eurotechno.

“Beautiful.”

I jumped. Chell’s hands were on my shoulders and his face above mine, grinning from ear to ear. Admiring his handiwork in the mirror in front of us, he repeated, “Beautiful.”

Had to admit, I did look a lot more presentable. If I didn’t despise wearing make-up then maybe my social life would turn much more exciting. Assuming I ever actually had the time to hook up. I eased out of the chair and turned to thank Chell once again. “You’re a pro.”

Chell’s smile was genuine as he responded, “And you are beautiful. Someday you’ll even believe it yourself.”

I patted his arm and returned a rueful smile, “Someday, Chell, it won’t matter if I do or not.”

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We wrapped the last scene for the season by 8:30 that night—still not knowing if we’d have a Season 2. Our ratings had been inching up in the last few weeks. And Spud’s Q scores, audience appeal measures, are through the roof. I’m not as into the show biz scene as my sister Kris, but it does annoy me a little that Spud’s starting to get more fan mail than me.

Our wrap party was set for the Vista Rock on Sunset. Simon Carter, the sumptuous Captain Warner on *Bulwark*, was co-hosting the fete to celebrate his latest divorce, and much of LA’s TV royalty was expected to attend. “Wouldn’t hurt either of us to talk to some new people,” I said to Spud as we climbed into my trailer.

He plopped down on the divan, rolling his eyes. “I doubt most of them are interested in talking.”

“That’s never bothered you before.”

“While modern freedom is still attractive, it is no longer a novelty. I have spent much of my life resisting temptations.”

“Oh, come on. Brand’ll be there. And *he’s* attractive, if nothing more,” I teased. “Ha.”

Sneering, he pulled out and lit a cigarette and offered me one from the pack.

“No thank you. Besides, I have quite a bit of thinking to do.”

I declined, my irritation showing. “You know, why don’t you just directly inject the nicotine? Save yourself the trouble of smoking.”

Spud blew a few rings and smiled. “’Tisn’t trouble. It gives me something to do with my mouth.” He grinned. “You should try it.”

“Ick.” I made a face. “Anyway, bad breath and yellow teeth.”

“Ah, but I only smoke when I’m grappling with a problem.”

“Yeah, right,” I snorted. “Speaking of problems, you ready to talk about our little conversation with Gary?”

He shook his head. “But there *is* light ...” He stood up, heading for the trailer door, and smiled at me. “I shall pay you a visit in Malibu tomorrow morning so that we may talk.”

“Not too early,” I threw back with a wink. If temptation brushed by me tonight, *I* wasn’t going to resist.

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It was sunrise by the time I Ergaled us home to my ocean-side bungalow from the wrap party. Me and my Zoom Cruiser, that is. I wasn’t going to drive from Hollywood to Malibu being so ... tired. I collapsed on the futon in my living room and fell asleep to the sounds of the crashing surf outside my patio doors.

Being so ‘tired’, I foolishly didn’t bother to set the alarm code, nor did I wake up when the Andarts entered my house. I did finally wake up when the stun ray immobilized me, but, after that, of course, no matter how hard I struggled, I couldn’t open my eyelids to see the intruders. I had to use my other senses, one of which was alerting me that, boy, did I need to pee.

I was able to figure out that the Andarts were speaking an Ursan dialect of some sort, perhaps from the planets around the stars Merak or Dubhe in the “Big Dipper”. I couldn’t get to my Ergal, abandoned oh-so-close to me on the coffee table, so I only recognized a few words. Most of them profane. The Andarts seemed intent on searching through every nook and cranny of my bungalow, but, to my relief, didn’t seem too interested in me. For now. What were they going to do with me after they finished their scavenger hunt, however? In this stunned condition, I couldn’t grab my Ergal—or any other weapon. I had no way to protect myself, to fight back.

I tried desperately to battle the stun and move an external nerve or muscle, to no avail. My breaths were already shallow, driven only by my diaphragm, and now became even more rapid due to my growing anxiety. Desperate to burst free so I could breathe, I struggled even harder to break out of the stun, but my efforts were in vain. I felt my throat closing up, crushed by an increasing pressure on my chest. I had to escape or I was certain I would die.

And then I remembered John’s words, calming me that day years ago in the emergency room. “I am by your side, do not be afraid. Patience is the champion’s best tool.” Soothing myself with the memory of his voice, I was able to regain control of my heart and my mind once again. Thank you, John, I heard myself thinking. I miss you so...

Not finding what they were seeking, the Andarts finally returned to the living room and, I’m assuming from the few words of Ursan I could understand, tried to decide what to do with me. One Andart was apparently ready to throw me into the wild, wild surf, but, fortunately, the second was able to convince him to pocket my Ergal and tractor me to their ship.

On board their vessel, I soon found myself a prisoner in a small chamber, which blessedly had a small chamber-pot. Just before locking me in alone, a furry paw reached around the door and unstunned me, to my, and my bladder’s, great relief. Tara Guard and her television ilk never had to worry about bodily functions. I wish I could be so lucky.

After, uh, finishing, I looked around the makeshift cell. The writing on the wall panels was definitely Ursan. I recognized words in several Ursan languages and dialects that I had uploaded when I was at Mingferplatoi. I tapped my pockets, and scanned the room—nope, my Ergal was still MIA. At least I could get my bearings with those training uploads, as minimal as they had been.

Okay, my first order of business, Catascope 101, was the 5 W's: where (am I), who (kidnapped me), which (planet or species), when (Era or eon), and what (the heck will get me out of here!).

'Where' was obviously an Ursan ship. 'Who' and 'Which' were Ursan Andarts (note for later: Benedict Andarts?). 'When'? I looked out the porthole. We seemed to be in deep space, but I could identify no familiar landmarks. Place and time unknown. And 'what'? "What indeed," as Spud would say.

"Why not ask 'why'?" those of you with diligent English teachers could reasonably question. Our pedagogue mentors always taught us that 'why' was irrelevant. Don't waste your time with motivations in the field. Focus on the controllable reality. I remember getting that advice when I was with Spud and Sarion on a training mission near Centauri Gamma in 1832, fleeing five Centaurians who resembled charging bulls and were moodily irate that my accidentally misfired laser blast had burned their barn. The words "controllable reality" then seemed like an oxymoron. Or, as Sarion teased me during our debrief, an oxen-moron. Yes, everybody groaned.

Restless, I checked the porthole again. I still couldn't tell much from the star patterns except that we had now gone into hyperdrive, and were someplace I'd never been before. Which accounted for 99.99999 percent of the Universe, unfortunately.

I was concentrating so hard on the stars outside the ship that I almost didn't hear the door behind me whisk open. I did catch the Ursan entering my room when his tall, furry figure was reflected in the porthole glass. As he neared, I spun around and aimed directly for what I thought might be a tender area in a giant bear. He was ready for me, though, and sidestepped smoothly, letting me land face first on the not-very-soft titanium floor.

"You okay?" he said with a note of concern after I didn't get up immediately. In English. English? Did he have an Ergal to translate?

The voice sounded vaguely familiar. Nose aching, I turned on my back and looked up at my captor, wondering why I hadn't yet been overpowered and placed in cherukles or stunned. My jailer was a classic arctic Ursan, a typical native of southern Caniformia, with long white fur and a moist brown snout. Not someone I'd typically run into in my neck of the woods. And not someone I'd expect to be particularly compassionate either.

I nodded. "Embarrassed, but, yeah, I'm okay. Any, uh chance you could give me a clue where we're headed?" I added with a tentative smile.

"HD5924, Octant 7, M82," the Ursan responded.

What was it about his voice ...?

The sector of our neighboring M82 galaxy was, I remembered from my cosmography uploads, sparsely occupied, and not by Ursans. I'd never been outside of Zygan Federation territory before, much less to M82 in any case. Newer catascopes were usually encouraged to stay 'close to home', especially until their relative age of majority, which for Terrans was eighteen. Normally, I wouldn't mind a chance to explore new expanses, but wasn't M82 where Gary had said Benedict had begun his Andart assaults on Zygfed? Was the Ursan Andarts' mission to deliver me into Benedict's clutches?!

“And what happens after we get there?” I tried to keep my expression calm.

“Don’t worry,” he added, “just stay with me and I’ll take care of you.”

I got up slowly, my hands visible and clear of weapons. “My Ergal would help.”

He smiled—I think—and reached a paw out to gently pat me on my head. “Just follow my lead.”

I smiled at him politely, and muttered, unconvinced, “The check is in the mail.”

Chapter 10

It's about Space

M82 Galaxy—present day

It took us quite a few hours to arrive at planet HD5924. The M82 galaxy wasn't much farther from the Milky Way than Andromeda, but I surmised that the Ursan ship wasn't a racing model, and we weren't exactly flying at top speed.

My self-appointed "friend" met me at the door right after we landed and put my hands into cherukles so I could still walk. I entered the hangar sandwiched between the two Ursans, neither of whom had bathed for what was an inconsiderately long time.

We trudged down a long dark hall and then turned into a closet-sized chamber. I recognized the lights that glided over us as a primitive NDNA scan, and wondered if, after all these exposures, I'd ever be able to have children someday.

Another chamber door opened to another dark hall, and we continued walking somewhat downhill for several more minutes before reaching a large, solid door, where we waited until it groaned open.

The lights were blindingly bright, and it took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust. The room beyond was quite big, the size of at least three football fields, and contained several khaki-colored domelike structures on its hard floor. Above the domes floated hundreds of white spheres, many the size of tennis balls, others up to twenty meters in diameter. Their walls were translucent, and I could see flickering lights inside, but no openings in their smooth surfaces.

Ignoring some of the smaller spheres that had begun trailing us, the Ursans headed straight for one of the large domes on the ground. The absence of doors in the domes didn't seem to faze my captors. When we arrived at the dome wall, we sort of diffused right in through the ... membrane ... and found ourselves in what looked like a government office building. Yes, right down to the scuffed linoleum floors, stained linen-colored plaster walls, and scratched gray doors, each sporting foot-long signs with obscure titles that morphed from Ursan to English to Ursan as we walked by.

We stopped in front of a door whose sign read Executive Coordinator of Strategic Initiatives and Outcomes Assessment. Ursan #1 placed his paw on a coat of arms on the center of the door, which was momentarily bathed in light. The door then opened and we were welcomed by a short, oily-haired man in a tweed suit and bow tie. He invited us in to sit in some burnished leather chairs before his cherry desk.

"Welcome, gentle beings, welcome. Do make yourselves at home; I can mega the chairs if you wish," he added for the Ursans benefit.

My friend nodded and the chairs instantly grew by a factor of two, pushing my own seat towards a paneled wall. I eased my toes out to see if the wall was porous, so I could maybe slide back out and make a run for it. Hard plastic. No such luck.

The man was looking intently at me. "That would be foolish, my dear," he said in a harsh tone. An instant later, he was smiling again. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

I shrugged, showing him my cherukled hands. "Agriarctos," he instructed in Ursan, "do let our guest have some tea."

My friend nodded and removed my cherukles, patting me once more with his paw. I gave him a cold stare that I hope included the message, “You are not my type.”

The creepy little man Ergaled a steaming mug of a purple substance that he levved towards me. I thanked him, and cradled the mug without drinking.

“Now then,” he stopped and shot me a sideways glance. “Does she know?” he asked the Ursans.

Agriarctos shook his head.

“Well, then,” said the man as he turned to me and gushed, “I am Fahrquardt.”

He seemed to be waiting for a response. I finally squeaked out, “Ah ...”

“Goshdingdong to heckypoo!” Fahrquardt shouted, as he angrily threw several paperweights which crashed on the paneling over our heads. “What does it take to get fashionable with young people today?!”

I now saw that the paneling all around us was pockmarked—and that Fahrquardt still had a number of paperweights laid out on his desk. Uh-oh. Reminded me of an insane studio executive I had to deal with last year...

“Jumping Jilly!”

I started. Another paperweight flew by my ear. “Yes, yes, sirree, Mr. Fahrquardt. Right here with you.”

Fahrquardt seemed to calm down just a bit. “Well, goshamighty. Of course you are.” He paused, and then giggled, “Didn’t mean to scare you there. They just don’t make catascopes like they used to.” He laughed heartily for a few minutes and then stopped cold.

“Where is it?” His voice was icy.

Double Uh-oh. I was in trouble. Not only didn’t I have ‘it’, I didn’t even know what ‘it’ was. But, I’d watched my agent do this during negotiations. I leaned back and oozed faux confidence. “Are you ready to make a deal?”

“You are a cheeky little thing, aren’t you?” Fahrquardt said, chuckling. “Okay. I’m a businessman. Ten million credits as soon as you deliver the Somalderis. And, of course, I’ll send,” he nodded at the Ursans, “Agriarctos and Plionarctos to help.”

Summelwhat? Where had I heard that before ...? Pretending I knew exactly what the clown across from me was talking about, I put on my self-assured grin, and sat forward assertively. “Fifty million *and* asylum. *And*, my own sanctuary in M82.”

I braced myself for another paperweight assault. Fahrquardt’s hand reached towards his desk. “Goodness gracious, you do drive a hard bargain, my dear.” He grabbed the only book in the room, opened it, and removed several tissues from the dispenser inside it which he used to blow his nose with a loud honk. “Golly gee, I guess I’ll have to say yes.” He stuffed the tissues back in the book dispenser. “Plionarctos, go with—”

Agriarctos stood up quickly, knocking the mug out of my hand and splattering the hot liquid all over his partner. Plionarctos roared as the tea burned his white fur and skin, so unused to heat.

“A thousand pardons,” Agriarctos whispered to his companion. The clumsy Ursan turned to the small man. “Plionarctos must seek care, Fahrquardt. I will go with the girl to retrieve the Somalderis. We will return by sunrise,” he added, brushing my hand.

Hearing my cue, I stood up and joined in, “Hey! Why are we wasting time, Artie?” I grabbed him by his thick, furry arm. “Let’s go. Mister Fahrquardt’s treasure awaits!”

A paperweight whizzed by each of our noses, dealing Agriarctos' longer snout a glancing blow. We both turned, ready to duck.

"If you're not back by morning," Fahrquardt's tone was no longer genial, "Benedict will have your hide," he threatened Agriarctos, before fixing his piercing gaze on me, "and your neck."

• • •

"Well done," I said to my Ursan guard as he guided me in cherukles back to the Ursan ship. "Thank you for getting me out of there. You do know, of course, that we now actually have to go find that Summelthingy, whatever it is."

"Somalderis," he whispered as he shut the door of the airlock.

"Whatever. So, what exactly is it?"

Agriarctos struggled to explain. "It's an ancient ... membrane, that's a ... gateway to other ... worlds," he stumbled. "That's all I really know."

Membrane? Gary's tale popped back into my brain. Brain ... Brane ... P-brane. God, I wish Spud were here with me. I really could use *his* brain right now.

"You wouldn't happen to have any idea where we might find this, uh, membrane?" I ventured, not very optimistic.

Agriarctos shook his head. "Just give it to me and I'll see that Fahrquardt gets it and sends you your money." "Me? What makes you think *I've* got it?" Was that what all this was about?

Agriarctos snorted, a sound that blended a cough and a bark. "You didn't steal it from Sutherland? You were bluffing?"

"Uh, yeah..." I inched away as far as I could to stay out of furry arms' reach.

"Well, then," Agriarctos decided, "I guess we'll have to go back to Sidon and look for it together." His voice was cold. "Until I believe you."

• • •

Agriarctos locked the portal and let me ride shotgun on the bridge this time, without cherukles. I settled comfortably in my seat for the long trip back to Earth, where I figured I'd have a better chance of successfully escaping. Agriarctos' current size advantage against me would be offset once we landed by the spectacle of a talking polar bear chasing me down the streets of ancient Phoenicia. I was fervently hoping that Sidon had a well-staffed Animal Control Department, or at least a few Roman archers with good aim.

"Who is Fahrquardt, anyway?" I asked as we went into warp. "I've never heard of him."

"Benedict's #8, though he thinks he's #4," Agriarctos chuckled. "Bureaucrats never make it past #5."

I whistled. "So that *was* a Benedict refuge?"

"Outpost. Not refuge," Agriarctos clarified. "M81 and 82 aren't Zygan protectorates, you know."

I shrugged. "Not yet, anyway. So what makes you think this MacGuff—Somal ... deris is still on Earth?" I asked casually.

Agriarctos looked at me from the corner of his eyes. "I've seen it."

I sat up. "Whoa. No kidding?" The Ursan nodded.

“Where?”

“The first time, a place called Kolhis, near the Black Sea. Many, many years ago. And then—”

The rest of his answer was lost in the explosion. The fusion torpedos from the starcruiser took out the rear of our ship and all of our propulsers. We were tossed out of faster-than-light hyperdrive and thrown off course hundreds of kilometers, floating dead in space. Thankfully alive. But lost “at sea.”

“What happened?” I asked Agriarctos, who seemed intent on determining our coordinates on his locator holo. Before he could answer, our ship trembled and started to move. Agriarctos’s furry paws desperately tapped buttons on his console and icons on multiple holos, but were unable to counter the force that was pulling us backwards, faster and faster through unfamiliar space.

I leaned over and switched one of the screens next to me to display a view of what was left of the rear of our ship, in the hopes that I might glimpse what or who was tractoring us at top speed. I was, I admit, relieved when I recognized the titanium maw of the enormous ship that was about to swallow us. Gliesers. The border guards of the Zygan Federation.

“Rescued!” I cheered, as we were drawn into the belly—or bowels, depending on your perspective—of a giant shark-nosed vessel whose underside sported the Zygfed flag.

Agriarctos mumbled something that sounded like a Zygan curse. As our cruiser slowed down and came to a stop in the giant warship’s hangar, Agriarctos slipped me back my Ergal with the pointed comment, “Your turn.”

Before I could ask what he meant, our cruiser’s main portal was opened remotely by the Glieser welcoming committee. As soon as the airlock released, I inched towards the opening and peeked into the cavernous water-logged hangar to be welcomed by the Gliesers with arms. Not open ones, I’m sorry to say, as Gliesers are an aquatic species and only have fins. And in those fins were the latest model stun guns, pointed at me.

Oops. Apparently, entering back into Zygfed space without clearance or authorization was somewhat frowned upon, even if our intentions were harmless. Which they were ... I think.

I now understood Agriarctos’s plan. He’d given me back my Ergal in the hopes that I, as an official Zygint catascope, would save *his* skin this time, and get us out of trouble with the border barracudas.

I stepped out of what was left of the Ursan ship, and stood at the water level on the ramp, holding up my Ergal in a gesture of “I’m with Zygint. Don’t shoot!”

They didn’t shoot. But they didn’t trust me entirely either, as I felt myself become stunned and immobile once again. A contingent of glistening Gliesers levved me supine above the water and out of the hangar. I flashed a mental image of being trapped in a coffin, paraded to my grave by piscatory pallbearers, and concentrated on taking deep breaths as John had coached me years before.

From my frozen position, I couldn’t see what was happening with Agriarctos. I was taken directly to a room that resembled, well, an aquarium. Only the water was on the *outside* of the tank, bathing my audience of Glieser interrogators. I was laid on the cold floor, and, after my pallbearers had returned to their fluid-filled observation posts, I felt waves of scans buffeting my body.

After the requisite scans confirmed my genuine identity as a Zygint catascope and I had been unstunned, I asked my current (no pun intended) colleagues about the Ursan.

“What Ursan?” was the frigid response.

“Damn!” was my hot one. I was now facing hours of grilling about why I was tooling around the edge of Andromeda without authorization in an Ursan ship. And, somehow, Agriarctos had managed to escape!

Chapter 11

It's about Two Men in the Strangest Place

Zygan Federation Border—present day

I wish I could say things went swimmingly, but I'm not Sarion. It took almost six hours of intense questioning, and an influential call from Juan De La Cruz at Headquarters, for the Gliesers to finally agree to release me in my own custody; along with a warning about following proper procedures for travel authorization and border crossing to enter Zygfed territory. Yes, sirs. At least I had escaped another visit to the Omega Archon.

As the Ursan ship was in no condition to take me home to Earth, Captain Gil Pesci kindly offered me one of the Glieser warship's shuttles for my return to Terra Firma, as long as I promised to send it back immediately on autopilot. Yes, sir!

It was actually kind of fun to wend my way home in a vessel resembling a sting-ray. I yielded to the impulse once or twice to guide the ship through some smooth flips and turns as I glided through the ether. I gave a silent thanks to Captain Gil for his loan, and to Th'Alia for her tlyp'ath skills that had allowed me to survive Glieser interrogation without revealing what had happened with the Ursans and the strange small man on HDWhatever. I'd half expected Agriarctos to reappear and cheruklize me again, but my furry partner in treasure hunting seemed to be gone for good. I resolved to keep my Ergal within arm's reach in the future, just in case.

• • •

Hollywood—present day

Spud should be grateful I didn't shoot his head off. He M-fanned in the bathroom of my Malibu house soon after I'd arrived—as I was taking a relaxing bubble bath. I invisible-ized my stun gun and sunk deeper into the tub, only my head sticking out of the bubbles.

"Don't you ever knock?" I asked, irritated.

"You said it was urgent," he shrugged, putting down the toilet cover and sitting on it next to me. "Here I am."

"That's for sure," I rolled my eyes. "You smell like a chimney."

"I have been cogitating ..."

I held out a hand quickly. "I don't want to know." I looked at him with a satisfied smile. "Somalderis."

An eyebrow went up. "Pardon?"

"The MacGuffin. Somalderis, that's what it's called."

"Ah." The eyebrow went down. "I had begun to fear it might be the Philosopher's Stone." He added, "Sorcerer's Stone, for you Yanks."

I threw a wad of bubbles at him—and missed. He laughed. "So what is it?"

"I'm not quite sure," I admitted. "Agriarctos said it was some kind of membrane that could take you to another world."

I expected the next question to be, "Who's Agriarctos?"

Instead, it was, “Did he say membrane, or M-brane?”

I shrugged. “I don’t honestly remember. What difference does it make?”

Spud was looking off at the corner, lost in thought. He mumbled, “All the difference in the worlds ...”

• • •

Spud had me go over and over the last day’s events, and continued to interrupt me with peculiar questions about the most insignificant details. Finally, he sat back and said, “It is time.”

I entirely agreed. My skin was so pruny I looked like a ghost. I kicked him out of the bathroom while I rinsed off and got “decent”. An hour later, Spud and I sat over a pot of tea on my patio and made our plans. He pulled out his Ergal and I craned my neck to look at the map on his mega’ed screen.

“The Black Sea was called the Euxeinos by the ancient Greeks. West of its waters you could find the Greek cities of Chersonesos and Pantikapaeon. East of its waters lay ‘the edge of the Earth’ as the Hellenes called it, the kingdom of Kolhis in what is now the Republic of Georgia.

“Mythological databases describe ancient stories that say that’s where the Somalderis was hung on an oak tree as a sacrifice to Ares.”

“Aries the Ram?”

“Ares, the god of War. Mars.”

I looked at Spud. “What do the Zygfed History records say?”

Spud shook his head. “Unfortunately, there’s nothing. Not one thing in the Zygint data bases or directories about a Somalderis, or anything where it relates to Mars either.”

“Okay. God of War. Certainly fits with Benedict’s tactics.”

“In Greek mythology, King Athamas’ son Phrixos escaped across the Euxeinos Sea to Kolhis on the back of a winged ram—”

“Aha!” I chided. “I said ‘the ram’.”

Spud ignored me. “He sacrificed the ram skin to”— he said pointedly—“Ares the War god and hung the fleece where it was guarded by a dragon until Jason—”

“Fleece?!” I shouted, practically knocking Spud out of his chair. “Fleece?!” My expression was pained. “The *Golden Fleece*?!”

“Well, yes, but—,” Spud stumbled.

I sat back in my chair and threw up my hands. “Oh, great! I’ve been on a wild goose chase for the Golden Fleece!”

“No,” Spud said, wiping my spit off his face. “I don’t know that it’s really golden. The word in the proto-Indo-European language might have meant light or sun—”

“Okay,” I sighed, “I give up.” Proto-Indo-European language. *Really*. “So now we have to go back to ... 5000 BC and try to find it before Jason and the Argonauts—or Agriarctos and the Ursans.”

“More like 500 BC.” Spud ventured. “And I’m not sure Kolhis is where we’ll find the fleece any more. However, I do believe it is a good place to start.”

Spud micro-ed his Ergal screen and went to put the phone back in his pocket. I shot my hand out and grabbed his arm.

“Wait. What about the temporal vector shield?” Would we need another Trojan horse to get into Earth’s past? Technology was Eikhus’s specialty, and I’m sure Spud wasn’t

eager to dive back into Kharybdian waters quite so soon and ask for Eikhus's help once again.

"I'm scanning—no, we're clear," Spud looked relieved. "The shield doesn't extend that far back in time. It's only covering the period of Yeshua's recorded life, which was much later. So, looks like it's just you, me, and the Ram, Rush." He got a sly grin and added brightly, "The game is ahoof!"

I don't think Spud was permanently injured.

• • •

The Black Sea—578 BCE

Pantikapaeon was a beautiful city for its day. Gleaming marble temples, rolling hills overlooking deep blue waters and clear azure skies. Kind of like Baja California before they built all the tourist hotels.

We M-fanned on the edge of town in 578 BCE, as the intrepid brothers Akbar and Danel, or, as we were now called, Aristotelis and Dimitris. Though I normally liked to wear jeans or other pants—excuse me, Spud, trousers—I was actually getting used to these togas. Commandos going commando, I giggled.

"Don't giggle," Spud scolded, as we ambled towards the beach. "Or I shall start calling you Dimitra."

"*Perilypos*," I apologized in ancient Greek, or rather my Ergal helped me say. Uploads can only go so far, and I hadn't had much of a chance to practice dead languages living in modern L.A..

We neared a row of boats bobbing in the water a few feet off shore. Bronze-skinned fishermen were gathering twine nets filled with flopping fish and pulling them onto the sand. I flashed back to the Gliesers for a frightening second and felt myself shivering.

Spud had engaged one of the fishermen in a spirited conversation in fluent ancient Greek. He's always got to show me up. Darn those British public schools and their Classics classes.

Thanks to Spud's linguistic and diplomatic skills, as well as a large sac of Ergaled drachmas, we soon found ourselves in a borrowed wooden fishing boat riding the choppy waves with the sun on our backs. Before long, my arms were aching from pulling the oars, and trying to keep up with Spud's semi-pro rowing stride. Darn those British public schools and their rowing clubs.

As soon as we were a speck on the horizon, I mutinied. "We're levving this thing the rest of the way," I insisted. "Why can't we just Ergal to this Kolhis anyway?"

Spud didn't answer immediately. He kept scanning the water and raising a hand to the wind. "Because I want to see," he finally said, "where our dinghy naturally takes us. If my calculations are correct, the currents and weather conditions should mimic those described in Apollonius's poem." He looked at me, and sighed. "The Argonautica—the story of Jason and the Argonauts. Now row."

I made a face and grudgingly picked up my oars, adding with little enthusiasm, "Aye, aye, Captain Bligh."

• • •

Many, many hours later, we made landfall on a rocky beach battered by small waves. I found a shady spot under an oak tree on a clump of moss to sit and rest my weary arms. I didn't know what Spud was going to do next. There seemed to be a veritable forest of oak trees around us, none of which sported a hanging ram's pelt Somalderis.

Spud wandered carefully from tree to tree, his Ergal out and measuring something. I closed my eyes and waited. Spud would tell me soon enough what was on his rather arcane mind.

"Aliens!"

I jumped, opening my eyes and reaching for my Ergal. Spud was nowhere to be seen.

"Aliens!" The voice belonged to a tall, brawny man, who stood at my feet aiming a large bronze spear at my chest.

My Ergal CANDI'd me that it was translating Georgian. A fleeting Sarion joke about Southern accents crossed my mind, but my groan was blocked by the gravity of my predicament.

"Not alien. Human," I said in Georgian, thanks to my Ergal. "Greek."

"Greek. Persian. All of you are invaders of our kingdom! You must die!"

Ah, I like a guy who gets to the point right away. "Um," I raised my hands, "I mean you no harm. I am, uh, a simple fisherman who was shipwrecked and wants to return home. With your mercy."

I must not have been very convincing. The Georgian slid the tip of his spear over my chest along the surface of my toga. "Tell your soldiers that if they set foot here we will skin alive every last man and hang them from the trees."

Common practice around here, huh? You haven't seen a fleece hanging—

Crack! Like a tall tree felled by loggers, the Georgian fell stiffly to one side, barely missing my legs. Behind him stood Spud and his trusty stun gun. Spud walked over to the guard and Ergaled an E-shield around him so that we could speak freely.

"Where were you?" I asked in modern English, an edge to my voice. I scanned the trees, wary of additional Georgians ready to attack us.

"We're alone," Spud reassured me. "Well, sort of. If you ignore the portal."

"The portal," I said with a note of sarcasm. "Go on." "There's a gateway between two trees thirty meters into the woods."

"A wormhole?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. I was able to Ergal into something for a second or two, but I was ejected. Perhaps one needs the fleece."

My curiosity was aroused. I nodded at the stunned guard. "Let's leave Brutus here to rest and go check it out."

We walked over to the site. I saw nothing more than a clearing filled with waist-high robust weeds. Spud suggested I check my Ergal—it was documenting some space-time distortion that it couldn't identify.

"Think we should try it?" I ventured with some eagerness.

Spud was enthusiastic. "Yes, maybe with two of us and two Ergals we can push in farther than I was able to do alone."

I smiled gamely, hoping for the best. Holding hands, Spud and I tried simultaneously X-fanning through the portal. 1-2-3—

I felt my body being torn apart and didn't even have the energy to scream. Spud's hand floated by my eyes and disappeared, still grasping mine. I saw the skin of my leg

unfold and dissolve into a sparkle of light, then watched my eyes leave my head and disperse into a shower of glitter. My brain slowly absorbed that, without lungs, nose, or mouth, I was unable to breathe, before it dissipated and I felt nothing but...

Hard ground. Gasping. Grabbing for each breath with the desperation of a drowning man. Next to me. Gulping breaths. Spud.

We lay together, still holding hands, for quite a few minutes, before I could eke out a, “What the hell was that?”

“I suspect it was Gary’s—and Benedict’s—‘Level 3’,” Spud responded quietly, still panting. “But I expect it is more like ‘Brane 5’.”

“English, please ...”

“Think of it as another dimension. *With* another dimension.”

I sat up slowly, still shaking, and furrowed my brow. “Well, we normally exist in four dimensions, right? Height, length, width, plus time. So you mean Brane 5 is a place with five dimensions?”

Spud nodded. “The Miletic Theory you were supposed to have learned in your exocosmology uploads, postulates at least eleven dimensions in which strings and membranes form the basic components of each universe. I think our portal here takes you into one of them, but, for reasons I have not yet been able to figure out, only the Somalderis can keep you there.”

I lay back on the cool ground, breathing deeply. “Wow.” I rolled on my side, frowning. “You think Benedict and his gang want to be able to access those dimensions?” Spud nodded again. “That’s my hypothesis. And I presume that the Omega Archon wants to make sure that doesn’t happen ... again.”

Chapter 12

Ion Eyes

Earth Core—present day

We levved the dinghy back to Pantikapaeon soon after nightfall, so that the kind and greedy fisherman would have his boat by morning. We also timed the removal of the Georgian sentry's stun and E-shield to occur at the same time as our X-fan. We didn't want any, uh, hard feelings. In fact, Spud Ergaled an almost-empty bottle of Chersonesan wine next to the guard before we left so that the Georgian might have a straw to grasp after he woke up and wondered why he'd spent the last few hours lying literally senseless in the forest.

Our next stop was Earth Core, in the modern era. It was time to talk to Gary again about what we'd discovered.

"Gary isn't heerrre," Fydra responded at reception, her tone professional.

I leaned over and handed her a bright, studded necklace I had seen on one of the hotter models at the wrap party; I'd Ergaled a copy on my way down in the elevator from Heck. "Happy Birrrrthday!"

"It's rrrravishing!" Fydra broke into a warm grin and leapt over her desk to give me a wet nose rub. I hugged her back as Spud began tugging on my arm.

"Come on!" he urged.

"Where are we going?" I asked him as I followed him inside the station.

"Gary's office. We have work to do." "But Fydra just told us he isn't here."

"Exactly," Spud said, as we arrived at the suite. "Shh."

Spud pulled out his Ergal and manipulated some of the dials. After a few moments, Gary's door opened, and we gingerly stepped in. As it closed behind us, I asked, "How did you do that?"

"Better you do not know," he said. "Let us hurry." He started to scan the stylish room, lined with bookcases and what I guessed was expensive art.^[18]

"What are we looking for?"

"Gary may know more than he is telling," Spud explained. "Anything MacGuffin-related."

I chuckled, and started to pore through Gary's books. Amusingly, a large number of them could be found in the self-improvement section of your local bookstore. Well, at least they weren't filled with tissues. Spud went and rapidly downloaded Gary's holo- files into his Ergal and then joined me in searching the rest of the room.

"Hello!"

I turned towards the door, terrified that Gary had walked in. It was still closed— Spud had only spoken an exclamation. I walked over and punched him in the arm before asking what he had found.

He punched me back, then answered, "Look at this textbook."

The book looked at least twenty years old and was titled, *Cosmological Physics: A Unified Theory of the Universe*, by Whit N. Miletus, PhD. I raised an eyebrow, "Glad we don't have to learn all that any more."

“Miletan Theory.” He flipped through a few pages. “Look at these notes in the margins.”

I glanced at the formulae lining the text, then joked in my best ancient Greek, “It’s Chinese to me.”^[19]

Spud, concentrating as he skimmed page after page, didn’t laugh. He closed the book, micro’ed it and slipped it in his pocket. “Let’s go.”

I looked at him as if he were crazy. “Are you crazy? You’re taking Gary’s book?”

“It isn’t Gary’s,” he returned soberly. “It’s Benedict’s.”

• • •

We M-fanned back into my Malibu bungalow. Spud put my whole house under an E-shield, explaining that he needed a few quiet hours to study the text and Benedict’s scribbles.

“How do you know Benedict did that?” I asked. Sure, Spud was a whiz at studying handwriting and being able to identify writers—and forgers. But this was amazing. Where would he even learn what Benedict’s writing looked like?

Spud, annoyed, opened the book to its coverleaf and showed me the nameplate. Chagrined, I read, “This book belongs to: Theodore Benedict.”

“Any other questions?” he mumbled, his head still buried in the formulae.

“No ... no ... I’ll, uh, just hang ...”

Spud’s hand slipped into his jacket and he took out a new, full pack of cigarettes. On second thought, I realized I hadn’t seen the family in a few weeks; maybe this would be a really good time to deliver Kris’s package to Andi.

• • •

Maryland—present day

I M-fanned at the farm in Maryland and ran up the path to avoid being drenched by a pouring spring shower. Taking cover under the awning on our front porch, I wiped the mud off of my shoes before I rang the bell. Some of the gang was bound to be home. I didn’t expect to see George, as ‘Osborne, Conrad, and Jeffries’ was a killer law firm to intern for, and he’d likely be working at his office all weekend. Connie was probably at Georgetown studying for her upcoming finals, and Blair should have already gone back to the UK for planting season. But, Andi and the boys still had a couple of months left in the school year, so I’d have enough company for a few hours, at least until Spud’s smoke cleared. Literally, as well as figuratively.

Bobby opened the door eagerly as I approached. Seeing me, he crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Want to make it to fifteen?” I favored him with a faux frown as I walked past him into the foyer.

Billy waved his free hand from the home theater in our family room, his eyes glued to his game. I ducked to avoid a holographic Romulan warship as it almost sliced through my head. Two years younger than Bobby, the blond “starfighter” was already beating his brunet brother in battle games. In a few years, when he turns sixteen, I’d love to nominate him for Mingferplatoi. The boys were back at their controllers even before I headed for the kitchen. At least I knew what to get them for their birthdays.

Andi was making a peanut butter sandwich, strands of her long auburn hair falling into the paste as she tried to keep it from tearing the doughy bread.

“Whole wheat isn’t as fragile,” I suggested.

“Shiloh!” she squealed, and stretched out her peanut butter-covered hands for a hug. Thirteen is old enough to know better. Really. I hugged her anyway.

“I’ve got a present for you,” Andi’s face brightened as I pulled out Kris’s package from a plastic bag. “From Christine.” I handed Andi a towel to clean off the remnants of peanut butter that didn’t make it onto my own T-shirt.

Andi carefully unwrapped the shiny paper and folded it into a small square which she laid on the kitchen counter. She raised the lid of white box underneath and squealed with excitement. “A Mid Kids jacket!”

The olive windbreaker looked wonderful next to her auburn locks, and I complimented her on her style. I pulled out a second box from the plastic bag, this one unwrapped. “I got you a little something, too.”

Andi’s eyes lit up when she saw the sketch pad and colored pencils. She gave me another big hug. After taking off her new jacket so it could stay peanut-butter-free.

We made a pitcher of lemonade for us all and sat around sharing some family and Hollywood news and gossip. I learned about George’s plans to intern in Congressman Acton’s office in July. And Connie’s student teaching in an urban DC school. Blair and Uncle Ari were planning to double the potato crop this year, and the little guys were balancing school, baseball practice, and acting in the occasional local commercial pretty well. Bobby had admitted that he wanted to join Kris in LA this summer, and maybe get a shot at a guest part on ‘Mid Kids’ next season, but George and Connie had both responded with a vehement ‘no’. For once, I was on their side. Kris wouldn’t be a real good role model for her younger brother. And me? No way could I babysit. I already had a second job.

Neither Andi nor I mentioned John. We drank lemonade, and, until the rain stopped, I sat in the home theater and played a few rounds of war games with the boys while Andi sketched us. I let them win, of course, ‘cause I don’t know when I’ll have time to come back and see them again.

Only when I was at the door, giving Andi a good-bye hug, did her eyes well up with tears. “I can’t remember what his voice sounds like anymore,” she whispered. “And I never wanted to forget.”

I held her in my arms for a very long time.

• • •

Hollywood—present day

I M-fanned back into Malibu as the sun was setting. I don’t like to miss the sunsets over the Pacific at this time of year. The sun paints the clouds orange and pink, with bright yellow halos. June gloom will arrive in several weeks, and with its marine layer coming in around 3:00 PM, you won’t be able see anything out my windows at all for most of the day, even the paparazzi crouching behind the dunes. It gets pretty lonely sometimes...

The first thing I did was prop up Andi's sketch of us on my desk in my bedroom. I was so glad she gave it to me. I'll add it to the others I've mounted on the wall as soon as I can find the right frame.

My very next task was to open the windows, especially in the living room where Spud was 'cogitating'. I knew we were able to regenerate our lungs with one trip to Nejjinsen, but I still didn't want to breathe all that smoke.

Spud ignored my sour face, and began cryptically, "Van Allen Belts."

"Yeah ...?" I waited.

"Radiation belts around the Earth." "I know that," I said, exasperated.

"Most planets don't have them. They're burned off by the sun."

"I didn't know that."

"So, why does the Earth have them?" Realizing I wouldn't have a clue, he raised a hand and answered his own query, "The Earth's magnetic field traps the radiation."

I nodded, pretending to understand. "Or."

Sigh. "Or?"

"They're the remnants of attempts to transition to other branes ..."

"Well, that's a leap. Literally."

"Bear with me. I shall try to explain. What are the belts made of?"

"Sugar and spice." No response. "Green cheese?"

Spud was not amused. "Charged ions."

"Okay ...?"

He sat back, pursing his lips. "I'm not an astrophysicist, but ..."

I snorted. "You should be."

"Recall, we were only in the portal for a second or two. We needed something, an energy source, perhaps, to propel us forward. Our Ergals, even together, couldn't provide enough power to make the transition." Spud leaned forward, his eyes bright. "What if—and this is simply a presumption—what if the Somalderis somehow provides or channels energy. One is then able to fully transport to another brane."

I'd like another brain right now, I thought, as Spud continued, excited. "Without the Somalderis, one would need to provide one's own energy. An enormous amount of energy."

"Mm-hmm." I shrugged. "Then how 'bout using a nuclear bomb?"

Spud grinned. "Bravo! So, you try to harness nuclear energy to push you into the next dimension. But—"

I nodded. There's always a 'but.' "Something goes wrong?"

Spud echoed my nod. "Very wrong. The energy is still inadequate, and, as you are ejected there is a nuclear backdraft. Voilà, you have created a Van Allen Belt."

I frowned. "But, if what you're saying is true, they, the belts, would have to be pretty recent. I mean, wasn't the Bomb only invented in 1960 or something?"

"In 1945 or something. I did a little atmospheric measurement before we left Kohlis," Spud glanced at his Ergal. "I read no Van Allen belts in BC."

"Really? Wow." I checked my Ergal's reference files. "Says here Christofilos and Van Allen did their work on the belts in the 1950s..."

Spud nodded. "That fits perfectly into our timeframe. No belts in ancient times. Belts now. The nuclear blowback then must have created the belts sometime soon after 1945. Van Allen finally confirmed the belts' existence in 1958. Now all we require is evidence

tying the belts into a nuclear explosion in the late forties or early fifties of the 20th century.” He paused for a brief moment. I saw a hint of an ironic smile. “And we both know who has access to that evidence.”

Spud looked at me earnestly. I rolled my eyes and let out a long, long sigh.

• • •

Earth Core—present day

Temporal analysis at Earth Core was Ev’s baby. We needed access to Earth radiation tracking data from the past hundred years or so to prove Spud’s theory. And the only way to get it was through Everett Weaver. I wished I hadn’t been so hard on the dork all this time. I hated having to eat crow.

Oh, well, nobody ever said acting was easy. Well, yes they did, but anyway. Back at Earth Core, I came up behind Ev and gently put my arm around his shoulders. It took all my skills to push the words “I’m sorry” through my gritted teeth.

Everett wasn’t entirely convinced of my sincerity. “What do you want, Rush?” Innocent eyes. “I just wanted to apologize. I haven’t been very nice to you really.”

Everett stared at me for a few moments, frowning. My eyes dropped, drawn to the pizza stains on his shirt. Dork. Finally, Everett sighed and said, “Okay.” He turned back to his holos.

I smiled and nonchalantly started ambling away. Wait for it. Wait for it.

“Hey!” Ev called out to me.

I turned towards him, batting my big blues.

“Hey,” he continued, looking sheepish. “I thought you were, uh, kidding. Thanks.”

He smiled, genuinely pleased.

I smiled back, and turned back away. Wait for it ... Wait for it...

“Rush!” Ev said again. I turned around and smiled. “Anytime you need anything, you know ...”

Warm smile. “Thanks, Ev. I’m okay.” I shrugged oh so casually. “But, hey, now that you mention it ... Spud was asking me about something earlier today ...”

• • •

New Mexico—1947

June 12, 1947: No Van Allen Belts. June 14, 1947: Van Allen Belts. Contact metrics. June 13, 1947: Chaves County, New Mexico.

I had on Amelia Earhart duds, right down to the aviator goggles. Spud wore a leather cap with some military-type insignia and a madras shirt and jeans. We both looked very *Grapes of Wrath*.

Spud guided us to the right coordinates, and we settled in under a large oak tree to wait for whatever was to come. I could only pray that any nuclear backdraft wouldn’t blow us away with it.

The night was unusually crisp for summer, and I drew my legs up under my arms to stave off the shivers. I looked up at the black sky, and, to my surprise, actually saw stars. LA’s bright lights reflect back up into the sky after dark, drowning out the constellations. I had almost forgotten what Earth’s night sky was supposed to look like.

The flash woke me up with a start. For a split second, I was blinded, and then the dark sky returned as it had been. Several hundred yards ahead of us, a glowing mass streaked to the ground, bursting into flames when it hit. Spud and I leaped up and started to run towards the burning site. Suddenly, Spud shot out an arm and knocked me back, pulling me behind another tree. My irritation turned to curiosity when Spud put a finger on his lips and pointed in the direction of the fire. A shadowy figure had arrived at the site and with—a Zygan-type stun gun?!—in hand, was extinguishing the flames.

We crept through the rim of oak trees around the clearing where the thing had crashed. We could now see remnants of what looked like some kind of a spaceship scattered over several feet of charred grass. Spud Ergaled us some binoculars and we scanned the site from our hiding place among the trees.

The ship seemed to be shattered into a number of pieces. At its center was a pod, which, though blackened from the heat, looked intact. I increased my binoculars' lens magnification. It was clear that the pod was shaped like a humanoid, with a trunk, limbs, and a large head. Armor of some kind?

The shadow man was struggling with the pod to no avail, and finally—lasered!—it open with his stun gun. I looked at Spud. I was certain that Terrans didn't have laser guns in the 1940s—or even lasers for that matter. Off-worlders? Or, worse, rogue Zygons?

We continued to watch as, grunting, Shadow Man pulled out what looked disgustingly like a burned body from inside the pod, and laid it on a patch of green grass.

The body lay still, unmoving. Shadow Man knelt next to it, crouching over it, his back to us, shaking with spasms.

“Is he crying?” I whispered to Spud.

Spud shrugged and motioned for me to be quiet.

“Hey!”

“What is it?”

The voices came from the other side of a small hill across from our hiding spot. We crept back deeper into the woods a bit, circling around to get a better view. Shadow Man had jumped up at the sounds, and grabbed the burnt body in his arms.

As he looked around the horizon, his hand reached in his pocket and he pulled out a stop watch—an Ergal?! And, only a split-second before two hollering ranchers came running over the ridge, Shadow Man and the body disappeared.

I was as white as a ghost and Spud was even paler. As he had been scanning the area, we had both caught a glimpse of Shadow Man's face. We didn't have to speak the name. We both instantly knew who Shadow Man was. Gary.

Chapter 13

Double Trouble

Sol System Space

We Ergaled straight to the Zoom Cruiser, still staying in 1947. We didn't dare show up on Earth in the modern era. If Gary had decided to run a trace of our recent tracks, he'd be waiting for us when we returned. And somehow, we didn't really expect we'd get a very warm reception. We held off until we were well past Ceres before we M-fanned into the present.

Spud told nav to go into hyperdrive and then leaned back in his seat, eyes closed.

"Gary looked so young ...," I observed to no one in particular as the stars flew by on our windscreens.

"I'd say he was in his mid-twenties then," Spud said, still "sleeping." "He left that part of the story out yesterday."

"No kidding. Who do you think the guy who died was?"

"I'm not sure," Spud said, opening his eyes and sitting up. "In fact, I'm not sure anyone did..." A momentary pause. "What if," he continued, "the body was Benedict?"

I sat forward, facing Spud. "Whoa! No way!"

Spud held up a hand. "No, wait. Let us review what we have learned. Gary has a desk job for Earth Core. After Mingferplatoi, after Harvard. Working his way up the ladder to mediocrity."

I nodded. "That's our Gary."

"Then Benedict appears and takes him on that joyride to another dimension he related to us."

"Okay, I'm with you."

"Only instead of Benedict remaining in Level 3, as Gary had said, they *both* came back. Now their goal becomes to return to this Level 3—or, as we really should label it, Brane 5—and stay there. They run through the similar calculations and speculations to ours, and decide to try a nuclear bomb to provide the energy to push them all the way through the portal."

"Okay ... but why go back in time thirty years to the 1940s?"

Spud chewed on his lip. "I think because there was a lot of above-ground nuclear testing in that area then. Perhaps they figured that it would be less suspicious if anything went wrong."

"Which it did."

"Apparently." Spud scratched his chin. "So let us suppose Benedict is the risk-taker, so he assumes the role of the test pilot. He dons some kind of protective suit, and detonates the nuke just as he crosses the portal. Boom. Backdraft. He's blown back to—"

"Is there a portal in near where we were in New Mexico?"

Spud shrugged. "I didn't get anything on my Ergal close by, but, the portal they used could be anywhere within hundreds of miles. Arizona, Nevada, Colorado ... The blowback could have thrown him all the way to where we were waiting in Roswell."

"Roswell! Of course. The 'alien invasion'." I quoted with my fingers.

“Gary’s admitted he blew a mission at Roswell. What if that ‘mission’ wasn’t an invasion from outer space, but from another brane ...?”

I took in a sharp breath. “So Benedict gets burned to a crisp and lands at Roswell. Gary goes and finds him, pulls him out of his not-so-protective suit and then Ergals out, leaving the remnants of the suit ...”

“And the bomb. Which could resemble the broken pieces of a ship. The suit looks like ...?”

“An alien ...”

Spud nodded. “Exactly.”

We stared at the stars for a few moments in silence.

I hesitated. “Then Benedict’s dead?”

Spud didn’t answer right away. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. He may have died and been anastasised. Or if he lived, regenerated his injured parts. Or ... Benedict could simply be a political tool, and not really exist any more at all ...”

“A tool? Whose? Gary’s?”

Spud said quietly. “Perhaps. Perhaps not.”

• • •

Back to Zyga—present day

As our Zoom Cruiser whizzed through the last leg of our journey to Zyga, we both sat quietly, trying to digest the events of the last few hours. No offense to the Kharybdians, but the muddy waters had gotten much deeper. If Gary had been a friend of Benedict’s, was his allegiance to the Omega Archon, or to the outlaw? Was Gary himself still working for Benedict, a double agent like Wart? Did he send us after Sutherland hoping we’d fail, to help Benedict succeed? And, if Gary had gone to the other side, who else at Core—or beyond—had he taken with him?

I could only hope that Ev wasn’t one of them, and that my favorite dork had kept his mouth shut—literally—about our temporal research on radiation belts. If Gary found out, he could probably guess that we were on to him. In that case, we were dead meat. Gary could use his cred and authority with Zygint to convince Central that *we* were the traitors. We’d be arriving at Zyga soon. Would we be greeted as citizens or enemies of Zygfed ...?

“Spud?”

He raised an eyebrow. “The Somalderis...”

He smiled wanly. “Ah yes. The Somalderis.” “Agriarctos told me he’d seen the Somalderis years ago. In the past. Why didn’t Gary and Benedict go back and steal it to use?”

“Maybe they did. And battered the gates of heaven with the ram ...” Spud said in a soft voice, adding mysteriously. “A man who has never been to heaven is driven by hope. A man who has lost heaven is driven by desperation.”

Spud pulled out his Ergal and smiled. “Perhaps we should revisit our Milton.”

I nodded, not wanting to reveal that I didn’t have a clue what he was talking about.^[20]

• • •

The Kharybdian Enclave, Zyga—present day

We didn't dare touch down in Mikkin until we were sure that Zygint hadn't discovered our detective work. Instead, I followed Spud back into the mud of the Kharybdian enclave. We'd come to Zyga in stealth mode again, and my stomach was still churning from the rough entry. I was grateful that I hadn't eaten since I don't know when.

Eikhus greeted us with a soothing warm shower and led us in to his thal. We were surprised to find Matshi and Nephil Stratum waiting for us in the sala.

Matshi looked good. His limbs had grown back fully, and he was smiling. I was glad to see him less depressed.

Nerea welcomed us with dewy hugs, and invited us to munch on some thikia. "Eikhus has a new recipe. They're delicious."

And they were. I didn't realize quite how hungry I'd been. Even Spud seemed to eat with some vigor, and without the grumbling that usually accompanied his encounters with things Kharybdian.

After a hearty meal during which Spud filled in our friends about our adventures, we relaxed with mugs of Chidurian Ale, courtesy of Matshi. Despite the drink's relaxing benefits, I noticed a hint of tension had crept into the Chidurian's features. When I could catch him alone, I would try to find out why, I decided.

"Ergal records show nothing, but my contacts did find some references to a Somalderis," Nephil Stratum relayed to us. "Kolhis—"

"Where we were," I interjected, grimacing at my memory of the Georgian thug.

"Also, Sparti, Uruk, Judea," she continued. "Nothing much after that."

"Anything in the US?" Spud asked. "New Mexico? Nevada?"

"No. Nothing. The last report was thousands of years ago in any case."

"Any connection with Orion?" asked Matshi.

"No. Sorry," Nephil Stratum said softly.

Ah. Ulenem's outburst to save Orion was clearly on the Chidurian's mind.

Spud leaned forward in his seat. "Matshi, does Orion Alpha have Van Allen Belts?"

Matshi shrugged his shoulders. "Never checked. My ship has always been radiation shielded, just in case."

Eikhus shot a waterspout to his holo. "No Van Allen Belts," he told us, as he scanned the display.

Spud looked disappointed.

"But," Eikhus continued, "There *are* Trapezalnitaks." He turned back to face us. "Radiation belts."

"Capital." Spud's excitement trumped his annoyance. "How do they compare with the Van Allen Belts?"

Eikhus re-checked his computer. "Stronger. Much stronger. Especially the inner belt. They seem to be products of fusion reactions."

Matshi nodded. "It makes sense for them to have tried a stronger bomb."

"And Benedict has seemed to have an affinity for fusion weaponry in his guerilla attacks," Spud agreed.

Benedict. *That's* where I'd heard it. It seemed like weeks ago when we'd all been sitting around the table in Matshi's kalyvi watching Benedict's holo as he was doing, we figured, some calculations. What had he been muttering? $M \cdot c^2$, $E = mc^2$,

Einstein's equation for conversion of matter to energy ... Alpha ... trapezalnitaks. Radiation belts on Orion Alpha! Summeldare ... ram. The Somalderis!

"Can you temporal track on that thing?" Excited, I asked the Kharybdian about his holo unit. "When were the trapezalnitaks formed?"

"I can't temporal track with this," Eikhus sighed, then brightened. "But, I can measure decay parabolas and estimate a date."

Eikhus's fingers splattered through the holo display for a few minutes, while I shared my memory of Benedict's mumbled words with the group. The Kharybdian seemed puzzled, frowning as he worked.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I keep doing it and doing it, and it still comes out the same." Eikhus sounded extremely frustrated. "My calculations show that these belts have only been around Orion Alpha for three months."

"Months?!" Matshi cried. We all looked at each other in alarm.

"Let me see what some other planets in the area show," Eikhus suggested. The results were not reassuring. Populated planets around Betelgeuse and Bellatrix also showed evidence of recent radiation belt development. Had Benedict's Andarts used fusion bombs to try to cross to another dimension, creating radiation belts? Were those attempts the so-called terrorist attacks Zygint had warned us about?

If Ulenem was right, and Orion's solar systems were the latest testing grounds for Benedict's attempts to travel to another brane, millions of beings could be in danger from radiation poisoning. And, if Benedict and his lieutenants eventually tried a crossing with the Somalderis and it wasn't strong enough to power the transition, could blowback destroy one of the most densely populated star systems in the universe?

"I cannot answer that question," Spud said gravely. "But, I must refer us back to our brief glimpse of Benedict and the last word we heard him utter. If my memory serves, I believe it was 'catastrophe'."

Chapter 14

Orion

En route to Orion Alpha, Orion—present day

The constellation of Orion is also known as the Hunter. It's fitting, as some of Zygfed's best hunters hail from its many solar systems. Ulenem was one of a long line of Assassins from Orion Alpha, many who had honorably served Zygfed in heralded battles. Ironically, Zygfed had brought relative peace to the constellation's quadrant, by drafting Orion warriors into Zygint and the Sentinel Corps and effectively halting their bloody incursions into neighboring star groups such as Sirius. Long-victimized Scyllians and Ursans became grateful supporters of the Zygans for ending the rains [sic] of terror.

Our own hunt for the terrorists now pointed us in the direction of the planet Orion Alpha. Ulenem's warning, as well as the discovery of those recently created radiation belts around so many worlds in the Orion system, led us all to suspect that Benedict (or another villain with the same name, Sarion joked) was using the star system as his new testing ground. We needed to go there and investigate.

Spud and I agreed to lead our team to Orion in my Zoom Starcruiser. Matshi would follow in his warship with Sarion, and Eikhus and Nephil Stratum would join us in the Nautilus^[21] after picking up Setsei and Suthsi from the Ytran Enclave.

Contact metrics were finalized and we fled Zyga, once again, by stealth. I set nav to warp towards Orion Alpha.

"So who's this Milton guy you were talking about before," I asked Spud.

"John Milton," Spud responded. "Merely the best English writer of all time."

I raised an eyebrow. "Not Shakespeare?"

Spud snorted. "In my opinion, Shakespeare was a very inferior fellow. His entire *oeuvre* was soap opera and situation comedy," he added for my benefit. "And," he chuckled and gave me a wink, "it may actually have been written by another man with that name, Francis Bacon."

"Hey, I've played that," I returned with a grin. "Six Degrees of Francis Bacon." I did a pretend drum roll with my hands. "Ba-rum-pum."

Spud looked at me through narrowed eyes, "That, Rush, was worthy of Sarion."

"I am properly insulted," I huffed.

"Anyway," Spud continued with a twinkle in his eye, "John Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, an epic poem in which Satan, a fallen angel, is cast down into Hell and decides to fight God and re-enter Heaven. He finally succeeds and ends up tempting Adam and Eve to eat the apple of the Tree of Knowledge, so now they too are cast out."

"You think Benedict and/or Gary are fighting—"

The pain was overwhelming. I almost lost consciousness as my head cracked against the viewscreen and my sore elbow was momentarily wrenched from its socket. In the darkness, I couldn't even see Spud, nor hear his breathing. Nav was obviously dead. Our ship pitched and rolled endlessly, magnified by the forced transition out of hyperdrive. My back slammed against weapons control, which, already damaged, crumpled with the force of the blow.

I was unable to visualize anything inside or outside our ship as we somersaulted in black space. Gritting my teeth against the pain, I pulled myself back into my seat and grabbed my Ergal, hoping I could jumpstart nav and improvise weapons.

Spud must've had the same idea, as auxiliary nav came on along with the ship lights. I gasped involuntarily. Spud had a huge gash on his scalp and was drenched in blood—some of it apparently mine.

“Weapons regen!” I shouted. “Fusion torpedos.” “Laser charges,” echoed Spud hoarsely. “Full power.”

I scanned nav holo and ran my fingers on it to enter an evasive pattern. “Identify attack.”

Crash! Another blow hit us from the side and we flipped over and over—this time, fortunately, tractored into our seats. Smoke filtered in from our vents, fogging up the interior and triggering the atmospheric shields that all Zygan ships automatically activate if airlocks are breached accidentally or deliberately. “Ventilation resuming,” Spud grunted, as we felt the flow of fresh air.

“What is it? Who?” I cried, between deep breaths of replenishing oxygen.

“Zygan, certainly,” Spud said, alarmed. “And they obviously know all our evasive maneuvers.”

I hit nav again. “Manual.” My skills as a pilot trainee at Mingferplatoi had been good. Would they be good enough?

Crash! We pitched again, but this time it was a glancing blow and the damage was less. I dove a light-year and spiraled up to catch our assaulter by surprise from behind. No such luck. The Zygan ship had duplicated my moves and was still following us when I leveled off. Panning, spooling, flipping, all were useless. The Zygan pilot's skills were terrific, and his ship seemed to be even stronger and faster than ours. Spud continued launching a few of our charges and torpedoes, which, dodged by the Zygan vessel, flew harmlessly off into the ether.

Crash! The lights and nav went out again, and we floated, dead in space. Neither of our Ergals could regenerate systems this time. We were in deep space, in deep trouble.

“Escape pods?” I suggested to Spud.

He nodded, and we Ergaled into our suits and ejected invisibly into the vacuum. Or, so we thought. The tractors hit us the moment we left our ship, which was then blasted into smithereens by a well-aimed fusion torpedo from our attackers' vessel. As we were being hauled through space towards our captors, Spud was actively mouthing some words to me I couldn't make out from inside his helmet.

I shook my head and shrugged. Nothing to do now but wait. We'd be in the Zygan ship soon enough. And somehow I didn't think we'd be meeting friends.

• • •

As soon as we'd entered the airlock, the tractors were released. We tried to Ergal out of the enemy ship, only to find that our Ergals had somehow disappeared, and we were effectively unarmed. *Someone* apparently had a functioning Ergal, because we were M-fanned into a holding cell right after clearing the airlock.

The holding cell was a small chamber, no larger than my walk-in closet at the Malibu pad. We sat at the far end of the room, watching its locked portal and waiting for our captors to appear and reveal themselves. Spud lifted off his helmet and turned to me.

“What were you trying to say to me out there?” I asked, as soon as I had removed mine.

Spud shook his head and said, “I suspect it is Gary.”

The chamber door whooshed open and a familiar voice greeted us. “That’s right, Escott. Gary.”

Neither of us was happy to see him holding a stun gun. Spud remained stone-faced. I tried a smile. “Boy, are we glad to see you.”

Gary didn’t smile back. “What were you two doing in this quadrant?” he asked coldly.

“Dogfighting with you,” I answered, somewhat truthfully, then instantly regretted being flip as Gary aimed his gun at my chest. I curled into a defensive crouch and added. “Okay. Sorry.”

Gary turned to Spud. “You don’t think I monitor my office?”

Spud looked pained. “I should have. But I counted on Core Security as being adequate ...”

Gary Ergaled himself a chair and sat down facing us, stun gun remaining at the ready. “Once again, why are you here?” he demanded.

He turned his gun towards me for a moment, but I had already decided that answering “because we can’t escape” would be unwise. Neither Spud nor I said anything.

Finally, he continued. “Your bearing seems to indicate you were headed for Orion. Why?”

I theatrically nudged Spud. “See, I told you we were off-course. We were on our way to, uh, see a live comedy show on Scylla.”

Gary and Spud both looked at me, incredulous. I rolled my eyes and then finally said seriously, “Oh, cut it out, Gary. You know why.”

Gary smiled at last. “Yes. Yes, I do. Very clever of you to figure some things out.” He raised his eyebrows. “Not very clever of you to leave a temporal trail I could track.”

Spud shook his head. “Ev ...”

“No. When I first sent you to Phoenicia, I put trackers on your Ergals that left temporal footprints. Just wanted to be sure nothing went wrong.” He couldn’t resist a smirk. “No reason to take them off when you got back.”

“So you knew Sutherland was in Phoenicia all the time!” I said angrily.

Gary snorted. “Knew? I sent him there. Poor Wart and his shattered reputation...” His sigh turned into a laugh.

“And why are we still alive?” Spud interrupted. My heart skipped.

“Frankly, I was a little slow on the draw.” Gary smiled again “I underestimated you. You’ve now had a couple of hours lead on me. And before I eliminate you as threats, I need to know who else you’ve talked to.”

My heart stopped. Spud simply nodded, satisfied. “I thought so.”

Gary looked at each of us in turn. “So, let’s not get melodramatic here. Just give me the names and I’ll catharize^[22] you.”

“And if we don’t?” I said, clenching my teeth.

“I’ll put you through hell,” Gary said coldly, “and then I’ll kill you.”

Our only hope was that our cavalry would arrive in time. Matshi and Eikhus working together might be able to vanquish Gary. Unfortunately, our designated rendezvous time

was still a few hours in the future. Until then, they wouldn't even know we were in trouble. Could Spud and I hold out that long?

• • •

Zyga—present day

Matshi glided his ship along the stunning rocky coastline of Zyga's Megaran Enclave above the sparkling aquamarine sea below. Bacchanalian resorts were few and far between in Zygfed, so the Enclave was a favorite vacation destination among Zygans, who enjoyed its lovely beaches during the day, and its exciting entertainment at night. At the top of the Megaran Bluffs was one of the Universe's largest collections of holo caverns with magicians, dancers, comedians, singers, Deltans (pleasure facilitators), and other entertainers from the far reaches of Andromeda. The Enclave, like Megara itself, was famous for being on 36/12^[23].

Sarion was waiting for Matshi in a Transport portal off Promenade 48. The Megaran had enlisted three mates to accompany him on the mission, Pallas, Nissos, and Lykkos. Matshi had sparred with Pallas at a Megaran wrestling arena a couple of years before and was thrilled to have Pallas and his friends on his team.

After the pick-up, the always-wary Matshi took a parabolic route from Zyga to our agreed-upon meeting point in the Bellatrix solar system. He didn't expect Eikhus to arrive for another hour, what with the fussiness of the Ytran meiotas, Setsei and Suthsi, and Eikhus's tendency to pilot the Nautilus like an elderly excursioner. But, Matshi was surprised to see that we weren't there. We were respected pilots, and I usually lived up to my last name, Rush.

The Chidurian scratched his head, and, after a few minutes, began a parsec locator scan to look for us.

"Afraid to ask for directions, huh?" Sarion joked as he walked over to Matshi.

Matshi did not seem amused. Even Sarion finally realized his friend was very worried. "What's the matter?"

"Fusion torpedo residue," Matshi shook his head. "And I've picked up some Terran DNA ..."

Sarion's expression registered concern.

"But," Matshi continued, "it's a very small amount. Mixed in with shards of ship composites and metals. But not enough for a complete human. Or two."

"Then where could they be?"

"I don't know, but I may be able to trace the fusion residue and backtrack to find its source." Matshi's nimble fingers played over the holo as he searched for a ship that could have fired the torpedo.

After a few minutes, he frowned. "It doesn't make sense."

"What?" Sarion strained to see.

"I traced the torpedo track back to these coordinates." Matshi pointed to one end of a jagged line on the holo. "I'm getting an ion footprint there, but I can't see a vessel." The Chidurian's frustration was clear.

"Invisible? Stealthed?"

"Possibly." Matshi chewed his lips. "But that's illogical."

"What do you mean?"

“The footprint of the residue is Zygan. Why, in a Zygan quadrant, would a Zygan ship be stealthed? Unless they’re up to something. Even *we’re* not invisible-ized, and we’re not exactly on an official mission.”

“Kidnapping? Hit and run?”

Matshi nodded his head. “That’s what I’m thinking.”

“Do we go after them?” Sarion didn’t seem to be asking a question.

Matshi nodded and gave the command to nav.

• • •

“But we’ll die!”

Frustrated, Nephil Stratum looked at Eikhus. “Suthsi, that really isn’t likely.” The Kharybdian tried to be convincing. “And we could save the lives of millions.”

Setsei ambled onto the bridge holding a Geryon in each of his two right hands. He handed one of the long, golden, spear-like Ytran weapons to his meiate, who hesitated, and then accepted the Geryon with one of his two left hands. Setsei’s voice trembled as he gently rubbed Suthsi’s smooth right trunk with his own left. “We went to Mingferplatoi for a reason. Let us fulfill our purpose now.”

Yellow tears fell from Suthsi’s eyes as the Ytran took his gleaming Geryon and micro’ed it into his robes. Setsei stroked Suthsi’s flagella with his own as a gesture of thanks.

“What’s wrong?” Eikhus interjected, noting that Nephil Stratum had turned a dark gray.

“I just got commed by Matshi,” she replied anxiously. “Shiloh and William are not at the contact site. They seem to be missing, and Matshi thinks they may have been kidnapped by a rogue Zygan ship!”

The Ytrans said the word together: “Andarts!”

Chapter 15

Adam

Kidnapped—present day

Rush screamed in agony. Only my tlyp'ath techniques kept me from losing complete control and collapsing into unconsciousness, where my neurocache would be ripe for Gary's picking.

I heard myself scream again. The *chorizing* procedure allowed me to mentally step outside my body and kept me from experiencing the full extent of the pain. Like a hyperpowered narcotic, *chorizing* also removed the anxiety that made pain so unbearable. Still my mastery of the tlyp'ath practices was primitive. If he knew I was resisting, Gary might 'turn up the volume' of the torture more than I would be able to cope.

Meanwhile, Spud was *chorizing* in another chamber. Perfectly still, his response to the interrogation was catatonia and escape to another plane of consciousness, where Gary would be unable to access his neurocache and effectively download his brain information.

Gary moved back and forth between us, trying to scan our brains with an instrument that I didn't recognize. It was bright gold and shaped like an orange cut in half, a divided sphere. Gary had placed the flat surface over my frontal lobes, near my forehead. Then, he'd demand, "Who did you talk to?!" over and over. When the answers didn't come, Gary hovered next to me, shifting his weight impatiently from one leg to the other, and twisting a gold ring on his left middle finger back and forth as his frustration grew.

Both of us were able to perceive Gary's anger rising as our efforts kept him from his goal. "These techniques are far more advanced than Zygint's," he muttered. "How are these green baby Zygint catascopes able to resist?"

As minutes turned into hours, Gary's fury intensified. I was convinced he knew we could hear him speak as his pacing became ever more agitated. "Catharization is too good for these children. Execution is what they deserve!"

• • •

Matshi's ship

The holo showed mild dark matter flux, but little else. If there was a ship stealthed at the target metrics, Matshi couldn't see it on any of the screens.

Pallas nodded at the display. "It's there. Look at the differential."

Nissos agreed. He reached over Matshi's shoulder and manipulated the display. A faint shadow of a vessel appeared. "There you go."

"Zygan technology isn't always state of the art," Sarion said. "And that's no joke."

"It's actually an understatement," Pallas snorted. "Zygan bureaucracy actually stifles innovation."

"One of these days," Matshi admitted, "I'd like to blow this Fed and see what I've been missing."

"Count me in," Sarion agreed. "I've heard the Deltans in the Virgo Cluster are really hot!"

Lykkos snickered, “You wouldn’t believe what we learn from some of our ‘visitors’ when they’re under the influence of Aldebaran brandy.”

Matshi glared at them through furrowed brows. “I was thinking about witnessing new spaceflight technologies.”

“Speaking of, based on the ship outline, it looks like a Messier Sportstar, the latest cool cruiser among Ursans,” Nissos announced. “Seats 22.” He ran his fingers across the holo again, and added, “I read three humans on board.”

“And two of them may be Escott and Rush,” Sarion stated, serious. He turned to Matshi. “Orders, Cap’n?”

Matshi looked at the Megarans soberly, and declared after a beat, “We go in.”

There was a general cheer.

“Suit up, men,” Matshi advised. “We’ll Ergal in invisibly and scan and disperse once we’re on board.”

• • •

Eikhus’s ship

Suthsi sat quietly as Eikhus gently guided the ship towards Matshi’s contact metrics. In the years since they’d left Mingferplatoi, he’d not gotten a decent night’s hibernation. Setsei had wanted to stay at the Academy. I should’ve stayed, too.

Suthsi felt Setsei’s flagella slide over his shoulders and smiled. “Whatever our fate,” he said quietly, “may we share it together.”

Nephil Stratum was relaying comm data to Eikhus. “Matshi and his team are mounting a rescue.”

“Can you see the ship?” the Kharybdian asked. “Inside?”

“Yes,” she responded. “To both. Do we join them, or do we wait?”

Eikhus hesitated, finally declaring, “Just monitor for now. We’ll know when and if we have to make a move.”

• • •

The Messier Sportstar

Matshi M-fanned invisibly into Spud’s cell, dumbfounded by the scene before him. Spud was lying motionless on a metal slab, his eyes closed, his aquiline features devoid of expression. The Chidurian crept closer to see if Escott was breathing. Barely, he realized; no more than a breath a minute, too few for humans.

He reached a hand towards Spud’s chest. A human hand grabbed his and twisted him towards the floor.

“Matshi!” Spud cried as he landed on top of his rescuer, adding in a whisper, “I am actually quite pleased to see you.”

Rolling to one side, the Chidurian slid out from under Spud. Rubbing his sore limb, Matshi stood up to his full height and muttered a Chidurian curse.

“I know what that means,” Spud grumbled as he got to his feet.

“I know you know,” Matshi responded. “Now let’s get your arse out of here.”

• • •

When I opened my eyes and saw Sarion leaning over me with a worried smile, I thought Gary was taunting me with a cruel joke.

“Come on,” Sarion cried. “Hurry.”

I reached up and grabbed his muscular arm. He lifted me off the table and spotted me until I’d regained my balance.

“How did you find us?” I asked, grateful for the rescue.

“No time for that now, follow me.” He pulled out his Ergal and started entering instructions with his fingers. Dazed and drained, I was still wobbly on my feet, but free of the spasms of agony with which Gary had tortured me. “How did you stop my pain?”

Sarion looked at me, puzzled. “Here, let me Ergal you a suit and we can X-fan back to Matshi’s ship.”

“No.”

Sarion looked even more puzzled. Could it be he had no idea why we had been captured?

“I can’t leave,” I insisted. “I have to save Spud. And stop Gary.”

“Matshi’s saving Spud,” the Megaran informed me. “And, by now, Pallas and Nissos should be on the bridge of this beauty. They should be able to handle your ... uh, Gary.”

I was now puzzled. “Who are Pallas and Nissos?”

“My mates,” Sarion said, his eye on the door and his tone impatient. “We better get going. Before somebody tries to stop us.”

I nodded. “Okay. But shouldn’t we disable Gary’s power grid first?”

“Lykkos, another mate, is on that,” Sarion urged anxiously. “Let’s just go.”

“Ergal me a stun gun,” I ordered the Megaran. “I’m not leaving til we arrest Gary.” I stood stone-faced, hands on my hips. “I am still—I hope—a fully certified Zygint agent.”

“I’ll go along with the certified part,” Sarion sighed, rolling his eyes. He Ergaled both of us stun guns and handed one to me. Without hesitating, I blasted the portal of my prison cell open and led Sarion carefully out into the corridor, determined to succeed in my quest.

• • •

“The bridge on these birds is usually astern,” Matshi whispered to Spud. “This way.”

A sudden yaw threw the two against the bulkhead. “Go, Pallas,” Matshi said quietly.

Spud clutched his stun gun even more tightly and crept behind the Chidurian. The ship lurched again, and the power grid went down.

“Lykkos,” Matshi explained as he Ergaled two torches and handed one to Spud. “Shh.”

Spud pulled Matshi back as they rounded a corner. He gestured at his ears and turned off his torch. Matshi followed and the two waited in the darkness, guns at the ready.

The faintest sound of stealthy footsteps approach hed from the corridor ahead. As the steps neared, Matshi and Spud both aimed their stun guns at the source of the sound. Around the corner, a faint light appeared, followed by two shadowy forms.

“Freeze!” cried Matshi as he and Spud each flew to one side of the shadows.

“Don’t shoot!”

Matshi and Spud turned on their torches to see Sarion and me.

• • •

I really thought I'd bought it when I felt the stun gun in my ribs. I'm so glad Matshi wasn't quicker on the trigger.

Spud recovered first. "Let's get to the bridge," he said quietly.

I nodded, not bothering to hide my sarcasm. "Thanks for asking."

"We do not have the minutes to waste on...small talk," Spud returned, as we set off down the corridor behind Matshi and Sarion towards the bridge. "My observation that you seem well was adequately reassuring. As I hope the converse was for you," he added with a bitter edge.

Ouch. That hit straight home. "Look, I'm sorry, Spud," I sighed. "After what I've—we've been through..." I struggled to articulate my distress.

"It is hardly necessary to dissect and relive the experience again," he finished for me, as he pulled on my arm to encourage me to pick up my pace.

Our companions had gone down a corridor to our right, and we jogged to catch up. After a few yards, Matshi led us off to the in the opposite direction, and then back again to the right. A few more turns and I felt that we had come around in a complete circle. Matshi was an excellent navigator, but I still kept wondering if we shouldn't've 'turned left back at the stop sign', you know?

Following the Chidurian, we clambered up a flight of stairs, walked down a short corridor, and finally reached a titanium door at its end. Our attempts to open the door with laser blasts from our stun guns failed. We'd need to use one of our rescuers' Ergals to M-fan into what we expected would be the bridge on the other side. We all held hands, and, on my whispered count of three, Matshi activated his Ergal and we all X-fanned through the door together.

Yay, Matshi. Success! We looked around hastily, bewildered to see that the surprisingly roomy bridge was dark and quiet. There was no sign of Gary, nor of Sarion's buddies. The emptiness and silence were very worrisome. I hoped the Megaran's friends were okay. I hoped Gary wasn't. Our Chief obviously had some tricks up his sleeve that we didn't learn about through Zygint and he didn't seem to hesitate to use them.

Stun guns out and charged, we peered into the darkness, trying to listen for sounds of life. I heard someone sniffing. Matshi. Chidurians did have large nostrils and triple our sense of smell. And then I smelled it, too. Something was burning. We'd better find out what. Following Matshi's lead, we crept behind the large nav and comm panels so we could hide before attempting to turn on the lights with an Ergal.

That effort was unnecessary. A split second later, the entire circumference of the bridge around us became brilliantly lit as it burst into flames. In the center of the chamber, holding a vibrating machine about the size of a large shoebox under one arm, stood Gary. To Sarion's alarm, there was no sign of either Pallas or Nissos.

"Don't bother looking for your friends," Gary announced. "They're on their way to Level 3 as heroes."

"No!" Sarion lunged forward, and was barely held back by Matshi and Spud.

"Their ... transition was instantaneous, I'd say," Gary chuckled. "I guess their mother never told them to put on their suits before they go outside." He waved his free hand at the darkness of space beyond the bridge's windscreens.

Sarion's face was contorted with rage. Red-faced, he sputtered a string of Megaran oaths.

Spud's eyes had remained focused on Gary's box. "What is that?" he interjected.

“That, Escott,” Gary said coldly, “is my key to Level 3.”

The blazing fire was moving rapidly towards our panels. We inched forward to avoid the flames, closer and closer to Gary, guns still aimed at our adversary. Soon we were standing only a few feet away, surrounding him. As Matshi shot out a free appendage to grab Gary’s box, Gary waved a hand and all our stun-guns instantly dissolved. Matshi and Sarion instinctively reached for their Ergals.

“Really, children, you don’t honestly believe that the extent of Zygan knowledge is limited to Catascope 101 at Mingferplatoi?” A second wave of Gary’s hand, and their Ergals had similarly dissolved. Matshi patted his pockets and, looking at Sarion then us, shook his head. “Benedict learned so much more during his exile.”

“And don’t expect Rescue 911,” Gary continued. “I’ve activated E-shields. No one else can get in to save you.”

The toasty flames were now licking our feet. We had no other option. With a shout from Matshi, we all leaped forward intending to grab Gary with our bare hands, and take away his Ergal or whatever it was that was the source of his power. Without an Ergal, or some *super*Ergal, Gary wouldn’t be able to take down the E-shield and escape. He would perish in the inferno along with us, an option that we estimated he wouldn’t tolerate. He’d attempt to save himself, and thereby open the door for us to get out, too.

Unfortunately, Gary had once again anticipated our move, and, still holding the shoebox, which had now started to emit a high pitched whine and shake violently, he avoided us easily by levving beyond our reach to the ceiling of the bridge, comfortably above the flames.

“Nice try, children, but there’s no escape for you,” Gary mocked from his smoky height as the blaze rapidly engulfed us and our suits and clothes began to burn. We scattered to all corners of the bridge, futilely trying to find an exit and flee the flames, but the entire bridge deck had become a fiery inferno with no egress.

Gary waved from his perch above, his gold ring reflecting the glow of the fire below. “See you in Level 3,” he shouted callously over our cries, and pressed a button on the side of the shoebox he continued to tightly clutch.

Faced with certain death, I started my tlyp’ath techniques once again to stave off the burning agony. The end would come quickly enough for us all. I did not want to suffer in my last moments alive.

Through the distance of my trance, I heard a blood-curdling scream, like none that I had ever heard before, come from above my head. I looked up as Gary screamed again, and collapsed onto the ground, dead.

As quickly as it had started, the fire was doused over the entire bridge, wisps of smoke the only trace of its flames. On the ceiling levved a dripping Eikhus, his stun gun pointed at the supine, still figure lying at our feet.

“Pallas! Nissos!” Sarion broke into a broad grin as he saw his friends had just M-fanned behind the charred panels on each side of the bridge. “Thank the stars you are alive!”

Eikhus floated down. “Thank Nephil Stratum. She anticipated their ... ejections, and we were ready with spacesuits the nanosecond Gary pushed them out the airlocks.”

Spud had knelt next to Gary’s lifeless body. “You did not fire,” he said to Eikhus. “What happened to him?”

“Nephil Stratum has learned many things since we last talked.” Eikhus nodded out the windscreen, where we glimpsed wisps of Nephil Stratum’s tendrils floating around our ship. “With her talents at shadowing communications.”

Setsei M-fanned into the bridge and drew out his Geryon.

Eikhus continued, “Nephil Stratum was able to observe Gary removing his E-shield to escape. And that gave us the cue to get in.”

“If the E-shield was down, then why didn’t he make it out?” I asked, equally curious. “Why is he, uh, dead?”

Nephil Stratum M-fanned on the bridge. “Same reason as the first time. Not enough momentum to push through.”

“Through what?” I asked. “A second E-shield?” “Through the portal,” Spud explained softly.

“This system apparently has several,” Eikhus nodded. “I’ll bet we’ll see that the radiation belt around Al Najid^[24] just got quite a bit stronger.”

I whistled. “You mean he was trying to go to another dimension? Here?”

Nephil Stratum nodded. “But he was bounced back by the brane. He thought he’d have enough power in that machine to make the crossing, but ... someone,” she turned a light golden blush, “tapped into and drained his energy source, and he didn’t get very far.” We looked at the shattered remains of what had been the shoebox scattered along the floor.

“Nephil Stratum,” I cheered, “I could hug you!” I stopped. “Wait a minute. You said like the ‘first time’? What first time?”

Eikhus nodded at Setsei, who walked over and pierced Gary’s skin with his Geryon. An astounding transformation occurred. Gary’s skin, in its deathly pallor, slowly dissolved, and a charred body appeared in its place underneath. With a ringing tinkle, Gary’s gold ring, now too big for his burnt finger, rolled off his hand and came to rest on the floor near my feet.

Spud smacked his forehead. “Of course. What an ass I have been!”

Matshi chuckled. “Yeah.”

Spud glared at him for a second and then continued to me, “At Roswell, we saw Gary, remember?”

“Yes,” I said, puzzled. “He turned towards the woods and we saw his face.”

“That was very clever of Benedict, I must say,” Spud responded with a tone of admiration.

“That was Benedict? But the face we saw was Gary’s.”

Nephil Stratum interrupted. “*Gary* was the unlucky traveler who made that test run and burned to a crisp.”

“Benedict Ergaled to look like Gary at Roswell—a brilliant move on his part,” Spud acknowledged. “He may even have muted down to his DNA. By pretending to be Gary for a few weeks, Benedict could cover for their failure without raising suspicion, and buy time to get Gary anastasized.”

Eikhus nodded. “I agree.” He turned to us. “But His Highness would never have approved anastasis through Nejinsen Medical Center after a capital crime.” He ran a finger across his neck. “Looks like Benedict took Gary outside of Zygfed to get it done.”

Nephil Stratum looked down at the burnt corpse, and tsk’ed. “M81 anastasis techniques do still have a few bugs.”

Shaking my head, I bent down and picked up Gary's ring. "Crossing to another dimension. I never figured our Gary for the type to take those kind of risks," I said, my voice cracking.

Nephil Stratum placed a comforting tuft on my shoulders, cooling my burned skin. "There is always another dimension to those we think we know."

I nodded and relaxed into her arms, letting my tears flow.

Chapter 16

Orion, for real this time

We placed Gary's charred body, wrapped in a protective latex shroud, on the Nautilus' autopod^[25] and launched it on course for Zyga. Eikhus instructed the autopod's nav to take the body to Aheya, just in case Nejinsen's medics wanted to do a post-mortem study of the anastasis work of their M81 colleagues.

Seeing as we'd lost our ship, Spud and I decided to keep Gary's for the trip to Orion. Lykkos had the power grid up and working in no time, and Setsei and Suthsi's Geryons helped to regenerate bridge equipment and repair the fire damage within hours. Nephil Stratum used her polyhedron to locate where Gary had secreted our vanished Ergals, and we were each soon re-united with our most valuable tool and weapon. Unfortunately, none of us had any luck in putting back together Gary's shoebox. The pieces had shattered and burned in the fire. What was left formed an empty shell that had no discernible internal parts we could put in some kind of order.

Luckily, the backdraft radiation from Gary's ejection had been minimal. Nephil Stratum's shield hadn't let Gary get far enough on his journey to create a significant blowback. Scans showed that Al Najid had had only a slight augmentation of radiation belt levels, and our own ship only demonstrated a trivial ring of electrons that was quickly decaying. We would be quite safe with simply the ship's shielding for at least a week. But even that small amount of blowback energy had unfortunately been fatal to Gary's anastasized cells. Pity he hadn't realized that another effort to cross into a different dimension would be deadly after his M81 anastasis.

I caught my reflection in the nav panel, and was surprised to see a few tears bead from my eyes. Gary had been my first real mentor. I would miss the man I thought he was.

I remembered that I still had Gary's ring in my pocket, where I'd stuffed it after picking it up from the floor. I took the gold band out and held it up in my hands. It was smooth, hard, and cold, and surprisingly heavy. I saw my tear-streaked face reflected on its outer surface, and quickly shifted the ring's angle. My eyes caught some unusual tiny characters etched on the inside. I didn't recognize the symbols. Even my Ergal could only identify them as resembling letters from an obscure language in a distant sector of M81. Translating them was a task that could keep me, Spud, and our Ergals busy for the next leg of our trip.

We set course for Orion Alpha, Ulenem's home planet, this time with Matshi's vessel in the lead. Matshi was well-known among the residents of Madai, Ulenem's town near the equator, and he was expecting a warm welcome.

The best laid plans...

Two patrol ships fired on Matshi's warship as soon as he ID'd himself. Matshi was an expert pilot and easily avoided their fire. And, fortunately, Eikhus and I had hung back out of their range. But that hostile reception certainly wasn't part of our plan. Shaken, we all retreated to Rigel IV to decide our next moves.

• • •

Rigel IV, Orion—present day

Rigellian halaropools are known for their healing properties. I for one was glad for the break and a chance to soothe my singed skin in the spa. To avoid looking creepy, Spud and I had Ergaled our surface burns and injuries away. But Spud, wincing every time he was touched, was obviously still feeling the pain of his now invisible head wound, as well as his underlying toasted skin.

We got ourselves some R and R, and then, refreshed, met up with our cohorts in the Elgebar, a popular watering hole, to feast on some universe-renowned fusion cuisine and Aldebaran brandy.

We opted to gather in one of the Elgebar's private suites, large chartreuse egg-shaped chambers that resemble giant cocoons. Our cocoon was spacious and we levved into comfortable positions as we enjoyed our food and drink. Only Matshi's appetite seemed dulled.

"You don't think the Madais know how Ulenem really died?" I asked the Chidurian as he sat, morose, on the floor of the cocoon.

"I've told only you all," he said listlessly, his eyes roving from one to another of us.

"Maybe Ulenem spilled the beans himself," I wondered, taking another sip of the tasty liquid.

Matshi grabbed me with three arms and pulled me to the floor. "What does that mean?"

I brushed him off and crouched defensively out of his reach. "If he could M-fan to us and start talking," I gestured towards Spud, "he could appear to his relatives, too. And blame you for his death."

Matshi grabbed my mug of brandy, still floating by his head, drank it almost empty, and threw the cup across the chamber. The mug bounced off the edge of the cocoon and landed on Eikhus with a splash.

"Hey!" The Kharybdian looked at us, annoyed.

"Chidurian Ale is better," Matshi complained. "He *did* try to kill me," he added, referring to Ulenem.

"Well, maybe he left that part of the story out, you know," I said.

Eikhus levved towards us. "Orion Alpha is only one planet. We can go back and take a closer look at the phenomena in the Betelgeuse and Bellatrix systems."

"No," Spud said forcefully. "Ulenem told us to 'save Orion'. I think he meant Orion Alpha."

"Or Orion, the star," I added.

"Or Orion, the constellation," Sarion jumped in. "Sorry," he added as he caught our frowns.

"This isn't helping," Matshi said bleakly. After a long pause, he sighed. "Much as I hate to admit it, I'm inclined to agree with Escott." His tone became more assertive. "Orion Alpha is where we have to go."

• • •

Reluctantly, Matshi consented to park his ship on Rigel and have his team join me and Spud on the Sportstar. Spud was right. Ulenem had likely been recruited by Benedict

on his home planet—which meant that Benedict had probably been nosing around Orion Alpha and its largest city Madai.

It was clear that Matshi had somehow been put on Orion Alpha’s “no-fly list.” If we wanted to follow Benedict’s trail on Orion Alpha, we had to try another approach.

“Spud and I can Ergal down to—”

“But I know Orion Alpha like the back o my hands,” Matshi interrupted me. “Besides, who’s to say your comrade Gary hasn’t ID’d you two as traitors to anybody who’s still clean at Zygint?”

He did have a point. Had Gary put us on Zygint’s Most Wanted List? Just to be on the safe side, I commed Everett at Core.

“Not surprised to hear from you,” his holo image said between open-mouthed bites of a shedding submarine sandwich. “Gary raced out of here chewing nails this morning. Wouldn’t even talk to me.”

“Smart man ...,” muttered Spud, in a low voice that I prayed Ev couldn’t hear. My kick landed unfortunately on Sarion’s shin, and the Megaran cried out with an alarming “Yaaiiii!”

Everett, oblivious as always, asked, “Is he around?” Tomato juice ran down his chin and dripped onto his shirt. “Got a message from His Highness.”

“Not exactly...,” Spud whispered with a not very benign grin. “Ow!” I aimed better this time.

“If I see him, I’ll let him know. Thanks, Ev,” I signed off with a glare at my partner. At least we had some good news. If Ev was clean—figuratively anyway—we were still in like Flynn at Earth Core. And the rest of Zygint.

• • •

As much as Matshi was eager to lead our team to Orion Alpha, we all finally convinced him it would be more productive for less unwelcome visitors to be part of the first landing party. Spud and I, as Zygint catascopes, would probably have no trouble sailing through customs, and, as Sarion put it, we could “catascope out” the territory and help Matshi sneak through after us if needed. Lykkos had a distant cousin in Mitanni, one of Madai’s suburbs, and would also have no trouble getting in. Setsei and Suthsi, to my surprise, volunteered to join us. I was all for it; you can always use a Geryon or two, even if it’s in the shaky hands of a terrified Ytran.

Eikhus and Nephil Stratum followed us in the Nautilus and offered to monitor critical communications from orbit. Sarion finally ended the discussion with his remark, “The Madai is cast.” We all groaned politely. The pun was even worse in Zygan.

We left Matshi and the other Megarans “on call” at the helm of the Sportstar, and Ergaled down to the starport on Agri Dagi. Orion customs officials do have a reputation for being terribly obnoxious bureaucrats, but we did manage to get through planet entry in a remarkably short three hours.

Lykkos insisted that we had to try out the sidirodrome, a picturesque elevated train down the mountain to Madai, which would give us glimpses of the Orestians, the renowned Orion giants in the Spire City of Tegea. The hundred-foot tall Orestians were pretty impressive, but Suthsi was more awed by the pink and verdigris leaves of the Adrakne trees in the lush forests that lined our path.

We arrived in Madai by moonlight [sic] and made our way to a comfortable inn to reserve rooms. Unfortunately, we'd probably have to spend at least one night in the city. Orion Alpha was one of the few Zygfed planets that had had E-shields around it for years, requiring all travelers to go through Customs to exit and enter planet territory. It was very annoying not to be able to freely Ergal back up to our ship whenever we wished. But, considering that the planet had spawned both fearsome giants and assassins, maybe the tight border controls were all for the best.

Chapter 17

Madai

Orion Alpha, Orion—present day

As soon as we were settled in our rooms, Lykkos and Spud left to explore the town. The sun had already set, and the streets of the city were almost deserted. Izmalis liked to hibernate when darkness fell. Based on my experience with my older siblings, I figured the local university might be a place where we could find some activity going on during the dark hours, as well as some information about unusual experiments with radioactive materials.

My brother John had been a graduate student in astrophysics before he'd left us on his ... last mission. He'd often spend night after night doing research at the University of Maryland on the campus synchrotron, the sub-atomic particle accelerator at the College Park campus.

I remembered one night George had gone to pick John up and I'd tagged along. By two in the morning in the middle of the week, it was even quiet on Fraternity Row. If you were at the synchrotron building, however, you'd think it was Grand Central Station; filled with people making lots of noise, watching video screens under bright fluorescent lights.

I was only eleven, so I didn't really understand what they were doing. (As if I do now, physics uploads notwithstanding.) I guess I must've gotten bored and fallen asleep. I just remember waking up to complete silence. For a moment, all the people in the control room had stopped making all that noise. Their eyes were frozen on the TV monitors. Then, the chatter started up again even louder and I slipped back to dreamland. John seemed so excited on the ride home. Obviously, something important must have happened, but it never occurred to me to ask for an explanation. Maybe I was just mad that after that night, he started to spend more and more time on his research, and less and less time with us. Six years later, I still don't know what John was hoping to discover.

"Daralfanoo," Setsei interjected.

"What?" I looked at him, confused.

"The University," he looked at his Ergal screen again. "I think that's how you pronounce it. Daralfanoo."

"Noon," said Suthsi, looking over Setsei's shoulder. "There's a 'noo' on the end."

"That's what I said," whined Setsei.

"Great, great," I added quickly. "Daralfa-whatever. Metrics and let's go." If those two started fussing again, we'd never get anything done.

• • •

Daralfanoon University was an imposing structure of over three hundred storeys in Base 12. And, since each storey had to not only have room for two-foot Madaians, but two-hundred-foot Oresteians, the tip of the spire was well in the chartreuse clouds. Nephil Stratum would feel right at home on the top floors, I surmised.

I was right about the university; unlike the desolate streets outside, Daralfanoon at that hour was filled with beings, many of whom, I was somewhat surprised to see, were not native to Orion.

“I had an opportunity to study here, you know,” Suthsi whispered. “They have an outstanding training program in temporal manipulation.”

“You’re too good at that already,” Setsei accused.

“Shh,” I whispered. “Will you two stop it?! We’re here on business.” And they call *me* annoying.

We waited over thirty minutes for our authorization to enter the building. Rifling through a holodisplay to pass the time, I was surprised to find out that Daralfanoon had a synchrotron, a particle accelerator, too. The synchrotron building at Maryland had taken up a half-acre on the green campus, but, based on the display information, this university apparently had one the size of a breadbox on its fifty-sixth floor. I don’t know how big a breadbox really is either, but it looked in the holo to be about size of a discount twelve-pack of frozen mini-pizzas.

We took a high speed elevator up to the synchrotron location. The doors opened to reveal an enormous domed chamber, brightly lit, and totally empty. We stepped out and the lift doors closed behind us.

“Welcome to the Synchrodome,” a deep voice boomed. We turned to see a pink pentapod, a five-legged insectoid that looked like a giant grasshopper with a limp, holding a box of not-mini-pizzas in three of his limbs.

My jaw dropped. The box looked eerily similar to the one Gary had clutched so tightly before he died, although a bit larger.

“I am your guide, Pylos of Nestor. I understand you wished to see the Synchrotron,” the pentapod continued.

We nodded. “Could we see it in action?” I asked, excited.

The Nestorian shrugged. “It is.” Experiments with the synchrotron had produced enough power to supply half the planet, the pentapod explained proudly as he held up the machine. The energy released with the acceleration of only one particle had fed the power grid for all of Madai for the past year.

“That’s a lot of juice,” whistled Setsei. “We have not been so successful on Ytra.”

Nor on Earth, I thought. John and his colleagues had spent over a day on just one relatively weak synchrotron run at Maryland to produce one neutrino. Benedict could probably go quite far into the branes with this technology in his tank. With this technology, no wonder Orion Alpha was so attractive.

I tried to sound casual. “Can... anybody... use this... synchrotron?”

The Nestorian laughed. “No. There *is* paperwork.” “That goes without saying.” This *is* Orion Alpha. “But,” the pentapod continued, “unless you’re on the ‘no-try’ list, you’ll probably eventually get cleared.”

I nodded soberly, trying to stifle a giggle. Was the pentapod related to Sarion? “Benedict’s probably on the ‘no-try’ list, I’d bet,” I returned lightly.

I expected either laughter or discomfort. I didn’t expect the pentapod and the synchrotron to disappear in a flash. The three of us stood alone in an empty chamber looking at each other in astonishment.

“I think we should get out of here,” Suthsi said quietly.

I nodded and we headed for the lifts. But, before we reached the doors, they, too, had disappeared, to be replaced by smooth, impenetrable walls. The entire room now had no visible means of exit at all.

“Ergal,” I said, “and damn the bureaucracy.” We clicked our Ergals to no avail. The chamber obviously had an E-shield. We were still trapped inside the dome.

I looked at the Ytrans helplessly and silently mouthed the word, “Geryon.”

Setsei nodded and mega’ed his Geryon, scraping its sharp point against the wall in the general direction of the elevators.

To our relief, the original wall and the elevator doors reappeared. We summoned the lift and, nonchalantly entered it when it arrived. I didn’t breathe until the doors had closed and we were on our way down. Or not. No, the lift was not going down. It jerked to one side and then shot up so rapidly that we were tossed roughly onto the turquoise carpet lining its floor. In barely a second, we had arrived at the pinnacle of the spire above the clouds.

Stun guns Ergaled, drawn, and ready, we waited for someone to open the door.

Chapter 18

From Bad to Ursa

There were many things I expected might greet us on the other side of the lift door, but Agriarctos the Ursan was not one of them. And yet, there he was, towering over us with his paws open to welcome us to the spire's penthouse. Susthi cowered behind me and Setsei shakily held his stun gun in one of his right hands and his Geryon in the other.

I had one chance. I leapt for the lift controls, hoping I could close the door and return our elevator to the building entrance. Who wants to bet that it worked?

"Really, all that isn't necessary," the Ursan growled at us, not very convincingly. "Plionarctos, please lighten their burdens."

The second Ursan stunned us with his gun, and one by one, relieved each of us of our Ergal and our weapons. He then grumbled something in Ursan to Agriarctos, who shook his head and advised him to unstun us and lead us into the penthouse suite.

The night sky was a spectacular panorama of stars that twinkled through the transparent windows of the spire. I felt as if I was in a glider surfing over the fluffy clouds, and I paused for a few moments to admire the breathtaking view.

Plionarctos shoved me forward roughly, and I stumbled for a second. It took all my willpower to keep from spinning around and assaulting him in the—well, that and my memory of what had happened with Agriarctos on the Ursan ship a few days before.

We practically floated down a hallway decked with a lush indigo carpet that I'm convinced had anti-grav properties, and finally entered a small room with a comfortable chair in its center. In the chair sat a trim man—human, I believe—with red hair and a warm smile. "Burr," said Agriarctos, pointing at the human.

"Okay," I responded non-committally.

"They don't know who I am," the human said gently. "I prefer to keep a low profile."

"Benedict's #2," Plionarctos barked.

The Ytrans froze. I simply said, "Ah. I thought Gary was."

Burr chuckled. "Gary wasn't even in the top five." He Ergaled us chairs and invited us to sit and relax. "Agriarctos has told me all about you."

The Ytrans continued to stand, clutching each other for support. I sat down opposite Burr, who looked at me with narrowed eyes. "So. Why did you ask the Nestorian if Benedict had used the Synchrotron?"

I shrugged. "No particular reason. Just an off-hand question."

Burr nodded, and Plionarctos aimed one of our stun guns at the Ytrans. The redhead continued, "Sorry. I didn't hear your answer."

I squinted at the gun. Yup, it was set to kill. Setsei remained frozen, and Susthi's shivering intensified. I took a deep breath. *Maybe I should try the truth ...* "Gary clued us in to what you all were planning. He offered us a stake, Burr. I was just doing a little back-up research to see if he was on the level." Or not.

Burr frowned for a moment. He eyed me warily. "Gary never said anything to me about that ..."

"He didn't have time," I admitted, my eyes welling up with crocodile tears. "The Omega Archon's catascopes fried him." A sprinkle of truth there...

Burr sat up, shaken. “Gary’s dead?”

I nodded, looking down as a tear rolled down my cheek. That move had gotten me my first part as an actor. For a moment, Burr looked truly disturbed.

Then the angry tone quickly returned. “Why haven’t they come after you?”

My eyes met Burr’s. “I figured I could be more useful if I didn’t blow my cover. So they don’t know about me yet. They think it ended with Gary,” I added for emphasis.

Clearing my throat, I leaned back in my chair. “You know my agenda. A piece of your action. Now what’s yours?”

Burr’s smile was insincere as he said with a hint of sarcasm. “To overthrow His Highness, of course.”

“What a shock,” I responded in kind. “Thanks, then. I’ll let him know the next time I see him.”

Burr’s chuckle caught in his throat as I added, shaking my head, “It hasn’t worked yet, you know. Even the synchrotrons don’t have enough energy to make the crossing.”

Sober, Burr folded his hands and said nothing. “But, I’m sure that’s not a surprise,” I continued. “There are Trapezalnitaks all over this constellation from your earlier attempts. You need the Somalderis.”

Burr allowed himself a smile. “And if we do ...?”

“Well, that’s where I can help.”

His astonishment was clear. “Really,” he finally responded as he waved Plionarctos to aim the stun gun at my head. “Good. Then just tell us where we can find it.”

I shrugged my shoulders and, continued to bluff. “Oh dear, I do so wish I could. But, you see, Gary warned me about you, so, on my orders, the Somalderis was hidden by my mercenaries, even from me. My men see that the Ytrans and I return safe and sound, fifty million in credits richer, and you’ve bought the Somalderis. If not, no Somalderis—and, just like Gary, *you’ve* bought the farm.”

Burr studied me intently as I confidently met his gaze. Finally, he sighed and pulled up his holo display. “Krøneckðr account?”

“Of course.” I stood up, as if to leave, and gave him the numbers I remembered Carlton Platt had used for Wart’s secret bank account, praying that the account had not been closed after Wart’s arrest.

There was a noticeable delay, and my anxiety grew as Burr continued to enter data. Finally, to my relief, the redhead laughed. “Well done. The money is almost yours. I’ll release the escrow as soon as I get the Somalderis.”

“Not that I’m not trusting,” Burr added as he waved a hand towards the lift doors, “but you won’t mind if we keep your Ergals and weapons until you’re safely out of range, of course.” I shook my head. “Be my guest.” Then, to the Ytrans I said, “Come on, let’s go get Mr. Burr his Somalderis.” They looked at me, even more alarmed than before.

The lift doors opened as we approached. “Come on,” I said intently, pulling them towards the elevator.

“No!” Agriarctos shouted. “Don’t!”

I paused at the threshold, my back to the others. Snapping my fingers, I said, “Darn. Guess you’re right. Three hundred storeys is a big drop. Especially without an Ergal. And you took ours, didn’t you?”

Suddenly, I clutched my abdomen with both hands and bent over, my face painfully contorted. As the Ytrans approached me, concerned, I flashed them a warning look and then spun around, launching myself from the carpet towards Burr's chair. I leved into a double flip and landed on my feet right behind him, aiming a stun gun directly at his head.

"Well, now, that's better," I said smoothly. "Pooh-bear, put our weapons and Ergals back on the floor and step away. Now we can all go down the three hundred storeys together."

Plionarctos stammered, "How...?" He held the Ergal he had taken from me in his hand and looked at it, confused.

"It really helps to have a back-up Ergal," I smiled, wagging my hand to display Gary's ring on my middle finger. "Gary clued us in. M81 technicians are making Ergals in micromodels now. So move it, Plionarctos: Ergals, Weapons, Floor!" I pressed the gun into Burr's temple, and added politely, "Shall we go?"

Grudgingly, Plionarctos put the Ergals and weapons down on the carpet and stepped back away. I motioned to my comrades who, with no little hesitation, inched towards the pile. Setsei finally picked up his stun gun, and, after a nod from me, stunned the Ursans. I stunned Burr, and, radiating confidence, the Ytrans and I grabbed the rest of our equipment and leved our prisoners into the lift.

• • •

I cut through the paperwork to get out of Daralfanoon by blasting all the bureaucratic forms to cinders with the laser setting on my stun gun. We then Ergaled in peace to our inn, where we were greeted by Lykkos and Spud, who had just returned themselves and were eager to report on their investigations.

I had Ergaled E-shields around all three of our prisoners but was still uncomfortable with doing our debrief in the small Orion suite. For all I knew, the walls could have ears, big floppy ones like the hotels on Scylla. "Let's take our friends ... upstairs," I suggested, "where they'll be a little more ... secure."

In no mood for a slow scenic return via the siderodrome train, we Ergaled to the spaceport. Spud and I both used our Zygint ID's to get our group expedited through Customs this time. We were done in just over an hour. Burr repeatedly tried to mumble protests, but was fortunately stopped by his frozen tongue and jaws. The Orions were unable to make out Burr's incomprehensible syllables, and bought our story that he and the Ursans were Zygan tax scofflaws we were extraditing back to Zyga to pay for their capital crimes.

Back on board, Matshi recognized Burr immediately. "That's Benedict's #4!"

Burr grumbled something unintelligibly through his frozen jaw. I knew my practice understanding Ev with his mouth full would come in handy some day. I was able to make out, "He's #3, now that Gary's gone."

"Maybe he and Fahrquardt can have a playoff round to see who makes it to the semi-finals," I joked as we escorted our guests to their holding cells, in which only a few hours earlier we had been prisoners.

On the bridge, Eikhus and Nephil Stratum joined us by holo from their ship so we could all catch up. I quickly filled in the group on our discoveries at the university about

the compact particle accelerator, and how our detective work had led to our arrest of Burr and the Ursans.

“I think the box Gary was holding was an older version of the super-Synchrotron that the Nestorian showed us,” I offered.

“A subatomic parachute,” surmised Spud. “For a quick getaway to another brane.”

There was a murmur of agreement. “But even that Synchrotron apparently wasn’t strong enough to get him through to the other dimension,” I added.

Sarion concurred. “Especially with Nephil Stratum’s helpful barrier blocking his way.”

We nodded, and Matshi gave the Syneph an energetic four thumbs up. I noted with some surprise that Spud’s expression was dubious.

“Give me an hour with Burr and I’ll find out what Benedict’s been up to.” Matshi was eager to tackle our prisoners—literally, I expect.

“In due time,” Nephil Stratum soothed. “First, let’s hear from Lykkos and William.”

Spud had remained lost in thought. At the sound of his name, he started, and said, “Oh, er, yes.” He looked at Lykkos, who gestured for Spud to speak.

“Well, as soon as we departed the Inn, Lykkos and I made our way to the estate of Ulenem’s family,” Spud began. “The streets were so quiet you could hear an athame drop. And, actually, I did do.

“We hid behind a tree and waited. Nothing. No one was there. So, we set off again on our path, and then, this time, we both heard a sound.

“Again we hid, again nothing.

“By that time, we were in proximity to Ulenem’s family estate. It was an enormous villa by Madai standards, with several wings and a plethora of rooms. We vaulted over the perimeter fence and micro’ed, so that we should not bump our heads were we to venture inside. Unsurprisingly, as it was well past the hibernation threshold, the main house was dark and silent. What drew our eyes, however, was a small structure behind it.

“It appeared to be a mausoleum, recently built, and lit brightly by floodlights. We proceeded closer and observed that the door was open, or, more accurately, that there was no door at all, just an arch. On each side of the building.

“We entered with great care and found ourselves in a bare central atrium, with an open arch to our left and right, and a conical ceiling that seemed to rise up into infinity.

“I checked outside again, but from the exterior, the building’s roof was flat, so I assumed the ceiling was a holo. I was preparing to mega inside the cone and test my theory when I heard the noise again. We spun round, stun guns at the ready, and saw him.”

“Ulenem,” Lykkos said unnecessarily.

I nodded. “All cut up and ... dead?”

Spud shook his head. “No. He was ... complete ... this time. Well, still transparent, but healed.”

Matshi looked up, his expression puzzled.

“He spoke first,” Spud continued, “in Zygan.”

“It may be too late,” Ulenem said, “It has begun.”

“Where are you,” I cried, “Level 3?”

“He shook his head. “No, I am luxuriating in a tomb with a view,” he explained, adding, ‘And I can see the future in the past.’

“Then what do we need to do?” I asked in desperation.

“There is only one hope. Benedict must not succeed. Destroy the Somalderis or all is lost.”

“How can we find it?” I asked him, “if Benedict himself has not?”

“It will soon be in his hands,” he said, to my alarm. “You must—”

“*Whoosh!* The missile flew past me, millimeters from my head. I sprung back behind a column in the atrium and saw Assassins aiming weapons at us from both arches. We were squarely in the line of fire.

“As we leved and dodged, Lykkos and I got off a few good volleys, but we were quickly outnumbered. And Ulenem had long since disappeared. There were at least ten Madai warriors coming towards us—Ulenem’s family, I surmise—shooting missiles and heaving knives, defending their brother’s crypt. In seconds, they would be upon us.”

“How did you get out of there?” Sarion interrupted anxiously, almost falling out of his seat.

Spud glared at him. “We used our magic wands,” he responded with obvious sarcasm.

Sarion snorted. “No, really.”

Lykkos stepped in. “I think he’s being metaphorical.” He pulled out his Ergal and waved it in front of Sarion. “Abracadabra.”

Once again, everyone laughed. Everyone except me.

• • •

Memories of Maryland and Mingferplatoi

One trait John and I shared was a love of knowing how things worked. As a young kid, I used to take things apart around the house to try to figure out their innards. Unfortunately, I wasn’t always successful in putting them back together again. Thankfully, John was always happy to help, especially before Connie discovered what I had done that time to her hair dryer.

It only took me about a week at Mingferplatoi before I tried the same trick with my Ergal. I pried it open to see what miracles of Andromedan technology made the instrument do all the wonderful things we were learning. I expected to see some combination of gears, dials, and motherboards, but nothing had prepared me for what I did see.

Nothing. The Ergal was completely empty. By then, mine had been disguised to resemble a cell phone, so, from the inside, it actually looked like one of those cheap plastic phone covers that vendors sell from carts in the mall.

I asked one of my pedagogues about it the next day, expecting to get a lecture about nano-technology. I was shocked at his reaction. He warned me I’d be in big trouble if anyone else found out what I’d done. I shut up, of course, and hoped that my curiosity wouldn’t have already bought me a visit to the Omega Archon.

After a few months at Mingferplatoi, I’d come home for a few days on my first leave, and finally decided to venture back up to John’s attic room. Again, inexplicably, the stairwell was filled with dust and cobwebs, but the room itself was pristine. I didn’t need the overhead light this time, as the July sunshine filtered through the windows and brightly illuminated the entire chamber.

The letter from the “Army” that I had tossed into the wastebasket months before had somehow disappeared. The manila envelope was still there, however, lying on the desk where I had laid it, empty. I sat in John’s comfortable chair and pulled the box with his research onto my lap, running my fingers over the multiple disks and computer drives it contained. Now that I’d finished my astrophysics uploads at Mingferplatoi, maybe some of John’s research would actually make sense to me.

To my surprise, under the metal drives, my fingers felt several leaves of smooth paper. John was a brilliant computer geek, but I’d never known him to do anything much by hand. I pulled out the sheets and studied them. They were lined and seemed to have been torn from a spiral notebook. John’s flowing handwriting was easily recognizable, and covered all the pages. I’d never figured John for an essayist—that was clearly Connie’s territory—but I began to read a most disturbing story...

The story was set on a planet called Daedalus where people lived wonderful lives—or so they thought. In reality, the populations of this planet were slaves to a supercomputer, which controlled their life and death. This computer had lined up all the planet’s citizens in incubators inside massive chambers, fed them by tubes, and wired inputs into their brains that made them think they were actually experiencing active, exciting lives. As they lived “virtually”, the computer powered itself with the energy given off by the population’s brain waves.

To ensure the population wouldn’t become too large or too old, this evil computer randomly generated a death list each day. The individuals unlucky to find their names on that list would be terminated, their virtual lives halted and their physical bodies destroyed.

The protagonist of John’s story somehow awakens out of his wonderful life, and realizes he is actually a prisoner on full life-support. The hero escapes from his womb-like entrapment, and strives to prevent other people on the death list from being randomly executed. Eventually, he starts a revolution that struggles to pull people away from the computer’s nurturing virtual world into the harsh, but free reality.

I’d seen the theme with some variations in many books, TV, and movies before reading John’s work. What stood out in my brother’s story was the ending. The hero, also named John, recognizes that even the so-called free world he discovers is really just another layer of virtuality, and that his only hope of fleeing these layers, these virtual prisons, is death.

So, to escape his multi-layered virtual purgatory, John the hero sacrifices himself, hoping to go to heaven and finally achieve freedom. And that was the fictional John’s end. Not that he made it to heaven, but that there *was* no heaven. There was nothing more after his death, except, simply nothing.

John the Martyr’s story ended by focusing on his followers, his fellow resistance fighters. Without a sign from their lost idol, some got desperate, and followed their leader into the void. Others waited and waited for his return, his resurrection, until one by one, they died, too. Eventually, the planet’s sun went supernova and melted the planet and all its organic and inorganic components, and, when the star receded into a dwarf, all that was left in the planet’s place was ... nothing.

I’d reached the end of the story and had become totally depressed. Then I noticed that there wasn’t a period at the end of the last sentence. Seems trivial, I know, but John was a stickler for punctuation. If he had completed his essay, he wouldn’t have left off

that period. I searched the box and then his room for any trace of another page, and didn't find it. There wasn't a file that I could find on his computer either. I looked for hours without any luck. I finally asked George. He didn't know, but he did wonder if the last page could've been that paper John had always kept folded in his wallet. In any case, he told me, with eyes averted, that he didn't have time to read John's story, what with law school finals looming. I doubted he ever would.

I never opened my Ergal again. I just kind of took it for granted that it did wonderful things and that I should just appreciate them. There had to be some technology that made the Ergal work, but I would never be able to access it or understand it. All that my curiosity would bring me would be ... nothing. So, for a while at least, I pledged my allegiance to "ours is not to reason why," and tried to avoid asking questions.

And that remains Zygan Policy #28746.33, by the way. But I couldn't stand by after John disappeared and just accept what I was told. Or make jokes about it. Like blacklisted author Arthur C. Clarke had written, "Magic is just science we don't understand yet." John had dedicated—and given—his life to finding those answers. And because of him, I was willing to do so too.

• • •

The Messier Sportstar—present day

"So Benedict *did* try the Synchrotron to go to another brane and it didn't work," Eikhus theorized again. "Shiloh? Hello? The radiation belts?"

"Oh, sorry, I was ... somewhere else," I stammered. "You know, I don't really know. Burr never actually verified ..."

"It's more likely Benedict sent some of his Andarts to try it," Matshi interjected, sweeping a finger dramatically across his neck. "So now all we have to do is keep him from getting the Somalderis. Considering he hasn't found it all these years, sounds easy to me."

Spud shook his head, lost in thought. "No ..."

"Yeess ...?" I prompted.

"Ulenem said that the Somalderis would be in Benedict's hands soon," repeated Spud.

"Well, then, we'd better find Benedict before that happens," Matshi said forcefully. "And keep whoever's bringing the Somalderis from reaching him. I'm sure that's what Ulenem was going to suggest."

Eikhus nodded. "I'm inclined to agree. But, let's question our guests, first, and see what they can tell us."

We all turned towards Spud, who continued to stare off into the distance. Finally, with a troubled expression, he returned a weary. "Yes, by all means."

• • •

We took a few hours to question our visitors, as well as for rest and brainstorming, on how we might prevent Benedict from "brane-storming," Sarion joked. Under gentle questioning by Matshi and the Megaran warriors, or so I would like to believe, our guests finally admitted that Benedict had used the most powerful synchrotron he could find for test runs, and had lost more than a few of his Andarts who had volunteered to brave the

portals near the Orion system's planets. None of the travelers had succeeded in maintaining the transition. Most had come back severely burned and/or dead. Apparently, only the Somalderis, channeling massive amounts of fusion energy from the closest sun, had ever allowed travelers to fully and safely transport to the other dimensions. Therefore, Benedict had recently abandoned the Synchrotron and turned all his organization's efforts towards the quest for the Golden Fleece. If he were to get the Fleece, he and his Andarts could commit the ultimate Zygfed crime: successfully escaping to another dimension, beyond the reach of the Omega Archon.

As Zygfed's soldiers, our duty was to make sure that wouldn't happen. We gathered on the bridge again to strategize our next move.

"With a whole universe here to enjoy, why would Benedict want to go to another brane?" sighed Suthsi.

"What if," I posited, "that brane, Brane 5, holds keys to knowledge and technology that Benedict could use to come back and undermine or overthrow the Omega Archon?"

Suthsi nodded. "I see your—his—point"

"Benedict and His Highness are at war," Sestei reflected. "Perhaps he believes that he can also marshal allies from another brane."

"Exactly," said Matshi. "Otherwise the Omega Archon should be happy to be well rid of Benedict. Or any of, uh, them. The Andarts, I mean."

"Interdimensional travel would violate one the most basic Zygfed commandments," Suthsi continued. "Then why would His Highness have forbidden it if it was a good thing?"

"Because what's good for the Omega Archon may not be the good for His subjects," returned Eikhus, rolling his eyes.

Suthsi shivered and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Sacrilege?"

"No, Suthsi, pragmatism," sighed Spud. "But no one can force you to eat the apple. It's Benedict's choice to leave this, this Garden—and his alone."

"And it's His Highness' choice to fight to keep Benedict from achieving that goal," added Eikhus. "With Zygent. With us."

"So it's a standoff," Matshi announced. "And we're right in the thick of it. Just the way I like it."

Nephil Stratum chuckled. "Hardly an even match, Matshi. In any case," she added. "I would like to think we were on the side of the angels. So, let's go fight for our king."

"We're not exactly angels, present company excepted," teased Eikhus. "More like minions for hire, really. But, yeah. I agree. It's time we go to the source."

"So where is Benedict reputed to be?" Pallas asked.

Nephil Stratum broke off another tuft and brought out the sparkling multihedron gem once again. When the sparkles dissolved, we saw another holo of Benedict, this time sitting at a desk facing ... Fahrquardt.

"I know where he is!" I cried, "I've been there! HDfiftysomething."

"And that is where exactly?" Eikhus asked.

"Contact metrics are coming up," I said, running my fingers over nav holos. "It's in Galaxy M82, only 2.6 hours away."

Chapter 19

Lucifer

We agreed that Setsei and Suthsi would join Nephil Stratum and Eikhus back on the Nautilus. Matshi, Sarion, and the Megarans would stay with me and Spud and our prisoners on the Sportstar as we led the way towards the sibling galaxies of M81 and 82.

I decided to be proactive this time and I commed the Gliesers for travel authorization before we reached the Zygfed border at the edge of the Milky Way, so they wouldn't think there was anything fishy (pun intended) about our quest. In fact, not only were they more supportive, but Captain Pesci even told us to comm him if we needed any help from his schools. I guess following procedures sometimes has its benefits. I should try it more often.

We had a relatively uneventful flight to M82. Eikhus's ship was not as fast as the Sportstar, so it took us about three hours to arrive near HD5924. We warped down in invisible-ized mode, worried that our approach would otherwise be challenged by guard buoys or an E-shield.

But, it wasn't. To our surprise, the gates of the spaceport below opened to welcome us. We paused just outside apogee to regroup, cryptocomming to each others' ships via holos.

"This doesn't smell right," Matshi said, confirming my own suspicions.

"I agree," Eikhus responded. "It could be a trap." "They probably are aware that we have Burr and the Ursans," Spud assumed logically. "The minute we enter, they shall overwhelm us, rescue their people, and—"

"And bears," Sarion inserted, earning Spud's glare.

"You're a genius!" I said to Sarion, earning everyone's astonishment. I turned to Eikhus. "Have we been scanned?"

He checked his data. "Yes."

"Okay," I suggested, "how about if one ship does go in, Matshi driving, with Burr and the Ursans."

"Oh, that's good," Suthsi said sarcastically. "Then *we* have to go rescue Matshi?"

"No," I explained, "*We'll* be supporting Matshi. Spud, me, and Pallas—disguised as Burr and the Ursans."

Matshi grinned, and I saw a smile on Pallas's face. "You mean you'd Ergal your disguise to look like Burr and the Ursans?" Suthsi asked, confused.

Setsei frowned. "But wouldn't they see that it's just a disguise with their first NDNA scan?"

"Not if we mute into Burr and the Ursans down to our DNA," I averred.

The Ytrans gasped. "You remember you just caught Hell for doing that. If the Omega Archon collars you *this* time ..."

"Sometimes it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission," I returned, seeing the looks on my cohorts' faces. "This is *Benedict* we're trying to stop."

"She's right," Pallas said. "I'm in. I'll be one of the Ursans."

"I'll pilot," said Matshi.

I turned to Spud. "Do you want to go as Burr or an Ursan?"

He hesitated before answering. “No. I shall take my chances and go in as me. I am not willing to mute. Nor to face His Highness when the day is done.”

I was ready to try to convince him until our eyes met. I sighed and said, “Well, I hate to lose the intimidation factor that Matshi provides as our pilot, but how about you, Matshi, are you willing to be Burr or one of the bears?”

“Yes.” Matshi looked at Spud with obvious distaste and nodded. “I’ll take the risk. This is important.”

• • •

HD 5924—present day

Spud flew us in the Sportstar wordlessly. We had transferred the real Burr and the real Ursans over to Eikhus’s vessel under the Megarans’ guard. As soon as Pallas had returned, he, Matshi, and I had muted to look like our prisoners and so take their place. The tension was palpable and not just because we were entering Benedict’s lair. I took a walk on our bridge, trying to get comfortable in my hulking, furry body. I didn’t want Benedict’s men to identify me as an impostor with my first steps off our ship. Pallas seemed to be doing better as Plionarctos, barely stumbling as he got ready for the landing. Not much of a stretch from a bulky wrestler to a hulky bear, I thought, smiling.

I tried to slip Gary’s superErgal ring on “Agriarctos’s” fingers. Unfortunately, it didn’t even fit on my hefty pinky, so I reluctantly slipped it into a pocket of my tunic, where I could reach it quickly if needed.

Nav landed us gently in the spaceport hangar and, as soon as we opened our hatch, as expected, we were greeted by a contingent of armed Andarts.

At stun gunpoint, we were led from the hangar. We trudged down the drab corridor and into the tiny alcove for the requisite NDNA scan. *Agriarctos*, *Agriarctos*, I kept saying to myself this time, as the scanner baked my molecules, hoping that I would pass as the massive Ursan. To my relief, we all made it through the scan without being unmasked. The scan suite’s door opened to reveal the longer, equally gloomy hall, and we began our extended walk towards the massive central arena filled with spheres and domes that I had been dragged to a few days ago by Agriarct—me.

As the titanium portal opened, I put my paw up to shield my eyes from the blinding light. And—it wasn’t there! Instead, the vast space was dimly lit, and, almost empty. There were no strobing spheres to be seen in the atrium, and only three domes remained implanted on the cold, hard, floor. My jaw dropped.

“Where did all—?” I started before realizing that Agriarctos might know the answer. “Nothing,” I finished, as our escorts looked at me with curiosity.

We entered the domes through diffusion, as before. I took the lead through the membrane and hoped Matshi and Pallas would confidently follow. Spud reached out and, fascinated, palpated the dome wall for a few minutes before gliding through. Only one Andart entered with us, keeping his stun gun aimed at Spud.

To my dismay, the Andart led us to the office of our favorite Executive Coordinator of Strategic Initiatives and Outcomes Assessment. Fahrquardt, as pompous as ever, greeted us with a vicious grin.

“Number 4,” said the small man, puffing out his chest, to “Burr.” “I made it.”

Matshi glanced at me for help.

“Burr is not interested in playing childish competitive games with you, Fahrquardt,” I interjected. “We’re focused on our mission, and you should be, too.”

The chest un-puffed. Matshi’s—Burr’s—eyes twinkled.

“Good golly,” Fahrquardt said smoothly, though his irritation was visible, “I haven’t offered you seats.” He waved an arm as his office expanded with seats for all of us, including the Andart.

“Burr” held up a hand. “We’ve come to see Benedict,” he said brusquely.

Fahrquardt’s face fell. “So, the rumors are true.”

Matshi stayed silent.

“You’ve brought the Somalderis,” continued Fahrquardt. A red flush rose from his neck to his oily pate. “Fiddlesticks! I had so hoped *I’d* be the one!” He pulled a paperweight from his suit pocket and threw it at me and my fellow Ursan Plionarctos.

We ducked and the missile hit the Andart in the head, causing a large gash that sprayed bright orange. Fahrquardt spun on his heel and re-entered his office, slamming the door. I saw Spud’s eyes narrow, just as “Burr” grab grabbed me and whispered, “Where’s Benedict’s office?”

I shook my head and turned to the Andart who had staunched his blood with an orange-drenched corner of his sleeve. He pulled his gun back out from under his armpit and aimed it at Spud once again.

“Do care for your wound; I can handle the gun,” I urged, as Agriarctos. “I will not let the Zygan escape.” I handed him a clean scrap of cloth that I tore from the lining of my tunic.

The Andart nodded and took the swatch, handing me his weapon for safekeeping as he daubed his oozing wound. After subtly changing the setting to stun, I pointed it at Spud and added, to the Andart’s delight, “Please, lead the way. You deserve the honor.”

We followed the Andart along a maze of corridors until we reached another membrane. And stopped. This membrane was bright green—I knew I hadn’t seen it the last time I was here. The Andart placed his free hand on the barrier, which bent and flexed under the pressure of his moving fingers.

I discreetly gestured to our group to hang loose; the Andart should know how to “unlock the door”. Sure enough, after a few seconds of the digital dialing, the membrane turned yellow and the Andart diffused through it easily with us in tow.

I was awestruck. Instead of another banal office hallway, we were instantly enveloped by a cocoon of beauty: a clear, blue sky, green trees with brightly colored fruits and fragrant flowers, soft grass, and crisp, clean air. For a brief moment, I felt like I was back home on our farm. I closed my mouth and tried to act nonchalant. Having spent most of the past two years in the dusty desert of LA or the disheartening darkness of space, I was relishing experiencing a few moments in this paradise.

My companions seemed equally impressed. The Andart turned to us and, in both Zygan and Ursan, urged us to keep up. We jogged forward, energized by the splendor of our surroundings. A few hundred feet beyond our entrance, around the curve of a rolling hill, we saw a lovely cottage. Spud blinked, his own mouth agape—perhaps due to a flash of memory of England. We walked up a floral rimmed cobblestone path to the cottage door, which opened by itself as we arrived.

Cautious, but curious, we followed the Andart into a large foyer and saw another door to our right open automatically to reveal a medium-sized den. Within it, a roaring

fireplace crackled an invitation. As we stepped in, I noted that the walls were paneled with dark cherry wood, and that an entire section of the room held shelves and shelves of multi-colored books, many of which were classics of Cosmic literature.

Sitting surrounded by this library, behind a semi-circle of holos at a polished cherry desk, was Benedict himself, in a gray suit and gold tie, looking much like we had seen him in Nephil Stratum's sparkling gem back in Matshi's kalyvi. Benedict was slightly stooped and slightly balding. As slim as Spud and, standing up straight, just about his height, I'd guess.

The Andart's blood had seeped through the cloth pressed against his wound, and a few drops landed on the lush burgundy carpet by our feet. Noting the Andart's misfortune, Benedict put his stylus down and looked up sharply over his reading glasses. I thought I saw something flash in his eyes for a fraction of a second. He glanced at us, then turned back to the Andart.

"You may go," he said quietly, with a tone that made me shiver under my fur.

The Andart flushed, and ran out of the cottage in hyperdrive.

Benedict looked directly at us now and, in the same tone, instructed, "Please sit."

We sat. I noted that Spud had been using the intervening time to sniff around the room a bit, pausing momentarily at tomes by Plato, Dante, Quinn, and C. S. Lewis. He took a leather chair by the fireplace where he could watch both Benedict and the door clearly. Burr/Matshi grabbed the chair closest to Benedict and sat on the edge of its seat as if ready to pounce. Plionarctos/Pallas and I settled in on the floor, our backs protected, resting against the paneled walls.

Benedict studied Spud for a few minutes, then said, with a puzzling trace of irony, "Escott, eh? So it is."

Benedict then leaned back in his executive armchair and eyed Burr. Matshi returned the steady gaze.

"I never thought *you'd* be the one," Benedict said. "But, nicely done."

"Thank you. My pleasure," Burr/Matshi said broadly, before glancing at me for a second with a silent question.

I looked away. Benedict seemed to be observing us as intently as Spud usually does on a chase, and I didn't want to raise any suspicions. In any case, I was just as puzzled by Benedict's praise as Matshi. What had he done so "nicely"?

Suddenly, the ground shifted under me and I was knocked hard against the wall. A very strong earthquake was causing the house to shudder for what seemed like an eternity. I was thrown back on the carpet and struggled to keep from sliding on the floor. The weight of an elephant compressed my chest and made me gasp for breath. The intensity of the trembling (beyond my own, of course) soon diminished, but I continued to feel a strong vibration under my legs and trunk. I caught the eyes of Plionarctos/Pallas, who seemed equally disheveled by the quake. Matshi and Spud had chair arms to hold on to and were faring a bit better.

Finally, the vibration lessened and I was able to return to my sitting position and face our host.

"I am sorry," Benedict began again, "but launch is always a little rough."

Launch? I nodded, trying not to look confused.

"Just the dome, or the entire planet?" Spud asked.

“Very good, Escott, but it’s really not a planet,” was the response. “Just a very, very large ship.”

Matshi and I looked at each other. Of course! HDWhatever-it-was was a huge ship, Benedict’s mobile base. And now, it was on the move.

Spud was making some calculations with his Ergal. “I would estimate that our eventual target is a gravitational singularity in the most distal octant of M81.”

“A bit more proximal, but yes,” Benedict said with a hint of a smile. “Octant 6.”

“Now I have a question,” Benedict continued pleasantly, maintaining his steady gaze at us. “Why have you allowed Escott here to keep his Ergal?”

Oops.

“Burr” jumped in, angry. “These Andarts, they are worthless!” He turned in my direction and gestured for me to take it from Spud. “You see, it is always up to us to protect you from the Zygans.”

I took the Ergal and slipped it into the pocket of my tunic, adding dramatically, “Vigilance is a virtue.”

To my surprise, Benedict laughed. “Always alliterating, are you?”

“What do you mean?” I said, nervous.

“Really, Rush,” he returned. “A good disguise demands more than a change in appearance. I have studied you all. Alliteration is one of your tells.”

Oh, God.

Benedict then looked at Burr. “You ... must be Matshi.” He smiled. “Ulenem spoke very highly of you.”

Matshi gritted his teeth and said nothing. I inched my fingers toward my Ergal.

“Don’t,” Benedict snarled, “bother. I disabled all your Ergals when you arrived. Gary always kept me well updated on your equipment upgrades.”

I was ready to say something, but Benedict raised a hand. His voice was cold. “I know. You have been ...very lucky.” Disturbingly, his tone seemed to imply a conscious use of the past tense.

“May I have the ring?” Benedict added, in a tone that made his request sound very much like an order.

I didn’t bother with the, “What ring?” If Benedict wasn’t bluffing, then the ring was useless to us. If he was bluffing, I now had a momentary opportunity to try to take the advantage. I shrugged, and casually reached into the pocket where I had secreted Gary’s ring, and, with a warning glance at Spud and Pallas, used my claw to activate it.

Instantly—nothing happened. Gary’s superErgal was dead. Annoyed, I pulled it out of my tunic and laid it sharply on Benedict’s desk.

Benedict smiled, and picked up the ring, slipping it onto his hand. “Nice to have it back again,” he said quietly. “Thank you.”

Frustrated, I plunked back down on the floor and did not respond.

Spud decided to take a chance. “Tell me, then. Theoretically, how might one uncover that beings are mutes?”

“Theoretically, I don’t have to do any uncovering,” Benedict said calmly. “I simply had to rescan the Kharybdian ship that’s now following ours.” He leaned forward and favored us with a piercing gaze. “I noted something peculiar—it also had a Burr, a Plionarctos, and an Agriarctos on board.” He winked at Spud. “Deducing the rest was not difficult.”

Doomed. We were so doomed. I cradled my head in my hands.

Smiling, Benedict sat back again and crossed his arms upon his chest. "Well then, it seems as if we are at a decision point."

None of us responded.

He looked at each of us in turn. "Are you with us?" he said, his eyes twinkling. "Or, dead?"

Chapter 20

Eve

Benedict pressed a light on his desk and we were immediately surrounded by a large corps of Andarts who M-fanned with stun guns aimed at us—and set to kill. I noted that one of the Andarts was our injured escort, whose wound had now been sealed and was no longer seeping.

Still playing the genial host, Benedict advised us that we would each be escorted to different sections of the cottage, where we would have an opportunity to reflect on and discuss our future. The planet-vessel's voyage to its destination would take a few hours. Our "planet ship" was obviously not a Sportstar. Benedict wrapped up by telling us that he hoped our business could be concluded by the time we arrived.

Doomed.

After being relieved of my now useless Ergal and weapons, I was led by three Andarts back into the main hall and through a large wooden door on its left. Spud, Pallas, and Matshi were all taken away through three different doors in, I assumed, three different directions and lost to my sight.

I was marched down a long hallway, my guards pushing me forward anytime I tried to slow my pace and observe my surroundings. The corridor seemed infinite. After walking for over ten minutes, I reckoned we must've long left the cottage and perhaps even the dome itself. Finally, we arrived at a turret with multiple doors—all of them windowless and closed. I didn't see either door handles or knobs, and none of the doors seemed to have locks. I leaned casually against the door next to me, but it wouldn't budge, even with force.

The Andarts marched over to a steel door farther around to my right. One of them took out a silver instrument that resembled the half of an orange that Gary had swept over my head as he attempted to raid my neurocache on the Sportstar. The door opened without a sound, and the rest of my guards shoved me into a bare windowless cell with an open toilet, a three-legged wooden stool, and a small cot. Remaining outside, they closed the door and left me there alone.

After exhaling, I did the usual Catascope 101 stuff, checking the door and the rest of the room to see if I could escape. That never works, you know—bad guys aren't stupid. What's the point of setting up a prison cell if your prisoner can easily get out? Unless you want him to. Which, unfortunately, Benedict didn't. So—no surprise—the door was quite locked, without slits through which I could squeeze a makeshift crowbar from the available furniture. I lay down on the cot. I would have to wait for my opportunity to run.

The one bright light on the horizon, literally, was Eikhus's ship following us. If Nephil Stratum had been monitoring Benedict with her gem, they could be aware that we were in trouble. With the two Ytrans and the two remaining Megarans to help, they might be able to mount a rescue mission. I could only hope. I closed my eyes, and, with John's words about patience echoing once again in my ears, prepared to wait.

A warm breeze caressed my face. I opened my eyes and found myself lying on cool grass in a forest of tall pines. Streaks of light shone through the branches and trunks of the trees, which formed a radiant cathedral ceiling. I breathed the pleasing scent for a few minutes, enjoying the peace of the spot, before remembering that I was a prisoner and

that it would behoove me to get up and find out where I was. Quickly. A rapid visual and aural scan of my location told me I still seemed to be alone, except for a few chirping insects that I hoped I wouldn't step on—or even catch a glimpse of, thank you very much. I trotted among the trees along a well-trod path for several yards before I came upon a clearing, surrounded by tall grass. Ducking low behind it, I couldn't easily be seen. The whispers I was hearing up ahead sounded like more than the wind.

Peeking through the stalks, in the field beyond, I spied three men, their backs to me. One was crouching over an unusual instrument the size of a large suitcase. He stood up, and, to my alarm, I saw it was Benedict. The second man nodded at Benedict and pointed to a pair of trees beyond the clearing a few yards away. I briefly saw his profile and my eyes widened. It was Wart! But it was the third man who really drew my attention. He seemed to be wearing a spacesuit similar to the ones Spud and I had used fleeing our ship, except that it was completely covered by what looked like a... a Golden Fleece!

Benedict adjusted some settings on his instrument and gave a thumbs-up sign to his suited colleague. Suddenly the man was outlined by a blinding light. I was too far away to see many details, but I did observe the space-suited man pull ... the Somalderis? ... tighter around him, and turn to Benedict and Wart and return the thumbs-up sign.

I could barely see the voyager's features through the suit's visor before he disappeared, but I didn't have to. I instantly knew who the other man was. An overwhelming agony lanced through my heart. The traveler working alongside Benedict was my brother John.

I heard my voice screaming, "Nooo!"

• • •

I sat up, blinking, eyes brimming with tears. Where was I? Oh, yes, Benedict's cell. My brother's face behind the spacesuit visor flashed before me: John! And Benedict! I shivered. Impossible! It was only a nightmare. It had to be. John would never ... I looked around the room. Benedict!

"I see you had a nice nap," Benedict smiled from his precarious perch on the rickety stool.

I brushed the moistness from my face. "Haven't slept much in the last few days," I said dully, my eyes darting to the door.

"It's still locked," Benedict informed me. "I Ergaled in, quietly. Didn't want to disturb your ... dream."

I looked up, astounded. How did he know ...?

"Your brother was one of my best men," Benedict continued. "You could follow in his footsteps."

I physically jerked back. No! Not John! Never John!

Through clenched teeth I responded bitterly, "What could I give you?" I added with a snort. "The Somalderis?"

"Thank you," Benedict said inexplicably. "Now, I would like your help with His Highness."

I stared at him, incredulous. The man was totally out of his mind. Aside from the fact that the Omega Archon never, ever left Zyga, he was, without a doubt, the most protected being in all of Zygfed. Me, a junior catascope, would get Benedict the Traitor access to our King? Come on. *Really.*

Still, I'd come from Hollywood. I'd heard crazier. Taking a cue from my agent's playbook once again, I leaned back and narrowed my eyes, "And then what?"

"Then, we will share a singular experience," Benedict chuckled. "Now that we have our Somalderis."

• • •

The idea that Benedict and his minions had somehow beat us in the quest for the Fleece was disturbing enough, but Benedict's claim that John had been part of his team had devastated me. Impossible, absolutely impossible! The brother I knew and loved would never have joined ranks with an avowed killer. What could have made something so unlikely happen? It had to be a lie. It had to. A lie to make me cooperate, perhaps?

Well, then, maybe I should play. Pretending to go along with Benedict could buy me some valuable time. Another few hours during which Eikhus and his team could attempt a rescue. Hours during which I could answer the unsettling questions my dream had engendered.

Apparently, and wisely, Benedict didn't entirely trust me, I wasn't given back my Ergal and weapons. But at least, using yet a different color of half orange— platinum— Benedict reversed my mute and turned me back into my lithe self. It was, I had to admit, a relief to be out of Agriarctos' hulky body.

Benedict then combed the three Andarts to come escort me back to the cottage living room and X-fanned with a small salute. Even though still under guard, I was glad to be out of Benedict's sight, so I could process my thoughts and my feelings. Walking as slowly as they'd let me, I followed my attendants docilely out of my cell and back down the long corridor. When we reached the cottage's foyer once again, they instructed me to enter an adjacent sitting room I hadn't noted before and await Benedict's return. I looked at the kill setting on their guns and obeyed, albeit with a discreet middle-finger salute.

Spud was already ensconced in the sitting room, leaning forward in his seat, his hands resting on his knees and gripping a handkerchief so tightly the veins stood out. He averted his eyes when I entered, focusing intently on the crackling flames of yet another fireplace next to his chair. He looked paler than I had ever seen him—which, trust me, is *really* pale.

"I had heard whispers of such skills among the Ifestians," Spud said, stopping my "What's wrong?" right on my lips.

"What skills?" I asked.

"Memory access," Spud said, his voice cracking. "Neural manipulation ..."

"You know, I had this dream ..."

Spud sighed and shook his head. "Memory."

"No!" I shouted, startling him. "It was not a memory!" Seeing his deep distress, I added more gently, "You, uh, had some, uh, kind of vision, too?"

He nodded. "Yes." The pause was lingering. Finally, he whispered, "I witnessed my mother's murder once again."

For one of the few times in my life, I had nothing to say.

• • •

I expected Matshi would join us soon, as himself, and I was not disappointed. Only he, too, like Spud, wasn't quite himself. His violet skin had faded to a pale lavender, and, instead of his usual confidence, he was radiating shame.

"We both had ... visions," I said gently, nodding at Spud.

"Memories," said Spud, his tone dull.

Matshi looked from one of us to the other and then responded with only one word, "Ulenem."

Nothing more needed to be said. We all sat silently in front of the sizzling fire, staring at our feet, and waited for Pallas.

Catascope 101 had taught us all to play along with our captors until we could manage an escape. After Pallas joined us, we would try to plan our getaway. Hopefully, he too would be arriving soon. But, in what condition?

Worried, I would occasionally glance over at Spud, who continued to stare at the crackling fire with an expression of horror that seemed frozen in time. Spud had never talked to me, or probably anyone else, about the atrocity he had witnessed in his childhood. And I had never admitted to him that I had stumbled on a brief summary of that event in Mingferplatoi Library records during our training years, when I was researching his biodata to get info that might give me an edge in our grav combat re-match. Years before, I discovered to my shock, Spud had observed his father walk in on his mother in the arms of her lover and shoot her to death. Thinking of my own kid brothers, I couldn't begin to imagine the devastation that scene must have carved on a little boy's heart and mind. No wonder Spud spoke very little about his family, even to me.

My attempts to reach out a comforting arm were repeatedly brushed off by my partner, who would not even turn towards me to meet my solicitous gaze. Matshi seemed somewhat more in control of his emotions, but it was clear that his thoughts were still with his own partner and friend. I thought I heard him mutter the word "betrayal" at least once as he kept wringing his multiple hands.

And I, I could not get that image of John enveloped by the Golden Fleece out of my mind. Could my beloved brother, whom I had so idolized throughout my relatively short life, be a traitor to everything he preached and everything he stood for? No, not the John I knew. But was there a John, or a part of John, that I didn't know ...?

Our painful ruminations were soon superseded by our growing alarm that Pallas still hadn't returned. Had he been hurt or killed by Benedict or his Andarts, or, worse, had he sold out to the enemy? Finally, despite our reluctance to abandon our companion, the three of us decided we could safely wait no longer. We spoke quietly in Zygan, hoping not to be overheard.

"I don't know," Matshi insisted, shaking his head. "He's Sarion's mate. Who can predict, who—" he choked on the word—"can be swayed to the other side."

I put my arm around his shoulders, and rubbed his neck, adding reluctantly, "We may have to make a move without Pallas, I'm afraid."

Still gripping his handkerchief tightly, Spud nodded. "I agree. I also expect that Eikhus must surely have called in the Zygan cavalry by now, so we should be seeing a rescue attempt well before this planet-ship nears Zyga. Our best bet is to suss out as much of Benedict's base as we are able so that we can take up arms and assist our rescuers once they arrive."

“And, once we’re secure,” I reassured Matshi, “we can come back for Pallas. We *will* come back.”

Matshi wrung his hands for a few more minutes, before turning to face us. “All right,” he said softly. “Lead the way.”

I walked over and peeked out the door of the sitting room. There was no sign of Benedict or the Andarts. I gestured for my friends to follow. We crept through the front hall, and, seeing that the front door was unlocked, opened it carefully. Nothing happened. I mean the door opened and nothing happened. Shrugging, we eased out of the house and ran back down the cobblestone path into the field of colorful flowers. Ahead, however, instead of the green or yellow membrane we expected, was a grassy meadow extending in all directions to the horizon. I turned to look behind us, and gasped when I saw that the cobblestone path and the cottage were no longer visible. Finding a grove of trees, we stopped to regroup.

“This is strange,” I said to the guys. “Where’s the house?”

“Even more strange,” Matshi concurred, “Why have the people in the house let us escape?”

“Why not?” shrugged Spud, waving an arm at the panorama of flowers in which we were now lost. “It is not like we are able to truly go anywhere. This is simply a more pleasant prison.”

Unwilling to buy Spud’s assessment, I tried to retrace our steps back to the cottage. Or where the cottage should have been. Matshi followed me for a few yards, turning back frequently to make sure that Spud, who had chosen to stay put, was still in view. Despite my certainty that we were going in the right direction, I was unable to locate either the path or the house. Stretching for miles everywhere we looked was more meadow. Matshi threw up his hands and returned to where Spud was standing, arms crossed. Finally, after trying a few different routes, I trudged back to join my companions, utterly discouraged. Spud kindly didn’t say “I told you so”

“There has to be a way out of here,” I said, sighing, “without our Ergals.”

Spud brightened and slapped his forehead. “Thank you! That’s the answer!”

Matshi and I looked at him, surprised. “How?” we both said together. (Followed by a stereo “Jinx”.)

“Simplicity itself,” Spud smiled. “We get out of here by using tlyp’ath.”

Matshi’s puzzled expression soon gave way to a grin. “Sure. It even makes sense.”

Spud gave Matshi a peeved look. He turned to me. “Are we verily in a field, a glen of grass? Or are we on a planet? Or a ship? Or somewhere else...?” He took my hand and squeezed it for a second. “Let us find out where we truly are, and where we are able to go.”

We all held hands and closed our eyes, starting the breathing cycles that herald Stage 2 tlyp’ath. When we finally opened our eyes, several minutes later, we were no longer “out to pasture”. We were standing, hands clasped, in the center of the cavernous chamber that held the three domes.

“Very good,” Matshi said with a broad smile as he patted Spud on the back. “Now what?”

I looked around the empty chamber, and wondered briefly, once again, what had happened to all the spheres. No time to investigate now. I shrugged and nodded at one of the domes. “How about we visit our friend Fahrquardt again? If I remember my signage,

I think his office might be just up the hall from the ship's comm department. Maybe we can send get in there and send out an SOS."

Spud nodded, and we trekked back to Fahrquardt's dome, diffusing through the membrane into the banal hall. Three doors down from Fahrquardt's office, we found the suite for the "Coordinator of Communications and Connections," and, with some help from Spud's nimble fingers and Matshi's strong kicks, soon broke open the security system and entered the suite.

The reception area was dark and deserted. It seemed as if the entire suite was devoid of humanoid life. All we heard was some faint buzzing from an adjacent room, so we crept closer to investigate.

"Anthophila?" I whispered, as Spud eased open the door.

"Nope," Matshi returned. "Antennae."

Lining one wall of the adjoining room was an enormous functioning comm network. Much of the operating equipment stacked from floor to ceiling had displays in languages none of us recognized, and seemed far more advanced than the machines that populated Earth Core or Zygint Central. Geeky Ev Weaver would drool a river over a chance to work with this machinery; but even he'd need to spend quite a few months learning how to use it, Spud ventured, in the uncharted manufacturing plants of M81 or M82 where it was probably built.

Fortunately for us, we were able to identify a holo server with comm access which looked more familiar in a far corner of the suite. Matshi sat in front of the holo's console and, with all twenty-four fingers bustling, he soon sent out a dispersed general distress call through broadband channels. If something had happened to Eikhus, we could still be rescued if someone else picked up our signal.

"Are you able to determine Eikhus's contact metrics?" asked Spud.

"Working on it," Matshi said. "That's unusual. It looks like this planet-ship we're riding could be on a course for Zyga.

Spud frowned. "That makes no sense. Why would Benedict willingly walk into the lion's den—?"

"Shh!" I whispered. "I thought I heard something!"

Matshi rested his digits and we listened. Nothing.

I shrugged and Matshi returned to sending out the SOS, with Spud and me looking over his shoulders.

"Ha!" Matshi finally exclaimed. "Success! I've got Eikhus' ship and all I need to do is—"

"Move away from the console!" the gruff voice barked.

We all looked up to see Plionarctos/Pallas. Our greetings froze in our throats when we also saw that he was carrying a stun gun set to kill, aimed directly at Matshi's head.

• • •

"Pallas!" I cried, "It's us. Help us!" Unlike Spud, Matshi, and me, the Megaran hadn't had catscope training. I prayed that Benedict had not been able to permanently turn Pallas against us, against Zygfed.

"That's enough." Pallas's tone was cold, and I physically felt myself shiver.

"I said move away from the console, Matshi," the pseudo-Ursan continued. "Everybody, out of this room. Now."

Fuming at the Megaran's disloyalty, we trudged single file into the reception area, which was now fully lit and filled with Andarts and their requisite stun guns. Great. Lights on. Hope extinguished.

The door to the hallway opened and Benedict entered the suite, ambling towards Plionarctos with a warm smile.

"Excellent," he praised the Ursan. "We cannot let their small-mindedness derail us from our plans."

Plionarctos nodded as Benedict turned to the Andarts and instructed them to return us to our cells.

"Traitor!" I couldn't help my outburst. Pallas had not only betrayed us, but Zygfed as well!

I had expected a laser burst from the pseudo-Ursan, and was ready to duck. Instead, Plionarctos held his stun-gun steady, and began softly, "You would join us if you could understand. It is a better place and a better way. Freedom and wisdom, they are worth the risk of anguish."

I stood bewildered. Strange talk from Plionarctos— or Pallas, for that matter. Apparently, Spud felt the same way. He looked in the Ursan's eyes very intently for a few moments, and then turned away, his own eyes filling with tears.

Matshi and I looked at each other, confused, as Benedict said to Spud, "Yes."

"You may as well unmute," Benedict added. "He knows."

Before our eyes, Plionarctos activated his Ergal and began to unmute. His Ursan features slowly dissolved and his massive trunk began to morph into ... oh, my God! Into something amorphous. Or, more accurately, *someone* amorphous. Nephil Stratum.

Chapter 21

Anakalipsis

I gasped, unable to speak. Nephil Stratum! With Benedict!

Matshi was shaking from anger, and Spud—well, Spud didn't look at anything but his boots.

“What did you do with Pallas?!” Matshi exploded at Nephil Stratum. The Andart guards held his arms to keep him from attacking.

Still aiming her gun at us, she answered with a gentle voice. “Stunned in the Nautilus’ lavatory. I took care to see he was not hurt.”

Matshi almost spat, his rage unabated. “Thank you for that.”

“Why are we going to Zyga?” The question came from Spud, whose eyes were still glued to his feet.

Nephil Stratum looked at Benedict, waiting.

I snorted. “He still needs the Somalderis. Maybe His Highness has it.”

Spud shook his head. His tone was bitter. “He *has* the Somalderis. We're still alive because he needs something else.”

Benedict sighed. “Ah, Escott, how sad that I cannot recruit you for my organization.” He turned to us. “Yes, now that Nephil Stratum has joined us, we are almost ready.”

“What?!” Matshi did spit this time. “*She's* the Somalderis?!”

“*A* Somalderis.” Benedict explained. “There is more than one in the Universe. For example,” he added, gazing directly at me, “your brother had one, too. The one originally from Kolhis. I gave it to him to wear the night he crossed and he never sent it back.”

It was my turn to lunge and be held back by the arms of my guards. To be betrayed by both friends and family was more than I could bear...

A holo appeared before us, the figure of a uniformed Glieser surrounded by underwater nav controls, announcing that we were nearing Andromedan space.

“Thank you, Henderson,” said Benedict. “And the Kharybdian ship?”

“Tractored,” Henderson answered. “They'll be on board within minutes.”

“Well, then,” Benedict smiled, “we must be on hand to receive them.” Benedict nodded at the three of us, and said to the guards, “Pity they couldn't wait quietly in my cottage. Take them back to their cells until we reach Zyga.”

• • •

I didn't sleep in my cell this time. I lay on the cot, my eyes wide open, my heart broken. What had Benedict offered Nephil Stratum so that she would turn against her kingdom and her friends? And John? What could he possibly have offered John? My John ... I so wish Spud were with me. He was so good at psyching out others, and why they did stupid, *stupid* things.

“Psst.”

I sat up and looked around. Except for me, the room was empty. Annoyed, I lay back down on the uncomfortable cot.

“Psst.” There it was again.

I sat up once more, my back to the wall, just in case. I felt so naked without a functioning Ergal or stun gun. I pulled my legs up towards my chest. I could shoot them out at an attacker if need be.

“Down here.” The same voice, coming from under my cot?

I swung my head under the frame, and broke into a broad grin. Standing with his arms open and all of three inches high was Setsei and his Geryon.

“You micro’ed!” I whispered.

“Shh!” He put a finger on his lips. “Give me your hand,” he whispered. “Here’s a finger, anyway,” I smiled as I extended my pinky towards his chest.

As soon as we touched, Setsei micro-ed me to his dimensions. I gave him a hug and my effusive thanks. Holding my hand, he Ergaled me out of the cell and back into the enormous chamber with the three domes, which seemed even larger now that we were so much smaller. “Our prisoners have unfortunately been freed,” he explained. Stopping to Ergal me a stun gun, he added, “And Benedict and his Andarts took Eikhus and Sarion at gunpoint.”

“How did you escape?” I immediately set the stun gun to kill.

“We micro-ed right before we landed and slipped right through the Andarts’ legs. They searched all over the ship apparently, but never thought to look down at their feet.” Setsei gave out a small giggle. “Suthsi’s gone to get Escott. Lykkos, Matshi; and Nissos, Pallas.”

“We’ve got to stop him,” I said urgently.

“We got your general alert. Eikhus has already contacted Zygint.”

“No, stop Nissos. Plionarctos isn’t Pallas.” Setsei looked at me, surprised.

“Have you seen Nephil Stratum recently?” I asked him.

“Actually, not for a while,” he pondered. “She was turning a bit green ... said she was going to her quarters to rest. Haven’t seen her, come to think of it, you know, since just before you all muted.”

I nodded. “That’s because she stunned Pallas on the Nautilus and muted as Plionarctos in his place,” I whispered with visible anger in my voice. “We have to get to Nissos before Nephil Stratum sees him and sounds the alarm.”

• • •

We scanned the dome where we had originally discovered Benedict’s cottage, to no avail. Setsei’s Ergal did identify a Syneph in the dome across from ours, not far from where we had tried to send out our cry for help. Nephil Stratum had probably stayed with Benedict and his leaders to plan. But, to plan for what?

“Nephil Stratum must be in this structure,” I whispered, pointing ahead. “Probably helping out the Coordinator of Interrogation and Torture.”

Setsei smiled wanly. As we neared the dome, he clutched his Geryon even tighter. In my micro’ed state, I was now able to see gaps in the dome’s membranous walls. I waved for Setsei to follow and we diffused through the openings easily. Once inside, we Ergaled to the hallway near the Syneph’s identified location^[26] and hid behind a plastic pink poinsettia that someone thought— wrongly—would make an attractive decorative statement.

We watched as, at our eye-level, a few Andart legs covered by their uniform’s baggy cuffed pants walked by us and entered the room. Now there’s an idea. I gestured my plan

to Setsei, and, on my cue, we leapt into the trouser cuffs of the next passing Andart and hitched a ride inside the room. Peeking over the cuffs, we observed that chairs had been set up for Benedict, Nephil Stratum, Burr, and most of the Andarts. A quick scan of the room showed us that Sarion, Pallas, and Nissos were sitting across from us, stunned and under guard by the real Plionarctos. Eikhus was imprisoned in a giant stoppered bottle on which someone had scribbled, "Houdini was here." Fortunately for a few dozen paperweights, and a few dozen heads, Fahrquardt wasn't.

Hoping we wouldn't be seen, we slipped out of the Andart's pants and scurried under a row of chairs. Just as I caught my breath, I felt a hand on my shoulder and almost screamed. Spinning around, I smacked an equally miniaturized Spud in the shins. His agonized grimace frightened tiny Suthsi, who was hiding under a chair in the back row. Glaring, Spud pointed at Lykkos and Matshi who, also micro'd, had taken posts on the other side of the room. I could dimly see our friends peeking out from under the real Agriarctos's furry legs.

We all watched Nephil Stratum float over to Eikhus's bottle and wrap her tendrils around it. "We don't have much time," she said quietly. "Unfortunately, the Kharybdian managed to alert Glieser border patrols, and, despite Henderson, they are likely to attack as soon as we reach Andromeda." She floated back over to her seat at Benedict's right, and warned. "This ship would be blasted to smithereens if it tried to cross into Andromedan airspace."

From his post under the Ursan, Matshi raised two fingers, then extended twenty-four fingers in our direction and started silently counting them down.

"Well, that makes our course even clearer," Benedict announced to the accompaniment of his colleagues' nods. "We stay here at galaxy periphery in invisible-ized mode, and dispatch an undercover to get the target."

12-11-10...

Agriarctos raised a paw. "I'll do it." 6-5-4...

"I like to play to Andarts' strengths," Benedict laughed. "And, somehow, for you, Agriarctos, blending discreetly into the scenery is not one of them." Nodding at Agriarctos, Benedict turned to the group. "But, you would make an excellent decoy and distraction—"

Positioned squarely under our foes' chairs, we'd started to mega. Though it would take another few seconds to fully reach our goal of growing twice our regular size, we'd gained the element of surprise by knocking everyone's chairs over and throwing the startled occupants to the floor. Then, we'd each leapt to disable our closest targets.

Benedict and Burr were easily grabbed and stunned by a giant Setsei, who, with his Geryon pointed like a bayonet, then turned his attention to the onslaught of Andarts, mowing them down like frozen bowling pins as they attacked. Suthsi launched his Geryon at Nephil Stratum, piercing her and turning her tufts into icicles. He then unstunned Sarion, who lunged onto the back of an Andart that had Spud gasping in a chokehold, and applied a Megaran mpoon.^[27] The Andart immediately released Spud and spun around screaming, unable to throw Sarion off his aching back. Spud called on his brilliant boxing skills and got in a direct blow to the Andart's face. One more Andart down for the count.

Matshi threw his arms around the Ursans' necks while Lykkos stunned them. The Ursans stood stiffly, two tall, white columns amidst the Andarts flying across the room

and writhing on the floor. I, tall enough now to easily slip the cap off of Eikhus's bottle, did so, and Eikhus washed over me with gratitude before he, too, joined the fray.

It didn't take long before we had the entire room stunned, unstun-gunned, and un-ergaled. I was about to give a victory cheer for our team, when I froze. Nope, not a panic attack. *Really* froze. The entire room was filled with a bright blue light which turned us all into human—and alien—contorted statues. I felt like I was back in acting class doing the freeze exercise, where you stop moving and stand in ridiculous positions every time the teacher yells the cue.

And then the door opened to reveal Fahrquardt, in full puffery, holding a stun gun. He slowly and deliberately unstunned Benedict, the Ursans, and all of the now-fallen Andarts. As Spud would say, all our efforts, alas, had been for naught. Surprisingly, Fahrquardt's gun was not effective on Nephil Stratum, and he seemed to purposely avoid freeing Burr.

In fact, Fahrquardt sneered at Burr as he walked by, then stopped and stood proudly in front of Benedict, saying simply, "You're welcome."

A re-mobilized Benedict calmly took a paperweight from his pocket and whacked Fahrquardt on the head with it, knocking the Coordinator unconscious at his feet. Had I not been stunned, I wouldn't have been able to keep from laughing.

Benedict then sighed and, looking at his audience, began again, "As I was saying, now that we have our decoy and distraction—Agriarctos—we need our undercover." To my alarm, his gaze settled on me.

I would've shaken my head if I could. Oh, no. No. No way...

Benedict walked over to me and took my stun gun out of my pocket, tickling me a bit in the process. I protested with a choked gurgle. "Yes, I think you would do quite well," he said, smiling, "for, after all, who can get into Central faster than a bona-fide catascope?"

"But," he continued smoothly, "you haven't been entirely cooperative, you know."

My eyes flashed with anger. I'll cooperate in your dreams!

"So, since you're an actor, we'll provide you with a little motivation," he smiled, chuckling at his own joke. Then his tone got serious. "You and Agriarctos there will take your whirlpool buddy's ship to Zyga. You'll go into Zygint Central and to the location I specify and retrieve the target, and then return it to me."

He moved to within an inch of my frozen face. Could I spit? No, darnit. "Failure," he said, his voice dripping with malice, "is not an option. Not if you ever want to see your companions," he nodded at Spud, "alive again."

Chapter 22

Anazitisi

The Ursans levved me behind the footfalls of Benedict as he walked out of the room and down a hall to another office. I blanched when I saw the title on the door reading “Executive Coordinator of Interrogation and Torture.”

I was dreading entering the room—and relieved when I saw it was empty except for a few utilitarian desks and chairs. “Ransome’s on sabbatical,” Benedict said casually, “Went to give his old buddies at Orion Revenue a hand.”

“Tax Collectors,” the genuine Plionarctos growled as he took his post by the door, and then, after a nod from Benedict, unstunned me. “Now you can speak.”

I snorted. “Benjamin Franklin said it best.”

“Ah, yes, the well known cliché,” Benedict rolled his eyes and sighed, “Nothing is certain but death and taxes...”

“No,” I returned, “‘There never was a good war or a bad peace’.”

Benedict actually chuckled for a moment before a note of sadness crossed his face. “I did not start this war...,” he said to someone who wasn’t there. Finally, he brightened again, and said firmly, “But I do intend to finish it.”

“With *my* help,” I said bitterly. “So, either I kidnap His Highness, or you kill my friends, is that how it goes?”

“No,” he responded, to my surprise. “Despite how your pedagogues have brainwashed you, I truthfully have no desire to waste my time any more with—” the words seemed to be almost distasteful “—His Highness.”

“No. I want something else.” He sat forward and looked at us intently. “On Zyga, there is a room you can access through Zygint Central the size of ... of a small planet. In it is the target I seek.”

Agriarctos looked alarmed. “Not the Ram?” Benedict nodded. “Exactly.”

I looked from one to the other. Again with a ram? “But you *have* a Somalderis,” I protested. With Nephil Stratum on his side to channel unlimited energy from any bright sun power a trip to another brane, why would Benedict still need or want the Golden Fleece?

“RAM,” Benedict repeated. “Registered Anastasial Memory. It’s the chamber where the neurocache of every single creature in the Universe, alive or dead, is stored.”

“Whoa!” I staggered. “What, you’re trying to tell me that the Omega Archon keeps a head file on all of us?”

“Simply put, yes.” Benedict pulled out my Ergal from his suit pocket and fiddled with it for a few minutes. “When you access the RAM, your Ergal will take you to the appropriate storage area and upload the information I’ve just instructed it to. Then you will return the information to me here.” He handed my Ergal to Agriarctos, who slipped it inside his robes.

I snorted again. “Great. Sounds easy enough,” my voice was dripping with sarcasm. “And *then* you’ll kill my friends, and me?”

“No,” Benedict said quietly. “*Then*, as far as you’re concerned, I’ll just get out of your way.”

• • •

With Agriarctos as my partner and guard, I flew the Nautilus off Benedict's "Death Star" and ordered nav to set course for Mikkin, Zyga's capital city. I was tempted to cryptocomm some disruptive nav orders to throw us off track, but Benedict's threat to kill Spud and the others, along with Agriarctos's stun gun pointed at my head, kept me from attempting an escape.

"I gather Benedict's going to try to go to another brane with help from Nephil Stratum," I fished, hoping that Agriarctos was feeling chatty.

Agriarctos shrugged. "He doesn't tell me his plans."

"Whose neurocache do you think he wants?"

The Ursan seemed annoyed. "I *said*, he doesn't tell me his plans."

I sighed. "You think he'll really let us go if I do this?"

Another shrug. "But he won't if you don't."

"Thanks," I said without enthusiasm.

Agriarctos shifted his gun so it was pointing at my chest, and settled into a more comfortable position in his jump seat. He looked out at the stars and avoided my gaze.

"Have you ever been to this RAM?" I asked casually.

"No." He continued to look out the viewscreen. "It's not open to the public."

"I'll say. The public probably hasn't ever heard of it." I admitted, "They never said anything about it at Mingferplatoi."

"They don't tell you a lot of things at Mingferplatoi." Agriarctos was clearly a cynic.

"What I don't get," I continued, "is why Benedict just can't access the neurocache he needs through his Ergal. I mean, when I muted as this guy from Earth Core, or, as you even, my Ergal got me the right DNA and neurocache."

Agriarctos turned his snout in my direction. "You ask too many questions." He took out his own Ergal. "Let's go over what we have to do."

• • •

Our plan was for Agriarctos to create a distraction that would allow me to find and access the RAM. I'd kind of expected he'd mega and do a King Kong on Zygint Central, but Agriarctos had other ideas. Still keeping his stun gun trained—well-trained—on me, he activated his Ergal. His hulky Ursan torso slowly morphed into the lanky body of a tall lean youth dressed in a T-shirt and jeans. Agriarctos had now Ergaled, or more likely, muted, into Spud!

"Oh, no," was all I could gasp. "You're not gonna get away with this."

Agriarctos/Spud was confident. "You're much more likely to succeed in your mission with me," he pointed at his human form, "than with ... me. After all, we're catascope partners. It's natural for us to be together."

"The accent's supposed to be English," I said, shaking my head. "Oh, sure, this'll really work."

"Okay. Pip, pip, jolly good, cheerio!" "Spud" teased. "How'm I doing?"

I buried my head in my hands for the second time today. Doomed again.

• • •

We had an uneventful hour until we approached Andromeda's border. I finally had to acknowledge that Agriarctos did have a point. "Spud" *would* have an easier time getting into Central. Easier than we were having getting back into Andromeda past the Gliesers. Despite my advance comm, Gil Pesci was very persistent about grilling us this time, even when I tried to reassure him that we were just fine and simply piloting a relaxed flight back to Zyga.

"You were in the vicinity of HD5924," he insisted. His holo showed him standing in front of a starmap.

"Just doing a little sightseeing with my partner." I nodded at "Spud" sitting next to me. Agriarctos waved.

"We've had reports of Benedict operating out of that quadrant in M82. Did you see him?"

"No, no," we both said simultaneously.

"We're fine. Just piloting a relaxed flight back to Zyga," I repeated.

"So you don't know what happened to the planet?" "What do you mean?" I asked as innocently as possible, my heart skipping a beat.

"Our scans of the sector show that HD5924 is no longer there."

"Spud" piped in with a British burr, "Maybe a black hole ...?" Hmm, the accent was passable after all.

"No," Gil responded. "No disturbances in the area. We recorded that the planet flew out of its orbit 6.8 hours ago, headed in our direction. Then, 1.7 hours later we received a general distress call from its tracked location. Twenty-seven minutes ago it disappeared completely from our scanners."

I looked at "Spud" in alarm. Benedict's planet-ship had disappeared?! How? Where? My friends!

Agriarctos did not seem distressed. He ran his fingers over our scanning display. "Checking."

I waited anxiously. If the Benedicts "vessel" had vanished, my friends were gone as well. They could even be—

"Bollocks!" cried "Spud," his fingers still playing over the holo.

Dead ... all dead...

"Got 'em!" "Spud" grew a self-satisfied grin. "They're in the sixth octet of M81." He raised a hand, adding, "Don't ask me how ..."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Gil and "Spud" spent the next few minutes talking about cutting-edge propulsion systems and warped space, but finally we got the green light to enter Andromeda and resume our trip. Now it was up to me to keep my friends alive.

• • •

Zyga—present day

The other checkpoints were easier to go through. Our catascope creds were good enough to get us through routine planet screens, and we had a relatively pleasant entry into Zyga's atmosphere. We landed at the largest spaceport in Mikkin, and micro'ed the Nautilus into Spud's pocket.

We Ergaled to Zygint Central and entered the building with a desperate air of confidence. Fortunately, as mutes, the WHO scans easily cleared us, and we were admitted to the lobby of the spire structure.

“Now what?” I whispered to Agriarctos, who was busy studying his Spud-style cell phone Ergal.

“It’s this way,” he said quietly and motioned for me to follow him to a bank of lifts.

Along with others in the lobby, we entered the lift and levved up almost to the top of the spire. The trip took several minutes—we had to stop and let out passengers on so many floors—but by the time we reached the top, the two of us were alone in the car.

The doors opened on a barren lobby, but Agriarctos held me back. “Not here. Wait.”

Curious, I waited for the doors to close again. Agriarctos had his Ergal out again and was activating it in some way I couldn’t interpret. As soon as the doors clicked together, we shot down as rapidly as the descent I so hated into Terra Core.

I grabbed the railings of the lift to keep from falling, and from floating up due to the loss of gravity from the sharp drop. We kept going down for a distressingly long time. “We should be arriving at Earth by now,” I joked, trying to lighten the mood.

“Spud” didn’t laugh or comment. He kept monitoring his Ergal intently until we started to slow down. The car finally came to a surprisingly smooth stop, and its doors opened again to reveal, astonishingly, a lush garden reminiscent of the meadows around Benedict’s disappearing cottage. We stepped out onto a wide path among the multi-colored flowers and shrubs. I felt that I’d walked into a greenhouse designed by a graphics editor with an infinite number of tints.

I had an irresistible urge to sneeze. And then I realized that the flowers had no fragrance. I reached out and touched one. It felt real. Breaking off a stem, I noted that liquid oozed out from the broken ends. I put the flower to my nose. Nope, no smell. Weird.

Agriarctos was already some distance down the pathway and waving for me to catch up. I set off at a jogger’s pace, amazed and troubled by my surroundings. Was this a holo? Were we in an Enclave missing from my Zygraphy upload? Were we even still on Zyga?

“Stay with me,” “Spud” barked. “We are not on holiday.”

I snorted. “I would sure like to know where we are.”

Agriarctos led us at a good clip before answering. “If you must know, Nejinsen Medical Center.”

I stopped in my tracks. “Nejinsen?! Nejinsen’s in Aheya!” A city hundreds of miles from Mikkin!

“Tell me something I don’t know,” “Spud” responded, before softening his tone and adding. “We came in through the back door.”

“You have been here before...,” I guessed as we started forward again.

Agriarctos nodded. “With Benedict.” His voice was a whisper. “I hope we’ll succeed this time.”

• • •

I soon noticed that we had started to climb, and that the terrain and vegetation were changing. Before long, we had left the garden and entered sparse woods, and eventually, a denser forest of equally odorless pines. The path on which we were hiking was now

blanketed with scattered twigs that crunched under our feet as we trudged onward. Having slept little in the past few days, I was starting to feel the fatigue, and hoping we would either arrive at our destination soon or stop to rest.

Finally, I told Agriarctos I had to take a break. There was a slight clearing in front of us surrounded by the pine trees, and I insisted we pause for a few minutes. I found a patch of cool moss and plunked down to relax. “Spud” sat next to me on a sturdy log, leaning against a thick tree trunk and closing his eyes.

I yawned and laid down, relishing the refreshing wetness of the dew against my neck. As I looked up, I saw streams of light breaking through the tall pines above me, forming a vault, a cathedral of luminosity, which looked very beautiful and familiar. And I remembered. This was the forest I had awakened to in my vision in my— Benedict’s— cell.

I sat up quickly. If this *was* the same forest, was there a chance I would I stumble upon Benedict—and my brother—up ahead?

Chapter 23

Apocalypsi

I jumped to my feet, pulling “Spud” off the log on which he was sitting. “I know this place. I’ve been here before—I think. We have to go see! We have to find him!”

“Spud” raised a “Spud-ian” eyebrow—gosh, Agriarctos was a good actor—and, groaning, got himself up as I took off down the forest path. The road wound through the trees just as I had seen it in my vision. At this pace, we would soon reach the clearing where I’d had the last glimpses of my brother. Agriarctos lumbered along behind me, his expression now filled with concern.

Finally, the grove of trees broke open to reveal the field of my dreams. “There it is!” I shouted as we drew closer, pointing at the tall grass.

Agriarctos looked at me through narrowed eyes. “Well, yes, but—how did you know?”

“Because I saw Benedict send ... a traveler to another brane through a portal here.” I motioned for “Spud” to pull out his Ergal. “Scan. There has to be one.”

Agriarctos reluctantly complied, scanning the surroundings with his Ergal. I could barely contain my excitement. My brother had been wearing a Somalderis, a Fleece. Might he have launched to another dimension from this very spot—and survived the trip? If so, would we—would I—ever be able to see him again?

“No.” Agriarctos shook his head. “No portal here. I think you must be mistaken.”

I crash landed—hard. Standing frozen, barely able to breathe, I couldn’t speak for several minutes. I had so desperately hoped that in this field of my dreams I could find a path that would lead me to John. Or at least to the truth about him and his fate.

Patience is the champion’s best tool. His voice once again echoed in my ears. It took all my strength but I finally responded with a simple “Yeah ...”

“But,” the Ursan added, “we *are* only a few yards away from RAM entry. Through that back door I was talking about.” He pulled out my Ergal from his back pocket and handed it to me with a forced smile. “You’ll need this.”

I took the Ergal without a word and, avoiding his eyes, slipped it into my jeans. Fighting back tears, I followed Agriarctos numbly to the opposite edge of the empty field and, when he reached out his hand for mine, I took it and waited for him to Ergal us into the RAM.

• • •

We M-fanned in a distinguished lobby under a grand cupola. The marble floor felt hard under our feet after our recent walk through the soft grass. The stun guns against our ribs felt pretty hard, too.

We were surrounded by at least ten Zygfed guards, with orange Zygfed Sentinel Corps insignia on their red uniforms. Members of the elite unit were selected from the best of the Zygint pool. It was a goal I myself had once hoped I’d achieve. But, you had to prove yourself in the field for several years before you would even be considered. It’s funny. Benedict would’ve been a shoo-in for Sentinel Corps if he hadn’t gone against the Omega Archon. Now he was their sworn enemy.

I kept my tone light. “We’re Zygint. Go ahead and scan us.” I suggested in Zygan.

The team leader, a massive Chidurian, looked directly into my eyes. “Catascofes are not authorized in this area. What is your business here”—he scanned me quickly with his Ergal—“Rush?”

Agriarctos jumped in. “Benedict,” he started, to my alarm. Fortunately, after all eyes had turned to him, he continued, “has infiltrated Zygint, and we think he’s gotten into the RAM.”

A murmur of distress spread among the Sentinels. Their Chidurian leader, however, didn’t seem entirely convinced. “I will, of course, comm to check.”

“Of course.” “Spud” nodded genially. “It is expected.”

The Chidurian gestured, and the remaining Sentinels stepped back a foot or so, still pointing their stun guns at us. I took a deep breath, my eyes glued to Agriarctos for my cue. It was nice to have those guns out of our ribs.

As the Chidurian M-fanned a comm holo, “Spud” took a deep breath as well. Exactly three seconds after exhaling, “Spud” exploded! Bits of flesh and blood spattered over me. I grabbed my Ergal and X-fanned as the Sentinels stood momentarily frozen in shock. Agriarctos—or what was left of him—was now on his own.

• • •

I M-fanned into a massive arched chamber that stretched endlessly before me. The walls on each side were white, and seemed to radiate a soft glow that lit the infinite tunnel ahead. The light was soothing, and I basked in its comfort for a few moments, then, aware of my mission, I activated my Ergal and let it do its thing.

I was levved quickly forward for five long minutes, accelerating faster and faster, the air whipping my face as my speed rapidly topped one hundred miles per hour. I flashed back to the afternoon John had taken me out on his motorcycle a few months before he’d left. Sans our helmets, we’d done the usual back roads in the rolling Appalachian hills until we hit a distant valley with a straight stretch of highway and John had floored it. I’d held onto him for dear life, and whooped with joy as we practically flew over the asphalt. I remember watching the speedometer going eighty, ninety, one hundred, and feeling the rush of wind across my body. I knew then that when I got older I was going to learn to fly. I just never imagined I would be doing it by myself.

My Ergal finally stopped me—a little too fast for my stomach—next to the white wall on my left. I looked at the wall more closely. Its surface seemed slightly rough, like the popcorn ceiling in George’s ancient dorm room. Strangely, the roughness seemed to be growing, the wall turning into a sea of white bubbles. I realized I was being micro’ed at a rapid clip.

As I became smaller and smaller, I was able to see more and more detail in the wall. To my relief, the process finally stopped when I got to the level of several microns, the resolution of an electron microscope. And that’s when I saw them. Lining each wall, to my shock, were thousands and thousands of brightly glowing spheres.

The spheres looked to me like basketball-sized versions of the spheres I had viewed in the giant chamber the first time I had been dragged to Benedict’s planet-ship. Could those spheres have been stolen neurocaches? If so, where had they gone when I had returned to the chamber with Matshi and Spud? To another brane, perhaps?

I was still clutching my Ergal in my hands, and I abruptly felt it start to vibrate. The vibrations caused my hands to tremble violently. At the same time, one of the balls directly opposite me started to vibrate and glow with a greater intensity. It soon resonated in rhythm with my Ergal, and, finally, visibly startling me, it flew off of the wall and attached itself to my Ergal.

“O-kay,” I said to myself, trying to stay calm. This is creepy. The ball felt soft, warm, and soothing against my arms and chest. I felt its vibrations slowly become synchronized with my pounding heartbeat. Bum-pum, bum-pum, bum-pum. *Really* creepy.

My mission accomplished, I expected my Ergal would swing me around, mega me, and shoot me back to the entrance. However, as soon as my Ergal stopped vibrating, I—and my new friend, the sphere—started moving forward again. After another few minutes of swift travel, we were stopped near another wall of spheres, this time on my right. The Ergal once again started to vibrate, and I waited, expecting another chosen sphere to respond and join our party.

Instead, all the spheres seemed to be growing larger—or was I getting smaller again? The sphere I had cradled in my arms became much larger than me. Fortunately, it was feather-light, and it floated next to me, hovering and shadowing me as I moved. The spheres in front of me had also grown, and I felt myself being towed towards one in particular. That sphere was now positioned directly in front of me and continued to grow until it was almost four times my size,^[28] and micrometers from my face.

As I’d been able to do on Benedict’s planet, I soon found my body diffusing through this new sphere’s membrane. As I passed through, I developed an inexplicable feeling of dread. Once inside, my feathery sensation of flying quickly disappeared. I started to feel very heavy and clumsy, as if I was bound and imprisoned once again. My breathing became more labored, hampered by thick secretions in my nose and throat. My eyes now had difficulty focusing, my vision was blurry and double. I felt hunger, thirst, and a pressing urge to empty my bladder, yet, when I tried to move, my limbs jerked wildly, seemingly completely out of my control. Worst of all, I could no longer hear John’s voice, or remember his comforting words.

An auburn-haired woman, middle-aged, I’d guess, leaned into my line of sight, her expression filled with concern. She seemed, somehow, to be talking directly to me. “What’s wrong, Stacy?” the woman said tenderly. “Honey, are you okay?”

Stacy? Who is Stacy? The woman reached over and adjusted my pillow, re-positioned my arms, and then patted me on my bottom to see if my diaper was wet. Diaper?! What the hell? Where am I? What’s going on? I tried to cry for help, but I was unable to form any intelligible sounds and my voice only came out in grunts and groans. I was terrified, and, once again, tried desperately to escape this nightmare into which I had stumbled—or been led to—to no avail. I was trapped, incapacitated. A prisoner in a strange and disabled body, unable to flee. Panicked, I heard myself scream.

• • •

I don’t remember anything about my return to the infinite tunnel. I recall only the joy of feeling free, weightless, and comfortable, bathed and calmed once again by light. I opened my eyes and saw that my Ergal was still in my hand. The first sphere I had collected was getting smaller and smaller. It had stopped shadowing me and had

reattached itself to my Ergal, disappearing completely as I kept mega'ing and could no longer see at the molecular level. As I continued to grow, the wall in front of me lost its texture and once more became a smooth surface of glowing radiance.

I waited uneasily for my Ergal to take me still further into the endless room, worried that I'd be pushed into yet another terrifying experience. But, the Ergal instead whooshed me briskly back to the starting point of my bizarre journey. I arrived at the RAM entry breathless and grateful for my short, spiky haircut that was ideally suited for surviving the wind.

At the entrance, as Agriarctos and I had planned, I, with fingers crossed, simultaneously X-fanned and activated a temporal leap. This is a very dangerous and, if unauthorized, illegal move. Temporal leaps are different from time loops. Time loops bring the traveler back on or after the point he or she left. The time the traveler experiences in the past or future is just lengthened relative to those who remain in the present. For example, it was a week in Hell for me, and only an anxious hour outside waiting for Spud. Temporal leaps take you back in time *without* looping, so the traveler can return to any time, including a time *before* he or she time-traveled. There's a potential for some pretty peculiar paradoxes with temporal leaps. And, if you're caught, some pretty long temporal loops in Hell.^[29]

Temporal leaping, I M-fanned in the reception lobby under the cupola minutes before Agriarctos and I were due to arrive. As several of the Sentinels whipped out their stun guns, I strode directly to their Chidurian leader, whom my Ergal had by now identified as Gameshi.

"Gameshi," I said immediately in Zygan, "Rush from Central. You're about to be invaded by two impostors, one of them pretending to be me, and the other my partner. They're going to try to break into the RAM."

To my dismay, the Chidurian seemed suspicious. He ordered one of his Sentinels to keep his stun gun aimed at me, and then told the rest of the team to adopt defense formation five. Anxious, I stood at the periphery of the lobby with my captor, watching as the guards formed a circle awaiting the impostors' M-fan. I crossed my fingers once again.

It took a couple of minutes, but my prediction did come true. Agriarctos, muted as Spud, and the "earlier me" M-fanned into the circle of Sentinels. I shouted loudly in Ursan, "RHRak'nk!"^[30] The cry distracted the Sentinels for a crucial moment as they turned to look at me. Agriarctos and the earlier me sprung into action, Ergaling stun guns and spraying the closest Sentinels with stun rays. I shot out a kick that threw my guard's stun-gun flying across the room, and leved out of the way to avoid his lunge. It was soon down to three against five, and we fought like...Zygan Sentinels. I disabled my own sentry with a blow to his head, and as I whirled around to assist *my* team, I saw the Chidurian raise his stun gun to get a clear shot directly at me.

Shouting, "Find out about Stacy!" I tossed my Ergal to my earlier self just as Gameshi fired. The laser burned my skin for a nanosecond and then—

• • •

Screaming, I leapt towards the Chidurian, trying to stop him from shooting. But, it was too late. The stun gun fired a laser ray that completely disintegrated me—or really that person who looked so much like me across the room. I had caught the Ergal she had

thrown to me, and slipped it into my pocket as I landed on top of the trigger-happy warrior, knocking him to the marble floor. Purple blood started seeping from the back of his head, but that didn't stop him from using several of his arms and legs to heave me off of him. I did a double back-flip and landed on the shoulders of the last free Sentinel, knocking him out, and turned to help Agriarctos, who was finishing off another fighter.

The Chidurian was back on his feet again, rivers of violet blood flowing down his face. He lunged towards me, and, just before he reached me, he was stunned in mid-air by Spud/Agriarctos and crashed, grunting, to the ground.

"Did you get it?" Agriarctos asked me urgently.

I nodded, looking sadly off at the place where my avatar had recently stood, and responded, "X-fan!"

We did.

• • •

With all the Sentinels either unconscious or stunned, we were hoping that we could make it out of Nejinsen without setting off alarms. We M-fanned into the Maternity Ward, and Ergaling into scrubs, we strode confidently behind a row of chattering, expectant Ytrans, whose eyes were glued to the meiosis chambers where their offspring-to-be were splitting and incubating.

We reached the lifts without incident, and stepped into a crowded elevator for the trip down to the lobby. Wary of a potential welcoming party, I was relieved when the door opened and we saw only routine activity in the Medical Center's entrance hall. I realized then that I had been holding my breath longer than I ever thought I could.

As soon as we had exited Nejinsen, we mega'ed our ship, and set off as quickly as possible in stealth mode for Benedict's planet-vessel. Every minute's delay increased the chances that someone would stumble on the stunned Zygfed Sentinels, who would, no doubt, raise a very angry alarm about our RAM invasion as soon as they were unstunned. Briskly dodging guard buoys, I piloted the Nautilus with one hand on our weapons control, ready just in case.

As we approached the last tendrils of Zyga's atmosphere, the terminal buoy started flashing a pulsing red light. Going into hyperdrive while still in planet orbit was a risky move, but it was one of the best ways to avoid the laser blast that I knew would follow from the buoy in the next second or two. I warped, and the ray missed.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I sat back in my jump seat and focused my eyes on the starstreams on our viewscreen. After my adrenaline shakes passed, I turned to Agriarctos, who had waited until we'd cleared Andromedan airspace before returning to his normal Ursan form.

"So, where are they?" I asked Agriarctos, who was thankfully no longer Spud.

The Ursan shrugged, but, perhaps picking up on my anxiety about my friends, he swung his seat around towards the Nautilus' nav and scan holos and pulled up displays of M81. Despite Benedict's assurances that, if we succeeded in our assigned mission, he would keep up his end of the deal, I didn't exactly believe he'd come through with his promises to keep Spud and the rest of our team safe.

Agriarctos fiddled with the holo screens for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, he responded, "They're still there. M81. Octet 6."

"At a portal?" I wondered.

Agriarctos didn't answer, but kept his snout buried in his viewscreen.

After a few minutes of silence, I spoke up again. "Who's Stacy?"

Agriarctos looked at me and shrugged. "I don't know. Who?"

"It's something she yelled to me just before she died, 'Find out about Stacy!'"

"Who yelled?"

"Me. I did. Or rather, *she* did. The me that went into the RAM."

Agriarctos appeared genuinely puzzled. "No idea.

Are you sure the name was 'Stacy'?"

I nodded. "Yeah ..." Sighing, I added, "That's okay." In all the commotion, I probably didn't hear her right. She could have said "space heat" for all I know, maybe something to do with the Zygan Sentinels. I shook my head. If only I'd had time to ask her. And to say thanks.

I just could not erase her final minutes from my mind. As a catascope, I'd witnessed deaths before, but seeing *yourself* die, disappearing into nothing, had been both terrifying and devastating. What had she—I—been thinking, feeling? Did it hurt? She'd been so *there*... and now she was gone ... and *I* was here. I'd just met her, but I knew her better than anyone else in the Universe, and, in some peculiar way, I missed her.

A flash of anger washed over me. *She* was the one who'd succeeded in the mission. *I* should've been the one to die ... Or maybe we could've merged, so that *both* of us could live. Damn these paradoxes! I suddenly understood why Zygfed considered unauthorized temporal leaping a very serious crime.

But she—I—didn't deserve the death penalty. No one does. I wiped the tears from my eyes and turned my gaze once again to the stars.

• • •

M81 Galaxy—present day

Benedict's planet-ship loomed enormous on our viewscreens. My reflections on my future self's demise had rapidly been superseded by my ongoing worry about my comrades. Yes, Agriarctos had located the "Death Star" in M81. But, were my friends still alive on board, or would I find myself following them to Level 3 as soon as I handed over my Ergal and its package to Benedict? With the planet-ship's impenetrable shields blocking our scanners, I had no way of finding out from space.

The Nautilus was welcomed with open hangar doors and we landed without obstructions—no surprise. After all, we still hadn't made our "delivery". We stepped off our ship in the vessel's hangar and found ourselves—alone. I stood dazed, expecting any minute to be greeted with a hostile welcome and a guided trip back to my cell. But, Agriarctos motioned for me to follow him with an urgent "Come on!"

Scans, scans, scans. Steps, steps, steps. Minutes had passed, and no one had joined us, or attacked us. Agriarctos had led me once again to the giant chamber with the three domes. The spheres I had witnessed on my first visit were still missing. I suppressed a shiver. The cavernous room seemed empty and cold.

"Give me your Ergal!" barked the Ursan.

"What?"

"Your Ergal," he repeated.

Robotically, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the instrument, handing it to my erstwhile partner. “Here ...”

Agriarctos activated some settings for a few moments, and then I heard the Ergal vibrate once again. An ant-sized sphere M-fanned next to the Ergal and started to float away towards the enormous open vault of the chamber above our heads. As it soared, it grew larger and larger and was soon the size of a beach ball, its internal lights flickering brightly in shades of white and yellow, bathing us in a comforting warmth.

“Well done,” a familiar voice behind us cheered. Benedict. I didn’t turn to face him. “My friends?”

“I have kept my end of our agreement as well,” he responded. “They are unharmed.”

Relieved, I did an about-face and pointed a finger up at the new sphere. “What is that?”

“Not ‘what’, my dear,” he said gently, “‘who’. My mother.”

I suddenly felt myself shaking, and I didn’t know why. I just wanted to get out of here, to go home. Not to Malibu, but to Maryland, to see Andi, and Billy, and Bobby, and Kris, and Blair, and Connie, and George—and John, especially John. Again.

The tears came and I didn’t bother to try to stop them. It was only Spud’s arm around my shoulders that helped me ease my sobbing. Spud! Matshi! Eikhus! Sarion!

Setsei and Suthsi! Pallas and his mates! All around me, reaching out to me, in the living room with the crackling fire in Benedict’s country cottage. All alive!

First, hugs and laughter. And then, “Nephil Stratum?”

Suthsi spoke first. “I released her with my Geryon.” “She insists on helping Benedict,” Setsei said sadly.

“She is convinced it’s the right thing to do ...”

“They’re going to try going to ... the other side,” Suthsi whispered, trembling.

“To another brane,” Spud corrected. “Another dimension. With Nephil Stratum’s assistance, Benedict might be able to channel enough energy from SN1993J, one of M81’s largest suns, to succeed in transporting himself and his mother this time, if not this entire ship.”

My eyes met Spud’s. “Is that what John did? Channel energy from a sun to cross into another brane?”

Spud nodded. “It’s certainly possible his Somalderis was a Syneph, too. Anamorphed as a ram, a fleece. Helping your brother draw energy from the Sun closest to his portal so he could make a crossing. Or ...” He stopped and looked down at his feet. “You might

discover the answers if you joined us on our journey,” a gentle voice said from the door. We turned and saw Nephil Stratum ease into the room.

“Or, I might find ... nothing on the other side,” I said, my voice cracking. I shook my head and snorted,

“Come on, Nephil Stratum. You’re acting as if it’s even my choice. Benedict’s going to decide our fate now.”

“You always have a choice,” Benedict announced as he strode into the room.

“You mean if we don’t make the, uh, trip with you, you’re just going to let us go?” I said bitterly. “Just like that?” I snapped my fingers. “Aren’t you supposed to be a villain?”

Matshi interjected. “He wants to kill His Highness.

That makes him one.”

“I want to,” Benedict agreed, “but obviously I can’t. At least not now. And not for the reasons you might think,” he added to Matshi.

“So, instead he’s going to run,” Eikhus posited.

Benedict smiled for a moment. “So, ‘I’m going to run in such a way that I may win it.’”

“What’s ‘it’?” I asked, curious.

“‘It’ is 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. Sort of.” Spud’s eyes met Benedict’s. “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize?”

Benedict laughed. “Escott, I have a few regrets in my life, and one of them is that I can’t take you with me.” To my shock, he reached out a hand to my partner.

To my even greater shock, Spud took his hand and shook it.

• • •

With Benedict’s acquiescence, Nephil Stratum Ergaled us back to the Nautilus in the hangar.

None of the group except for me was willing to talk to her. As my cohorts entered the ship, I took a moment to step away and pull her aside. My hands felt safe nestled in her tufts, and I felt more than a twinge of sadness at the thought that I probably would never see her again.

“You’re sure about this?” I asked, with a hint of desperation.

“Yes,” she responded softly. “It has to be done.”

Trying to keep my voice steady, I ventured, “Well, then, I know it’s just me dreaming, but ... if you make it ... and if you find John ...” My voice cracked again. “Please tell him to come home ...”

I felt her tufts tenderly squeeze my hands, just as Matshi stuck his head out of the Nautilus’ fuselage and yelled, “Rush, remember your name!”

Nodding, I pulled my arms away and said, “Well, thank you for the, uh, tlyp’ath.”

“There is an old proverb, from one of your Terran countries, China, I believe,”

Nephil Stratum said. “Without experiencing a thing, one can not gain knowledge from it. Have a safe journey—and wish me the same.”

I stood still, struggling with mixed feelings. Finally, after Nephil Stratum had almost reached the hangar door, I shouted, “You, too!” and, without looking back, Ergaled into our ship.

• • •

En route to Zyga—present day

I was relieved that Eikhus was back at the helm of the Nautilus for our return to Zyga. I was drained and exhausted, and not eager to battle the winds of space again at nav controls. Assuming we’d arrive safely, we’d have a lot of ‘splaining to do, and I needed to use the voyage to gather my strength—and my wits. Meanwhile, unable to truly believe that Benedict would simply set us free after our capture, Matshi and the Megarans had spent the last few minutes scanning the ship for potential booby traps.

The Nautilus seemed clear, even after Setsei did a Geryon scan. With little fanfare, we launched through the opening hangar door and departed post-haste from HDWhocares.

Spud seemed unusually quiet, sitting in one corner of the bridge, his head buried in a scanning holo.

I ambled over. "What're you looking for?" I asked casually.

"I am not certain," he replied. "Some type of a disturbance."

After a few more moments, he straightened quickly, exclaiming, "There. There it is!"

We mega'ed the holo so we all could see what Spud had observed.

"A portal!" Eikhus cried, shooting a spray of mist at the center of the display, "Only twelve thousand kilometers from HD5927!"

"No, not that." Spud pointed at the lower end of the screen. "Down here, approaching us. See this flux?"

It was barely visible, but definitely there—and coming at us very, very fast. "Fusion Torpedo!" shouted Matshi. "Eikhus, evasive!"

Eikhus immediately amped the nav and pitched our ship violently to one side and on a new course, speeding away from the missile as fast as possible. Unfortunately, his efforts were unproductive, as the bomb seemed to duplicate our every move, all the while nearing closer and closer. My cohorts' suspicions were right. Benedict was not going to let us get away alive!

"Shields!" Matshi ordered, as he pulled up the Nautilus' weapons console and started running his fingers over the holo.

Setsei continued to monitor the torpedo's progress. "Three thousand kilometers to impact."

Matshi shouted, "Firing torpedoes with track!" We heard the grinding sound of the Nautilus' weapons launching mechanism under our feet.

"Missed," Spud said without visible emotion.

"Two thousand kilometers to impact," Suthsi advised tremulously. "Try again?"

"Wide scatter blast, now!" Matshi fired another round of homing torpedoes.

"Benedict's ship!" I pointed at the center of the scanning holo. "It's almost at the portal!"

"Missed again," Spud declared to Matshi's frustration.

"One thousand kilometers to impact," Setsei chimed in once more.

"Better hope our shields hold," Sarion didn't joke. "Don't hold your breath." Matshi shot off another sequence of lasers and torpedoes—in vain.

"Eight hundred kilometers, seven hundred kilometers ...," Suthsi continued to count softly.

Desperate to avoid listening to the countdown to our looming demise, I watched as Benedict's craft stopped at the edge of the portal. A thin cloud smoothly seeped out of the planet and soon blanketed the entire sphere. The Somalderis, Nephil Stratum!

Our holo showed that, within seconds, her color transformed from its downy white to a luminescent golden yellow as she channeled solar energy and cosmic rays to Benedict's planet-ship for the voyage.

"Three hundred kilometers, two hundred kilometers to impact ...," Suthsi intoned.

"Prepare for impact," Matshi yelled.

We took our Catascope 101 APPs (Avoidance Preparation Procedures) and implemented them immediately. There was little chance we could survive a fusion bomb, but—

The flash of light was blinding and our ship rocked violently. All our screens went blank for a few moments. Fortunately, the shock waves from the bomb must have dissipated in the vacuum of space before impacting our ship, and the rocking eased quickly, under Eikhus' expert nav control. We were all, to our immense relief, alive and uninjured. But when the screen displays flickered on again, we saw that Benedict's planet-ship had disappeared! The starfield we'd been viewing was now deserted—with no sign of Nephil Stratum, HD5924, or of the portal, anymore.

"What happened?" I asked, shaken.

Eikhus shook his head. "I don't have a clue ..."

Matshi was subdued. "*We* should be the ones who... vanished."

"Detritus near the portal?" pressed Spud anxiously. Remnants from Benedict's ship might give us an indication of their fate.

"I'm checking," Eikhus responded, his fingers moving from holo to holo. In a few minutes, he shook his head. "Nothing."

"Did they transition ... or explode?" Suthsi asked quietly.

Eikhus sighed as he continued to search his holos. "I don't know," the Kharybdian responded. "One way or another, they're gone."

• • •

Setsei had finished a Geryon sweep of our ship, and, to our relief, found no significant external or internal damage. Eikhus followed with a scan of our perimeter, and identified scattered fragments of the detonated fusion bomb—the bomb that should've scattered *us* into fragments. Further checks on our vessel, however, showed we didn't even have a tiny scratch.

"Hello!"

We all turned to look at Spud, who was diligently focused on his holo screen.

"There is a comm module among the local bomb debris," he explained. "I shall tractor it in."

"Could be a trap," Matshi warned, pulling out his stun gun. "Guns at the ready," he commanded in true Zygint form.

As we Ergaled our stun guns and aimed them at the expected M-fan site of the comm module, Spud scanned the small silver sphere and then Ergaled it on board and up to the bridge. The module was a bit larger than standard Zygan models, about the size of a Terran watermelon, and was covered with lettering that resembled the writing we had seen on the comm equipment on Benedict's ship. From M82 or 81?

Setsei cautiously approached it, his Geryon ready, and ran a Geryon scan as we held our breaths. The Ytran finally nodded, and said with little confidence, "Activate."

Our fingers on our triggers, we watched the module emit a low-pitched buzz and then a holo, which rapidly coalesced into the shape of a hulky, furry Ursan.

"Agriarctos!" I cried. "Where are you?"

The Ursan looked around and smiled. "That's classified. Glad to see you all made it."

"We almost didn't," I chided.

Spud snorted. "*You* fixed the bomb so it would explode just before it hit us."

“Sorry about that,” Agriarctos shrugged. “I had to cut it close so Benedict would think he actually blew up your ship. I couldn’t be sure that otherwise he wouldn’t try again.”

“Thanks,” I added, puzzled. “Mind if I ask *why* were you trying to save us?”

“That’s classified,” the Ursan repeated with a grin.

“I believe I know why,” Spud put up his hand. “Setsei, Geryon the holo, please.”

Setsei strode over and ran his Geryon over the image from head to toe.

I stood with my mouth agape. As Setsei ran his weapon over the Ursan’s holo image, the long snout of Agriarctos morphed for a brief moment into a very familiar face. Ward Burton! Wart!

Wart must have been coming us from far away, as Setsei’s Geryon couldn’t maintain the change, and the holo image soon reverted back to its furry Ursan form. No wonder Agriarctos had been able to act as Spud so perfectly when we’d partnered on Benedict’s quest. He’d spent a great deal of time with us over the past year at Earth Core and gotten to know us well.

“Very clever, Spud,” the Ursan nodded. “Let’s keep it our little secret, okay? The walls at Central have ears, and they’re not all on His Highness’ head.”

I walked over and faced Agriarctos/Wart. “Are you coming back with us?”

He shook his head. “Not right now. Not right away. But you kids don’t need me anymore either. Earth’ll do fine in your hands.”

I sighed and nodded, my voice cracking. “Well, I sure needed you, and thank you, again.”

Wart as Agriarctos saluted with a bulky hand and waved as his holo started to dissolve. I’m not sure if it was an artifact of the communication, but, for a moment, I thought I saw the flash of a gold ring on the pseudo-Ursan’s finger.

I felt my right hand rise up and return the wave until Agriarctos’s image had completely disappeared.

Chapter 24

Apantisis

Mikkin, Zyga—present day

Debriefs at Zygint Central had taken hours. I think we had all sat with three quarters of the senior admin by the time we were done. Thank heavens for time loops, or I would've finished an old lady of, say, twenty-five.

Just as I was finally ready to leave for my much awaited return home, Juan came up to me and asked me to follow him. My heart stopped when I saw he was leading me down the hall once again to the Omega Archon's suite.

Juan paused outside of His Highness' door and gestured for me to go in. I gave him an insincere smile and stolidly entered the room, taking my usual seat on the edge of the uncomfortable contemporary sofa.

A door on the other side of the room whisked open and the Omega Archon entered, this time dressed in a polo shirt and khaki pants. I stood up and resisted the urge to ask him if I was interrupting his golf game. He took a chair opposite my seat and waved for me to sit back down. Then, smiling, he observed me for a few moments.

In complete silence. I was getting more nervous by the minute. Say something, will you?

“Do you believe that the end justifies the means?” he finally asked.

Was that a trick question? “Uh ...,” I stammered.

“It's not a trick question. Just answer.”

“Sometimes,” I said hesitantly.

His eyes narrowed for a moment, then he smiled once again. “So do I—sometimes.”

My eyes widened. That was an admission I didn't expect. “Is that why you didn't go after Benedict?”

“That was your job,” the Omega Archon pointed out.

“Well, he's out of your way,” I stammered. “And he might be dead.”

“That was not the outcome I'd hoped for,” he responded ambiguously. After a short pause, he folded his hands together and gazed intently at me. “But that is not why you are here. Your list of violations is extensive. First, unauthorized entry into the RAM—”

“Wait a minute!” I protested. “I never went into the RAM! *She* did. And she”—I choked—“died.”

I felt myself being scanned once again. His Highness bestowed me with a trace of a smile. “I will accept your point. And your means. But, remember, Rush, as a principle, legal and ethical are not always the same.

“Look,” I countered, “‘the end’ in this situation was saving the lives of my friends. For me, that *was* an ethical choice.”

His smile broadened, only to disappear when I asked my next question. “*She* yelled something to me just before she died. ‘Find out about Stacy!’ Who's Stacy?”

The Omega Archon studied me with a sad expression and said gently, “There are many branes, some accessible to you, and some not. Her brane is not accessible.” Or did he mean ‘brain’?

“You're not going to give me an answer?”

“I have.” He remained impassive.

I sighed. “Well then, I guess we’re done here.”

“Not quite.” My stomach turned. “Even without RAM entry, you still have quite the long list of violations,” he continued as he started enumerating the sequence of policy numbers I’d run afoul of to my numbed ears.

It was clear I wasn’t going to get out of here scot-free. I flashed for a moment, with a pang of regret, on Nephil Stratum. Despite her subsequent treachery, I would always be grateful that she had sent me to Th’Alia for training. Tlyp’ath had helped me survive Gary’s torture. Perhaps it would also keep me from suffering through the Omega Archon’s flames.

“So,” he finally concluded, “your sentence is one year.” One year?! One year in Hell! I gasped, “This is the thanks—”

The Omega Archon rose up and I instantly regretted my outburst—until I observed he was smiling, his eyes actually twinkling as he headed for his door.

“You will pretend that justice is served. And I will pretend that you do not know tlyp’ath.”

• • •

The Ifestian technique *was* extremely effective. Rather than the overwhelming agony I had experienced during my previous penalties, I was able, using my tlyp’ath skills, to emotionally pull myself out of the flames of Hell and the time loop, and see myself actually sitting comfortably on the sofa, watching the minutes ticking by on the suite’s clock.

Though I was relieved on the one hand that I had learned how to escape Hell, I was also frustrated that His Highness had clearly avoided answering my questions. There was still much I didn’t know—and didn’t know how to learn. For a few moments, I actually felt like my brother John, who had always raged when his questions went unanswered. If my dream in Benedict’s cell held a grain of truth, maybe John had chosen to travel to another dimension because he’d been desperate for answers, too, and our dimension, our brane, seemed to have few or none. Because “nothing” wasn’t an acceptable answer. Not for him, and not for me.

My time-out finished quickly. The hour passed before I knew it and the door of my suite opened to release me to the hallway with a soft chime. I looked at the door from which the Omega Archon had entered on the opposite side of the room, and promised myself that one day I would walk out of this room through that other door. The door to the answers. To what was beyond.

Energized, I made my way over to Zygint Central Comm, where I found Spud fixated on a holo montage.

“It worked,” I said happily. “The tlyp’ath.”

When he didn’t respond, I started massaging his stiff shoulders, whispering, “Okay. Something’s on your mind.”

He didn’t look at me. “Brilliant deduction.” “What up?”

“I have gone over and over it. I cannot find any ripple in the timeline. Earth history remains unchanged.” He ran his fingers over the holo, and the scene before us changed to reveal a somewhat older, fully-bearded Yeshua preaching to a large crowd along a mountainside.

“That’s good.” I paused. “Isn’t it ...?”

“Perhaps. But, knowing what we now know, I don’t understand how, or why ...”
Spud paused, turned around, and faced me. “Feel like a ride?”

“If it’s looking for answers, always. Let’s go,” I smiled.

• • •

Phoenicia—two thousand years ago

I wasn’t surprised to see us M-fan outside Sidon. Spud had chosen our contact metrics from data on one of the holos he’d been scanning. Our calendar read 3779. It was in fact only a few relative months after our last visit, Phoenician time.

We landed invisibly in the desert, Ergaled into our familiar costumes as Akbar and Danel, and micro’ed our ship into the folds of our robes, before setting out for the hike to the Phoenician burg. Look out, Sidon, the boys are back in town.

Autumn in Phoenicia was definitely more pleasant than summer. The temperature was a comfortable eighty-two degrees, though I know Spud still would’ve preferred a climate in the high fifties. Nevertheless, we found our steps were a lot more energetic, and we even jogged for a few stretches on the path towards the city.

Lost in the rhythm of my pace, I had run ahead of Spud without noticing. I stopped and saw him far behind me, standing outside the temple where we had met the old Keeper on our first trip. What was it called? Es-man ...Esh-Eshmoun. Spud waited for me to trot back and then led me through the gate to the entrance.

Right after Spud knocked, the Keeper opened the door and greeted us with a smile. “Welcome, Akbar and Danel,” he said in Phoenician. “How come you to cross our path again?”

“Inductive reasoning,” responded Spud. In the Queen’s English, to my shock.

The Keeper’s eyes twinkled and he let out a warm chuckle. I looked at Spud, flabbergasted.

“Well done ... Akbar,” the Keeper replied, echoing Spud’s Eton-bred accent. He opened the door more widely and waved us into a cool stone foyer inside the temple. “Please, enter.”

“He is here,” Spud said, his tone having the hint of a question.

The Keeper nodded. “Yeshua,” he called out in Aramaic, “would you come to greet our guests for a moment, please.”

The young Yeshua we remembered, looking healthy and fit, appeared from a room beyond, holding a scroll in his hands. My jaw dropped. Over the young man’s shoulders was draped what looked like a ram’s pelt whose fluffy down shone with shimmering streaks of gold.

“The greeting in their language,” the Keeper said to the youth, “is ‘hello’.”

Yeshua nodded, and, with some effort, repeated the word ‘hello’ to us both.

“Thank you, Yeshua,” the Keeper continued in Aramaic, “you may return to your studies.” As the youth disappeared, the old man turned to us and added, again in English, “He will be safe here until it is time.”

“Who are you?” I blurted out in my natural voice.

“Simply a Keeper, Shiloh. I watch over my world and repair that which is broken.”

I stumbled, mesmerized, “W-well, you certainly were ours.”

Spud nodded. “Our *deus ex machina*.”^[31]

The old man smiled again. “Et machina est universa.”^[32]

Spud grinned. “Veritas.”

I was a little slow on the uptake. Especially in Latin. A God out of ... the Universe?
“Y-you’re a god?”

“No, Shiloh, there are no gods. I am simply ... a friend.”

The Keeper then extended a hand in the Phoenician gesture of friendship. His gold ring flashed in the sun again, and this time I was able to see the pattern on its face. A sunflower in full bloom.

We responded in kind, and then, waving, we walked off up the path once again, where, less than a month ago, we had trod with trepidation. Once out of sight, I turned to Spud, shaking my head.

“Who—or what—is he?”

Spud shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe,” he paused, and then added with a smile, “maybe he’s ... a temporal vector shield.”

I jabbed him in the arm, and, laughing, he ran off sprinting towards our landing site. I gave good chase, and, as always, we arrived in a tie. Well, almost. He was a second or two ahead of me, as always. Except, when, as always, I was a second or two ahead of him. It gave us something other than opera to argue about during the trip home.

Chapter 25

Home

Hollywood—present day

The surfers had come back to my beach again, and the waves were really sick. That means good in surfer slang. I'd M-fanned back to Malibu for a few hours to check my messages, pack a few things, and close up the house until the end of hiatus. We got the word this morning: we'd been renewed and season two shooting was due to begin in late August. Our producer had left me a message that the Singularity Channel had ordered another thirteen episodes of *Bulwark* for next fall. If the ratings stayed up, there was even a chance they'd go with a full twenty-two for the season. Tara Guard and Larry Sioux would have another chance to defeat the dastardly villain Mordmort after all.

My agent had also called to let me know they'd finally cast the movie about the girl with disabilities—unfortunately, without me. Meryl Streep's daughter got the job. Gosh, you'd think playing Tara Guard would have made me a shoo-in, IMHO. Seriously, my agent did offer me a Disney film instead, and said I'd only have to be the shaggy dog for the middle of the picture. I told him to send the script to Kris. I'm not turning into an animal again. On the other hand, I do have a friend named Matshi who doesn't mind doing that once in a while...

Matshi's promised he'll comm me when he returns from M81. He, Sarion, and Sarion's mates decided to go for a joyride through non-Zygfed space for a few months. I figure it'll be a while before they run out of new places to explore and things to do—and maybe they'll tell me about some of their adventures when they come back.

Eikhus and the Nautilus made their way safely back to the Kharybdian Enclave after dropping Setsei and Suthsi off in Madai. The Ytrans have surprised us all by deciding to enroll in classes at Daralfanoon University where they plan to study cosmocriminology, and, yes, hone their fighting skills.

Eikhus himself has decided to channel his own fighting skills towards the battle against death. He has only one more year of nanobiotech training before he can begin an apprenticeship in anastasis, which he hopes to do at Nejinsen. Meanwhile, Nerea has asked Eikhus to officiate at her merging ceremony in June. Spud and I are looking forward to seeing her and her other two tributaries join currents to create little creeks or, as Sarion joked, pro-creek-ate.

And Spud? Well, he's still playing those screeching operas during our routine duty patrols in our own Solar System. Though I'm happy to report that Spud's transmitting an super-high note from an awful aria at an enormous, out-of-control Humboldt vessel yesterday caused the massive renegade ship to break up harmlessly in Earth's atmosphere, before it could crash land and turn Europe into a giant impact crater.

Off duty, Spud heads back to Europe himself for a couple of months, spending weekends tending to his mother's estate in France, and weekdays in those intimidating British public schools. Anything to get time away, he insists, from Everett Weaver's insipid leadership of Earth Core.

As for me, after waving "buh-bye" to the paparazzi, I pulled the window shades down, locked the doors of my Malibu bungalow, and set the alarm. The marine layer was

creeping in and I didn't bother to wait to see my world turn gray. I M-fanned to Maryland, where late spring on the farm is a lush garden warmed by bright sunshine, my very own Eden. My plan was to camp out for several months between Zygint duty shifts in my true home in the Appalachians until, if we were renewed, filming would begin again on *Bulwark*.

I couldn't avoid wondering what had happened to the souls we had left behind on HD5924. Were they successful immigrants to another dimension where the fruits of knowledge were ripe for their picking? Had they died during transport, and transitioned en masse to Level 3? Or had they, like the John in my brother's story, left the planet—the universe—Icarus for the vacuum of nothingness, from which no one had ever returned? I would also have to take a few weeks this summer to return to Zyga and try to uncover the secrets behind Project Helios and my brother's...death.

The whole family was sitting around the dinner table when I arrived back East. I took one of the two empty chairs, sitting between Andi and Blair, to join everyone in a hearty meal of vegetable stew. We had a lot to catch up on. George had passed his bar exam, Connie had gotten engaged, Kris had won a music award in Vegas, and Billy's Little League team was in the semi-finals. It was wonderful to all be together again. Almost. My eyes tried not to wander to the only unfilled seat, where with each glance I'd hoped to see John's tall frame and his friendly face. I ended up repeatedly disappointed, seeing... nothing.

Nothing. Was that John's fate, as he had written in his story? Or had his driving passion led him to write another ending for himself, in a world beyond our own? A world forbidden to everyone except foolhardy villains and beings who yearn to fly.

Kris was nattering on about plans for her new CD, and I politely tried to turn my attention back to the rest of my family. And then I saw it, just a blur in the corner of my eye, in the empty seat I was desperate to avoid. The silver water pitcher in front of me taunted me with a reflected view. I looked, and gasped. John!

Ghostlike and transparent, emaciated, his eyes sunken and dull. His expression was a silent pleading that grew more intense as he faded slowly from my sight. I turned to look directly at his chair. It was, as before, empty.

"Okay, maybe that wasn't the best title, but it's hot!" Kris said accusingly, in response to my gasp.

Shaken, it took me a minute to process her remark, and I responded with a wan, "I hear you." I scanned the faces of my siblings. Some were looking at me with a bit of concern, but none seemed to be reacting as if they too had seen my momentary vision. I took a deep breath, smiled at Kris and then the others, and added, "Hot sells. Go for it."

And filled my mouth with a convenient spoonful of vegetable stew.

Had I simply imagined I'd just seen John? From another brane? Desperate? Alive? I'd come home to Maryland to be with my family and catch my breath, but perhaps there was another family member that I needed to seek out. One who needed my help. Right away.

We had waited for John for so long. *I* had waited... But what if John was wrong, and 'patience is not always the champion's best tool'?

Pleading fatigue, I excused myself from the table and ran up to my bedroom, my fingers reaching for my Ergan. First stop, London. To pick up Spud, who I needed by my side. Then...

I closed the door, pulled my Ergal out of my pocket, and activated it. Maybe, just maybe, a Rush's best tool is... action.

The emprise continues!

Endnotes

Getting to Know Zygfed

[1] A primitive satellite sent into space by the Soviet Union (a Russian empire) in 1957 that launched the space race between the Soviets and the United States, as well as the very first lame techno song.

[2] They try to get you with the classic paradox: You go back in time and keep your parents from meeting, therefore you can't be born; but if you can't be born, you can't go back in time and keep your parents from meeting; so you are born, and you go back in time, and so on. This is a straw man, peeps. Just stay away from your parents and you'll be fine. Good advice for all teenagers, come to think of it.

[3] A tax auditor works this way: You make a teeny tiny mistake on your math homework. The math teacher makes you do the homework over, takes your allowance for the next five years, *and* he confiscates your iPod and your X-box. Evil, I tell you.

[4] Watchful Heuristic Operation. In other words, they check our IDs.

[5] Neuronal Deoxyribonucleic Acid. (Say that tongue twister five times really fast!)

[6] Okay, here's the joke. It's as old as Homer himself, I think. They say that Homer was a penname, a fake name used by the real "writer" of the epic poems "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey." But, Zygan history students learn the truth; the poems were really written by William Shakespeare.

[7] A cubit is a primitive measure based on the distance between the hand and the elbow as opposed to, say, a foot, which is based on ... a foot.

[8] An undocumented immigrant.

[9] Ergal shields are localized impenetrable force fields; smaller versions of the shield around Earth Core. We'd learned how to install and uninstall them in our Advanced Ergal Thermodynamics lab during our last month at Mingferplatoi Academy.

[10] Kind of like a wireless Internet audio stream with only a few accessible Web sites. So, a whole family would have to sit around a box—together!—and listen to "shows," which sometimes lasted a *whole hour*—yawn! Life was rough in your great-grandparents' day...

[11] Krøneckör is the largest city on Delta II and the financial center of the Delta planets in M82, an adjacent galaxy. Or so I've been told. Zygint discourages its agents from visiting bacchanalian planets outside Zygfed borders, especially if the agents are under eighteen.

[12] Large sharp-clawed feline creatures the size of a small human. They are found throughout the universe, most commonly in roller derby arenas and suburban high school in-crowds.

[13] A Madai septic word.

[14] Ethnic populations on the planet Chronos.

- [15] Terrans can't pronounce it.
- [16] First introduced to Earth by Hymenoptera from the planet Zom.
- [17] Spud explained this phrase to me later. It refers to Don Quixote's fruitless quest, where he mistakes a windmill for a giant and tries to joust with the structure. It's basically pursuing something futile. Heck, it sounds like Quixote should've pursued a good optometrist. I mean, giants and windmills look nothing alike, except on the planet Anemomylos where the windmills are five storeys tall and alive.
- [18] Because the art was so ugly, I couldn't see any other reason for hanging it.
- [19] Actually, it isn't a joke. That's what they really say in Greece.
- [20] I'll explain later. If you can't wait—just check out John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.
- [21] Her Kharybdian name was, as close as I can pronounce it, Shfrsh. I named her the Nautilus because she looked like the Nautilus. No, not the cigar-shaped submarine in the Jules Verne story—the logarithmic spiral of the cephalopod. Really a cool ship. I did tease Eikhus once though and called him Captain Nemo. It took me a week to dry off completely...
- [22] A civilized Zygan war tool. Rather than killing the enemy, you basically erase and then re-boot their brains.
- [23] Twelve days in a week and thirty-six hours in a day, of course.
- [24] Bellatrix's fifth planet.
- [25] A small shuttle that can make it to Zyga on autopilot. Or, as Sarion called it, a Trojan hearse.
- [26] When you're smalling, the whole world doesn't small with you. So, Ergaling helps you cross what are now long distances for people as tiny as we were.
- [27] A Megaran fighting move that you don't want to be on the receiving end of. It hurts like hell, literally.
- [28] Or rather, I must've continued to micro until I was one fourth its size.
- [29] Which reminds me of the old limerick: There was a young lady named Bright, whose speed was much faster than light, she set off one day, in a relative way, and returned on the previous night. Don't blame me—I warned you it was old.
- [30] The word means "Charge!" Now!
- [31] God out of a box. Literally, God out of a machine, but in ancient Greece and Rome, a box was about as complex a machine as you could get. It was lowered onto the stage and contained the image of a God, who served to rescue the protagonist, or the plot, from destruction.
- [32] And the machine is the universe...
- [33] Catch our reruns on the Singularity Channel, Fridays at 10 pm, 9 Central, or streaming at SingularityTV.com. Season 2 starts in October! We hope!
- [34] You'd never guess he was 138, Heron said.

[35] The German mathematician who co-discovered the Möbius strip, a half-twisted paper strip whose ends are joined together to make a loop with one infinite surface. Zygapedia has another citation for Johann Listing as the strip's other genius inventor. Personally, I would've called it the Listing strip—it took me half an hour to find the umlaut for Möbius in the Help Menu.

[36] We sure dodged a bullet. The farmer who saw the crushed wheat on his acreage the next morning called it an alien crop circle. Imagine if people had actually believed him!

[37] I thought he'd said, "go get 'em".