

Redemption
Book 2

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

REDEMPTION

The Zygan Emprise

Book 2

Pity the man imprisoned in his own mind. It is the cage from which he can never escape, except, of course, by death. And if death were to run from his arms, taunting him from an unreachable distance, man's thoughts would fade into the ether, trees falling in the woods that no one can hear.

Except the Ursans.

—Lester Samuel Moore

Chapter 1

Galaxy Quest

Where time and place are meaningless

The gaunt young man looked up at his tormentors and opened his mouth to scream. Only a whimper escaped his cyan lips before he collapsed unconscious onto the spongy surface of the pediment under his shackled feet.

“Death will come quickly,” the empyrean woman declared to her companion as she tapped the youth’s head with the point of her shoe. “He was a fool.”

The elderly man blinked back tears. Allowing himself one last glance at the prone victim, he began his transformation—reborn as a transparent liquid which oozed into the gaps in the porous ground and disappeared. The woman, too, was melting into the permeable layer on which the body lay. Within seconds, the cushioned layer itself had fully dissolved, and once again the young man lay silent and surrounded by infinite emptiness. Alone.

• • •

Great Britain, 1871

“What happened? What’s the rush?” I whispered as I caught up to the panting first-former in a too-tight tuxedo who was running down the stone path to Eton College Chapel. Several other long-legged teenage boys sped by us, black gowns flapping, and we upped our pace to keep up with the crowd.

“An execution.” There was a disturbing hint of excitement in my “classmate’s” voice. “A rip for Neville Minor. Hurry, Rush, or we shall miss it.”

I suppressed a shiver under my own black robes. Execution? In high school? These British boarding schools were worse than I thought. I’d uploaded enough Dickens before time looping back to the past to know that 19th century London wasn’t exactly a Beverly Hills spa, but murdering teenagers in British boarding schools hadn’t come up in any background files. What possible crime could this Neville kid have committed to deserve death? Even the Zygan Federation’s ruler, the Omega Archon, had never imposed the death penalty on its worst criminals and terrorists. Much less on push-the-limits teens like me.

I brushed my fingers through my blonde windblown curls. I wasn’t used to having hair down to my collar, Shiloh Rush’s trademark was a spiky short haircut in a modern punk style. Funny, disguised as a clean-shaven 13-year-old boy on this—ahem, unauthorized—time loop, I actually had longer locks than I sport playing teen space cadet Tara Guard on our TV show *Bulwark*.^[33]

“Cap the beaks or you shall get swished as well,” my jogging partner—Richards, I think he’d said his name was—buzzed. “We’re the last of the tugs.”

Flipping up my tails, I reached a hand in the back pocket of my trousers and felt for my Ergal. Anamorphed into the shape of an antique stopwatch, the Zygan all-in-one tool had not only transported me back to 19th century Britain, but was supposed to translate foreign words directly and silently into my brain. I’d set it for England and the correct

date, but still didn't have a clue what Richards was saying. Eton had a language of its own.

We arrived at an open clearing and clambered over some large granite blocks to get a better view of the arena before us. In the center of the muddy courtyard below was a wooden box shaped like a stepstool. On it knelt a boy no older than my 12-year-old brother Billy looking ashen and terrified as he was being held down by two muscular sixth-formers. I scanned the yard, but saw no sign of a guillotine, gallows, or the executioner's axe. Good. There might still be time to save Neville's life.

I couldn't help but flash to my own "school days" a couple of years ago at the Mingferplatoi Academy as a Zygan Intelligence trainee. Zygan Intelligence catascopes, agents, were expressly forbidden by our kingdom, the Zygan Federation, to interfere in local cultures. "Observe and Preserve" had been our mantra as cadets. But there was no way I was going to stand by and watch a real-life horror film play out for this crew of lusty adolescent voyeurs. I had to create a distraction of some sort that wouldn't violate Zygfed's strict rules, but *would* give the poor kid down there a shot at breaking away from his captors.

A loud murmur rose up from the audience as two gray-haired men decked in long black robes walked onto the grounds, the taller of the two carrying a bundle of branches tied together. I frowned. *They're not actually thinking of burning him to death with that kindling, are they?* If I was going to engineer a rescue, I'd better live up to my last name—*Rush*.

My eyes landed on a on an enormous elm whose leaves overhung the field. Were those black fuzzy spots among the foliage birds?

I pulled out my stopwatch Ergal and, after checking that the gazes of Richards and his classmates were intent on the arena's spectacle, I casually put the chain ring next to my right eye. Under the 20x magnification of its barely visible lens, I could easily see, perched on the tree limbs, yup, a flock of ebony ravens. I flashed on a quote from my uploads of Edgar Allan Poe. Were they an ill omen for poor Neville? If I could only act in time, nevermore.

Hiding my Ergal back under my robes, I picked up a two inch rock from the dirt and grass by my feet. Pressing the watch face with a secreted hand, I morphed the Ergal into a slingshot, pulled it out again, and, drawing on the skills I'd gained as a kid on our Maryland farm, shot the rock over Richards' head at the big tree.

Unfortunately, I never had developed very good aim with such a primitive weapon. Yes, I missed. The elm, that is. The rock arced up over the crowd and started its fall, landing directly between the shoulder blades of the tall man gripping the branches. Professor Gray-hair let out a piercing scream and threw the bundle up in the air, terrifying the ravens, which cawing and shrieking, swooped out of the tree en masse. The errant bundle of sticks bounced off the bald pate of the shorter of the two masters before splashing into a puddle, showering both men with splatters of mud.

The students' rumblings and laughter echoed across the field, giving me time to anamorph my Ergal back into a watch and join the chorus of "Neville, Neville" from the stands. Wouldn't do to get caught myself amidst this barbarism. I did manage an honest 'whoop' though, when, distracted by the circus, the older teens holding Neville finally released their grip. *There's your break, kid, take it.* To my amazement, pale and

shivering, Neville stood stiffly by their side. “Run, dammit,” I muttered under my breath. Would I actually have to go down there and rescue him?

I jumped up a foot when a strong, firm hand grabbed my shoulder from behind. My Zygan Intelligence training kicked in instinctively and I spun around, right arm extended, locking my fingers together to land a disabling karate chop on my attacker.

But a second strong, firm hand stopped my fingers an inch from their target, my fellow agent’s wiry neck.

“Spud!” I grunted, as both of his strong, firm hands pulled me away from the other students, and prodded me out of earshot towards a stone archway back down the path from whence we’d come. Though I wasn’t exactly short at almost 5’9, Spud towered over me by at least a few inches.

Turning to face me, his brown hair slicked back and his brows knitted over piercing gray eyes, William “Spud” Escott’s expression was as dark as his robe. “What in blazes do you think you’re doing?!”

“Trying to save Neville from the blazes,” I nodded towards the show. “They were going to execute him—I had to do something! What? What’s so funny?” Spud had uncharacteristically erupted with deep guffaws.

“Tisn’t *that* kind of an execution, Rush,” Spud finally returned, still chuckling. “Trust me, Neville is not about to die. Though his bottom may be a bit aflame for a few days after Hornby’s punitive handiwork with the birch.”

You mean—oh. *That’s* what those branches were for. Still, beating students—barbaric much?

Serious again, Spud added, “On the other hand, if the Omega Archon discovers you’ve been interfering...”

I raised a hand. Spud didn’t need to remind me how painful our own ruler’s sentences in Hell had been whenever I’d violated one of the gazillion Zygan Federation rules.

“And I have received no missive about an assignment. Why exactly are you here anyway?” Spud queried, eyeing my costume as a seventh-grader at the boys-only “public school” with obvious disdain. “Dressed like that.”

I met his gaze despite my wavering voice, “Just me. I came to find you.” A whisper. “I saw John.”

An eyebrow went up. “Your brother?”

I nodded, and recounted John’s spectral manifestation at our Maryland farm the evening before. At barely 18 years of age, our oldest brother John had stepped in to raise all of us after Grandpa Alexander passed away. We never expected that five years later, we’d lose John, too.

John had bid us good-bye for what we thought would be a short tour of duty in the US Army. A month later, he’d been officially reported missing in action. Gone for good.

That message didn’t sit well with me, so I launched a quest to find my lost brother which had led me to the gates of the Zygan Federation, a multi-planetary kingdom unknown to our relatively primitive Earth. I soon discovered that, at age sixteen, John had joined Zygfed’s universe-renowned Zygan Intelligence Agency as a catascope, an agent. Figuring I’d learn more about John’s secret life “from the inside”, I signed on the dotted line when I turned 16 to become a catascope as well.

I'd uncovered that John's graduate school research with subatomic energy particles at the University of Maryland's synchrotron had somehow tied in with a top secret Zygint mission called Project Helios. After months of diligent investigation, I stumbled on clues that John may have been working undercover on inter-dimensional transports along with the Zygan Federation's Public Enemy #1, Theodore Benedict. Unfortunately, I'd had no success in figuring out where my brother could be, or if he was even still alive. John's trail had grown cold.

Sharing a rowdy supper with my seven brothers and sisters last night, my eyes had wandered to the empty chair where, after three long years, we had almost stopped hoping he'd somehow magically be seated. For just a flash, reflected in our silver water pitcher, a cadaverous image of John appeared, his eyes pleading for help. By the time I'd taken a second look, he was gone. No one else had seen his ghastly, ghostly image, but I was certain that John was alive and reaching out to me from—from...?

Spud raised the other eyebrow. "And then?"

"That's it."

"An hallucination, certainly."

"No, Spud, it was real. It was John." I blinked to dam in the dampness. "He needs my—our help. I think he's trapped in another dimension, another brane." I paused, hesitating. "When Benedict had us locked in those jail cells on his planet-ship, I had a vision."

Spud's pale skin turned ashen. I assumed he was remembering the vision he'd had during that imprisonment, reliving the childhood tragedy that cruel Theodore Benedict had somehow unleashed from Spud's chest of repressed memories. The long-buried secret that Spud's mother had been murdered at the hands of his father.

"A dream," Spud whispered after a moment of silence. Louder: "I have concluded that they were merely dreams."

"Well, it sure as hell felt real. I saw John and Benedict just a few feet in front of me—and Wart."

After years as an honored hero of Zygfed, crack Zygan Intelligence agent Theodore Benedict had betrayed our kingdom and our ruler, the Omega Archon. Forced into exile, Benedict had become a terrorist, returning to our galaxies and launching a campaign to overthrow our king. His fellow catascope, Ward "Wart" Burton, who'd been our mentor when we'd joined Zygan Intelligence as newbies, had gone undercover in Benedict's guerilla ranks to try to foil the traitor's plans. I could only hope that John had been doing the same thing, playing a double agent seeming to cooperate with Benedict to gain his trust. I prayed that my beloved brother wasn't instead a misguided catascope who'd been "turned" by Benedict's villainous charm.

"I think John was one of Benedict's test pilots for the trip to another dimension," I explained. "He seemed to be wrapped in a Golden Fleece when he disappeared in that flash of energy and light. And, unlike the other 'test pilots' Benedict sacrificed, John wasn't blown back to our dimension."

Benedict and his minions had repeatedly attempted to transition—without success—to another brane for years during and after his exile. His previous cross-dimensional intrusions had thrown all his unlucky 'test pilots' back to our universe, most severely injured—or dead. But the Golden Fleece John was wearing, the Somalderis, might have been able to draw enough energy from our sun to fuel a successful inter-dimensional

crossing to a universe beyond ours. Perhaps even as far as the elusive Level 3, the heaven that Zygans were promised would be their final reward.

“With—” I choked on my former classmate’s name, “Nephil Stratum as his Somalderis, Benedict was able to travel to another dimension. That means there’s a good chance John made it, too. And if he did, he could’ve landed in enemy territory. What if he’s a prisoner?” I badgered Spud. “What if he was hurt? No way I’m standing by and letting him die. We have to mount a rescue.”

Spud leaned his lanky torso against a marble column and sighed. “My dear Shiloh, it pains me to temper your fervid disposition with logic. Our own universe, our brane, is nearly infinite in space and time. For the last two years, utilizing the vast resources of the Zygan Federation and Zygan Intelligence, mind you, you have had no success in finding your brother. If, as you so imply, John survived the transport and *is* in another brane, and if we *could* somehow succeed in travelling to that dimension alive ourselves, we would likely have neither the assets of Zygint, nor our Ergals to aid us in our quest. Our very own survival would be in grave doubt.”

“It’s crossed my mind,” I returned. “But we don’t have a choice. It’s like in that old adage. ‘I’ve been looking in the wrong place—our universe—just because—’” I did the quote gesture with my fingers—“‘the light’ here is better’. We’ve got to bite the bullet and search where it’s dark—in the other brane. Even if we do so without our allies or our tools.”

Spud offered a small wave in the direction of a group of black-robed students that strode by us heading towards the Chapel, then resumed stroking his chin. “Leaving for a moment the question of how we can find something if we can’t see it,” he whispered, “how do you propose that we travel to your universe without ‘the light’. As I recall, not only your brother, but even a keen terrorist like Theodore Benedict needed a Somalderis to succeed in such a trip. And the last Golden Fleece I have seen was draped over Yeshua Bar Maryam’s shoulders at the Temple of Eshmoun.” He opened his hands, palms up. “In ancient Phoenecia.”

“Exactly,” I said. “And, I’m sure Yeshua will let us borrow it for a day or two. After all, we’re not criminals fleeing this universe and trying to storm the gates of heaven like Benedict and his Andart guerillas. *We* plan to come back—with John.”

“I’m not entirely convinced Benedict— if he survived the trip to Paradise—may not be planning to return to our universe himself someday. Especially with the Omega Archon still reigning over Zygfed. But, despite your good intentions, I doubt Yeshua and the Keeper of the Temple are willing to take the chance that *we* might not return and lend us their Somalderis.”

“You never know until you try.” I insisted, feeling over my pocket for my Ergal. “I’m going back in time to the Temple of Eshmoun to find our young prophet and his mentor. Coming?” I added, my tone impatient.

Spud scanned the school grounds to ensure we were out of sight of probing eyes, but the crowd’s attention had once again focused on the spectacle in the arena, where poor Neville had just tasted the first fiery sting of the birch. I shivered again, remembering the agony of the Omega Archon’s hellish punishments when I had violated Zygfed’s rules, the figurative flames ‘burning me alive’.

Spud sighed and shook his head. “Yes, I shall join you. If only to keep you once again from the blazes of the Omega Archon’s Hell.” He grabbed my forearm and pulled

me behind him under the shade of a stone parapet. I slipped a hand inside my robe and found my Ergal.

• • •

Sidon, Phoenecia—two thousand years ago.

A wall of dust whipped up by the wind blinded us momentarily. As the gusts paused to inhale, we were able to make out the outline of the path we had taken a few months before towards the city of Sidon in ancient Phoenecia, circa the second decade ACE. “No temporal vector shield obviously,” I coughed, reaching out to find Spud’s hand. The force field had been installed by Zygint Central to protect young prophet Yeshua Bar Maryam from Benedict’s assassins. It should also have blocked us from breaking into Yeshua’s time and space. “Wow. I don’t know how, but we made it.”

Spud’s hoarse voice returned through the haze. “I expect Zygint Central was convinced that with Benedict’s successful departure from our universe, the Keeper of the Temple would be adequate protection for young Yeshua and the temporal vector shield would be no longer necessary.”

I felt a tug on my black robes. No need to change costumes into white togas with this weather. The sand was already bleaching our clothes.

“This way,” said Spud, “stay with me.”

“On your tail—your *tails*,” I teased, grabbing his penguin suit as, my free hand shielding my eyes, I followed him gingerly through the sandstorm.

Spud stopped us in front of a large stone gateway which heralded a stone path lined by juniper trees. Once sheltered slightly from the gale, I could make out the ancient temple up ahead, only a few steps away, and wondered if the Keeper would, as he did on our last visit, greet us warmly as we approached.

Our arrival seemed to go unnoticed this time, however. We climbed several steps onto the front landing and stood before the door. I looked at Spud, his black robes polka-dotted with flecks of beige sand, and shrugged. “Nobody’s home?”

I reached over and knocked on the door. Loudly. Again. And again. At last, I thought I heard the ‘clip-clop’ of wood sandals on stone on the other side of the portal. The door opened slowly with a squeal, and revealed a grey-haired scalp followed by a wizened face that peered back at us with a frown.

I nudged Spud who was much better at Phoenician than me, Ergal translating or not. “I am Akbar,” he began with less enthusiasm than I’d have expected, “and this is my brother Danel. We wish to speak with the Keeper.”

The old man gave us the once over before responding, “I am the Keeper.”

“No, no,” I interjected, lowering my register. “The other one. ‘Bout your height. With a beard.”

The frown didn’t disappear. “I know not of whom you speak. There is no other Keeper.”

“Then this isn’t the Temple of Eshmoun?” Even Spud wasn’t infallible.

“Yes, it is.” The door started to close.

“Wait,” I cried, “Yeshua. Yeshua Bar Maryam? Young, thin, black beard, student?”

Spud shook his head as the elder slammed the door shut. “It is futile. They, and the Somalderis, are gone.”

“Gone? Wait! Gone where?” My knocks, and then bangs, on the stolid door went unanswered. I plopped down on the steps in frustration; my eyes, stung by the wind, once again brimming with unshed tears.

“It is a mistake to theorize before one has all the facts,” was Spud’s only response as he set off back towards the gate.

• • •

Hollywood—present day

We M-fanned in the present—*my* present— looking like a pair of ragged exiles from Harry Potter’s Hogwarts. As we waited in the Hollywood garbage bin to enter Zygan Intelligence’s Earth Core Station, I could swear the guards from the planet Chiduri, disguised as rats by our feet, were snickering at us. Not quickly enough, the hidden door on the side of the bin opened to let us in to the deserted warehouse corridor, and out of range of their snarky squeaks.

“Empty handed. Now what do we do,” I said to Spud as we passed our WHO scan and entered the housekeeping closet/hidden elevator. I leaned against the wall, and, during the jarring descent to the Earth’s heart, closed my eyes to call back the sense memory of the inner peace I had felt with the soft touch of Nephil Stratum’s tendrils massaging my aching muscles, the soothing caresses that had eased my physical and psychic pain. But that inner peace had vanished—along with Nephil Stratum. The Syneph, a cloud-like being, had been the one classmate of ours at Mingferplatoi Academy I’d never have suspected would have betrayed us. Nephil Stratum’s awesome talents as a living Somalderis had allowed her to channel energy from a sun in galaxy M81 to Theodore Benedict’s planet ship, finally propelling him and his minions into that other dimension (John’s dimension?) far beyond our reach.

“Nephil Stratum is not the only Syneph in our universe,” Spud said softly, as the lift accelerated down towards Earth Core Station.

How did Spud always know what I was thinking? If we couldn’t get the Golden Fleece from Yeshua and the Keeper, yes, maybe we could talk another Syneph into being our booster rocket into John’s brane.

“You think Ev could get us a meeting with the Syneph ambassador?” After Gary’s death—and Wart’s “disappearance”, catascope Everett Weaver had become the new Chief of Earth Core, but he wasn’t exactly a power player millions of light years away on the Zygan Federation’s home planet of Zyga, where representatives from the thousands of Zygfed planets gathered to pompously rubber stamp the Omega Archon’s edicts. Even calling in markers wouldn’t guarantee us an audience with Syneph big-wigs; the cloud-like Synephs were a notoriously cryptic and cloistered Zygan Federation species. Their home world, a treacherous nebula-like sector at a distant edge of the Milky Way known as the Plegma, was off limits to most Zygans.

“Or, we could go to the Plegma ourselves,” I offered, as we stepped off the lift into the barren receiving room. I chose to ignore that few who had visited the nebula had ever returned.

Spud didn’t seem enthused.

“I’m in pretty good with the Gliesers,” I continued, referring to Zygfed’s maritime Border Patrol. “I know I could get us in.”

“Then they’d have to send a search party to rescue *us*,” Spud returned, squeezing shut his eyes and shaking his head as the NDNA screening scan washed over us both. Before I could respond, the room transformed into the plush reception suite of Earth Core Station, and Fydra’s welcoming open paws.

• • •

Zygan Intelligence Earth Core Station—present day

“Have you ever been to the Plegma, Ev?” I tried to sound casual, picking some lint off my sweater and jeans.

Everett Weaver’s chubby cheeks puffed out as he gagged on the large bite of club sandwich he had stuffed into his mouth. I handed him a bottle of water I’d Ergaled up back in the Costume Department, and waited politely while he cleared his throat and brushed the crumbs off of his wrinkled shirt and portly abdomen. “What’re you up to now, Rush?” he finally gasped, catching his wheezing breath.

I blinked my baby blues. Nice to be out of my Dickens dude costume and back to being femme again. “Nada. Just wonderin’.”

“No, I’m not going to give you permission to travel there, even if I could. Bad enough I’m ignoring the little unauthorized excursions to Berkshire and Phoenecia you just took.” He took a deep breath, adding in a higher pitch, “The Plegma? Are you out of your mind?”

Spud, now sporting a leather jacket, black turtleneck, and black trousers, joined us, nodding and rolling his eyes. *Thanks a lot, partner.*

I didn’t have to call on my acting skills to bring out the tears. My voice cracked. “Please, Ev. It’s for John.”

Ev had trained with John as a Zygan Intelligence cadet at Mingferplatoi Academy—surely they’d be brothers in arms and all. I saw Ev’s expression soften and a question bloom in his eyes. Good. “John...Rush? Your brother John Rush?”

“I saw him, Ev, and he needs my—our—help.” “Whoa.” Everett held up a hand. “He’s alive? Give me the whole story—and start at the beginning.”

“You know more about the beginning than I do.” Ev had already been assigned to Earth Core as an agent when John had disappeared, years before my and Spud’s time.

“No, I mean about my helping.”

The words poured from my lips. “Yesterday. I was home in Maryland, having supper, and I saw him. He was like a holo, not all there. Half alive. Half dead.” I took a shaky breath. “He was trying to tell me something. ‘Save me.’”

“Rush believes her brother is alive in another brane, perhaps a prisoner,” explained Spud. “She wants to find a Somalderis, a Golden Fleece, to channel enough solar energy to cross over to that dimension so she can go rescue him. Unfortunately, Yeshua Bar Maryam and the Keeper as well as their Somalderis are no longer... available.”

I expected Ev to whistle, or even to burst out laughing, but, to my surprise, he rested a hand on my shoulder, and sighed. “Just because Nephil Stratum helped Benedict transition doesn’t mean that other Synephs will—or can—serve as Somalderes, derises, whatever.” His brow furrowed. “You could end up empty-handed, and lost—forever—in the Plegma.”

“I have to do something!” I cried out, brushing him away. Didn’t either of them understand? Standing and waiting, my brother’s hallowed motto of “patience”, was no one’s best tool.

Ev patted my arm. “Okay, okay. I have an idea. I’ll do my best to set up a meeting for you on Zyga with the Syneph ambassador. You can explain the, uh, situation, and see if the ambassador can get you someone with the skills to channel the energy needed for a crossing. It’s not like all the Synephs can do that anyway. Your old classmate might have been...special.”

I looked away, my heart skipping a beat at the memory of Nephil Stratum. Yes, she was...

“Even if we recruited a Syneph who could facilitate the transition,” Spud interjected, “how would we know where to begin our search? Assuming that this parallel universe John may be in is as infinite as ours.”

“Ev, you still got the comm logs from Gary’s Messier Sportstar we used to escape Benedict’s planet ship, right?” I interrupted. “There’s something I remembered.”

The Chief of Earth Core nodded and ran his fingers across an adjacent holo screen to pull up the files.

I smiled at Spud. “I have an idea.”

“What’re you looking for?” asked Ev, curious, as I played my own fingers across the holo seeking a particular, very compelling, message.

“Ha,” I exulted as the grainy image of Agriarctos the Ursan, a hulky polar bear, came up lifesize on the screen. Fleeing Theodore Benedict’s planet ship, we’d gotten an interstellar missive from one of his guerillas sent just before their transport to the other dimension. Agriarctos turned out to be undercover Zygint agent Wart in disguise, who’d made sure that we’d escaped Benedict’s “Death Star” safely.

Spud inched closer. “’Tis the message Agriarctos— Wart—sent us just before Benedict disappeared into—”

“The other brane,” I finished. “Turns out I was right. Wart wasn’t only trying to give us a heads up about the fusion torpedo Benedict sent our way.”

Both Spud and Ev looked at me, puzzled. I smiled and nodded at the screen. Agriarctos’ furry holographic body seemed to be sprouting from a sparkling base, the core of the melon-shaped communications module. “Notice anything down there?” I pointed to the sparkles under the Ursan’s feet.

“Regular flashes, impulses, on-off, off-on, on-on—” Spud broke into a grin. “Why, ‘tis a digital code!”

“Exactly. We were a little too shaken by our close call with Benedict’s bomb to notice at the time.”

“Running analysis,” Ev shouted as his fingers danced next to the flashing lights. “Looks like contact metrics...at...got ‘em. Son-of-a-gun, Wart gave us a trace.” The translated signal was now readable as a series of multi-dimensional coordinates, for both a portal and a universe beyond.

I favored Ev with my warmest smile. “Make that call to the Syneph embassy, Boss. With my new Zoom Cruiser, Spud and I’ll be halfway to Zyga before you’re done.”

• • •

Planet Zyga, Andromeda Galaxy—present day

The journey to Zyga took less than the three hours we'd been used to only weeks before. With its upgraded hyperdrive system, my replacement ship was able to navigate through wormholes as well as curved space, cutting our voyage to Zygfed's home planet by a full hour. Spud had barely had time to peruse one of his dusty old monographs before we were entering Andromedan space.

Unlike most ambassadors to Zyga who chose to spend their leisure hours in the Enclaves that mimicked the comfort and familiarity of their home planets, the privacy-loving Syneph contingent preferred to hover over Zyga's Capital City of Mikkin in the rainbow-colored sky. Up in the Zygan stratosphere, visitors were unlikely to wander through or loiter in the clouds. Ev apparently did have some pull with Juan De La Cruz, his boss at Zygint Central, because Juan had arranged for me to meet Cirra Stratum in the private conference suite on the 53rd floor (base twelve, of course) of Zygint Central Headquarters. Spud eagerly accepted Juan's invitation to "navigate the nexus" or something equally nonsensical, abandoning me in my quest for the Syneph ambassador's merciful aid. Great. Thanks, Spud.

When I entered the suite, the Syneph ambassador greeted me politely with an extended tuft. Her cloudlike mist felt cold against my skin. Where was the warmth I'd always felt from Nephil Stratum when we'd physically connected?

Cirra Stratum's smoky tendrils reflected the afternoon light from Zyga's setting suns shining through the panoramic window. I envied the freedom she and the other Synephs had to coalesce into a cottony mass or disperse into streaks of haze. Did she have to take the elevator up here, as I did, or had she diffused directly into the conference room from the sky outside through the porous glass?

"How may I assist you, Shiloh Rush?" the ambassador asked as she pointed a tuft towards the empty room's only chair.

I shook my head. "Thanks, but I've been sitting for two hours on my ship. I'll just tell you about John."

As succinctly as I could, I related the story of my brother's work for Zygan Intelligence and his disappearance three years ago while he was working alongside the terrorist Theodore Benedict—undercover like Ward Burton, I insisted.

I told the ambassador about my painful discovery that my brother John had apparently partnered with Benedict in his unsuccessful quest to travel to a lost Eden in another brane with the help of a Golden Fleece to channel energy for the transport.

"He didn't return. And we've heard nothing since." I couldn't disguise my bitterness. "Before he left our universe, Benedict denied knowing where he was, but— someone," *thank you, Wart*, "has left us a trail of crumbs to follow."

"What is it that you wish from us?" Cirra Stratum's tone blew a wintry chill into the room.

I pursed my lips. "John himself never brought the Somalderis, the Golden Fleece, back to our brane. Otherwise Benedict wouldn't have had to," the words caught in my throat, "to brainwash a Syneph, Nephil Stratum, to serve as an energy conduit to fuel his own flight to 'paradise'".

"I am not unaware of those events," Cirra Stratum returned, "but my question still stands."

I explained my suspicion that Benedict's destination was the dimension holding my brother prisoner. Now, I—we—needed another Syneph's help to make the journey ourselves, to rescue John and bring Benedict back to Zygfed and to justice.

Cirra Stratum listened intently to my story without another comment, the color of her wisps remaining a frosty gray. Was she communicating to other Synephs with one of those internal crystals that Nephil Stratum had used to tap into Benedict's lair? Was she sorting through a list of possible candidates that could help us in our rescue mission?

I waited silently as she wafted about the suite, her tufts growing darker and darker as the minutes passed. I began to worry that maybe I shouldn't have mentioned Nephil Stratum's betrayal—

The gust seemed to carry an army of icicles piercing my skin with a biting frost that froze me where I stood. "No!" Cirra Stratum erupted as she showered me with a stinging blast of algid air.

Before I could respond, she had X-fanned, disappeared, from the conference suite in one frigid swoop and was gone.

Chapter 2

Gesundheit

I was still rubbing my frostbitten skin when I met Juan and Spud at Juan's office. Spud, Mr. Observant, took one look at my face and thankfully didn't say "I told you so." Juan smiled genially and pulled out a chair.

I shook my head. Additional elaboration wasn't necessary. "Thanks, Juan, but we'll be on our way. We've got a week off and I intend to spend it with my family." No need to mention that the family I was thinking of was John. I turned to Spud, "Want a ride?"

Spud's eyes narrowed. "Back to Earth?"

Dammit, Spud. I forced a smile, and quipped, "Where else?" before sliding out the door and heading towards the elevator. Once inside the lift, I hit the button for Ground and waited for the door to close. A firm, strong hand waved in front of the sensors, reopening the door, and letting in Spud.

"You know I didn't want Juan to know what I had in mind," I grumbled, in response to Spud's chuckle.

Spud pulled out his Ergal and tapped it. "Too late. Contact metrics and authorizations for the Plegma are set in here for the Zoom Cruiser's Nav Control. Juan knows you almost as well as I do."

I rolled my eyes. "Does that mean you are coming with me?"

Spud nodded. "And leave you alone in the Plegma? Disaster." Another chuckle. "For the Synephs."

Just before the elevator door opened, I punched him in the arm.

• • •

Zygan Federation Border Region—present day

"Greetings, Rush. Escott."

Captain Gil Pesci greeted us warmly on our comm screens from his Glieser ship as we neared the edge of the Lambda quadrant. The piscine species served as Zygfed's border guards, their shark-shaped vessels patrolling the edges of Andromeda and the Milky Way for unauthorized travelers from the galaxies beyond. Or was their duty really to keep Zygan Federation citizens trapped *inside* the Zygan territories? Very few Zygans had the means or authorization to venture far beyond the borders as Benedict—and I— had into galaxies like Triangulum or M82.

"I am," Pesci continued, "Astonished that Juan authorized this trip. You do know that the Plegma seems to swallow up most visitors—permanently."

"Thanks for the warning, Gil," I spoke into our comm screen. I've got a strong reason to want to make it out alive. We'll be back soon, I promise."

Captain Pesci saluted me with a fin and closed his feed. Our holos showed the Glieser ship changing course and turning away, leaving our coast clear.

I took a deep breath and glanced at Spud before cueing nav to proceed. Cirra Stratum may have said "no", but there had to be another Syneph in the Plegma that would be willing to help us, even in an unofficial capacity, to travel to John's brane. The Zoom Cruiser jerked forward and within seconds, our windscreens were filled with the colorful

fluorescence of the enormous nebula as the interior of our ship was plunged into darkness.

• • •

The Plegma—present day

“What the hell?” I shouted as I keyboarded instructions to turn on auxiliary power.

Spud’s face was lit only by the light from the nebula surrounding us. Irritation? Anger?

Our vessel’s systems refused to respond. No holos, no nav, no juice. Spud’s expression? Definitely anger.

We sped along by inertia, or was it a tractor beam? We actually seemed to be accelerating—I felt the weight of the Gs heavy on my chest now that our ship’s grav monitors couldn’t counteract the increasing forces. If we didn’t slow down soon, it’d be very hard for us to breathe.

I started to hear Spud wheezing in the jump seat next to mine. I’d warned him about those darn cigarettes. But, I wasn’t doing much better myself—each breath required all my muscle strength to move my ribs and diaphragm. Yet we continued to go faster and faster.

Just when the lightheadedness had enveloped my consciousness and I had reached what I feared was my last gasp, our ship tumbled to a rapid stop. Spud and I both were thrown forward from our seats, fortunately landing on top of the flexible input keys of our nav and comm holos. We lay on the keyboards panting, enjoying a few moments of luxurious oxygen exchange before either of us could speak.

“What a ride!” I croaked, as I, on alert, sat back in my chair and scanned the windscreens to see if I could make out any structures among the colorful clouds.

Spud’s tone as he began his checklist was all business. “Keep your stun gun handy. I expect a welcoming party that may be less than welcoming.”

He had barely finished his sentence when our ship’s lights came on, and we saw we were surrounded by our wispy hosts—*inside our vessel*. I didn’t bother with my stun gun. Actually, I couldn’t. Somehow, we’d been stunned immobile by the Synephs and couldn’t move any of our limbs. Their fog thickened around each of us, and I could no longer see Spud who should have been only a few feet away from me. I hoped.

In a few minutes, the fog started to disperse. Yay. Spud *was* sitting at my side. In a chair. A wooden, polished, fancy, plush chair.

“Louis Quatorze,” Spud said inexplicably as we gazed around a room that resembled a Victorian salon. The fireplace nearby crackled and sparked as the flames warmed our chilly feet. Misty, damp, and cold. Spud, you should feel right at home.

On the divan opposite our couch sat a small, pale, bespectacled man, whose white hairline had receded back to his occiput. He smiled at us with full, thick lips.

I returned the smile as I tried to move my legs and shift in my seat. Good, I was unstunned, unfrozen. Now to get to my Ergal.

“Welcome, travelers,” said the small man. Unusual accent. Couldn’t quite place it, but it almost sounded like it came from Earth.

“I am Mel,” the man continued. Definitely Earth. “Your liaison. I will arrange for your schema.”

Huh? I looked at Spud, whose brow had its “puzzled” furrow. Good. I hate being the only one confused.

“Hey, Mel,” I dived in, stalling, allowing my fingers to creep towards my pocket—where was my Ergal? “Thanks for the offer. What kind of a Syneph is a Schema?” Damn, they took our Ergals.

The little man seemed perplexed. “I don’t understand. A schema is not a Syneph. It is a Gestalt.” He pronounced the archaic word with a “sh” in the middle. German?

“It is your world. I will arrange it,” he insisted. “You will find everything you seek.” Mel waved an arm and the lights came on in the formal dining room beyond where we sat.

My jaw dropped. Twenty feet from me, sitting at a long, lavishly appointed table, vividly real, were my brothers and sisters. George, the law clerk, Connie, a student teacher, her engagement ring sparkling from a sunbeam, Andi, with her long flowing auburn locks, sketching the scene. Bobby and Billy, toggling handheld holos in a private video game match. Kris, eyeing her reflection in the casserole dish. Blair, facing me, deep in conversation with a massive man, whose gray-haired locks were bound in a—my God—Grandpa Alexander! Alive!

Seven years since I’d last seen his generous smile. Seven long years since his bulky arms had comforted me with sturdy hugs. When he’d passed away, the task of keeping us safe had fallen to John; and John’s wings, despite his best intentions, were much more fragile than Grandpa Alexander’s.

My eyes narrowed. Who was that woman with the red hair sitting next to Grandpa? She looked somehow familiar. Had I seen her before some—? Oh, my God! There, at the farthest end of the table was John! John! Looking healthy and strong, laughing and glowing as he always did when regaling us with tales of his latest adventures. John. Safe. Here!

I jumped onto my feet, once again unable to breathe. Could this be where John was imprisoned? In the Plegma? “John!” I cried as I launched forward.

And couldn’t move. The dining room plunged into darkness, and, instantly, my family was gone. I stood frozen, blinking back tears, until I heard the whispered “Maman” and turned to see Spud standing next to me, pale, jaw clenched, locking in a moan.

Mel chimed in brightly. “There now. You see. All is as it was—and as it could be. You will be king of a world entirely built of your paramount hopes and dreams. Shall I prepare your rooms?”

“You mean our Bastille,” Spud snorted, his voice hoarse. “You have shown us nothing but a fantasy. And fantasy sans reality is but a prison.”

“No, not a prison, Escott. Paradise.”

Spud shook his head. “Then your paradise is a prison. A cocoon that swaddles those without the courage to fly beyond its fetters. You may keep your luxuriant indentured servitude, Mel. I, for one, should rather ‘rule in Hell,’” he averred, grabbing my arm and pulling me towards the door behind us.

Mel stood up slowly, his voice weary. “And I should not be so sure that you are not doing so already.”

Before I could ask Spud what Mel’s remarks meant, Spud had run to the door and, after a moment’s hesitation, leapt off the doorjamb onto a fluffy cloud which hovered

conveniently below the floating suite. He gestured for me to follow. I took a quick look around. Aside from the room itself, where Mel was now standing, observing us with a curious mien, I could see nothing but the resplendent Plegma around us, bordered by scattered pink streaks below. Feeling naked without my Ergal, I decided to follow Spud's lead, and jumped.

The soft cloud, with us both riding bareback, sped away from the suite as soon as I'd landed. "I'm almost afraid to ask this question," I whispered to Spud, "but how are we breathing? Outside of that room up there?" I nodded at the receding box from which we'd fled.

"Oxygen-nitrogen environmental capsules surround you. They should be quite effective." The voice answering me wasn't Spud's.

"Who?" We both looked around.

"Me. Down here. Alto Stratum." The cloud we were riding on spoke again. "I've gotten an urgent message to get you two out of here. I'm taking you back to your ship. We have to hurry."

"Wait," I said. "From who?" "Whom," Spud had to interject.

"I know why you're here," Alto Stratum continued. "But none of us can help you. I mean with the transport to another brane thing."

"Cirra Stratum told you?"

"Not exactly. If she finds out where you are, well let's just say that all three of us will be molecularly dispersed into M81 space. Bad enough her protégé escaped her clutches."

"Protégé?" Spud interrupted again. "Nephil Stratum?"

"Here you go." Alto Stratum pointed a tuft at our Zoom Cruiser that had just appeared in the mist. "Climb inside and you'll find your Ergals. I'll swallow up the ship and tow you to the Plegma's border. After that, get out of Dodge. Fast."

"Wait," I repeated as we stepped off the cloud and into our vessel. "You didn't answer Spud's question."

Alto Stratum's wisps felt warm as he reached over to close our gull-wing doors. I heard "He knows the answer" as the doors clicked shut.

• • •

I hadn't expected the return trip to the Plegma's rim to be as heart-stopping as our tractor entry. I'm an experienced Zygan pilot, but it was nerve-wracking being a passive passenger while my dimly-lit ship, its nav holo dead in the water once again, was being steered by the cloud that fogged up all my windscreens. Well, at least the lack of scenery "outside" gave me time to think about Alto Stratum's comments.

My mind started racing faster than our ship. Who else might be in Alto Stratum's helpful "us"? Were he and Nephil Stratum part of some underground movement working against...against...who? Whom. Cirra Stratum? The Omega Archon? And, could Nephil Stratum actually have the ability to communicate from another brane with Synephs in the Plegma? Maybe. Wart, as Agriarctos, had sent us that comm module from Benedict's planet ship in the brane beyond, hadn't he? Nephil Stratum's communications skills far, far exceeded Wart's. If Nephil Stratum was contacting friends and allies to help us out, then perhaps she was playing Wart's game, undercover agent, rather than Benedict's, Zygfed traitor.

That thought gave me a warm burst of joy, quickly snuffed out by the aggressive worry that Cirra Stratum or that creepy Mel were behind all this theatre and had arranged to dispose of us in the depths of the Plegma. Whoever had put Alto Stratum up to “rescuing” us may instead be expecting us to be led blindly to our slaughter.

Spud must have been thinking the same thoughts, because we both reached for our Ergals at the same time. Sitting on the dashboard of the Zoom Cruiser, my Ergal was still in the form of a smart phone. I tapped on the black screen, and waited for access to the Zygan data banks. Nothing happened. My Ergal too was dead.

“Navigation.” Spud said as he shook his stopwatch-shaped Ergal. I heard him snort in disgust. Our Ergals didn’t even shine us a flicker of light. Were we trapped in an E- shield that drained all our power? Locked inside our drifting ship without any nav controls we were literally powerless to protect ourselves from attack or termination. Riding towards an unknown destination on the fumes of faith.

Then, darkness.

We must have both blacked out from the G forces as Alto Stratum ejected us from the Plegma. By the time I regained consciousness, the Zoom Cruiser’s control panels showed that power had been up for 4.37 minutes. And the border of the Milky Way was only 2.41 minutes ahead.

I put nav back on auto-pilot right after we cleared the Gliesers and sat back in my jump seat with a loud sigh. Once more, empty-handed. I muttered, “Curses, foiled again.”

“We are alive and free. That is a cause for gratitude.” Spud grunted as he stretched his long arms and legs.

“Not if you buy all that prison stuff that weird guy Mel and you were talking about. You’re the one studying literature and philosophy in that Gothic mausoleum of a high school. You think he meant to imply we’re really living in Hell?”

Spud didn’t answer immediately. “Many have likened our lives as analogous to Purgatory,” he finally began. “Others have written that heaven and hell exist on Earth— or are products of our fervent imagination.

Spud put his fingertips together and, leaning back in his seat, gazed out at the stars. “I prefer to ponder the wisdom in the Chinese proverb, that the only man unhappier than the man who has not been able to satisfy all his wants is the man who has.”

Huh. A little out of left field, Spud, but I think I see what you’re getting at. John’s been alive in my imagination for three years. If it isn’t real, it’s not enough.

Chapter 3

The Greatest Story Never Told

Zygan Federation Space—present day

I decided not to try Zygint Central again. Juan had already done all he could for us, and appealing higher up to the Omega Archon would be futile. Travel to another dimension wasn't legal in the Zygfed rulebook. Except for Level 3, of course, to which Zygons usually were transitioned after a lifespan of thousands of years (unless one was killed sooner in the line of duty as a Zygint catascope or Sentinel Corpsman). As suicide would bar one from Level 3 forever, I, just eighteen, had a long way to go before I'd be getting an invitation to Zyga's heaven. Knock wood.

But we were still back at square one. The clock was ticking and we were no closer to rescuing John. If I couldn't get a Syneph to act as a Somalderis and help us into another dimension, I had no choice but to find another Golden Fleece to do it. I wished myself luck. I'd drop off Spud at Eton and head to Earth Core and bury myself in the historical holo files in the Terran archives. Starting at A for Argonauts.

"You would do better to let me assist you in the search," Spud said as I leaned over to instruct nav to take us back to Victorian England. "Else you waste precious time seeking the mythical Jason."

"Bollocks." I tried not to admit he read me again. "Based on Wart's comment that he'd seen it in Colchis, John apparently had Jason's original Golden Fleece, anyway. It's probably the one he carried over to the other brane." And never brought back...

Spud leaned back in his jump seat and lit up a cigarette. "Which then leads me to wonder from whence Yeshua got *his* Somalderis. Perhaps there is only one Golden Fleece," he added, blowing rings at the Zoom Cruiser's roof with the smoke.

My frustration got the better of me. "Must you? Really?"

"It helps me think. Would you prefer I Ergal myself some nicotine gum?"

I rolled my eyes. "I can live with the death sticks. I'm talking about your theory. Its implications. With the Synephs out of the picture, if there's only one Golden Fleece, it means my only option to rescue John is to find Yeshua and get his Fleece." Through gritted teeth. "Which he or the old Keeper would then have to have somehow stolen from my brother."

"Not an illogical supposition, Rush. Which presents more questions than it answers." Spud tamped out the cigarette on the Zoom Cruiser's titanium door and X-fanned the stub with his Ergal. "The only way then to prove that there is more than one Fleece is to find a second."

"That could take forever. And Yeshua, too, could be anywhere. Maybe we should time loop while we search?" Time loops allowed time travelers to spend hours or days in the target century and return to the present right after leaving. We could hunt as long as we needed without delaying our rescue mission.

Spud favored me with two raised eyebrows. "Ev was kind enough not to play, as you Americans say, the stool pigeon about your unauthorized trips to draft me and Yeshua for your quest. I hardly think that you should expend your capital for time loop

authorizations until we have a clearer picture of where and when—and if—we can find a Somalderis. Agreed?”

I shrugged, but made it look like a nod. And kept my fingers crossed.

• • •

Earth Core Station—present day

The library suite at Earth Core was deserted when Spud and I entered. Spud took a seat before the bank of holo screens and instructed them to respond in search mode.

“As I recall from my previous research, sheepskins were very common in the Southern Black Sea and were used to capture flecks of gold.” Spud called up images of fishermen in the region. “The fleeces were stretched over wood frames and submerged in the water downstream, collecting the precious metal.”

Spud panned towards a bank of trees from which several sheepskins were hanging. “Hung out to dry, and then the gold would be combed out. Voila.” He pointed to a grizzled bronze-skinned treasure hunter who was shaking one of the fleeces to trap the shiny flakes.

“Looks promising. So I should ask Ev if we can go back to ancient Georgia?”

“Not yet. There is nothing here to suggest that these sheepskins would provide us with anything more than a warm coat—or the ability to at least barter for one.” Spud played his nimble fingers on the screen and the scene dissolved to display some Acropolis-style buildings.

“Athens? Rome?”

Spud shook his head. “Alexandria. See the Pharos, the lighthouse, in the distance? I shall try to track the *Argonautica* writings from Apollonius of Rhodes in the Great Library. It may lead us to the source of the original story.”

Great. That could take hours. I, and John, didn’t have time to wait. As Spud zoomed the holo view in through the columns of a stately marble building, I started hopping on one foot and then the other. Spud finally noticed. “If you are in need of the water closet, I can continue the research by myself.”

I patted him on the shoulder and scurried out of the suite. Actually, the bathroom wasn’t a bad place to prep for my time loop. Spud may be clever, but I couldn’t believe that the equally clever Theodore Benedict wouldn’t have tried to find another Fleece in Colchis or wherever to fuel his inter-dimensional trip. With a real Fleece, he could have avoided all those years he spent struggling, unsuccessfully, to cross over to Paradise with fission and fusion support. So, if Benedict, with all his resources, hadn’t found another Somalderis of sheepskin, how could we? I hated to admit it, but Spud had probably been more on target than he knew when he’d implied there was only one Golden Fleece, and only one man who now had it. Yeshua Bar Maryam.

Secreted in the rest room, I pulled out my Ergal. After we’d escaped from Benedict’s Planet Ship and returned to Zygint Central last month, I had found Spud examining holo images of an older Yeshua preaching to a group of his countrymen on a desert hill. Clearly, Yeshua had survived to adulthood, perhaps under the old Keeper’s watchful eye. Had the Fleece we’d seen on his adolescent shoulders in Phonecia survived the years as well?

I dug into the cache where I'd shelved a mirror file I'd created of Spud's holo data. My Erganal screen quickly displayed the scene that Spud had been reviewing. Yes! Adult Yeshua was standing atop a rolling hill in Judea, decked in a flowing white robe which flapped in the howling desert wind. Underneath the robe, I could catch glimpses of the Somalderis, which he'd wrapped around his legs from his waist to his thighs. Excellent. I instructed my Erganal to anamorph my tank top and jeans into a 'modest vestment'. I would soon be on my way to Judea to ask Yeshua for, as my jokester friend Sarion of Megara might say, a sheepish loan.

I also Erganaled myself some coins of the era and secreted them inside my robes. The Tetradrachms, Tyrian shekels, might come in handy if I needed to bargain for the temporary use of the Fleece.

Checking for contact metrics, I pulled up Spud's Erganal screens again showing Yeshua and his activities in the distant past. The images had fast-forwarded from the mountain to a banquet, at which I could see Yeshua breaking bread with a lively group of diners. Better not to interrupt his meal, so I advanced the action by one more Earth hour, uploaded the contact metrics, and clicked the Erganal to send me back in time.

• • •

Judea—two thousand years ago

I almost scraped my scalp on the gnarly branches as I M-fanned under a craggy olive tree in the Garden of Gathsmanni in ancient Judea. In the distance, Yeshua was exiting a cenacle, and was followed by several robe-clad bearded men. I squinted to see through the loop of my Erganal; yes, good, he was still wearing the Somalderis.

Yeshua was twenty years older than the last time I'd seen him up close. Now in his early thirties, he already had some streaks of gray along his temples and salting his beard. Wasn't likely he'd remember me either. I'd taken a chance and traveled as a woman this time, instead of the young Danel. Figured I'd be less threatening as a female if I approached him in the crowd begging for ovine alms. I pulled my scarf back over my head and ventured into the field.

Yeshua's steps were slow and deliberate as he ambled down the dirt path in front of the younger men. His face was in the shadows, but his sagging posture seemed so different from the sturdy vigor he'd demonstrated in Phoenicia in his youth. Frankly, he looked like he was carrying the weight of the world on his narrow shoulders. I surveyed the garden for a glimpse of the Keeper, but the elderly caregiver was nowhere in sight. Twenty years can be a very long time.

A few yards from me, Yeshua paused and knelt on the ground, hiding his head in his hands, and muttered and moaned unintelligibly. I could see beads of sweat dripping through his fingers from his brow. Uh, oh. Maybe this wasn't the best time to hit him up with my own desperate plea.

The memory of John, crying out to me from that elusive other brane, flashed before my eyes again. I took a step closer to Yeshua. Ready or not, I had to get the Somalderis. For John.

Yeshua's eyes were bloodshot, and brimming with unshed tears as he looked up at my flowing white vestments, backlit brightly by a moonbeam through the olive branches above my hood. He blinked a few times, his expression puzzled, and then, after glancing

back to confirm that his fellow revelers had fallen asleep on the ground off in the distance, asked me hoarsely if I was a messenger from his father.

Did he mean the Keeper? I wasn't sure. In any case, it wouldn't hurt to say yes. Yeshua might be more likely to let me borrow the Somalderis for a day or two if he saw me as a friend of a friend. I'd return to the modern day a few minutes after X-fanning out of Judea, grab Spud, and we'd use another time loop to rescue John. With a little luck and my well-known pluck, I could be back in Jerusalem before morning.

I nodded, stumbling through the truth in Aramaic, "I return to you from a world far beyond this one."

Yeshua's eyes radiated relief. "I await his wisdom and his behest. Though I shall obey his commandments, I have prayed that my father might ease me this burden."

From what I could make out in Ergal-translated Aramaic, Yeshua seemed to have me confused with someone else—an ancient Aggelaphor messenger perhaps. His last remark threw me for a loop, but also gave me an opening. Catascope training had taught us to be quick on our feet and to jump in when an opportunity arises. Yeshua's plea had offered me that opportunity. I wasn't going to let the sudden unwelcome tightness in my gut sabotage my mission to save my brother.

I laid a comforting hand on Yeshua's bony shoulder. "The Χρυσόμαλλον Δέρας *is* a burden, is it not?" I whispered. "Let me carry it forthwith and present it to your father, and I shall return a-morn' with his reply."

Yeshua hesitated for what seemed like an eternity before nodding and unwinding the treasured fleece from his waist. He handed me the Somalderis with an expression of concern. "He must know that I will not forsake my duty."

I nodded, numb. If there had only been some other way...

Off in the distance, an advancing crowd clad only in robes and sandals caught my eye. Most of the angry-looking men had long, tangled grey hair and bushy beards; leading the group was a short, stocky man who pointed towards us with a cry of "The Teacher". The noise awakened Yeshua's companions who leapt up and rushed over in our direction, shouting something that sounded like "parasols". Sure smelled like trouble brewing; time for me to "exit, stage left". Fast.

Wrapping the Somalderis around my own waist and reaching into my pocket with my free hand for my Ergal, I set off towards the heart of the grove of olive trees. I hid behind the largest trunk I could find, peeking out to make sure I hadn't been followed. As I activated my Ergal to X-fan, I glimpsed the stocky bearded man reach Yeshua and lean in to give him a respectful kiss.

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Earth Core Station—present day

"Ev, you are an angel," I said as I kissed him on his chubby cheek. "I'll drag Spud out of the library and we'll be on our way." After Ergaling back into my comfy costume of sweater and jeans, I'd carried the Somalderis into Earth Core Control like a championship trophy.

"So this is a Somalderis," Ev said with a sprinkle of awe, as he ran his hands up and down the Golden Fleece. "Wow."

Spud burst out of the library suite brimming with enthusiasm. “I have uncovered an obscure reference in the Alexandria records that guides us to—” His face paled as he saw Ev caressing the Somalderis. “Where did you—?”

“Those who can, do. Those who can’t, research. Come on, John’s waiting for us. We’ve got to hurry. Ev’s authorized us to time loop through that portal Wart had commed us about near Area 51. Let’s go.

Spud’s frown lasted until we’d M-fanned in Nevada.

Chapter 4

If I Only Had A Brane

Area 51, Nevada—present day

The moon hadn't yet risen above the Tonapah Hills to spotlight our arrival, but we'd invisible-ized just in case a curious US Army MP or two decided to drive through Groom Lake with too many questions. Seeing as we were invisible anyway, I wish we hadn't arrived after sunset. The desert in the night was frigid.

"Now what do we do?" I ventured to Spud.

"Hold my hand," Spud ordered as he finished adjusting the settings on his Ergal to align with Wart's recommendations. "Wrap the fleece around us both like a greatcoat."

I shivered as I took his arm. "Glad this thing is warm."

"Hold on tightly. We must stay together, else we may not survive. Are you ready?"

I nodded.

"On your mark, get set, g—"

Blinding light flashed into my eyes, and I felt the weight of a thousand suns upon my chest. My body exploded into a million pieces, a big bang that scattered my essence beyond my severed arm's reach. I was nowhere, and yet I was everywhere, my soul inhabiting each molecule that flew through the blackness of the light. Before I could scream, the scene rewound and my molecules rushed to reform my corpus with a giant roar.

I lay supine for several minutes, until my panting eased. The ground under my fingers felt so much softer than the desert dust. "Damn." I sat up, still gasping for breath, fortunately in a decently oxygenated environment. "What a ride."

"Don't move," Spud cried, shooting out a hand to pull me back down flat. "Just lie perfectly still. Do not even breathe."

A giant shadow swept over us, as the winged reptile soared across the pink sky, its beak seesawing open to reveal enormous teeth.

"We are fortunate to be little desired by predators on Earth. Our story might be prematurely terminated here."

"So where's here?" I whispered after the gynomous pterodactyl had glided towards the red horizon. All I could see around us was an expanse of white cotton balls on which we lay. "Brane 5? Level 3? Hell?"

Spud shrugged as he hopped to his feet. "It remains to be seen. The same should not be said for us, however. The Somalderis?"

Intact, but a bit smaller than before. I reached for the Fleece and tied it once again around my hips. Then instinct kicked in and I felt for my Ergal. It was gone!

"Our Ergals did not seem to survive the transition," Spud intoned. "I am afraid we are mortal visitors in heaven."

I didn't like that he stressed the word "mortal". And my definition of heaven didn't include predators. Spud was right. We were sitting ducks in this field of fluff. "Wonder why Wart sent us here. We're miles from nowhere. Glad I wore my sneakers, uh, trainers."

Spud wasn't listening. Shielding his eyes from the two red dwarf suns still lighting the sky, he was scanning the horizon. "It will be a long trek. I would not wish to give those avian demons another chance to ingest us. I am a bit less credulous than you about Wart's motives."

"Then how about we try tlyp'ath?" I suggested. The Ifestian technique had allowed us to instantly transport ourselves from one spot to another on Theodore Benedict's planet-ship. Maybe the technique could help us find a productive destination in this world, too.

"Now that, Rush, is an excellent idea." Spud reached out his hands and took mine. "Together."

Eyes closed, breathing deeply, we began the mental gymnastics we'd learned from the Ifestian shaman Th'Alia that would ease us into the transcendental state. I felt the ground begin to shift under my feet, accelerating so quickly that Spud and I were knocked down onto the cottony carpet. The movement continued so that we were soon lying supine on a surface now angled at 70 degrees. Slipping, we started to slide bottomward through the cotton balls, cascading down, down, down to...

I opened my eyes as I felt the steep curve of the field lessen and our descent slow. We splashed directly into a lake tinted chartreuse and ecru, and, fortunately, rose to the surface without needing to tread water. Or whatever this creamy liquid around us was.

"The nutrients will diffuse through your skin," said a gravelly voice as we bobbed on the pond's surface. "We will not have time to stop for din."

I swum around and faced the six-foot frog that sat cross-legged on an enormous lily pad. Not a Zygan species, for sure, I quickly assessed, wishing I had my stun gun. Or my Ergal.

"Really?" I mustered. Or my wits.

Fortunately, Spud had his. Wits, I mean. "Agriarctos sent us. I apologize for our tardiness."

"No time for sorry. Hop on to my lorry."

Spud and I each pulled ourselves onto the lily pad and bookended Mr. Giant Frog. I offered my hand. "Shiloh Rush. William Escott. And you are?"

"Robert," the frog croaked, as he leaned over and brushed my fingers with his nippy lips.

I stifled a giggle. My Mingferplatoi Academy classmate Sarion the Joker would've started calling Robert "Ribbit", of course. Damn, I missed Sarion. And the rest of the team of Academy dropouts. After the "Lost Boys" had helped us rescue Yeshua, they'd snuck off to explore M81 and Triangulum, galaxies beyond Zygfed. Would that I could contact them and draft them to help us rescue John now.

My gurgle choked in my throat as the lily pad shot off on the surface of the lake like a speedboat. As we bounced on the pond's gentle swells, the lake of "nutrients" started to grow smaller and smaller, until it was only a drop at our nutrient-caked feet. Ribbit the frog was right. I was no longer hungry at all.

"Flurry, scurry, hurry," our Frog guide chided.

"You made the pond shrink?" I jumped off the lily pad onto a winding amber stone path that stretched out before us, gingerly avoiding a three inch winged lizard that scurried by my toes.

“No go,” Robert returned as he started ahead down the trail. “You grew big. Mega’ing, dig?”

Spud raised an eyebrow. “Indeed.” Spud trotted up to Robert. “I assume we should now follow you along this icterine adobe path?”

“Aye, guy.” The Frog returned as took a giant leap forward.

“You have *got* to be kidding,” I grumbled, as I hopped from one yellow brick to another and caught up with Robert and Spud. “And don’t anybody ask me to sing. I am not my sister Kris.”

Both of my companions stared at me with puzzled expressions. I sighed, and, confusing them even more, began literally skipping ahead of them both, raising my arms in a cheer and shouting out, “Road Trip!”

• • •

On the Yellow Brick Road—present day

“Halt!”

“Who is John Galt?” I ventured, picking up Robert’s rhyming rhythm, but the elephantine cockroach blocking the road before us didn’t smile.

“A fantasy figure bred by an overreaction to a forced communal society that ignored the realities of self-preservation tendencies and familial and tribal competitiveness. If you please,” the cockroach responded with a small bow. “Now who are you?” His antennae dangled over his eyes like a brutal frown.

Well, at least he wasn’t a rhyme freak like Robert. “Shiloh Rush,” I said, my fingers instinctively feeling for the Ergal that I knew wasn’t in my pocket.

The cockroach frowned even more. “Have not read of you. What is your book?”

“Where Angels Fear to Tread,” I mumbled. More loudly: “Unfortunately, not enough have read of me.” Or watched me, judging by the mediocre Season 1 ratings for our show, Singularity TV’s science fiction adventure series *Bulwark*.

Spud stepped up beside me. “William Escott.”

There’s a smile. A grin, even. Never thought I’d see that on a cockroach.

“Yes, I have always believed that you are real, and not just a brilliant figment of the good doctor’s imagination. I would love to pick your luminous brain. Figuratively, of course,” the giant cockroach cackled, before turning to Robert and adding, “May I be your tin man?”

“I suppose you can,” the Frog returned warily. “But, don’t wait, we can’t be late.” Tugging at Spud, Robert sped past “John Galt” and hopped down the road.

“I thought the tin man needed a heart,” I said to no one in particular, revving up my own trot once again.

“You’re right,” said a tiny, pale, pointy-eared elf as he leapt onto my left shoulder from the adjacent grassy border of the road. “NoOne at your service. *I’m* the one who needs a name.”

“What?” I pulled him into my palm so he wouldn’t fall off as I upped my jogging pace.

“Until I get a name, I answer to no one.”

I grinned. “Tempting even if you have a name.” In genial Frank Baum mode, I yielded to my training in *Catascope 101*, Lesson 12: Go with the flow. “Okay, NoOne. Welcome to the team. Any idea where we’re headed?”

NoOne hesitated before answering. “The yellow brick road ends at the Gates of Hades. But I expect we’ll probably layover in Azgaror until we can finagle an invitation.”

‘Hades’ I remembered from my Academy Terran mythology uploads. The underground world where the souls of the dead languished. A slightly less painful version of Hell.

Swell. And ‘Azgaror’ didn’t seem entirely unfamiliar either, but I couldn’t place the reference. Damn! I was naked without my Ergal.

Forcing a smile, I gently placed NoOne in my jeans pocket, leaving his head and arms out hanging over the rim so he could see, and set off to catch up to the others. “John Galt” and Spud were already in deep conversation; I overheard a few words about ‘analysis and synthesis’ as I passed. Spud seemed to have found a soulmate, much to the distress of Robert whose ranine features expressed annoyance at their less than snappy pace.

“Are we going to Azgareur?” I asked our Frog leader, trying to mimic NoOne’s pronunciation.

Robert frowned. “Our path will not bend until we reach the end,” he replied as he hopped past us several yards.

“If it involves a wizard behind a curtain, I’m warning you, I’m done,” I grumbled.

“There are no wizards in Azgaror,” John Galt interjected. “Rather an overused literary trope recently. Along with vampires, zombies, and elves.” He frowned at NoOne. “No offense.”

“NoOne is offended,” the elf returned.

“In Norse mythology, the city of Azgaror is the location of Valhalla, where the Valkyries fly heroes slain in combat,” Spud added. “It is the divine abode of the god Odin.” Show off. “So why would we care about that allusion?” I muttered.

“Because, Rush, Valhalla, the warriors’ promised land, is analogous to Level 3.”

My eyes met Spud’s. He nodded, and added, “And I should not be surprised if we were to find traces of your brother, or, for that matter, of Theodore Benedict, at its gates.”

Chapter 5

And The Beats Go On

Maryland—eight years ago

My brother John first took me camping in the Appalachians in the autumn when I was ten. Grandpa Alexander had died a few months earlier, and the atmosphere at home was still funereal. John had just turned 18, and, with help from Connie and George, had been tasked with raising the rest of us six. I'm close to his age today, and I couldn't imagine taking on that kind of responsibility myself—not now, not ever.

My memories of the trip unfortunately aren't as sharp as I hoped. I can visualize the lush, brilliantly colored foliage, with hundreds of shades red, orange, yellow, and green greeting us as we walked through the tree-lined trails. I also remember my having to run to keep up with John, taller than me by a foot, with his long, lanky legs. The sky through the trees was overcast, and the weather was nippy, even with my down jacket and corduroys to stave off wind chill. There was a faint pine scent in the air, air so clean it seemed to scrub my nostrils every time I breathed.

We set up a tent in a small clearing next to a rocky ledge that gave us a view of the green valley below. John lit a campfire, and I do remember lying next to the flames, enveloped in warmth, my head on his knee, gazing up at the night sky and the constellations in space. Awed by the panorama of the heavens above us, I asked John, "Is that where Grandpa Alexander is?"

John didn't respond for what seemed like a very long time. "I'd like to think so," he finally whispered, "but more likely there's nothing but a vast darkness surrounding our Earthly oasis which sadly can't nourish our souls."

"But what about the stars," I protested.

"Brimstone and Fire," John said with a faint smile.

"Then where is Heaven?"

"That, Shiloh, is a question for the ages," John admitted. "If you ask me," he tapped his temple gently with his index finger, "heaven is right here."

"On Earth?"

"Sometimes," he said softly, as he turned to stoke the campfire. "Have you ever eaten s'mores?"

• • •

On the Yellow Brick Road—present day

"Now what do we do?" NoOne's voice was an octave higher than its usual high pitch.

The pine scent was fading as our Frog leader walked back towards us. "No time for fear, we can't stay here."

Our winding path had brought us to the rim of a thick forest. The entrance to the woods that stretched before us was dimly lit by the light of a trio of moons. Beyond loomed only darkness. No tall redwoods to blaze our trail, no leafy maples to cushion our tired soles. Just twisted brambly branches sporting violaceous leaves, taunting us as we

tentatively inched closer. I took a quick look around, expecting Tim Burton to pop out of the shadows and yell “Cut!”.

“Aha!” cried John Galt, startling us all. “Just in time. Nothing more boring than reading interminable stretches of text describing scenic journeys without confrontations and challenges,” he added. “We should aim to be more than avatars in a travelogue.”

“Don’t be so sure,” NoOne piped in from my hips.

“Will everybody stop going meta!” I cried. “Please. If we continuously ponder the meaning of our existence we will never get *anywhere*.” Seeing John Galt open his labrum again I raised a hand in protest. “You’ve read the book, J.G.. Robert is right. We have to charge forward already.”

A tap on my shoulder. Spud leaned into my ear and whispered. “Without Ergals or stun guns, we may be at a disadvantage up ahead. *Catascope 101, Lesson 8*. Should we not pause to gather some defensive weapons? Just in case.”

I grinned, “Hey, I’ve read the book, too. But, I think we’ll be all right. Remember, we’re the heroes, and *they’re* the red shirts,” I nodded at our traveling companions. “And if *they’re* okay with pressing on, we should be safe.”

“Actually, *our* uniforms on *Bulwark* are burgundy,” Spud protested, referring to the costumes he and I wear as space agents on our TV series. “That is a shade of red.”

But I had already surged ahead. Taking Robert by his webbed hand, I started chanting a marching song I had learned as a child from John, stepping one foot in front of the other in cadence to the rhythm of the words.

“Left, right, left. Beat, Left, right left. Beat. I left my wife and 48 kids and an old gray mare and a peanut stand and I do right, right, right from the country from where I came from, right foot, left foot, skip by jingo, left, left.”

• • •

My own voice had dropped to a whisper after we had proceeded about a mile into the forest. I could hear few sounds except the crackling of our footsteps and anominous throbbing that seemed to be growing louder and louder as we plunged deeper into the darkness.

Robert had stepped aside and let John Galt and his compound eyes take the lead, as his vision was the most penetrating in the gloom. Having a giant cockroach as your front man was probably not a bad defense strategy either against who- or what-ever might attack us.

The yellow bricks under our feet looked grayish in the dark; a sharp contrast to the twisted tree trunks that stood guard like a black fence on both sides of the road, vibrating with ever greater intensity. My adrenaline levels were at max, my heart beating out of my chest in sync with the din, as we tiptoed through the forest, ducking our heads to avoid frequent low-hanging branches that we feared would come alive and grab us by the hair. Or in John Galt’s case, the antennae.

After another torturous mile, J.G. spotted a clearing up ahead, lit by the moons through a gap in the trees. As we approached, the throbbing sound increased to a deafening booming that forced me to clutch at my ears to block out the agony. A musical sting worthy of an epic film score crescendoed around us, and, at its peak, I opened my mouth to scream.

But instead, silence. Once we stepped inside the clearing, the cacophony abruptly stopped. No music, no throbbing, no noises. All we could hear was the sound of our breathing and our pounding hearts. The rays of moonlight bathing us in luster were a welcome relief after our arduous trek in the gloom. This haven might in fact be a comfortable place for us to rest and spend the night.

I turned to the Frog. “Robert, how about we— AHHHHH!” The pain in my side was paralyzing. I looked down to see blood dripping down my leg, gushing from a small bite wound at my waist.

Spud’s cry was at a lower register, but just as loud. Brushing at my hip, I spun around to witness my partner being shielded by John Galt’s exoskeleton, then screamed, “Oh, my God!”, as the cockroach shouted, “Dinner! I love brains!” and sank his mandible and denticles into Spud’s bloodied blond hair. From the corner of my eye, I saw a flushed NoOne leap off my hip onto Robert’s warty back and start stabbing his vertebrae with vampire-sized canine teeth.

I had no time to ponder NoOne’s radical transformation into a demonic creature— Spud, even at six feet tall, was no match for a seven-foot vicious insect. Ignoring my own pain, I jumped onto John Galt’s vestigial wings and, planting both feet around his thorax, grabbed and pulled back his head. The cockroach released his grip on Spud and started bucking his body to try to throw me off. Spud collapsed to the ground, clutching his lacerated and oozing scalp, as I cried, “We’re sentient creatures, please have mercy!”

J.G.’s harsh voice snapped at me as he tried to brush me off his back with his limbs. “Compassion is not in my vocabulary. One has to eat. And NoOne does too.”

Tightening my grip, I hammered at his exoskeleton. “Why would an Elf want to hurt us?”

A cackle exuded from our tiny companion, followed by a raspy growl, “I am a Goblin, you mythist! And that’s what you get for picking up a stranger!”

“Mega!” The cry came from my feet, as a crouching Spud rolled over towards Robert. Mega? How could I grow larger without my Ergal?

J.G. bucked ferociously and I lost my balance, flying off his back and landing supine onto the hard ground under his torso. As the cockroach turned to face me, grinding his denticles as he lowered his abdomen onto my trapped body, it clicked. Of course, Spud was right, *Robert* could Mega. But our Frog guide was writhing on the ground, trying to escape the onslaught of NoOne’s teeth. Would Robert have the strength or the opportunity to come to our aid?

John Galt’s cold breath chilled my face as the predator opened his mouth wide for his first bite of Shiloh. His jaw snapped shut—and clipped the toe of my shoe. I now stood a hundred times his height. Thank you, Robert. Quickly, I lifted up my foot and stamped on John Galt’s exoskeleton, ashamed that I relished the crunch under the sole of my relatively giant shoe. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a red “ant” escaping from the clearing into the flora, literally leaving NoOne.

Robert’s enlarged but immobile green body lay prone on the ground, cushioned by trees shrunk so relatively small they were now the size of weeds. The weeping wounds on his back were flapping open with each gust of wind. A mega’d Spud lay next to him, the scalp bleeding staunchly by a piece of cloth torn from his sleeve. “Robert, Robert, are you okay?” I cried, as I turned to my surviving companions.

Spud rolled over the unconscious Frog and felt in the neck area for a pulse. "His heart is beating, but I cannot perceive respiration." Before I could respond, Spud tilted up Robert's head, planted his lips on the Frog's, and exhaled.

I gasped. The tortured olive dermis was began to morph into tanned humanoid skin, and we spied an elegant face with delicate features which was soon topped by a web of curly dark hair. The transition took only moments, but appeared to heal the dermal damage caused by NoOne in the process. Sitting up before us now was a very handsome young man, clothed only in brilliant gold vestments encircling his hips, who looked just a little older than Spud's eighteen years.

Possibly a prince. Definitely a hunk. "Thank you for saving our lives," I said as I reached out my hand and helped Robert up, marveling at the smoothness of his bare sculpted chest and back. "Your wounds?"

"The wheals, love heals," he returned, still rhyming. Oh well, nobody's perfect.

Robert leaned down and kissed Spud's scalp as my fellow catascope lay on the weeds, propped up on an elbow. Spud's forehead laceration disappeared, replaced by a rare look of admiration directed at our guide. "Thank you, my friend, well done," Spud said, jumping up, and clapping Robert on the back. "I am once again chipper."

I was about to suggest that Robert tend to my hip wound in the same way, when I observed that Spud's arm remained wrapped around Robert's shoulders. Sighing, I stretched the hem of my blouse to cover the wound and compressed the oozing bite with a clenched fist. Guessing what would be coming up in the next act, I decided that now might be a good time for me to excuse myself for some beauty sleep.

A glance down at the path, now a thin, winding yellow line, showed it extending from our feet far towards the flat horizon. We would have a long journey again tomorrow. "Is there a place I can safely snooze around here?" I, stifling a yawn, hinted at Robert.

Robert nodded, and taking a small leaf from his pocket, laid it on the weeds, and, somehow, mega'ed it into the size of a pup tent. "No one will not bother you here, my dear. At all."

He took a second leaf and enlarged it to fit two a few yards from mine. Putting his own muscular arm around Spud's waist, he eased Spud over to the edge of the leaf and folded the remainder over their heads like a blanket, adding, "But if you need anything, just call."

Waving weakly, I walked onto my leaf and folded part of it over my own head and weary body. I'd be on my own for the rest of the night. Spud usually opted for intellectual pursuits, but once in awhile, he'd go "mad about the boy". I'd long ago learned to get out of the way when Spud stumbled into some action. As his best friend, I was happy he'd hooked up. But how long had it been, I wondered, trying to ignore my twinge of guilt at my envy, since *I'd* gotten lucky? With anyone.

"One cannot reflect in streaming water. Only those who know internal peace can love." That ethereal voice could only belong to Nephil Stratum. Startled, I peeked outside my leaf tent for traces of a fluffy cloud, but there was nary a wisp in the vicinity. Of course not. I must have imagined that's what the Syneph would say if she'd been here: that until I'd rescued John, internal peace was beyond my grasp.

Airing out my wound, I laid down again in my leaf tent and closed my eyes, covering my ears with my hands to block out the ambient sounds, resolving to put aside my own thoughts of romance until I'd succeeded in my quest.

Chapter 6

The Vizier of Az

On the Yellow Brick Line—present day

The night cycle on this planet was a good 14 hours, so I found myself waking up just as dawn's light pierced my leafy cocoon, feeling well rested, pain-free, and refreshed after yesterday's "skirmish" in the brambled forest. Clearly, Spud was equally refreshed, I noted when he stuck his head in my makeshift tent. I hadn't often seen him grinning from ear to ear.

'*Chacun a son gout*', I teased as I rolled up the leaf. "Of course, '*Je m'en fous*'?"

Spud raised an eyebrow. Blushing, I turned away to avoid his gaze. Unlike Spud, I didn't limit my attraction to one gender—or species, for that matter. I would've been open to exploring Robert's assets myself, if Spud hadn't been first in line. And, though I'd never admit it to Spud, I'd had more than one fantasy about us getting together. But, this was reality, and Spud was off limits—even if he turned beer bi. Nephil Stratum—or was it my conscience that had whispered to me last night?—was right. I had a job to do, and time was a-wasting. As Robert appeared, I pointed to the leaf and asked, "Ready to hit the road. We going to need these?"

Robert shook his head, and in a second, the leaf had micro'd and wafted away in the breeze. "Speed with all our might, in Azgaror before the night."

I suggested we stay mega'd so we could cover the distance to Azgaror more quickly. In fact, if Prince Robert could mega us even more, we could grow big enough to theoretically reach our destination in a few steps. Alas, he reported we'd mega'd to the max, so it still took much of the day for us to arrive at the village.

As we jogged, Robert explained, keeping rhythm in in what Spud called dactylic hexameter, that he was the seventh son of the seventh son of 'Odious', the king currently ruling the heaven of 'Valholler'.

*King Odious begat of Fyorgyn his son Thor
For Yule to cross the lake of Hargaror
And fly again to Freya's hall of Sessrumnir
Folkvanger's gates were barred by word of Syr.*

The recitation was an epic that recounted generations of deities, kings, and soldiers, and I couldn't catch most of the names and places as Robert 'sang'. I found my mind drifting to how much my warrior friend Matshi would have enjoyed the performance. But, since little of this history had been in the Mingferplatoi Academy uploads, and none of it would be "on the test", I had little real interest in learning the details of a world I didn't intend to visit for very long. Unlike Spud, who took in every stanza with rapt attention. Ain't "wuv" grand?

I did hear enough to learn that John Galt and NoOne very likely were demons, sent from Niflheimr, the Land of Ice, and Muspell, Flame Land, to capture warriors trekking to Azgaror and deliver them to Hel. Even spelled with one 'L', it sounded, like, well, Hell.

Robert reassured us—me—that at our current size, we were unlikely to run into any more dangerous predators. Except of course the Goliath Jotuns, who were still three times

our current dimensions. Good to know. Sure wish I had an Ergal—or even a slingshot—in my back pocket.

Thanks to our longer legs, we arrived at Azgaror a few hours before sunset without a scratch and with very few blisters. It felt like my sneakers hadn't grown as much as my feet. I was also starting to get a bit hungry, seeing as it was almost two days since my last meal and our swim in the nutrient pond. Can't explain it, but I had a weird desire to capture and eat a cockroach. Or an elf. But, instead, we agreed to join Robert at an Inn on the outskirts of Valholler for a dinner of mead and wild boar. Yum.

The village of Azgaror consisted of arc-shaped narrow streets framed by dark, brick-paved alleys. A layer of gray clouds kept any sunlight well hidden. It reminded me of the overcast marine layer called "June Gloom", which darkens coastal Los Angeles every spring. And the pavement on which we trudged was drenched with a misty dampness that should have made Spud feel nostalgic for *his* sceptered isle. On both sides of the road stood domed four storey buildings, all painted in colors that I could neither place nor name.

"These chromatic frequencies do not exist in our brane," Spud theorized. "One could amuse oneself by inventing new names such as glue and breen, I suppose."

"This isn't a sightseeing trip," I reminded Spud *sotto voce*. "The sooner we find Wart, the greater the chance of finding John."

The brick road wound through the center of the town, our path ahead hidden by the curves in each block. Frigid drafts were keeping the numbers of fur-clad pedestrians on the street limited in this last leg of our voyage. Gusts from the galloping horseback riders that burst across our path every few yards upped the wind chill. Shivering, I pulled the Somalderis off my hips and wrapped it around my shoulders. Much better. Robert must be freezing in his state of attractive, but relative undress.

Our guide had continued ahead of us, and I ran up to catch his ear. "Is Agriarctos staying in the village?" I asked. It would be easier—and more pleasant—to find our ally without having to navigate Hades and its lost souls in Valhalla or Valholler or whatever.

"I know it is a hassle, but he's staying in the castle," was the Prince's response.

Darn. On the other hand, if John himself was imprisoned in Hades, we'd have to venture there, too, so we might as well head in that direction from the get-go. I suggested a quick refuel and then storming Valholler's gates, but it was not to be. Admission was limited to heroic warriors fallen in battle, Robert poemed us, as well as a few invited special guests. "Being a deity, for example, would be ample."

Spud sometimes acts like he's a cut above the typical human, but, no, neither of us thought we could successfully sell ourselves as gods. As a prince, couldn't Robert finagle us an "invitation"?

A dramatic sigh. "The end is nigh, it was a lie."

What? "What?!" I felt even more irate than I sounded. Spud made an unintelligible gurgling sound.

"My words I mince, I'm not a prince. The royal court I pester, but, simply, I'm a jester."

Oh, great. Another Sarion, the comedian. "Then get to the punch line," I countered.

"If I brought you here, said the bald vizier, they'd remove the curse, and I'd stop the verse."

I frowned. Who's the bald vizier? *What's* a vizier?

“A vizier is a high ranking political advisor or minister,” Spud said, his voice cracking. I could almost see daggers in his eyes appearing when he glared at Robert. That’s why I’ve never been a fan of one night stands. Or “wuv”.

“Are you implying we have to break into Valholler?” I poked an index finger at Robert’s sternum. “Why?”

Robert glanced at the Somalderis warming my shoulders and chest. “I’d be wary of what you carry.”

I looked at Spud for some elaboration, but he avoided my gaze. Shaking my head, I said to the amusement artist formerly known as the “Prince”. “Okay, then, Robert the Ribald, let’s get some chow and strategize how we can get past those warrior guards. Now.”

• • •

Azgaror—present day

If only we had our Ergals. We could anamorph into 350-pound samurais and bulldoze our way into the castle—heck, we could even invisible-ize and not have to bother. Unfortunately, even though I tried, I wasn’t able to get the Somalderis to shape shift us at all.

Could Robert? After all, turning into a non-Prince from a frog was a sweet trick.

“I know you’ll be blue, but I no can do,” Robert admitted, explaining that the “frog thing” was part B of the rhyming curse, and not an anamorphing talent. Apparently, the Vizier was a big fan of fairy tales—and foolish curses.

I sighed. We needed a *plan B* then. Perhaps some martial costumes? Chainmail? Shields?

Robert rested a platonic hand on my shoulder. “No sad face, I know just the place.”

I swallowed the last of my boar meat and forced a smile.

• • •

“Awfully dark in this alley,” I whispered, as I watched the shadows from moonlight seeping through the deserted towers alongside us flicker across Robert’s bare back. “You sure we’re going the right way?”

Robert waved us a few yards forward and stopped at a structure that was decrepit as well as deserted. A wooden sign hung from a single chain, swinging rhythmically with the biting wind that had eroded the painted scarlet letters til they were almost too faded to decipher.

“Ambrosia,” Spud ventured, his vision and interpreting faculties, as always, surpassing mine.

“Never fear, we are here,” Robert announced, his words a reverberating echo that made both Spud and me do a quick 360 scan to make sure we hadn’t been followed. Robert opened a squealing oak door and led us into a dimly lit hallway, illuminated only by remnants of simmering candle wax hanging precariously from tarnished holders along the peeling walls.

“And where exactly is that?” Unless this was a secret tunnel into Valholler, I wasn’t optimistic that we were making progress towards our Plan B.

Robert paused before a splintered door, brightened only by worn patches of reddish paint. “Before we concede defeat, I have someone I’d like you to meet,” he said with a grin as he shot out an arm to open the door, and stepped aside to let us through.

Oh, my. Before us was a large cavern, rainbow-tinged stalactites and stalagmites dripping blue liquids onto a smooth, slippery floor. Across from our entry stood a tall, wizened, gray-bearded man, dressed in azure and gold robes, wearing a long cone-shaped hat that displayed several recognizable constellations. From *our* universe, our brane. In his right hand, the old man gripped a Geryon, the facile weapon that my former classmates Setsei and Suthsi had used to help us escape the clutches of Benedict and his minions not so long ago.

Robert waved at the cave’s tenant. “Marlin, darlin’.”

I tossed an eye roll at Spud before facing Robert with hands on hips. “Merlin? Really, Robert? The dude looks like he just walked off the set of “Fantasia”. And, anyway, didn’t you promise us there wouldn’t be any wizards in Az?”

Robert shrugged off my irritation. “No need to wince. You know I’m not a prince.”

A deep chuckle from across the cave, as Marlin, eyes twinkling, started ambling towards us. ““Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save’. Psalm 146:3, right?” Marlin stopped before us and extended his arms in welcome, adding, “Though I have advised Robert that he might rethink his habit of being annoying. Not everyone humors his humor, as his rhyming penance amply demonstrates.” The wizard’s accent sounded vaguely Scottish, with a hint of American.

“So, are you the Wizard of—I mean the Vizier of Az,” I grumbled.

Another guffaw. “Oh, good heavens, no.” He removed his hat to release and shake out his silver shoulder-length locks. “Hardly. Though I do admit I’ve known my share of Viziers in my days. But, inevitably, the bloom falls off the polished apple, and one can only keep one’s head if one moves on.” A long sigh. “I *have* been trying to change my behavior these last few hundred years, instead of falling in with the same type of bad apples over and over. At my age, it’s getting harder and harder to go on the run at the end of our run.”

“Looks like you ran from our universe.” I added, nodding at the hat in his hands. “Oh, dear,” said Marlin, shaking his head, “I did forget to change my hat this morning. One of these days I’ll forget my own brain.” He looked up at each of us, one at a time. “And what brane are we in today?”

“I theorize Brane 5,” said Spud. “But that remains to be seen. Tell me, Marlin,” he continued, “was Julius Caesar or was King Arthur your favorite ‘vizier’?”

Marlin’s eyes narrowed. “I preferred Iulius Kaisar, frankly. Much more sure of himself—less wishy-washy. Consensus isn’t always the best management style, as my old friend Machiavelli used to say. But you’re a clever fellow, now, aren’t you? In some odd way, you remind me quite a bit of Lancelot.”

“Good call, at least once in a while,” I muttered, earning a brief glare from my partner.

Spud turned back to the old man. “Your speech reveals tenures in Imperial Rome, medieval England, rural Wales, and 20th century New England, among other traits. Deducing your identity is simple, even without your give-away name.”

“And sometimes he’s just showoffalot,” I said, louder.

Another glare from Spud came my way as we heard Marlin sigh. “Ah, my name, truly a cross to bear. Do you know that the Welsh made it sound like a French curse? My brethren never had this problem. But, as I chose to swim alongside humans, I have only myself to blame.” Marlin cleared his throat. “And who is to blame for your exile in this Purgatory, may I ask?”

“My brother. John. John Rush,” I dived in. He disappeared three years ago,” more forcefully, “working undercover. We think he might be a prisoner in his brane—this brane.”

Marlin’s expression was sympathetic. “I’m sorry about that, young lady. I regret to disappoint you, but I’ve heard nothing in the winds about a John Rush.” A twinkle in his rheumy eyes. “Is that all you desired from me, I expect, considering my age?”

“Uh, not exactly.” I took a deep breath, ignoring his implication. “We’d like to get into Valholler. Without dying in battle first. We’ll need another strategy. Maybe disguises? Can you help us?”

Marlin frowned. “Ooh, now that may be a challenge. I don’t know that I’m able to—”

“Well, seeing as you’re a wonderful wizard, after all,” I interrupted, nodding at the spear in his hand.

“’Tis merely a Geryon, Shiloh,” Spud whispered. “How much of a wizard was our Suthsi?”

Oh. Spud had a good point. My former Mingferplatoi Academy classmates, the Ytran meiores Setsei and Suthsi had no ‘magic powers’ without their Geryon. Did Marlin?

“Must you puncture my delusions of wizardry with your Geryonic intellect,” Marlin growled at Spud, adding in a softer tone. “I have an image to protect.” He tilted his head at Robert.

Robert looked confused, “The conversation at hand, I don’t understand.”

Feeling a twinge of empathy for the old magician, I jumped in, misdirecting with enthusiasm. “Look, Marlin, why don’t you take your magic wand here,” I pointed at the Geryon, “and dress us up in some costumes that’ll get us through Valholler’s gates. Like battlefield armor?”

A smile. “Now why didn’t you say so. Of course I can arrange that. But, I have a better idea. I knew my days riding Níðhögg the Dragon would come in handy. With these outfits they won’t dare turn you away.” Merlin aimed his Geryon at Spud. “You first. This’ll just take a minute.”

I had a momentary flash that maybe we shouldn’t have been so naive. Sure, Geryons could anamorph our external appearance, but with the right—or wrong—manipulation, they could also stun or kill us.

“Wait!” The cry came from Spud. He stepped off to one side, holding up both hands. “Just take those rocks over there and anamorph them into costumes instead, all right? We can dress ourselves.”

“All the world isn’t made of faith and trust and pixie dust, eh?” Marlin smiled again and genially turned his Geryon towards the pile of rocks a few yards away from his golden pointed shoes. In a second, the rocks’ molecules had been rearranged to form colorful robes and hairpieces for us to don.

“No, not in my universe,” said Spud, reaching for the Geryon. “You know, I think we shall also need new pairs of shoes. Would you mind if I added a finishing touch?”

Marlin’s eyes narrowed for a moment, but, to my surprise, he handed the Geryon to my partner. “As my friend Ben Franklin used to say, ‘Trust thyself, and another shall not betray thee.’”

Nodding, Spud aimed the Geryon at a few remaining pebbles near the pile of clothing. I stepped back a couple of inches. Handling a Geryon well took a lot of practice—was Spud really qualified to use this uncommon tool? I hoped so, for all our sakes. As our eyes were trained on the ground target, Spud swung the Geryon around and pointed it at Marlin’s head, activating it. The wizard’s skin and hair began to melt and diffuse into a sparkling mist that formed a halo around Marlin’s upper body.

I gasped. Underneath the grey locks and the wizened features, we began to see shiny scales that adorned the smooth face, eyes, and mouth of a giant fish. Marlin was a Glieser!

Among the many lessons we’d studied at Mingferplatoi Academy, at least for those of us who were non-telepathic, was Interspecies Cultural Communication. Sure, it meant uploading Zygan and a host of other languages into our brains and not just into our Ergals. But it also meant learning to read the signals across species. For example, if you’re chatting with a Chidurian, who basically resembles a giant crab, how do you know when he’s happy or, well, crabby? Some Scyllian species and other canines have these heartbreaking sad eyes, even when they’re ‘walking on air’. And, most Rigellians literally walk on air—but only when they’re angry! So, Spud and I had to call up our Academy memories to recognize that Marlin’s piscine features were registering a mix of fury and disappointment. And a lack of oxygen.

“Just wanted to confirm my theory,” Spud admitted, as he moved the Geryon away, restoring Marlin to his panting humanoid form. “Your lifespan is not unique for a Zygan. But one question remains.” He raised the Geryon again, and we all jumped back another foot. “Why?”

“The aqueous world is the world’s womb,” Marlin finally spoke in a hoarse whisper, “but it is the Gliesers’ cage. I so envied our Coelacanth cousins that had escaped the water’s clutches and tasted the dry dirt and the fresh air. I spotted the Geryon among the wreckage of an Ytran cruiser in the Kepler 5b backwaters, and thought I could barter it for a ticket to a Glieser starship, and a chance to explore the world beyond. It was only when I started to fiddle with it that I realized it wasn’t a toy, and that its many powers included shape-shifting.” Marlin’s eyes sparkled as he cast a loving glance at the spear-like weapon. “I no longer needed to see the universe from the inside of a Glieser aquarium. I could be free to travel through the air with this Geryon that’s rarely left my side.

“You sound like my brother,” I said, snorting. “Only he wanted to escape the cage of dry land and an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere. The grass always looks greener in Level 3.”

“It is a truism, but, as truisms go, it’s true. We cannot escape ourselves. God only knows I have tried. Again and again.” Marlin waved an arm at the stalactites above our heads.

“And yet, here we are. Isn’t this a lovely cage?” Were those actual tears in his bloodshot eyes?

“Indeed, Marlin, here we are,” Spud conceded before returning the Geryon to Marlin.

“Purgatory has never looked better, but we have Heaven and Hades in our sights,” Spud added, motioning for us to pick up the clothes. “Thanks for the Geryon. Shiloh, Robert,” he winked, “let us carry on.”

• • •

Valholler—present day

Which is how three Valkyries arrived at Valholler’s gates, their long flowing horsehair extensions whipping in the wind, their long flowing robes hiding the stuffing strategically placed to make my two male companions, Spud and Robert, sport C-cups. When you use a Geryon rather than an Ergal to anamorph, you have to improvise.

I hadn’t expected to face the leers we got from the thousands of warriors as we walked softly and nonchalantly down the red carpet towards the massive iron castle doors. I’d have to take the bullet for my team if the soldiers got pushy, as they might be put off by Robert and Spud’s male anatomy. On the other hand, since women here weren’t exactly a common commodity in the encampments of these horned warriors, maybe I was worrying too much. Glad I thought to bring along a big stick as a staff, just in case one of them decided to mount...a campaign in my direction.

The sentry at the castle entry asked for our names as we approached. “Fagrskinna, let us inna,” said Robert.

I stifled a giggle. A fitting Norse narrative name. “Heimskringla,” followed Spud, lifting the name of another Norse saga. Now what was the one *I* was going to use...?

“Kriskringla,” I erupted, flashing a warm smile and waving my “staff”. “At the behest of the vizier.”

The guard frowned, then looked down and spoke into a gold medallion hanging on his chest. A comm device, obviously, but awfully advanced for this awful place. That didn’t bode well—medieval values with modern technology? And we only armed...with our arms? We stood anxiously in silence for a few minutes before he spoke again, and, unlatching an enormous set of iron keys from his belt, unlocked the doors to let us in.

“Gunner will see you now.”

I smiled, and led the guys into the castle foyer. As the door closed behind us, leaving us isolated in the empty lobby, Spud whispered, “Gunner is the Valkyrie of War.”

My smile disappeared. “And I don’t like being a sitting duck. Let’s get moving. Robert, where’s the royal court and this vizier guy?”

Robert stood in the foyer with a confused expression as we tried to pull him to one side into the shadows. “Don’t tell me you haven’t been here before,” I groaned.

“I don’t know what to tell ya, it doesn’t look famellya,” he returned, as a giant plume of smoke erupted in the middle of the entrance hall.

“In here, hurry,” Spud whispered as I spied a seven-foot woman with Medusa hair and a Xena body appearing inside the mist. Grabbing Robert, I dragged him through the doorway, and signaled to Spud to close the door.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw a long hallway on the other side of the small room, and no other way out. Orange smoke started to seep in through the doorjamb. Could Gunner be far behind?

We ran. And ran, and ran. I thought we’d run far enough to be back out in the city of Azgaror, but the hall still surrounded us, with no visible exit. Fortunately, as we looked

back, we saw no wisps of smoke coming our way. We slowed down and trotted towards a dimly lit cave far off in the distance.

In the center of the cave was a large pit, several yards across. Perhaps a way out? I ventured towards its edge, leaning over to peek inside. My scream caught in my throat. Only a few yards below us were worm-riddled carcasses, stinking of putrefaction, extending their skeletal arms up towards us, bones clacking as they moved, their eye sockets oozing blood and pus. Their mouths were open, chipped and stained teeth coated with sludge, crying out to us without making a sound.

“I expect their larynges have dissolved, rotted away,” Spud said from behind me. “We are staring into the maws of Hades.”

A whimper from Robert. Hey, man, I hear you.

“Well,” I said after a deep breath, “I don’t recommend we exit this way.”

“Indeed not,” Spud agreed. “If I recall, soon after Gunner’s smoke wisps cleared, I saw an aperture in the ceiling above us. Twenty or thirty yards back. I propose we revisit that part of the hallway.”

I nodded. I couldn’t get out of this hellish cave fast enough.

“There it is.” Spud gestured at the hole over our heads. We’re all skinny, but even we wouldn’t be able to squeeze through an opening that size. The light from above shone down on us, teasing us with its warmth. “Perhaps Robert could micro—”

“A door I didn’t see before!” cried Robert, pointing to a 4-foot wooden portal on the side wall by our feet.

“Now there we can fit.” I clapped our guide on the shoulder. “Good show. Just let me make sure we don’t have any more dead souls hiding in there first.”

The door creaked open to reveal another hallway, this one about five feet in height. We’d have to crouch, but otherwise the coast seemed clear. We set off in the new direction, our eyes peeled for company, and crossroads.

Once again, it seemed as if we were walking for miles before we reached the terminus. Another wooden door. I looked at my companions and shrugged. “May as well.”

The room beyond was palatial. Ornate furniture, decorations, marble floors, travertine walls, velvet curtains, gold vases, very Versailles.

“Norse myths place Heaven and Hell in close proximity,” Spud lectured unnecessarily. “I have found that paradigm reflects life.”

Before I could roll my eyes, a female voice resonated through the room. “You are impostors!”

Gunner. Damn.

We turned to see the Valkyrie of War towering over us, her flowing robes cascading over a very muscular torso, the sharpness of her expression only surpassed by the sharpness of her spear.

“And impersonating a Valkyrie is a crime,” she boomed, “punishable by excruciating death!”

Maybe we should’ve opted for that pit after all...

• • •

Gunner waved her spear and we found ourselves wrapped tightly in the clutches of a giant boa constrictor. I could feel Robert’s heart beating faster and faster as the snake

tightened its grip. Spud and I both went into Catascope 101 mode, gulping in as much air as we could to push back against the boa's compression. That would only buy us a few seconds, though. We had to think fast.

"The Vizier!" I shouted, gasping.

The boa stopped contracting. Gunner bent down to meet my eyes. "Yes?"

"We're his guests," I croaked, "You must not kill us before we have fulfilled his mission."

"Mission? What mission?"

Good. She bit. "Um, take us to him, and then we can tell you. If we lie, you can execute us before his eyes and preserve your honor." God, I hope the Vizier has a heart. Even if not, we might have enough time to plan an esc—

The room disappeared in a cloud of smoke. When the smoke cleared, we were in a, a library? Floor to ceiling around us were thousands, millions of books, books as far as the eye could see. I was hoping we'd see some curtain I could open for "the great reveal", but we were surrounded by nothing but books. In a myriad of sizes, colors, and languages. Oh, yes, and the boa.

Gunner seemed content to stand by us and wait. I used the time to scan our environs for possible routes of egress. Did any of the books trigger a hidden door or window? Were those big volumes heavy enough to use as shields—or weapons?

Spud must have been making the same calculations. I saw him flick his eyes toward a shelf a few feet to our side. I'll be damned—Milton. In English. *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Here in this alien brane. Oh, no, I was starting to rhyme, too. Was Spud was betting those two books could open a portal out of here? Considering our limited options, not a bad bet.

Spud nodded and together we each inhaled an enormous breath, sticking out our chests and enlarging the boa's circumference. On the count of three, we both exhaled explosively, sucking in our guts and dropping down to the ground, sliding out from under the boa's spiral prison and rolling on the floor onto our feet. We each leapt for a Milton volume, grabbed one, and opened it, hoping for a trapdoor release. And—nothing. Alas, poor William! Where be your escape route now?

"They're just books," said a familiar voice. "Though I would never deign to malign masterpieces of literature with the adverb 'just'. Still, I must commend you for your survival skills—at least to date."

I looked up to see the familiar balding pate, wire-rimmed glasses, and hint of a sneer. Theodore Benedict. Sporting floor-length, colorful gilded robes.

Gunner aimed her staff at the Zygfed terrorist leader and announced, "Ladies, the Vizier of Az."

Theodore Benedict, The Zygan Federation's Number One "Most Wanted"! And us without our Ergals.

Doomed.

Chapter 7

Pandora's Balks

"They're here, I beg you to approve, the spell that will this curse remove," came the high-pitched whine. I spun around to see Robert pointing his index finger in our direction.

"You traitor!" I clenched my jaw. And my fists.

Benedict chuckled, "It all depends on your perspective, Rush. Robert will get what he has earned. Anesidora?" He gestured at a petite young woman who stepped out from behind the colossal Valkyrie. Her long brown curls framed beautiful features and teased the shoulders of her sparkling gown.

The woman smiled and touched the ring on her middle finger. Wasn't that the band-shaped Ergal we'd, uh, collected from Gary's body? The one Benedict had reclaimed on his planet ship? Apparently so. Robert was surrounded by a cocoon of bright light, which flared and then faded. Where the tall, handsome young man had been standing was now, once again, a small frog.

"Hey!" Frog Robert croaked.

Benedict wagged his own index finger. "Now, don't be ungrateful. At least you're not rhyming any more."

Before Benedict could finish his sentence, the boa opened his jaws and swallowed the frog in one gulp. I swallowed a gasp.

Benedict sighed and continued. "Catascope 101, Lesson 5": Never let your guard down."

Spud, white as the lovely brunette's gown, watched the lump travel down the snake's gullet and then disappear in its coils.

I was shaking in anger. "If I had Marlin's Geryon, I'd—"

"I'm sure you would," Benedict said, as he turned to Gunner, "but now that you mention it. Gunner, do send my thanks to the old fossil for his alert, will you." Facing us again, Benedict winked, "Always good to have a Plan B, no?"

Spud's gaze had lingered on the boa, but he now favored Benedict with an icy glare. "Win us with honest trifles, to betray's. In deepest consequence," he growled, fury dripping from his voice.

Benedict continued to smile. "As I said, it's all a matter of perspective." He reached over and gently squeezed the brunette's smooth hand.

Spud's eyes fell on the young woman, and, still frowning, he asked, "Anesidora? As in the mythical, er, philanthropist?"

"Right again, Escott. May I introduce the two of you to Anesidora Benedict. My mother."

I caught my breath. Benedict's mother? Was this the woman for whom Benedict had sacrificed his membership in Zygan Intelligence, and in the Zygan Federation itself? The woman whose neurocache Agriarctos/Wart and I had been forced to rescue from the Zygan Federation's Registered Anastasial Memory chamber on Benedict's orders?

"Good to see you again, Shiloh," Anesidora said, resting a warm hand on my shoulder. "I never had a chance to properly thank you for reuniting me with my son. Perhaps I can return the favor to you some day."

Spud interrupted, his eyes widening on noting Anesidora's ring. Benedict's Ergal! "How did you get the Ergal across to this brane?" he demanded.

"It's not a Zygan Ergal, Escott," Benedict confided. "It does not wither away if you travel beyond Zygfed's prison walls. There is technology in the multiverse that far surpasses the Omega Archon's. Pity you won't have a chance to observe it."

"Your verdict, Vizier?" Gunner boomed, impatient.

Benedict's hand slowly extended to form a gesture of 'thumbs down'. I froze, my eyes meeting Spud's. Why the hell was he smiling?

"Thumbs down means Benedict will *not* throw us to the lions," Spud whispered. "Modern reviewers have it backwards. Thumbs up is the one to fear."

"Oh." I breathed a sigh of relief, as a frowning Gunner tapped her staff on the stone floor and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

"Let us ourselves X-fan to my salon," Benedict urged, "Plionarctos the Ursan will brew us a blissful tea, and I will proffer some of the answers I am certain you seek."

My brow furrowed as well. This seemed a little too easy. Remember Catascope 101, Lesson 8. Keep an eye out for the other shoe.

• • •

Theodore Benedict's Lair, Valholler—present day

With help from Anesidora's Ergal ring, we M-fanned into a spacious room, lined by walls of glass that looked out onto a panorama of green hills nudging azure seas. Didn't seem to be a part of the topography of gloomy Azgaror, that's for sure. Much more a Pacific Islands or Mediterranean scene.

The light of the planet's two suns reflected off of its three moons in the pink sky. The brightness was a blinding contrast to the oppressive gray of the village, and the terrifying twilight of that bramble forest.

Benedict motioned for us to take a seat on a fluffy beige couch. Spud sat stiffly on its edge, but I welcomed its softness and lounged back in the cushions. No point in making the visible point to Benedict that we didn't trust him. I managed a quick glance around to establish my environment. The room was filled with art, sculptures, paintings, modern and ancient, all beautiful. Richly woven carpets on the polished marble floor. I could see no easy exits, however, unless some of those floor-to-ceiling glass panels were in fact doors. Or breakable.

My not-favorite Ursan, Plionarctos, M-fanned with a tray of appetizers, followed by—yes!—Agriarctos, our disguised friend Wart, bringing in tea.

"Thank you," I said to both Ursans as they served us, putting a hint more sincerity into my gratitudinal gaze at the former colleague who had saved our lives, perhaps more than once. "Nice to see some of the old crowd again." I took a sip of the gentle brew and added, "Where's the rest of your staff?"

Benedict waved a hand at the panorama beyond the window, pointing at the three moons in the rosy sky. "This planet in fact only has two moons. Our ship adds a certain '*je ne sais quoi*' to the *mise en scene*," he grinned. "And I can pop in every now and then to ensure their ambitions remain focused on their tasks and not on each other."

"And...and Nephil Stratum?"

“All in due time,” Benedict said, waving the Ursans away. He snapped his fingers as they X-fanned and we were surrounded by the soothing sounds of—

“Aaron Copland’s Appalachian Spring,” Spud chimed in.

“Conducted by Copland himself,” Benedict said. “While I admire the technical skill of the baroque masters, their work cannot capture the grandeur of the compositions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.”

“I’ll bet he loves Wagner,” I muttered to Spud.

It was Benedict who chuckled. “Not really, my dear, there *is* such a thing as ‘over the top’.” He took a few swigs of his tea as, smiling, he waved his fingers to the music. An expression of sadness crossed his face. “Humanity has so many divine gifts it can share with the universe. Pity it cannot conquer its demons.”

I flashed an image of NoOne, before I tossed back, “Physician, heal thyself, Benedict?”

“One must play the cards one is dealt, Rush, and at the level of your opponent, or else you will soon not have anyone with whom to play. That, by the way, became your brother’s curse.”

His words hit me smack in the gut. “Is John here? Do you know where he is? Did he,” I hesitated, “make it to Level 3?”

“He made it to the heaven he imagined. But a soul cannot survive for long in a vacuum.”

I softened my tone. “Please. We came here on our own because we thought he was in trouble. He worked with you. Can’t you help us?”

Smiling again, Benedict swallowed one of the appetizers. “Never thought I’d hear that question from a catascope.”

“We’re not catascopes in this brane. And we won’t turn you in to the Omega Archon.”

Benedict laughed. “Your naiveté is always amusing, Rush. I have no need to fear the Omega Archon. When it’s time, King Odious will lend me the Valkyries to pay back my many favors. We will return to Zygfed and the Valkyries will make short order of Zygfed’s fusible King.”

The terrorist rinsed his mouth with a sip of tea and then put down his cup. “But, no, Rush, I cannot help you.”

Another punch. Why was Benedict staring at my waist?

“He said cannot, not may not,” Spud interjected. “I would venture *his* Somalderis, Nephil Stratum, has failed at the quest to rescue John. *You’re* wearing the only Somalderis here that can.”

“Exactly, Escott. Nephil Stratum’s tender tendrils have kept your brother alive in his brane, but there is not enough energy in his prison purgatory for her to return him to *this* brane. That’ll be your task, if you survive.”

I looked first at Spud and then at Benedict. “I’ll survive. *We’ll* survive. Just tell me where he is and I’ll go get him.” My eyes fell on Anesidora’s ring. “It would help if I borrowed an Ergal.”

The beautiful woman shook her head. “Impossible. But I will assist with your crossing,” she said softly, “if you’ll be kind enough to deliver a gift.” In her delicate hands M-fanned an exquisite amphora, a delicate vase, its narrow neck stoppered by a giant sparkling ruby.

Spud laid a warning hand on my arm, but I brushed it away. “I’ll do anything to rescue John. Anything,” I whispered, before turning to Benedict, and adding, “I’m in.”

“Excellent,” Benedict glowed, “then let us take action—right after dinner.” He waved his hand and the music changed again, “Synthetic filet mignon always tastes better with a *soupeon* of Strauss.”

I had a hard time containing my excitement. For three years, I’d feared that I’d never see John again. And now, in a few hours, as in my happiest childhood moments, I’d be at his side.

Spud’s attempts to whisper in my ear were becoming annoying. Benedict’s beef was with the Omega Archon. We were off-duty in this brane, and we didn’t seem to be a target. In fact, we were being regaled like honored guests, with a meal fit for a king.

“It’s the least we can do to be polite,” I returned in a low voice. “And besides, it’s a free dinner, not a free lunch.”

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Dinner ended up seeming endless to me—and, in a nod to Spud, unnecessary. We had to humor Benedict (I don’t mind space opera, but I am so not a Strauss fan) but, after years of waiting, I was eager only to reach John. Spud and Benedict spent much of the meal arguing about Plato’s metaphysics, while I just poked at the food on my plate and pretended to listen to Anesidora’s hospital stories from her days as a nurse. I hadn’t seen my brother since I was fifteen. Would I be meeting the brave, strong, fighter that had so inspired me and my siblings? Or would my glimpse of him be fleeting as he hovered at death’s door?

Finally, an hour after sun-set, we M-fanned in a marble room that was entirely marble. Floors, ceiling, walls, simply marble, with no added decorations or furniture. Anesidora handed me the amphora, and laid her hands on my shoulders from behind.

“When you arrive at your, er, destination,” Anesidora whispered in my ear, “tell Hermes that we will join him soon.”

Oh-kay. What did they say in our uploads about Greeks and gifts?

“Ready?” Did I hear a note of urgency?

I turned my head. “Should I hold Sp—Escott’s hand?” I asked, as I clasped the jar next to my chest.

“No,” Benedict responded. “Close your eyes and we will take care of the transport.” He nodded at Anesidora who tapped her Ergal ring.

My last memory before I X-fanned was a cry from Spud, but I was traveling before I could make out his words. Once again, I felt as if my body had exploded, its pieces erupting from my core and spinning around the fragments of my spine. Curiously enough, I kept seeing the amphora orbiting my atoms, but, unlike me, completely intact.

And then, breathing heavily, I stood again united, suspended in the center of an enormous glowing sphere. Alone.

“Spud!” I shouted, looking around the empty sphere for my partner. Empty, except for me and the unscathed jar in my arms.

Grasping the amphora, I curled up into a ball, and jumped, spinning myself into a series of somersaults that floated me toward the sphere’s edge. My feet shot out to meet the boundary, and I bounced off the flexible substance and caromed across the diameter of the chamber, careening off impenetrable walls with my extended legs. Eventually, my

motion slowed to a stop and I found myself once again hanging in the middle of the sphere. I spat out an impolite curse.

The base of the sphere dissolved before my eyes and I found myself splashing into a large, shallow sea, with only my head and the jar rising above the bubbling liquid that licked my shoulders. My feet could barely touch the bottom, but I was able to kick and swim after a fashion towards a group of wizened humanoid heads that had gathered at the edge of my vision. There was still no sign of Spud.

“Anybody here ‘habla Ingles’?” I tossed off, not expecting an answer.

“We do not need hablar here,” blasted into my brain.

I twisted around to face my floating companions.

“Our thoughts are transmitted directly through ionic conductive currents,” a slightly more sonorous thought pierced my consciousness.

“Ah,” I said—or thought—who knows. Like CANDI, the Cascading Auxiliary Neurosynaptic Discharge Interaction, that sends wireless signals from our Ergals directly to our brains. “Where are we? And have you seen my friend? About my age, dark blond hair...”

“No, you are alone. This is your world. Make of it what you will.” One of the grizzled heads—I wasn’t sure which one—didn’t say.

I gripped the amphora. “Where’s Spud?”

“You can draw on your neurocache to see him.”

Before I could ask what the not-talking-head meant, Spud appeared before us, floating stiffly on the liquid’s surface. As he drifted by me, I was struck mute by my view of his face. The same gray eyes, aquiline nose, pale skin, and thin lips, yes. But his expression was frozen, lifeless. Whatever made Spud who he is was missing—this, this avatar, it had no soul.

“Make of him what you will,” resonated in my brain from another of the cerebral guardians.

“Don’t be afraid,” the avatar Spud announced. He swung his legs into the liquid and, sitting up on the surface, smiled at me with his trademark lopsided grin. “This Spud will be everything of which you dreamed.”

The look in his eyes had suddenly shifted from reassurance to adoration. An expression I’d never expected to see on Spud’s stolid face. Sure, I admitted to having a few fantasies starring my catascope partner once in awhile, but I knew the real Spud played for the other team. Like half the guys I’ve met in Hollywood. This Spud’s intense gaze as he swam towards me was totally out of character, and made me more uncomfortable the closer he approached.

Before I could raise my free hand and block him, Spud leaned forward and planted his lips firmly on mine, teasing my teeth with his serpentine tongue. “No!” I cried, pushing him away with my knees. “Stop! This isn’t you!”

The avatar pulled back and floated vertically before me, his expression once again vacant, waiting.

I spun round to accost the observing heads. “No! I want the real Spud! Where is he?” The heads looked at each other before one communicated, “He is not here. You are alone.

Make of it what you will.” Without another thought, all the heads, as well as Avatar Spud, disappeared. And I *was* alone.

• • •

Shiloh's Brane—where time is meaningless

"Hey," I shouted, holding up the amphora, "Is one of you Hermes? I was supposed to give you all a gift!" My thoughts echoed across the sphere, bouncing back and forth, fading slowly into an eerie silence. Those old geezers weren't kidding. Except for me and my mind, nothing else existed in this hollow ball. No disembodied heads. Certainly not Spud. And not John. With every passing minute, the nothingness crept closer, surrounding me, drowning me with its emptiness. I felt my heart beating fast, my breaths growing short. I had to get out of here, now.

Still holding the amphora, I crouched into the liquid and sprung up to try to reach the sphere's ceiling. Would I be able to diffuse through the membrane as I had done in the spheres on Benedict's planet ship? If not, perhaps I could use the stopper's ruby to slice a hole through which I could escape this vapid prison. My arms, and then the ruby's tip, only stretched the sphere's wall; ruby, amphora, and I were shot back down to land onto the shallow liquid, whose level had somehow dropped to my kneecaps and continued to diminish.

At this rate, very soon, there'd be nothing but this spherical trampoline imprisoning me, a void filled only by oxygen and my anxious thoughts. But, wait a minute, if the liquid *was* disappearing, there had to be a drain or some other means of exit that I might be able to take advantage of, too. I slipped off one of my shoes, and waded across the length of the shrinking sea, hoping to find a hole leading out with my bare toes.

Nothing. The liquid's molecules must be able to diffuse through the sphere's membrane. Without an Ergal, I couldn't micro and get small enough to follow. Shoe on. Back to Plan A.

I glared at the ruby stopper. Why couldn't you be sharper, dammit? And if I ever did manage to get out of here, Anesidora would be pissed that I'd messed up her goodwill gesture. I was about ready to toss the amphora to my feet in disgust, when I realized, albeit late, that maybe I had a Plan C. Yes, it finally occurred to me to open the jar. So I did.

A thin plume of smoke rose from the amphora's opening, curling and looping into a spiral that grew to fill the open space around me. The wisps felt warm against my moist skin, bathing me, and drying the traces of the fluid still clinging to my clothes. Contracting, the wisps started to gather into a discrete cloud, which soon formed the shape and form...of a Syneph!

"Ha," I grinned, adding in Zygan. "Dude, am I glad to see you."

"My name is Helpus Stratum," the Syneph responded with the language's phonetic squeaks, "but you may call me 'Dude' if you wish. I am grateful to you for releasing me from my confinement."

I pursed my lips and nodded. Dude was obviously unfamiliar with slang. "Your name's very appropriate, Helpus Stratum. How long have you been...confined?"

"Since the birth of the Ifestian civilization. I am— was—considered a danger to their survival. You speak Zygan, but you are not Ifestian. Are you from Megara?"

"Terra," I corrected. "A small planet at the edge of the—"

"A child of Gaia has traveled into the netherworlds?" The Syneph sounded incredulous. "I should have wagered that Prometheus' folly would have borne fruit eventually. No matter," the Syneph sighed. "It is now my obligation to repay you for unchaining my bonds."

“Do I get three wishes?” I muttered, straining to remember who Prometheus was. *I need you, Spud.* I burst out, “Okay, first, I want to find my brother John. Second, I want us to get my partner Spud, and, third, I want us all to get home safely. Should be less than a day’s work.”

Helpus Stratum didn’t respond for a long time. “Be careful what you wish for,” the Syneph finally returned. “But, perhaps I could be of some aid. Tell me, Terran, where exactly is your brother John?”

Chapter 8

Prometheus Unbound

“Nephil Stratum.”

The Syneph turned pitch black for a moment, then retreated to a grayish shade. “Explain.”

“My brother John is with Nephil Stratum.” I kept my voice even. “Find her with that communications thing you all do, and you’ll find John.”

Grumbling, Helpus Stratum grabbed the ruby stopper from my hands with a smoky wisp, and secreted it inside a fluffy pouch. I laid the amphora on the sphere’s damp floor and waited in silence again for several minutes, stroking the soft wool of my Somalderis and trying not to fidget as the Syneph’s color wavered between blue and gray.

Suddenly, Helpus Stratum’s wisps enveloped me, smothering me in a foggy mist. Each breath blasted cold moist air into my lungs, air so thick that I gasped and gagged, thrashing my arms and legs to try swim out of the frigid white cloud. A wave of dizziness—and then my head broke through the fog into the blackness. And I could breathe.

But I couldn’t see. Not even a whisper of light, a darkness that made me long for the caustic blanket of Helpus Stratum’s smoke. Helpus Stratum?

“Helpus Stratum?” I cried.

The faintest shimmer of luminosity next to me. I felt a warmth, a softness, cradling me, opening my eyes. Before me, a welcome sight, was a familiar downy white cloud. I smiled. “Nephil Stratum.”

“Shiloh Rush,” was the quiet reply.

I could view little before me, but had a feeling that Helpus Stratum was no longer with me, us—wherever we were. “John?”

“He’s here,” Nephil Stratum said, as a flicker of light shot out towards my feet. “Helpus Stratum can be a cruel ally, but, this once, a saving grace.”

I looked down to see a prostrate John, cachectic and cadaverous, his sunken eyes blinking furiously to stave off the luminous assault, his expression revealing first confusion and then relief at the sight of his sister by his side. His emaciated arm shook as it reached out towards me, his mouth opened a sliver to let out a hoarse moan. Where was the indestructible mentor that had inspired me to literally reach for the stars? Now my brother needed *me* to save *his* life.

I knelt down and took John’s bony hand, warming it in mine. My other hand stroked his chilled forehead as I whispered. “Yes, John, I’m real.”

John squeezed my hand so hard it hurt my fingers. My eyes brimming with tears, I loosened my grip and his hand slipped out and rested on the soft Somalderis wrapped over my lap. John’s shaking stopped, his muscles relaxed. Letting out a long sigh, he smiled and closed his eyes.

• • •

John's Brane—where time is meaningless

A thunderous clap preceded the flash of light. I held my hand up in front of my face and looked away. Three not-talking-heads had just appeared before in what I could now see was another sphere. But these three now had bodies attached. And wings. Guess the sea we'd all been floating in in "my sphere" had hidden those before.

"How came you here? This is not your world!" thought-cried the tallest, an ethereal young woman.

"Hey, can't disagree with you there," I shot back. "Just give us a few minutes and we'll be out of your golden hair."

"Silence!" shouted another winged being with a gruff voice. "Clearly the Syneph apostate is responsible."

Did he mean my grumbling genie? "Helpus Stratum?"

The woman snarled, "Helpus Stratum made the correct choice. You, Nephil Stratum," she turned to face my friend's puffs, "have betrayed us, and, for that, you will face dispersion!"

As the woman raised her winged arm, the third creature, a wizened old man, caught sight of my Somalderis and rasped, "It has returned! It shall be ours again!"

I took the opening and I jumped. Bouncing off the springy surface of the sphere, I leapt head first for the woman's trunk. Unfortunately, she must have been a holo, because I flew straight through her abdomen and landed on my face behind her back. Oops.

I did succeed in distracting her, though. She turned back to me, buying Nephil Stratum some time. A lightning bolt shot out of the woman's fingers, barely missing me as I rolled to one side and thrust up over everyone's heads

The second being aimed his own hand above his crown. I curled into a ball and pushed off the sphere top with as much force as I could muster, whizzing through his extended arm and his winged torso. I spied Nephil Stratum behind me, smothering the elderly apparition, and keeping him from grabbing the Somalderis as I slid past.

Landing on top of my brother, I wrapped an edge of my Somalderis over John's chest, I glanced up at Nephil Stratum, who had misted completely through the elderly man and was heading for us at a windy clip. "Go," I shouted, spotting both of the other creatures extending their hands in our direction.

Nephil Stratum's warmth enveloped us just as I glimpsed sparks arising from the creatures' fingers. Would we have time to get away before our bodies were seared with the lightning's flame? The elderly man raised both his hands and—

My body exploded into a million pieces, each only a few microns in size. I felt the pain of my atoms tearing apart, screaming for the cohesion of unity that was razed by the explosion. And John's atoms, crashing into mine, giving me a flashing glimpse of the maelstrom in his dying mind. The screams in the molecules of my ears were coming from his soul. Without the structure of his body, John had nothing left. And nothing was what he had always feared the most.

• • •

Benedict's Lair, Valholler—present day

The Persian carpets in Benedict's living room suite felt soothing on my aching skin. I lay on my back taking deep breaths until my heart rate slowed down and the spinning sensation passed. And then I remembered. John!

Next to me, John's eyes were still closed, his breaths shallow, irregular. I sat up, and looked around the empty room for Nephil Stratum, Spud, Benedict, anyone. Help!

I heard the rustling of a long gown behind me.

Anesidora. "He needs help," I cried, "you're a nurse."

Smiling, Anesidora walked over to John and laid a hand on his forehead. "I don't have the luxury of knowing Zygan medicine, but I have learned a few techniques from King Odious' shaman." She tapped her Ergal ring, and summoned a chalice which she lowered to John's parched lips.

John's eyes flickered for a few moments as a golden liquid dripped into his mouth. As Anesidora pulled back, John's body shook, and he turned his head to look at her and then at me.

"Shiloh?" was his only word, before he lay back and drifted into a peaceful slumber.

"He will sleep for a day while his body heals," Anesidora said as she stood up.

"Sunsets are nearing, and you would be wise to rest too before your return."

"So you're going to just let us go back to Earth?" I sat up, my eyes narrowed.

"Good heavens, yes," Anesidora patted my hand. "Theodore has no use for—no reason to fear you young people." A muttered afterthought. "There is very little that he does fear anymore."

A half-question. "You all'll be staying here?"

"Of course. Our work isn't done yet."

"What work?" I couldn't help asking.

"We have mysteries," she said as she levved John's body gently onto the plush couch, "yet to be answered. John's venture was a well-meaning effort to reach Level 3, but he obviously failed. It's now our turn to try."

Anesidora sounded so genuine, and almost convincing. But, she was a Benedict, so I wasn't going to totally let down my guard. Nodding, I forced a smile as I reached over and took John's hand in mine. To Anesidora: "By the way, where's Spud?"

She smiled again and X-fanned, leaving us alone.

• • •

I woke up, startled to see only darkness outside of the suite's glass walls. Night had fallen. John was still sleeping, his head resting in my lap. Besides his light snoring, I could hear no other sounds.

Where *was* Spud? He hadn't—I hoped— transported over to the universe spheres behind me and remained a prisoner in that hell of isolation? Benedict and his mother must have meant for me to make that journey alone.

Easing out from under John to not disrupt his rest, I tiptoed around the suite, looking for a door or exit. I pushed my chest against the floor-to-ceiling glass—it didn't give. Yet another prison. Damn!

No more amphorae, vases, or containers that might squirrel away another Syneph either. Obviously, Benedict meant for us to stay in this suite—calling out to him would not be much help. But, maybe...

“Agriarctos,” I whispered, “I’m hungry. I need food.”

Silence.

“I’m starving and dying of thirst,” I tried again. “Some tea, anything.”

Silence. Then, a large Ursan, looking like a rumpled polar bear, appeared before me bearing a tray of sandwiches and juice. Agriarctos!

“Thanks, Big A,” I said, patting him on the arm. I tiptoed up to whisper in his ear. “Can they hear us?”

A flash of light filled the room for a second. “E-shield. Now they can’t. Hurry up, kid, while they’re still asleep.”

I knew, but Benedict probably didn’t, that Agriarctos was really ‘disgraced’ Zygint agent Ward Burton. Was Wart really on assignment for Zygint, undercover, scoping out Benedict’s nefarious mission? Or was he a double agent, working behind the scenes to help Benedict as well? Either way, my using his real name might put him—and us—in danger. I had to be ultra-careful, and trust no one, including Wart.

“Brief me,” I mumbled, as I bit into a PnJ sandwich.

“Go back,” he whispered as he handed me the drink. “We’ve got it covered here now. And hide that damn Somalderis.” His eyes darted to the fleece still clinging to my hips. “It’s a magnet for trouble.”

I swallowed. “Is Spud okay? Where is he?”

“With Benedict. They’ve been alone in chambers all day.” Wart shook his head. “Without me.”

I winced. Spud alone under Benedict’s influence? “Is that a good idea...?”

“Escott isn’t the type to fall for the irrational. He’ll make the right decisions.” Agriarctos placed the plate with the remaining food on the coffee table and added softly, “When you three get home, take John back to his core. He’ll ‘ave to recover.”

Or did he say ‘He’ll Ev to recover’? “And you? What’s your game?”

“Survival,” Agriarctos growled as he disabled the E-shield and, with a hint of a salute, X-fanned.

Chapter 9

Homeward Bound?

The scent of bacon and eggs woke me up as the first rays of the suns filtered through the giant windows onto the plush carpet. In the adjacent dining room, Plionarctos was Ergaling bowls of breakfast dishes on the long table, which had been set for four.

I sat up and turned my attention to John. Anesidora's potion must be working—my brother looked much healthier than last night. His color had a hint of pink, his skin no longer sagged over his bones, his muscles were filling out. I was overjoyed to see John's eyes flicker open. He looked up at the ornate ceiling with a confused expression then swung his head in my direction.

“Shiloh! My God! Baby Sister!”

I scurried over and gave him a hug. “All grewed up.” I grinned, sitting next to him. “You look so good, big bro.”

John tried to sit up, then fell back, clutching his head in his hands. “Don't feel so good. Where are we?”

“My domain, Rush,” Benedict boomed, M-fanning into our view. “Or, I should say, Rushes.” He waved an arm at the dining room table, where I saw Anesidora was now taking a seat. “Breakfast is served.

The invitation was welcome. I was actually hungry. And, it would do John some good to have something to eat.

A groan by my side drew my attention back to my brother. “Get up slowly,” I warned him, earning the expected glare. Wincing, he took another stab at sitting up, this time with greater success. “Benedict, you bloody bastard,” he growled as his eyes focused on his old mentor. “Took you long enough to come get me.”

“We certainly have a lot to talk about over a delicious meal,” Benedict parried.

John staggered to his feet and, donning a brave smile, stumbled towards the table with an unsteady gait. I ran up behind him to spot him, just in case, then jumped ahead to pull out his chair. Anesidora had already dived into a fluffy omelet. But, where was Spud? And Nephil Stratum?

John let gravity drop him into his seat. His hands gripped the edge of the table, easing their shaking. The road back from the grave would be longer than he was willing to admit. Plionarctos spooned a large serving of scrambled eggs onto his plate, and, seeing John's hesitation, grabbed John's fork with a hefty paw and shoveled a sizable bite onto the tines, growling, “Eat”.

John patted the Ursa's arm. Gingerly, he picked up the fork and moved the eggs toward his lips, pausing to sniff the sulfurous odor before opening his mouth.

“That's one thing they didn't get,” John said after he swallowed, “Smell. Nothing had a smell.”

“I'm sorry. I really could use a shower,” I admitted. “And a change of clothes.” I eyed Anesidora's Ergal—a new pair of jeans and sweater would be nice.

“Then they weren't Helianthi,” Benedict interjected, confusing me.

John shook his head. “No. Nor Zygan.” Benedict ventured, “Cathars?”

“It's possible,” John said before diving into the remaining eggs.

What in the world were they talking about? I chewed on my hash browns, trying to remember. When we'd been trapped on his ship, our former Earth Core Chief Gary had threatened to 'catharize' us. He'd used a neuroinvasive device shaped like a grapefruit to delve into our minds and tear away our innermost secrets. If I hadn't learned tlyp'ath from the Ifestians and blocked the mental invasion, my very essence would have been vacuumed away. Gary had been Benedict's very first "test pilot" into the branes beyond. Had he visited that horrid sphere world where I'd found John and brought back some of their brain-draining technology back to our universe? From the Cathars?

"I was outnumbered and they grabbed the Somalderis. I held out as long as I could," John added. "But the isolation was lethal. Nothing is worse than nothing. Thank you for sending me the Syneph. She kept me going and saved my life."

"Where *is* Nephil Stratum?" I interrupted. "And Spud?"

"Spud?" asked John.

"My partner. My fellow catascope. William Es—"

"You, a catascope?" John exploded in laughter. "George, maybe, or even Blair, but I never thought *you'd* fall victim to the Omega Archon's cultish wiles."

I frowned. John's Ergal had literally dropped into my hands and had led me to Zygint. I'd always thought his Ergal had been meant for me. "But you were a catascope, too. Why—?"

"*Were* is the operative word, Sis. I was taken in by the divine promise of the grand theatre, fabricated by the majestic Omega Archon. Took Benedict here to show me the light."

John *must* be putting on a show for Benedict's benefit. Isn't that what catascopes undercover had to do? The words stumbled from my lips. "I-I was just following—trying to find you." Why was my vision growing misty?

Chuckling, John patted me on the shoulder. "Well, on that count, I'm glad you did. Hey, can somebody pass me the eggs? I'm ready for seconds."

• • •

I said nothing more for the rest of the meal. Benedict and Anesidora peppered my fast-recovering brother with questions about his solitary confinement in the sphere. Though resembling the spheres that stored Zygan neurocaches in Zygfed's RAM, John's prison sphere had been vastly different, not just in size.

"In my sphere, I didn't even know that I had died," admitted Anesidora. "I felt as if my experiences were real, concrete, and entirely under my control. I believed that I could have everything I wanted and that all my wishes would come true."

Benedict patted his mother's arm. "Well, one certainly did."

I felt a shiver of disgust. Too weird a vibe there for me.

John snorted. "They didn't even let me have my thoughts for comfort." He clasped his head in his hands, his face contorting in agony. "I'd hoped to find the truths I'd been looking for, but I discovered nothing. Just nothing. Hell, I've been afraid of nothing all my life."

The mist washed over my eyes again. John's search for answers had left him isolated, with only the echo of his own voice as company. And that voice, so alone, had changed. How could it not have?

I felt myself longing to connect with something familiar. Spud, Nephil Stratum, even Wart. Eloquent words flew back and forth at the table before me, yet I felt more and more excommunicated, desolate. As I watched John's flourishing features assume a healthy glow before my eyes, I wished George or Connie could be with me to welcome our brother, as well as to assuage the gnawing anxiety tearing through my gut. I missed my friends, my family—and *my* John.

I couldn't hold back much longer. "Spud. I want to see Spud," I cried.

Benedict smiled at me and nodded. Anesidora touched her ring and I was X-fanned from the dining room. Alone.

• • •

Gunner. With the barb of her staff pointing directly at my heart.

Damn.

"The Vizier sent me," I said quickly, raising my hands. "Don't shoot."

Frowning, Gunner stepped to one side. Behind her, on a massive, ornate throne, sat a handsome young man; sprouting from underneath his golden crown were blond curls covering his bare, sculpted arms, on which rested two black ravens. The young man's piercing blue eyes were focused on me.

"You escaped the Cathars. That is honorable and worthy of a reprieve," he said in a deep voice. "The Vizier chooses his acolytes well."

"King Odious, I presume," I ventured. Somehow, I'd imagined the king as being old and gray. Come to think of it, no one except Marlin looked old and gray in Valholler. Not the warriors. Not Gunner, not Benedict, not Anesidora. Only those screeching skeletons in the pits from which we'd fled. Everyone else appeared as young as me and John.

"I am seeking my friend Spud," I said. "Know ye where he be?" (Sometimes, I do get carried away with the dialects I'm using. Come to think of it, seeing as I was without an Ergal to translate our conversations—where did all these Azgaror folks learn English?)

"If you are referring to William Escott," Odious returned, unsmiling, "We expect him to return momentarily."

"Where did he go?" Spud would never have abandoned me. Us.

Odious' sigh carried the weight of millennia. "The Vizier is only the most recent of our immigrants seeking passage to the world of the Creation. Our 'way station', as it were, provides and nourishes the armies that guard that path. A thankless task, indeed."

Gunner snorted. The chamber shook. I jumped.

"It seems sometimes as if every ambitious and corrupt general in the multiverse ends up at our doors." Odious opined. "I really do believe that hubris must be a necessary driver of inter-dimensional transport."

Gunner laughed, a deep, bellowing guffaw. I jumped.

"Theodore Benedict is actually quite refreshing. To consent to allowing your companion to tackle the excursion first was most sagacious. You understand why I have entrusted Benedict to serve as my Vizier."

"Wh—what're you talking about?" I was livid. And terrified. We had just rescued John from his misguided journey to what he'd hoped would be Level 3. Spud couldn't be foolish enough to try the same trip. And force me to attempt another rescue. "You're saying Spud is test piloting a trip to—to?" Those Cathar monsters wouldn't let me, us, Terrans, escape twice.

“Yes,” Odious said, “The launch portal to heaven. But there is much advance study needed before the transport can be tried. His measurements will be able to determine whether the Syneph can muster enough energy from our dwarf suns to bypass the Helianthi and their Somalderi.” The King smiled at me, adding. “The guardians of Heaven’s Gates.”

I returned the smile, pretending to understand, my fingers unconsciously stroking the Somalderis hidden under my puffy silk blouse. That was the second time that word—Helianthi—had come up this morning. It did sound a bit like Project Helios, my brother’s secret mission. Were those Cathars that had cruelly imprisoned John for his attempt Helianthi, too? Perhaps Spud or Nephil Stratum might be able to fill me in.

“I can do it.”

The warm mist tickling my shoulders had a familiar and welcome aura. Nephil Stratum.

• • •

And Spud. Leaning against a marble column with his lopsided grin.

“Took you all long enough,” I bluffed, nodding at Odious. “Benedict expected you hours ago.”

“We had to double check our estimates,” Spud chimed in. “Wouldn’t want any surprises during transport.” Spud winked. At me?

“If you can open heaven’s gates without a fleece,” interjected Gunner, “We will finally be free of the Helianthi and can return Balder to his rightful home.”

“Now that would be cause to celebrate,” Odious echoed. Turning to me: “Tell the Vizier we shall meet in the Champions Hall at solar apex. It is time to begin our campaign. We must prepare for the return of Balder.”

“I can get you some Rogaine,” I muttered under my breath, earning an elbow in the ribs from Spud as he grabbed my wrist and tugged me towards a large door that Nephil Stratum was opening.

The minute we had entered the deserted passageway and were out of earshot, I turned on Spud, grabbing his arms. “You’re actually planning to go with Benedict to Level 3?”

“I am relieved you have returned safely,” was the quiet response as he extricated himself. “And I am flattered by your concern.” His smile returned. “I was just helping Nephil Stratum with her next steps.”

“It isn’t possible, Shiloh,” whispered Nephil Stratum in Zygan, “for a Syneph to manage that passage unless the Helianthi approve. But if Benedict were to understand that, he would then steal your Somalderis.”

“Why hasn’t he done that already?” I dared to ask that nagging question.

“Because the Fleece is also empowered by the Helianthi. It can transport us from brane to brane in Level 2, our multiverse, but without their endorsement, it cannot unlock the gates of Level 3. Benedict would find himself cast out into the vacuum of the Cathars, just like John.

“Despite that possibility, I do not trust that Benedict might not take the risk of ending up in Cathar Hell if he believes he has no other choice.” She patted my arm. “Our first goal is to get you safely home.”

“So you don’t trust Benedict after all,” I returned. I’d been heartbroken to think Nephil Stratum was one of the “bad guys”, a Zygfed traitor. I lowered my voice. “Are you working with Agriarctos?” I asked, hoping she, like my brother, like Wart, was really working undercover.

“Sort of. But we shouldn’t chatter too much here, Shiloh. We need to get you and Escott—and your brother—on your way before Benedict sacrifices you all and tries to use your Fleece as a battering ram into the gates of heaven.”

“Works for me. But won’t you be in danger when he finds out you can’t make the crossing either?”

Nephil Stratum stroked my cheek gently with a warm tuft. “I have...abilities that can protect me from Benedict’s rage. Do not worry about my safety—just take care of yours.”

I wrapped my arms around her downy trunk and buried them in her cloudy clusters. My voice was hoarse. “Will I see you again?”

“I hope so, Shiloh, I hope so. When the time is right. Til then, if you must, you can reach me through Alto Stratum. But only in an emergency. I have to stay here to make sure the lock stays on the gate,” she said, as she opened a door that suddenly appeared beside us and led us into Benedict’s salon.

Chapter 10

The Grate Escape

I was stunned to see how healthy John looked; it had only been a short time since I'd left his side at the breakfast table. His cheeks had filled out, his skin was rosy, and his eyes gleamed with an energy that I hadn't seen since that long night of cryptic discovery at the University of Maryland synchrotron years ago. Anesidora's magic medicine seemed to be even more effective than the healing powers of Chidurian ale.

"Congratulations!" John cried as we entered Benedict's suite. "Level 3 is within our grasp."

"Word travels quickly," Spud commented, with a side glance at Nephil Stratum. "There is still much research to be done, but Nephil Stratum will be able to guide you."

I was dimly aware of Benedict shaking Spud's hand, and Anesidora extending an arm to pat Nephil Stratum. My own eyes were focused on my brother's face—in shock. John couldn't possibly intend to stay here—with *Benedict*—and try again. Not when I—when we *all*—desperately wanted him to join us back home.

I stood frozen, blinking, hoping my ears had misled me.

"Is there any way we can convince you to stay, Escott?" interjected Benedict before I could respond. "From the standpoint of 'scientific curiosity', perhaps?"

"I am afraid that my scientific explorations are best confined to my native brane," Spud said. "But I should be interested in reading a monograph about your voyage after your return." He smiled at Nephil Stratum. "Any communications would be fascinating."

Nephil Stratum assented. "We'll keep you in the loop, William, I guarantee."

John rested a hand on my shoulder. "So make sure you tell George and Connie and the kids I'm all right, okay? Don't want them to worry."

"No!" I shouted, brushing John's arm off me. Everyone turned in my direction, including Spud's rising eyebrow.

"I didn't say it when I should've, three years ago, but I'm saying it now—no! That's enough, John, no more Holy Grails. You're coming back with us."

John extended his hands, palms up, and nodded at Anesidora. "Look at me, Shiloh, there's nothing to worry about, I'm back 150%. She's one hell of a nurse."

"That's not—I'm not talking about your health, John. I'm talking about *ours*." I stopped to catch my breath. "Billy isn't even a teenager yet. He needs his older brothers and sisters."

John's brow shaded his blue eyes. "Didn't you tell me you were working as a catascope? Those responsibilities must be wreaking havoc with *your* babysitting duties."

I pursed my lips. "Connie and George don't need me to babysit. But at least *I* see Billy once in a while. Besides, I joined Zygint to try to find *you*."

John sighed, "And I'm grateful you succeeded. But don't make me *your* Holy Grail. I'm just your brother, healthy and whole. Your *adult* brother."

I snorted. "Ha. Pot. Kettle. Black."

"How dare you!" John's pink face was now ruby red as he aimed his glare in my direction. "You insolent little brat—"

Before either of us could swing, we were enveloped in a blinding cloud. Nephil Stratum had flown between us, blocking our sight, and wrapped her fluffy puffs around

my chest. I felt a misty tendril inch inside my blouse and make contact with the Somalderis. Was that shadow to my right my brother or Spud?

“Anesidora,” cued the Syneph. “Now.”

And we all exploded into a million molecules again.

• • •

Area 51—present day?

Spud must have come to first, as he stood over me waving our Ergals when I flicked open my eyes. My arm instinctively went to cover my brow; the blinding sun of the parched, Nevada desert would take a few minutes to get used to. Except, the sun was somehow shaded by trees. And the dirt and chaparral that I’d expected to be scratching my arms and legs under my supine body had morphed into soft grass. This wasn’t the Nevada we’d left behind in our interdimensional time loop, for sure. But if not, how did Spud find our Ergals?

“They were resting on the lawn right by our feet,” Spud explained as I stretched and sat up. In his hands, he held his “stopwatch” and my “smart phone”. “The compass reading confirms the same latitude and longitude from which we had departed for Benedict’s brane,” he added, focusing on his Ergal’s watch face.

“Well, at least they’re working.” I jumped up and made a quick scan of the lush forest. “Wow. Sure looks different around here. So green.” I nodded at the instruments in his hands. “What do you think happened?”

Spud tossed me my Ergal and shrugged. “I tried to find out, but I am only able to get simple, local functions such as the compass to operate. Communications aren’t running, and we can obtain no global metrics. Fortunately, the library and internal data banks do seem to be preserved. But nothing that actively connects with and utilizes Zygfed technology is operative.”

I fiddled with my Ergal as well. “You’re right. Mine, too. No non-Terran functions operational.” I tried several settings. “No morph, no lev, no invisible-izing. Damn.”

“And no weapons. I was unable to Ergal a stun gun, or even a Colt 45. Our Ergals had now become what they have been disguised to resemble—personal digital assistants and timepieces.” Spud pulled up a historical file and began to scan its pages. “Obviously, things here are not as we left them. The question is why?”

And then I remembered. “John!” John was lying a few feet away from where we stood, breathing softly, his eyes closed. “He still hasn’t woken up!”

“Wrong again, Sis,” he growled, opening his eyes. “I was hoping I’d wake up in Benedict’s suite tasting another dose of Anesidora’s divine nectar.” He sat up with a grunt and muttered, “And yet, here I am. Where the hell are we?”

“Area 51, Nevada, United States, Terra,” Spud recited as he continued his Ergal study. “However, we do not seem to be able to communicate with Earth Core, nor Luna Outpost.”

John cursed under his breath. “How’s your Somalderis? Still there?”

I felt under my blouse. Yes, the Somalderis was still wrapped around my chest, intact. But there was no Nephil Stratum within our sights.

Spud shook his head. “I did not expect that she would be making the trip back with us.” He sighed, and snapped off his Ergal. “Well, our historical records are of no

assistance. We are on our own. I propose we start ambulating towards the main base structures, which, I recall, are approximately 2.69 miles from the transport portal.” He pointed beyond a grove of bushes. “There is a dirt path over there.”

As I squinted in that direction, John ambled over behind me and rested his arms on my shoulders. “I don’t see it. Where?” he said, as we saw Spud heading off ahead.

Spying a narrow trail in the distance, I raised a finger to show him. “Ow!” The arm holding my Ergal was twisted back, and I lost my grip on the Zygan tool. I tried to spin around, but John’s other arm had trapped me in a tight hold. “What are you doing?” I cried.

Struggling to get free, I felt John’s arm reach into my blouse and pull on my Somalderis. His strength now far surpassed mine, thanks to Anesidora. “Spud! Help!” I cried.

John cursed as he dragged me towards, towards the portal, while trying to manipulate my Ergal that he’d caught with his free hand. “Just stay still. I won’t hurt you,” he muttered. “Now!”

I saw Spud turn and start running towards us. And then one eye saw flashing light and the other morbid darkness. John’s arm floated away in pursuit of his legs. My own limbs were somersaulting in orbit around my nose.

A sharp thud, and I felt the warm grass under my supine body once again. A second thud and John lay next to me, panting as I was, catching his breath.

I flung open my eyes, and saw an ashen Spud standing over us, glowering at my brother.

“Can’t blame a guy for trying,” John joked as he sat up with a grunt.

Neither Spud nor I were laughing. “You should be aware that transport requires both the fleece *and* a functioning Ergal.” Spud picked up my Ergal from the ground next to John’s feet and shook it. “Neither of our Ergals are able to provide the necessary power in their current state.”

“Dammit, John. We could’ve been killed!” I was furious. “For your stupid, stupid obsession.”

John rubbed his eyes, and didn’t meet mine. “Benedict and the Syneph are on the brink of a journey that no living human has been a part of, Shiloh. The chance to visit Heaven, Level 3, without the curse of death. How could I just walk away from that?”

“Nephil Stratum wouldn’t have sent you back with us if she wanted you on that voyage.”

John spun to face me. “And who appointed *her* God?”

“Who appointed *you* God?” I returned.

A harrumph next to us from Spud. “As a Deist, I find this conversation fascinating. As a traveller in what is now an even stranger land than your America, however, I suggest we postpone this discussion until we can deduce why this Nevada is no longer a desert, but resembles the Canadian tundra.”

John seemed poised to shoot back a reply, but held his tongue, murmuring, “You’ve got a good point there.” His brows knitted together. “If the topography of this region has changed so much, we’d better be ready for other changes. These Ergals don’t work, so we don’t have any weapons, right?”

Spud picked up a large branch from the brush and held it towards us like a cricket bat. “Better than nothing. Just in case we meet any other hikers on the path.”

We did the same. John used to be a Little League champion, and took the opportunity to practice a few swings with a thick cast-off. I could feel the wind brush past my face as he swung high and strong. I bet he could still hit a home run.

“What’s your name again? Ascot?” he growled at Spud.

“William Escott.” Spud’s tone was ice cold.

“Well, William Escott, I say we don’t take any chances. Do you have any evidence we’re even in the same century we left? What if we have to fight off rifles, spears, bows and arrows? Or go back even farther— dinosaurs? My batting skills won’t stand up to a T. Rex.”

“The date on my Ergal is one day after our transport to Benedict’s brane,” Spud said. “Even with a global catastrophe, there would not be enough time for our Jurassic ancestors to reclaim their lands in one day.”

John rolled his eyes. “I meant we should keep hidden. Parallel the path, but make our way through the woods. Let’s see them before they see us.”

Maybe my arms crossed over my chest gave my feelings away. John lowered his voice. “I had to try, Sis. It didn’t work. It’s over, okay?” He favored me with a hint of a smile. “We’re on the same team.”

“We were,” I grumbled. Clutching my makeshift club, I nodded at Spud to lead the way. Would that I could trust this, this *stranger* standing by my side. Another one of John’s favorite phrases was resonating in my memory. *Patience is the champion’s best tool*. Was John just biding his time until we could get our Ergals working, and he could try again to escape back to Benedict’s lair?

I watched my brother set off after Spud, and tried to swallow down the lump in my throat. I’d spent the last three years dreaming every night that I’d see John again. Where was the John of my dreams?

Chapter 11

New World Braves

We followed John's advice and kept a low profile among the trees on the path, using Spud's Ergal compass and the sun as a guide. Aside from some scurrying wildlife, there were no signs of habitation; human, at least.

After two hours of trekking, we had long passed the location where Area 51's offices, warehouses, hangars, and other buildings should have been. The mountains surrounding our valley looked little different than they had when we'd left, except for the tall pines that blanketed them in a coat of green. Far off to the northeast we could catch the first glimpses of a shimmering lake.

I was grateful for the hearty breakfast of "Eggs Benedict" in Valholler this morning, but eager for some water to quench my thirst. "How about we head that way and get some H-two-oh?" I suggested. "Doesn't look like the base commissary is open."

Ten minutes later, we had reached the water's edge. I carefully swept a few ounces of the lake's clear liquid in the palm of my cupped hand and sprinkled it my dry mouth. No side effects. I nodded, and we all ladled the liquid down our parched throats.

Spud sat on a flat boulder checking his Ergal as I splashed water on my face and neck. John, gripping his branch, kept a lookout on the horizon.

"Groom Lake," Spud informed us. "Really," John said, sounding surprised.

"Huh?" I was just as confused. Wasn't Groom Lake a *dry* lakebed? "How could it be so, well, wet?"

"It is only a theory, but I surmise that—"

"*Sas filoxenoume, xeno!*" a voice interrupted from behind.

We all spun around to see a tall, smiling man, whose dark curls framed his sharp features, extending both arms to welcome us. He was wearing a flowing white garment that covered his shoulders and ended just below his knees. His legs were tanned and muscular, his feet wrapped in green sandals, toes peeking through the straps of cornsilk. He continued to talk. We continued not to understand a word he said.

"*Nai, irthame apo makria,*" Spud suddenly returned. He tapped his lit Ergal to explain his fluency—apparently the internal translation banks were working.

Dubious, I activated my Ergal. Was this language in its data banks?

"A combination of ancient and modern Greek," Spud whispered in English before continuing in hybrid Greek, "We are seeking food and shelter."

"That is the right of every man," the man answered, as our Ergals translated, "and so we shall provide." He pointed at a trail off to one side. "Please join me."

We looked at each other, hesitant. John shrugged and returned the man's smile.

"You will not need your walking sticks," the man added, eyeing our branches. "We have assisted transportation."

O-kay. I glanced at my companions again. Spud jumped in, "A good walking stick is hard to find. Perhaps you would allow us to keep ours for the rest of our journey." Spud smiled as well. "I did not catch your name."

"I am Heron of Nea Alexandria," the man said, nodding at our weapons. "Alas, that is not possible. However, I can hold them and return them to you after you depart our town." He waved a hand toward a three wheeled vehicle resembling a triangular golf cart

that appeared parked behind a cluster of trees. How convenient. The cart had seats for four, three in the back and one in the front.

“Solar panels,” John said as we neared. “Look up top.” I could see the cells that absorbed the sun’s rays on the cart’s roof.

Heron took our sticks and stowed them in a vault under our seats. We sat, as directed, crowded together in the back, while Heron slid into the solitary seat in the front behind a notebook-sized screen. Heron then pressed a button on the cart’s dash and the screen lit up, looking— ha—like a colorful 2 D nav holo.

Heron’s fingers tapped several buttons on the display, and our cart lurched forward, its wheels crunching leaves and branches along the bumpy path. “Electric,” John relayed to us, “No engine noise.”

Less than a mile down the road, the cart steered onto a paved track, and we felt our seats jiggle and rise a few inches. “Maglev,” Spud inserted before John could open his mouth. “See the magnets lining the track there.”

I stifled a giggle at the sour expression on John’s face. Then my head shot back once again as we accelerated, sans wheel crunching, to a speed that rivaled John’s motorcycle on I-70. Without traffic. “Woo-hoo,” I ventured, but only the wind could hear me.

Giant windmills, tethered to the tallest trees, lined our way, and stretched for miles and miles on either side of us, their blades twirling as we whistled past. Every mile or so, a leg of the track would branch off in a different direction and disappear into the woods, a concrete spider web invading the forest. At each intersection, a small sign in the Greek alphabet as well as a few pictograph symbols identified the destination for each branch. The Greek letters on one sounded out as tʰiish Kóh, which my Ergal translated as “snake water” in Apache. Apache? Another sign read SháHashtaal in what my Ergal said was “Nabaxo”.

In minutes we reached a clearing and could see a settlement appearing on the horizon, shaded by luxurious maple trees. Our cart began to slow down, and I was able to hear our driver. “Nea Alexandria is only another twenty *decastadia*.”

Spud raised an eyebrow and did some calculations with his Ergal, as John and I focused on the landscape before us. “Is that a river?” I asked our host.

“Yes, the Amargosa. Our town is nestled against the bay.”

Another eyebrow from Spud. A quick glance at his Ergal showed he was following our trail on one of our maps. I shook my head. No point in trying to find our location on a world that clearly was not the one we’d left.

“And here we are,” Heron said as the cart exited the maglev track and, back on electric power, slowed to a stop in front of a tall stucco wall and polished brass gate. After we hopped out, the cart, wheels down, rolled by itself to a parking area filled with carts of various sizes and took an empty space in the lot.

“Where exactly is that?” John asked.

“Nea Alexandria is one of the larger Koinotist communities in the USA,” Heron boasted.

My intended question about the name Koinotist was trumped by my elation that we were in the US. Okay, maybe we weren’t that far from home after all.

But Spud did have to pierce my balloon of hope. “The USA?”

“Yes, the Utopian States of Anatolia, of course.” Heron indulged us, raising an eyebrow in Spudian fashion.

Double Doomed.

• • •

Nea Alexandria, USA—present day?

We had walked for what seemed like miles, winding through a network of paths paved with a spongy material that put a literal spring in our step. Lining the walkways were small one-storey cottages, each unique in its shape and color, but similar in size. The tree-lined streets of Nea Alexandria were filled with people, some tall, some short, some beige, some brown, some young, some old; most dressed like Heron, in toga-type clothes and sandals. Almost everyone smiled and greeted Heron as we passed. To our surprise, they also greeted us with the Greek version of “Welcome, Visitors”.

A few of the residents were using electric scooters or wheelchairs to get around, but we saw no carts or larger motor vehicles inside the town. All that walking seemed to keep everyone fit, I noted, as the pedestrians seemed to radiate that trim, healthy glow that makes most of my fellow actors in Hollywood the envy of Middle America. I didn’t see any fast food restaurants around, so...

“I’m hungry,” John said after a half hour on foot. “Is there a place here we can get something to eat?”

Another eyebrow and patronizing look. “Of course,” Heron finally replied, “Luncheon service should begin in a few minutes.”

I glanced at Spud. A faint shoulder shrug came back at me, which meant “go with the flow”. We did.

Heron guided us to a large auditorium which was filled with tables and chairs—and Nea Alexandrians. “We can eat now and then you can help with the clean-up,” he said, gesturing for us to sit. “Visitors usually find it the easiest contribution.”

“Ah” was all I could muster. A grey-haired man with pruny, wrinkled features and a hunchback^[34] served us a 9 inch plate of what looked like vegetables, beans, and tofu. That’ll keep those figures in check, I told myself, as I dived into the lunch provided. I was delighted to find the tastes strong and appealing. “Mmmm.”

“Yes, it is quite tasty,” echoed Spud, swallowing. “Not bad,”

John agreed. “But for seconds I’d love some beef.”

Gasps came from Heron and the tables around us. As did glares.

John scanned the now scolding faces. “What? What did I say?”

Heron cleared his throat. “We have evolved beyond primitive carnivorism here,” he chided.

John gulped down the veggies in his mouth and forced out the words. “Just kidding.” His eye roll to me made it clear he wasn’t. The sigh was superfluous.

Apparently, so were ‘seconds’. As soon as our plates were clean, Heron instructed us to collect them, along with those of the other diners, and carry them to the “processing room”—which very much resembled a kitchen.

“Please scrape off any remaining food into the gutter and place the plates on the conveyor belts,” Heron instructed. I noted the few scraps left would drain into a bin labeled “Anakyklosis”. Yep, “recycle”.

“I must commend you,” Spud said after we’d finished ‘paying our dues’, “on your efficiency.”

Heron raised both palms. “How could we be otherwise? Our resources are limited, and we must live moderately and judiciously. *Pan Metron Ariston*,” rolled off his tongue.

I recognized the ancient Greek phrase even without my Ergal. ‘Everything in moderation.’ Hoo-boy. Spud may have been impressed, but a place like this would be torture for me before long. I liked playing it closer to the edge. And then taking a flying leap. John’s sour expression seemed to also betray “A need for speed”. We needed to find out where we were—and how to get out of here—soon.

Chapter 12

Socrates Caves

“You can’t tell me that life doesn’t get boring in this—this utopia,” John admitted, sprinkling scads of sarcasm on the last word.

I’d expected Heron would be offended, but he just smiled, stepping aside and waving us into another large hall. This auditorium was filled with recliners, some arrayed in groups and some stationed solo. Some of the loungers were filled with Nea Alexandrians—in the diverse groups, those seated were engaged in dynamic discussions, a few penning intricate designs with geometric and mathematical symbols with a stylus on clay tablets. The loners seemed to be staring off into space, oblivious to the world around them. Weird. A few of the townsfolk, eyes dancing, were holding clay tablets that, on closer inspection, were actually screens with pictures and writing that resembled one-page books.

“We only limit what is limited,” Heron explained once we’d taken in the scene. “Natural resources are finite, imagination is infinite. Discussions, debate, communion. All cost us nothing but time.” He picked up one of the tablets from a shelf and turned the screen towards us. “Information to spur creativity and thought. Boring? We’d need twice the hundred and twenty years we live to absorb all the knowledge and lore at our disposal.”

I could see Spud brighten. “May I possibly obtain access to these data?” he asked, striving to keep his tone even.

“Of course,” Heron responded, pulling another tablet off a shelf and handing it to my partner, who eagerly began manipulating the inputs on the display. “Knowledge has even more value when it is shared and seeds synergy. We encourage and value open information exchange and review.”

I snorted. “Some fundamentalist religions would disagree with you.”

A frown creased Heron’s brow. “We came to this country to find freedom from religion. Except as a historical oddity, of course. Dogma is the antithesis of discovery.”

“Can’t argue with that,” John chimed in. “Though I prefer to physically visit new worlds rather than virtually think them up.”

Heron laughed. “I envy your certainty that that is what you are doing, Visitor. I daresay you’ll find plenty of the similarly beguiled in Nea Romi when you return.”

Anger flashed in John’s eyes. “What the—”

“Yes,” interjected Spud, laying a restraining arm on my brother. “Heron is correct. When does the next airship depart for the Atlantic Coast?”

“Tomorrow morning’s flight is to Nea Athina. From there, the train takes only three hours to get to Nea Romi. If you’d like, I can arrange beds for you tonight next to this library. You can continue your studies after you sup.”

I frowned. I was about to ask, “Shouldn’t we try heading west, towards our homes in L.A.?”

After signaling us to be quiet, Spud flashed an atypically warm smile at his host. “Yes, seats to Nea Athina would be excellent. We would like that very much indeed.”

• • •

I had to admit that even I couldn't wait to see what Spud had discovered—and what he had in mind. He refused to talk about his research until all the supper dishes were processed, and the three of us were walking back towards the library.

"I shall be continuing my research during the night," Spud informed us. "But there is light."

"Mind shining some of that light over our way?" John said, looking less than pleased.

"It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence," Spud returned. "I suggest you take advantage of the sleeping arrangements Heron has made, for we shall resume our journey in the morning."

"Journey? Journey to where?" I asked.

But Spud was already far ahead of us. Without looking back, he entered the library and disappeared.

• • •

Our sleeping quarters were in a corner of another auditorium. Only pony walls made of bark separated us from the snoring men in the next cubicle. I'd visited Japan on a publicity tour for *Bulwark* last winter and marveled at the tiny human drawers that some travelers used to catch a nap at the airport. With three mats on the floor, the cubicle in which we sat felt just as claustrophobic.

John was stretched out on the mat against the wall, his head resting on a feather pillow. I laid down next to him, my arms folded across my chest, my eyes glued to the thatched ceiling above us, unsure of how to begin.

"I couldn't do it any more."

I rolled over on my side to face him. "What?"

"Be a hero." He sighed. "Your hero."

"Wow." I swallowed an uninvited giggle. "Never asked you to." I rolled back onto my back, and stumbled on the words. "I just wanted my brother."

I heard his smile. "You have four others, you know." A hint of a chuckle. "George is enough brother for all of us."

"But he's not you." My voice cracked. "It's been almost three years. I missed you."

"I missed you, too. Especially you."

Another sigh. "Peas in a pod."

"Like hell." But a stealth grin did pull at my lips.

We said nothing for a few minutes. John had a point. He'd carried our whole family, all nine of us, for years after Grandpa Alexander passed. He deserved a break now that Connie and George could fill his shoes. A chance to do something for himself.

But, this? A futile quest in collusion with the most hated terrorist in the Zygan Federation. Why had he really chosen this path? Was he working undercover like Wart? Misguided, as I'd thought Nephil Stratum had been? Or obsessed with scoring a ticket to paradise like his loathsome mentor?

I turned on my side and asked the question.

"I'm on secret assignment for Zygint," he whispered.

"Ha." I waited.

Silence. A long silence. Finally. "What do you want me to say?"

"That you're on secret assignment for Zygint."

“Works for me,” he said, with a wink. “It’s good to know the right answers, isn’t it?” I hesitated for a moment. “In the Plegma—”

John sat up. “You went to the Plegma?”

“Uh-huh. Inside, there was this creepy guy, Mel, who tried to seduce us into staying—no, not that way.” I laughed when I saw his alarmed expression.

He laid back down, frowning. “He showed me like a 3-D holo, solid, of us, our family, all around the table. You were there, healthy, and—” my voice cracked—“so was Grandpa Alexander.”

Both of John’s eyebrows rose.

“He looked so robust. Like I remember him. How old was he?” I asked quietly. “In the end?”

John shrugged, “Grandpa? Thousands of years, I’d say. Never really knew. None of us ever thought he’d transition so soon.”

“And you’re trying to find him? In Level 3?” John met my eyes. “I expect to when I get there. That *is* where the Helianthi live.”

Furrowed brow. That word again. Helianthi. Unfamiliar from my Zygent uploads, my Zygan cosmology. “Who—what are the Helianthi?”

“Benedict never told you?” Genuine surprise.

Come on, John. “Benedict and I were never exactly on the same side.”

I saw John hesitate. “Maybe you’d better ask Gary. I don’t want to be telling tales out of school—Mingferplatoi Academy, that is.”

My turn to be surprised. John didn’t know that Gary, our former Head of Earth Core, another Benedict ally, had died trying to make a dimensional crossing. I echoed, “Benedict never told you?”

John shook his head.

I looked away. “Gary didn’t survive his last attempt to transition to Brane 5 or wherever we just were.”

John’s shock was palpable. He turned his head, brushing an errant lock of hair away from his eyes. I pretended not to see any lacrimal liquids.

“Maybe he finally made it to Level 3,” I ventured. “That was the goal, wasn’t it?”

No answer.

I waited a few minutes, until John cleared his throat. “So here’s my other question. Who was the red-haired woman at our table?”

Confusion on John’s face.

“In Mel’s mirage. Sitting next to Grandpa Alexander, there was a red-haired woman.”

“Andi?” A beat. “Our little sister.”

I rolled my eyes. “In her forties? Hardly. No, she was somebody else, somebody familiar, though I don’t remember meeting her before.”

John extended his hands in an ‘I don’t know’ gesture.

“Maybe she was Stacy?” When Wart and I had gone to the RAM on Zyga to steal back Anesidora’s neurocache for Benedict, my time loop avatar had shouted that I should ‘find out about Stacy’ just before she’d been vaporized by the Chidurian Sentinels guarding the chamber. But I hadn’t been able to discover who she was.

“Don’t know any Stacys,” John muttered. “With red hair or any other color.”

“You don’t think maybe...?” I led. No response.

The thought had flashed into my mind. I suppose I should've considered it sooner, but my memories before age six were misty after more than a decade. But John had been 14. "Our parents? Is that what this is all about?"

I could see the blood drain from John's face. He moved to speak and then fell silent. After an eternity, he turned to me, his expression sober. "Shiloh, I have something to tell you."

"Capital!" Spud appeared standing over us, aiming his tablet down towards our mats. "The library evidence proves my theory correct. We shall depart in the morning for Nea Athina."

Chapter 13

Led by Zeppelin

Spud's arrival silenced John for the rest of the night. Spud insisted we attempt to sleep, as, lacking functioning Ergals—or jet planes, we would be traveling for two days by airship. As in blimp.

My nudges and whispers for John to finish his remarks were ignored, though they managed to annoy Spud and earned me a number of glares from the locus of his mat. Looked like it would be a while before John and I could pick up our conversation.

Spud, somehow, was up before dawn and ready to go. Heron was another early bird, arriving at our inn with sandwiches made of pumpkin bread, vegetable slices, and cheese. One each.

I gave half of mine to John and followed the men down the road towards the launch field. I was surprised to see how many of the Nea Alexandrians were up and about on the streets.

“Early to bed and early to rise makes man healthy and wise,” Heron advised.

“You forgot ‘wealthy’,” John grumbled.

Heron's expression resembled that of a man who has stepped into something fecal on the street. “Wealth is not a virtue,” was all he managed to say.

Spud, ever polite, thanked Heron for his hospitality and assistance—with our accompanying nods.

“I had to ask,” I said to Heron, “How did you find us in the first place?”

“That is my contribution to the Koinotis,” Heron explained—a little. “I serve as a scanner, patrolling the hills and glades and welcoming our visitors.” His tone was guarded, as he added, “Though we are centuries past the Years of Transition to peace, there are still Xenoι who might represent a danger to our way of life.”

“Sounds ominous,” I said, trying to appear empathetic. “Barbarians at the gates. You'd fight back, right?”

Heron frowned, “*We* are not barbarians.” He took a visible deep breath. “We would sedate them and deport them, of course. The Barbarians are free to build the societies they desire in Oceania, oceans away from our havens and ports.”

John snorted, “That'll last long. Watch your back, folks. They'll return someday. Aggression always aggresses.”

“Aggression, my dear guests,” Heron returned, “is not a virtue, but a crime.”

The sun's rays were teasing the horizon as we arrived at the field where the massive silver ship was moored. At least several hundred feet long with a semi-rigid frame. The gondola was the size of a large van and could seat a dozen. “Helium, I hope,” I said to Heron, remembering the Hindenburg's fiery crash in the 1930's.

He nodded. “We used to use hydrogen but we lost the Osiris with a lightning strike outside Nea Romi thirty years ago.”

“Zeus was in one of his snits again,” joked a tall woman wearing earmuffs around her neck as she passed us, on her way to the ship.

“Hypatia will be your pilot,” Heron explained, chuckling. “The Nea Romaians weren't quite so sanguine about the tragedy, seeing as they get so many tourists from both Greater Romi and the Philaic states. So, helium it is.”

“Indeed,” replied Spud, sounding as if he understood all Heron’s references. John and I just did synchronized eye rolls.

We settled into cushioned seats in the back of the blimp’s gondola where we could chat. Hypatia distributed earmuffs for us all, promising to turn off the blimp’s whining electric motor after we had reached sailing altitude. At least we’d have a chance to pick Spud’s brain about what he’d discovered or deduced.

I noted that most of the other passengers had brought along their clay tablets, I guess to read, on the two-day voyage. They also carried knapsacks for their togas, and— “Are they providing food?” I asked Spud.

“Heron was kind enough to donate nutrition for the trip,” he responded, pointing to a small cloth bag which was filled with what looked like energy bars. “Our pilot has water.”

“Awesome,” said John, his tone implying the opposite.

If I wasn’t a Zoom Cruiser pilot I might’ve found the blimp’s takeoff off-putting. We rose at a steep angle of over 45 degrees. Glad to have the earmuffs—the engine strained to get the blimp up to 5000 feet. Hope we wouldn’t need that deafening engine power to handle bad weather along the way.

I must have said that aloud, as one of the other passengers turned to me and said, “Don’t worry. We land if there’s a bad storm and wait it out.”

I smiled and nodded thanks. This trip could take a while... Maybe we should’ve opted for a covered wagon.

We were gliding over Texas, or whatever the USA residents were calling it now, before Spud was willing to fill us in.

“I searched the historical records for three millennia,” he explained. “I was astonished to discover that this rustic library had access to data from much of the planet.”

“And?” I didn’t much care to hear about his research methods.

“It *is* relevant, Rush,” Spud chided. My partner knew me too well. “Because I observed that the changes we have witnessed did not affect the entire world. For example, the Orient, Japan, China, still exist, though as skirmishing sovereign empires.”

Spud eyed me and my brother. We both nodded. “Where I did observe earthshaking changes was in the Americas—which do not exist as such—Europe, and the Mid-East.” He paused for effect. “After a particular branching off point.”

“Really?” John frowned. “What do you mean?” “That up until a certain point, this Earth’s history was *our* history. After that, the timeline changed.” He cleared his throat. “It took me much of the night to find the intersection as I had to pore over written records from the ‘Coal Centuries’ and the ‘Oil Centuries’, the Moon settlements, the Crusades, and—”

“Come on, Escott, what’d you learn?” John interrupted. And I was going to ask about the Moon settlements.

“That the new ‘Europeans’ have unlocked the riddle of cold fusion. But this continent,” he pointed at the flatlands below us, “still fears the technology.”

“No, dammit, about the timeline.”

Spud bestowed upon my brother an irritated glare. “The timeline shifted within our first millennium. Specifically, in 33 AD.”

I felt a spasm grip my stomach. Had Spud somehow seen that date in the travel cache of my Ergal? I turned my gaze out the window, hoping that Spud wouldn't notice. But he did.

"Where did you get the Somalderis, Shiloh?"

I stiffened, not daring to answer. He didn't miss that either.

"Come on, Escott. What's the Fleece got to do with history?" John interceded.

I had never heard Spud's voice so arctic. "I have deduced that a young prophet," he said, "a self-proclaimed religious leader in the province of Judea, was given the Fleece to wear as an undergarment during his tortuous execution. Three days later after his death, he was to return and appear as alive before his followers, inspiring them to carry on his mission.

Spud took a dramatic breath. "But without the Somalderis, Yeshua Bar Maryam could not transport to heaven or resurrect himself to proclaim a miracle. He passed away, as have so many other visionaries, a footnote in religious history."

Spud's tone was fierce. "Where did you get the Somalderis?"

"I-I just borrowed it." I still couldn't face Spud. "I planned to return it as soon as we'd rescued John. But it took a lot longer for us to get back than I'd figured."

Spud's eyes narrowed. "You *stole* the Fleece from Yeshua?!"

"You'd understand if you had a brother." I reached out and patted John's hand.

A flicker of agony flashed across Spud's features, then his expression turned cold as ice. "You may have a brother, but it is likely that *I* no longer do. And your foolish actions have likely—I say that when we arrive in Nea Athina, we should take a jaunt to what was Maryland and see if your own brothers and sisters have survived."

My surprise at the notion that Spud had a sibling was trumped by the sudden shock of realizing that my actions to save John might have risked the lives of the rest of my family. Was that possible? If so, what in the name of heaven had I done? The tears I'd fought to hold back so many times in the past few days now fell without restraint. John, looking stricken, hugged me as I sobbed. Spud remained impassive, frozen in anger, his eyes boring through my waterfall with ongoing accusations of guilt.

Doomed. Or should I say, 'damned'.

Chapter 14

Truth and Consequences

Somewhere over the USA—present day?

It was the coldest trip I'd ever taken. Our voyage to Nea Athina lasted close to three days. We landed and waited several times along the way due to the tornados and violent late spring thunderstorms that were ravaging the Southeast. Hypatia fortunately had stocked some wool blankets that she loaned us so we could cocoon both in the clouds and on the ground. I chose to cover myself entirely with mine for the first leg of the journey, and avoid Spud's piercing unspoken accusations.

Had my well-intentioned plan to rescue John really affected the lives of billions of people, including, alarmingly, my own family? If so, was there any way we—I—could repair the damage and return things to what they were? And, if I could somehow reinstate our timeline, would I then be responsible for the, the deaths of millions, like Hypatia and Heron, who were alive in this new timeline today? The possibilities were frightening—I now understood why Zygan Federation controls on time travel were so strict, and why Zygint had a whole department at Zygint Central to prevent and monitor for potential timeline changes.

And the Zygan Federation itself? According to Spud's theory, as Zygfed wasn't driven by Earth history, our Ergals should have been working. Why weren't they? If we could somehow fix them and contact friends at Zygint, maybe we could get some advice and help with this disaster. And then I could flee from the Omega Archon before he sentenced me to Hell for a thousand years.

John tried to reach out to me—but, stewing in my guilty ruminations, I pushed him away. Spud wasn't inclined to talk to either of us, and had left our seats for an empty one near the front of the gondola. I wanted to be alone—and yet, I had never felt so alone.

I must've fallen asleep, because it was dark when I peeked out from under the blanket and saw Spud, back in his seat, conversing with John.

"I have little evidence on which to base a theory, but one hypothesis is that Zygfed and Zygint somehow no longer exist in this brane. At least as regards to Earth."

John scratched his head. "You mentioned a Moon mission. Think these people made contact and something negative happened?"

"Zygint's Luna Outpost," Spud corrected himself, "the one we left, that is, is underground. Doubt they'd be found if they didn't want to be." He put his fingertips together and leaned back. "No, there must be another explanation. I shall have to ponder the variables," he said, waving a hand and closing his eyes.

John sighed and looked over at me. I managed a wan smile. He rested a hand on my shoulder, and whispered. "I'm sure they'll be all right. Don't worry. Hope is the champion's best tool."

I frowned. "You used to say patience was."

John laughed. "Neither of us is very patient, Sis—and thank heavens for that." His eyes twinkled. "I'm betting on hope."

I gave him a big hug.

• • •

A memory from the year before, Earth

John's encouragement had helped shake me out of my funk. I fed myself the mantra that I was a catascope—and needed to rein in my emotions and stay sharp and ready to handle every new contingency. And I was also a Rush—and Rushes, John included, knew how to pull rabbits out of hats.

Using those talents, I'd even gotten us—me and Spud—a Zygan Federation Auric Star a mere six months after we'd completed our training at Mingferplatoi.

We'd been assigned to a routine temporal recon shift of the inner planets of our own solar system. Temporal patrols were rarely more than a formality in our bucolic octant of the Milky Way, so I wasn't expecting trouble—except maybe a headache from the incessant wailing from our speakers of a singer Spud had been raving about for weeks. Some Italian guy, Enrico Caruso, whose booming solos were tickling my bones and making our windscreens resonate. Fortunately, barring the opera, the afternoon had otherwise been quiet.

“Five battalions M-fanned at forty-eight mark five, status one thousand meters!” Spud suddenly blared, trumping Caruso. His eyes were glued to a holo display that had been scanning the past century. SRG (pronounced ‘serj’) fleets had been known to invade industrial planets like Earth in order to drain energy to re-fuel their ships, wreaking havoc on critical electrical supplies and infrastructure.

I kept my voice steady. “Contact metrics?”

“1965, 9 November, Ontario, Canada, 5:12 PM. Looks like they're heading for our power lines.” At extreme magnification, the scan holo showed a gaggle of tiny blips that seemed to be aiming for the vital electrical grid blanketing North America's Eastern Seaboard. I immediately activated our cruiser's Ergal to take us back in time to the location of the target coordinates.

Our ship M-fanned in 1965 and raced to catch the SRG. “They're only thirty seconds from power line entry,” Spud updated, continuing to track the intruders, as we sped towards our quarry.

“We're not going to make it!” I grunted, and, ramped up the Zoom Cruiser's propulsion to maximum. We watched our holos in dismay as the spherical SRG ships entered the power lines through a Queenston station transformer, and started a cascade of blackouts all over New England as they traveled along the wires. Spud muttered an inaudible curse.

I ordered our ship to miniaturize to SRG scale as quickly as possible. To have a tactical advantage over the invading fleet, we mini'd our ship to only sixty microns, ten times the size of the SRG vessels. Small enough to fly inside the power lines, but still big enough to intimidate the SRG.

The SRG began siphoning electrons for their turbines, knocking out the lights city after city from Toronto to Manhattan. As the SRG vessels charged down the lines, their turbine exhaust gave off a trail of yellow-green light.

On our holos, the northeast corridor of the US now looked like an intricate spider web of glowing power lines. In hot pursuit, we squeezed our own miniaturized craft into the lines through a small hole in a transformer drum in New York, and finally caught up

with the SRG battalions. Hoping to profit from the element of surprise, we armed our stun beams and aimed them at the—

Crack! Our ship shook as we were hit with a burst of fire from a regiment of SRG that had somehow snuck behind us in the power line.

“Evasive!” I ordered nav controls, while Spud assessed the damage.

Crack! Crack! Eruptions of lightning surrounded our ship as the SRG weapon bolts bounced off the electrons in the power lines to create a torrent of self-perpetuating sparks that enveloped us in a prison of photons. *Crack!*

“We’re intact so far, and our grounding is holding,” Spud reported, “but we need to get out of here.” *Crack! Crack!* “Soon!”

The lightning bolts were coming at us from both directions now, as SRG regiments in front of us in the power line had turned to attack us as well. Hoping to stall, we fired our stunners in a 360 dispersion, managing to de-power several SRG vessels, but we still couldn’t stop the rest of the fleet from hammering us. We had to X-fan out of the power line, or we’d be electrocuted.

The idea came to me—like a bolt of lightning. Those math uploads we got at Mingferplatoi had really paid off after all. Shouting “Möbius!”^[35], I entered the data into our ship’s weapons control as fast as I could and initiated the program.

We launched two of our fusion torpedoes, followed by hardy micro-robots, one towards each end of the power line in which we were trapped. Seconds before the torpedoes reached the ends of the power line and exploded, we X-fanned our ship out of the cable. The explosions sliced the segment of the power line we’d just exited off its towers, and the thick cable fell twisting and flapping towards the ground, sparks flying from each end. The micro-robots quickly sealed the severed ends of the flailing line together, turning the power line into a closed figure-eight loop like a 3-D Möbius strip which preventing the SRG fleet from flying out. Hovering at a safe distance, we watched the figure-eight land on a deserted wheat field, a twisted ring inside which the SRG orbited endlessly, giving off a circle of green glowing light.^[36]

And giving me another idea. We tracted the Möbius strip power line with the imprisoned SRG to the Moon and parked it at Luna Outpost for safekeeping while I commed our Chief Gary at Earth Core to clear my suggestion.

What if we found a way to give the SRG the fuel they needed to fly through our sector and get something out of the deal ourselves? Instead of wasting Zygent time guarding our power lines, we could set up factories on Earth to build small porous plastic tubes and fill them with electrons to make a kind of nano-battery. When the SRG needed to refuel, they could fly to these tubes, filter through the microscopic pores, fill up their tanks on the electricity, and release their engine waste. The SRG waste would then light the tubes yellow-green for a few hours and we could make a few bucks selling the tubes.

Gary loved my suggestion and let us pitch it to the SRG Consul on Zyga. And so, light sticks and light ropes were born. A field team from the Zygfed Bureau of Planetary Advancement developed a dummy front company on Earth and had the manufacturing plants for the plastic tubes operational in the US by 1966. Before long, the light sticks and ropes were everywhere. When needed, SRG were able to find “gas stations” all over Earth, and Earth never had a blackout that big again.

Spud wasn’t the type to lavish me with compliments, but he did say I was ‘a competent magician’, who’d extracted a lagomorph from millinery.

Or, as my Ergal translated, pulled a rabbit out of a hat.

• • •

Over the Eastern USA—present day?

“We’ll be touching down in Nea Athina in an hour,” Hypatia announced as we glided over the Appalachian forests. My nose was glued to the gondola’s windows, scanning the mountains below for signs of habitation. I nudged John. “Remember the hike we took in Shenandoah,” I began.

“Two hundred kilometers south of us,” Spud interjected, in robot mode. “We are currently near the border of what was Pennsylvania and Maryland.”

“Where is Nea Athina?” asked John.

“At the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay,” Spud said. “Not far from what had been Annapolis.”

John nodded. I said nothing. Spud had resumed talking to us, but our partnership weather was definitely wintry.

Nea Athina appeared on the horizon as our blimp turned to the East. Before us glistened a city of marble and gold, each acre its own Acropolis, with buildings resembling the Parthenon and the Erechtheum adorned with ornate friezes and sculptures.

“Capital city,” Spud said.

“It is beautiful,” echoed John.

Annoyed. “No, I meant that it *is* the capital city.”

Spud added, “This USA is a loose federation of city-states, not unlike a pacifist ancient Hellenic empire. But, they have realized the value of a central location for resource distribution and management. Thus, Nea Athina.”

“Oh,” was all John could muster.

• • •

Nea Athina—present day?

We thanked Hypatia as we de-airshipped at Daedalus Airfield and made our way to the gates. From the ground, the travertine avenues and marble buildings looked ever more imposing and ostentatious. Zygint Central, and Mikkin itself, Zyga’s capital, could learn a thing or two about classical grandeur from Nea Athina.

“Now what?” John, ever practical, asked.

“Heron has arranged for us to visit a diviner. He was supposed to have been here to meet us.” Spud scanned the crowds once again.

“A what?” John asked.

“A diviner. A seer, an alienist,” said Spud. “Whose insights can help us strategize our best course of action.”

“We’re a day late. All those stops for the weather. Maybe he left already.” I shrugged. “You got an address?”

Spud shook his head. “Heron would only give me a description of his appearance and his name. Lester Samuel Moore.”

“Now that’s an unusual name,” John said, “for around here anyway.”

“Yes, it is singular. We shall have to query Mr. Moore about it after he arrives.”

“Are there phones or other communication devices we could use to try to reach him?” I queried.

“Excuse me,” John said to a passing pedestrian. “Where can I find a telephone?”

The pedestrian frowned. “In the museum of technology, I suppose,” he said, “on Constitution Avenue.”

John smiled politely. “Capital. And more modern communications?”

“Ah, you are Xenoi,” the man returned. “Three blocks down on Independence Avenue.” He pointed to a broad boulevard on our left. “The Ministry of Intercourse can assist you during your stay.”

John thanked the Good Samaritan and we set off as directed to the Ministry of Intercourse. None of us were in a mood to make the obvious jokes.

• • •

The Ministry of Intercourse looked like a massive Lincoln Memorial and was filled with visitors seeking services, and, well, intercouring. We waited for an hour before a customer service contributor was available.

“Bureaucracies are an exasperating constant in a sea of change,” John whispered to me as we sat in line.

“You should see Orion Alpha,” I said, filling him in on my adventure with Benedict’s nasty lieutenant Burr at the University of Daralfanoon.

“You met Big Red?” John chuckled. “Wouldn’t want to run into him in a dark alley unarmed—even if he’s half my size.”

John shared the tale of his Zygan Intelligence mission to Megara, where he’d partnered with Sarion’s older brother to prevent an invasion led by Burr and a team of Benedict Andarts. John had single-handedly rescued his partner from execution by micro’ing and M-fanning inside Burr’s stun gun and sabotaging the trigger release. The gun discharged the laser beam backwards, singeing Burr’s scalp to match the color of his hair, and distracting the screaming Andart long enough for John to help Sarion’s brother escape.

The hour passed too quickly; I’d relished the chance to bond with my own brother as a fellow catascope.

The customer service contributor was able to locate an address for Moore on the outskirts of the city, but her expression implied that the neighborhood was far from a showpiece. We could arrange to rent an electric vehicle at the Ministry of Transportation or just ride the maglev train to within a twenty minute walk from the location. We opted for the train.

She then provided us with disks the size of a mini-CD as loaners. “Drop these in any ‘Returns’ box when you leave our city,” she instructed, assuming that we knew how to use them. We all decided it was best to pretend that we did.

“The train’s over here,” I said, pointing to a ramp leading to a crowded station.

“Something we have to do first,” said John.

“You are correct,” Spud said, “Without Heron’s generosity to sponsor us, we will need currency.”

“That’s not what I meant, but, okay, what do you suggest?”

Both of the men looked at me. My hands instinctively went to my ears. “No!” My diamond earrings had been a gift from Connie on my 16th birthday. They could be the last memento of a sister I might never see again.

Spud was running a finger over his mini-disk. “I spotted a currency exchange vendor back near the airfield.” His tone did not invite debate. “Let’s go.”

• • •

The pawnshop contributor had laughed at our attempts to trade in the diamonds. “Plentiful around the world, and worth very little, my dear.”

“I guess there’s no DeBeers monopoly to jack up the prices,” John muttered.

“Now the gold studs,” the shopkeeper examined the earrings with a loupe, “Yes, real gold. For those I can offer you something.”

I reluctantly consented to letting the treasured jewelry go, but only after my companions promised that we could return and repurchase the earrings once our Ergals were operating again and we were out of this... mess. I wouldn’t want to have to face Connie and tell her that we’d had to pawn her heartfelt gift.

We ended up getting enough drachmas to be able to cover our food, shelter, and transportation for a couple of days. Hopefully, this ‘diviner’ Heron had recommended could help us out before these resources ran out. I wasn’t eager to have to sell my gold navel ring.

John guided us to a train station north of the airfield despite Spud’s protests that we were headed in the wrong direction. “Let me have your Ergal,” John demanded as we sat in the cushioned seats. He pulled up the geographic display and studied it during the train’s smooth launch.

“It’s the old maps,” I sighed. “Won’t help us here.”

John pulled out his mini-disk, ran his fingers across it, and set about comparing the maps on both tools. “It will for what I’m trying to do.”

Spud’s voice was a whisper. “Is that wise?” “It’s necessary,” John responded.

• • •

We de-trained in a deserted area an hour out of Nea Athina. A small brick shed served as a shield against the elements for waiting passengers. Otherwise, we were surrounded by a thick forest sliced by a few dirt trails.

“You want to tell us why we’re here, Bro?” I asked, gazing at the uninhabited forest before us.

John smiled. “I’m betting that we’ll find that our worries were for naught.”

“*Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose, eh?*” said Spud, cryptically. “Very optimistic of you.”

John shrugged. “Some faiths believe that life flows like a river. Even if you change its course, it returns back to its natural bed. Beyond this forest, I expect to see my family once again.”

“Faith is the operative word, indeed,” muttered Spud, as we set off on one of the trails.

Monitoring my Ergal, John guided us along one of the paths for another half-hour of trekking. Could John be right? Could we actually be only a few miles away from our

farmhouse in Maryland—with our family living in this new world but still intact? I felt a twinge of hope, and a rush of energy. With each footstep, I felt my eagerness grow, and my burden of guilt lighten. Wait til I showed everyone who I was bringing home.

Thirty, forty minutes, and we were still hiking through the dense forest. My enthusiasm had been tempered by growing worry. There had been no settlements, no clearings, along our way. None of the roads or landmarks I'd remembered. Had we taken a wrong turn and gotten lost?

John insisted we were on the right path. "Anytime now." But I detected an edge of concern in his tone as well. My feet began to feel heavier and heavier as we trudged forward.

After an hour making our way through the forest, we arrived at a clearing bordered by small pond that resembled the one fifty yards behind our barn in Maryland. We could hear chirping cicadas and the caws of flying crows, rustling leaves from the breeze blowing through the deep green trees. But nothing more. No houses, no barns, no sheds, no people. And then I knew. We were here. Home. And our farm was gone. My brothers, my sisters, my beloved family, were no longer alive.

The blackness closed in before I could scream.

• • •

Maryland—not any more

"She's coming around." Whose voice? John's? John. John was back with me. But, the others? The others...

"Yes, I am observing tears," Spud's voice said, "upon her zygomatic arches." I heard dripping water. "Give her a few sips."

I opened my eyes, blinking to clear the mist, and held out my palm. "I'm fine. Don't need it." I sat up, supporting my head with my hands, still feeling lightheaded.

"Take it slow." John's gentleness warmed my chilled heart.

"Really, I'm fine." I stood up to face my brother. Were those tear tracks on his cheeks as well. "Thanks." And then I remembered. "I am so sorry."

John attempted to soothe me, "We don't know..."

I shook my head. "You were right. We needed to know. And now we know." I didn't—couldn't—look at Spud.

I was grateful Spud didn't say "I told you so". He kept his eyes on his CD and his voice even as he urged us to return to the train station. "The south train will pass through in an hour and it will be the last one for the day."

I nodded, and still a bit unsteady on my feet, leaned against John for the first few steps down towards the path from which we'd come. I didn't look back at the pond where I'd waded and splashed as a child. Without my siblings, it wasn't my pond any more.

We arrived back in Nea Athina by sunset. "There is an inn," Spud advised us, "several blocks away. I suggest we rest for the night and rise early on the morrow to locate the elusive Mister Moore."

We didn't argue. Sleep would be a blessing—I prayed the Sandman wouldn't betray me this time and shrink in horror from my guilt-stained door.

Chapter 15

Less is More

Nea Athina—alternate present day

I did manage to fall asleep sometime before midnight. Mr. Sandman toyed with me, after all, as my dreams—nightmares—were of my missing family and our no-longer-existent Maryland home. Waking up at dawn was a relief. I could consciously choose to think of something else, if only for a moment.

After eating a quick breakfast of steamed vegetables wrapped in a corn tortilla, we set off for the train that would lead us to the environs of the mysterious Mr. Moore.

Our stop was in an unassuming section of town, where the crumbling one-storey structures were built of brick rather than precious stones. I somehow expected to see trash on the streets and graffiti on the walls, but the neighborhood did have an air of neatness in its privation.

We walked for about thirty minutes as we had been directed. Spud studied his disc periodically, reassuring us that we were on course, before stopping and signaling us to follow him down a deserted alley between two three-storey ramshackle apartment buildings and down a short flight of stairs to a rotting wood door. The Intercourse lady was right—this sure wasn't the 'high rent district'.

The doorbell didn't seem to function, so Spud knocked several times. No answer. There were no windows near the door or on the ground level, so we had no choice but to wait and knock again.

An old woman stuck her head out of a neighboring window, looked us up and down with an expression of distaste, then ducked back into her house, slamming the glass shut on the sill. Friendly folk, here.

We were almost ready to give up when we heard a creak. Then another. Then another. The door had opened just enough so that, standing sideways, we could slide inside. We did.

The hall we entered was dim and narrow. A faint scent of urine wafted from the walls, as a rat (definitely not of Chidurian ethnicity) scurried across our path. Awesome. We didn't see any humans. We kept walking.

Another door at the end of the hall opened as we arrived. We entered a smaller room, the size of a closet, and jumped as the door slammed shut behind us.

"If we end up in Earth Core..." I half-joked, seconds before the elevator closet began to move. Only this lift didn't drop down at stomach sickening speeds. It moved slowly up about a hundred feet, enough so that we should have been hovering over the neighborhood in thin air.

A side wall dissolved to reveal another hallway, and the smell of barbecued meat reached our nostrils. We followed the corridor, though I did worry about what type of meat was being roasted in this vegetarian society, and hoped it wasn't human.

This hallway was brightly lit and curved. As we rounded the non-corner, we saw before us a sunlit patio framed in colorful flowers. A landscaped pool, fed by a small fountain, trickled clear water next to, yes, an actual barbecue, complete with sizzling burgers and spiraling smoke. Flipping the burgers, his back to us, was a medium-sized,

middle-aged, slightly chubby man with dark and grey curly hair covering the striped collar under his patched-sleeve olive sweater.

“Welcome, Visitors,” he said in English. American English. “Lunch’ll be ready in a few minutes. There’s beer and wine in the fridge at the bar, for those that enjoy those beverages.” There was a strong hint of New York in his accent, and of academician in his mien.

John grinned as broadly as I’d seen him since his rescue and dove into the refrigerator for a cold beer. He offered a bottle to Spud who declined with a sour expression. Spud shook his head at the Riesling John pulled out, too. “I prefer my wine red, at room temperature, and French,” was his only comment.

“I’ll take a beer,” I offered, and caught the bottle John tossed me. At eighteen, I was well above the Zygan drinking age, and possibly the local one, too. Hadn’t seen any alcohol anywhere in this USA, so it was a good bet the party laws here were either draconian or spirits—the liquid kind—were non-existent.

Our host transferred the well-done hamburgers onto a platter of buns with his spatula and turned to face us, holding out the tray. From the front, his receding curly hairline was framed by more salt and pepper hair, and his twinkling, intelligent eyes peeked out from behind his black tortoise-shell glasses. His broad grin was bookended by the weirdest sideburns I’d ever seen; bushy, they extended all the way to his jawline and made him look like a cross between a professor and an 18th century sea captain.

“Muttonchops,” Spud informed me, catching me staring. To our host: Lester Samuel Moore, I presume.”

“Half right. Yes, call me Les, and no, they’re genuinely beefy,” our host said, winking at me and Spud. Was he joking about the sideburns or the meat? He set the platter on a wooden table behind us that offered ketchup and mustard, plates, cups, and bowls of potato salad and cole slaw; and waved for us to join him. “Buns on the table, buns on the bench!”

We sat. I wished I hadn’t seen the musical Sweeney Todd, Demon Barber of Fleet Street the last time I was in London, in which a vengeful stylist murders his clients and provides his landlady with their ground meat as the “essence” of her tasty meat pies. I still couldn’t get rid of the fear that we’d be Mr. Moore’s next course.

John didn’t bother with polite reticence. “I don’t care if it’s beef or mutton. I am so hungry,” he enthused, building a triple burger and taking a bite. “Even my dreams are carnivorous.”

My own appetite, however, was dampened by my waves of sadness. Since I’d learned about the effects of my Somalderis ‘loan’ on my world and my family, my own dreams had dined voraciously on my conscience and my heart. My momentary hope that the effects wouldn’t be so dire had been dashed after our excursion yesterday. I could only pray that we could find a way to return things back to the way they were—even if it meant a long sentence in Omega Archon stir.

“So where’s the beef...from?” John swallowed the bite he’d stuffed into his mouth. “Didn’t see any cows along the way here.”

“Of course not,” Moore said as he helped himself to potato salad. “Do you know how much methane dairy farms spew into the atmosphere?” Before Spud could answer, he leaned towards me with eyes twinkling and patted my hand, “Don’t worry, dear, I don’t bite without permission.” To Spud: “I see no reason not to use a synthesizer.”

Spud's eyebrows betrayed his surprise. "You have a synthesizer? Didn't see anything about synthesizers in the historical records of this USA."

Moore chuckled. "The Utopians weren't driven to develop one. They found a different solution. Planetary symbiosis. A balanced, self-sustaining system. Works for them. A little too restrictive for me." He patted his pot belly.

John whistled. "Whoa. Lot of stuff you just threw at us there." He wiped some coleslaw off his chin with a napkin. "So, you're an alien."

"*Alienist*, actually," Moore returned. "I research a breadth of civilizations and their evolution. Or regression. The universe is an infinite laboratory for us scientists of life, as my buddy Mel used to say, as long as we can maintain our grant funding."

"Mel!" I gagged. "You don't mean Plegma Mel?" I looked at Spud, who was equally astonished.

"The Plegma? So *that's* where he went off to," said Moore, finishing his burger. "Personally, I find the Synephs too stuffy for my taste. No sense of humor."

Nephil Stratum had a sense—

"Okay," John raised a hand, "you're telling us you're from," he hesitated, "somewhere more than Earth. Like the Zygan Federation. And if it's the Zygan Federation, and you're using their technology," he waved a hand around the patio, "how come our Ergals don't work?"

"No, not the Zygan Federation, exactly." Moore responded cryptically. He shrugged, "If I had to guess why they're not working, I'd say interference. Each Zygan Ergal is tuned to its owner. Your Ergal," Moore pointed first to John, then to me, "became her Ergal when you hopped over to Limbo Land for your buddy Benedict. Now with you both here, the two tunes could be canceling each other out."

"Then why wouldn't his be working?" John nodded at Spud.

"How do you know so much about us?" Spud interjected, his voice louder than usual.

"The answer to both questions is actually the same. I'm assuming you don't want the technical details to disrupt your lunch. How about I show you the big picture after dessert." Moore opened a small refrigerator by his feet and pulled out an ice bucket. "Ice cream, anyone?"

• • •

Lester Samuel Moore's home—alternate present day

His gait verging on a waddle, Moore led his satiated guests into his small cottage beyond the patio where we'd enjoyed our hearty lunch. Once inside, the cottage had somehow transformed itself into an enormous hall, filled with monitoring equipment. "Um, why didn't we see all this from the outside?" I asked, scanning the vast array of holo screens before us. The room's size almost made Zygint Central Communications Center look like a closet, and extended far beyond, and above, the boundaries of the dumpy three-storey building we had entered. "Shouldn't we be hovering somewhere all the way over by the train station by now?"

Moore put his chubby arm over my shoulders and flashed me a voracious smile. "Time and space are not constants, my dear, as we know from our uploads."

I managed to extricate myself and sidle over towards John.

“You are a catascope,” Spud deduced, his voice untypically tentative. Moore laughed, “Hardly. Come, I’ll demonstrate.”

We walked through, literally through, a maze of holoscreens and stopped next to a small screen that was displaying—us. Yesterday. In Maryland, in shock.

“You needed to see your reality for yourself,” Moore whispered as we saw a 3D holo replay of our visit to what used to be my family’s farm. “I gave you a day to do so.”

“You’re a Helianthos!” boomed John. “Damn!”

More laughter. “Interesting juxtaposition there if I were, Rush, but no.” He raised up both ringless hands and wagged them. “Look, Ma, no sunflowers.”

Sunflowers? The penny dropped. Hard. Of course, the sunflower people! Like the soldiers that’d told us John was missing, like the old Keeper of the Temple of Eshmoun, like Wart. The masters of meta, always popping in to guide our way. Our guardian angels. All of them had sported sunflowers. And the Hellenic word for sunflowers was Helianthi. Damn.

Chapter 16

Roundabout

John was bursting with questions for Lester Samuel Moore. Spud for once opted to withdraw and study Moore and his holos through narrowed eyes. As for me, I didn't much care who Moore was, or how he got his "powers". All I wanted to know was, could he help us get our family back?

"Cigar?" Moore extended a colorful box. Its torn seal was stamped with Greek lettering reading TAINO.

John reached in and pulled out a stogie. Spud didn't resist for long either, mumbling something about "nicotine withdrawal".

I took Spud's place off in the corner of the room as the three men smoked. Never could stand the smell of tobacco, and cigars were the absolute worst.

Moore puffed and pontificated like a proverbial professor with a rapt audience of students. Pondering Spud's query, he suggested that Spud's non-functioning Ergal could be due to the absence of Zygan Federation activity in this sector of the galaxy; there was no reason to sync up Ergals around a non-Zygan planet like Earth. "They sail through here once in a while, but this planet of pacifists really has nothing to offer the Empire—I mean Federation—until they develop hyperdrive."

"Then why are you here?" John returned.

"I am not only a scientist, but a man of means. One might even say I'm a philosopher," Moore said after considering the question. "This stream presents some interesting currents for exploration."

"Stream as in string?" asked Spud.

"String theory and multiple branes," elaborated John unnecessarily.

"Imaginative, but inaccurate," Moore chuckled. "Personally, I prefer Ptolemy's idea that the Earth is the center of the universe and the stars are holes in the sky letting through the lights of heaven."

I could see John getting irritated. "Look, we're just trying to find some solutions to our problems here. If you've got them, don't yank our chains."

Moore raised a bushy eyebrow. "Over my years of study, I have come up with some answers, but my years of wisdom have taught me to hope I never ever have them all." He gazed directly at my brother and smiled. "Something for you to consider."

John looked ready to erupt, so I interrupted, "Mr. Moore?"

"Les."

"Les. You know my family's g-gone." I took a deep breath. "Is there anything I can do to bring them back?"

His expression softened; I saw a hint of tenderness. "The time-space continuum is a misnomer," he began. "It's really a time-space *circumference*."

Waving the hand holding his smoking cigar, he drew our attention to another holo screen on his left. On display was a children's playground, with swing, slides, and a simple merry-go-round inhabited by running, jumping, and giggling kids. The children's laughter was contagious; even Spud allowed himself a smile. "Wish I could ride them at my age," Moore sighed, patting his prominent belly again. "Not as fit as I used to be."

With another wave, the view shifted to show the carousel from above, as a spinning platter. Moore pointed a finger at the disk, then began tagging multiple spots on the display. At each point, a duplicate spinning disk appeared, filling the screen with randomly scattered spinning merry-go-rounds.

Moore turned to face us. “You can now abandon the ‘string theory’ for the ‘merry-go-round reality’. A metaverse of universes, all spinning in one direction for the riders. Time moves forward.”

He took a puff of his cigar. “But for travelers, voyagers can hop from one disk to another. Land on any portion of the disk, and appear in that universe at any time, past, present, or future.”

“Note the points I am marking with my cigar tip.” Moore charred one edge of each disk so that we could track the rotations.

He rested his thick finger on one charred spot and followed it around the disk. “Traveling back in time is impossible on each individual merry-go-round, each universe, with just a Somalderis because it can’t fight the force of time moving forward.”

John and I nodded. Spud’s squinting had magnified, his eyes mere slits.

“But, if you jump over to the adjacent merry-go-round at the right time,” Moore demonstrated by moving his finger over to the charred spot on the next disk, “you can land anywhere, and at any time in the neighboring universe.”

Moore bounced his finger randomly from disk to disk on the display, finally returning to the first “merry-go-round”—but at a different point, one behind the one he’d left. “Ta da. You’re now in the past.”

“Which isn’t another string, but another circle,” I offered.

“Exactly.” Moore nodded. “The metaverse is remarkably parsimonious. Spinning orbs are effective at all sizes, no need to reinvent the wheel.” He chuckled. “So to speak.”

John groaned appreciatively, but I was nursing an idea, a hope. I probed, “Les, could I go back, you know, use my Somalderis to hop from one merry-go-round to another, then return it to Yeshua so the timeline doesn’t change?” I didn’t need to say out loud, ‘and my family would be alive’.

Moore took a deep toke of his stogie, blew out the smoke, and watched it curl towards the hall’s high ceiling. A sigh. “Theoretically, assuming you had the means and methods, such as an Ergal, to implement those universe ‘leaps’, yes.”

My spirits rose.

“But—”

My heart sank.

“There might be a complication.”

I dreaded the question I had to ask: What could go wrong? Spud didn’t wait for me to say the words. His voice, cold and unforgiving, intruded without mercy. “If you succeed, John would die.”

Chapter 17

Reality Bites

“Why?” was all I could muster.

Moore scratched a bushy sideburn. “You are familiar with the time-traveler’s paradox?”

Did Moore know about my unauthorized mission to Zygfed’s RAM with Agriarctos to rescue Anesidora’s neurocache, too? Benedict’d had us do an Ergal-guided time leap so that I came face-to-face with the future version of myself—and watched her die. Hoarsely: “Some.”

“I see two scenaria. You hop merry-go-rounds to the past and return the Somalderis to its owner—before your past self arrives to...borrow it. The owner now has two—and is suspicious enough to prevent you from borrowing any. Ergo, you can’t go to Benedict’s brane and rescue John. And, you can’t take a used Somalderis back so the owner ends up, as before, with one.”

I frowned. I wasn’t exactly sure I followed Moore’s logic.

“The other viable scenario: you return the Somalderis after its owner dies, and everything remains the same.”

“Now wait a minute,” John interceded. “You’ve left out the possibility that she could return the Somalderis right after she borrowed it. Yeshua could use it—”

“No,” I muttered. “He was arrested just as I was transporting out...”

“And would not be alone again until he’d breathed his last...” Spud finished, focusing his gaze on John. “I checked the records, alas.”

“Hey,” John held up a hand and stepped back, “don’t load this on me. There’s always another solution to every challenge. I’m not going back to that hell of nothingness.”

“Even at the cost of your family’s lives?” Spud shot at him.

A flash of anger. “You don’t know what I know, Escott, so keep your tight-ass out of our business.”

“It’s not just your business, Rush. There are millions of people in this timeline, on this world.”

“Heaven on Earth.” Ice missiles in John’s voice. “Progress, prosperity, peace. Millions of people living happy, comfortable lives. Your brother’s life was a small sacrifice, Escott, for the common good we’ve witnessed here.”

“You do not have the right to choose who will sacrifice for whom,” cried Spud, flushing red from his neck to his hairline. “By that sin fell the angels’.”

“John! Spud!” I reached out an arm to each. “John is right—there’re always other options. We’ll find a way to bring everyone back. Without returning John to-to...” I couldn’t finish.

From Moore, a crooked smile and cryptic words, “I have no doubt that you will.”

• • •

None of us were in a mood to sample the lush dinner Moore was offering if we’d stay. But Moore did have some other things to offer that I found appealing. Like a

connection to this timeline's Zygan Federation, where we might be able to repair our Ergals; and get some obvious anamorphing and transporting powers that might facilitate any brane-hopping, or merry-go-round hopping, we needed to do.

"Can you take us to a Zygfed outpost?" I asked our host. "We could get our Ergals reactivated."

"I wouldn't advise that," Moore said. "You're under the Omega Archon's radar now—better than being under his heel if they become aware of what's happened."

Spud shook his head. "We shall all be sentenced to Hell for the rest of our lives." "Well then, Les, can you fix our Ergals? Nevada to here was bad enough in a blimp. I'll go nuts making that trip for two weeks over the Atlantic."

John brightened. "Where are we going?"

Spud contributed a disgusted sigh.

"I'd like to visit the 'scene of the crime'." I feigned lightness. "Perhaps we can figure out another way to reverse what happened."

Spud shook his head. "Jerusalem is now called Alsharif, and is a regional capital in the province of Philaia," he intoned, consulting his CD. "It is also 10,000 miles from here."

"That's why we need our Ergals operational."

Moore cleared his throat. Loudly. "Don't fret. I can arrange for you to get a black market tool that performs some of the functions of an Ergal. That should let you bypass the 'local transportation' and travel by instantaneous mass transport, and make your less patient readers happy."

"What?" I said, but Moore had already turned his back to us and headed off to an adjacent room. Did I hear what I thought I heard?

I glanced at Spud. The furrowed brow was back. But John didn't seem at all puzzled. He was leaning against one of the holoscreens with a satisfied grin on his face.

• • •

The 'black market Ergals' were thin bands, made of silver, but unlike Anesidora's M82 Ergal, were undecorated with writing or pictographs. We each slipped one on our fingers, and waited for Moore's instructions.

"They're not quite as powerful as real Ergals. You won't be able to invisibilize or lev, but they're not bad for data mining and anamorphing. With the right settings, they'll provide instantaneous mass transport, across the Atlantic, or across the centuries. If you leave soon, you'll be in Philaia within minutes, just before sunrise.

"And that's where the city of Jerusalem is, right?"

"Was," Moore nodded. He took my hand in both of his and brought it up to his chest. "But you're sure you won't stay the night? I make a mean lasagna."

I met his intense gaze with a confident smile. "Only if you answer my question: what'd you mean when you said 'your less patient readers'?"

My hand dropped as Moore released his grip and turned away, eyes twinkling. "Have a safe trip, Shiloh. Until we meet again."

Now I was the one with the furrowed brow.

Everything New Under the Sun

The Middle East—alternate present day

Alsharif, née Jerusalem, was a gleaming modern city. After promising to return our loaner CD's to Nea Athina's Ministry of Intercourse, Moore had arranged for us to M-fan in the Philaian burg in a lush park that encircled a glistening lake, shimmering with the rays of dawn.

"I love what these alternate civilizations have done to deserts," John said, awestruck as we made our way onto a broad pedestrian boulevard lined with colorful bushes and flowers and stared at the surrounding architecturally diverse towers molded from glass and steel. Marble statues and other *objets d'art* stood guard at the entrances and lobbies of the high-rises. At pavement level were shops and cafes where customers enjoyed shopping in the warmth of a sunny morning.

I noted the absence of cars. The streets were filled with toga-sporting walkers, men, women, and children, assisted by people-movers of various types. In the center of the road were drivers of small personal vehicles, resembling Segways with seats. Next to them were two rows of moving sidewalks, then lanes for ambulation, paved as in Nea Alexandria with a springy turf. I even noted a few bikes, three and four wheeled, with reclining seats. What was most impressive was, despite the traffic, I could hear drifting conversations in a variety of languages, not noisy vehicle engines.

"Solar and wind power can fuel all of this?" remarked John, amazed.

"Hardly," Spud advised us. "My historical review has revealed that the USA rejected low energy nuclear reactions as a source of energy. Philaia obviously has not."

"Wow. Cold fusion. Unlimited energy with limited risks." John's expression was pure admiration.

Spud seemed to share the USA's opinion. "Though I have sometimes acceded to taking a place at the table, I have never yet been seduced by a free luncheon." He paused to listen to the ambient chat for a moment, adding, "Arabic, Greek, Latin, and Farsi. A Germanic tongue, from Prussia, I believe, and another, from Eastern Europe, known as Yiddish. Quite a melting pot here in Alsharif."

"And it sure looks like everybody's getting along with each other. Amazing." John pointed to a clear tablet that a pedestrian was reading as he walked by. "Let's see if there's a blog or something we can use to get caught up with the local news."

We trekked a few blocks past buildings decorated with friezes honoring familiar-looking deities.

"Yes, that is Zeus and Hera," Spud said, pronouncing Zeus with the standard British two syllables.

"Who's the dude with the halo?" John asked. "Osiris, I believe," Spud squinted at the writing on the base of one statue. "Across the street is the Goddess Isis. You can also espy her on that frieze over there with Horus."

Osiris sure looks a lot like Yeshua, I marveled, eyeing the massive statue. But I hadn't seen any homages to our Judean prophet himself. I began to worry that our trip to

these historic lands would be for naught. The prevalence of pagan gods in the artwork of this modern city didn't bode well for followers of Yeshua's prophecies.

Spud was thinking along the same lines. "This culture is definitely committed to the Isis-Osiris team. If we are to uncover any residua of our target, it would behoove us to locate a local house of worship and access its library and historical records for traces of Yeshua."

"Fine," offered John, "but how 'bout we do that *after* we've gotten something to eat. My stomach wants dinner."

We found a shop selling tablets (along with ample servings of hummus, warm pita bread, and falafel) that was willing to accept our USA currency, albeit with a patronizing smirk. After uploading the news of the day on our tablets, first in English, which was a Chaucerian mix of Celtic and Germanic words, we gave up and opted for Latin, which came up a much more readable combination of Italian and French, especially with interpretive help from our new Ergals.

We sat in the shade under an awning, scanning as we munched. The news from Philaia, as well as Greater Romi to the northwest, was glowing, literally, on our electronic pages. Yes, there were still skirmishes raging in Asia between the Empires of Ming and Meisho, and occasional dust clouds from nuclear explosions in Oceania, but in what had been the Europe and Middle East of our Earth, the reports read "peace and prosperity for all". Measured growth and development, a vibrant arts and culture scene, free education for children and adults, subsidized health care—

"This system of government appears to be a federation of independent provinces, working together collaboratively under the guidance of the Ministry of Synergy," commented Spud between bites. "As far as I can determine, the model is most similar to that of the social democracies of Northern Europe in the latter part of the twentieth century. A social safety net and regulated enterprise."

"So how do they pay for all of this?" asked John, waving a hand at the skyscrapers and city's well-maintained infrastructure.

"That free lunch Spud hates so much," I speculated. "This society seems to have all the energy it needs. We all know most wars are really fought for resources, land, gas, oil."

"Not nationalism?" John's tone was dubious.

"You mean Queen and Country?" I teased, glancing at a dour Spud.

Spud didn't meet my eyes. "Not any more. My Queen and Country no longer exist."

• • •

John and I did most of the talking for the rest of our meal. Spud sat back in his chair, arms folded, appearing lost in thought, but the tense outline of his neck muscles made it clear that he was anything but calm. Better not to poke the sleeping dog. Spud's bite was *much* worse than his bark.

Neither our Zygan or our black market Ergals had a any additional data that could help us find Yeshua or flesh out his history, so John and I used the tablets to search for houses of worship whose priests might be able to give us some clues as to Yeshua's sad end and interment.

The closest temple we located was a massive brick structure two miles away sporting several obelisk-shaped towers decorated with ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. After a

pleasant walk, we entered its spacious lobby, our footsteps echoing up to the flat high ceiling above us from the mosaic tiles on which we stood. The inner walls around us were filled with bright murals storyboarding myths I assumed portrayed the life stories of the gods Horus, Isis, and Osiris.

Standing respectfully before the paintings, I felt obligated to whisper. “I’m awed.”

“Yes, you are,” was my brother’s snide response. Obviously he wasn’t as impressed by the temple as I was. I favored him with the appropriate glare.

“Are you men of the Mysteries?” a voice behind us asked in Arabic.

I guess I could look like a guy with my short hair, especially from the back. But “Mysteries” were a mystery to me in this context. I let John answer.

“What?” he said, in Ergal Arabic. Real good, bro. I could’ve pitched that.

“Are you participating in the lesser mysteries this morning?” the voice repeated.

“Um, yes, sure.”

“We are bringing the Kista to the Hierophant,” Spud intervened. “Please inform him we have arrived.”

I heard the sound of receding footsteps and peeked over my shoulder to see a red toga disappearing behind a set of wooden doors. John clapped Spud on the shoulders, adding, “Thanks for helping me out there. Where’d you learn all that?”

“British public schools,” I muttered. “Fill us pagans—I mean non-pagans—in.” “The

Mysteries are ancient rites and ceremonies that church members participate in as a way to access the highest truths of their religion.” Spud Ergaled an ornate wooden chest by our feet. “This is a Kista, and it contains some holy objects. A snake, seeds, laurel leaves, dried basil, and a curved dagger. It also contains a few doses of *psilocybe* mushrooms,” Spud paused, “to help achieve this state of understanding.”

“Ha,” I laughed, “In that case, half of Hollywood should be on its way to Nirvana by now.

“Nirvana has no place in the Cult of Isis,” Spud said, frowning. “Isis began as the Egyptian goddess Aset. The Sanskrit word Nirvana is traced to India.”

John and I both rolled our eyes, just as Red Toga strode back into the room, followed by an olive-skinned old man with a long scraggly gray beard.

“You are not participants!” bellowed the priest, his eyes resting on the B-cup domes on the front of my chest.

“No,” John said, moving in front of me, “but we bring you gifts in exchange for your wisdom.”

“Heretics,” the priest cried, pointing a bent finger at Spud’s face. Two more red-togas covering muscular acolytes appeared in our view. Neither seemed to be radiating hospitality.

“Am-scray,” John whispered in English, “On ‘three’.”

We were back out the door and running down the block by ‘two’.

• • •

By evening, we had visited a few more temples. Only one, its Doric columns making it look more like a courthouse than a church, had a cleric who was willing to hear out our questions.

“False prophets abounded one to two thousand years ago,” the priest reflected. “Poverty, pestilence and plague prevailed. The dire conditions were conducive to

promoting an apocalyptic mentality—the world was ending and the promise of paradise was irresistible.”

John snorted. “I don’t agree. Have you read the versions of Genesis?”

The priest nodded. “Of course. Unlike some of my colleagues, our temple’s clerics are progressive and work collaboratively with religious leaders who worship Yahweh, Zarathustra, the Buddha, and even non-theists. We have studied the Torah.”

“Well, Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden for corrupting their ignorant bliss with the fruit of the tree of knowledge,” John said, “but the driving search for paradise, for heaven, is to absorb *all* knowledge, to learn the answers to *all* our questions, to understand *all*. That passion is not inspired by unpleasant material circumstances, but by an obsession for the truth.”

“I believe my own interpretation of Genesis is that the absolute truth can be devastating and destructive.” The priest reached over and picked up a gold chalice, offering it to my brother. “Perhaps if you try some of our grapes, you can quench the fire that seems to be burning your soul into ash.”

“Pah.” John shook his head and turned away. “Keep your wine and your mushrooms. I’ll nurture my vice until we meet in heaven.”

“Well,” I said, exhaling. “That’s gotten us nowhere.” I swung my arms to release the tension.

“Perhaps you may find the information you seek at the University of Isaiah,” the priest said, patting my hand. “Let me see your tablet.”

Spud handed the tablet to him, and we watched him pull up a map of Alsharif. “Here,” the priest pointed to a ring around the city, “is the old wall. The renowned University of Isaiah has a large campus in the West Quarter. You should speak to Professor Malamud in the Department of History, Philosophy, and Religious Studies.” He returned the tablet to Spud. “Please transmit my wishes of ‘Greetings and Health’.”

Grumbling, John was already on the street.

• • •

Isaiah University, Alsharif—alternate present day

Professor Malamud burst into laughter when I relayed the priest’s message. “His wishes were rather the opposite when I declined his request that I become his fourth wife.”

Another surprise. We’d expected to meet a grizzled old man, the Middle-Eastern version of Lester Samuel Moore, when we made our way to the University of Isaiah. Instead, Professor Malamud was a tall, slim young woman in her late twenties, whose long dark hair framed delicate features. Unlike the majority of people in Alsharif, Malamud seemed to eschew the togas in fashion, instead wearing a form-fitting, sleeveless tunic, and a pair of, yes, shorts. I noted that John’s eyes seemed to be focusing on their decorative mid-thigh hem.

“I was not aware that priests were allowed to marry,” Spud muttered.

Malamud’s voice was melodic. “Asit, Isis, herself had several husbands. Polygamy is said to honor the example of Isis and Osiris.” Her tone indicated she wasn’t on board. “Fortunately, like most moderns, I’m not a practitioner of any religion. So, I’ve always

been a one-man-at-a-time woman.” She smiled at me and Spud and then rested her amused eyes on John.

“Uh, sorry. I was just, uh, wondering why you’re not—” John stumbled, a hint of pink teasing his face.

“Wearing a stola?” She shrugged. “I find these clothes more comfortable in the heat, and they do not inhibit my activity.”

John nodded. “It’s good not to be inhibited,” escaped his lips before he froze, embarrassed.

Another tuneful laugh. “I agree,” Malamud said, patting his hand. To us: “How can I be of assistance?”

“We are seeking the burial site of an ancient prophet,” Spud began, “As a Professor of Comparative Religion you may be able to guide us as to its location.”

Malamud sighed. “I can try. But human history has provided us with more prophets than knowledge. What is your prophet’s name?”

“Yeshua Bar Maryam,” I volunteered. Malamud’s olive skin turned ghostly pale.

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“We have no proof that Yeshua even lived,” Professor Malamud said, folding her hands in her lap to hide an obviously unwelcome tremor. “Only fragments written almost two thousand years ago by a follower, Paul, née Saul, have been discovered. They have never become an official part of the Torah.”

“Does that jibe with what you read in Nea Alexandria?” I asked Spud. Would he play it close to the vest—I mean waistcoat?

Spud nodded. “According to Paul, Yeshua was crucified by the Romans, buried in Judea, a footnote in Hebraic history. But,” he glanced the Professor, “Josephus, the renowned chronicler of the era, didn’t mention him at all.”

“So, no resurrection,” said John, to Spud’s dismay.

“On the contrary, resurrection is a theme throughout many documented religions,” the Professor countered. “Osiris and Dionysus were both gods who returned to life after death.” She smiled at John. “You are correct, though, I have found nothing to indicate that a Yeshua Bar Maryam did so.”

My hands unconsciously crept to stroke the Somalderis I was wearing under my toga. I kept my eyes aimed towards my feet.

“Paul’s writing has described a general region where his alleged mentor might be buried,” she continued, “but the grave has never actually been found. Why would you be interested in such ancient remains?” I could feel Malamud’s gaze burning my forehead.

John staved off a lecture from Spud with a loud sigh. “Professor—”

“Aliyah, please.”

“That’s beautiful. Aliyah,” he continued. “Call me John. I’m a research scientist myself, and I spent years searching for the elusive components of our universe’s creation, like the Higgs boson, which people often mis-named ‘The God Particle’. I finally realized that uncovering the building blocks of mass would bring us closer to understanding the laws of our universe, but wouldn’t clarify its history and its purpose. The productive investigation of Quantum Physics, in the end, may be truly inseparable from the study of Metaphysics.”

A snort from Spud’s direction and a chuckle from Aliyah’s.

“Though I’ve turned my back on my own religion,” she admitted, “I’m still convinced that *all* particles are God’s particles.”

Sarion would have been proud of me—I couldn’t resist the joke. “Hey, Bro, a woman after your own Quark.”

Everybody groaned.

Chapter 19

A Grave Mistake

Isaiah University—alternate present day

“The site you seek is beyond the old city walls.” The Professor handed Spud the tablet on which she had entered directions and instructions. “This monorail,” she pointed to an elevated track which ran a course through the University campus, “will take you to your final destination.”

I wish she hadn’t chosen those particular words. “Can’t we talk you into joining us?” John’s voice belied his eagerness.

Aliyah held his gaze for a moment, before shaking her head. “I have a seminar to present this afternoon. If you don’t find what you are looking for, return this evening and I may reconsider.” A warm smile. “If you are successful in your quest, you can meet me here tonight and we can celebrate.” Wishing us all good luck, she leaned in close to John and patted him on the arm.

John followed us to the station, grinning from ear to ear. I sighed. What is it with my companions and “wuv” lately?

We boarded the gleaming monorail at the campus station, and settled in for the journey. As the monorail skimmed quietly along its route, Spud recited our travelogue from the data files the Professor had highlighted on his tablet. John and I pressed our faces to the window, gawking like children at the fantasyland below. The old city wall had remained as a crowded tourist attraction filling the suburban villages surrounding Alsharif with travelers; travelers whose diverse toga styles spoke of far-off homes. As we approached the wall, our monorail glided over a busy boulevard labeled Via Laetitia.

“Avenue of Joy,” Spud explained unnecessarily.

A prerecorded message accompanied by faint bouzouki music startled us as the car moved forward. “You are leaving the Old City of Alsharif,” our Ergals translated from the Arabic, “may Isis and Gaia safely guide your journey to the provinces beyond.”

“That was sweet,” John said with a tiny trace of sarcasm.

“The next stop should be ours,” Spud warned, “Gulgalta.”

“We will,” I said, gathering our things.^[37]

• • •

Gulgalta—alternate present day

We walked a few yards to a rocky knoll whose dome shape resembled nothing as much as Benedict’s balding scalp. As in the Old City we’d left behind, the landscape we faced was green with medium-sized bushes and grasses, their stalks and leaves wafting in the gentle soothing breeze. The stone path to the edge of the hill split off before us into spokes, each curving along parcels of land blanketed with manicured lawns.

A few tourists were ambling along the smaller paths, stopping to look at the small statues that populated the green section. Noting a statue not far from where we stood, I loped over to it and pulled out my Ergal to translate the writing on its pedestal. “the...ashes... Alharbi...beloved—”

“Serapis,” said Spud over my shoulder

“Huh?” I stood up. “No, I think it’s some kind of a giant urn.”

“Serapis was a Egyptogrecian God who was reputed to be vying with Osiris for Isis’ affections.”

“And we care why?” John said

“All these statues represent Hellenic, Roman, or Egyptian deities. This tract is most likely a burial ground for the cremains of the citizens of Alsharif, guarded by their god of choice.”

“Ugh. Am I stepping on someone?” I jumped back over to the path.

Spud sighed. “Note the drawer on the back of the throne where Serapis sits.” He pointed to a latch which he pulled open with a hesitant finger.

John and I peeked, and saw the drawer open a chute leading down into the darkness. “The ashes could be poured into this cavity during the funeral ceremonies. Our blended god here is probably perched on top of a vault holding thousands of the dearly departed.”

“A cemetery.” I made a face. “Somehow appropriate.”

““And oftentimes excusing of a fault doth make the fault the worse by the excuse’,” Spud mumbled, confusing me.

“Well, I don’t see anything here that resembles an ancient grave,” John interjected. “All these names and dates seem pretty recent, only a couple of hundred years. And nothing’s in Hebrew or Aramaic. If we’re going to de-hat a rabbit, maybe we’re going to have to go back to ‘the *time* of the crime’.”

I knew I would regret using that idiom. Though John did have a point. This grassy knoll might be safekeeping the resting souls of millions of modern Philaians. But I doubted it’d tell us where to find one specific Judean who’d lost his life two millennia before. “At least we’re already wearing togas, so we’ll fit right in,” I said, “but didn’t Les Moore tell us that going back could put us—you—in danger?”

John’s voice was steady. “Moore thinks he can write the future, but he’s really only a reporter of what’s already past. I write my own life scripts, Sis. And I say we go back.” He turned to Spud. “Escott? Are you in the game?”

Spud continued to study the statue and avoid our eyes. Finally, he spoke. “A fool’s errand, I fear, but I shall join you. Else I remain here to be someday flushed through Serapis’ bowels into that watercloset of souls below.”

Thanks, Spud. Glad you’re coming with us. Though, I’m not grateful for that mental image. You could’ve just said ‘yes’.

• • •

We set our black market Ergals for a trip back almost two thousand years, struggling to figure out the best strategy to return our timeline to its previous course. Lester Moore was right—we couldn’t give Yeshua a second Somalderis prior to his arrest without introducing yet another change factor that could have even worse consequences for the timeline. Nor could I catch my earlier self and dissuade her from her quest—that would mean John’s rescue would be voided and my brother would return to his solitary prison—to die. We’d have to try and see if we could get to Yeshua after his arrest, and return the Somalderis before his death, so he could anastasize and “resurrect” himself or use it to transmit a holo from Level 3 to his followers. Or?

“Yeshua was sentenced to death by crucifixion, a common means of execution in the era,” Spud reported. “Death would creep in slowly, in some cases over days, and observers would be less likely to stand watch for the duration. Yeshua would be relatively isolated—it would be an opportune time to make contact.”

“We could appear to give him the Somalderis as an offering,” John suggested. “Escott and I could create a distraction and you could sneak up close with the gift.”

“Roman guards are not easily distracted,” Spud said, sounding unenthusiastic. “But I see few other alternatives. Making a move at the Sanhendrin or when he is surrounded by the high priests and elders would be even more challenging. And I do not wish to make the personal acquaintance of the Roman Prefect of Judea or the maddening crowds demanding iniquitous justice at the Governor’s feet. We should endeavor to return at night, two days after your theft.”

“Loan,” I defended. “But you’re probably right.

Let’s get moving.”

“Uh, wait,” said John.

We looked at him, waiting.

“I really should thank Aliyah. Before we go. For her help.”

Cue eye roll.

“Another couple of hours here won’t matter. We’ll still set our contract metrics at the correct time in the past,” John pleaded. “It’s only polite.”

Cue sigh.

Spud finally stepped in. “I appreciate your efforts to feign courtesy, but there could be unintended consequences, the longer we stay where we do not belong. It is critical that we leave now.” His hand crept towards the makeshift Ergal on his ring finger.

Spud’s urgency seemed out of place in this peaceful lea. I scanned the well-tended grounds, marveling once again at the intricate and statues that dotted the grass, watching us like a rapt marble audience.

John, leaning against Serapis, waved a hand, brushing off Spud’s anxiety. “Honestly, Escott, you’re such a buzzkill.” He stood up straight and stretched. “Fine, whatever. But, after we’re done, I’m letting you know, I may take a little vacation in the Middle East. *This* Middle East.”

After entering the correct contact metrics in each of Lester Moore’s “Ergals”, we reached for each other’s hands and stood together in a tight circle, rubbing our clasped fingers over the rings. A millisecond before we X-fanned from the graveyard, I caught a ghostly blur in my peripheral vision behind John. A pair of arms clutching at his chest.

• • •

Golgotha? Time unknown.

The missile exploded less than a hundred feet from where we’d M-fanned. The blast knocked us back onto the parched ground, hard. Eyes to the sky, we saw the shiny, sleek aircraft circling around for a second shot at an aluminum-sided warehouse not far from where we lay.

We jumped up and ran for a concrete building a few yards away, its windows shattered, its walls crumbling. Better than being targets out here in the open.

All four of us.

“Aliyah!”

Those arms. They’d belonged to Professor Malamud, who must have leaped onto John’s back at our critical last second in Alsharif, and had been transported to the past along with us. Was that a look of fear on her face—or regret?

John’s features broadcast a mix of concern and joy. Spud was wearing his “I told you so” expression, peppered with his, “We are so screwed” one.

When we’d hidden inside the shell of the concrete structure, John turned to Dr. Malamud with a broad grin. “Awesome. How did you get here?”

“The same way we did, Rush,” Spud intoned. “I thought I had heard a rustle behind Serapis. I should have arranged our departure with greater haste.”

“You have excellent ears. I slipped on a branch,” Aliyah admitted. “I could barely hear what you were saying and I had to tiptoe in closer.”

As another blast shook our shelter, John slipped an arm over Dr. Malamud’s shoulders. “I’m glad you’re here with us, wherever this is. We could use your help. I just hope we don’t get—”

A third blast, closer to our building.

“We’d better move,” I warned. “We can talk later.”

Nods all around. We ran through the remains of the concrete building and out a large hole in its wall onto a deserted street, its pavement filled with bomb craters, its sidewalks lined with burned-out houses and scorched trees.

“Where the hell are we?” John said, once we’d clambered into a damp cellar next to one of the destroyed homes. “This ain’t ancient Judea.”

Spud was fiddling with his Zygan Ergal, so Aliyah spoke first, in a comprehensible mix of Latin and Arabic. “Though I have no credible explanation for how it happened, it seems as if have landed in the middle of the Canonical Crusades. About eleven hundred years ago.”

Confused looks from me and John.

Spud looked up from his research. “That makes sense. Adding an unexpected fourth person to the transport diffused the Ergals’ energy. They couldn’t take us back as far as we had intended.” His glare was aimed at John.

John was smiling at the Professor. “Oops.”

Her tone was not apologetic. “How could I act otherwise? Aside from your clumsy dress, and your even clumsier English, you three were clearly not typical moderns.”

So much for Lester Moore’s Ergals.

“Yeshua Bar Maryam has long been forgotten in our day,” the Professor continued, “But, like Yeshua, my own ancestors had a covenant with the god Yahweh. There are few historical documents to be found, but those I have researched suggest Yeshua was condemned under a charge of blasphemy for his contention that he was kin to Yahweh. Like most contemporary scholars, I could learn little more.”

She reached out both hands, palms up. “And now three *xenoi* arrive with urgent questions about this lost martyr, seeking to locate his grave. What is their purpose for this quest? Have they information or revelations that could change our understanding of our past? I am a historian and a scientist, clearly should I not investigate your origins and mission? If only to understand mine?”

“And so here we are.” Apparently, she did comprehend some English. Or English. “Now, it is my turn to ask a few more questions about you.” She paused, her eyes on our Ergal rings, waiting.

I looked up at John, who seemed to have the best connection with our new “friend”, and shrugged.

He stepped up to the plate. “Well, you’re right, Aliyah. We aren’t exactly, uh, your kind of ‘moderns’. But, we’re just like you in every other way. I mean, human. We, uh, do have some technology here that, uh, you all, haven’t invented yet, that allows us to travel, uh, you know, back. But unless you’re an engineer, too, I don’t think you’ll understand my, uh, technobabble. Um, just think of us as having solved the riddle of cold fusion for time.” At last, John exhaled.

Oh, well. A punt.

Spud came up briskly to bat. “You are correct, we are *xenoi*, from an impassable part of Earth, I fear, and, in our own way, also students of science and history. But, I am afraid, Professor, that we shall have to accompany you back to Alsharif, thank you for your assistance, and bid you ‘adieu’. Our apologies for this unauthorized excursion, and our best wishes as regards to your academic pursuits.” No hesitation there.

Dr. Malamud raised her hand. “Wait. I’d like to stay with—”

The roar of the jets drowned out the rest of her sentence. Another blast vibrated our underground shelter. “Um, Earth history was never my strong subject, Professor, but weren’t jet fighters discovered less than a hundred years ago?” I asked as the building shook from the force of the bomb.

Dr. Malamud raised an eyebrow, “I’m not familiar with the term ‘jet’, but Heron, Hypatia, and so many other ancient Greeks had developed models such as the aeroripile that could be used for rapid flight. Why would it take more than two thousand years to implement them?”

Spud whispered, “They had no Dark Ages. *Our* Renaissance was delayed a thousand years.”

Oh. “But, didn’t she say something about the Crusades?” I countered.

“Dr. Malamud, who would the combatants in this epic battle be?” Spud asked.

“Why the Order of Isis and Osiris and the acolytes of Zarathustra, of course.”

Of course. Without Yeshua’s resurrection as their inspiration, the numbers of Yeshua’s followers would never have reached the critical mass needed to unseat the competing religions of the era.

And Yeshua could never have completed his own mission, to return and inspire those followers, without the Somalderis. Which he didn’t have when he needed it, thanks to me.

Doomed.

Chapter 20 Nothing

New Under the Sun

Golgotha—alternate eleven hundred years ago

We heard the whine of the jet's engines fade into the distance before we dared venture out onto the barren street, which was occupied only by rusted motor vehicles and mangled cycles.

The rolling hills on the horizon indicated we were still in the environs of Judea, but the land was dry, dusty, and barren. "Where is everybody?"

"Probably evacuated to avoid the war," John said.

Professor Malamud agreed. "At its peak, the Zarathustran empire extended east to the Hindi peninsula and north to the Varangian kingdom. The Cult of Isis expanded to the Anglo-Saxon Isles and the Arctic States, absorbing mythical elements of those cultures such as the honoring of the fantasy creatures, the Valkyries."

I jumped in without thinking. "Valkyries aren't fantasy—I met—" Seeing the looks on John and Spud's faces, I did a 180, adding, "many people who believe in them."

The Professor nodded, "Despite tens of thousands of years of evolution, the drive for spirituality has in fact, grown. Many people feel a need to believe in something beyond the material, beyond the limits of our human senses and cognition, even if it doesn't exist."

"Indeed," echoed Spud, casting a quick glance at John.

"Life has no meaning without faith in something," said John, smiling again at the Professor. "Something beyond ourselves."

"Life is its own purpose." She returned the smile.. "And how wonderful that we have the opportunity to relish it fully every day."

"None of us will be relishing life for long if we don't transport out of here," warned Spud. "Dr. Malamud, I acknowledge your thirst for scientific discovery and your astute skills at observation. But we remain at growing risk of discovery here with every passing minute. We must return to Alsharif post-haste."

The Professor hugged John again, shaking her head. "I told you. I'm not going back yet. I'm afraid you're stuck with me," she said to Spud.

John hugged her back and grinned. "Love that glue."

Really, John? I gifted my brother with my biggest eye roll. I expected Spud to emit an angry comment, too, but all I heard in response was a loud buzz and the smell of burning flesh. I turned to see a couple of uniformed men behind us, armed with a type of taser, felt searing pain throughout my entire body, and blacked out.

• • •

The liquid filled my lungs, smothering me as I gasped, desperate for a lifeline of oxygen. I coughed, gagging as the icy water from my throat sprayed onto my face and chest. I flailed my arms and legs, praying that I could swim away from—where am I—in a Glieser underwater prison?

Air. Air! Several deep, deep breaths before I could see beyond the fog that blanketed my eyes. Surrounded. No, not by Gliesers. Humanoids. Humans. *Uniformed* humans. “Rani Gaasoos! Mugahemin!”

I could not understand even one word, but their harsh tone made it clear I wasn’t a welcome guest.

“Heya askareya! Fen el asakyer?” Desperate for a translator, I looked at my bound wrists and bare fingers. Not a trace of my black market Ergal.

“Rani Gaasoos! Biyahagemo! Fel el askari eltani! Enta hat moot!” A middle-aged man whose buzz cut was grizzled with gray raised the tin bucket in his hands and held it a few inches from my nose. I felt the first drops of freezing water sprinkle on my lips, and turned my head to avoid the onrushing stream.

“Wait!” I cried. My arms fought to free themselves from the rough ropes that held them trapped. I bucked my breastbone against the tight cords around my ribs and tossed my head from side to side, hoping to avoid the liquid drenching my nose and throat once again. To no avail. The curtain of water flowed into my windpipe, blocking out the precious air once more. Coughing and gasping, I heard the cry “Gaasoos!” again—and then the darkness fell.

• • •

“Hurry!”

I didn’t recognize the voice whispering in my ear. As the fog retreated, I could barely make out brown tresses cascading over olive-skinned arms furiously striving to loosen my bonds.

“Come on. Help me undo your legs. John can only hold these monsters off for so long.”

John. Monsters. I shook my head, and then my newly freed wrists and hands. John. My brother. The Professor. “Aliyah!”

“Shhh.” Dr. Malamud reached for my hand and pulled me to a sitting position on the frigid metal table. “We have to go.”

I untied the last of the remaining ropes and quickly scanned the room. Cracked tiles on the walls, rusted oxygen tanks, and lifeless TVs. Either an archaic O.R. or a *very* run-down spa. “Where are we?” I asked as I hopped off the table and leaned back against it for a moment to steady my shaking legs. Chilled, my fingers buried themselves in the warmth of the fleece I was still wearing under my toga. The fleece! If it was still here, we might be able to escape somehow without those Ergals.

“An operatory of some kind, I’d guess. We heard you through the ventilator shafts.” She pointed to an open vent near the corner of the dirty room. “This way.”

“Really?” I said, trying to avoid rubbing against spattered blood on the mold-caked frame as, on all fours, I squeezed into the cylindrical shaft behind her. “I thought these were only big enough to crawl through in the movies.”

Dr. Malamud turned so I could see her shrug. “That sounds like something John said, too. He didn’t have time to explain what a “moo-veez” is, though.” She gestured for us to keep moving through the narrow tunnel, which was dimly lit through the cracks in its soldered joints.

“Is John okay? And, Spud?”

“We owe our reprieve to your friend,” she admitted. “As soon as the electric charge flashed blue, he leaped onto the back of the soldier that attacked you and began to choke him around the neck. The other soldier tried to come to his compatriot’s defense, but—and I don’t know how he did it—John managed to flip him onto his back and knock him unconscious.”

A frown crossed her face. “John reassured me that both men would be fine in a few hours. What the soldiers did was wrong, of course, but I didn’t want them to be permanently hurt.”

I’m glad the Professor couldn’t see my eye roll through the back of her head. Peace was something she’d been lucky to enjoy, but, for a historian, she was awfully naïve.

“John and your friend tried to carry you back to the warehouse, but when we heard sirens approaching, your friend insisted that we make a run for it so that we could find help. I told John to stay with your friend, but he wouldn’t leave me alone. She paused and peered off to her left. “I believe we need to travel down this way.”

I followed her on hands and knees, feeling clammy moisture seep through my clothing with each squishy step. I didn’t want to think about what exactly it was that I was crawling through.

“We made it back into the building,” said Dr. Malamud “and hid in the dark until the sirens had passed. When we went out to look for your friend, he was gone.”

They had Spud. Damn! This whole mess was getting worse by the minute. And I was ultimately responsible. Damn!

“John and I searched the surrounding grounds, but all we could see was more rubbish. We returned the warehouse to look for anything that might help.”

Dr. Malamud paused again at a fork in the ventilation system, and then, this time, chose a path to the right. I followed, my hands and knees chilled by their path through the dank detritus.

“John discovered a subterranean passage. We must have traveled down at least three storeys. Then we heard the voices—and yours—below us,” Dr. Malamud went on. “I could not make out too many of the words, but I recognized a few in archaic Arabic. Apparently they thought you were a Persian spy.”

I snorted. “One more round of that water torture, and I might’ve been ready to confess.”

“John wasn’t going to let them get that chance. He said he’d create a diversion to draw them away, so that I could come and get you.”

Worsen and worsen. I didn’t want John to fall into the soldiers’ clutches either. I’d done all this to save him, not to lose him.

“He told me he’d try to disable your interrogators— temporarily, of course—and would meet us at the terminus of this shaft,” She pointed at a rim of faint illumination far off in the distance.

“Ha,” I had to smile. John as the light at the end of the tunnel. Now, that was irony.

Energized by our goal, we stepped up our crawling pace, sloshing steadily in the moist mud until we reached the ventilator grill.

Dr. Malamud maneuvered her feet forward and aimed them to kick out the grill. “No!”

I whispered. “*We* don’t want to draw anyone’s attention. First we make sure nobody’s out there.”

I watched her peek through the slats and shake her head.

“I can’t see anyone.” Obvious disappointment in her voice.

“Don’t worry. We’ll find him. Grab the grill with your fingers and hold on to it. We have to lower it slowly—if it drops, it’ll clatter.”

The Professor nodded, and eased her delicate fingers along the struts, dislodging the vent. She placed it between her legs and gripped it tightly as she jumped out of the shaft onto the concrete floor a few inches below.

I followed her, and replaced the grill—in case we needed a way out, no point in advertising this route. The room in which we had arrived was empty, its walls stark gray concrete decorated only with colorful graffiti in Arabic script. Buried so deeply below ground, the room was eerily quiet; we could hear only our own short breaths. A wooden door in the far corner leaned ajar. We eased over toward it and peeked out—no one was in the dim hallway either.

I waved for Dr. Malamud to follow and tiptoed out into the passageway. She opened her lips to speak, but I pressed my finger on mine to signal silence, hoping the gesture was understandable in this alternate universe. John hadn’t met us yet as he’d promised, so we had to be very careful.

As we turned a corner towards an unlit hall, the Professor tapped me on the shoulder. I spun to face her, and saw her expression shift from worry to alarm. A gurgle in her throat was drowned out by the buzz of another taser, and, stunned, I fell into the blackness of unconsciousness once more.

• • •

Thank heavens the fog didn’t come with rain—this time. I woke up expecting Round 2 of Niagara Falls over my face, but, as my vision cleared, all I could see was a ceiling that badly needed a bath.

Judging by my own odoriferous condition, so did I. I just hoped it wasn’t going to be in torrents of windpipe-choking water.

“She’s coming around.”

John. John’s voice, behind me. “John!” I sat up, fighting off a wave of nausea. “Thanks for the rescue.”

“Wish I could take the credit,” he began as I scooted 180 degrees to face him, catching a better glimpse of our surroundings. Uh-oh.

For a technologically advanced society, the jail cell in which we were trapped was brutally primitive. Standard dirt floor, damp stone walls, tiny window blocked by thick bars, two bored guards chewing gum while playing board games on a tablet, under the flickering light of an oil lamp.

We’d been stripped of all our remaining belongings, as well as our shoes and clothes. *All* of our clothes. While I was thrilled to see my brother alive, I had no desire to see him living only in his birthday suit. My eyes quickly fell on Dr. Malamud’s well-proportioned curves, which made me feel like I needed to eat a pizza— or three. A pang of hunger reminded me that I hadn’t eaten anything since, oh, a thousand years ago.

My treasured Somalderis had been “appropriated”, too, and was now taunting us from beyond our reach, cushioning the knobby frame of one of the underfed guards at the table as he sat on a stiff wooden chair. Damn! Worse and worse!

I’m not a prude, but even if we could spring open the bars of our cell, not having clothes would sure discourage us from making a run for it. Nevertheless, as a trained

catascope, I swallowed my anger, and tried the bars, the window, the walls, and the floor, looking for a possible opening.

“Already checked, Sis,” said John. “No such luck.”

“Two eyes are better than one,” I muttered, aiming to keep my own two eyes away from John and the Professor. I spied a hole in one corner of the cell floor. Inching closer I realized it was only a few feet deep and held the pee and poop of, I guessed, the previous tenants. Frustrated, I added my contribution and moved back over towards the couple.

Still keeping my gaze averted, I asked, “Any sign of Spud?”

John sounded hesitant. “I’m afraid not. But we’ll find him as soon as we get out of here.”

“Soon would be good,” I returned, keeping my eyes glued to the others’ faces. John should never have left Spud behind.

“I’m so sorry,” John whispered to the Professor, “to get you into this mess.” I noticed his own eyes were focusing a bit lower than her, uh, face.

That did it. “*You’re* so sorry. You realize it’s *her* fault we’re not in the time we’re supposed to be!” I exploded.

“And it’s *your* fault we’re here in the first place,” John growled.

Furious, I shouted, “Yes. Yes it is. All my fault. I should never ever have tried to rescue you!” My voice cracked. “I should’ve left you to die alone.”

I moved back over towards the shithole, wondering if it was big enough for my brother to fall in.

Dr. Malamud patted John on the shoulder, “She’s right, you know. I am the one who sabotaged your plans. I could’ve waved the mysterious travelers through, and returned to the parchments I have been restoring to learn about the worlds of my ancestors. But who could resist an opportunity to explore these worlds in person.” Her warm brown eyes focused on John. “And perhaps part of me was hoping I’d have the opportunity to get to know you better.”

John met her gaze and moved in closer. I didn’t bother to hide my distaste. “Well, it sure looks like you’ll have plenty of time to do that. And if you two hook up, you can even give me and the guards a show.” I tilted my head to indicate that we now had an interested and leering audience outside our cell.

Then it hit me. “Actually, that’s a great idea.” Surprised, John and the Professor both turned towards me, and I quickly moved my arms to cover my lanky torso. I nodded at the guards once again. “How ‘bout *I* give them a show!”

John’s frown turned into a blanch. He slid over and stood between me and the cell bars. “No, Shiloh, I won’t stand for it.”

It took me a second to figure out why he seemed so upset—he’d thought I’d meant to use my body to achieve our escape. “God, no, John. Ugh, yick. I always swore I wouldn’t do that in Hollywood to save my life, and I’m not going to do it here either.” I lowered my voice. “But since we *are* in deep doo-doo...”

I took a few steps backward, hoping I’d measured correctly. “No, don’t touch me!” I shot my hands out, pretending to push John away.

A few more steps and I was at the rim of the hole. Waving my hands to appear as if I was losing my balance, I “fell” down into the hole. Double yick.

The layer of stinking feces was a couple of feet thick, and splattered onto my chest and shoulders. Fortunately, my head and neck were above the ground line. I forced a smile and pretended to be hurt and stuck.

“I can’t move! Help me!” I directed at the guards, as my team, playing their parts, gestured for help. Aside from some loud laughter, however, my cries and condition didn’t elicit any altruistic moves from our uniformed protectors, who turned back to their board games after a few moments. Damn. Even if they didn’t understand English—or English—I thought my plea had been clear.

Well, then. On to Plan B. “What’s this? Under my feet?” I shouted, pretending to reach down to pick the “this” up. “Oh, my God, it’s a gold ring.” I remembered the word ‘gold’ in Aramaic, and repeated it in Latin, just to be sure this message got through.

It did. The greedy guards put down their tablets and headed for the cell door, weapons drawn. As I’d hoped, they fought about who’d unlock the door and enter first to claim the treasure I was using as bait.

I was ready. As soon as they neared, ordering me to give up the gold, I aimed and fired a handful of poop at each guard’s face. Bulls-eyes. The guards screamed and clutched at their lids in agony, giving John the opportunity to overpower them and knock them out, then grab their tasers. I crawled up out of the hole, and helped John and Aliyah tie the men’s arms and legs with their belts and stuff a piece of soiled shirt (and you know what) in each guard’s mouth as a muffler.

“Let’s go,” I said, “They might have cameras set up around here.”

John had already pulled off and donned one guard’s pants and shoes, and offered Aliyah a long shirt from the guard that had escaped my well-aimed fecal missiles. As for me, well, I was coated in poop, so, although I smelled like you know what, nothing private showed any longer. I did use the remaining dirty shirt to wipe off my feet, however. No point in leaving poopy footprints as a guide to where we were fleeing.

John pulled the Somalderis off the chair and wrapped it around his hips, waving to us to follow him down an adjacent unlit hall. With apologies to Caesar, “we conquered, we locked, and we left”, trapping our guards in our erstwhile cell to struggle with literal and figurative headaches after they’d wake up.

• • •

The prison seemed to have been built after the abandonment of what used to be an old hospital. We ran away from the sounds of the angry guards’ voices towards a deserted wing and found ourselves in what resembled a dilapidated intensive care unit or surgical suite, complete with—yes!—a shower.

Which I did. Quickly, blessedly. We found a stash of once-white scrubs in an adjacent closet, and used several to fill in our wardrobe as needed, stuffing a few yellowed cloth masks in our pockets that we could wear in case we wanted to hide our identities. Now, how to get out of the building itself and find Spud?

John hid beside a shattered window, whose remaining glass shards were blanketed with fine dust, and peeked out at the courtyard below. “One sentinel at every corner tower, and the rovers are in pairs. About five minutes between patrols. If we can create a distraction for the tower guards, we’d have a break to make it to the east entrance.”

I pointed to several large dusty tanks, topped by rusty dials. “I think that’s oxygen. Anybody got a light?” If only Spud, who was always ready for a smoke, were here, we could build an explosive device...

But John and Aliyah’s heads were buried in a tall cabinet. Not again. “What’s so fascinating?” I chided, “You realize every minute we waste here increases our chances of getting caught.”

John turned to face us, his right hand holding a large jar filled with a yellow liquid in which floated a brown mass. “What does this look like to you?”

“I’m assuming you don’t want the obvious answer,” I returned.

“It’s a heart. A small one,” interjected the Professor, “in serum.”

John pulled open the cabinet door to reveal several shelves of similar jars, each containing small lumps of tissue in fluid. Some resembled identifiable organs. Livers, eyes, hearts, a pancreas, kidneys. Others were amorphous balls.

Dr. Malamud pointed to one of the balls. “This specimen is a more primitive form. Based on its length and shape, it seems to be developing into a stomach.”

“Wow. What were these people doing in here?” I scanned the room, noting a broken surgical table on the far wall. “Besides waterboarding Persian spies, of course.” The Professor’s voice was a whisper. “I would hypothesize they were promoting organ regeneration for transplants. My parents spoke of these myths, that such knowledge existed, but I never believed them.”

“Myths?” John asked. Organ regeneration was elementary medicine at Zyga’s universe-renowned Nejnsen Medical Center. But then again, this was Earth. Ancient Earth.

“My parents served as doctors. My mother worked with transplantation of donor and artificial hearts.” Dr. Malamud paused, averting her eyes. Blinking, she added, “But no moderns have ever successfully stimulated progenitor cells to differentiate into new organs.”

“I’m afraid that knowledge gained can just as easily be lost,” John said, replacing the jar with the heart back on the shelf.

“History is full of such tragedies,” he added, sighing. “Like the library at old Alexandria.” His frown returned. “Well, no makeshift bombs, no fires, that’s for sure. We’ll have to try to escape quietly. I don’t want to be responsible for derailing this world’s medical progress.”

I nodded my agreement. “Besides, we’ll have to limit any physical damage to the building so we can retrieve our Ergals before we split.”

“So we can split,” corrected John. “Which means we before we break out of these prison walls, we’ll have to break *in*.”

Chapter 21

Babylon IV

John took the lead, gripping an IV pole like his bat, as we snuck out of the surgical section. We made our way down a dimly lit hall past darkened operating rooms towards an abandoned central nurses' station, which was brightly lit by the setting sun's rays through a row of cracked windows. I brought up the rear, behind the Professor, my eyes peeled for any hidden intruders that might try to surprise us again. All of the operatories were also abandoned, their double doors rusted with broken hinges. Except one. A light shone through the slit between its double doors—I saw shadows within and gestured to John and Aliyah to move past the room quickly and quietly. We all exhaled only after we'd reached the nurses' station. But something was nagging at me. Something was off.

"What?" John whispered. "Let's go—there seems to be a door on the other side."

"Wait." I stood frowning, staring back down the hall towards the operatory with the light. "It seemed like there were people in there."

"An even better reason to keep moving, right?" said John.

"But when I walked past, it was just weird. The only place I saw shadows was in the top half of the slit between the doors, not the bottom. Like somebody was flying—"

"Or levving," John nodded. "I'll go check."

"Both of us," I insisted. "Professor, you stay here and hide behind these counters. In case you need to run and get us help."

John tapped me on the shoulder and motioned for us to tiptoe back to the lit operatory. We peeked through the slit and confirmed that the shadows seemed to be close to the ceiling, not the floor. John positioned his IV pole like a Geryon, and counted down with his fingers—3-2-1. We burst through the door, ready to fight off our unknown enemies, and stopped in mid-tracks.

Hanging from an IV hook was a young man, coughing and gagging, his feet bound and his arms tied behind his back, his face tinged violet, a rope tugging at his bruised and bleeding jaw.

"Spud!"

We raced to his side, and lifted him up and over the rope that had been digging into his mandible. He collapsed into our arms, taking deep, wheezy breaths, as we untied him and watched his skin assume a healthier beige hue.

"Thank the Omega Archon..." escaped my lips.

"Hardly," a hoarse voice responded, "Twas my anatomical investigations that allowed me to contract and relax my sternocleidomastoids and manoeuvre the rope into my mandibular notch." Spud took another deep breath. "Thereby relieving the pressure on my larynx."

"We thought someone was levving," said John.

Spud shook his head and winced as his muscles complained. "I did take the precaution of hiding my Ergal ring someplace I never thought they would search. But, alas, they left no cavity unturned." He rubbed his neck with a dirt-caked hand. "I'd been attempting to swing my legs up and over and release my head from the noose completely, though I am most grateful that you both were there to break what would very likely have been a painful landing on this stone floor."

“Well,” my voice radiated caring, “at least they didn’t waterboard you.”

Spud’s expression seemed to indicate that my attempt at empathy had been misguided. “But I told them nothing. I shudder to think what these savages might do if they could manipulate an Ergal.”

John interrupted, “We’d better go before they come back for you—for you. I think I spotted a way out of here. Can you walk?”

Spud stood up, albeit unsteadily, and nodded. “Let us make haste.” He frowned for a moment, sniffing. “Do I detect the faint odor of—”

“Come on,” I urged. “We’ll explain later.”

• • •

Aliyah and I spotted Spud as John led us to yet another deserted wing that offered us entry to a spacious room. The suite was barren except for several lopsided chairs and a scratched wood conference table with glass place mats.

“Looks like they could use a new housekeeper,” I offered, tracing a line in the dust on the glass with my finger.

Spud leaned in close to the mats, smelling the edges, and feeling the rims with his hands. “I believe,” he said, lifting one of them off the table to show us the wires attached to the underside, “that these rectangles were a type of primitive holo or tablet. A computer.”

“Wow. Way back in 1000 AD?” John exclaimed. “Can you get it to work?”

Spud’s eyes panned around the room. “I see no viable power source in here.” He ran his fingers down the length of the wire, then shook his head.

“Guess we’d better keep moving. The soldiers should’ve found our guilty guards by now.” I moved to the door, peeking down the dark hall. “Clear.”

CRASH! The building shook violently, plaster and dust showering us with a white coating. So much for my clean shower.

“What was that?” whispered Dr. Malamud.

“Another bomb, I conjecture,” said Spud, pointing out a broken window, through which we could hear the loud beat of revolving blades. “And another aircraft.”

Dr. Malamud took a peek herself. “That’s an autogyro! I’ve seen sketches in our historical files.”

“Looks like a helicopter to me,” said John. “A big one. Military issue. Which side?”

“The Daedalus autogyros were critical to the success of the Roman campaign to defend the East Mediterranean.”

“You don’t have them any more?” asked John.

“No,” Dr. Malamud said, “When the fossil fuels ran out after the Crusades, we returned to wind-powered airships for a few hundred years. The USA still uses them today.” She brushed a piece of plaster from her cheek. “Ion propulsion has only been functional in the past century for our supersonics, and we hope it’ll take us back to the moon someday.”

“Back?” Spud’s ears perked up.

“Gaia and Selene were considered the sisters of Isis. Historical records describe several ventures to the moon before the Crusades, in the hopes of claiming our satellite for Rome and Horus.” She snorted. “However, many of our modern scientists believe

that, judging by the period's modest level of technological development, such missions were spun from wool draped over their citizens' eyes."

"I doubt they'd have the technology to get through the Van Allen Belts," John injected, "The radiation belts around Earth." Spud and I exchanged glances. John probably didn't know what we'd discovered—that Benedict's dimension-traveling experiments had actually created that radiation only a few years before our own time.

"Granted, the nuclear winter that followed the Crusades would have been a challenge to navigate through. But the missions were reputed to have occurred much earlier than this holocaust. On the other hand, skeptics insist these ancestors, with primitive computers, aluminum craft, and petroleum fuel could never truly achieve extra-atmospheric travel." She smiled at us. "Nevertheless, I've always had faith that the reports were true, and that humans like us will someday spread their wings again in space."

Grinning, John put his hands together and gave the Professor a slight bow. "Namaste". Seeing her puzzled expression, he added, "Maybe, after we're done here, you'll give me the chance to take you for a ride."

"He's doing that right now," I muttered, shaking my head. Louder: "Hey, if we don't get going we really are going to be done here. We don't want to fall into the clutches of Officer Waterboard a second time." To Spud: "Any ideas? Can you get any of these 2-D holos working?"

"There may be light," nodded Spud, "if I were able to pull your brother away from the Professor to lend a hand."

"On it," I said, grabbing John's arm and tugging him towards the table.

• • •

"Dude!" I offered my fist to Spud for a fist bump. Rigging the glass computer to a makeshift power source would've been hard enough without the deafening alarms blaring from a crackling speaker system hanging from the ceiling, as well as the shouts from the guards making their way through the building in search of their escaped prisoners—us. Connecting the computer to the speaker wiring was a stroke of genius. But then again, that was our Spud. No slouch in the rabbit-pulling arena himself.

The glass lit up, flickering several times before displaying several menus in both Arabic and Cyrillic letters. Without Ergals, we would have to try to decrypt the writing manually. Professor Malamud was able to transliterate some of the Arabesque, no pun intended. John did surprisingly well with the Cyrillic. I'd forgotten that he'd studied Russian journals to bolster the research he'd been doing on high energy subatomic particles at the University of Maryland synchrotron.

"Select this one," John suggested. "Appears to be an index of hospital departments."

Spud and Dr. Malamud pored over the list. "No, let's try 'zatvor' . Corrections," she said.

John squinted at the uploading display. "It looks like at least half of this hospital was a prison. Wouldn't shock me if they did medical experiments..." He waved a hand in the direction of the surgical suites.

"The list of prisoners includes adherents of Ishtar, Aten, and," Dr. Malamud's voice caught on the last word, "Yahweh!" Her hand covered her lips.

“Zardosht, Zoroaster,” she continued after a trembling breath, “preached the philosophy of *asa*, truth, and free will. How could his followers have chosen to abuse others?”

“No such thing as free will in purgatory,” John snorted, “We are all prisoners of our creators’ whims.”

“Disciples of a sect have not always adhered to its founding tenets,” interjected Spud. “We do not have enough information to answer your question,” he added to the Professor. “Perhaps the disciples of Zarathustra were the liberators and not the imprisoners here. Isis may have tended the embers of peace, but Horus, Osiris, and Dionysus are not out of place in the violent pantheon of Jupiter and Mars, God of War.”

Was this *really* the time to be debating religious doctrines? I had to step in. I pointed to a section of the diagram across from our location. “You think that wing there could be where they’ve stored our Ergals—among other things?”

“You’re right, Shiloh,” John nodded. “Translates as pharmacy. Those *are* usually locked.”

“Locked or unlocked, we’ll have to figure out a way to make it past our former cells and those guards and possibly ‘the cavalry’, which I expect is approaching *post haste*,” Spud agreed, “judging by this horrid unceasing alarm.”

“If only we had an Ergal,” John sighed.

“Ha,” was the only response I could muster.

Chapter 22

Life is a Carousel

Three catscopes and a sharp stowaway brainstormed a salad bowl of strategies for our next steps.

I suggested we return to the surgical suites and build an armory of makeshift targeted mini-firebombs that we could use as a distraction, or, even better, for an aggressive frontal assault on our captors. John was in favor of a more delicate approach. There must be a stash of anesthetics in the operating rooms, he insisted. Spud weighed in with my brother, suggesting we disperse some “ether” into the ventilation ducts, knock out our enemies, stride into the vault and retrieve our belongings. By the time they’d wake up, we’d have long departed via for the ether of space-time.

Dr. Malamud advocated for us to try to negotiate. Spud and I patiently explained that she was fortunate to have grown up in a civilized modern society that was relatively free of deceit, villainy, and war. In *this* world, it was much more likely that we’d be handed our—ahem— assets on a platter. We had to be sure these “savages” didn’t find us. It sounded as if our oasis would soon be breached.

Spud headed back towards the suite’s door, opening it a crack to listen for the approaching soldiers. “I’d estimate they are three to five minutes away,” he whispered to me as I peeked into the still-deserted hall. “They are doing a room-to-room reconnoiter.”

“Then we should grab the computer and get moving,” I said. “John, Professor, we have to go.”

What the heck? I looked around the room. Where was John? And the Professor? Spud and I were alone.

“Your brother seems to have also taken the computer,” Spud observed, scanning the room for another opening or door.

“Where?” I shook my head. “There’s only the one door.” Beyond which the sound of shouting and banging by our captors was clearly getting closer and louder.

“Over here,” a voice behind us spoke.

We turned to see a smiling Aliyah with her arms around a grinning John standing on the other side of the conference table, both dressed in pristine, pressed togas. John’s extended right hand was holding—

“Our Ergals!” I gasped. “How did you do that?”

John doled out our prized rings. “Wish I could take the credit, but it was our buddy, Les, who saved the day.”

Spud’s eyebrow rose to his hairline. “Lester Samuel Moore?” No sign of the alienist here. “How?”

“You kids weren’t paying attention,” John chided. “Les didn’t give us that merry-go-round lecture for nothing. He was trying to tell us we could leap from our universe’s ‘carousel’ to an adjacent universe’s ‘carousel’. Then, all we had to do was wait til the time we wanted to travel to rotated by us again and then leap into it—presto, you’re back in the past.”

“Mr. Moore’s exact words said that such travel requires ‘means and method’,” Spud said with clear irritation.

“Means,” John opened his toga to reveal the Somalderis covering his hips. “And the method was that computer you were so kind to power up. Wasn’t quite as good as an Ergal, but, with a few simple calculations from my Maryland days, we—”

CRASH! Apparently the armed guards had made it as far our wing and broken into a nearby hallway. The walls shook as what sounded like an army of footsteps and shouts headed our way. John put his arm around Aliyah’s waist, and waived us closer. “I’ll explain later—we gotta fly.”

The door to the conference room slammed open and a cadre of helmeted soldiers sporting automatic weapons stormed into the room, guns ablaze. But they were seconds too late as our Ergals had just whisked us away. Holding hands and hoping for rain, the Babylon Four had left the building.

• • •

Golgotha—two thousand years ago. We hoped.

We M-fanned in a glade near a nest of juniper bushes behind a low hill. While Spud and John confirmed our location on their Ergals, I Ergaled me and Spud some era-appropriate clothing: long linen flowing robes. And demure headscarves for me and Aliyah. I wasn’t a fan of togs that wouldn’t let me fight or run, but I figured that our stowaway might not be able to deal with me anamorphing into a different gender before her eyes, as I was prone to do in these less progressive countries and eras. On the other hand, she’d impressed me as being pretty adaptable, after all.

Unfortunately, being in a rush to flee, we’d overcompensated just a hair on our makeshift Ergals. Yes, we had arrived back in Yeshua’s day, but quite a few hours earlier than we’d planned. At sunrise. In daylight, we’d have to be careful scoping out our territory. Best if we quickly found a discreet location to set up a base camp.

“We are in the general area of Golgotha,” Spud whispered. He nodded at the hill. “There is a clearing beyond where we first should turn our attention.”

John was already creeping up the back of the hill. He peeked over the top, nodded, and waved for us to approach.

“Got three of them hung out to dry. Is your Yeshua the one in the middle?”

Knitting his brow, Spud took a quick look at the scene below. “The man we seek,” he said, his tone admonishing, “yes, he is amidst the other two.”

Aliyah peeked over my shoulder. I felt her muscles tense behind me as her eyes took in the heart-rending picture before us.

Three large wooden crosses filled the clearing. In the center, I could barely recognize Yeshua. Not that many hours had passed from his perspective since I’d hit him up for the Somalderis loan. But the Yeshua drooping on the cross before us was dressed in a purple robe, open to reveal that his chest and trunk had been flayed without mercy, with rills of blood trickling down sun-dried tracks to his feet. Oh, my God. Was this tragedy partly my fault? Roman soldiers ambled among the victims—several stopped to poke and spit at Yeshua, growling words that we unable to hear. I’d never experienced such queasiness, such revulsion, at the evidence of such brutal physical and mental torture. Zygfed was an aggressive kingdom in its own way, but technology had made the need for carnal torture obsolete. Death by stun gun or fusion torpedos, like the Omega Archon’s flames of Hell, was sterile, efficient, and clean.

“Quite a crowd of onlookers.” Dr. Malamud’s voice was hoarse. “Our history records had described the barbarity of some of our ancestral cultures, but to see a whole village of persecutors and gawkers...I really did think humanity was better than that.”

Some of the onlookers spat at the wiry criminal sagging on the cross nearest to us, shouting “Thief! “Cut off his hands!”

“Yeah,” I muttered, “steal a loaf of bread to feed your family and get flogged and nailed onto a cross until you bleed to death.” I didn’t bother to hide my bitterness. “The milk of human kindness has always been curdled, girlfriend.”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t have to be. The lessons we learned after the imperialist crusades, the ones we ourselves just escaped, reshaped the very core of our values and the structure of our civilizations. Inclusion, respect, tolerance, intellectual curiosity, empathy, civic engagement, and altruism. Humanitarianism has kept our provinces and countries free of wars for hundreds of years.”

John was listening, his expression admiring. Clearly they had bonded even closer after their ride together on Lester Moore’s ‘carousels’. “Then you have created heaven on Earth, Aliyah. And they said it couldn’t be done.” His smile spoke the feelings he didn’t need to further articulate. Please.

“To everything there is a season,” Spud injected, saving me from diabetes. I scanned the crucifixion site below from over his shoulder.

“Those women over there have been next to Yeshua the whole time,” I said. “ID?” I pointed to a group of robed women gathered around Yeshua’s feet.

Spud checked his Zygan Ergal for data from our old timeline. “Historical records vary, but Panaghia and Mary Magdalene are at the top of the list of candidates. If so, they are unlikely to leave their posts.”

I sighed, and motioned to the others to follow me back down the hill. How was I going to be able to get the Somalderis to Yeshua if he continued to be surrounded by onlookers? Aliyah was the last to leave the hilltop, giving me a few minutes to confer with Spud and my brother.

“The only way we’ll get past these crowds to Yeshua is to invisiblize.” I whispered.

John agreed, “I was about to make the same suggestion.” Seeing Spud frown, he grumbled, “And these Ergals don’t invisiblize—unless?”

“I tried, just in case, a few minutes ago. Perhaps you should try yours, but I don’t believe Lester Moore’s intent was to mislead us.”

None of us were able to make either ourselves or the Somalderis disappear. “What about our Zygan Ergals?” I ventured. “Yeshua is still alive now, so the timeline actually hasn’t changed yet. Can’t we tap into Zygfed and activate them?”

Who wants to bet we were successful? I found Spud’s theory that the timeline officially changed when I borrowed the Somalderis...annoying.

“Okay, so what’s Plan B?” I challenged my brother and Spud.

“Records vary as to how long Yeshua will continue to survive on the cross,” Spud said, sifting through the Zygan history banks again. “Seven to nine hours at most.” “Rules out nightfall,” said John. “Sun just came off the horizon.”

“If that,” Aliyah added quietly, walking up to us. “I am quite fluent in Latin. Perhaps I can try to keep the guards occupied while you attempt your rescue.”

John, Spud, and I looked at each other, distressed. What had Aliyah overheard, and what was she expecting us to do?

I let John field this one. He dropped to his knees pretending to search for something in the reedy grass.

When I saw Spud follow, instinct kicked in and I pulled the Professor down, too. Between Spud's crouching knees, I could see the cadre of Roman soldiers jogging in step towards the crowds. Catching their attention wouldn't be a good idea, so we sidled over to a gully that led to a small inlet. And, behind a large boulder, barely visible through the tall grass, we spotted a five foot opening that led to a modest room-sized cave.

Not a bad place for us to hide until we could figure out our next moves. Judging from the scattered rags, cracked animal bones, dried fruit pits, and dust-etched amphorae that were strewn along its perimeter, we were not the first to make use of this hideout. Hoping our predecessors wouldn't return, we carried ourselves and our ideas into the cave.

Chapter 23

Light From Heaven

In the Cave of Ideas—two thousand years ago

As senior catascope, John took the lead, delegating assignments to each of us. Spud would continue scanning records of the period on his Zygan Ergal to help us determine a strategy. I was in charge of building a fire to light torches and to counter the dampness of the cave's dark interior. And John and Aliyah would use two torches to explore a few of the paths that seemed to branch off from the back of the cave. If we were lucky, we might even be able to reach Yeshua's location through an underground passage.

I built the fire in five minutes. No, I didn't rub two sticks together. Among the items John had reclaimed from the Crusaders was Spud's lighter—he never goes anywhere without it. John had also grabbed the two remaining cigars he and Spud had been saving for the right occasion. Breathing that smoke in these cramped quarters isn't the right occasion, John.

"You are going to tell us how you got back all our stuff, aren't you?" I prodded, as I took a seat next to the couple by the pit.

"I, too, am curious to learn more of your beta-test of Mr. Moore's carousel metaverse," echoed Spud, joining us.

"Not much to tell," John said, winking at Aliyah. "All it takes is time."

Seeing Spud's raised eyebrow, John laughed. "About a month at a time, to be inexact."

Both Spudian eyebrows went up.

"The transport was quick, just like our voyage into Benedict's universe." John didn't add 'and mine'. "But when you get there, you have to wait for the merry-go-round to cycle back to the time you want to leap to. That takes about a month."

I whistled.

"So, Aliyah and I had some time to explore—uh, our environment."

I forced a smile, hoping he wasn't going to get personal.

"Actually," John said, "it was amazing." Dang. Personal.

"We M-fanned into a modern Middle East—like the 1950s, but in their 1700s."

"Really?" I didn't expect that twist. "Like Alsharif?"

"No, like a modern Constantinople," John continued. "Apparently their Byzantine Empire wasn't swallowed up by the Ottomans. Greater Byzantium stretched from France down to Northern Africa and over to Pakistan. Luckily, Aliyah is fluent in Ancient Greek and Ecclesiastical Greek, so we were able to communicate without our Ergals."

I bestowed my forced smile on the Professor. "Lucky."

"Unlike our relatively secular society, Byzantium had maintained its religious core," Aliyah reported. "However, their Hellenic roots had instilled a love of philosophy and science that allowed their society to advance technologically as well as intellectually."

"Each member country of Greater Byzantium was called a Diocese, and was led by an enlightened Archbishop under the guidance of the Patriarch in Constantinople," added John.

Ο Θεός μας παραχωρεί τη σοφία για μάθημα της ζωής. Yahweh grants us wisdom to learn life's lessons," Aliyah translated.

"Resonates of the teachings of the Gautama Buddha," said Spud.

"There were many such writings in the libraries we visited. We spent almost two weeks in the Alexandria library alone."

"It was still there," John interjected. "I wish we'd had more time to study the works of Appolonius and Hipparchus. But we had to catch a catapult back to Phoenecia so we wouldn't miss the window to cross back to this carousel."

Spud's excitement was palpable. "Were you able to obtain duplicates of the documents you read in Alexandria?"

"Unfortunately not. I'd made some notes on our computer, but the technologies weren't compatible for us to be able to make direct copies. And, we, uh, lost the computer during our leap back."

"Here to the Crusades?" I asked.

"No. We leapt into the warehouse when they were, uh, interrogating you. They weren't expecting more visitors."

"Your brother is a very effective safecracker," Aliyah said, grinning. "We were in and out in minutes, though I can't help but wonder what would've happened if we'd then gone and tried to rescue you—*before* we rescued you."

"Don't ask." Having lost my own future/past self before my very eyes when I'd traveled to the RAM with Agriarctos, I wasn't eager to explain to Aliyah how disturbing seeing a duplicate 'you' can be. Much less watching her die.

"And the computer?" Spud persisted.

"I wished to return to Byzantium," Aliyah admitted, "but John opted for a different carousel."

John shrugged, palms up. "My safecracking skills had gotten us enough currency to support us for the month, but I hadn't realized those lamps in the tavern were also security cameras. My mug didn't look so cool on those Phoenecian 'Wanted' posters."

I allowed myself a giggle.

"We landed on yet another merry-go-round universe, but in this one, humans were not the dominant species."

Full out laugh. "Planet of the Apes?"

"Not hardly, Sis."

"Planet of the Robots," said Aliyah. "Wires and circuits instead of flesh and blood."

"Androids," John added. "Motherboards," he paused, adding with disgust, "for brains. We kept a low profile as we waited for the "carousels" to line up."

"As servants, tending to the robots' needs," Aliyah explained. "Like the other humans who had survived. Until this morning, when they arrived at our door."

Spud frowned. "The androids?"

"Human military police—they enforce the 'Three Laws of Humanoids'. They had identified an undocumented silicon-based entity within the slave quarters."

"His computer," Aliyah said.

John shook his head. "I'd turned it on to calculate our path back to you two. Didn't take the cops long to find it and appropriate it—for an android to adopt, of course."

“Thank the Omega Archon, we still had our Ergals and the Somalderis. I’d already put in the settings to leap back to the Crusades—and we made it in the nick of time. For both carousels.”

“You don’t think leaving your computer there will affect that universe’s timelines, do you?” I asked, worried. John stood up and shrugged. “Speaking as a human, I think they could use a little timeline change—and an Emancipation Proclamation.”

A loud sigh from Spud. “Well, I shall have to take a page from Shiloh’s playbook one day and make an unauthorized trip to pre-conflagration Alexandria. ‘Tis the only way I believe I shall ever espy the wisdom of the ancients.”

Grumbling, Spud settled in a far corner of the cave and continued to study the archived historical records on his Zygan Ergal as I stoked the fire and waited for John and the Professor to return from their reconnaissance. Unfortunately, they came back later than we expected, and without good news—no passages that could provide cover en route to Yeshua. Could’ve been the flickering lighting from the torches, but both looked a bit flushed. I didn’t want to hear their excuses, so I didn’t ask why.

John gave our companion an Ergaled blanket, and she lay down a few feet from the fire, welcoming the chance to rest. Good. I wouldn’t mind a few seconds alone with my brother, you know.

John must’ve read my mind. He sat down next to me and gave me a quick hug. “When we figure out a way to solve this mess,” I began, “I can’t wait to walk in the door of our farmhouse with you. You won’t believe how much the little ones have grown.”

“How many brothers and sisters do you have?” asked Dr. Malamud from her blanket bed.

“There are nine of us all together,” John said.

She whistled. “Always wanted a brother or sister, but ‘wow’.”

“You’re an only child?”

“Yes. Our culture doesn’t regulate reproduction, but it also doesn’t encourage people to have more children than they want.” She smiled at John, “My parents were very happy with just me.”

“You used the past tense again.”

The Professor looked away for a few moments. “Losing those you love, even as an adult...”

“I’m sorry,” John said, lying back and taking her hands in his.

I had a devilish urge to break the mood. “Your parents couldn’t have been that old.”

She seemed anything but offended. “No. You’re right. They had become eonauts, engaging in medical research in low earth orbit. Their experiments will help our space program to return to the moon someday.” Her eyes glistened, but the pride in her voice was clear, as she added. “Their craft exploded in reentry three years ago.”

Snap. “I’m sorry, too,” I said, meaning it.

“I am so glad they had a chance to live their dream to touch the edge of space. Perhaps someday I will do the same.”

“Perhaps someday,” John said with tenderness, “I could join you on that voyage.”

Biting my lip, I went over to sit next to Spud.

John and the Professor continued to murmur between themselves, but I no longer had the urge to eavesdrop. Spud continued to focus on documents in his Ergal, ignoring me as

well. We'd been up for many, many hours. Let the men in my life continue their respective research. I closed my eyes, and let sleep soothe my loneliness.

• • •

When I woke up, the fire had died to embers. Spud was still at his post scanning his Ergal files, and mumbled that John and Aliyah had gone off together to search down along more tunnels and passages a while ago and should be back soon.

I sat up, watching the embers cast flickering shadows on the walls of the cave. Half asleep, I started to imagine each shadow was a ghost, the tall one my brother George, the little one, my brother Billy. Soon I had named all the shadows as my siblings and confessed to them *sotto voce* that I had meant well. Fortunately, Spud chose not to comment if he heard.

A musical giggle floated from a passageway behind us. Dr. Malamud ambled in, leaning against John, who held her tightly around the waist. Once again, I didn't bother to explore what they'd been exploring. I laid back down on my blanket, and pretended to sleep.

John left Aliyah's side and scooted over to stoke the flames. After a few minutes, hearing her rhythmic breathing, I crawled over and sat up next to my brother. We didn't talk until the fire had regained its strength.

"I know what you're going to ask," John finally said. I pulled my knees up to my chin. "No. You don't." He waited.

"You gave up your scholarship at MIT to come back when Grandpa Alexander died." John had begun his college work in Boston at the age of 15.

John nodded. "It's okay. In the end, I learned much more at Mingferplatoi."

Understandable. The Zygan Intelligence Academy provided uploads with Zygfed's bi-galactic wealth of information, most of it unknown to Earth. I only wished that that had been enough for John. "Well, thank you. George and Connie were able to finish their studies thanks to you."

"I didn't leave until they could steer the family ship without me."

"I know. But I still missed you. We all did."

We sat quietly for a few minutes watching the shadows beyond the fire. Two nameless shadows hovered among the ones I had baptized with my family members' monikers. The question that burned my lips surprised even me.

"Bro. Why don't I remember my parents?"

John started. "Well, uh, you were very young," he stumbled.

"I was five. I have other memories that age. But not of *them*. And Grandpa Alexander's albums never had any pictures of my—our—mother and father." How pale John looked as I turned to face him.

John kept avoiding my direct gaze, digging at the ashes with an intensity that caused sparks to fly from the pit. "They never told you," was the whispered response.

I felt a gnawing in my stomach, a sharp pain that warned me to turn back from painful truths ahead. Yet the aching to *know*, superseded any growing dread. "No. Please."

John rested his head in his hands for a few eternal minutes. When he looked up, his eyes were wet with tears. "Nor me. It was Theodore Benedict who enlightened me. And it was then that I resolved never to be a pawn of the Omega Archon again."

“As a Zygint agent?”

“As a replicant.” He took a deep breath. “A clone.”

The volcano in my abdomen exploded, and for a few seconds, I couldn't breathe. When I found the air to speak, my voice was trembling. “You're saying I have no parents.”

John shook his head. “None of us do.”

Chapter 24

Tears of a Clone

Neither of us spoke for a long time. I blinked, hard, but the tears wouldn't come. Was it the fire's heat or my anger that had dried my eyes.

Finally, I began. "Tell me what you know."

"Not as much as I'd like," John admitted. "You asked why I've been so driven to go to Level 3. That's one reason. To get those answers." He rubbed his temples with both hands. "Where did we come from? Who created us? Why are we here?" He snorted. "I thought I was the only one asking these questions—and then I met Theodore Benedict."

"And he had the answers?"

"No. I wish, but, no. But he had the same questions." A sigh. "I don't know if I can explain it, but for the last several years, I've felt as if my life has just been a rehearsal for something else, something truly real. Til then, I feel like I'm just an experimental animal for unknown observers who keep building complex figurative dragons for me to slay."

"Sounds like the perfect definition of Purgatory," I observed, flashing an image of Marlin the Magician in his cave.

John nodded. "In the end, Shiloh, I am not a patient man. I refuse to spend the rest of my life playing Sisyphus, pushing a boulder up a hill just to watch it roll down day after day. I must, somehow, someday, get to Level 3, and 'put away childish things'.

I shook my head. "Haven't you kind of been pushing that boulder up over and over yourself for the last three years?" I snorted, "Besides, after all the stuff you've just told me, how can you be sure that Level 3 even exists?"

John looked into my eyes. "I have faith that it does." A pause. "The alternative would be too hard to bear." His focus seemed to drift for a moment—perhaps to the memories of his recent imprisonment and rescue. After a few seconds, he cleared his throat and continued, "I'd always believed that Level 3 is where I would find the truth and my real life would finally begin." I almost missed his momentary glance at the sleeping Aliyah.

"Then you think we might not even be alive at all?" I instinctively rubbed my skin and felt for my pulse.

"We're not robots or androids if that's what you mean." He nodded at Spud, "As your buddy Shakespeare over there would quote, 'If you prick us, do we not bleed?'" He shrugged. "We bleed."

"But, you've got no idea why were we, uh, cloned? And from whom?" A sheepish grin. "Whoms?" My gaze dropped to the part of his anatomy that differed most from mine.

"Benedict thinks I was the index case. In other words, I was created first for some reason," he theorized, "from an unknown template, and then my family was built around me." He poked at the fire again. "But I'm not certain he's right about that." His eyes met mine.

I moved back a foot. "You don't mean me? Why would it be me?"

Another shrug. "The red haired woman. Stacy. I've never seen or heard of her."

I frowned. "But I don't know who she is either." I told John about my experience with Agriarctos and my avatar in the RAM. "My avatar died before I could get the story.

But at Mel's diner, *you* were 'there' with the redhead—if she *was* Stacy. Grandpa Alexander, too." A new thought hit me. "Could Grandpa Alexander be the template from which we were, uh...?"

John shrugged. "Possibly. But I think he was just a 'recruiter'. For Zygint. Or the Helianthi. Or both. 'Why' is a question neither Benedict nor I could answer."

"Are all of us clones then? Benedict, too?"

"No. He says." John pursed his lips. "He does have a mother, as we saw." John put his hands on his neck behind his head and stretched. "Shiloh, I've given up any hope that Level 2 will ever provide us with the truth. Let's finish what we need to do to reset our timeline, and then I can revisit my quest for tangible knowledge—for me *and* you."

"We will have a brief opportunity in less than 30 minutes." Spud appeared behind us. If he'd overheard our conversation, he wasn't going to let on. "Records show the unusual concordance of both a total eclipse and a substantial earthquake occurring in the seventh hour. Around 1 p.m."

John beat me to it. "Darkness *and* distraction. The miracle we'd been hoping for."

• • •

Spud advocated that we try a full frontal approach. John and I should dress up as visiting—male—Roman officers, and stride through the ranks straight to Yeshua. Spud would disguise himself as a wandering prophet or seer, and draw attention in his direction by predicting the eclipse. Even so, John balked. "The numbers would still be against us. I saw at least ten guards. And even if we got to Yeshua, we'd have to transfer the Somalderis without creating...curiosity."

"That'll be a problem with any scenario," I said. "We can't distract everyone, and the Somalderis won't be easy to pull out quickly from under the shoulder plates of the body armor."

"We are too few to implement multiple distractions," Spud returned, his eyes falling on the sleeping Professor.

"No." John glared at Spud. "Forget it. She's not a catascope, this is *our* operation."

"That isn't our only concern with her," I admitted, lowering my voice. "She thinks we're mounting a *rescue*. And saving Yeshua's life unfortunately isn't in our game plan."

The realization clearly disturbed John. "I'm sure we could explain..."

Spud and I both shook our heads.

"Spud has a good point, though," I continued. "The guards—and everyone else—in these cultures are less likely to focus on what a woman is doing. Women aren't seen as immediate threats."

I convinced the others that I stood the best chance of getting close to Yeshua with the Somalderis. As a woman, I'd be less threatening to the Roman guards, and maybe I'd even be welcomed by the other female mourners providing solace by Yeshua's side. The flowing robes draped around my body could easily hide the Somalderis. John and Spud could, if needed, draw the guards' attention away from me, while I attempted to deliver the Fleece.

We left Dr. Malamud curled up in the cave, fast asleep. John knelt by her side and kissed her lightly on the forehead, then ran to catch up as we ventured back out towards the crucifixion site.

Yeshua's condition had deteriorated horribly over the past few hours. Sunken eyes and cheeks, cracked lips, gasping breaths from an emaciated chest. The wounds from his beating had filled with pus, which was oozing out and mingling with the serum dripping onto his bloody feet. One of the women nearby tried to wipe his legs with a damp cloth, only to be chased back by a Roman guard wielding a gilded javelin. Getting close wasn't going to be easy.

John nodded at me, and set off ambling in the direction of the guards. In his Ergaled beard and robes, his hair color and skin color anamorphed into a dark brown, he no longer resembled my brother but a sun-baked Judean cleric of the era. Spud had opted for the costume of a Roman courier. He had already engaged a couple of guards in casual conversation as they watched the abhorrent spectacle before them with cynical indifference.

My makeshift Ergal's Aramaic helped me approach the women as a convincing Yeshua acolyte from a neighboring village. I'd suggested just being Shiloh, but coached by an adamant Spud, I introduced myself as Mary, a daughter of Jerusalem and the wife of Clopas.

So close, and yet so far. I was only a few feet away from Yeshua, but still under the watchful eyes of a few of the unoccupied guards who seemed to have nothing better to do than their jobs. I'd trigger their attention in unpleasant ways if I inched closer. My team? Well, Spud did seem to be amusing several soldiers with some street magic, and John had attracted a few guards of his own who, in another era, would be demanding "to see his papers." But, with a couple of guards nearby still hovering warily, maybe Spud was right—perhaps we should've asked Aliyah to come and play her siren call for this group after all.

Well, nature would have to provide the "Look over here" distraction. Spud's hand signals gave us a 30 second countdown to the start of the eclipse. As soon as the darkness enveloped us, I'd race to wrap the fleece around—

"Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!"

I started at the sound of the harsh, hoarse voice, its plaintive plea stabbing my ears with a wave of despair. Frozen, I watched Yeshua, his eyes reaching towards a graying sky, railing at his abandonment again.

The earthquake knocked me to the ground. This shaker was bigger than I'd ever felt, even as a veteran Angeleno. By the time the shaking had eased and the screams of the frightened around me had quieted, the eclipse's dusk had neared its peak.

I jumped to my feet, my fingers rubbing the Somalderis. I only had a few minutes, I'd better move quickly before the light returned. All around me, terrified Romans and locals were running, crying, and shouting. Crouching down, I crept towards the cross on which Yeshua was imprisoned, reached down inside my robes to pull out the fleece, and—

I was pulled to the ground by a strong pair of arms behind me. My red hot reflexes kicked in—I rolled over and pulled my legs to my chest, ready to slice my assailant's abdomen in two with a powerful kick. My sandals stopped an inch from the protuberant belly of my attacker. One of the Yeshua disciples, she was clearly angry, and clearly pregnant.

"Keep away from him," the woman cried in Aramaic as she tried to grab my feet.

I dodged backwards—right into the hands of two other women, who, gripping my forearms with inhuman strength, dragged me away from my target. “I am trying to *help* him,” I protested, trying to break free. “Let me go. There isn’t much time.”

“Only Yahweh can help him now. It is finished,” the oldest whispered, waving her craggy fist in my face. “He will join his father in paradise.”

Rays of light filtered around the edge of the moon as the second dawn of the day began to break. The ground shook once again, less strongly. Good, the aftershock could frighten these women off my case and give me a last chance to transfer the fleece. Unfortunately, this time, the women didn’t scream. As one, they fell on their knees in prayer, and, my eyes were drawn to the cross once again visible in my line of sight.

Yeshua’s body hung limply, barren of life and breath. I swallowed a sob. It was too late. He was gone.

Chapter 25

Shiloh's Choice

The Cave of Half-Baked Ideas—two thousand years ago

“Zygan historical records note that Yeshua died at 1500 local time to-day,” reported Spud once we’d all gathered back in our hideaway cave. He ambled over to where I sat forlorn, poking at the last embers of our fire. Night was falling and it would be quite chilly again soon. “The first quake occurred at 1456, Richter 6.9, about 2 minutes before the peak of the eclipse.”

I forced a wan smile. “So close, so close...”

“Wasn’t your fault. I wouldn’t have figured on the women mounting an attack either,” John, sitting cross-legged next to the sleeping Professor, whispered. “You did the right thing, holding back.”

Grateful for the kind words, I touched my hand to my forehead in a subtle salute. John nodded and lay down next to his sleeping companion. With a sigh, I turned back to the fire. Funny. Despite all this mess, in some ways John seemed happier than I’d ever seen him before.

Spud sat down by me, still nose-first in his black market Ergal.

“I gather we didn’t change the timeline back,” I muttered.

“Doesn’t seem so.” Spud shook his head as he scanned. He didn’t add that things might have gone better had we opted for his strategy. He didn’t have to.

“Well, back to Plan B,” I mumbled, “Whatever that may be.” I added another twig to the fire and watched it sizzle in a flash of light. “Though I have to wonder if it’s even worth it to set things right. Professor Malamud’s world is a lot more advanced and evolved than *our* modern century.”

“And peaceful,” added John from his mat. “Imagine an Earth finally without war. It may even be worth the price of our brothers’ lives.”

“We don’t have the right to make that decision,” I returned.

“I know,” John sighed. “None of us do. Though enough drum-beating sovereigns have fooled well-meaning patriots into sacrificing themselves on the battlefield in the cause of peace, hmm?”

I nodded. “We’ll just have to pray our timeline— and our universe—gets its act together after we restore it.”

Shrugging, John said, “I’m not holding my breath.” He nodded at Spud. “Hey, you’ve been studying that Ergal of yours very diligently, Escott. Any fresh ideas?”

Another head shake. John scooted over and sat up next to us. “What if we go back in time a day and try again?”

Spud didn’t seem enthusiastic. “I’m not convinced that we’d be more successful. Our numbers, even with your friend,” he nodded at the Professor, “are still too small.” He pursed his lips. “Sadly, our Zygan Ergals are still inoperative, and these other Ergals are still missing vital tools. We would be both visible and poorly armed.”

John tossed in a heavier branch he and Aliyah had collected to feed the flames. His eyes searched for Spud’s. “So you’re saying that the only thing we can do now is deliver the Somalderis to Yeshua after his death, right?”

Spud looked away as I snorted, “What’s the point of that? It’ll just sit in his grave.” My stick jabbed at the fire and sent sparks flying.

None of us said anything more for a very long time. John’s voice was quiet when he broke the silence.

“I’ll do it.”

Spud twitched, but continued to stare at the fire. I turned to my brother. “Do what?”

“What I have to do,” John said, avoiding my gaze.

I shot my puzzled frown at each of them to no avail. When the realization hit me, it was unbearable. “No!” I cried. “No way! I won’t lose you again!” I wrapped my arms around John’s muscular shoulders, hoping I could protect him for eternity from the jaws of death.

Dr. Malamud stirred, her eyes flickering open, squinting to take in the scene. “What’s going on?”

John and I said nothing. Spud intervened. “Rush is considering delivering the Somalderis directly to Yeshua.”

Scratching her head, the Professor said, “But the guards will not allow that, right?”

“In Level 3,” Spud continued. “Deliver it in heaven.”

The Professor sat up, wide-awake and visibly confused.

John’s voice was tender. “I’m afraid, Aliyah, that Yeshua didn’t survive.”

Her expression turned to sadness. A plaintive reply: “Were we not supposed to have tried to rescue him after sunset tonight?”

“He was taken sooner than we’d hoped,” John said. “We were far outnumbered. You wouldn’t have been able to help.”

Aliyah looked at both John and me with genuine concern, a frown creasing her forehead.

“It’s a crazy idea, John” I exploded. “Suicide doesn’t get you into heaven.”

“But it’s okay if it’s ‘suicide by cop’.” John’s light tone was very disturbing. “Or in this case, Roman Legionnaire.”

“I might remind you that this era does not provide lethal injections or painless euthanasia,” Spud warned, highlighting the gruesome, “The death of Yeshua, or even the more rapid decapitation of Cicero, was brutal torture. The best one might hope for would be a clean blow up the epigastrium with that Legionnaire’s sword.”

“You’re both nuts.” I was aghast at the direction of the conversation. “Forget it. I said it before and I’ll say it again. I will not let my brother sacrifice himself.” Softly. “If anyone falls on their sword on this one, it should be me.”

John gave Spud a jaunty nudge with his right foot. “Hey, Shakespeare, didn’t Macbeth say ‘what’s done is done’?”

“Lady Macbeth, yes,” Spud corrected. “But, I’d have to agree with Shiloh, because—”

Aliyah’s voice cracked. “You mean, John—John wants to k-kill himself to take this thing to…” Her lips trembled.

John extricated himself from my grip and slid next to Aliyah, pulling her close to him with a firm arm. He whispered a few words of Arabic in her ear, before turning back to me.

“Shiloh,” he said gently, “Ever since I was created, I have had a mission to learn, to know, and to understand. I know now that this world, this world of three material

dimensions, is only a piece of the whole. And the answers I seek will not be found in this universe, or in any brane, in Level 2.” His warm smile almost convinced me. “Taking the Somalderis to Yeshua in heaven is a sacrifice I embrace with my entire being. Earth will have its timeline restored, and I will have my answers.”

Almost. I stood up and stared down at the couple with the hint of a sneer. “And you would leave Aliyah behind? Alone?”

The arrow hit bullseye. I saw real pain in John’s eyes. “I would hope she—you, Aliyah—would join me in Level 3 someday.” He blinked back tangible tears. “Shiloh, I’ve always loved my family. But I never thought I’d develop feelings for anyone else.” He squeezed Aliyah’s shoulders, stroking her hair as tears crested over her lids and misted onto her hands. John looked up at me and smiled. “I will in the end have to practice what I’ve preached regarding patience.”

“Don’t do this.” I prayed my businesslike tone disguised the churning inside me. “The solution is clear. I’ll take the Somalderis to Level 3, and you two live happily ever after, all right?”

“Not all right,” interrupted Spud. “I apologize for disrupting your competitive heroism, but you need to be aware of a realistic possibility you haven’t considered.”

Three sad faces paused to gaze at Spud. We waited. “If you restore the timeline, it is likely that your sisters and brothers—and mine—will be resurrected.” Yeah, Spud, we know. That’s the point.

“But some of the people who currently exist in this new timeline, will exist no longer.” Okay. So? Oh. Aliyah.

“Or will never have been born at all,” intoned Spud. The sob came from my brother.

• • •

I didn’t join John and Aliyah in their moonlit foray outdoors to find us some sustenance. Our makeshift Ergals were perfectly capable of turning those old animal bones in our cave into a tolerable ham sandwich, but none of us was terribly hungry. Anyway, John and Aliyah needed some time alone, and so did I.

The somber-faced couple did bring back some figs and dates for us to munch on. Under better circumstances, I would have enjoyed them. We all lay on our mats, staring at the cave’s roof and pretending we were able to sleep.

I crawled over to the fire after a few useless hours trying to dampen my racing thoughts. Spud and John soon joined me, and, heads together and whispering, we spent a fitful night parsing the paradoxes. Over and over, we searched desperately for a loophole that would allow us to complete our mission, as well as save my brother’s love. Like the math puzzles that had one rowboat transport sworn enemies back and forth across a wide river to safety, we labored over one scenario after another that failed to solve our conundrum.

We’d survived the timeline change, Spud reasoned, because we’d been completely outside Earth’s space time and brane. We could go back to Benedict’s Brane 5 with Aliyah, but, then we’d have to leave her (and maybe us) there while John returned to this brane with the Somalderis and got himself speared into Level 3. There’s a good chance we then might not have a way to get back—if we survived another encounter with Benedict. On the other hand, if we left Aliyah here, and John’s sacrifice reverted the

timeline, she might still disappear. And how many other Aliyah's would we be murdering by returning the timeline to what it once was?

"People that never would have existed without your intrusion in the first place." Spud played devil's advocate.

Exhausted, we'd finally dropped off into weary sleep. Perhaps rest would clear our minds and dawn would offer us a ray of hope.

I woke up with the sunshine toasting my exposed skin. The brightness and—peeking out of the cave—the location of the sun in the sky hinted that it was at least mid-morning, and maybe even close to noon.

My stomach growled, and I realized we might wish to Ergal ourselves some anamorphed bone brunch. To shore up the brain cells with some energy for Plan C.

I rubbed Spud's shoulder before turning to my brother and running a hand across the top of his head. Then I noticed the empty mat. Where was Aliyah?

"I don't know," John said, looking around, "I thought she was sleeping next to me all night."

Spud knelt next to Aliyah's mat, meticulously examining the area from our beds to the opening of the cave, eyes and nose to the ground, dusting and sniffing like an over-caffeinated bloodhound.

John groaned. "Of course we—"

Spud held up his palm. "No, that's not what I'm after. There are muddy impressions leading to and away from the mat that have the distinct odor of basil. The herb," he added, as if we hadn't already guessed.

"Maybe she's cooking up something good—I'm getting hungry," John offered. "Date bread'd be a real treat."

I waved a hand, signaling that we'd best wait for Spud to finish his investigation. Spud made his way outside the cave, then ambled down to the adjacent stream and around a jutting rock beyond which we couldn't see. It took him a half hour to return, carrying a small object in his toga, his expression sober.

"What?" John didn't hide his anxiety. "Where is she?"

"I am not yet certain. I can say with some certitude that I observed multidirectional footprints near the stream. I also found," he pulled out the vase, "one of the amphorae that had been rubbished in our cave."

"Water? We'd already gotten some in one of the cave's tributaries yesterday. She didn't need to go out, we could've Ergaled more," John sighed. "Why hasn't she come back?"

"Perhaps a second set of footprints that arrived from the north might be a clue. The Professor seems to have walked alongside this companion for a few yards along the road, before the companion's footprints veered off into the tall grass, and I was no longer able to observe the impressions."

Spud shook his head before we asked. "The sandalprints were smaller than the professor's, and the sandals seemed more unevenly worn. Estimate of leg length and height would indicate that the companion was most likely a small woman."

John seemed a bit relieved. "Why do you say woman?"

"Both walking and running, men's and women's gaits differ due to differences in pelvic anatomy and Q-angle. I can draw you a picture of the angles and—"

John raised a hand, "So where is Aliyah now?"

Spud shrugged. “I returned to the path and followed the trail of the Professor’s sandals for over a kilometer. There seems to be a sizable village on the other side of those hills about three kilometers to the northeast. I considered continuing thence alone, but seeing the number of pedestrians crossing my path as I neared the town, I thought it would be best to come here and get my back-up,” Spud paused, hesitating, “I did not see Aliyah’s prints returning in this direction.”

John shrugged, his tone unconvincingly light. “Well, maybe she found something that could help us at that village. Including delicious local food. Let’s go check it out.”

We gathered our Ergals and a few thick branches we might use as walking sticks or defensive weapons, and set off behind Spud towards the nearby village.

The sun beating down on our backs was blisteringly hot. I was grateful to be swaddled in white robes head to toe, and worried that Spud’s pale arms and legs would be burned to a crisp by the time we arrived. Why *had* Aliyah run off in this direction? The path to the village was covered by dirt and rocks, yet quite a few Judean pedestrians seemed to be journeying back and forth along this road. Fortunately, we did not run into any Roman guards. Bet they weren’t fans of this heat.

We were just at the base of the large hill Spud had described when we heard it. From the other side—a bottomless scream, a cry that froze us in our tracks, followed by a counterpoint chorus of shouts and laughter. I recognized the voice. Aliyah. At the precipice, staring into the gaping jaws of death.

Chapter 26

Rescue 911

A Judean village—two thousand years ago

Clutching our branches, we clambered over the hill at top speed, racing towards the direction of the cries. The downward slope before us was dotted with small houses built of stone and bricks. A few boys and girls skipped between the homes, throwing pebbles and rocks at each other with giggling glee. Women, their heads covered with large kerchiefs, craned their necks through tiny windows and peered off into the distance ahead where a large crowd of men had gathered.

I'd neglected to anamorph myself into a man, so I hid between Spud and John as we made our way into the valley, pulling my own hood over a few unruly strands of my spiky blond hair. Running with sandals through rough grass and rocky ground was a challenge; our pace slowed down after we'd turned our ankles more than once.

The spectacle of the gathering seemed to be sufficient distraction for the villagers to keep them from stopping us as we neared. A vocal group of 25 or 30 men were packed three-deep in a circle—we could not see beyond their waving arms and shaking backs. Their shouts reminded me of my training mission to Aldebaran's fifth planet, Krittika, where I'd stumbled on a holiday ceremony that mimicked animal sacrifice. Dressed in colorful robes, the city managers in Nakshatra, the largest city of the country of Parveen, would lead a procession of hundreds of thousands to a central plaza where they would launch the annual tradition of Tzabek, the slaughter of the demons.

Aided by liberal doses of a legal hallucinogenic, the Nakshatrans would excite themselves into a frenzy, their cries and shouts growing louder and louder with each beat of the Tiba drums. Finally, about thirty citizens chosen to be honored in the ceremony were handed serrated gold swords and cheered on to attack a braying golden animal the size of an elephant and the shape of a bull, and subdue it into silence.

I had M-fanned into the city on a recon assignment early in my Academy days with my classmates Spud, Matshi, and Ulenem. We'd been tasked with the goal of locating a theoretical cache of illegal fusion bombs, allegedly hidden somewhere in Nakshatra by Benedict's terrorist Andarts.

Witnessing the spectacle of Tzabek, I'd been appalled by the animal brutality of the attacking citizens towards the unfortunate bull. Despite Spud's scolding "Observe and Preserve" to remind me that we should not interfere, I drafted my other two companions on a rescue mission to save the wounded beast.

I grabbed several swords from a vendor at the fringe of the crowd—they made of were pliant plastic, but we intended to intimidate, not injure. Cueing Matshi and Ulenem to follow, I ran screaming through the crowd, shouting Krittikan curses and waving my wobbling weapon, Matshi and Ulenem on my heels. I became the spectacle *du jour* within a few moments. The crowd paused their cheering and turned to gaze at the Chidurian, the Madaian, and the crazy humanoid disrupting their ceremony with an unscheduled performance.

By the time we'd reached the bull, the ceremonial attackers had also stopped their assault, letting their swords hang from their middle arm down to the ground. The wounded animal stood silently, its eyes glaring at us, as we neared.

And then I saw the wires. And the circuits. Yes, the "animal" was clearly an inanimate—or actually, animate—robot, remotely controlled from a few yards away by a baffled Krittikian unsure of what to do next.

As was I. Oh, well, best to bluff through. Trying not to blush, I raised my sword high, and cried in Zygan, "Victory and Health!"

"Run for it," I'd whispered to Matshi and Ulenem, as we raced back through the crowd and dove into a waiting tuk-tuk, the three wheeled vehicle Spud was driving. Spud sped off as the stunned crowd watched the local gendarmes run fruitlessly in pursuit. Didn't get an A on that one.

I had no doubt that the frenzied crowd before us would be much less sanguine and much more sanguinary than the Krittikians. Our Ergals translated their Aramaic phrases as "Kill her!" and "Die, Whore, die!"

Spud and John were taller than most of the rabid villagers and peeked over the men's shoulders to see what havoc they were wreaking to wrench those screams.

I had never seen my companions so disturbed. Spud had begun shaking, his pale skin blanched as white as Agriarctos' Ursan fur. John was flushed fiery red with anger from his forehead to his sandaled toes. Using a hand on each of their shoulders to push, I jumped up—and saw these, these primitives, aiming large stones at a collapsed Aliyah's bleeding head.

"Stop!" cried John in Aramaic. "Stop now!" He charged through the circle, threatening those before him with the thick branch in his right hand.

Spud, too, aimed his branch at anyone who dared move within a few feet, shouting "Maximus Occisor!"

As they broke into the clearing, I covered their tail by wagging my own stick violently back and forth, catching a few stray stones and lobbing them back at their sources. Glad John had taught me to play baseball—I managed to hit quite a few of the stone throwers squarely in their faces with my swing.

Cowards once they met opposition, many of the men fled, the others holding off on shooting new missiles and stepping back as I growled and shook my "bat". Glancing at Aliyah, I saw that her robes had been torn open, and her skin was gashed with multiple lacerations from the assault. John rushed to Aliyah's side, kneeling down to caress her abraded cheeks. Spud crouched near Aliyah's shoulder, and put two fingers on her neck.

"There's a pulse," Spud announced, his eyes now monitoring her shallow breathing powered weakly by broken ribs.

John gently lifted Aliyah's head. Her long brown hair was caked with blood and matted with dirt and clay, and John cradled it in his arms. "Aliyah, please, please, stay with me."

Aliyah's eyes flickered open, lost in a fog of pain, and found John's. For a second, life flared in her face. Her lips struggled to smile, and as her eyes rested closed we heard the faintest trace of a few words. "Al hubb jameel."

"I love you, too," John said, his tears rinsing dried blood off Aliyah's brow. "Don't go."

As Aliyah's eyes grew dim, Spud's fingers palpated up and down Aliyah's neck to no avail. He shook his head, and looked away. "Ecchymoses on her chest and abdomen indicate the possibility of massive internal hemorrhage, bleeding. I can begin CPR...?" Spud intoned, not really asking a question.

John shook his head. Aliyah had passed on.

Chapter 27

The Palace of Eternity

Spud stood up slowly, his face scorched by hate. He glared at the stragglers hovering a few yards away and gripped his branch against his chest. I almost couldn't hear, "To do a great right, do a little wrong."

"What?" I whispered, muddled.

John came up behind us, carrying Aliyah's sagging body firmly in his arms. His hands and robes were covered in blood, and his face was streaked with sweat and tears. "We must get her safe," he croaked, "and then I swear I will come back and tear these bastards limb from limb."

"We'll cover you," I insisted. "Let's move."

We had made it back over the hill and as far as the stream when Spud's sharp eyes observed a young woman cowering behind a juniper bush. He gestured for us to stay alert as we trudged along the banks. Our somber funeral procession would be an easy target, and none of us wanted to have to abandon Aliyah's body in these barren hills.

Why in the world had Aliyah left the safety of our cave in the first place, and trekked alone towards the river, and the village, without our—or John's—protection?

My roving eyes also spotted the frightened girl trying to stay undercover as we moved past her haven of juniper bushes. So focused on her task of hiding, she didn't see Spud veer off and circle around to approach her from behind.

"No farther," Spud ordered in Aramaic. "Come here."

John laid Aliyah's body gently down on the path and stood next to me as Spud led the woman to us by the elbow.

"Why have you been following us?" Spud continued, all district attorney.

Under her headcovering, we could see her eyes and nose were red. She looked no older than my sister Andi. Her lips trembled as she struggled to speak. Unable to draw her gaze from Aliyah's lifeless body, the girl whispered, "It was supposed to be me."

"What!" John's red hue returned as he moved to within inches of her face. "What're you saying?"

"I-I had been with Ya'akov." She pointed towards the field with the tall grass, her voice steeped in pain. "But only for a few minutes. I thought I could return without discovery. But the village elders saw us from the hilltop." She broke into a wave of sobs. "They would have stoned me, as I am betrothed to Igal."

"So instead you fingered Aliyah?" John exploded.

Spud and I both reached for an arm to hold him back.

The young woman shook her head, "No, no, I tried to run. To hide." She took a shaken breath. "But I am not good at hiding."

"Indeed," was Spud's only comment.

"Your friend, she-she was there, sitting downstream by the water, washing her feet." Looking up at me: "It was *she* who decided to—to..."

"Pray continue," Spud urged.

"She seemed to understand what the elders' were threatening. She told me to run down a different path, towards the Roman encampment, and to circle around into the village from behind. She said she would handle the elders, and ensure that I would not be

caught and punished for my transgression.” More sobs. “My father would only have beaten me, but I think she knew the aims of the village elders—she said I was too young to die.”

“And you just left—you left her to be murdered!”

The woman shook, “No, no. She told me it was all right. She said I’d given her the answer she was seeking. Please let me go. If they find I have escaped from my home again, I shall end up like, like…” Her last words were drowned by her tears. She fell to the ground and, slipping from Spud’s grasp, scurried away among the grass.

We didn’t let go of John. I could feel his rage pulsing through the muscles of his arm, and stroked it, hoping to soothe his turmoil even the tiniest bit. After a few minutes, his rapid breathing slowed, and the red in his face began to fade.

“Professor Malamud’s sacrifice grants you *carte blanche* to make your choice,” Spud said softly. “She must have reasoned that her presence would likely keep you from completing your…mission. By leaving, she has given you your freedom to do what you will.” Spud pursed his lips. ““A stage where every man must play a part. And mine a sad one.””

John now stood stiff, unmoving, next to Aliyah’s body. “Leave us alone. Go back to the cave, both of you, and leave us alone.”

Spud nodded, and tugged me by the arm onward down the path. A quarter mile forward, I turned back to take a look. With Aliyah’s corpse resting by his feet, John was still standing, motionless, staring out at the sea.

• • •

It was nightfall before John returned to the cave, his arms empty.

“I buried Aliyah by the giant date palm” were his only words.

Our fire had long died, and John joined me at the pit’s edge in staring at the black and gray ashes.

Spud nodded, and resumed scanning his Ergal from his mat at the edge of the cave. I was grateful that he knew when to keep his distance. It was going to be hard enough to talk to John myself.

“I’m sorry,” I finally mustered, my eyes glued to the pit.

“Maybe it was just written, Shiloh.” John sighed, clasping his hands. “Maybe it was all meant to be.”

I choked back a sob. I had played with matches and had melted my brother’s wings. “Please, John, I beg you. Let me go instead.”

His arm enveloped my shoulders. “You’re not responsible, Sis.” He squeezed me in a warm hug. “It’ll be all right. I know what I have to do. It’s what I *want* to do.”

I pulled away and looked up at him. “No! Just no.”

John’s eyes shone with a warmth that silenced my words and my pain. Softly, gently: “Yes.”

• • •

I couldn’t believe that I was pretending to be so professional about my brother’s impending death. John and Spud and I threw dirt on the ashes, covering our presence in the chilled cave, as we plotted how we could aid and abet in John’s self-proposed murder.

We finally agreed that, right after sunset, John would grab one of the large branches we'd stashed by the fire and use it to charge violently at an isolated Roman guard. A group of guards standing together would be more likely to be able to subdue John and beat him painfully into submission, whereas a lone soldier would be more apt to unsheathe his sword against John in self-defense. No point in making John's transition more torturing than it had to be.

John wrapped the Somalderis around his hips, under an Ergaled clean toga. Spud and I costumed ourselves as married villagers. When John would make his final run, we would be watching from a discreet distance behind him, ready to come and claim his, his body. Too soon, far too soon, we were ready.

John handed his black market Ergal to Spud. I walked over to John and met his gaze. "Godspeed, bro. Godspeed."

"You'll tell them all how much I love them."

I nodded, unable to speak. And then the dam broke and I fell into his arms, sobbing.

John squeezed my shoulders tightly, and leaned in to whisper in my ear. "Every soul is a story, Shiloh. Do not mourn for me. A story told is never lost."

It took all my strength of will to pull myself away and watch John's solitary walk out of the cave.

• • •

The crucifixion site—alternate two thousand years ago

Spud and I trudged a hundred yards behind John with weary steps. From afar, we could see the crucifixion site had wasted no time in replenishing its victims, as two more unfortunates were breathing their last to a chorus of tears. And our honorable actions were about to repair the timeline and return such human brutality to our modern world.

I blinked away the dust in my eyes. John had passed a group of guards, rowdy and laughing as they indulged in the local wine, and headed for an isolated soldier who stood off to one side scanning the horizon.

When John had arrived within a few feet of the lone guard, he turned to look back at us and, with his free hand, give us a subtle wave. As we returned the gesture, he set off towards the soldier with a roar, raising his stick with his muscular arm to aim at the guard's head.

The soldier's training kicked in, and he didn't hesitate. Unsheathing his weapon, he aimed it straight at my charging brother's heart.

Alerted by my brother's bellow and the cries from female onlookers, the jubilant guards had abandoned their chatter and were running to help their fellow trooper on the other side of the glade. I looked away, unable to watch, as the solo soldier struck his offensive pose. The sword would no doubt be sliding in under John's sternum, poised to lacerate cardiac muscle and the aorta and bring rapid death. I did not need to witness the final act.

The women's screams heralded when the deed was done. I turned my head to see John lying immobile on the ground, his toga drenched in the spray of his own blood. I quickly looked away again, and focused my eyes on a juniper bush hiding raptors in ambush.

“It is time,” Spud nudged me with an unwelcome elbow. “We can best stave off John’s decomposition in the coolness of our cave.”

I was too shell-shocked to take offense. Spud often retreated to science and logic when stressed; sometimes science and logic were the better pool to swim in than guilt and regrets.

Acting anxious and submissive, we shuffled towards the murder site, our hands clearly visible as holding no weapons. We were the man’s family, Spud explained to the guards in his impeccable Latin. Yohanan had been mad since a febrile illness last month, and had managed to escape and run amok during our afternoon siesta.

“We apologize for his disrespectful actions, and wish to take his body for burial with our thanks,” said Spud as he bowed and knelt next to my brother, his fingers subtly feeling for a pulse.

When he shook his head, I allowed myself to sob; hoping my genuine tears would mollify the guards and ease their adrenaline rushes. Our tactics worked, and Spud and I together, our hands caked with dirt and blood, were soon able to carry John away from this valley of death and out of the view of its victims; soldiers and sinners. I didn’t stop crying until we’d reached the cave.

We rested John on the mat where he and Aliyah had slept in bliss not long before. Spud tore open John’s toga beneath the gash above his abdomen and announced, “No Somalderis. The Fleece—and your brother—are now in heaven.”

John’s sacrifice had not been in vain.

Chapter 28

Resurrection

We decided to bury John next to Aliyah near the giant palm where he'd laid her to rest. Just before sunrise, we made our way to the massive tree next to the flowing stream. Aliyah's grave was still marked by the white irises John had planted into the soft dirt in the shape of a sunflower.

We lay John down next to Aliyah's grave, and pulled out our black market Ergals to Ergal us a pair of shovels.

The cry came from a distance, on the other side of the rocky hill where we were standing. As we strained to make out the words, we heard more shouts, and a growing commotion. We climbed up a few feet to the rim of the rocks and saw two women gesturing towards a group of bearded men in village robes. "It is empty, his tomb! Come!" one of the women clamored, pointing down a dirt path leading south of the ancient city.

"Yeshua?" I asked, knowing the answer.

Spud nodded, and started back down towards my brother, waving for me to follow. As we stood once again next to John, Spud fished inside his robes and pulled out his Zygan Ergal, entering an anamorphing command. "Let us see if our own timeline has been restored."

Two shovels M-fanned by Aliyah's grave. Success. "Operational" was Spud's only comment. Our Ergals were working once again.

Driven by an urge I couldn't harness, I grabbed a shovel and began digging into the soft dirt. Spud didn't stop me, but kindly collected John's irises and held them in his hands like a memorial bouquet as I dug.

I dug and dug and dug until I could dig no more. Tossing the shovel aside, I lay down on the ground next to my brother and let my tears and perspiration mingle. I could find no body, no bones in the mound, no trace of Aliyah in the makeshift grave. Now that our timeline was restored, Aliyah had never existed at all.

• • •

Home

We used our Zygan Ergals to lev John back to the cave, where we did a last cleanup to erase any remnants of our visit. Ergaling a polished cedar casket, I levved John into his silk lined bed, closing and locking the lid and laying a kiss on the smooth wood.

We would first have to stop in and update Ev at Earth Core, but I was eager to take John back to Maryland and into the arms of our family. Spud said nothing about his brother, shrugging when I asked if he would return to England—or France.

Our arrival in Earth Core Reception was low key. I'd micro'd the casket and was carrying it in my jeans pocket. I had no desire to report on my adventures to Fydra who staffed Reception with a bloodhound's curiosity.

Ev welcomed us both warmly. Because we'd time looped, only a few days had passed for Ev since we'd set off for Zyga and my futile meeting with Cirra Stratum, and he was eager for a debrief. Those few days had been pretty uneventful, Ev insisted, as he

caught me peering around the Core station. No, no subtle changes. Nothing to indicate that Ev's world had temporarily disappeared.

"Before I forget, Rush, regards from the SRG ambassador," he began, "we had a little conference on Io yesterday about setting them up to do nuclear meltdown cleanup." He snorted, "All that free energy, you think they'd give us a break on their price."

"Ah," was all I could muster.

"So did you find John? Is he okay?" Ev swallowed a bite of the "everything" pizza slice he was trying to balance on his pudgy fingers.

I stood frozen, unable to answer.

Seeing my discomfort, Spud interjected, "In the end, John was successful in finding his Holy Grail. I wager he will have much to tell us on the day we join him in Level 3."

A flash of sadness crossed Ev's face. "Oh. I'm so sorry. I was kind of hoping that I'd see him again, you know."

"Perhaps some of us will," said Spud, inching in the direction of the library. "Now if you'll excuse me a moment. I need to complete some research."

"And I'll just, uh, go make my report." I nodded towards the conference room. I didn't know how long I could hold it together. The last thing I wanted was a long conversation with Ev. Catching the wounded look in his eyes, I softened and took his hand in mine. "I just want you to know how grateful we are for everything you did to help us."

Ev smiled and cleared his throat. "You and Spud."

I turned back from before reaching the conference room door. "Me and John."

• • •

Earth Core Station—present day

Once Ev had returned to his Zygent business, I gave myself a time-out in the "water closet" where I had first launched my quest for Yeshua's Golden Fleece what seemed like an eon ago. After drying my tears on a wad of paper towels, I glanced at myself in the mirror. Red eyes, red nose, ruddy cheeks, swollen lips. Thinner than even Hollywood standards. The last time I'd visited this bathroom, I'd been a crusader, set to sail the seven seas to rescue my brother. In the end, with all my good intentions, I had only managed to lead him to his death. I heard myself snort a chuckle. My confidence, my hubris, had blessed me with a worse punishment than even the Omega Archon's Hell. My brother was gone for good, and, without question, I would spend a millennium in Hell to bring him back.

An hour had passed by the time my features were passable enough to not give my sorrow away. I snuck past Ev at his consoles and met up with Spud in the library. "Checking the timeline?" I asked, seeing Spud's aquiline nose buried in a row of holos.

"Yes. To my surprise, it seems quite intact."

I nodded and took a seat next to him. "Good. I haven't noticed anything different around here either."

On the screens before us were several ornate oil paintings dating from the 1600's to the modern era of a man who clearly resembled the Yeshua we had known. I pointed at one attributed to an artist named Coypel which had a resurrected "Yeshua" floating above

images of joyous acolytes and fearful legionnaires. Around his waist and hips, and extending over one arm—was that the Somalderis?

“I believe so,” Spud concurred, “though the painter didn’t render it quite as lush or golden as it truly was.”

Always the critic. “I suppose.” I didn’t want to ask the next question. “Did you happen to check on my family?”

“Satellite images show your farm in Maryland is populated by a rowdy cohort of children and adults. You shall be returning home soon enough—I did not need to invade their privacy as well.”

I couldn’t help but smile. More seriously: “Your brother okay?”

Spud hesitated. “‘Okay’ is not a word in his vocabulary, but yes, Ian is alive.”

“I’m glad.” I stood up and patted him on the back. “Thanks, partner. Uh,” I paused, “thanks for helping when I needed you.”

Spud didn’t turn to face me, but I did hear a sigh. “You, Rush, are as exceptional an antidote to boredom as the universe has provided me to date. Despite the palpable risks, I have never yet been able to resist injecting you into my life.”

“Oh-kay,” I admitted, allowing myself another smile. “I guess I’ll accept that.”

Kneading his fingers, Spud bestowed me with a sideways glance, “I only wish I could have facilitated a more...positive outcome for your brother...and for you.”

My voice cracked. “I wouldn’t be here without you. William.”

Spud flashed a smile, “Nor I without you.” Another pause. “Shiloh.”

I cleared my throat. “Well, partner, we’d better check what’s on our duty roster coming up.” I sat in front of another holo, my fingers pulling up the assignment schedule for Earth Core, and searched vainly for our names.

“I expect Ev cleared us from duty for a few weeks before we left, just in case, we, er... Our next shift for Zygint is not until July,” said Spud.

Wow. Two months off. A real, and, after what we’d been through, very welcome respite. “Then I’ll see you at SingularityCon?” The Las Vegas sci-fi convention was only three weeks away, and we were both slated to staff the *Bulwark* booth and do publicity for the show that might increase our chances of getting a Season 2.

“Indeed you will,” Spud waved, adding, “if I have not perished first from the oppressive lull and ennui.”

I could see him smiling in the holo screen’s reflection. “Good luck on your finals, dude,” I said, as, setting my Ergal for Maryland, I X-fanned.

Chapter 29

Home is Where the Heart Breaks

Maryland—present day

The sun had just set on the East Coast by the time I'd M-fanned on our farm. The gate behind me was locked for the night, and I could only spot a few lights on in the house.

I'd mega'd John's casket and let it rest in the evening's shadow on the grass behind me. What now seemed like an eternity ago, I'd run off in the middle of dinner and left my family in the lurch—better they see just me first and give me time to start explaining.

Stepping up onto the porch, I hit the doorbell. Bobby opened the door on the third ring. "Ooh, you're in trouble," he teased with a broad grin.

When I didn't return his serve, his grin disappeared. "What happened?" he asked with genuine concern.

I still couldn't answer. I just gave him a big hug and tried my hardest not to cry.

"Shiloh, what in the world?" Connie appeared behind Bobby in the hallway, her brow knitted by a worried frown.

I pulled back from my brother and reached a trembling arm to clasp my sister's. "Everything you could imagine." Blinking the fog from my eyes, I noted the house seemed dark. "Just you two?"

Connie nodded. "Billy and Andi are spending a week in the UK with Blair, and Kris is in Las Vegas with that musician. George should be back any minute. I'm helping him out until Tom returns tomorrow." She paused to catch her breath. "I wish—I wish you'd told us you were leaving." A sigh. "Anyway, come in and sit down."

I didn't move. "I can't, uh..." I turned to point outside the door into the night.

George stood filling the doorway, his arms clinging to the jamb, his face ashen.

"Oh, my God," were the only words Connie could muster.

• • •

I had to be very careful what I revealed, even to Connie and George. John had implied they knew something about our reality, but my own experience didn't agree. When John had disappeared three years before, George and the others had seemed awfully convinced he had really run off and joined the US Army, as he'd claimed. My own absences for Zygint, those not covered by time loops, had been explained away by my nascent acting career. The work I was getting in Hollywood had allowed me to live 3000 miles from DC on my own in L.A. Better that my family didn't find out the truth about the Zygant-Federation-behind-the-curtain. Or about John.

Truth be told, I didn't know the truth myself any more. I hoped desperately that John's faith in Level 3 would be rewarded, and that he would be alive, whatever that meant in heaven, and sponging up the answers he sought in the world beyond. The idea that he might have returned to the hell of nothingness was one I rejected every time it knocked at my conscience. That truth would be more than I could bear.

The memorial service was set for the day after tomorrow, allowing enough time for the whole family to fly back home. In the cave, John had asked me if I would arrange cremation and scatter his ashes into the wind at the base of Sugarloaf Mountain in his beloved Appalachian Mountain Range. Praying that I'd never really lose him, I had promised—with my fingers crossed.

I was grateful Connie took care of all the preparations. She's always been the "doer" in the family, fixing things I—and John—undo. In a couple of days, once everyone had returned, we would gather near the Rappahanock River and hike along the path towards our favorite hill, stopping every mile or so to share a memory of John's short, full life. When we'd reach the caverns, we'd let Icarus soar, and watch the breeze lift John back into the sky.

• • •

George was nursing a cup of tea in the darkness of our library, a black silhouette in the large armchair Grandpa Alexander had once occupied. Grateful that the lack of light would be a veil for my tears, I Ergaled myself a cup of hot chocolate and sat down on the sofa next to him.

He finally spoke. "I didn't ask you to tell us the whole story. Just why he never bothered to call."

"Come on, George. I told you what I could. Army Special Ops swore him to secrecy." My sip burned my burning tongue. "He did say how much he loved you."

"I'm sure," George snorted. Sighing, he added, "Something happened a few years ago, Shiloh. After that, John became all about John."

George shook his head. "I confess I was hoping for the return of the older brother I'd grown up with. He did love us. Back then."

I pursed my lips. Hesitated. Didn't say "and now, more than you know". Instead, I took a deep breath and changed the subject, sticking my big toe in the water. "Hey, Bro. Do you remember our parents?"

George looked at me, surprised. "Of course. I was almost ten when the accident hap— why wouldn't I?"

"Because I don't."

"Well, you were pretty little when they passed." "What was my mother's name?" A tremor in my voice.

George's jaw slackened. "Really, Shiloh?" "Her name." A deep frown. "Same as it used to be. Anastasia."

He shook his head. "You sure you're all right?"

"Did she have red hair?"

"Nooo..." A hint of a question. My brother's frown now carved canyons in his forehead.

"Can I see a picture?"

George laid his cup on the end table, spilling some of the tea onto the antique walnut under the doily. "They're all still there. We haven't moved them." He pointed to a row of photo albums on the bottom shelf of a nearby bookcase.

"Can I turn on the light?"

George reached over and flipped the switch on the reading lamp before I'd finished standing up. My face turned away, I shuffled over and picked up several of the dusty volumes in my arms, bringing them back to my chair.

I flipped the pages one by one. Yellowed photo albums of sunny days long since forgotten. Connie with pigtails. Kris with braces. George without his mustache. Grandpa Alexander, working in the barn with Blair. And— I swallowed hard—John, golden locks teasing his sculpted shoulders, sitting atop his red Moto Guzzi.

What I didn't see among all of our photos were images of my mother or my father. Even in the snapshots with Billy and Andi in diapers, frolicking under a volcanic sprinkler.

I looked through every single album, each book groaning and coughing dust, as I opened it to search for visions that weren't there.

"Maybe you'd better go lie down, Shiloh," Connie said from the doorway. Her expression mirrored George's concern.

"Dammit!" I cried, throwing down the album in my hand. "Where are they?"

"You've been through a lot and—"

"Our parents! Where are they?" I clenched my fists to stop the shaking.

"Could be a fever." Connie reached out her hand to feel my forehead.

I shoved it away. "I am not sick! Just show me one picture, one, of my parents."

George and Connie looked at each other, the worry and sadness clear in their eyes. George sighed and picked up the volume with the pictures of my younger sibs playing outdoors. He opened the album to the page where Billy had climbed up onto a small boulder and was preparing to jump. "Here, Shiloh. Can't you see?"

His finger rested a few inches to the right of Billy. I stared at the photo, unblinking, for as long as I was able. Until the shivering washed over me and I dropped to the carpet by their feet. How could I tell George and Connie that there was no one there at all.

Chapter 30

Merely Players

I don't remember much about the next two days. Connie said I was the picture of teeth-gnashing delirium until the fever broke.

That was as good an explanation as I would be able to come up with, so I played along. No point in rattling their padded cages with my reality. Once again, it was going to be up to me to track down the truth—alone.

I'd snuck one of the Billy and Andi pictures out of the album and tried to catch each of my sibs in private and see what they saw in the photo. No, I didn't lead them on, didn't hint. They all claimed—pretended—to see our parents.

The photo went into my jeans pocket, right under my Ergal, saved for Spud and his eagle eyes.

Because of my 'illness', Connie suggested we wait another day before the hike to Sugarloaf. I wouldn't have it. I was dreading the memorial, and the bitter barbs I expected to hear from Connie and George about John's decision to strike out on his own. "Let's do what we have to do," I insisted, pulling on my sneakers and donning my windbreaker.

We set off, Connie carrying the ornate urn with John's ashes. I noted some runic symbols in the design— one or two reminded me of characters I had seen on Benedict's planet ship, on the non-Zygan communications equipment we'd tried to use to escape our captors. I took a quick photo with my Ergal. Another item to file for further study with Spud.

At the base of Sugarloaf, Connie and George scattered the last of John's remains. I was grateful that, despite my fears, the eulogies remained positive and inspirational, and no one sang "Dust in the Wind". And, that I didn't cry.

I let the gang know at dinner I'd be returning to Malibu the next morning. Glancing in the direction from where John's plea for rescue had emanated only a few days ago, I saw that Tom, Connie's fiancé, was sitting in John's chair at our table. Life moves on, and so must I. If only I could.

"Can I come see you at the Convention?" Andi whispered.

"Oh, Andi. I wish. I won't have any time to hang with you in Vegas—we'll be marketing our show the whole time at the Con," I was sorry to answer. I did promise her she could spend a few weeks with me at my LA beach house as soon as her school year was over, and that we could fly back to Maryland together in July for Connie's wedding.

Kris declared that she'd stop by our booth at SingularityCon and market her new album—I mean 'say hi.' Her boyfriend, Mettle singer Elijah DiFiero, had just been cast in a few webisodes from the zombie graphic novel *Hideous Undead*, that had just been picked up by the Singularity Network, and would be making an appearance at one of the big-money booths for a few hours during the weekend of the convention.

"He'll be scoring, too," Kris gushed.

I smiled politely, and returned an "Of course."

I hoped that none of them picked up that I just couldn't sell it—the warm, fuzzy family thing; I felt as if this entire day, all my conversations, this dinner, was an act. Me

acting on the set of one of those so-called reality shows, and I was going up on—forgetting—my lines.

Maybe Connie was right. Maybe I still had that fever and this whole family scene was a delusion like the one in the Plegma—that sudden thought made me scan the room for any sign of creepy Mel.

I hadn't even realized I was shedding tears. To my shock, it was Kris who put an arm around me and gave me a worried hug. I shook my head and dabbed at my eyes with my napkin. "I'm okay. Really. Just tired." I excused myself from the table with a forced smile and headed upstairs.

• • •

No, I couldn't resist a last look at John's room.

Empty. Everything was gone. Well, except for the curtains, the desk, and the bed. But, John's books, his files, his disks, his mementoes. Nothing. The room was clean, and recently dusted, "ready for its next occupant". Lives—like hotel guests—move on.

The only trace of my brother remained in my memory. And in the urn that someone—Connie?—had lain on its side in a dark corner of the room.

I took the urn to my room, and hid it under my windbreaker. Driven by a sudden thought, I snuck back down the stairs without disturbing the vibrant jabbering at the dinner table. Alone in the den, I dove for the photo album that had had the most pictures of John.

A sigh of relief. Still there. Still smiling. Still "alive". The Moto Guzzo photo joined the other snapshot in my jeans. Just for me to cry over and remember.

• • •

Las Vegas—two and a half weeks later

I'd agreed to meet Spud at the exhibitor's check-in table at the Las Vegas Convention Center at 7:30 am on opening day of SingularityCon. He seemed to have grown another inch during the three weeks he'd been in England, I observed, as he bent down to meet my eyes with a questioning gaze.

I patted his arm and let him know I was doing okay.

"Of course," he responded to my nosy question about passing his finals. "And I shan't be taking a gap year either. I have placed at Sidney Sussex." A beat. "The University of Cambridge."

"All about networking," I muttered, adding upon catching his frown, "The old school tie."

He snorted. "No, rather, my *vitae*, building my *repertoire*."

Ergal, do your work. "Getting skills and adding to your resumé?"

A hint of annoyance. "That is what I just said." "Escott, Rush," cried Simon Carter, the "hawt" star of *Bulwark*, dressed in the uniform of successful Hollywood, a black turtleneck and tailored slacks and jacket. "Our booth is near the morning panels; hurry and you'll be just in time to start your pitching."

Spud and I both rolled our eyes. For once, we were exactly on the same page. Marketing's a pitch.

• • •

Apparently, *Bulwark* fans weren't the type to show up—or even *wake* up—before lunchtime. We only saw a trickle of passers-by in the first hour we staffed the booth. A few stopped to ask about our show, which network it was on, what time, etc,... With all this underwhelming enthusiasm, I started to wonder if we had any chance of getting renewed for a second season.

But the downtime also gave me a chance to broach the subject of John's revelations with my partner. Spud's brilliant brain might give me an insightful interpretation of John's...theories and speculation.

Happy to leave Simon out in front to flirt with the fangirls, I pulled Spud back, towards a couple of folding chairs on the far end of the booth, out of earshot of the associate producer that had drawn the short straw and a large stack of flyers to hand out to uninterested passers-by.

As soon as I sat down, I realized I didn't know how to begin.

Spud sighed and came to my rescue. "I wasn't listening, but how could I not hear you. You were both sitting five feet away from me."

I nodded. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"What do you think? About the, uh, clone thing? About me?"

Another sigh. "Though improbable, it is certainly not impossible. Whether it is the truth, I do not know. Perhaps that is a question your brother would be able to answer, but not I. However, I am not one to retreat from a mystery. We can, together, research some klevs."

I fished in my jeans pocket and pulled out the photos, handing them both to Spud.

He studied them with a raised eyebrow for a few minutes, then returned them to me. "Yes?"

"Clues. What do you see?"

"I observe a young man in the prime of his life straddling a powerful motorized stallion and shaking a fist of defiance at the world he has dared to engage and hopes to conquer."

"And the other one?" My voice trembled a bit.

"Two small children. With a family resemblance, so I am assuming they are Rushes? You?"

I shook my head. "Andi and Billy." "And there is something missing." I flinched.

He pulled the photo out of my hands and indicated the open space on one side where George'd said he could see my parents. "Your brother and sister are far off to the left of the frame. The angle of this shot implies that the photographer was aiming to include something else on the right."

"Grandpa Alexander must've taken the picture. George insisted he could see my mother and father in it." I choked on the words.

"Then I am inclined to believe he was telling the truth. Why I." he looked at me, "and you cannot do so is yet another mystery I am unable to solve." Casting down his eyes, he added, "I can only apply my methods to the material."

"I don't understand."

“To the concrete world which we inhabit,” Spud explained, leaning back in his chair. “Others are drawn to a world I cannot observe.” A pause. “I shall tell you a story of a man I once knew. An acquaintance from my childhood.”

I shifted in my chair, and slid the photos back into my pocket.

“He was an artist, a painter, and, as are many who embrace the arts, a man of many passions. His mien and demeanor ebbed and flowed from ecstasy to the abyss, tides enslaved by the phases of the moon.”

A gaggle of fans costumed as vampires and werewolves closed in on Simon outside our booth and pretended to attack him—to his obvious delight. Simon never missed a chance to ham up a death scene to entertain an audience.

“Great timing,” I joked. “Full moon out?”

“Didn’t quite mean *that* extent of transformation,” Spud held up a hand. “More in the line of what you call ‘bipolar disorder’. Untreated and severe.”

Serious again. “Oh.”

“In a state of mania that likely bordered on psychosis, he k-killed his wife and wounded her illicit lover.”

Very serious. Was Spud talking about his father?

“He was, of course, arrested.” Spud continued. “The gallows loomed.”

I frowned. “But it sounds as if he was mentally ill.”

“Judges and juries were not quite so forgiving in those days. Unless one was entirely *non compos mentis*, there was an assumption that one could perceive and act on the difference between right and wrong.”

“Oh.”

“He was sentenced to hang. I only saw him once before his execution.” Spud’s eyes glistened, and he paused to clear his throat.

I gulped.

“He seemed astonishingly at peace, convinced that the entire crime had been merely an evening of theatre, and that after the curtain would fall, it would rise again, bestowing him with applause, happiness, and joy. His wife would be in the clapping audience, waiting to welcome him with open arms—she had, he was convinced, told him so, and implored him to hurry and finish Act III so that they could reunite.”

I reached out my hand and laid it over his. He waited a full minute before pulling his away.

“I was told he’d had many conversations with the spirit world of his imagination, and that he continued to converse with these spirits even as the noose was tightened around his neck.”

Spud sat up in his chair and clasped his hands in his lap. “I could not, I *should* not, corroborate his faith—or his delusions. In truth, I castigated that faith for what it provided him in his last hours: solace and reparation, a misguided belief that his actions had caused no one pain or grief,” his voice dropped to a whisper, “or death. So, my dear Rush, I cannot answer your question. I am sorry.”

I hid my face in my hands and turned away so no one could see me cry.

• • •

Spud retreated into his stoic armor for the rest of the morning shift. I’d dried my eyes and fanned my face, hoping to minimize my puffy lids and Rudolph-ian nose, and taken

my place next to him at the front of the booth. By ten, the crowds had begun to build, and traffic at our table was growing, even without Simon's overblown thespian antics to draw attention.

Spud's stamina for, as he put it, "the adoring overtures of our obsessed muliebrous claque", had faded by eleven, and, as lunchtime approached, he set off to "study the bacchanalian eruptions of the conference attendees."

I was ready for a break myself. It was almost noon, and we'd greeted and metted hundreds of fans, vendors, PR shills, and Hollywood-wannabes. My smile was frozen in place like I'd OD'd on botox. I was hungry, and eager to put something in my mouth that didn't give me a bad taste.

Spud's tale still weighed heavy on my conscience. He didn't know that I knew that his father had killed his mother—so maybe he'd just been trying to explain why the spiritual and non-material were so disturbing for him. But, I couldn't completely erase the worry that Spud's story hid an accusation targeting both John's behavior and mine. Had my dramatic rescue of John and its consequences brought pain and grief to an entire world?

Most of the food stands near our booth already had long lines, so I skirted the edge of the exhibit areas and made my way to the other side of the convention hall where the latest speakers' sessions wouldn't let out for another ten minutes. Should be less of a crowd over here—nothing worse than being caught in a queue where you're trapped making small talk with *Bulwark* admirers, especially when you're struggling to process ethical dilemmas involving life and death.

The Ike's Deli station seemed to have the fewest customers. I grabbed a paper menu and got in line.

"All's well that ends well." A familiar voice, not entirely unwelcome, behind me.

"Half right, Les." Stuffing the menu under my arm, I shot my hands out, palms up, as I turned. "I'm here. But, I lost my brother." A polite smile. "As I'm sure you know."

Lester Samuel Moore sighed, "I have to admit I *did* peek at a few of the highlights of your progress on my monitors. I was drawn to catch the conclusion of your...adventure." He reached out his hand to shake mine. "Glad you made it back."

My grip was limp. "John should've made it back with us."

"As much as I like happy endings, Shiloh, that could only happen for one of you."

I frowned, confused. "For Spud? His brother 'returned'?"

"For *your* brother. John got what he wanted more than anything—a path to Level 3." Moore's eyes twinkled. "And I wouldn't be surprised if he joins a kindred soul there who has also returned home."

"You don't mean Aliyah?"

A hint of a shrug and a broad smile.

"But, she, she—her body disappeared. After John— after we reinstated our timeline," I shook my head. "We dug up her grave and it was empty. She never existed."

"Well, *you* certainly remember her. Didn't a very astute young man say not so long ago, 'A story told is not forgotten'? Could apply to Aliyah, too."

"But her body vanished. I dug up her grave myself. And John's didn't. My sister had to arrange for him to be, uh..." I took a deep breath, "cremated."

Moore nodded. "Then neither of the bodies exist any longer, right? If there is a Level 3, then apparently bodies aren't needed for admission." Noting my frown, he patted me

on the shoulder. “I’m a non-theist, Shiloh, so Level 3’s a little beyond my pay grade. But maybe bodies are a, how can we say this, Level 2 thing, you know?”

“Or,” he leaned closer and whispered into my ear, “it may just be that another stream has washed Aliyah away.”

I stepped back. “Huh?”

“A few of my colleagues have speculated that the merry-go-rounds I spoke of exist in streams. Each time, say, a butterfly in Judea, or even in L.A., flaps its wings, a new stream is created with new merry go rounds and new promise. An infinite number of streams, an infinite number of possibilities. Aliyah and her Earthmates may not only have existed, they may be continuing to exist after all—just in another parallel stream.

I shook my head. “Souls and spirits. Merry go rounds and streams. All sounds like fantasy to me. Like the mythic gods of Mt. Olympus.”

Moore acknowledged my point. “There is science behind these theories. But some may say the science is both imaginative and incomprehensible; ergo, an intellectual religion.”

“Clear as glass.” I snorted. “You know, at our farmhouse in Maryland, off the side of the porch, our family room has a giant single-pane picture window. When I was in middle school, I used to do my homework in the rocking chair facing our garden. Every so often I’d hear a boom—a robin or sparrow would come flying right straight into the glass. Fortunately, the glass didn’t break and the poor birds would only be stunned for a few moments. The window looked clear as air to the birds, and they just weren’t able to understand what the glass was and why it kept them from going where they wanted or needed to go. So they kept slamming into it.

“At least,” I shrugged, “until George convinced Grandpa Alexander to put in wooden glazing bars.”

Moore chuckled. “Are you asking for some gods to appear and explain something you can’t understand—or just to put up window frames around our universe to keep you from injuring yourself?”

“Someone’s already done that. John was desperate to fly through those frames. I’m just happy to settle for a few answers.” A puzzled frown. “For example, you don’t believe in God. The Keeper at the Temple of Eshmoun told me there were no gods. Question is then, who’s that someone who put up those bars?”

“Now that’s a question,” Moore laughed, “for which I bet your brother gets an answer before we do.”

“Before he, uh, you know, passed,” I hesitated, “John told me something about our family.” Dammit, I didn’t want the fog rolling into my eyes any more.

I took a deep breath, willing the mist to dissipate, and forced myself to meet Moore’s eyes. “Is it true?”

Moore looked away this time. “Does it matter?” He shook his head and grunted. “I used to think it did, you know. That one’s creation and hard-wiring forever determined one’s world and its laws.”

“And now?”

Moore patted my arm. “Shiloh, I’m an old man.” He smiled at something I wasn’t privy to, before he continued. “I’ve learned something in my many, many years navigating these universal merry-go-rounds and streams. We may never discover who or what is on the other side of that glass, but in the end, it doesn’t matter. What matters is

what you do with the life you have on this side. Obsession about the past—who created you, why you were brought here, who or what you are—keeps you from moving forward. You become just as much of a prisoner as your brother was—only you’re the one imprisoning yourself.”

“But what if John is wrong? What if there’s nothing on the other side of the pane?” I shivered at the thought.

Moore smiled at me, “You can build a beautiful universe with your imagination if it comforts you to know that there is a world beyond. But don’t let your fantasy—or your reality—confine you as you graze from life’s infinite buffet.”

He reached over and took my hand in his. “Ride the rapids, Shiloh. Soar through the skies. Relish the mist on your face, the wind in your hair, the kiss on your lips, the mustard on your tongue, the laughter in your gut. That’s all the answers we really need. Don’t put yourself in a 3-D version of the Omega Archon’s Hell for a life sentence.”

He reached into his right pocket and pulled out something that glistened. Jewelry—a sunflower? No—oh, my!

“Connie’s earrings!” I cried. “The ones she gave me for my birthday.” I’d sacrificed their gold for the drachmas we needed in Nea Athina, and never thought I would see them again.

Moore placed the shining jewelry gently into my hands with a warm smile. “Something you deserve. The heaven of family love.”

I blinked back tears. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You just did,” Moore replied, patting me on the shoulder as we reached the head of the line. “I’ve got to eat fast. I’m on a panel in ten minutes with two other fallen angels—I mean, science fiction writers.” He took a quick look at the crumpled menu he pulled out of his pocket. To the barista: “I’ll have the number 42, ham on rye.” A wink in my direction. “And don’t hold the mayo.”

• • •

I wish I hadn’t forgotten to ask him about Stacy. By the time I finished paying for my veggie wrap and tall decaf latte, Moore had disappeared into the crowd. I searched all around, over and under the heads and costumes of the Con attendees, but had no success in locating our mentor. I only spied one set of muttonchops, on a tipsy guest sporting a souvenir Captain Jack Sparrow pirate hat, who—I kid you not—managed to run right into a glass display case right before my eyes and knock the knock-off off his noggin.

The tongue-twister swept the analogy from my mind for at least ten minutes, but, as my fingers stroked Connie’s gift now dangling once again from my ears, my thoughts drifted back to the questions about our family that John had planted in my brain. Were he and I—and the rest of our family—clones? If so, who cloned us—and from whom? Was Grandpa Alexander involved—on behalf of the Zygan Federation, or the Omega Archon? For Benedict? For the Helianthi? I hoped my brother was getting the answers he sought in Level 3, but I wasn’t convinced *my* answers weren’t right here in my brane, my universe, Level 2. With Lester Samuel Moore holding the key.

I enlisted Spud to help me find Moore later in the afternoon, after we’d wrapped up the day’s shilling shift at the *Bulwark* booth. Unfortunately, no one admitted to having seen a plump man with scraggly gray hair and bushy sideburns. I even checked the SingularityCon program brochure, all forty pages, including ads, to see if Moore might be

giving another talk today or tomorrow. No luck there either. In fact, as I leafed through the book from beginning to end, there was no listing of a Lester Samuel Moore as participating in any of the SingularityCon activities at all.

Spud raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. He sat back in a folding chair resting his fingertips together and looking off in the distance with a curious smile.

“Penny,” I prodded. “For your wise thoughts.” “It is written—” he began.

Our Ergals CANDI’d us at the same time. Intensely. We each whipped out our pseudo-mobiles and put them to our ears to hear the message from Zygan Intelligence.

Ev’s voice sounded higher-pitched than usual and even bore a hint of hysteria. “Glieser posts at Andromeda borders report an invasion from Triangulum Galaxy. The Omega Archon has declared a Stage 1 Alert. All catascopes are to report to their home stations for immediate assignment. Repeat: Stage 1 Alert.” The recording began rerunning as I hung up.

Our expressions mirrored our high-level concern. Stage 1 Alerts were damn serious. The Zygan Federation hadn’t had an extra-galactic enemy invasion since Benedict and his Andarts had returned from exile and waged guerilla war against the Omega Archon.

I checked the time. *Bulwark* staffers were closing up the booth for the day, and chatting with loud enthusiasm about the costume parties they’d be attending tonight once off-duty. Simon had already left for the Vegas strip, in the company of several nubile young women in revealing alien costumes. Nobody was going to miss us for the next few hours or even notice we were gone.

Spud nodded, and we ran for the closest custodian’s closet we could spot. We needed a quiet place out of the eyes of awestruck fans so we could X-fan to Earth Core.

We’d barely closed the door and squeezed in between the mops and carts when our Ergals CANDI’d again. Ev was on live this time, and the hysteria had been replaced by fury. “A fusion bomb took out the whole reception fleet, including the diplomatic contingent from Zygint Central,” Ev’s voice cracked. “Juan de la Cruz and his outreach team are dead.”

We froze for a minute, shocked. A Zygint field agent for centuries, Juan had survived so many harrowing Zygint missions. Administration at Central was supposed to be a safe, cushy billet. Could Theodore Benedict and his Andarts—maybe with the backing of King Odious and the Valkyries—have had something to do with this abominable attack? And was Nephil Stratum a part of this murderous scheme? Pierced by dread, I pushed away that devastating thought.

As catascopes, we had to do everything we could to help our Zygfed brothers and sisters. My brooding ruminations and my unanswered questions about my family and friends would have to wait. We Ergaled ourselves stun guns, and, ready for action, M-fanned into the entrance for Earth Core.

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".