

**Rebirth**  
Book 3

**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

# **REBIRTH**

The Zygan Emprise

Book 3

The secret to happiness is freedom...  
And the secret to freedom is courage.

—Thucydides

## Chapter 1

### **The Frying Pan**

“Three hundred light years and closing.” The aerolimo pilot turned from his nav holo and grinned at his guest. “Better hurry up with that monkey suit.”

Juan de la Cruz forced himself to smile as he buckled the last epaulet on his shoulder. “Never hurts to dress up for a first date.” Brushing a few flecks of dust off of his sleeve, the Zygan Intelligence Chief explained, “This is the first delegation from Triangulum Galaxy to the Zygan Federation in our lifetime. The Omega Archon wants to be sure we give them a warm welcome.”

A hint of a nod. “Ever been outside Zygfed?” the pilot asked as he ran his fingers across the holo to begin the contact approach.

“Not on the record,” Juan winked back. “But I’ve never been to Triangulum. Kind of curious to see what we see. Do we have a comm link yet?” The comm holo only displayed the V-shaped flight formation of eight Zygan Sentinel Corps cruisers escorted by a Gliaser Border Patrol Unit, trailing Juan’s ship.

“Working,” muttered the aerolimo co-pilot, struggling with his holo. “They’re not responding yet.”

“One hundred light years, disengaging hyperdrive in five,” droned the pilot.

“I’ve got ‘em,” the co-pilot cried, as his comm holo switched to a view of a cluster of shimmering lights hovering before the whizzing starfield.

“Disengaged,” the pilot announced as the starfield froze.

Juan ungripped the railing, still marveling at the latest Zygan grav technology that could slow a ship from hyperdrive to sub-light speed without jarring its riders. When he’d served as a Zygint catascope decades ago, their starships’ primitive grav systems had to be backed up with actual seat belts to keep pilots and passengers in their seats when shifting in and out of hyperdrive. Almost as rough as his cruise on the Niña with Cristoforo. Almost.

The comm holo now showed six disc shaped vessels surrounding—and seemingly attached to—a central disk, a flower with spaceship petals. As the Zygan team drew closer, the Triangulum guests began rolling their “flower” of vessels; each disc was lit along its circumference, giving the cluster the appearance of a delicate water lily at twilight, floating through space.

“It’s beautiful,” the pilot remarked, his eyes glued to the screen.

“Asombroso,” Juan agreed, not bothering to hide his awe. How he missed being out in the field, exploring new worlds, uncovering the majesty of this resplendent universe. And now, he’d be among the first Zygans to greet visitors from this neighboring galaxy that had remained a mystery throughout the Zygan Federation’s millennia.

“Visual coming in from the core disc,” the co-pilot reported. “On screen.”

The impact knocked Juan off his feet, cracking his head against the railing. A rivulet of blood trickled down Juan’s temple and splashed onto his starched white uniform. Ignoring the pain, Juan sat up and shook his head to clear his vision, laboring to peer through the smoke that was quickly filling the aerolimo’s command center. Both pilots had been thrown from their seats and lay on the floor unconscious—or worse. Above

their bodies, a field of static filled the comm display that revealed the faintest outline of a giant crustacean head.

A second explosion rocked the aerolimo, showering sparks across the thickening black smoke. Coughing and gasping, Juan tried to sit up once again, his throat gagging, scorched by the heat massaging his burning skin. His eyes could barely focus on the comm screen and the gravel voice that spoke out from the looming crab-like head. Confused, Juan struggled to understand—was this visitor from Triangulum in reality a Zygan Federation species? A Chidurian?

“No longer are we slaves of the Omega Archon!” Juan heard the crustacean’s garbled cry as the black smoke enveloped his body and snaked into his lungs and brain, smothering his consciousness.

“Freedom!” was the last word Juan heard.

The final explosion pierced the hull of the aerolimo, shattering the ship into thousands of pieces and propelling its passengers into the vacuum which instantly drew the smoke out of Juan’s airless lungs, and Juan’s heart from its scorched chest. Zygan Federation space had soon reclaimed Juan’s body, but Level 3 had already welcomed Juan de la Cruz’s soul.

• • •

“Freedom!” The screen froze on the angry visage of Matshi the Chidurian. It took all my willpower not to gasp.

“Shiloh Rush, you’re as pale as, as Spud,” Ev said, staring at my face.

I was certain that all my blood had pooled down at my feet. Matshi! My Mingferplatoi Academy classmate. My fellow catascope trainee. My friend.

“You recognize him?”

William “Spud” Escott nodded. “Matshi of Chiduri. We were in the same class at Mingferplatoi.” His voice was even. “He did not complete the program and was never certified as a full-fledged Zygan Intelligence catascope.”

No need to tell Everett Weaver, the Head of Zygan Intelligence’s Earth Core Station, that Matshi had helped us not so long ago in our quest to capture wanted terrorist Theodore Benedict and protect ancient prophet Yeshua Bar Maryam. Juan de la Cruz, R.I.P., had buried that information six feet under, I hoped.

“Right on that one, Escott.” Ev’s fingers pulled up Matshi’s school record on the holo screen. “Says he got disillusioned with the mission of Zygan Intelligence. Dramatically, according to the reports.”

Matshi’s still shot reappeared before us. “Apparently,” Ev continued, “he and his friends have a beef with the Zygan Federation itself.” Ev turned to glare at me.

Maybe Ev knew about our misadventure after all. I raised an open palm. “I don’t know what happened to him.” I wasn’t acting. “I’m not in Matshi’s posse.”

“It would seem as if a singular change has affected the Chidurian.” Spud’s voice was hoarse. “Are we certain that it is truly he?”

“Shape shifting pattern recognition programs confirm 99.9% certainty down to DNA level,” Ev said. “No anamorphing or muting, I’m afraid,” Ev added, referring to the shapeshifting options Matshi could use.

“Have you identified any of the other, er, attackers?” Spud asked.

Ev shook his head. “Scan images sent to Central showed several humanoids and other Zygan species in the sunflower-shaped vessel.” A blurry picture of the ship appeared on the holo screen. “Nothing we’ve ever seen before in Zygfed. Looked like each one of those ‘sunflower petals’ had its own propulsion system. They flew apart and raced off in different directions as soon as the barrage started.”

Doppelganger Dieter Drexel popped up from behind us. “Where did the Mischlinge hide out after their attack?”

“Our ships didn’t survive long enough to see,” Ev’s tone was somber. “We do think Matshi was leading the charge from the central vessel, but we lost his ion trail amidst all the debris.”

“With his Zygint training and Chidurian fighter pilot skills, none of our borders’ll be safe for long,” muttered Dieter.

His Teutonic twin Derek echoed, fists clenched, “Benedict must’ve turned the bastard. How do we catch him?” His blue eyes bored into my face.

Even though I was no longer convinced that Matshi was on the side of the angels anymore, *we had* parted friends. I wanted to turn around and deck Derek. Spud and I hadn’t seen Matshi for months—we’d been sparring with Theodore Benedict and his minions in another dimension, trying to save my missing brother John. But Matshi’s culture deeply valued *filotimo*, committed loyalty to friends and country. Something must have gone very wrong, for Matshi to go so very wrong.

I took a deep breath and opted for diplomacy with Ev. “What’s Zygint’s current assessment?”

Ev faced Dieter first. “Comms on all our vessels were disabled with the, um, explosions. But Octant tracking stayed viable—and showed nothing. Triangulum must have some cloaking technology that bypasses our tracking systems. Zygint Central is working on trying to locate them, but, so far, no luck. For all we know, they could’ve gone back to Triangulum or still be hiding somewhere in Zygfed space. Waiting.”

Derek was disturbed. “So we just stand by and let them ambush us again?”

Ev shook his head. “Every section of Zygint, every Sentinel Corps unit, every Glieser patrol, every member planet, every Zyga enclave—everyone is on high alert. If they’re here, they’ve got to come up for breath at some point.”

“And that’s when we strike,” Dieter added.

“If necessary.” Ev’s voice cracked. “But maybe if we can understand what it is he—they—want, we might be able to, uh, bring them in alive.” Ev’s eyes had fallen back on Spud and me. “Any idea why your classmate might’ve gone off to Triangulum in the first place?”

I shrugged. “We, um, did uncover some awesome technology on Theodore Benedict’s planet ship in M 82 before he left our universe for Brane 5. Could’ve been from Triangulum.” Chidurians anamorphed into rats to guard Earth Core entry portals, but I sure wasn’t going to rat on Matshi’s plans to “blow this burg.” “Look. Matshi was as great at engineering as he was a pilot; maybe he just wanted to learn things beyond what Zygfed had to offer and found someone to teach him—here. We should all be open to new discoveries, right?”

“Travel outside of Zygfed, you two excepted,” Ev returned with a hint of irony, “isn’t usually allowed.” More than a hint of irony. “Though that’s never stopped you, Rush.”



Spud sighed, “Matshi would easily be able to bypass the Gliesers. With or without authorization.” He rubbed his temples before adding. “To deduce his motives, were I you, I should focus on Matshi’s message.”

“Freedom?” Ev frowned. “Makes absolutely no sense to me.” Palms outstretched: “We’re free.”

Spud raised an eyebrow. “That is one hypothesis.”

“Granted, the Omega Archon can get a bit dictatorial...” I said.

The eyebrow stayed up.

“Look, you live under a queen. Do *you* think you’re not free?” I poked.

“I choose to be a subject of Her Majesty, you are correct,” said Spud.

Annoyed. “Well, we *choose* to be citizens of Zygfed.”

“Then perhaps one should explore the distinction.”

Very annoyed. “I don’t understand you,” I snorted.

“Clearly.” Spud closed his eyes and lay back in his chair, fingertips together, signaling an abrupt end to our exchange.

Ev stepped in. “Ours is not to reason why, and all that, in any case. Our duty’s to stand by until we get instructions from Central. Meanwhile, we double our area patrols.” Ev turned to us. “Do you two have to go film that TV show of yours soon?”

“We’re on hiatus til July, and still on the bubble,” I offered. Tara Guard and Larry Sioux are hanging from a papier maché cliff in Burbank, California space until Season 2. Pun intended. *If* we’re renewed. ”

“Good. Then you both go out first shift and brief Deimos and Io Outposts. We can’t trust our comm systems until we know just what those, those traitors learned in Triangulum.”

The word “traitor” stung. So hard to think of Matshi with that label. I pursed my lips. “Fine. But I really don’t think Matshi’s going to waste his time buzzing around our backwater solar system here anyway.” I looked at Spud for support.

“As you say.” Spud rose, bestowing a cryptic smile on both me and Ev, before heading off towards our Zoom Cruiser hangar.

Dammit, Spud, what is it you’re not telling us, I growled to myself. If only I’d spoken the thought out loud.

• • •

“I’ll drive,” Spud said as soon as we’d left Deimos Outpost.

I frowned. Spud rarely took the helm when I was on board. “Really? Don’t you have any boring monographs to ‘peruse’?”

He didn’t look at me. “It’ll be better this way.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, you’ve got nav. Can you at least tell me what you’re thinking instead of,” I nodded at the blackness of space beyond our windscreen, “leaving me literally in the dark.”

Spud put a finger to his lips and focused on his nav holo. His rough piloting through the asteroid belt included a few close calls, and I didn’t exhale until Jupiter was behind us.

“Um, Spud, I don’t want to be a back seat pilot, but we just passed Io Outpost.”

Still no answer. Spud’s long fingers continued to tickle the nav holo, and, as soon as we’d passed Uranus, his deep voice ordered, “Engage hyperdrive”.

The starfield morphed into the linear streaks signaling faster than light speed. Instinctively, I grabbed Spud's arm. "Are you crazy? We haven't cleared Pluto or Eris orbits yet!"

"Where tracking systems will be focused for evidence of warping spaceships, my dear Rush." He eased my hand from its grip. "My nav formulae shall keep us out of their scope, and safe until we reach Chiduri."

I plopped back into my seat and squeaked, "Chiduri?" Shaking my head. "You *are* crazy."

Spud's eyes twinkled as he returned to his nav holo. "Did you not once tell me that there is method to my madness?"

I snorted. "Yes, but I was talking about the techniques you used in your "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" scene for our acting workshop. Heesh." I threw up my hands. "You really think we're going to find Matshi on his home planet—before all the other Zygint agents looking for him?"

Spud sounded offended. "Of course not. But I expect to find the answers I am seeking—and more." A wink. "I suggest you disable your Ergal as well until we arrive, as I have done with mine. These models can be tracked even through hyperdrive. In the meantime, I shall ask comm to provide us with some musical accompaniment for our journey. La Traviata, please."

As the strains of Verdi's overwrought opera filled our cabin, I watched Spud lean back in his seat with a wide grin, close his eyes, and wave his fingers in sync with the ebb and flow of Caruso's voice.

Grumbling, I sat forward in my seat, covering my ears with my hands, annoyed that Spud couldn't see my own frown. My very, very big frown.

• • •

As a Zygfed pilot, I'd journeyed in hyperdrive many, many times. But the stars streaking by our windscreen had never before seemed like missiles, threatening to batter and pierce our ship. Had Juan been able to spy the lethal torpedoes heading for his vessel? Or was his death instant, painless—like John's?

It had only been a few weeks since my own beloved brother had met his heartbreaking fate. To finally find him, after all those years he was gone, and then to lose him so quickly... John had sacrificed himself, dying, to save not only his family, but his entire world. My world.

A world which had never seemed so dark and so cold.

I glanced at Spud, who was still rapt in Caruso's angelic melodies. I may never have liked opera much, but I had to respect it. So many complex layers, ear-splitting as they were, spawned from simple notes. I flashed back to Theodore Benedict's Azgaror suite, where—it seemed so long ago—he'd pondered how a species like ours could spawn such beauty, and such tragedy within the same breath?

John had striven to understand our universe's complexity, and instead had met his death. I hoped he had all the answers he sought now, in heaven, Level 3. And Juan should, as well. But why did any of us need to die to understand? Why did Level 2 gatekeepers like the Valkyries, the Helianthi, and, frankly, the Omega Archon always block our vision, and shield us from the truth?

At SingularityCon, that curious sci-fi writer, Lester Samuel Moore, had told me to stop chasing after answers and to relish every minute of my life here in Level 2. But, like John, I was cursed. Without understanding where I came from and why I was here, there was little I could enjoy. Before his death, John had confessed a devastating secret about our family and our roots, leaving me only with more questions. I trusted Spud with my life, and was willing to go along for this ride to Orion; but I swore to myself that my next solo voyage would be to the Omega Archon. And his fires of Hell couldn't keep me from demanding that he teach me the gospel behind life's—and *my* life's—mysteries.

"Your brother's greatest fear was that there were no answers. Of nothingness."

Spud's voice drew my eyes to his face. Reading my mind like that, I'd swear the dude was telepathic. I shook my head. "Just before we, um, implemented our plan, back in Golgotha, John told me that wasn't true for him anymore. He had faith."

The raised eyebrow. "In Yeshua Bar Maryam?"

"No," I snorted, "in Level 3. In answers. In, in somethingness." I smiled, "He wanted to lead the expedition into the unknown on behalf of us all."

"And?" Spud expression held a hint of pity. "Any clues yet? Communications?"

"If there's a way for John to contact me, he will," I said, more loudly than I'd intended. Damn aria. "Can't you turn that music down?"

Spud nodded and flashed his polite smile. "Of course. We should be nearing Chiduri perigee in 5.8 minutes. As we shall be approaching incognito, carving a serpentine course, I'll be activating grav controls to keep us in our seats."

"Thanks for the warning," I said, sighing. "Once again, partner, my life is in your hands."

• • •

The planet Chiduri, in the belt of the constellation of Orion, under the bright rays of the triple star Alnitak, can be described with two words, "hot" and "hotter". Its coolest landscapes resembled the Sahara Desert, and provided tourists with a comfortable midday temperature of 160 degrees Fahrenheit. Spud chose a landing site that was heading into nightfall, where we would only have to deal with a much more tolerable 120 degrees.

We invisible-ized as soon as we entered the searing Chidurian atmosphere. Spud touched us down in a busy parking lot in suburban Jawaher next to a public bazaar crowded with autogamils and other Chidurian vehicles disgorging large families of crustaceans of varying shapes and sizes. Not eager to subject myself to such heat, I'd avoided visiting Chiduri in the past, and had stayed away from the Chidurian Enclave on Zyga as much as possible, as well. Now, I couldn't help marveling at the variety of Chidurian species whose appearances ranged from giant sand crabs to towering, fiery red lobsters.

"Not polite to stare, Rush," Spud chided as he shut down nav. "In this disagreeable climate, *humanoids* are the rarity."

"Disagreeable?" I muttered, eyeing the shimmering heat-parched atmosphere beyond our windscreen. "Always the diplomat, aren't you?"

I reached for my Ergal—and stopped as I gripped it in my hand. "Is it safe to reactivate? I don't want to get arrested here for going AWOL by an overzealous Sentinel Corps pilot. I bet the prisons here don't have air conditioning."

“Patience,” Spud grabbed my Ergal and ran his fingers rhythmically over the back of the “phone”. “I’ve disabled the universal positioning system so they cannot track us. Everything else should work as before.”

I gazed at him in surprise.

“Some of the yellowed monographs you chide me for perusing are from ancient Zygan journals,” he returned with a hint of a smile. “A virtual treasure trove, you should read them sometime.”

“Ha,” was my only response.

After we’d hopped out of the Zoom Cruiser, Spud micro’ed the vessel down to the size of his cigarette pack and stashed it in the front pocket of his rucksack. We’d each Ergaled ourselves into *hadirs*, hooded toga-like garments with removable masks for the frequent sand and dust-storms that blew across the parched terrain. No wonder the Chidurians dug their homes deep in the depths of the ground, where they could access cool temperatures and even springs of fresh water.

“So,” I ventured, as we ran across a busy boulevard, visible once more, “you ready to tell me where we’re going?” I dodged a speeding autogamil that barely missed my foot, raising my fist at his dust cloud. “Speed freak!”

Spud’s eyes were intent on his Ergal screen. “Left in 15.5 meters, then right in 53.8 meters.”

My *hadir* was already drenched in sweat. “Can I vote we go indoors, at least?”

“Then down 38.4 meters. Happy?”

“Oh, yes.” The underground building’s entrance was a simple arch from which hung the tanned skins of two large gamils. I pushed one of the skins gingerly to one side and ducked into the foyer behind Spud. And came face to face with an enormous and rather forbidding crawfish, whose sharp-toothed claws were the size of my head.

Spud seemed unfazed. “*Mawidah mookarah*,” he said in Chidurian.

My Ergal translated the words as Appointment with Destiny. God, I hoped not. “Dumb and Dummah,” was the crawfish’s impolite response. Waving a claw in our direction, he spun his exoskeleton 180 degrees and set off towards an arched doorway.

My brain fortunately didn’t let my mouth verbalize my comeback. Spud followed the crustacean, and motioned for me to tag along. Grumbling, I trudged behind Spud, wondering if I’d been foolish to trust my partner and “fly blind” on this excursion to a sauna planet.

We circled down a broad, dimly lit circular ramp for what felt like half an hour. With the temperature cooling down to a much more tolerable 90 degrees, I decided not to complain. The crawfish finally stopped in front of a large bead curtain. I shivered when I realized that the beads were the empty, glistening shells of tiny shrimp.

The giant claw pulled the curtain aside, leaving room for Spud and me to proceed into a barren, domed suite. I turned to see if our host had joined us, but the crawfish had disappeared.

“Oh-kay. Now what?” I faced Spud. “Is Matshi going to M-fan in here and bring us tea?”

Spud put a finger to his lips, before whispering. “No, Matshi is not here. We are here to see the Oracle of Muckbillahgin.

“Oh, too bad.” Gruffly: “Now who or what is, uh, what you just said?”

“I am,” the deep voice boomed in Zygan. “The Oracle of Future and Past.”

“I kinda like to live in the moment,” I returned, as I scanned the room for signs of the Oracle.

“Wisdom beyond your years,” the Oracle intoned. From somewhere.

“Where are you, O Oracle, Sir?” Invisible-ized?

“Everywhere the suns shine, everywhere there is light,” was the sonorous response.

I snorted, peering through the dimness. “No wonder you’re not down here.”

“He’s being metaphorical,” Spud whispered.

As if I didn’t know. I frowned back at Spud, doubting he could see my glare. Next question, “Where’s Matshi?”

I did see Spud wince. Come on, Spud, no point in wasting time.

“In the light,” the monotone voice continued. “Metaphorically speaking.”

I chuckled. Dang, an oracle with a sense of humor. “Well, then, can you enlighten us?”

“We have tried,” the Oracle said. “But most beings prefer to remain in their caves.”

Okay, so we happened to be in a cave of sorts, too. “We can go back up to the surface,” I offered. “To the suns. But it is awfully hot.”

“What she means is we’re open to the truth—what must we do to gain your trust?”

Oh, is that what I meant, Spud?

“That is unnecessary,” returned the Oracle. Ha.

Spud’s eyes narrowed.

“You have the tools to escape your chains and see the truth with your shielded eyes.”

Spud raised an eyebrow. “Our Ergals?”

“Tlyp’ath,” announced the Oracle, and our suite filled with a fluorescent glare, temporarily blinding us.

“This way,” growled the crawfish, who somehow had returned along with our vision, and grabbed our hands in each cold, hard claw. I didn’t bother resisting. A little more pressure, and we would be amputees.

• • •

I was still rubbing my wrists as we returned to a quiet corner of the parking lot where we’d landed a couple of hours before. Spud extracted the Zoom Cruiser from his rucksack and laid it on the burning asphalt.

“Hurry up,” I said hopping from heel to heel, “my feet are turning into fried eggs, despite these sandals.”

Spud mega’d the Zoom Cruiser and we dived inside; I shouting for comm to turn on climate control STAT. Once we’d cooled down, I turned to Spud. “So what’s the story? Did the Oracle mean we could use tlyp’ath to locate Matshi?”

“Among other things,” Spud said, rubbing his forehead. “But we shall have to master a higher level of tlyp’ath to succeed over the vast distances of space.”

Uh oh. As the planet Ifestia rarely admitted off-worlders, that meant we’d have to go back to the Ifestian Enclave on Zyga, the home planet of the Zygan Federation. I had struggled a few months ago just to learn the basics of *tlyp’ath* from the very harsh mentor Th’Alia. I knew she wouldn’t be eager to see me again for an advanced course.

“Not even considering it,” Spud said without skipping a beat. “This time, we shall have to go directly to Ifestia itself.”

“Um,” I hesitated, “Ifestia isn’t the most welcoming planet for visitors, you know.”

“I am aware of that reality.”

“But?”

“We have no other choice. I’m certain that Everett Weaver has sent out an alarm for us by now, seeing as we didn’t complete our assignment at Io. It would be best for him to believe that we have been waylaid, as you say, by our enemies, rather than voluntarily venturing to their ‘dark side’. We are less likely to be discovered near Ifestia, our galaxy’s Nepal, than near Zyga cum Paddington Station.”

I froze. “Oh, cripes.”

For once, Spud looked puzzled. “What? I thought my analogies were quite clear.”

“You didn’t consider that chess move?” So unlike Spud to not be playing the game three moves ahead. What was weighing on his otherwise sharp mind?

The realization must have hit Spud, as he whipped out his Ergal and started a scan of our Zoom Cruiser. “Damn. I have been blind. Blind!”

“Let’s hope Ev is, too. Otherwise, we may have already betrayed Matshi by coming here—for ill or for good. Zygan Sentinel Corps officers are probably closing in.”

“How could I not have suspected that Everett would use us as a lodestone!” Reading his Ergal screen, he added, “Negative for hardware.”

“I’ll check comm,” I volunteered, running my fingers on the comm holo display. “Nothing so far.”

“Hullo,” snorted Spud, “he’s a clever devil. The worm is in our nav holo—Everett’s been able to track our every move.”

“Can you disable it?” Spud was better at handling holo guts than I was.

“Better yet, I shall adjust the settings so that nav and the industrious Mr. Weaver will pursue a wild goose.”

He gathered up his rucksack and motioned for me to exit the Zoom Cruiser frying pan for the fire outside. I stood sizzling next to him and, with a wave of sweaty regret, watched our ship fly off on autonav into the orange Chidurian sky.

• • •

“Now what? How are we going to get to Ifestia?” I whispered after swallowing a large gulp of Chidurian ale. The elixir was a rare treat beyond the planet, and somehow made the oppressive desert climate much more tolerable.

Spud pulled out a chair and sat down at the bar next to me. Though the bottom storey of the shopping center was far underground and substantially cooler than the planet’s surface, Spud’s *hadir* was dripping with perspiration. He grabbed my glass and drank the rest of it dry with a hoarse “Dehydrated.”

He wiped his soaked forehead with a moist sleeve, and ordered another two ales for us before filling me in. “You may not have observed that we passed a transport company on our path to the Oracle.”

“Sorry, but no.”

Spud sipped his ale and chuckled, “Your effectiveness as a catascope would improve exponentially if you would not only see, but observe.”

I swallowed, “But then I wouldn’t want to steal your thunder. Somehow, I don’t think you’d like that much.”

Spud’s eyes narrowed. I dove on, “So when do we leave?”

“I was going to tell you,” Spud continued with more than a hint of ice, “that the transport enterprise was run by a Megaran. A distant relative of our old classmate Sarion.”

“No joke?” I joked, alluding to Sarion’s often annoying sense of humor.

Spud ignored my Sarion-esque weak wit. “I told Creon that I had fought alongside Sarion at Mingferplatoi. He was receptive to our hiring a ship at non-usurious rates. We can depart for Ifestia within the hour.”

“Not too soon for me,” I said, finishing off my second ale. “Let’s g—”

The bell from the entertainment holo at the end of the bar drew our ears and eyes to the display. A Chidurian announcer interrupted the *panjerah* match to announce that a flower-shaped UFO had attacked a distant Kepler 6 planetary outpost in the constellation Cygnus, killing the outpost’s 30-odd Zygan Intelligence staffers in the ambush.

Even after the anesthetic hits of Chidurian ale, I felt like I’d been punched in the stomach. Matshi again, for sure. Killing more good guys—was the Chidurian out of his mind? A glance at Spud’s pale visage convinced me my partner likely shared my alarm.

“They seem to be light-yearing closer to Zyga,” Spud whispered. “I believe we’d best readjust our plans.”

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We entered Zyga’s atmosphere through the back-door route I had taken when we’d gone on the run after our Phoenicia fiasco a few months ago. Creon’s rustbucket was no match for my beloved Zoom Cruiser; the trip took us over three hours, even in hyperdrive. We landed once again in the rainy Kharybdian Enclave, this time grateful for the torrential showers that washed over us after our recent afternoon in the boiling Chidurian heat.

Eikhus’ kalyvi was a short slog through the mud. We knew Nerea and her spouses had gone back to Kharybdia, but Eikhus should be either here or at Nejjinsen Hospital; a quick, but risky Ergal-hop to the Zygan city of Aheya.

The arched doorway of Eikhus’ thal opened a crack as we stepped onto the front path. A rivulet of clear water coalesced into two eyes and a mouth and peeked around the portal to greet us.

“I expected you a lot sooner,” Eikhus said, his mouth spraying a layer of mist into Spud’s face.

Spud didn’t bother to wince. “We have been otherwise engaged. What do *you* know?”

Eikhus opened the door to let us into his sitting room. The agitated whirlpool shook his head, bestowing another wave of mist on Spud’s matted blond hair. “They brought a couple of the Reception Party victims to the hospital, hoping to anastasize them.”

Spud and I took seats on the near Eikhus’ flickering holo.

“Something about the weapons, burned them so bad, anastasis was impossible. Dr. Ayelborne managed to resurrect only one, a Batagurian, whose shell had protected his DNA from complete denaturation.”

I whistled. “He debriefed you, right?”

“Unfortunately not. He only survived a few minutes after we got him. Long enough to try to warn us that extra-galactic intruders were headed this way.” His clear features relayed his anxiety. “If their weapons can block our ability to anastasize, our entire

civilization becomes vulnerable. Our lifespans will return to being decades rather than millennia. Our populations will be decimated.” Eikhus wiped his damp forehead, shooting more spray in our direction.

We both ducked. Spud moved to another seat a few feet away. “Did your ‘messenger’ reveal the motives behind the, er, intruders’ attacks?”

Eikhus sighed, “No. All he told us was that right after Juan De La Cruz’s ship was blown to bits, an audio comm message came through on all the bridge consoles. A gruff voice, speaking in accented Zygan, shouted, ‘If you poison us, do we not die?’ That was the last thing poor Testudo remembered.” Whispering. “And the last thing he said.”

I snorted. “None of this makes any sense. *We* were the ones attacked!”

“Shylock speaks to the ill-treatment he received at the hands of Antonio and his brethren,” Spud interjected, “and how it sowed his desire for vengeance. In the Merchant of Venice, by Will—

“Shakespeare,” I groaned. “Great, an intellectual alien with a grudge against Zygfed.”

“Or a non-alien. Such as Matshi,” returned Spud.

Eikhus frowned. “Matshi? What? What do you mean?”

Spud turned his Ergal screen towards Eikhus and played the grainy holo we’d seen in Earth Core.

When Matshi’s face appeared, Eikhus’ expression literally turned to ice.

• • •

The trip to Orion Alpha in Eikhus’ lumbering spiral ship, the Nautilus, took over 5 hours. Spud and I took turns keeping watch for pursuers—from Zygfed *and* Triangulum. We didn’t say it out loud, but none of us felt certain anymore that Matshi wouldn’t turn his weapons on *us* if we crossed his path.

Orion Alpha was the home of the renowned Daralfanoon University, where our friends Setsei and Suthsi of the planet Ytra had enrolled after our misadventures last Spring. Orion Alpha was also the home of another old classmate who had departed our circle—permanently—the Madai warrior Ulenem, Matshi’s former partner and best friend.

When Spud had last encountered Ulenem’s ghostly image in his Madai tomb, Ulenem had revealed that his vantage point had given him a new perspective on our world. The ability to see what we couldn’t see, in the past, present and future. Maybe that perspective from wherever Ulenem was could give us a glimpse into Matshi’s psyche— as well as a hint as to his location.

Spud and I risked using our Zygint identification to speed our way through Orion Alpha’s onerous customs department. Eikhus had reluctantly consented to split himself and hide in two large recyclable water bottles which we took care not to sip or spill as we wended our way through the notorious bureaucratic maze of Orion’s largest planet. Once free of the last official, we released Eikhus from his plastic prisons and welcomed him back to his unified whirlpool form.

“It’s a short trot to Ulenem’s mausoleum,” Spud explained as we jogged towards the warrior’s family estate. Using our Ergals to M-fan would put us “back on the grid”, so we had no choice but to walk.

“Where is Ulenem? Is he in Level 3?” asked Eikhus.



“Possibly,” said Spud, “though we can’t be sure. His violent pastimes do not seem to reflect the peaceful stereotype of paradise we have been marketed. We shall have to induce his location.”

“I’ll let you handle that, Spud,” I said. “I’m more interested in where Matshi is.”

Night had fallen by the time we’d arrived at the estate’s gates, and with us, grey mists which shrouded the stone and steel entry.

“The better to hide us, my dear,” I cackled as, one by one, we climbed over an adjacent wall using its clinging turquoise ivy as a rope and footholds.

“Belay that,” Spud tossed back at me, as I slid down on the other side, landing on my posterior quite a bit harder than I’d intended.

My “ha” kept me from groaning—or saying “ouch”. About a hundred yards ahead we could see faint shadows of Ulenem’s mausoleum through the fog. A dim light flickered from its interior, sending lens flares into the mist.

“Looks like somebody’s in there,” Eikhus whispered, a little too loudly for my taste.

“Ulenem, duh,” I said, putting my finger up to my lips.

Spud’s arms reached out to each side, holding us back. “I see more than one shadow.” He pulled out his stun gun. “Arms at the ready.”

I waved both of mine and snarked, “I can’t imagine why a ghost would need a guard.” After noting that Eikhus was putting up his evaporation shield, I grabbed my own gun, just in case.

We tiptoed closer to the mausoleum, taking care to stay in the darkness. As we approached the entrance, we aimed our weapons, ready to fire if necessary, and stepped across the marble threshold.

“Avast ye!” came a squeaky cry in Zygan, as we stood frozen, mere inches from the sharp points of two wand-like Geryons.

“They’re not pirates, Suthsi,” a gruff voice chided. “Those are Zygint-issue stun—Shiloh! Spud! Eikhus?” Setsei laid down his Geryon, and, extending his two right arms, gave us a warm grin. “Our dear friends—I hope.”

“Yup. *We* haven’t changed.” I holstered my stun gun and gave both Ytrans a lopsided hug. “So, you’ve heard, huh?”

Setsei nodded. “Sounds like we’re all here for the same reason. We, um, hacked into a Zygint comm feed at the University as soon as we heard the news.”

A long sigh from Suthsi. “I can’t believe Matshi would do something like that. So sad...”

“Perhaps Ulenem can provide us with some insight. Has he appeared?” Spud asked, to the point as always.

“Not yet,” said Setsei. “But we’ve only been here a couple of hours. Geryon scan didn’t show anybody, or any—thing.”

Spud unpocketed his stopwatch Ergal. “If Ulenem is not in Level 3, we should be able to ring him up.” Spud’s spindly fingers danced across the face of the watch, as the rest of us stood by on alert, waiting for the inevitable outcome we feared, the appearance of Zygan Sentinel Corps officers tracing the signal.

A giant athame, its curved blade glistening from the tomb’s torch reflections, clattered near our feet. Suthsi jumped several inches, but continued to grip his Geryon in his two trembling left hands.

“Cut it out, Ulenem,” Eikhus warned. “We’re not playing games.”

“Games are rapturous,” rasped a transparent two-foot reptile shimmering behind the Ytrans. Suthsi jumped another few inches closer to us, but kept his tremors more subtle.

“I have vanquished over a hundred warriors in the arena with this my own sword since I have seen you last,” said the ghostly Ulenem as he turned to Spud.

“Doesn’t sound like you’re in heaven to me,” I observed.

“One being’s purgatory is another being’s heaven, my mates,” Ulenem returned.

“I cannot disagree, Ulenem,” Spud said. “But I should not be blissful if my opponents in the boxing ring were to find their way to heaven at my hands.” He cleared his throat, and continued. “Have you a view from your tomb for us tonight or did we come in vain?”

Ulenem shook his green head and chuckled. “Escott, it is your heart that makes you vulnerable. Take care to shield it or you shall suffer a similar fate as my opponents and plummet into the abyss.”

A crease along his forehead was Spud’s only reaction. “I was referring to Matshi.”

Ulenem’s jaw eased into a grin. “Ah. My mate Matshi fled his own purgatory and dived willingly into the deepest level of Hell. I often thought I should thank him for sending me here, but I cannot say that I’m displeased that he now resides in the Hell of the truth.”

Only Spud seemed unconfused. “Ulenem’s analogy alludes to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise after eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge,” he explained. “But I, for one, have always believed that seeking the truth is a noble goal. As did your brother, John,” Spud added, glancing at me.

“Wait. Wait a minute.” Wincing, I raised a hand. “So Ulenem’s implying that Matshi’s actions may not be misguided? That would mean we might be playing for the wrong team.”

Spud shrugged. “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

A hearty guttural laugh from our host. “Well said, Escott. I can add nothing more.” Ulenem’s athame dissolved into a sparkling mist, reappearing in his translucent scaly hands. “Another match beckons, and there are always new dragons to slay in Valholler.” He twirled his sword and leered, “You do realize, my friends, that our branes have much in common.” Without another word, Ulenem’s ghostly image faded away.

Setsei rested his Geryon on the mausoleum’s marble floor. “Well, that was a hodge-podge of nothing at all.”

Suthsi put an arm around his meiate partner and patted his smooth head. Eikhus and I turned towards Spud, whose faraway gaze seemed to hint of being in another dimension himself.

“Escott?” Eikhus aimed a few droplets at Spud’s crossed arms.

“What did he mean in Valholler? Is he in Brane 5 with the Valkyries?” I pressed.

“There is a light,” Spud said. “Merely a glimmer. But there is no use in proceeding without all the facts. And we clearly have few so far.”

“Bet you Matshi has a whole shipload,” I said. “We need to find him and pick his brain. Before he kills us.” I felt a momentary pang—If Matshi did, um, send me to Level 3, there would be one good consequence. I could see my dear brother John again. I took a deep breath and unclenched my hands. “I think Matshi would at least be willing to talk to us, no?”

No replies. I continued, “Well, I’m going to try. Fools rush in and all, right?”  
I didn’t expect them all to nod.

• • •

Colleges are known for their 24/7 activity (or, in this case, 31.5/9), and Daralfanoon University was no exception. Setsei arranged for us to enter the University grounds with minimal bureaucratic delay (only 2 hours), and we slowly made our way to the bank of elevators where I had not so long ago tangled with Agriarctos, and Benedict’s henchman, Burr, aka ‘Little Red’.

I suggested that Spud and I both use the loo when we passed a row of W.C.s. He heartily agreed, and we left our lucky colleagues for a few minutes to each enter one of the Waste Collection rooms. It must be nice to just sweat off your waste like Eikhus and the Ytrans.

To my surprise, Spud took longer than me to return to the elevators. I pressed the call button again and we stepped on the lift as soon as it arrived.

“You want to tell us how we’re going to find Matshi in the Communications Department?” Eikhus asked Spud, as the elevator headed for the 212<sup>th</sup> storey. “If you just set me up with a holo, I can try to do a catchnet bioscan in the octant where he last attacked.”

Sounded reasonable to me. But Spud shook his head and tapped his nose with a spindly index finger, as Suthsi tried to stifle a giggle. “I took a few moments to...communicate, when I was in the W.C. My tlyp’ath skills have improved with practice.

I frowned. “Huh?”

The lift doors opened to reveal a hallway that resembled a gothic church, with spires and pointed arches. Were those actually gargoyles looking down at us from atop stone columns? Denver airport, much?

None of us spoke as we made our way down the dark hall past rows of massive sculpted wooden doors. “How very English,” I muttered, expecting to be accosted by wizards aiming wands at our hearts. “Double bubble, toil and trouble.”

“Erm, I hate to live up to my nickname,” Spud whispered, eyes a-twinkle, “but you have just quoted a chewing gum, not Shakespeare.”

“It was a joke, dude,” I lied. “This place is giving me the creeps.”

“Then you should be grateful we have arrived at our destination,” Spud returned as he walked up to one of the doors to our right. “They do tend to put the visiting faculty in the least convenient offices.”

“Who?” asked Eikhus, as Spud rang the doorbell.

Spud laughed out loud at my expression when the door opened to reveal our Ifestian “mentor” Th’Alia. “Bet you didn’t expect that one.” He tapped his nose again.

“No, I didn’t,” I growled, “and she doesn’t look any more happy to see me this time.”

Spud had already entered Th’Alia’s Visiting Faculty office, whose warm temperature echoed Chidurian climes. We asked Eikhus and the Ytrans to wait for us in the hallway, as I didn’t think Th’Alia would welcome ‘plus three’.

Flickering flames from multiple candles highlighted Spartan decorations and cast an orange-reddish glow on the stones next to the pond fountain that gurgled in the center of

the small room. Th'Alia was dressed in a traditional navy blue Ifestian gown, with yellow runic characters that reminded me of Marlin's wardrobe in Azgaror.

"Sit. Please," the Professor instructed as she pointed to the group of stones.

We sat.

"Where? Or why?" was her only comment.

"Both," said Spud.

"Then I shall facilitate your access to the 'where', and your colleague can answer the latter for himself." Th'Alia turned her austere gaze towards me. "*She* also?"

Or even a 'plus one'.

"If possible," Spud said with a hint of a shrug.

I didn't think it was possible for an Ifestian to roll her eyes, but I could've sworn Th'Alia came as close as her tertiary lids would allow. "I've been practicing, too," I growled. "Let's just get on with it."

Th'Alia raised her wizened hands and extended them towards Spud and me. "Begin."

We closed our eyes as she began the chant to guide us to the second stage of tlyp'ath. "*Hyppono, Honyro, Logho...*"

I let the guttural sounds wash over me as I unlocked my mind to receive Th'Alia's probing mental fingers.

A dimly lit figure appeared before my resting eyes, which quickly began to shimmer and coalesce into a wispy humanoid form. Matshi it sure wasn't. I did notice that the figure was wearing a long toga which was decorated with obscure runic symbols as well as sunflower clasps. *Take that observation, Spud.*

"Eirene. Embrace me." The being's voice was soothing, and I felt myself being bathed in warm sunshine. The sensation was more pleasant than any I'd ever experienced before, and, for I don't know how long, I was content to just bask in the illuminated blanket that enveloped my brain.

Th'Alia's harsh voice intruded into my inner peace, "*Skopos y tellos.*"

A soft reply, "Our creations may outlive us if we are blessed. Or cursed."

"*Epitxia y thanassia,*" returned Th'Alia.

"We cannot save this world from fear and war," the being whispered. "But perhaps your friend will succeed. He can descend to depths that are beyond our reach."

'Your friend.' Was the being referring to Matshi?

"*Epitichos,*" Th'Alia intoned. "*Phobos y thanassia.*"

"A," Th'Alia responded. "*Omega tellos!*"

A blast of cold shot over me, jarring me. I pitched forward and landed on the hard stone floor, on all fours. The being was gone.

"Wh-what happened?" I asked, retaking my seat. Without activating my Ergan, which would quickly identify my location, I could barely understand Ifestian.

Spud was better at languages than me, and offered a quick translation. "His goal is the eye of fire."

"Oh, good," I returned. "Clear as mud."

Th'Alia shook her head. "I shall assume that you are not referring to Kharybdian mud. Which is transparent, albeit tinged slightly azure."

I sighed. "No, Th'Alia. I'm trying to say I didn't understand."

“Well, you have better succeeded this time in saying that.” Was that a hint of irony in her tone? “Mr. Escott, would you care to enlighten your colleague?”

Spud nodded. “Matshi is on a quest, a quest which may not only burn him to a crisp but incinerate our civilization. I posit that the eye of fire is the all-seeing ruler of Zyga. The Omega Archon.”

## Chapter 2

### Into the Eye of the Fire

“Whoa. The Omega Archon?! He’s out of his mind!” I turned from Spud to Th’Alia. “So, you’re saying Zygint Central Headquarters is the where, right?” My last encounter with our omnipotent king, the Omega Archon, at the peak of the thomeo skyscraper in Zyga’s capital city of Mikkin, though less unpleasant than I’d feared it would be, was still terrifying. If Matshi and his crew were heading there, it would be a suicide mission.

Th’Alia’s visage remained expressionless, leading Spud to smile.

I looked back at Spud. “What?”

“No, ‘where’, Shiloh,” he corrected. “The where could be *any*-where.”

“Great. Clear as m—I don’t get it.”

“Your ‘meetings’ with the Omega Archon were in the Zygint Central penthouse, yes?”

I nodded.

“What storey?”

A mile up? “500, in Base 12? I didn’t count. I was just a little bit nervous, if you must know.”

“Well, whilst waiting for you during your last ‘detention’, I performed a bit of basic Maths. Counting the storeys from outside the building, the highest storey was 300.”

“But the elevator took me to the top floor.”

“Or so you believed. ‘Tis very likely that you were no longer in the building at all. Remember the lift that took you and Agriarctos from Mikkin to Aheya to collect Anesidora’s neurocache?”

Spud had a point. “Okay, then where was I? Where were we?”

“Fire is an excellent clew. Perhaps you observed your surroundings with some detail during your sojourns in Hell?”

“Um, no, Spud. I was kind of occupied, remember? Screaming.”

“Pity. Hell is another good clew. But, it is of no matter. Matshi’s returning to Zyga indicates that that direction is getting warmer, so to speak. Perhaps if we *rendez-vous* with our old friend, *he* will know the exact where, and we shall discover the why.”

I spun towards Th’Alia. “Do you know something you’re not telling us?”

Her response was curt. “Many things. Now take your leave.”

Spud grabbed me by the elbow, and, nodding at Th’Alia, led me out of the suite. I looked back towards the Ifestian, and was shocked to see that she was no longer there, and that the flames of the candles had withered, their orange wicks casting eerie shadows on the fountain’s now still water. I shivered, maybe because it had gotten cold. Or maybe not.

• • •

Waiting for us in the deserted hallway were Setsei, Suthsi, and Eikhus, as we expected. What we didn’t expect were the two companions that had joined them, our old friends, Sarion the jokester and his mate, Pallas.

Spud was the first to speak. “Look what the cat dragged in.”

“No, we’re cool cats in drag,” Sarion shot back, pointing to the calf-length togas he and Pallas were wearing, open to display buffed chests and six packs.

I greeted both men with warm hugs, but Spud offered only a stiff handshake. Eyeing Pallas’ ripped physique, Spud seemed a bit envious. “I see, Pallas, that your fitness regimen has been very successful. Alas, the *épée* and the boxing gloves do not have the same effect.”

As Sarion raised a hand to speak, Spud added, “I do hope that your sense of humour has had a similar improvement.”

“Yes, a rise, I swear.” He sneered. “A rise out of you.”

Spud returned an icy glare.

“So, guys,” I began. “Last time I saw you, you were off exploring our universe beyond the Zygan Federation with Lykkos and Nissos—and Matshi. What are you doing here? You do know that Matshi, um…”

“Yes, we have seen the reports,” Pallas admitted. “I am not surprised.”

“What happened?” I asked.

Sarion sighed. “Our goal, after our adventures with Benedict on M82, was to ditch this backwater Fed. And that’s how it started. We all flew under the radar to Triangulum to start. It’s our closest spiral galaxy and we thought we’d find some Zygan parallels to get our feet wet.”

“We landed on a lush magenta planet with singing plants,” Pallas. “Gentle breezes, wafting sweet perfumes our way as soon as we opened our hatch.”

Sarion rolled his eyes. “‘I think that I shall never see, a poem lovely as a tree.’ Not a joke. But, you get the picture. We were kind of up for some adventure, but this planet was a giant snooze-fest. The funny thing, after a couple of hours walking around the garden, we started to feel a little sedated ourselves.”

“A poppy field?” I asked.

“No,” said Sarion. “Don’t think so. No opiates. I think it was the botanical songs. I mean, no translations, but I felt like I understood the lyrics.”

“Peace, love, and understanding,” said Pallas. For Sarion: “No poetry.”

“So we all kind of got ‘kumbaya’ and sat around in a circle feeling kind. And high. All except for Matshi.” Sarion nodded. “Matshi kept watching us and getting more and more angry.”

Spud interjected. “He was the only non-humanoid with you, yes?”

“You got it, dude.” A rueful expression. “Turned out the plants gave off chemicals, after all, but not opioids. The enzyme aromatase, which converts testosterone to estrogen. And the hormone oxytocin. Neither of which affected Matshi as a Chidurian crustacean species.”

“But crustaceans have testosterone, don’t they?” said Eikhus.

Spud nodded. “Yes. But it is inaccessible from externally due to their shells. Ditto for oxytocin.”

“Well,” Sarion continued, “Matshi saw us fading into a coma and dragged us one by one into our ship. We slept like babies for a day. During which Matshi ran a Bio-scan on us and identified what had happened.”

“As soon as he told us, I said I was out of there,” interrupted Pallas. “And so did our mates. Matshi flew us to the nearest Glieser outpost and we M-fanned into one of their tanks. Good to wash off the rest of those drugs.” He flexed his prominent peccs.

“We told them we’d been kidnapped. They almost believed us,” Sarion explained. “If it hadn’t been for this Captain Gil Pesci—”

“He says hello, by the way,” interrupted Pallas.

“Anyway, we all returned home, and Matshi went on his way. We never heard from him again. Until—all this. Pallas just called me after hearing what happened.”

“I figured a visit to Ulenem would help us learn more. He told us where you went, and here we are. Damn he looks like he’s having fun,” said Sarion.

“Unfortunately, Lykkos and Nissos got a mercenary gig for some Rigellian traders. So, it’s just us two. What do we know so far?” Pallas asked.

“That Matshi is headed for Zyga.” Spud summarized our experience with Th’Alia. “And he may be after the Omega Archon himself.”

The Ytrans gasped, and Sarion and Pallas turned pale. Even Eikhus released a light spray of hail. I nodded and added “I tagged it. Suicide mission.”

• • •

Spud pulled us towards the elevator, and asked the Ytrans if we could access a holo with U-Net connections.

They nodded, and called the elevator for us to take the elevator for us to go down to the Archives on the one hundred and forty-second floor.

The Daralfanoon University Archives were buried in over a dozen floors in the middle of the 300+ storey building. Setsei led us to an area at the far end of a massive high-ceilinged auditorium, which was filled with students of different species sitting, standing, blinking, or twirling in around long tables, working with holos of different sizes, shapes, and cultures. Flickering 3-D images danced throughout the suite like a sea of holiday lights. Walking through the aisles, I had the impulse to lev above the students, and swim through the air around them google-eyed like a skin diver in a colorful tropical fish preserve. For just a moment, the warmth of the being’s presence in Th’Alia’s office seemed to return in my thoughts, but the spell was broken by Eikhus’ voice.

“Shiloh, in here.”

We gathered in a sheltered and E-shielded room, and waited for Setsei to sneak back into the campus holo system, so we could track Zygint reports of the recent attacks. “There has to be either a pattern or a direction hidden in these data,” I insisted.

Spud was skeptical. “Matshi would not be so negligent as to leave ‘bread crumbs’ for Zygan Sentinels to follow.”

“No argument there. But I wouldn’t put it past him to leave a few hints for his friends to uncode.”

“All right.” Sarion winked at me. “Let’s give it the old college try.” He met our glares. “What? We’re *in* a University.”

• • •

We didn’t have to wait long before the next clue appeared. Matshi and his warriors attacked a Zygan Sentinel outpost at the fringes of Andromeda, massacring a platoon of thirty-five Sentinel Corps officers. The general direction his sunflower ship was heading seemed to be towards Zyga itself, as Spud had surmised, but this latest foray was surprisingly off the track.



Eikhus threw up a plot of Matshi's incursions to date on the holo screen. We stared at the pattern for several minutes, hoping for some Spudian "light".

Sarion shook his head. "I don't recognize anything. Except—"

Suthsi burst into giggles.

I wasn't at my most patient. "What? Out with it."

"Well, if you add another wing towards Zyga, up here," he tried to swallow a laugh, "it would kind of look like humanoid buttocks."

"Or a W," Spud injected, ignoring the Ytran. "Which could stand for warrior, or winner, or..."

"Maybe it's the symbol 'etchad' in Zygan," said Eikhus. Zygan written language uses a mixture of letters, runes, and pictographs. "etchadawali" is Zygan for freedom."

Setsei nodded. "I think you've got it."

"It's not etchad if you add the wing towards Zyga," I began.

"Which hasn't happened yet," said Suthsi.

"Granted." I furrowed my brow. Something else nagged at me. "Wait—I think, yup, if we assume the next attack will be on Zyga, this pattern could represent another letter."

Spud's eyes twinkled. "Of course."

"What? What of course?" said Setsei.

"The Greek letter Omega." I announced. "The symbol for the Omega Archon."

"And," Spud added, "for the ultimate and apocalyptic end."

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"Well, that certainly confirms what Th'Alia and her visitor were implying," I said. "But we still don't know exactly where on Zyga the Archon may be. Do you think Matshi does?" I shrugged. "If so, doesn't that mean we should follow him?"

"Sounds like a plan to me," said Pallas.

"Has anyone tried to...just talk to him?" Suthsi asked. "I mean we *are* his friends."

"*Were*," said Eikhus. "He killed de la Cruz in cold blood. Zygint is his enemy. I don't think he's thinking in grays right now."

Setsei pointed to me and Spud. "Except for you two, none of *us* are Zygint. Maybe we can reach out to him. Packing a Geryon, of course."

I shook my head. "Somehow, I think we're past that. If we do find him, we'll have to be prepared to fight him." To Spud: "So you think he's not at Zygint Central..."

"The Omega Archon, as we all know," Spud offered, "Is everywhere. Which means Matshi can be anywhere. He presents differently to each of us, which means that none of us may truly know what he looks like—or who he is."

"Can't disagree with that," said Eikhus. "But if Matshi is seeking him out, he must have a clue as to some location where he won't be vaporized by Zygan Intelligence agents or Sentinels."

"Agreed." I turned to Setsei. "Any way we can track his ship?"

"I suppose we could try to convince Ulenem to give us a clue. He has the best vantage point from...where he is, but he didn't seem to be very willing to tell us more than he already did," Setsei shrugged. To Sarion: "Think we can get anything more out of him?"

Sarion shook his head. "I wouldn't be surprised if Ulenem really wanted Matshi to, um, fail, so that Matshi would end up...where he is. I could see Ulenem enjoying a re-match, after Matshi did him in in Canaan."

"An eternal re-match, again and again." Suthsi visibly shivered.

"We may have another option," said Sarion.

We all turned to look at him.

"Before we X-fanned from Matshi's ship, I micro'd my Ergal and slipped it into his armor."

• • •

"Sarion, I congratulate you!" Spud cried. "Never thought I'd see the day." A thought. "It's still activated, isn't it?"

"It was when I left," said Sarion. "I figured I would say I lost it when I got back, and they'd assign me another one." Smiling, he pulled out a shiny new Ergal from a fold in his toga.

"But they'd turn the lost one off," said Suthsi.

"Yes, if it was in ZygFed. But Matshi was long gone, beyond the reach of the Zygan Federation."

"So it could still be active," Setsei said. He switched his holo to do Ergal tracking. "And we might be able to see it now that Matshi is back in ZygFed territory."

We gathered around the holo display, looking at the zones where Matshi and his sunflower ship had attacked Zygint outposts. Setsei removed Ergal tracks that didn't match the location and timeline of the attacks, and, after a few minutes, we were able to identify a track heading towards Zyga. "Your Ergal, I'd guess," said Setsei. "I can't imagine Matshi wouldn't have deactivated his."

"Can you do a projection of where on Zyga he's headed?" I asked. "Sarion, we'll need your ship. We'll never catch up to him in the Nautilus."

"Of course. Pallas and I will go and get the bureaucracy stuff done which you search, so we can leave as soon as you get a course for us."

Suthsi laughed. "A course! Good one, Sarion. Since we're at a university and all."

Even Spud tried not to frown.

• • •

Sarion set the nav holo per Setsei's instructions. "Zyga Core." he shook his head.

"Funny how almost every planet we studied at Mingferplatoi," Eikhus said, "Had a Zygint headquarters in its core. Except Zyga itself."

"How does that surprise you?" Spud asked, as he leaned back in his seat and put his fingertips together on his chest. "Clearly, none of us are supposed to know about the Omega Archon's real location. But the consistency of Core Zygint bases should have suggested that possibility. Along with the myths about a superheated environment, validated by the occasional erupting volcano. A fiery Hell, right below our feet." A snort. "The ancients were more astute to place Hades in the ground."

"Sorry to be practical here," I interrupted, "But if we suffer in Chiduri, how are we going to survive Zyga Core? Assuming that we can M-fan there in the first place."

Eikhus spun once. "I'm guessing that Matshi has already figured out a way to break in. We could wait and see what he does."

"But you don't think the Omega Archon could anticipate whatever he'll do? If not when he does it, certainly for anyone who follows," I countered.

"Good point," said Pallas.

"Besides, if we follow Matshi in, we could be taken down in the blowback," Setsei admitted. "If we wait, and Matshi really is armed and ready to take down the Omega Archon, we could be too late, or collateral damage."

Suthsi wrinkled his brow. "Escott, you said Th'Alia couldn't tell you why Matshi is doing this."

"Or wouldn't, yes," Spud acknowledged.

"Well, if, as you say, Matshi isn't thinking in grays, maybe we shouldn't either."

We turned to Suthsi, waiting.

"What I mean is, if he's willing to risk his life to fight the Omega Archon, maybe that's the right thing to do."

"Well, that's certainly what Theodore Benedict and his minions believed when they started their attacks," Eikhus said. "But even Benedict gave up once he got his mother's neurocache from the RAM."

"Well, not exactly," I countered. "Last we saw him, he'd moved into another brane, away from Zygfed, with the help of King Odious and his Valkyries." A pause. "And Nephil Stratum."

"You're putting Matshi and Theodore Benedict on the same team? That's not exactly a good endorsement," said Setsei.

"I agree," Suthsi replied. "But, it does make you think. We have everything here in Zygfed that we need for a happy, healthy, fulfilled, and long life. Why rock the boat?"

"Freedom," said Eikhus. "That's what Matshi said. And that leads me to ask, and reflect, are we free?"

• • •

"Where is he? What happened?" I asked, when Sarion announced that we could no longer track Matshi. We were at least an hour away. "Did they shoot him down?"

"No. Not as far as I can tell. He was heading straight for the Kharybdian enclave, but as soon as his ship hit the water, we lost him."

"Kharybdis? Nerea and her rivulets are visiting our enclave on Zyga for a few days!" cried Eikhus, spinning toward us. "They can't be in danger!"

Sarion frowned. "No, holo scan shows everything calm. Cool it, Eikhus, you're scalding us with your spray."

"Then what is he—?"

"Worry not." Spud ambled over to gaze at the holo scan of the Kharybdian Enclave. "Appears peaceful to me as well. And I do not see any ship debris. It may simply be that the Ergan signal is weaker deep under water. Perhaps Matshi has found a back door entrance to Zyga Core in Poseidon's lair." An idea. "Eikhus, why don't you ask Nerea to do a little reconnaissance in her enclave and see if she or her friends can spot Matshi or his ship."

"No!" sprayed Eikhus, icy this time. "I won't risk her safety, or that of our family. We've already lost too many of our kin." After a few spins, he began, more calmly, "But,

I must say, that when Nerea and I were younger, we would frolic in the waters where we last saw Matshi's ship. Once in a while, we'd see flashes of light, lightning, we called it, come from the clouds and pierce the water, lighting up the bay for many meters below us. I couldn't see the strike point of the plume below, because the lightning bolt seemed to continue deeper and deeper beyond our streams. More courageous rivulets told us tales of a portal deep in the darkness that became visible with those lightning strikes. A back door, you called it, Escott?"

"Indeed." Spud nodded. "To Zyga Core. Where our target awaits."

• • •

As we were approaching the Zygan perimeter, Sarion invisible-ized our ship and began the tortuous route that would allow him to avoid sensors that could trigger a Sentinel Corps alert. "Best if we swoop in unannounced, like Matshi did."

"Wait!" I cried.

The group turned to face me. Sarion slowed the craft so the rocking lessened.

I frowned. "Let's think about this first. Strategy. All right. Scenario 1, Matshi goes in guns blazing, and the Omega Archon destroys him and his ship. Scenario 2, we follow and the Omega Archon destroys us, too. Scenario 3, Matshi destroys the Omega Archon—if that's possible at all—and then destroys us as emissaries of the Omega Archon. All of those end up with us destroyed."

"You have a better idea?" asked Setsei.

"I don't know if it's better, but it still leaves you all the option to try Plan A."

Spud's eyes narrowed. "I'm certain that Sarion's new Ergal won't let us M-fan into Zyga Core."

"Wasn't planning to use his Ergal. Or Pallas'. Or mine. At least not for that. But, thanks for the idea you gave me a while back. Sarion, can you land us in Mikkin near Zygint Central instead?"

Realization dawned. "I shouldn't recommend..." Spud blurted out. "In fact, I should forbid it."

The others looked puzzled. "Forbid what?" asked Eikhus. "She goes where angels fear to tread, remember?"

"And now she wants to go to H-hell," Spud stammered.

"Yup. Exactly. Assuming Hell is in Zyga Core. I'll turn on my Ergal and turn myself in to Zygint as soon as we land in Mikkin. I'm sure I'll be arrested on the spot and sent to the Omega Archon. When the Archon sentences me to Hell; now, *that'll* be getting in through the back door."

• • •

As I'd expected, Juan de la Cruz's replacement, Ftpg 33, was waiting for me as soon as I'd passed my NDNA-scan. I didn't expect that he'd grab my Ergal and bind my wrists in cherukles before even saying 'hello'.

"Everett Weaver is on way. Much looking forward to chatting as soon as come," Ftpg declared. "Escort to Omega Archon now. Is partner in crime near?"

"No." I wish Ftpg would use his Ergal to translate his poor English and poorer Zygan. "I don't know where he is. I knocked him out right after the Sol asteroid belt and

disabled his Ergal. For all I know he could be halfway to Chiduri.” A decent cover story for our ship’s stopover on that broiling planet.

We rode up the empty elevator silently. Porcines are not great conversationalists. I watched the numbers on the screen rise above 200, and pondered Spud’s theory that we were really riding out of the Zygint Central building rather than to its top. Anything to keep my mind off of a plan that I now regarded with a tinge of regret.

After an eternity of several minutes, the doors opened and Ftpg escorted me down the hallway to the Omega Archon’s contemporary suite. “Here wait,” he said, leaving without another word as the door swished shut behind him.

I sat on the orange futon and awaited my fate. My eyes fell on the red door through which the Omega Archon had passed each time I’d been sentenced to visit his office. I expected it to open—but it didn’t. Maybe Matshi had succeeded in vanquishing our leader after all. Restless, I stood up and walked towards the red door, back and forth, several times. The last time, I reached over and touched it. Ouch! My fingers burning, I pulled my hand away. Back in my seat, I soaked my fingers in my mouth to soothe the burn.

It was at least a half hour before the Omega Archon made his entrance. Though I would not have recognized him—long grey hair, matted together with green, purple, and red blood, with two black horns poking through the nest. No muscle or polo shirts this time. His chest was bare, and his lower torso resembled the rear of a quadruped from Orion’s agriplanets. Was the purple blood trickling down his breastbone Matshi’s? Or had Matshi succeeded in unhinging the Archon and his almost mechanical organization that supported ZygFed’s myriad planets and beings?

The Archon trotted up towards my seat, and I rose to face him. Big mistake. My eyes met his—any traces of kindness or compassion had been extinguished. His orbs flashed red ire as he neared.

“A millennium in Hell!” he shouted, dispensing with the niceties, as Spud would say. “And this time tlyp’ath will not protect you!”

Before I could respond, I was surrounded once again by the flames of Hell. I thought I’d prepared myself for the pain, but the screams escaped despite my efforts to stay in control. The Archon was right; my attempts at tlyp’ath were too weak to affect my environment, which the Archon acknowledged with maniacal laughter as he X-fanned, leaving me alone. Or...?

Still screaming, I forced myself to uncurl, and stand erect, facing in the direction of the red door in the suite a few minutes ago. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen...each step was torture, flames licking up my legs, and the soles of my bare feet blazing as they touched the ground. Twenty-four. I reached out once again where I had touched the door before. This time, the surface felt cooler, more refreshing than the fire that enveloped me. Desperate to stop the agony, I leaned against the door, which burst open into a large tunnel, a tunnel blasted by cold air that doused the flames that seared my body.

I lay against the stone wall in the tunnel, eyes closed, letting the coolness of the surface soothe my skin. Deep breaths. Cool air to smother the fire in my lungs. Opening my eyes in the dim light, I looked down at my arms and legs, expecting to see blistering and scars. But, my body was normal. Nothing, no damage at all.

I did a quick scan up and down the tunnel. No other beings that I could see. But, I did see rows and rows of doors, red doors, each shielding the tunnel from the echoes of

the screams beyond. How many victims were imprisoned in this Hell of Fire? And was Matshi one of them?

More alert now, I noticed a slight tilt to the stone path under my feet. My sneakers, unmarked, had re-found their place comforting my toes. To my left, the grade was about 10%, going down. Down to Zyga Core, perhaps?

I set off at a quick trot down the pathway further into the tunnel, willing myself to ignore the cries from the prisoners hidden on either side. There would be time for me to return and save them, I hoped. My mission now was to locate Matshi. I must have jogged miles into the seemingly infinite tunnel before I reached a fork with many paths. No more red doors, at least, but which of these would be my “path not taken”?

I was about to continue on the leftmost course which was sloping downward, when I saw something glint to my right. I walked over and picked it up. Turning it over in my hand, I realized what it was. A scale. A Chidurian scale. Matshi! Had he gone down this path—or come from it?

The path seemed to have a small uphill incline. Up wasn't the direction I had planned to head, but... I took a deep breath and started upward. I felt as if I had walked at least a mile, in a slightly curved way, but saw nothing but natural stone walls on either side of me. The agonizing sounds of the agonized had faded as I trod deeper into the tunnel. I'd hoped I'd find another scale or two, but there was nothing but smooth stone on the ground as well.

The curve seemed to tighten after a few more yards forward. And, to my surprise, the path started to go downhill once more. I picked up my pace, observing that the curve degrees grew tighter and tighter until I was trotting down a stone spiral rather than a linear path. I felt as if I were following a trail to the cooler caves of Chiduri... Could a Chidurian like Matshi have designed this spiral?

And then, the trail ended. In a small ledge which was barely large enough for two humans. Or one Chidurian. Before I had time to ponder that reality, the ledge started shooting downward, knocking me off balance. I was barely able to keep myself from banging into the stone wall which seemed to be narrowing in around me. Was this road turning into a trap to crush me to death?

As the ledge grew smaller and the walls began pressing my shoulders, I gave one last look above, only to realize that I could not get traction on the smooth walls and climb back out. Desperate without my Ergal, I shouted, “Micro!”, expecting only that my chest would soon be collapsed. Instead, I was bathed in a ray of light, whose source I couldn't recognize, and the pressure on my torso was relieved.

The walls seemed to be moving away again, and the ledge growing larger. Or, more likely, I was getting smaller. Small enough to reach my destination? How was that possible without my Ergal?

The ledge, now giant, relative to me, slowed down and started to tilt. I inched back towards the high end, but could no longer hold on as it became almost vertical. I slid down and landed softly on my feet in a chilly hallway which was bathed by blue light. The light highlighted intriguing patterns of gold and green. I could see the hallway infinitely stretching in both directions. It was lined by openings which led to tracks and rivers of a rainbow palette of colors, all shimmering brightly and emitting a warm energy that reminded me of the being's aura in Th'Alia's suite. I felt as if I had arrived in

another world, one which I had not learned yet to navigate, and one in which I had not learned yet to communicate.

I took a few tentative steps towards the magenta light in one of the openings, seeking its warmth, when I felt a freezing sharpness prick my back. In a microsecond, I spun around, ducking low and aiming for the legs of my assailant. The massive Chidurian legs of my assailant, whose massive arms gripped me by both shoulders. Unable to wriggle free, I looked up to face my opponent.

“Matshi!”

## Chapter 3

### **Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch**

Eikhus shut off his Comm holo and turned towards Sarion. “I do not think it is safe for us to return to my thal. Nerea will put us up in the Kharybdian enclave. While we wait.”

Sarion scoffed. “Put up with us, you mean.” He entered the coordinates into the nav holo and the ship floated out of the clouds and into low orbit for a quick trip to Nerea’s thal. “I can just hover up here and keep an eye out if Matshi uses the back door to escape.”

Spud shook his head. “We have been fortunate that your piloting skills have kept our shielded ship from attracting Sentinel Corps attention. But we cannot risk staying in the air.”

A sigh. “It’s not my first choice...” Eikhus began. “But Nerea and I can float down from where we lost the ship. We may be able to reach the hidden location,” he suggested. “I hate to leave Shiloh all alone.”

“That’s assuming that she’s still not in Zygint Central.” Pallas eyed Spud. “For all we know.”

“We waited an hour for her to return,” Spud shot back. “No, if she were to rejoin us, she would have appeared by now.”

“All the more reason to try to help her,” Setsei said.

“Didn’t you mean rescue?” said Suthsi.

Setsei sighed. “I was trying not to use that word.” He leaned over to Pallas’ holo. “See anything down there?”

“No. All is still quiet. Sorry.” Pallas turned to Eikhus. “I thought you were worried about Nerea and her rivulets. Maybe you should let us try to dive down, so she—and you—are not at risk.”

“I appreciate the offer, Pallas, but, truth is, we’ll be a lot less noticeable than you folk. I believe it’s what Nerea would choose to do as well. Fortunately, the rivulets have 2 other tributaries, so, if something happens, we will not leave them bereft.” To Sarion: “You can un-invisible-ize as soon as we enter the enclave. We’ll be safe there.”

Sarion executed a perfect six-point landing on the front pools of Nerea’s thal. Nerea and her tributaries Drosia and Bremen stood holding the rivulets at the thal door.

Eikhus was first out of the hatch. Spinning, he and Nerea sprayed each other and then doused the tributaries and rivulets as well.

Pallas shook his head. “Glad all I have to do is shake hands.”

“You were spraying me like that on the wrestling mat last week, bro,” Sarion teased. “Hey, Escott. Come on out and have a cold shower.”

“No thank you,” said Spud. “I shall wait until the currents of Kharybdian emotions lessen a bit.”

“I think it’s safe to go out,” Suthsi asked his meiate.

Setsei nodded. “The specific gravity of Kharybdian spray upsets our osmotic balance.”

“Among other things,” muttered Suthsi. “Yes, let’s go. I see the rivulets have gone back inside and the coast is clear.”



“So, you don’t like children, huh?” Pallas poked.

“Ytrans divide into two fully mature beings. Yes, we may be half our size for a few months, but we quickly duplicate our genome and grow to full size,” explained Setsei.

“So you become new beings?” Sarion asked.

“No,” Setsei continued. “We remain who we are, but create two additional Ytrans who have our genome.”

“With the same genetic make-up, how does your species evolve?”

“I’ve read about evolution,” Suthsi interrupted. “It’s not something we do. It sounds rather brutal, if you ask me.”

Spud nudged the Ytrans into the front pool. “This sidebar into exobiology is fascinating, but we must re-focus on tracking Shiloh and aiding in her return.” He strode to the door of the thal. “Eikhus, are you set up?”

Eikhus nodded and the group entered the small den where Eikhus had launched several colorful holos.

“Which one is the tracking device on Shiloh?” asked Suthsi.

“It’s live,” said Eikhus, pointing to a red sphere. “I got a history that confirms your theory, Escott. Shiloh was M-fanned from Mikkin to Zyga Core. But Zyga Core is much larger than we’d guessed, based on Shiloh’s path so far. She seemed to travel a significant distance deeper into our planet, slowly at first, and then, very rapidly. I have her almost at the center, judging by Zyga’s radii and diameters.”

“Are we getting any visuals?” Spud asked.

“No, we lost the visuals when she X-fanned. But, you were right, Escott,” admitted Eikhus, “the earrings from Shiloh’s sister completely slipped past the Omega Archon’s sensors. Excellent disguise for the tracker.”

That acknowledgment didn’t seem to please Spud. He stood behind Eikhus stroking his chin, lost in thought.

“Wait, it’s blinking,” observed Pallas, pointing to the red sphere that showed Shiloh’s location. “Long, long, short. Short, long, long. Short short short. Long long, long. Short, short, short—”

“SOS. Morse code. Eikhus, get Nerea and get down there as fast as you can. Shiloh is in deep trouble,” Spud cried. “Literally.”

• • •

“Matshi!” I blurted out. “Don’t kill me—I’m a friend.”

Matshi lifted me up so that our eyes met. “This is war, Shiloh, not hide and seek.”

I tried to open my arms and tap my earrings. “Look, I’m unarmed. And way overmatched, no pun intended. There’s nothing I can do to hurt you, at least physically.”

Matshi let out a hearty laugh, and loosened his grip. “Shiloh, you must know I am no longer the being I used to be. But, the fact that you are here means that you probably aren’t either.” He let me go and I landed back on my feet on the too hard floor.

“Well,” I said, brushing myself off, and taking a moment to send an SOS signal by pulling and scratching my ears. “You don’t seem surprised to see me.”

“You were more delayed than I expected,” he returned. “But, finding a way in, I admit, was a challenge for us as well. Couldn’t have done it without the Ursans.” He fished inside his armor vest and drew out Sarion’s Ergal, “I tried to leave some hints, but

I couldn't keep this on once I had gotten close to Zyga Core. Though I did turn it on to help you out for a few minutes when you were almost pancaked in that elevator."

"So you *did* want me to find you!"

"Well, not you specifically. I thought you were off in another brane trying to find your brother. I was hoping to marshal Sarion, Pallas, and their mates to join me for the incursion. But, you'll do. At this point, all I need is a witness—and a recruiter."

I was disappointed he didn't ask if I'd found John. But relieved I didn't have to admit that we'd lost him once more. "A witness to what?" I asked.

Matshi waved a giant claw. "To all this."

I looked around at the colorful rivers of piping that circulated around us. "What is 'this'?"

"I micro'd you when you were on the elevator ledge. Made you even smaller than the RAM or the Hell suite residents. You are literally 3 microns tall."

"Swell. Shouldn't I be able to see the atoms on these walls then?"

Matshi rolled his eyes. "Did you forget our physics uploads already? Nuclei are femtometer-sized. Fermi. One times ten to the minus fifteen. A micron is only ten to the minus six."

"How could I forget?" I didn't hide my sarcasm. "So you wanted me to witness my deteriorating calculation skills? I guess all these years I shouldn't have depended so much on my Ergal..."

"That's my point. You have depended on Zygan technology. We all have."

"You turning into a Luddite, dude?"

Another chuckle. "No, Shiloh. A realist. This—where we are now standing—is the core—"

"We *know*."

"Let me finish. The core of Zygan technology. *This*, Shiloh, is a giant holo, what's the old word, a giant computer." He waved the other arm. And we are inside it, surrounded by infinite cells feeding its functions like pre-holo microchips. *This*, Shiloh, is not only the core of Zyga, but the core of the *Omega Archon*."

Stunned, I said, "So the Omega Archon is a *machine*? Not a being?"

"Well, the more advanced the machine, the less the difference, but, yes, a giant machine. And we are now tiny viruses in its body who have not yet triggered an immune response. But, I expect our respite will not last long. So, now that you've glimpsed the truth, we'd better keep moving."

"Fine. I'll go along. But tell me, how did you figure all this out?" I didn't dare lag behind, as we wended through a maze of similar glistening pipes.

"After my fellow voyagers were overcome by the debacle on a plant planet in Triangulum Galaxy," Matshi explained, "I left them in Zygfed to lick their wounds and thought I'd be better off venturing out on my own. I'd soured on Triangulum, so I set off for Bode's galaxy in Ursa Major."

"Plionarctos, the Ursan working for Theodore Benedict, was from a peripheral planet in M81. The planet was called Ursida, if I remember correctly. High gravity."

"Not much higher than Chiduri, in fact. Not a problem for me. I landed in its most populated city, and, using our Ursan friends as references, made my way to the central archives." A scoff. "I wasn't the first Chidurian to visit, but, they hadn't seen one for a

couple hundred years. That's what got me to thinking. Sure, Zygfed keeps a tight lid on travel beyond our current borders, but for *everyone*? And, if so, why?"

"Um, don't want to interrupt your story, but where are we going?" It seemed as if we had been trekking through miles of the pipe maze. Must be one mother of a microchip.

"My ship. Before the Omega Archon cleanses us. Our vessel is micro'd too, but still big enough to house 3 Ursans, and a few guest mercenaries tickling the Archon's neural network with M81 shielded weapons. Distracts the Archon and allows the rest of us to recon." He looked back at me. "Everybody's back on board now, but I thought one of you might make it here, so I hung out a bit longer just in case."

"Thanks, Matshi. So what did you find out in the Ursidan library?"

"Run!" shouted Matshi.

"What?"

"No, *now*, Shiloh, you. Run! Immune system attack!"

I glanced for a moment behind me and saw a puffy soft sphere contorting to pushing its way through the tunnel opening we had just passed. I ran.

"If the Cleaner catches us, we'll be smothered." Matshi yelled. "Jump on my back and hold on, my legs are longer and faster."

Together, we were able to slip through another opening, but I could see that the "Cleaner" was gaining on us. "How much longer?"

Matshi mega'd just enough to be able to make it through the openings if we ducked. The extra height gave us a little edge on speed, but the Cleaner was still getting closer.

"Here," said Matshi as he jumped up onto another ledge. We immediately started rising, with the walls compressing us at our slightly larger width for just a few seconds. Fortunately, the tunnel began to widen. I looked down at my feet, and, alarmed, saw that the Cleaner was rising up the shaft. Wisps of its malleable surface crept through the sides of the ledge, inching for our toes.

"Can't this thing go any faster?" I cried. "It's almost on my shoes!"

Matshi shook his head, and grabbed me in a crab hug, just as the wisps approached our legs. He pulled out Sarion's Ergal and activated it just as the Cleaner reached our feet.

• • •

We M-fanned onto the bridge of Matshi's sunflower ship. Stationed at Nav was an Ursan who, for a moment, I thought was my old friend Agriarctos. Or, rather Ward Burton. But, no. This Ursan had a longer snout and hazel eyes. Wart's were brown.

In addition to the other Ursans on board, Matshi's ship was staffed by a variety of large species that I didn't recognize. Some had a humanoid appearance, or at least mammalian. Others were shimmering lights, circular waterfalls, and one being who looked like an animated Erector Set. A few reptilian and avian species. And a smoke creature. I'd heard they existed, but had never met one before.

There was no time for introductions, however, as Matshi immediately ordered his crew to hightail it out of the cave in which it was hidden. We could hear the whooshing sounds of not one but several Cleaners approaching, and we had no doubt that they would be able to smother our ship as well as us.

Nav Ursan holod reverse as quickly as possible, and guided the ship through the zigzag path towards...towards...? Comm holo showed us a 360 view of the tight quarters

in the cave and the bulging bubbles that were in pursuit from the microchip tunnels we'd escaped. Once again, they were getting closer and closer.

As the Cleaners neared our vessel, the Ursan blasted them with a blue liquid, dyeing them with azure streaks. They tried to scrub off the liquid, which turned into an expanding bubbly foam. The more they attempted to rub off the liquid, the foamier it grew. I turned to Matshi. "What...?"

Matshi smiled. "Laundry detergent, what else?"

The wall of foam separated us from the Cleaners and gave us a few more minutes to escape before they would be able to break through. Nav Ursan gunned his Nav and we shot out of a cave entrance into dark, unlit water.

"Mega," said Matshi, and we began growing to our Zygan size, as we rose from the depths.

I felt a moment of fear when I saw the Cleaners reach the mouth of the cave which was framed by the soapsuds. Would they be able to swim out and follow us? Our ship experienced a jarring jolt, and we felt ourselves caught and rapidly rising as if we'd been tracted. In minutes, we could see sunlight through the waves, and we surfaced with a small bounce.

Comm holo showed us surrounded by two currents, who guided our ship to a port with Kharybdian writing. The Kharybdian enclave? Then, the two currents...

Turned into Eikhus and Nerea, who greeted me with warm sprays as I exited the ship. "You made it!" Eikhus cheered.

"Thanks to you both...and to Matshi."

Seeing Matshi follow me out of the ship, the Kharybdians gasped.

Matshi offered a genuine smile. "Bring it in, Eikhus, I need a shower."

## Chapter 4

### **Revelations**

We gathered in a room in Nerea's that that would shield our discussions from the freshwater ears of her rivulets. We all had questions, many questions. And, despite the fact that Matshi had helped me escape the clutches of the Cleaners, and the Archon himself—*itself*—none of us knew Matshi's endgame—or whether we could, or should, trust him.

Matshi understood and expected our suspicions. Surrounded by his crew, he sat before us like a king on his throne, and continued his recitation of his experiences on Ursida.

“Why were we limited as to the number and location of planets we could visit? And why were we limited now? The Omega Archon, and Zygfed *itself* seemed to be glutted with “don'ts”, rules that kept us isolated and blocked us from fulfilling our full potential.”

“Sounds like a typical government to me,” said Nerea.

Spud disagreed. “A government should protect its subjects.”

“Spoken like a true royal,” Nerea huffed. “We should be citizens, not subjects. In a republic, not a kingdom.”

“We should be free,” Matshi interjected. “Freedom is our birthright, and no government, however well-intentioned, should take away our freedom. And, in Ursida, I found out that we used to be.”

My ears perked up. “What do you mean, used to be?”

“An Ursan elder, Aparctos, led me to a vault of holos, where I lived for 40 nights and days. I viewed, and read, and absorbed, and uploaded thousands and thousands of historical records from across the universe, and even across branes. I learned about the glorious battles of Kaironia, of Gaishia, of Solach. Cities, states, countries, planets, alliances that worked to ensure the success of their empires to defeat their enemies and exploit their resources.”

Suthsi grimaced, “Sounds just awful to me.”

“You would not have survived,” said Matshi, matter-of-factly. “But you would have lived, really lived.”

Suthsi shivered. “Ugh.”

“It is the way of life,” Matshi continued, “and even non-life. Stars consuming other stars, galaxies other galaxies. The survival of the survivors. It has,” he smiled, “an appealing symmetry. Until the Platrellorgs evolved.”

“Evolution again,” muttered Setsei.

“Oh, you'd like this one, Ytrans,” said Matshi. “Drawn to the light, they transitioned from molecules to waves, and exist in a wave form in inter-universe space, drawing unlimited energy from empty solar systems, and dying stars. As waves, they could merge with or cross each other without damage, so corporeal territory was no longer a need. Neither was technology, hardware tools. As waves, they could understand and communicate with each other and with all living species, telepathically. And, that's when they discovered the rapture of peace. *Eirene*.”

“Hey,” I interrupted. “I heard that word in Th'Alia's office, when that being was there. Spud?”

“Yes. It is the ancient Greek word for peace,” said Spud. “I did as well.”

“Could the being have been a Plate—what did you call it?” I asked.

“Platrellorg.” Matshi shrugged. “Well, I wouldn’t be surprised; if anyone could summon one, I’d expect an Ifestian elder or a Syneph elder would be at the top of my list. Anyway, the Platrellorgs made it their mission to bring peace to the multiverse, by preserving living beings for as long as possible.” A sigh. “But, everything comes at a cost.”

“What does this have to do with Zyga, Matshi?” Eikhus pressed.

“We are paying the cost,” Matshi insisted.

Setsei scoffed. “Well, Juan de la Cruz would hardly think so. Or the Sentinels that your ship vaporized.” He aimed his Geryon at Matshi’s chest.

Matshi raised a claw. “Hold your fire, Ytran. We’re not here to attack you. Let me finish before you jump your gun.”

Grumbling, Setsei pulled back his weapon. “Finish. But I won’t let you finish us.” “If I’d wanted to finish you, I’d have done it already, Setsei.” Matshi pointed at me and Spud. “These two ‘most wanteds’ are a lot more likely to get you executed than I am.” He shook his head. “No, I left Sarion’s Ergal activated so you would find me. And join me. We have a more formidable enemy than each other. The Zygan Federation and its minions.”

Matshi waved a claw at his shipmates. “Inside Zyga Core, we discovered an enormous solid holo, what used to be called a computer. Our comm holo was able to map the over octillion connections that we scanned for further study. To buy us time, our crew aimed laser volleys at key points in the structure, at its neural network. This intrusion destabilized the Omega Archon, both physically and mentally. Which makes me think that the enormous computer in Zyga Core *is* the Omega Archon.”

More gasps.

“Or at least responsible for the holo display of the Archon,” Matshi added, describing our trek through the innards of the Core computer. “The Omega Archon, the solid holo, may be the gift to our multiverse from the Platrellorgs that I read about in the Ursida Library archives.

“The beginning and the end,” intoned Spud. “The Platrellorgs may have bequeathed us the best of their technology, but a technology nevertheless. With a flawed design despite a universe of good intentions.

“I’d never seen the Archon so ragged before,” I admitted. “He appeared like he’d lost a gladiatorial combat against Ulenem.”

Matshi frowned for a moment. “Low blow, Shiloh.”

“No, Matshi. Dude is happier than I’ve ever seen him. He’s living in a world the Platrellorgs would hate. Skirmishes and battles, eternal games.”

A smile. “Then I’ll try to visit him when I give my life to the cause.”

“What *is* the cause, Matshi?” asked Sarion. “You still haven’t told us.”

“Of course I have. Freedom. Freedom from the Platrellorgs legacy. Freedom from the Zyga Core computer that is running our world.”

• • •

Laughter.

I expected many reactions from our team, and witnessed them. Gasps, stunned silence, spit takes. But not laughter. Especially not from Spud. “What the hell?”

“Capital!” Spud exclaimed. “I believe, Matshi, that you have confirmed my theory.”

“What theory?” we asked.

Spud scanned all our faces. “Tell me, good subjects, how old is the Zygan Federation?”

“Oh, man, that’s Mingferplatoi 101, dude,” Sarion said. “Several dozen millennia or something.”

“11 to the power of 9,” said Suthsi. “In Zygan years.”

“Which is certainly well before our adventure in Canaan, no?” Spud returned. “So, why send us—the two of us—and then Matshi and Ulenem to Judea on assignment in the past, and not someone from that era?”

“Because Zygfed didn’t exist then...?” I ventured.

“Because we’re all living in the Matrix,” Sarion popped in. “And, ooh, none of us really exist. Or at least *you* all don’t.”

A glare at Sarion, before Spud continued. “That’s unfortunately a very simplistic way of looking at it. I couldn’t have expected anything better from you.”

Sarion pouted. “I think I’ve been insulted.”

“But, you’re not entirely wrong.” Spud stroked his chin. “I posit that all of us have been created in the past 200 or so Earth years, myself included.”

“But Zygans live for thousands,” Setsei objected.

“Or so we are told. Eikhus, you work at Nejnsen Hospital. Have you ever seen anyone speak to events more than a century or two ago?”

“Well, not really.” Eikhus sprayed a few droplets. “I mean not that I can prove. But I never really expected them to. What’s past is past.”

“I have, Spud.” I rubbed my chin. “Juan de la Cruz once spoke of sailing with Christopher Columbus.” I held up a hand. “But, come to think of it, it could’ve been a history upload that blended in with his memories to make him think he’d lived that long ago.”

“Or was implanted there,” Spud suggested.

I scratched my temple. “You know, back in Judea, John told me I was a clone. And I was shocked. Still am, actually. Because I don’t remember any other life than this one. Any other me. Maybe I had memories of the ‘other’ erased. And uploads of memories of a life that never happened to replace them. If that’s the case, we could all have history uploads...making us think we’ve lived long lives.”

“Well, that’s Blade Runner,” said Sarion. “I liked mid-career Harrison Ford.”

“I liked him, too,” I admitted. “On set, of course. He gave me a lollipop on my first movie. But, if you follow Spud’s reasoning, I *could* be a replicant who never really met him at all.” I looked at Spud. “Or I could be an Android. Do you want to see if I bleed?”

“I have seen you bleed, Shiloh; no, thank you.” Spud sighed. “Theoretically, though I am not convinced yet from the evidence, we could all be clones. All of us seem to inhabit bodies that reflect our memories. Ytrans on Ytra. Kharybdians on Kharybdis. Shiloh and I on Earth. But a specific body is not necessary with the Zygan technology that allows the reconstitution of the neurocaches stored in the RAM. A new body can be cloned, or created, or even appropriated. Cloning processes can be accelerated and RAM

memories implanted in a physical body, as they had been by Theodore Benedict in Brane 5 to rebirth his mother, Anesidora.”

“And,” Spud continued, “From the perspective of the Platonic ego, a body is not necessary at all. Our mortal souls, such as they are, can be preserved in an immortal database, from which they experience life, and perhaps even heaven, Level 3.”

We all sat quietly, pondering Spud’s pronouncement. If his theory were true, we could all be data stored in the RAM at this very moment, siloed souls, experiencing only what each of us could see or sense. Our lives could literally be an isolated eternal dream. Even my recent terrifying escape with Matshi could have been a simple fantasy. As could my entire life. My wonderful life. From nowhere, the name Stacy popped into my head. “Ask about Stacy.” my future me had shouted, what seemed so long ago, as she succumbed to her Sentinel attacker at the entrance of the RAM. Stacy. Who *was* Stacy? Matter of fact, who was Shiloh?

“Why?” a tentative question from Suthsi, pierced the silence.

“That is a question that no one seems able or willing to answer,” Spud admitted. “Yet. But Matshi’s discovery that the Omega Archon could be a computer is the *apocalypse*.”

“The apocalypse?!” cried Eikhus.

“No,” Spud said, “The uncovering. The word means, in effect, revelation. Perhaps of the truth.”

“Wow. Blows my mind. Maybe we’re someone’s entertainment,” suggested Pallas. “And they’re watching us right now, like animals in a zoo.”

“The Truman Show,” piped in Sarion.

“And 500 other science fiction stories.” I shook my head. “No question that we’re being watched. But the Omega Archon doesn’t need TV cameras like that movie had.”

“Then how about 1984? Big Brother was pretty omnipotent,” Sarion suggested. “Well, don’t look at me, guys, my mother was from Earth.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Pallas. A snort. “That answers so many questions.”

Sarion jumped out of his seat, but was stopped by a cold shower from Eikhus.

“You philosophers can sit here and argue about this all day,” interrupted an irritated Matshi. “All we know is that our universe is controlled by a machine. Granted, a very advanced and complicated machine. But, a machine nevertheless. And, Pallas may not be far off in his guess about zoos. A cage, even if gilded, is still a cage.

“So what do you propose we do?” asked Sarion.

“I’ll send my team back to my ship to continue analyzing the information we got from our recon in Zyga Core. Find functional areas of the machine and assess their vulnerability. Then we attack and destroy.”

Sarion and Pallas raised fists and whooped.

Eikhus sent hail pellets their way. “Look. I have to ask. Is negotiation an option? If not with the Archon, say, with Ev. With Zygint.”

Matshi turned to me. “What do you think, Shiloh? Is the Omega Archon open to negotiation?”

A shiver ran through me. “Not any more. Way beyond that now. And there’s no one at Zygint that I trust to help us, either in Mikkin or on Earth. But, we’re only a dozen beings at most. You really think *we* have a chance to neutralize the Omega Archon? Really?”



“Which is why I reached out to you. Witness and recruit,” said Matshi. “You all can help us marshal the forces we need to take on the Archon, not just among your friends and allies, but among your enemies. You just returned from Brane 5 recently, right? From a visit to Theodore Benedict? Who has a planet-ship?”

“Well, yes,” I acceded. “But, um, I think Benedict had a mind of his own, and a plan of his own.” I shook my head. “Now that Agriarctos and I had retrieved his mother, Benedict wanted to get away from Zygfed, not fight it. With his staff, King Odious, and Nephil Stratum, he was trying to find a non-Zygfed way to get to Level 3.”

Spud cleared his throat. “If all we have posited is in fact true, another aspect needs to be considered before we consider anything other than a surgical strike on the Archon’s holo.”

“What do you mean, Spud?” I asked.

“We don’t yet know *what* of us is real, and what is the Archon’s three-dimensional creation.”

A sobering thought.

Spud continued, “Even if we assume that the billions of beings in Zygfed *do* exist, *are* real, can we say the same thing about their environments? For example, what if Zyga’s enclaves were created and are supported by the Archon? His destruction might turn the Kharybdian enclave into a burning desert, or the Chidurian enclave into a raging river. Would Zyga’s atmosphere support our breaths?”

“Good point,” agreed Nerea.

“Millions and billions of beings all around Zygfed could find their lives challenged, if not snuffed out, without the Archon’s environmental management. And, Shiloh, you remember taking apart your Ergal. To find nothing inside it, right?”

I nodded.

“Well, our Ergals could be simple receivers and transponders, which would not function without the efforts of the Archon’s machine. We would never be able to fly our ships and return to our home planets again.” Spud held up a hand. “And, we have only discussed Level 2. What impact would the Archon’s destruction have on Level 3, and the trillions of beings enjoying heaven?”

“You saying our Archon created heaven?” asked Setsei. “My God.”

“Exactly,” Spud said. “It has been so written, but I am not yet certain enough of my theory to assert its validity 100%. I would recommend, Matshi, that you and your crew return to your ship and continue your research and analysis of the data that you have collected—with the assistance of our colleagues here, except for Shiloh and me. Before we engage in a course of action from which there will be no return.”

“And what are you and I going to do, Spud?” I asked.

“I’ll show you. Sarion, I need your ship.”

## Chapter 5

### **The Adventure of the Three Wise Men**

Spud refused to let any of our team join us for the return to Earth. I didn't think a trip to Earth was a wise idea, with or without the gang. By now, Spud and I were certainly on Ev's Most Wanted List, and I wasn't confident I could talk my way out of this one.

"You shan't have to," Spud announced.

Was he mind-reading me again? I turned and glared at him.

"In a few minutes, I shall take us out of hyperdrive outside Eris orbit. We will be invisible to Zygint sensors before we reach Pluto." His nimble fingers adjusted the settings on the nav holo next to his seat.

"Well, let's hope Earth Core and its Zygint catascopes don't take *us* out. How are you going to avoid them?"

Spud answered only with a faint smile. Grabbing my hand in his left hand, his right index finger tapped a round ball that floated in the middle of the nav holo display, and we X-fanned.

• • •

Darkness. I could barely make out Spud's features in the fog.

"Where are we?"

"An alley off Montague Street. In 1871. Hold my hand. We should not lose track of each other in the mist."

"Ugh. Smells like a furnace out here—God, what did I just step in?" My shoe squished on a soft substance that quickly gave off a fecal odor. "Never mind. Yick."

"Horse excreta are ubiquitous in this era—I suggest you keep to the pavement—er, sidewalk."

"Coal dust and horseshit. If steampunk fans could only experience this reality..."

"I would remind you that your era of Sulphur and Petrol has not been much of an improvement." He stopped in front of a short staircase, and looked around. "Here we are."

Little was visible through the fog, though I did hear hoofbeats far off in the distance.

"And that's where?" As we climbed, I could make out the inklings of a brass sign with the ornate number 42.

"The Theogenesis Society," Spud whispered. "A clandestine consortium of the brightest and best minds of the British Empire. The Church of England does not fancy their proto-humanist agenda, however, and the Society's members do not seek to, erm, shall we say, 'illuminate' them." Spud did another 360 scan before adding, "If you would kindly resume the form you took as Danel, I believe that you would be better received in this venue with a, erm, more masculine appearance."

"Isn't your Queen Victoria a woman?" I muttered. Frowning, I clicked my Ergal and anamorphed myself into a young, well, dandy, waistcoat, ruffled shirt, and a top hat balancing precariously on top of my short blond curls. "Beau Brummell would be proud, right?"

A sigh. "I'd say it is literally over the top. Place that hat in the crook of your elbow and fill it with your gloves. Should draw less unwanted attention." Shaking his head, Spud reached up and lifted a large knocker centered on the iron door.

A doorman dressed in a tuxedo and a severe expression opened the door and nodded for Spud to enter. His frown deepened when he saw me follow, but Spud intervened. "Our cousin Ignatius, thank you, Barrymore."

I gave the gargoyle my most hypocritical polite smile.

We entered a small hallway next to a long staircase and stepped aside to allow a pair of portly middle-aged men to pass. "My dear Young," said the one without the full beard, "you shall err in choosing Adam as did Saul."

Spud paused and raised an eyebrow before guiding me forward into a room at the rear of the townhouse.

"Um, why the eyebrow?"

"No time to explain now. Make haste." Spud's English seemed to automatically revert to the 19<sup>th</sup> century whenever he was home.

"Making haste. Okay, already."

Spud opened a large oak door at the end of the hall and led me into a spacious room with cherry paneling, leather chairs, and a crackling fireplace. The air, unfortunately, was fouled with the stench of tobacco from a plethora of pipes.

"I'll take a hot toddy and a Cuban, thanks." I joked in the best English accent I could muster as we passed several seated men engrossed in books and newspapers, sipping orange-colored alcoholic drinks between puffs. Not even a smile from Spud, no surprise. I *was* surprised, however, to see that a couple of the men enveloped by the swirling smoke were relatively young, one not much older than Spud and me.

To him Spud walked, and motioned for me to follow. The slightly pudgy man looked up from his book and yawned.

"William," he said in a deep voice.

"Ian."

Ian? Spud's brother Ian? Wow. *The* Ian. Unlike Spud, the young man sported curly, unruly brown hair that graced his shoulders, as well as an imposing handlebar mustache. Waxed. Of course, if you got rid of the 19<sup>th</sup> century grooming, I guess they did kind of look a little alike, with the aquiline noses and strong foreheads, but *The* Ian was a good 30 pounds heavier than my partner.

Silence. Should I be saying something? "Um, Ignatius. Pleased to, um, how do you do?" I extended my hand, which hung out before me, unshaken.

Spud ignored me again and said to Ian, "We must needs speak in privacy."

Ian sighed and then, grunting, pushed himself out of the plush chair with both arms. "Very well." At the door, Ian paused a moment to eye me from head to toe. Stepping into the hallway, he chided his brother. "I should not have brought her here, were I you."

I looked at my scratchy wool suit and vest, and felt my chin to confirm the presence of stubble. Nope, still a dude. "How the heck—?"

"Fortunately," Ian continued, "few others here have my astute powers of observation." He closed the door and led them to another empty room. For my benefit: "Her gait reveals a broader pelvis and genu varum. Additionally, among men, 'how do you do' is not a question. Though I must credit your costume for its somewhat effective presentation. Barring that pretentious hat. So," he added once we had settled in a few

empty chairs, “how might I be of assistance to you, William and, mademoiselle, what is your true Christian name?”

“Shiloh.” I chuckled. “Definitely in the Bible, but not Christian. The bearer of tranquility.”

Spud’s snort turned into a cough. “We’re here with a conundrum. And,” he hesitated, “we need a master logician to guide our strategic thinking.”

Ian waved a hand, encouraging Spud to continue. I clamped my jaw shut. I’d never heard Spud admit that there was a more master logician than himself before.

“Posit an infinitely keen mind,” Spud continued. “A mind that is as evolved from human genius as an *ourang-outan* is from an amoeba.”

Ian raised a Spud-ian eyebrow. Wow. Runs in the family.

“Of course, were it to exist,” Spud went on, oblivious, “such a mind would be unsurpassed in the cosmos, a power that could control its universe, one that could not be resisted. A force that vanquishes all in its wake, able to create an empire that stretches far beyond the borders of our own motherland’s successful global imperial ventures.”

“I am assuming,” Ian interrupted, “that this ‘mind’ would not be inhabiting the cranium of a Titan, or an Olympian Zeus.” He pronounced Zeus the British way, with two syllables.

“No, this mind does not belong to a true God, though many see its owner in that light.”

“Including its owner,” I interjected.

Ian’s other eyebrow went up.

“Now postulate that this, erm, being, this perceived God, has created an Ithaca, a destination, in which plague, famine, and pestilence no longer exist, and joy is eternal,” added Spud, “A virtual paradise.”

“You got that,” I muttered.

A frown in my direction. “Unfortunately, the price to obtain a domicile in this remarkable Eden is complete and unconditional acceptance of Ouranos’ rule. Should the King’s subjects rally behind a William Wallace, or enjoy the fruits of paradise in peace.”

Huh? I’d understood the Ithaca reference, Odysseus’ home, but who is William Wallace? I shook my head, “Look. What we’re trying to ask, is should you—one—submit to the King for a key to heaven, or rebel, and shutter the pearly gates forever? For everyone.”

“Everyone?” Ian sat up, turning his eyes to Spud.

“Shiloh is alluding to another factor in this equation,” Spud admitted. “Death. The final end.”

Ian sat back and yawned. “Death is always a risk with rebellion. Wallace chose death and forswore mercy. His martyrdom inspired Scottish independence, but he himself was disemboweled. I would yield to the Scots as to whether his sacrifice was of value in the final end.” Ian stared at Spud again, eyes narrowing. “By the way, you should know that the Professor has become a toothless tiger, William. The armistice has arrived. He need no longer be of your concern.”

What Professor? Spud had turned his gaze away from mine and did not respond. “Are we going off-topic here? I’m trying to talk about *real* death, not just for the, uh, rebels,” I explained. “Choosing rebellion wouldn’t just risk the life of one, uh, person, it could lead to the death of the king, death of his empire, and death of everyone in it. Death

would be the price of freedom. If no one survives a revolution, there is no one who can be free.”

“Ah. Then the equation is no longer ‘Give me liberty, et cetera.’” Ian sipped his whiskey, rested the glass on an end table, and placed his fingers together under his chin. “The solution becomes even less difficult in that case. We ourselves addressed it generations ago.” Another gulp of the orange liquid. “Clearly William has been appropriately discreet about our society. We practice enlightenment, and thereby do not believe in a life after death. Therefore, logically, if freedom is not an option, then death becomes the best choice only if life becomes intolerable.”

Ian shifted in his chair to face me. “Aside from your struggle with this hypothetical quandary, I see no evidence that you have been victimized by torment. Perhaps then the logical outcome is that your king is best served rather than attacked.” Glancing at Spud, Ian chuckled. “My brother sometimes lets passion overrule logic in this regard, but even he would eschew treason, yes?” Ian nodded and raised his whiskey glass in a mini-salute.

“We have arranged a post for the Professor in Edinburgh,” added Ian, turning to Spud. “He will no longer grace the halls of Cambridge, never fear.” Ian emptied his glass. He stood up with another grunt, and turned to me. “Evolution is a process not an instant, Shiloh. Building alliances promotes evolution from within, and, is, in the end, more successful than storming the castle.”

Ian handed the empty glass to a butler who had appeared from nowhere. M-fanned?

“So, I believe I have answered both of your queries,” said Ian. Now if you will excuse me, I have several briefs I must review for the Home Office and time is of the essence. Take care to amble with a longer stride upon your exit, Ignatius, or your disguise may be discovered by my even my less observant fellows.”

Spud stood stiffly in place after Ian had left the room.

“Boy, he’s even an even colder fish than you,” I said. “No wonder he wants to work within the system. Who’s this Professor he was talking about anyway?”

“An old, erm, friend of our family,” croaked Spud. Clearing his throat: “I should not be as sanguine as Ian about his benignity however.” My partner seemed lost in thought for a few minutes, before shaking himself alert once again. “Well, I *had* hoped that Ian might reveal a possible connexion to Zygfed. After all, it was he who had recommended that I interview with Admiral Harcourt in the War Office.” Spud nodded at an oil portrait hanging on the paneled wall.

A formidable gaze from beneath bushy gray eyebrows made me look away. This Zygint agent had nothing like Gary’s genial sales charm or Everett’s genius nerdery. “Your recruiter?”

Spud nodded and began trudging towards the door. “It was Harcourt who first informed me about Mingferplatoi. He is currently serving, for only our ears, as this era’s Chief of Zygint Earth Core.”

I couldn’t avoid a shiver. Talk about authority figures. “Well then, why didn’t you just ask Ian if he knew about Zygfed?”

Spud sighed. “I did, after a fashion. And he gave us our answer, did he not?” Without another word, he spun on his heels and strode away.

Alone, I gave Admiral Harcourt a middle finger salute and, making sure to lengthen my own stride, I followed.

• • •

The fog was even thicker when we exited the Theogenesis building. Unable to see the steps, or my feet, I clung to the brass railing and crept down the marble stairs, slipping at least twice. The air burned my lungs with each breath. No wonder everybody smoked here; you had to build up calluses in your respiratory system to be able to breathe. “Reminds me of Anthrakos,” I recalled, referring to the mining planet in the sixth octant of the Milky Way where we’d been dropped for our first Mingferplatoi training exercise.

“Shhh,” Spud whispered, as a shadow passed us kerbside. He reached out and grabbed my hand, pulling me closer to a wrought iron fence. “We may not be easily seen, but we can be heard, I assure you.”

“Over all this noise?” The clip-clop of horses’ hooves on Montague Street’s cobblestones had been pretty steady, I thought.

Another whisper. “I fully expect that we are being followed.”

“Your brother?”

Spud deflected my question. “By the sound of their footsteps and pace, I believe there are two, one short and one tall, and, one of them has a—”

A dull thud. I turned towards the street and saw shadows racing to the corner. “I think somebody just got hit, Spud. Spud? My partner had disappeared. “Spud!”

The pain overwhelmed me as the blade pierced my lung; I started to gasp. Starving for oxygen, with a river of warm blood coursing down my back, I collapsed, and my world went from gray to black.

• • •

I woke up in a blood-stained cot, surrounded by the moans and cries of dozens of patients on hospital beds lining the walls of the open room. I could breathe, but each breath stabbed me, chiding me for straining for oxygen by moving my ribs and core muscles. I lay on the cot only allowing myself shallow breaths until the pain in my back and side receded.

Groggy, I was able to turn my head and neck, enough to get a supine blurred view of the dingy hospital room. I also had control of my limbs. But, a nagging ache in my left side remained, and I slowly edged my fingers towards the source of the pain. A hard tube, metallic, was what I felt, extruding from my chest.

“I shouldn’t touch that, were I you,” said a male voice.

I turned my head to look at a man who seemed only a shade older than me, who was dressed in a blood-stained white coat, on which he wiped his bloody hands.

“Ormond Sacker. Dresser,” he said, examining the area of my chest where I’d felt the tube. “Signs of healing, capital.” He took out a stethoscope, lifted open the moist gown in which I was now dressed, and placed the tool under and around my left breast. “Deep breath, please. Tis fortunate that we utilized ether.”

Wincing, I took a deep breath. He smiled and said, “Quite, quite.”

“Uh, Dr. Sacker. Quite what?” I asked.

“Oh, you are American,” he returned. “I very much fancy the Yanks, and hope to sail to your country someday. We remain cousins, despite our governments’ rift.”

I forced a smile. “Yeah. Capital. Now, what’s the good news?”

Sacker seemed a bit surprised at my jargon, but I was in no mood to Victorian it up.

“Yes, ‘tis good news that you suffered a pneumothorax,” he admitted.

“That’s a collapsed lung, right?” I said, remembering my Mingferplatoi uploads. “How is that good news?”

“When a lung collapses, it separates from the pleura, the membrane that lines your thorax—your chest cavity. All the structures in your thorax, shifted to the right, including your heart. So, the misplaced first stab wound prevented your assailant’s second stab wound from hitting your heart.”

“Well, ain’t that lucky,” I said.

“I assisted Dr. Cripps as he re-expanded your left lung with this chest tube and sutured the lacerations on your back. I am still a student of medicine and surgery, but I shall not soon forget the sonata of his fingers as he labored to repair the damage your assailant caused before exsanguination.”

“Capital...” I said, trying not to visualize my blood gushing out of my body and pooling on Sacker’s clothing and shoes. A painful chuckle. “Where I come from, Los Angeles, it’s the Crips who *stab* you, not save you,” I joked.

Sacker looked puzzled, so I moved on, “My friend Spud—William, William Escott—is he alright, too?”

Sacker shook his head. “I fear that I do not know Mr. Escott. Nor do we have a patient by that name. You were brought to us in shock, and I do not know yours either, Mister...?”

Oh, my God. I was still Danel, or Ignatius—a young man. I felt around my pelvis surreptitiously. Yup, a man. “Um, Ignatius. Ignatius Rush.”

Sacker took a quill from a table by my cot and jotted the name. “Now, Mr. Rush, as your lung capacity has returned, we can begin the process of removing the tube. I will need to close the opening with one or two sutures. I hesitate to bring out the chloroform or ether for such a quick procedure...”

His recommendation was clear. How much worse could no anesthesia be than Hell. “Don’t bother,” I said. “Just give me a bullet to bite.”

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Sacker insisted that I stay in the hospital for at least one more night so that the chest tube opening could heal somewhat. I was desperately worried about Spud, but the effects of both the blood loss and the ether had left me weak and unable to resist lying back down on the cot, whenever I tried to sit up. And, supine, I had a lot less pain.

I did manage to see that the nurses on duty had gathered my clothes and rolled them into a ball on the small table with my chart. My top hat had been crushed and leaned onto its brim. Fortunately, the nurses had laid the clothes next to the item I really needed. My Ergal, which had been anamorphed into a brass pocket watch suited to the era. Gritting my teeth, I reached over and grabbed the watch, then lay back exhausted, breathing heavily. Nope, not ready to get back in the field.

I flipped open my Ergal and did a search to see if I could pick up Spud, Ergal to Ergal. Nothing. No sign of my partner anywhere in London, or in 1871 for that matter. A morbid thought came to me...had he died on Montague Street, as I almost did? I hadn’t asked Sacker about a dead body that matched Spud’s description. Did medical students even work in the morgue?

Or Spud could have been kidnapped. That was a terrible but more comforting thought. But, if so, his life could still be in danger. I would have to get out of bed as soon

as possible and try to track him down. Maybe I could enlist his brother in that quest, and we could rescue Spud together. I could use a partner with Spud's brilliance and familiarity with Victorian England.

But what if Spud wasn't in Victorian England at all anymore? Gary and Ev had sent us back millennia in time to catch Theodore Benedict's ally Sutherland and prevent Yeshua's kidnapping. Surely Ev could spare Dieter and Drexel from Earth Core on a mission to grab Spud and me. And if so, Spud would be facing the Omega Archon "post haste", an Omega Archon who I doubted would grant mercy for a "first offense" in his current state.

I sat up again. Painfully. After a few moments, the room stopped spinning. I had no choice. I had to act now. I pressed the settings on my Ergal and felt my skin melding together and my bone marrow going into hyperdrive. In an hour, my body would be ready to fight. If only my Ergal could so easily dissolve my pain.

"You appear as if you are improving," said a familiar voice.

I turned to see Sacker, in civilian clothes of his era, approaching. "I thought I would stop by and confirm the progress of our efforts."

I raised a hand. "No need. All good. Getting better." I gave him a thumbs up. "Looks like you're going out on the town."

Sacker blushed. "Yes, I am due to welcome a visitor from Trinity College who wishes to read at Oxford in a year or so. Oscar's father Willie Wilde is a renowned ophthalmologist in Dublin, and I am considering that surgical specialty myself." His eyes twinkled. "I understand that Oscar is highly knowledgeable in the classics, and, as he wired, has 'learned to love the things of Ancient Greece', so I look forward to a scintillating evening."

I nodded several times, trying not to smile. "I'll bet," was all I could muster without grinning. Spud, if you and I get out of this with our skins, I may have someone to fix you up with.

As soon as Sacker disappeared, I hopped out of bed, grabbed my clothes and headed for the loo. Damn, no stalls. I had to wait for the other urinators to exit before I could toss the toff duds, and Ergal myself a more casual Victorian outfit. Checking for prying eyes, I saw the coast was clear and left the restroom, seeking the morgue. The stink in St. Barts was horrid, and I knew that by following it as it got stronger and stronger I would find the location of the poor lost souls who had also lost their lives.

The morgue was in the basement of the hospital, and, as I expected, dark, dank, and ripe. I don't know what was worse, the smell of the dead, or the acrid odors of formaldehyde to preserve their rotting corpses.

The employee tending to the nearest body looked like a butcher in a developing country. His soiled apron barely covered soiled clothing, spackled with blood and brown stains. I hadn't eaten in a day, so the appetite-suppressant was welcome.

"Oy, maytey," I said, trying to sound Cockney.

"You a pirate or a septic tank?" he returned in a genuine Cockney accent.

I quickly gazed at my watch. Septic tank meant Yank. "Yank," I continued in Murrican. "I'm looking for a 19 year old gentleman, William Escott, about yai high and thin. Brown hair and an aquiline nose."

"All we got is battlecruisers here. No gentlemen."

My Ergal said "boozers". Oh-kay. "Mind if I take a quick look?"



“Suit yourself.” He shrugged and went back to opening up the corpse in front of him. I walked from body to body, lifting up the soaked sheets covering their faces and trying not to vomit. Septic tank indeed. I paused at the last one. Please don’t be Spud. *Please*.

It wasn’t. Waving an unanswered good-bye, I walked out into a dark hallway and found a hidden corner in the deserted basement where I could use my Ergal to X-fan. Here I come, 42 Montague Street.

## Chapter 6

### **A Study in Theogenesis**

Barrymore did not look pleased to see me at the door of the Theogenesis Society building. His eyes started at my hatless head and slowly moved down to my scuffed shoes. Yes, I'd managed to step into it, as it were, this time on the building's stairs.

I lowered my voice. "I must needs see Ian."

An even more disapproving expression. "Mister Sherrinford is not welcoming visitors this evening."

I stepped over the threshold to his dismay. "Well, tell...Mr. Sherrinford, was it?...that Ignatius is here to try to save his brother's life."

Good. That registered. "Please wait here," Barrymore intoned, as he walked from the foyer into one of the lounges.

It wasn't long before Ian nudged Barrymore aside and trotted down the hall over to me. He took me by the elbow and pulled me towards a side door. "Come, we will meet in this suite."

After closing the door, Ian turned to me and put a finger to his lips. He reached into his pocket and brought out a pocket watch similar to mine, clicking it. "Excellent. E- shield is up. We have privacy. Where is William?"

"I wish I knew. When we left here yesterday, we'd only gotten about a block and then somebody attacked us."

"One person?"

"I don't think so. I heard a thud, and then Spud—William—didn't answer. Next thing I know I was stabbed and I blacked out. I've only been awake a couple of hours from surgery. Somebody took me to the St. Bartholomew's Hospital. It's a miracle I didn't bleed out on the sidewalk."

Ian looked at me, sans comment.

"You?"

He didn't bother to answer me. After another Ergal click, opaque shades lowered to cover all the windows, and a series of holos appeared before us in the salon where we stood.

"Wow. I should've expected this after the E-shield," I exclaimed.

"'Twas I who M-fanned you to Bart's. Cripps is one of us as well. But William was nowhere in sight when Barrymore and I arrived at your side."

"And he still isn't. I did an Ergal scan and couldn't find him. Thank you, by the way."

"You are welcome. As did I. If William remains in London, his Ergal has been destroyed. But, because his temporal signature disappeared at the time of your attack, it is equally likely that he is not here at all." Ian's bright eyes bored into my weary ones. "Had he initiated the campaign about which he questioned me yesterday?"

"Not exactly." I hesitated. "We've been kind of off the grid recently. Yeah, Zygint is itching to grab us, but Spud hasn't yet challenged the Omega Archon. Directly." Seeing no other alternatives, I filled Ian in on the theories about the Archon's true form that Matshi and Spud had been discussing in Eikhus' thal.

“A farrago of nonsense,” Ian sighed. “Blast it! I knew we should have kept him here. In our world. Under *our* influence.” A flash of anger crossed his face.

Uh-oh. Would Ian now turn on me, too?

He shook his head, and went on. “But William was always an affected young man. A man who chose his own road, even at his own risk. After—after we lost our mother, his bursts of anger became less controllable, and he dove into the abyss of melancholia that was only worsened by my father’s execu—death. Harcourt had suggested that we send him to the United States for a few years to work with Pinkerton, but it was I who had insisted that he continue his education at Eton, and now Cambridge. If only...” He pressed his fists against his temples and looked away for a moment, then turned to me with a question.

“Has he been imbibing?”

I shrugged. “Not really. A little Chidurian ale.”

“No coca tea?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Is that tea made out of Coca Cola?”

“Tis tea brewed from the coca leaf. What is Coca Cola?”

I snorted. “Couldn’t tell ya. The formula is secret. But, no. Spud’s been as sober as a judge on the job, as long as I’ve known him. I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

Pursing his lips, Ian squinted at the holos next to us, running his fingers across several screens in sequence. I recognized temporal tracking on one, location tracking on another, and time loop and leap analyses on the third. I also saw a chain of conversations on a comm holo, none of which had borne fruit with Spud’s location.

“William had been Mother’s favorite since his birth. Their bond was unique. Both brilliant in science and mathematics, they shared a love of the written word, and of fine music. Mother was a virtuoso on the violin, and taught William how to beckon magic from its strings,” Ian continued. “William was a small child, thin and delicate, and did not much care for the activities at which Father and I excelled, such as rugby and hunting.”

“Well, he’s a pretty tall and strong guy now, I can tell you,” I countered.

“Yes, after William witnessed my mother’s death at the hands of my father, and the cowardice of the Professor who did nothing to protect her, his behavior changed.”

I remembered how Spud, striving to hold back his tears, had revealed his family secret to me at SingularityCon., before the alert about Matshi’s attack had drawn us back to Zygint Earth Core. And how his father had been convicted of premeditated murder after fatally shooting his unfaithful wife.

Ian continued, “His anger had been barely under control. He began to study the martial arts, and to exercise his newfound skills in even more bellicose ways. When bullied for his demeanor by a prefect at Eton, William exploded and sent the senior boy to hospital. Were it not for my relationship with the Home Office, my brother should have been expelled.

“You see, Shiloh, your era is much more understanding and tolerant than ours. Though he denies the need, your world is one in which William can live as himself. Our structured and restrictive world remains an oasis for him to visit when his demons are in check, but, in your world, he can fly—and flee.”

Before I could speak, he added, “I have fretted that exposure to you and your ‘wings’ would be a negative influence. But, I believe the equation had provided a relatively

positive result. William has been able to process and express his emotions without endangering his survival or his sanity. Until now.”

Ian let out a sudden exclamation. “There is light, Shiloh, there is light.”

“You have a theory about what happened?”

“No,” he pointed to one of the holos. “There, there is light.”

I noted a faint orange spot at the edge of the nav holo. “Yes, I see it. What’s there?”

“St. Stephen’s Tower. But the signal seems to be dampened by the bells at its peak. I would estimate that the source is approximately halfway up the tower, and below the clock face most persons erroneously call Big Ben.

A moldy oldie popped into my head. I hummed, “...the tower of Big Ben, the rosy red cheeks of the lit-tle child-ren. Engulland swings.”

Ian gave me a disapproving glance. “There is a prison in the middle of the tower, rarely used, but convenient as a way station for political miscreants.”

“A holding cell,” I suggested.

He nodded. “The orange light I posit is a reflection of the blood moon that has just broken the horizon. A belt buckle or button can serve to redirect the light towards the invisible comm sensors that orbit our planet. Clever that, Will.”

“Well, if we know where he is, what are we waiting for? Let’s go rescue him.”

Ian scoffed. “Tut. I have heard that you seek adventure where angels fear to tread, but I prefer to direct surrogates to engage in such reckless missions. I would calculate that the odds of our success are less than 30%, so I shall prefer to lead this concerto from a perch that does not risk sacrificing my life. I have much yet to achieve before I sleep.” He clicked his Ergal and the holos disappeared. Walking to the door, he opened it a crack and whispered “Barrymore, the Irregulars, please.”

• • •

I spun around to see 3 beings M-fan into our room. An Ursan, a Chidurian, and a Madai. A fourth appeared, a Scyllian, who barked a greeting, “Rrrready to rrrrescue.”

“Rut-roh,” I returned. “You’re all going outside looking like that?”

“Course not,” said the Madai, anamorphing into a street urchin.

The other Irregulars followed, taking on the appearance of soot-covered working class chimney sweeps.

I turned to Ian. “You didn’t just want to call the police?”

“My dear Ignatius, did you not deduce the meaning of William’s absent Ergal?” Ian chided.

“Um, they took it. Whoever took him?”

“And?”

“And if they turned it off, they must have know it was an Ergal and not just a watch...?” I ventured. Got it. “Off-worlders, huh?”

Ian nodded. “Enlisting our bobbies would be as if we were to bring a sword to a gunfight.”

“I micro’d my athame,” popped up the Madai, pulling the now pocket-sized knife out of his trousers and twirling it like a juggler. “We will be bringing it, along with our stun guns.”

Ian cracked a smile. “Anyway, in case you are in need of additional support during your venture to-night, Barrymore and I will dissemble as theatre patrons promenading

along Westminster Bridge.” He chuckled, “The brilliant evening performance of Thespis—from those two young chaps Sullivan and Gilbert, will provide us with plenty of fodder for discussion as we stroll.”

“Thanks,” I muttered. “We’ll wave from the front lines…”

• • •

With our TAC team looking like extras from the musical *Oliver*, I thought it’d be a good strategy to take another tack. Yes, my face scuffed with dirt and sweat, my skirts and petticoat torn, I, back to being a woman, wheeled my M-fanned cart, filled with colorful flowers, to the base of the Big Ben tower, singing Eliza Doolittle’s “Wouldn’t it be lovely?” from *My Fair Lady*.

I stopped at the tower’s doorway and set my cart to block the view of its lock. “Flowers for the lady?” I offered, holding out a bunch to a breeder couple “promenading” past.

They kept walking. Good. I didn’t much cotton to snobs. In fact, the number of pedestrians nearby was relatively small, as the night was clear, but quite cold. I was glad for the number of layers of my costume, under which I wore a pair of comfortable jeans. Even if I couldn’t reach my Ergal, I’d be able to tear off my dresses, and dive into action if necessary.

Scanning the perimeter, I noted my Madai colleague taking his post on a bench beyond the bridge. He was using his anamorphed athame to whittle a piece of wood. Once we gave the signal, he’d be our lookout to distract and stall any passers-by heading our way.

My other three companions had levved in the darkness to window ledges surrounding the towers, and were crouched in the shadows to avoid curious eyes. At the far end of Westminster Bridge, two posh gentlemen, Barrymore and Ian, began their stroll. I laid out bunches of flowers in a ring around my cart, and then, hearing the all-clear whistle from above, ducked down behind the cart to pick open the lock to the tower entry door.

The lock opened easily, and I didn’t even have to use a stun gun to laser it. Opening it a crack, I slipped inside, noting that the base structure was open except for a few wooden benches and a staircase around the tower’s perimeter. I debated levving myself up along the stairs, but decided to walk up, just in case, the off-worlders holding Spud had access to monitors that would identify Ergal use inside the building.

At 114 steps, I reached a sealed room, whose door was locked and bolted. I put my ear to the thick wooden door, and heard shouting and faint cries. If that was Spud, he was in dire straits. We had to hurry. Outside the room, through the windows, I could see my 3 companions in the windows silhouetted by the orange moonlight, which shone into the prison room through its transom window. I gave my colleagues a “thumbs up” sign, and started a countdown with 5 fingers. As I closed my fist, I pulled out my stun gun and lasered open the door, leaping into the prison room just as my chimney sweep companions M-fanned beside me, stun-guns cocked.

The visage that turned to face me was one I was not happy to see. Juan de la Cruz’ successor, Ftpg 33, snorted in disgust as he saw me. Surrounding him were 2 more and a couple of Zygfed Chidurian Sentinels. 5 to 4, not bad odds, considering we had our weapons out and aimed.

“Not only Harcourt me diss, but Zygan fellows fight me, no enemy.” He pointed to Spud, who was cherkled to a wooden chair, his head hanging onto his chest, his face bruised and lacerated, with blood dripping onto his ragged shirt. He looked barely conscious as he turned his head to blink at me several times.

“He enemy, you enemy.” Ftpg 33 spat. “You die in Hell.”

“Stun!” I shouted, and we froze all our opponents except Ftpg 33. Still aiming my stun gun at him, I sidled over towards Spud, and reached out my other hand to feel his carotid pulse. Weak, but only 110 and regular. Good, not yet in shock.

I turned back to Ftpg 33, shouting, “Is this the new *modus operandi* for Zygint now? Battering its own agents?”

“He choose,” said Ftpg 33. “He need say you where are. He no say. I make say. My job you both to Hell.”

“These were Ev’s orders?” I couldn’t believe that even an irritated Everett Weaver would stoop to these depths.

“No Ev. Omega Archon. You go Hell. You die.”

“When pigs fly!” My finger massaged the ‘kill’ setting for a millisecond, before I lifted it off and stunned Ftpg 33 as well. Our opponents stood stiffly, unable to move or talk, as I returned my gun to my Ergal and started to release Spud.

“My Ergal is no longer operational,” he whispered.

“I know. It’s okay. Mine is. Now we have to get you to—”

“Dr. Cripps,” said Ian from behind me, where he had just M-fanned. “I shall take my brother to Barts to recover. Barrymore will help you X-fan these,” he grimaced, “colleagues to Harcourt’s headquarters in Earth Core.

Barrymore and the Madai M-fanned into the prison room, as Ian placed his arms under Spud’s shoulders and knees, and gently lifted him out of the chair. Spud’s blood painted Ian’s waistcoat, as Ian clicked on the pocket watch he gripped in his hand and X-fanned.

We approached our opponents and prepared to X-fan them as Ian had instructed. As we neared each living “statue”, I instructed the team to locate and remove our opponents’ Ergals. We didn’t want the Omega Archon to track locations and send the cavalry to ossify *us*. As I reached into Ftpg 33’s pocket for his Ergal, I felt a sharp pain in my neck. I had only a moment to see my colleagues collapse on the wooden floor of the prison cell, before I too began to lose control of my limbs.

I fell onto the hard floor, shocked to see that Ftpg 33 and his crew were fully mobile. Ftpg 33 uttered a guttural laugh. “You no think we have method to shield from stun?” he gloated. “You kill should. Now you die.”

I tried to speak, and was able to grunt out. “Please don’t hurt them.”

Ftpg 33 laughed. “I no hurt. They lie here 3-4 hour, then they find. Tigers no teeth. You I want. You to Omega Archon. And I success. Escott good bait. We go.”

Touching my elbow, Ftpg 33 clicked his Ergal and we X-fanned.

## Chapter 7

### **Judgment Day**

I was surrounded by an impregnable S-shield in the center of a late-model Racer ship, still unable to move. The Zygint team had reclaimed all their Ergals, and mine. I could see the faces of my captors in the seats around me, as Ftpg 33 activated the nav holo before him and gave instructions for us to return to Zyga in his native language. Perhaps the trip would take an hour or two, and the neural agent I had absorbed would wear off enough for me to put up a manual fight before being dragged before the Omega Archon.

Unfortunately, the trip to Zyga in Zygfed's fastest vessel took only 30 minutes, and Ftpg 33 quickly X-fanned me to the Archon's suite as soon as we landed. Or at least the chamber with the red door. I was spared the perp walk through Zygint Central, and the excruciating elevator ride. But I was also spared any furnishings in the barren room, whose concrete walls surrounded me once more. I quickly noted that the entry door from the elevators that I'd come through in the past was missing as well. I too was now in a prison cell.

I walked over to the red door and tried to open it. No luck. My fingers burned from the heat. Better get used to it, I told myself. The Omega Archon seemed to be a 'fool me once' kind of machine.

After an hour, I lay on the floor and closed my eyes. Good to get some sleep before the next round of torture.

I don't know how long I was out, but I wish it had been longer. I dreamt I was in King Odious' palace, enveloped by Nephil Stratum, my Syneph friend. All my questions had been answered, and I felt at peace. No longer feeling them burning, I sought to examine my fingers, but could not see them. Like Nephil Stratum, I had become a creature of mist, whose tendrils intertwined with my friend's in a synergistic union of tranquility. The world around us ceased to exist and we remained together in a soothing blanket of darkness.

"That is an option you can choose," said a familiar voice, with an unfamiliar firmness.

I opened my eyes to see the boots of the Omega Archon, no longer unkempt, and rolled onto my back to gaze up beyond his jeans and muscle shirt at his face. "Oh, do I get free will, after all?" I scoffed, as I pulled myself up to stand next to him.

"Shiloh, in June 1919, your planet's Harvard Law Review published an article quoting an adage credited to an anonymous judge: 'Your right to swing your arms ends just where the other man's nose begins.' You have, you must admit, hit my nose."

Was that a hint of a smile? God, I hope so. Maybe I'll get a reprieve after all. Let me try diplomacy. "If I did, I am sorry. I was just trying to learn more about you."

A raised eyebrow. "And you have. Your conclusions?"

I hesitated. "Well, you're a...being made of silicon..."

No reaction.

"And you run our world. Worlds. Universe." Grasping at straws.

Still no reaction.

I chuckled nervously. "I guess you could say you're a god. You *are* God." I extended my hands. "Look, there's no question you are more powerful than us. You're *all* powerful. So, um, what else can I say? I'm sorry."

"Yes, you seem to be, Shiloh," the Archon returned. "Sorry that you have learned the truth about your world and its immutable parameters. A lesson that your rogue compatriots have not yet absorbed. So now that you have processed your reality, you will be offered the opportunity to exercise your beloved free will."

Why didn't I feel optimistic, hearing his tone?

"You will have three choices. Two of them are inscribed in our tenets and legislation. One is my offer of mercy," the Archon's voice was flat.

I let out a deep breath and looked away. Not good.

"The first," he continued, "is a life sentence in Hell. From which you will not be able to escape this time. These flames," he added, "will be fatally strong. In due time, you will die."

Would that mean I'd get to Level 3? I was afraid to ask, worried that my question would lock that door for me as well.

"The second is your dream. You will die immediately, and the blanket of darkness will envelop you and smother you in a peace of nothingness."

Nephil Stratum. Would she be there to protect me?

"And the third," he said, "is a negotiation. A simple task really. You return to your friends who are off my grid, and put them *on* my grid. Once I have M-fanned them all to my chambers, you shall be...free. I will see that you are returned to Earth and assume a normal human existence. Sans your training and memories, of course." A polite smile. "Now you can choose."

Mercy? Hah! Death by fire, death by dissolution, and death by betrayal. Of my friends. I shook my head. "No point in asking for a pardon?"

He didn't answer.

A long silence. But, I knew what I had to do. Pick the choice that offered me a small chance of escape and rescue. I raised my index finger and responded. "Number one."

• • •

The Omega Archon vanished amidst the flames. Flames that filled the chamber and stroked my body, fire that crept into my agonized lungs with every breath. My skin was sizzling, and melting in the extreme heat, the level of which I had never experienced before. Each unbridled scream led to my swallowing large balls of flame, which slid down my internal organs and began disintegrating them from the inside. Screaming, I tried to run, but the flames followed, clinging to my dermis like a fiery glue, and triggering waves of pain. Desperate, I tried to marshal the strength to draw on tlyp'ath, but to no avail. The flames bored into my sizzling brain, until the agony overwhelmed my senses, and I fell onto the concrete, dead.

• • •

"Whuuu." My body was frozen, my lips unable to move, to speak. The pain was blessedly gone. And I was blessedly alive. I struggled to release a cry for help, but from my throat could escape only a grunt. Was this the Option 2 that the Archon had given



me? Lying in darkness, surrounded by nothing? Did he make a mistake, or did he do this on purpose?

I forced my eyes open to scan the room, and focused on a blurry shadow that was encroaching towards the bed on which I seemed to be lying.

A red-haired woman. Oh, my God—the red-haired woman. The woman I'd seen sitting at our dinner table in Mel's vision in the Plegma. As she drew closer, I could make out the features of her face, which were etched with concern. "Are you okay, honey?" she said, her hand reaching out to pat my shoulder, and brush strands of brown hair from my brow.

Brown? My hair is blond.

The song was a whisper in my ear. "Stacy came to play today, to play today, to play today. Stacy came to play today. Hel-lo, Stacy."

Stacy! *Find out about Stacy*, my late time-leap twin had shouted at me before she'd vanished in the stun gun blast. Clearly, the red-haired woman seemed to imply that somehow I was Stacy.

"Shiloh!" I cried. "My name is Shiloh!" But the grunts that came out of my mouth sounded nothing like words.

My desperate efforts to move my arms and legs only made them thrash around violently. The woman took both my hands in hers and held them firmly. "Are you having another seizure, Stacy? It's okay, I've got your medicine."

She pulled up a railing that trapped me in my bed before walking over to the room's closet. Was that a syringe in her hands?

My attempts to move were useless, so I opted to freeze again, hoping she would reconsider the use of the medication aimed in my direction. As she neared, I closed my eyes—maybe if I was sleeping she'd wait.

I felt a jab and my eyes flew open. I was sitting cross-legged on a transparent floor inside a large white sphere—a Cleaner?—a few feet away from the Omega Archon, shaking. What the hell was all that?!

Yes, my arms and legs were mine again, under my control. Arms that could wrap themselves around the Omega Archon's sinewy neck, legs that could kick the tender spots little protected by his skinny jeans. Anything to erase the self-satisfied smirk on this avatar's face.

"Resistance is futile," the Archon avatar said, chuckling. "I gave Sternbach that line in a dream. You would only find yourself in a reality that would be worse than death. With no hope of immortality or the rewards of Level 3." He nodded at the seemingly infinite machinery we could hear humming below us. "Option 3 is still on the table."

"And you just expect me to walk out of here and rat on my friends? And let you— it— continue to run our lives? Our universe?"

"Oh, my dear. I don't expect that at all. Not from you." He snapped his fingers and we were back in the lounge, on the other side of the door. Still smiling, he added, "Not until Hell has beaten it out of you."

His expression turned icy as he waved an index finger at my heart. The lounge disappeared, and I found myself standing alone in the pitch darkness, able only to hear my own rapid breathing. The flames exploded around me once more, and began searing my skin. The agony drove me to flee blindly in my empty universe. The flames bored

through my nose and mouth and into my charred heart, until, after an eternity, I collapsed again. Dead.

• • •

“Shiloh!”

I spun on my heel and saw him standing behind me. My world turned misty grey and I struggled to catch my breath. “John!” I gasped. My brother John!

Strong arms grabbed me, hugging me, holding me tight against his chest. “Welcome home, Shiloh. Welcome home.”

His familiar scent drew me back into the sunlight. I forced myself to pull away. “Home? Where am I? Where are we?” I took my eyes off his smiling face and scanned our lush surroundings.

“Yes, you made it. We’re in Level 3.” Grinning, he waved a hand to show me the resplendent scenery. Rolling hills of green grass, pink-flowered trees, crystalline rivers surrounded us as far as the eye could see. Air as fresh as an unpolluted Earth entered my aching lungs, and eased into my muscles and mind. “Perfect, isn’t it?”

“Perfect is you, Bro,” I nodded. I grabbed his arms, squeezing them. “I can’t believe you’re here. Alive.”

“Reborn is more like it. It has been...heavenly. There is so much to explore, and so many answers to discover.”

I tried to smile. “That *is* what you always wanted...”

“Irony is, for every answer, I’ve found two more questions. Did you know that the Vrogistroic dimension has over a million anti-epiploic particles?”

“No. No, I didn’t.” What else could I say? That I cared? The fact that John did was good enough for me. But, from my POV, even all the answers in the world couldn’t satisfy me if my world was devoid of those I loved. My family. My friends. I fought back a frown. “I don’t see anybody else here but you. Are we alone?”

“Not hardly,” another familiar voice said from behind my back.

I turned around to see a young woman with olive skin and glistening long brown hair smiling at me. “Aliyah! I mean, Professor.”

My brother’s erstwhile girlfriend gave me a tender hug as well. “Aliyah. Please. Although sometimes your brother calls me Eve.”

“Except when she’s upset with me,” John teased. “Then she becomes Lilith.”

Laughing, John put his arm around Aliyah and gave her shoulders a squeeze. “Thankfully, I don’t have to worry. We don’t like apples. Unless they’re caramel. With chopped nuts.”

Aliyah patted John’s re-discovered abdominal six-pack. “And, best of all, all the food here’s zero calorie.”

“Wow. I guess it *is* paradise.” I allowed myself another look around at the lovely grounds. “It’s beautiful. But, I don’t see other people. Don’t you all get lonely here?” Wincing: “Sometimes, anyway?”

“Heavens, Shiloh,” John said, his eyes twinkling. “You wouldn’t believe the souls you can meet in Level 3. Your friend Yeshua Bar Maryam, for starters. Juan de la Cruz. George Harrison. Albert Einstein. This meadow,” John waved a hand, “is only a way station, a brane.”

Seeing my puzzled expression, Aliyah jumped in. “Not a bad way to try to explain it to newcomers, but, what you’re seeing and experiencing here is only an infinitesimal part of Level 3, both in space and in time.”

“Okay, now I’m really confused.”

“Level 3, Shiloh,” said John, “is not just 3-dimensional.” He snapped his fingers, and we were decked out on 3 chaise lounges overlooking a peaceful aquamarine sea. “We have the ability to manipulate space—and time here isn’t linear either. It takes a while, but you get used to it.”

“But then why does it look like the Earth?” This beach setting seemed pretty 3-dimensional to me as well.

Aliyah stepped in, “Human religions through the eons have enticed their disciples with visions of a paradise that echoes the most idealized experiences from Earth. But these models were always anthropomorphic and Earth-centric.” She opened both palms. “How could they not be? But a real afterworld is not limited by human imagination—or limitations. Wait til after your orientation—you too will be able to taste this incredible sensory buffet.”

“In Level 3, you can be anything—or anyone,” John added. “Or many. Being stuck only being yourself for an eternity could be really hellish. So, instead, you can spend infinity exploring consciousness on your own or in a group, as yourself or as someone new, sampling infinite universes and infinite pleasures.” A fond gaze at Aliyah. “And, whenever you want, you can always come home, back to yourself and your loved ones.”

“You know,” I paused, “In some ways, what you’re describing sounds a lot like imagination on Earth.” I forced a smile, and turned my gaze to the sea. “Still, I’m glad you two seem so happy. And, I gotta admit that this view is even more beautiful than mine in Malibu.”

“This is nothing. Just wait until we take you to some of the multi-dimensional universes. I can’t wait for us to explore them together,” said John.

“Maybe so.” I held up a hand. “But, I can’t right now,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m not done with my fight—I’m going back.”

“No, you can’t!” John cried.

I raised an eyebrow. “I am not able to go back—or I shouldn’t go back?”

John and Aliyah glanced at each other. John sighed, “You have to at least wait until you’ve been oriented here, until you’ve personally experienced the gifts of Level 3.”

“You didn’t answer my question. We all know Zygans can be anastasized.” For Aliyah: “Resurrected. Like Anesidora. So, why not me?”

Another finger snap, and a holo of my fiery torture appeared between us and the soothing sea. “We were able to see how you got here,” said John, his voice cracking. “What that-that monster did to you. You would go back to...that?”

My eyes met John’s. “I have to,” I insisted. “Again and again, until I can find a way to escape his commanding clutches—in Level 2.”

“And then do what?” Snorting, John threw up his hands. “Push the boulder up the hill one more time? That’s all Level 2 is, Shiloh. The Myth of Sisyphus. Struggling to force a boulder up a mountain, only to watch it roll down and crush your feet. Here, we can live in infinity, and experience infinite joys. Why would you even consider leaving?”

“That holo,” I nodded at the flickering flames. “How much can you see in it? Did you rewind to my ‘discussion’ with the Omega Archon?”

John looked away.

“Yes, we saw the Omega Archon’s real form,” Aliyah admitted. “Come on, John, tell her.”

John shook his head. “It makes no difference.”

“That he’s basically a computer? Hell yes it does. I’ve got nothing against robots, replicants, or androids—but I won’t stand for a machine running *my* life. I haven’t given up on freedom. Or sold out for a more interesting prison, *John*.”

“Please don’t do this, Shiloh. Please stay. Here. With us.” John’s voice was hoarse. He refused to meet my eyes.

Aliyah patted John’s hand with a sigh. “There is a theory, Shiloh, as yet unproven, that Level 3 is only different from Level 2 in scope, not substance. That what gives life to Level 2, also gives life to Level 3. Say there was even the slightest possibility that you could defeat the Omega Archon, you might possibly destroy more than Level 2.” She waved a hand across the panorama. “There are billions and billions of souls in Level 3.”

“So you’re implying that if I could go back to Zyga Core and finally unlock the pearly gates, they’d all die, too?”

“We don’t know that answer, Shiloh.” Aliyah put an arm around John’s shoulders and rubbed his neck. “Even being here.”

I snorted. “Well, then, I guess paradise isn’t so perfect after all.” I shook my head and turned to my brother. “So you’re finally giving up, John. I can’t believe it. You.”

“I’m tired, Shiloh,” John whispered after a long pause. “Tired of wondering, tired of looking, tired of fighting.” He pressed his lips together, suppressing brimming tears. “I’m happy here. We’re all happy here. God got it right this time. I’m not giving up. I just don’t need to fight anymore.” He shrugged. “I’m sorry.”

I stared straight ahead at the flames in the holo that blocked my view of the peaceful sea. *But I haven’t given up*. Yet. I would find a way to return to Level 2, the agonizing pain would smother me again, and I would drown in smoke as the fire scorched my lungs. And then I would, perhaps, end up in this beautiful universe that would give me infinite pleasure beyond my wildest dreams. And again, I wouldn’t stay. How many deaths would it take for my own spirit to become exhausted like my brother’s? How many journeys before my own fire would be extinguished and I would long only for solace, for peace? For Level 3.

“I’m sorry, John.” I reached over and gave him a warm hug, then pulled away with my own sigh. “I didn’t stop you when you rode off on your Moto Guzzi six years ago. I couldn’t. You did what you had to do. I know you never meant to bring us pain. And I don’t mean to hurt you either. But, we each have to do what we have to do.” I tried a wan smile. “Who knows? Maybe someday I’ll be happy in Level 3, too. I’m sure that’s what the Omega Archon would like to see. But that day isn’t today, or tomorrow. Today, I go back.” Facing him: “So, big brother, you gonna tell me how to do so?”

John swallowed hard and, after a few long minutes, snapped his fingers again. The beach disappeared and we were in a barren white room which was filled with a mist as cold as his tone. “Anastasis from Level 3 is facilitated by the Helianthi via the Plegma. But where you arrive depends on who’s there to meet you.”

I wasn’t real eager to run into Plegma Mel again, but I wouldn’t mind a chance to consult with the Synepha Alto Stratum in the Plegma clouds. Maybe he could even get a

message through to Nephil Stratum. I copied John's professional tone. "So, I, uh, just wait here?"

John nodded without a word. He stood stiffly, several feet away.

Aliyah took my hands and squeezed them. "*N'see 'a tova*, Shiloh. Safe travels."

I gave her a quick hug, and eased over to my brother, putting my arms around his waist. "You don't have to do this every time I come back, you know. I don't need a welcoming committee."

"If," John's voice cracked again, "If you come back, I will be here if you need me. The Helianthi will know when you arrive." John peeled my hands from his sturdy torso and turned to clasp Aliyah's. Another nod, and all I could see before me was the mist.

• • •

The Omega Archon didn't even bother to appear this time. Neither did the flames. The mist was cool and crisp, and I could barely see my hands. Was I in the Plegma, in the arms of a Syneph?

"Hello, Shiloh," a deep voice greeted me. "Or should I say, Danel." A toga-clad form began appearing from the mist, with long flowing grey-white hair that blended with the walls surrounding us. A familiar form. The Keeper of Eshmoun. *Our* Keeper of Eshmoun.

"Yes, I am—was—the Keeper of Eshmoun."

"I did try to find you again, but, uh," I stammered.

"Yes, your little adventure with our Golden Fleece did lead to some 'complications', but 'all's well, et cetera', as I told Will Shakespeare just yesterday...or was it a few centuries ago..."

"So there really was a William Shakespeare!" I couldn't resist poking a hole in Spud's Francis Bacon theory.

The Keeper's eyes twinkled. "Possibly, quite possibly." A smile. "You could stay here, if you would really like to find out."

I laughed. "I'm sure you've got better temptations than that to offer, if I believe my brother John." Serious again: "No, the only thing that would convince me to stay is a rational reason why ignoring a cosmic dictatorship is ethical."

"Aside from self-preservation? I could give you several, if you wish. But I would ask you a question first. How many religions are there on Earth? In your era."

I shrugged. "Twenty, thirty?"

"Over four thousand," said the Keeper. "Granted, some of them are more belief systems, but, for argument's sake..."

"Um, so?"

"So, why do you think that humans have had such a need for faith?"

I raised my hand. "I know the answer to that one." Remembering John: "To answer the questions science can't."

The Keeper nodded. "In some cases, of course. But questions are driven by the brain. Do not most religions address the heart?"

"Now you're not being scientific," I retorted. "The heart is the brain. I mean the heart's just a pump. The heart" I did the quote marks with my fingers, "is *in* the brain. If I recall my Mingferplatoi uploads, somewhere in the amygdala, right?"

“Among other sites, literally, yes. But what humans, and so many other species are seeking, is not an answer but a purpose. A reason to care.”

“I grant you that.”

“And to be cared for. To matter, not only to someone, but to the universe itself.”

“You mean like ‘Kilroy was here?’ ‘I am woman, hear me roar!’”

“My hearing is quite good, Shiloh, despite my age,” the Keeper chuckled. A pause. “When your Grandpa Alexander died, your brother John, and then your siblings George and Constance, cared for you and the younger children. You would not have fared as well without that care. Perhaps you can consider the Zygan Federation as being a family writ large. A family that would descend into chaos without a capable leader with his hands on the reins. As has certainly been the case on your Earth.”

“Are you trying to sell me on a ‘New World Order’? A so-called ‘benign dictatorship’? That’d be bad enough, but those so-called hands on the reins you’re pushing don’t even belong to a living being, but a cruel—and *heartless*—machine.”

“The Omega Archon is only a tool, Shiloh. A very advanced one, yes, but still a tool. One of many that remain in the trillions of galaxies in Level 2. Quite an achievement, by the way, and one that did not come without sacrifices. Like you, its makers wanted to promote absolute freedom, to release the inner drives and passions they had buried deep in their structured and rigid culture. But that unregulated freedom almost led to their complete destruction. The few who survived created the Archon apparatus to be, as my friend Sigmund would say, a Superego to repress the Id. Without supervision and boundaries, most life forms face an eventual extinction.”

“Well that’s patronizing.” I shook my head. “Maybe their species couldn’t handle their own affairs, but that doesn’t mean that we couldn’t.”

“Of course not,” the Keeper smiled. “Murder, war, holocausts, and genocide are unknown in Earth’s history.”

I rolled my eyes. “So who’s running the show here in Level 3—those same makers?”

“No, we are. No, I don’t mean we the Helianthi. Aided by the boundless resources of this heaven, we as residents of Level 3 have evolved beyond the need for parenting, though not for caring. Here, we care for each other.”

“Isn’t that a kind of humanistic society? And I--we—can’t build that on Level 2?”

“You may be able to—quite often. But most of your peers, your fellow humans and other species, cannot. I do not mean to be patronizing. I am merely stating a scientific observation. Our observations over millennia have not shown much progress in this regard, I fear, despite our efforts. Mel often chides us with a warning that, without tangible results, our powers will eventually be cut off.”

“Plegma Mel? Is he one of you? Helianthi?”

“No, he is an Observer. That is a role you may consider for yourself someday.”

I tried not to look puzzled. “These makers? Any chance I can talk to them—and give them a piece of my mind? So to speak.”

“Alas, no, Shiloh. They are now at Levels far beyond this one. Levels even we cannot access without their invitation. Truth be told, infinity is a very hard concept for all of us to grasp. And yet it is the core of all that is. But, there are many fountains of wisdom here with which and whom you *can* communicate. Come, let us travel together to the Chamber of Knowledge and I shall give you a glimpse of all that you will learn and understand.” He extended his hand, seeking mine.

I held up a palm, keeping my distance. “Not now. Not yet. I appreciate the offer, but you know what I’m going to do. What I have to do.”

“I was hoping to convince you otherwise.” His expression held a hint of pity.

I stood, unmoving. The Keeper sighed and reached out a wrinkled hand to touch my forehead. “Well then. It is time. *Gi an-ki*”

I felt my body dissolving into the mist. An even colder mist soon enveloped me and I recognized the stifling rancid moisture of the clouds within the Plegma. Would I be handed off to Mel for another adventure in virtual reality or would I meet one of the fearsome Synephs, like Helpus Stratum and Cirra Stratum.

Would it be ‘The Lady or the Tiger?’

It didn’t take long for me to find out. The Tiger. Cirra Stratum.

• • •

The Cloud-creatures dubbed Synephs, guardians of the Plegma, were exalted in the Zygan Federation, and Cirra Stratum embodied, so to speak, the carriage of a queen of a vast realm. I fully expected her to point a tendril at my neck and shout in full Queen of Hearts mode: “Off with her head!”

Upon spying me, her color had turned a menacing dark gray. “I have no patience for anarchy, Shiloh Rush,” was her greeting instead. “I shall simply relate that we have projected all the outcomes even before you have ‘created’ them. Your arrival here is predicted by our study parameters.”

Oh-kay. “*Over* my head”, for sure. “Then, kudos on the prescience. I suppose you’ll try to convince me next that I’m making the wrong choice.”

Cirra Stratum scoffed. “There are no wrong choices, Rush. Only research, record, reboot, repeat, in your parlance.”

“Okay, here’s *my* outcome right now: I’m totally confused,” I threw back.

“That’s because Cirra Stratum is a scientist, not a writer,” said Plegma Mel, appearing by her side. “Come. Let’s have a drink. Would you prefer Wodka or Piwo?” Mel waved a hand and the three of us shuffled to a comfortable sitting room, with an array of alcoholic beverages laid out on its coffee table.

“Um, if my destiny is to return to the flames, hand over that bottle of vodka, Mel,” I half-joked. I poured myself a tall glass, adding a twist of lemon from the slices on a bone china plate. “So, give me *your* pitch.”

“You’ve heard of the Platrellorgs, I assume?”

I nodded. “But I don’t know all the backstory.”

“They too are scientists. Or were. Until they no longer wished to ask any questions.” He raised his glass towards Cirra Stratum. “As an Observer, I have seen the pattern again and again. At some point, curiosity is replaced by complacency; usually when one is granted the keys to paradise. The design of heaven varies depending on the background of its subjects, of course, but all our studies of Edens have discovered one common characteristic.” He paused.

*Faith? Immortality? Delusion?* I leaned in.

“Inexhaustible resources,” he announced, wagging a finger. “If such exist, the studies to which Cirra Stratum refers can proceed as planned. Without them, or if they are limited, the study is terminated and descends into anarchy.” Mel took a satisfied swig of his Piwo. “Despite eons of myths to the contrary, promoted by their flacks the Helianthi,

the Platrellorgs did not create Archons to control their uninhibited emotions, but instead to control resources. The Omega Archon is tasked to shovel coal into the railroad engine car so that it can continue to stay moving on the track.” He took another hearty sip of the foamy beer. “Rather a dirty job, I’d say.”

I sat back, grumbling, “So I should be grateful that our universe is a runaway train powered by a mechanical dictator without feelings or empathy.”

“You should be grateful that, thanks to the Omega Archon, the studies continue to be subsidized and sustained, and that no one is yet pulling the plug.”

Cirra Stratum’s color had returned to a bright fluffy white. “The alternatives are not pretty. Laus Mel can show you every set of results we have projected, even those not yet created.” A blast of cold air made me shiver. “I must say, this reboot has been the most successful, and the longest-lasting. Thanks to the Omega Archon. The Platrellorgs didn’t get it right the first million times or so.”

I frowned. “That so?” My tone didn’t seem to please them. “Okay, look, you both are part of *our* universe, our study, right? So how can you know all this?”

“That is not exactly accurate,” Cirra Stratum returned. “Synephs exist in multiple universes, and can travel among them. And some of us are Somalderises. As is your friend, Nephil Stratum. And Laus Mel, here, well, Observers have a unique role to record and translate the studies and their outcomes. They too can travel from study to study, from book to book, from hypothesis to hypothesis, and analyze the findings from their vantage point outside the crucible.”

“She’s right,” said Mel. “And the Plegma serves as a showcase for our narratives, our studies, our stories. *And yours.*”

I sniffed. “Well, if you’re so knowledgeable, Mel, then answer me this. The last time I was in the Plegma, why did you show me the red-headed woman? And Grandpa Alexander? What ‘outcome’ were you looking for?”

Mel smiled. “*I didn’t.*” The wagging finger pointed at me.

“What?” I started.

“*You did.*” He finished his drink and chuckled. “That vision was a story *you* wrote yourself.”

“Oh.” I let that revelation sink in as I sipped my vodka. But why would I create a vision of someone so unfamiliarly familiar? “You know, I saw her again. I touched her. But I still couldn’t talk to her. Something went wrong. My mind was clear, but...”

“But you could only observe,” Mel finished. “It is not always easy to be an Observer. It is much easier to do something rather than to sit back. But, when you cannot do, you should sit back, and do what you can.”

“Oh, that’s clear as mud,” I said. “I mean, I don’t understand.”

“For now,” said Mel. He looked at Cirra Stratum and nodded. “But it will become clearer, trust me. Because I know the outcome of your study—your story.”

Snapping his fingers, the room and its occupants disappeared, and I was back in the concrete chamber. Alone. And on fire.

• • •

The flames enveloped me again, but this time I didn’t fight my screams. The faster the fire melted my corporeal being, the faster I could die my way out of this purgatory. If



only I had Spud's talents, his focus and concentration. I bet he could get us out of this loop. If only I had Spud by my side...

"We are all by your side." John's voice? No, John was standing directly ahead of me, his expression dour. The voice I'd heard was a little lower, a little hoarser, and very familiar. The words came from a smiling man who stepped out from behind my brother, a man whose warm smile and twinkling eyes I had not seen in close to a decade. Grandpa Alexander.

He stood tall and strong, unchanged from the time he'd left us. Salt and pepper hair braided down his back. Bushy eyebrows shading his sharp gaze. Which was focused on me. "I have come to help you, dear Shiloh."

My first impulse was to run into his arms. So many years had passed since, as a child, I'd felt the comfort of his hugs. How he'd gently stroke my forehead after tucking me in at bedtime, helping me relax and go to sleep. The wonderful stories he'd make up to entertain us all, adventures about kings and queens, and knights, and philosophers, and warriors, and gods and goddesses, and pirates, and treasure, and—and then he died. Gone forever. Leaving us alone.

*Thanks for nothing, Grandpa. All those years when our family struggled to survive. All those years John took your place.*

The anger bubbled up. I snorted. "Still alive, I see. Surprise, surprise." I remembered that John had forbidden us to peek into the closed casket at Grandpa's funeral. Something about the injuries from his 'accident'. Right. "Not even a scar."

"Level 3 eliminates scars, Shiloh," he said.

"Not all of them." I looked at John, who didn't meet my eyes. "Did you know he was here, John? Did you?"

Silence. My answer.

"You mustn't blame John, Shiloh. He was a good soldier. Though I do regret that I may have burdened him too much."

"Yeah. And us. All of us. When you 'left'." I clenched and unclenched my fists. "And then you recruited *him*, too. To serve the Omega Archon."

Alexander shook his head. "No. To safeguard your world from a greater evil."

Another snort. "Theodore Benedict? Pfft. He's a toothless tiger."

"Not from Benedict, Shiloh. From the truth." Alexander sighed. "From the outcome you are risking upon us today. The end of life. All life."

"Yeah, sure, if John didn't take up a sword, every living thing in our universe, in Level 2, would vanish. And even Level 3, right? Well, I've got news for you, Gramps, everything in Level 2 dies anyway. And we don't all get an invitation to sit by God's throne here in Level 3."

"You don't know that, Shiloh," interrupted John. "I've met so many Terrans here, but there may be billions more."

"Good. Should keep your calendar full for your eternity, John. You'll need to clone yourself to attend all the parties." I frowned. "And speaking of clones..." I nodded at Alexander. "Did we all come from *him*?"

"No, Shiloh, I am not the source of your life," Alexander said gently. "Or John's. Or your family's. I am—I have been—your guardian. From the moment you were created. I have continued to watch over you, even when you didn't know I was there." He smiled, and I fought to hold onto my anger. "You have managed to surprise me, Shiloh," he

added, “despite my predictions. I had foreseen—and feared--a different outcome for you. A life too short, a quest unfulfilled.”

“I like to write my own scripts—with happy endings,” I returned. “Helianthi notwithstanding.” My eyes narrowed. “Like you...?”

After a glance at John, Grandpa Alexander smiled. “Yes, Shiloh, I am a Helianthos. As did the Keeper, I served as a mentor, and as—”

“My guardian angel.” I pursed my lips. “Yeah, I get it.” With an edge of sarcasm, I added, “Thanks.” Narrowed eyes. “So, in that case, Angel of mine, who are my parents, *our* parents?” I looked at John, who continued to stare at his feet.

“I could answer John, Connie, and George. They served in that role after I was called to Level 3.”

I snorted again. “Called to Level 3? For what? By whom?”

“By the infinite mist of the Platrellorgs. Before their passage, the Platrellorgs assigned Helianthi as Keepers to each of the Levels of our multiverse. Theodore Benedict is not the first interloper who has attempted to pierce our firewalls. Your acquaintance, King Odious, had a son, Balder, who garnered unauthorized entry to Level 3 by promising to build a bridge of joy and light between our Levels. However, King Odious was not so sanguine at the loss of his son to our dimension. Odious’ raging efforts to pierce our firewalls and reclaim Balder resulted in the termination—the death—of several Level 3 Helianthi striving to bolster the gates. That is why I was, shall we say, promoted to Level 3 from Level 2, to strategize and serve towards Level 3’s defense. Odious was persistent--obsessed with ‘rescuing’ his son.”

My eyes narrowed. Spud never did tell me what he and Nephil Stratum had discovered about Odious’ quest on Brane 5. Understandable, though. Wanting your son back isn’t just limited to kings and gods.

Alexander pursed his lips. “We tried sending Balder’s bodily remains back to his brane without his neurocache, but that gesture didn’t assuage Odious’ rage. So, we braced ourselves for certain battle with Odious and his other sons. They could not know that we needed to send Balder back to Level 2 in another vessel, another body, under the tutelage of the Keeper of Eshmoun, to inject his philosophy of peace and brotherly love into the brutality plaguing Earth.”

You might’ve tried explaining things to Odious, I couldn’t help thinking. On the other hand... And speaking of brutality...

Alexander sighed. “I and my colleagues were able to keep the gates of paradise locked and under our control for several segments of time, but Odious’ recent alliance with Theodore Benedict and Anesidora re-opened a Pandora’s box of challenges for Level 3’s sanctity. If not for John’s tactical intelligence, for which we are all grateful, we might have seen our universes taken over by the barbarians throwing stones from Brane 5.”

“Well, congrats, John. You’re a hero.”

“It was all for our family...” John had sat on a tree stump, his head in his hands. “Family first, Shiloh...family first.”

“Family? Grandpa Alexander? Family!” I turned to him, my sarcasm biting. “Are you family? Really?” To John: “Are *you*?”

John didn’t answer for a few minutes. “They made me believe I was.”

I nodded at Alexander. “Who, him?”

John shook his head.

“Then who is our family? Who is my family?” I cried.

Alexander stepped in, and clapped his hands once.

I barely heard his words. “The red-headed woman. Stacy.”

## Chapter 8

### **Shining a Light Without Joy**

“Are you Stacy?” I tried to speak but the words wouldn’t come out. I heard myself moan. Was I back in that bed, that prison, from which I couldn’t escape?

“Stacy,” the red-haired woman whispered as she stroked my forehead. “I love you, Stacy.”

“No, I told you. I’m Shiloh!” But again I felt like I was frozen by a stun gun, only my thoughts under my control.

In a deep voice, the woman began to sing that blasted song again, while moving my arms around in a regular pattern. “Stacy came to play today, to play today, to play today, Stacy came to play today, Hel-lo, Stacy.”

Were a couple of those movements signs, like American Sign Language? I tried once again to communicate, this time in ASL, but only succeeded in thrashing my limbs and eking out a few grunts.

“Oh, honey, you’re so upset today,” the woman said. “How ‘bout if I tell you another story.”

She took my hand and sat down on a stool next to the bed. “It was a dark and stormy night,” she began, chuckling, “and lightning lit up the skies of Hollywood like an aurora. The sound man cursed at the thunder that kept interrupting each take. Why didn’t the director just keep shooting—we could always loop in the dialogue later, right? The corner of Highland and Hollywood at 11 pm in the rain was a perfect backdrop for the planet Tigran. On the director’s cue, stalwart agents Tara Guard and Larry Sioux crept out from behind the shadows, their stun guns aimed at the Beemer invaders—”

Tara Guard! Larry Sioux! What the hell? I marshaled all my strength and tried to sit up and shout. My limbs shook and I felt my body—this body jumping into spasms and sliding off the edge of the bed.

“Thomas! Thomas! Come quick. Stacy’s having another seizure and she’s falling off the bed,” the woman cried, as she grabbed my shoulders and, groaning, tried to keep my head from hitting the floor.

A tall, dark-haired man, of about the same age as the woman, early forties, ran into the room and wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling the body in which I was trapped back up onto the pink sheets.

The woman approached me once again with a syringe without a needle. I felt my pelvis being jostled and my diapers—diapers!—pulled down my legs. The syringe entered my anus this time, and I felt the sensation of pooping as the cold medicine filled my rectum. In less than a minute, I had fallen asleep.

• • •

“Stacy? John? Alexander?” None of the somber faces scurrying by me in the crowd seemed to recognize me or my bellows. A loud honk startled me and I jumped to one side, between 2 parked Buicks with chrome grilles and giant tailfins. A bright, yellow Checker Cab sped by me, its driver shaking his fist and cursing as he revved his V8 and

squealed away. I had no idea where I was, but it was definitely not heaven this time. At least I could move again. So it wasn't Hell, either.

"Up for a sandwich?" Another familiar voice—one that I welcomed. "My favorite deli's on the next block."

Lester Samuel Moore. He looked just the same as he had at SingularityCon not so long ago, like a ruffled professor. I was so happy to see him, and broke out into a wide grin. "Okay, I get it now. New York City street and all. Kinda makes sense with your accent." Damn, I'd actually missed those salt and pepper muttonchop whiskers.

Moore set off down the cracked sidewalk at a fast clip that belied his portly frame. I jogged to catch up. Arriving at the deli door, Moore held it open for me and followed me inside. He waved a chubby hand at the maître d' who quickly led us to a polished wood booth at the rear of the crowded restaurant. After we ordered, the server brought us two steaming cups of black coffee. Moore added 4 sugar cubes and stirred his coffee before sipping it with a smile.

I took my coffee black, despite its bitterness. Leaning back, I asked my lunch companion, "So, How did I get here? You told me you weren't a Helianthi—thos."

Moore laughed. "I'm not. But I come here to do my research every once in a while. Play out a couple of scenarios, plots. Didn't expect to see you here...quite so soon."

"I think Grandpa Alexander sent me here. I won't be here long, count on it," I insisted. "I'll take the sandwich and a map to that mist room so I can go back to Level 2 again. The Archon and I want to pull out each other's plugs."

"Yes, I've noticed that you've gotten yourself into quite a purgatory loop there." A chuckle. "Reincarnation to gain enlightenment has been an overused religious meme, though I have a personal fondness for the movie 'Groundhog Day' myself."

"Yeah, good movie. But I can't believe being submissive and compliant is the right answer, even if that's what the Archon is trying to teach me. He's still a dictator, and he's still a machine. This is why I still fight. So unless you can spring me with another one of your black market Ergals, I'm going to adopt Einstein's version of insanity, 'Doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results.'"

"Some people call that determination, but insanity will do. Of course, you realize that my helping you wouldn't really be kosher."

"But, you did it before. We couldn't have made it back to our world without you," I insisted, remembering how Moore's assistance allowed us to travel to modern and ancient Judea to return Earth history to its "normal" timeline.

"You all were resourceful on your own. I just sped the action up a bit for our readers' sake. A happy ending was most definitely in the cards." The server returned to our table balancing giant plates bearing enormous sandwiches and placed them before us.

Eyes widening, Moore reached for his pastrami on rye, taking a bite with relish—and enthusiasm. After chewing and swallowing, he winked at me and said, "I'll see what I can do. But first, let's finish lunch, yes?"

I shrugged and dived into my pulled pork on wheat. Why not?

"So, how long have you been an Observer?" I asked after swallowing a chunk of my delicious sandwich, and wiping my mustard mustache with a delicate flourish.

Moore stopped in mid-bite, and shot me a grin. "See? You figured it out. Resourceful. All my life—my lives, really. You've probably read some of my early records in the Iliad—and both testaments of the Bible. I didn't really venture into fiction

until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but I decided I'd focus on science in the 20<sup>th</sup> right after I wrapped 'War and Peace'. I do so miss Mother Russia, however, with all her faults."

"Oh, come on. You're trying to tell me you're Homer and Dostoyevsky?"

"Tolstoy, my dear. Mel was Dostoyevsky. Or rather Dostoyevsky was Mel."

"I just saw Mel in the Plegma. With Cirra Stratum."

"So I observed. Cirra Stratum is not one of my favorite Synephs. No sense of humor at all. I love to tease Mel, though, by turning down his horrid Polish beer. And his stinking cigars."

"I thought you liked cigars."

"Heck no," Moore returned. "I just smoked one back in Nea Athina as a prop to explain time travel to your brother. And to break the ice. I despise tobacco, it's the indigenous peoples' revenge, as I told Cristoforo Colombo and Juan de la Cruz, but did they listen?"

I winced. "Cigarettes didn't kill Juan," I muttered. A sigh.

"No. They didn't," Moore agreed. "I am sorry, Shiloh. Observing can often be difficult."

I took a deep breath. "Anyway, he's not my brother. John, I mean."

"Shiloh, Shiloh." Moore patted my hand. "Of course, he's your brother."

"Uh-uh. If we're clones, and he was my brother, why aren't we twins? And the same gender? And if we're not, well, we're not. Family, I mean." I pulled my hand away and slapped my fist on the table. "Why can't I ever get a straight answer on anything?"

Moore chuckled. "I suppose because Alexander would say that it is better to learn insights for yourself than have them chewed up and spit at you. I am not in any position to argue with a Helianthos. But, I do have to admit that he did give you some very good clues." He took another giant bite of his sandwich.

"The red-headed woman. Stacy. She *is* Stacy, right?"

"I'm sorry, Shiloh, *you* are."

I put my food down, unable to swallow.

"The red-headed woman is Stacy's mother—*your* mother."

I shook my head. "No way. That...person...Stacy...can't even move. Or talk. Or anything.

Moore nodded. "That's right. Nothing. But she can see. Her mother. And she can feel. Her mother's love. And through that love, she can live the best life possible for her. That's her reality." Another bite. "But, fortunately, it doesn't have to be yours."

I rubbed my temples, hoping the pressure would halt my impending tears. "Dammit, Les, I just don't understand."

"Shiloh, what I'm trying to say, is that you are not trapped in that body, her body. You are here, enjoying a delicious side of cole slaw."

"How? How am I here? How did I get here? In life, Les, in life."

He paused for a moment, and scratched his chin. "Questions for which I have no answers. It's very possible that you and your brothers and sisters may have been germinated from Stacy's genetic material. With some genetic engineering adjustments, of course, to provide a diverse family. But, it's also possible that multiple embryos may have been fostered from Thomas' and Helen's DNA."

"So those two people I saw are our biological parents, then?"

Another nod. "It's possible." He wiped his mouth with a large napkin. "But, there are many other possibilities. You won't know for sure until you reach out to them and find out the answers for yourself."

"And how am I supposed to do that if I'm trapped in that prison body? Stacy can't talk."

"You will find a way, Shiloh. Of that I am sure."

"Well, a black market Ergal would sure help, you know," I pitched. "If I need to go back to that—that bed... And, I'd prefer to avoid the flames of Hell any way I can."

"I expect the Omega Archon would rescue you from your purgatory loop and let you finish your quest for your creation if you agree to pull back from your quest to destroy him. Nobody likes being under siege."

"Oh, come on. You, too, huh?" A sigh. "I thought you were on *my* side."

"Well, your character is appealing, but, remember, my role is to observe, not manipulate. Your choices remain yours." A nod. "And I have to respect today's boundaries, darnit..."

Puzzled, I asked, "Cirra Stratum and Mel implied that they'd run all the possible scenarios, and knew all the possible outcomes. You can't tell me which one is the right choice?"

"Of course I can," Moore said. "But if I did, you wouldn't have free will, now would you?"

"But if all the outcomes have been plotted out, I don't have free will either," I countered.

"As I told you at SingularityCon, when you live your life fully, each decision feeds your story and creates a new universe string. Free will *requires* that you make decisions, and the Omega Archon rewards you by creating a string in which your decisions come to life. If you don't exercise your free will, you will remain frozen in space and in time, like Stacy in her body, and your story will be over. You may be breathing, but you will not be alive."

"Like Stacy," I intoned. I looked into Moore's eyes. "All right. Here's one more question for you. Without the Omega Archon, will I—will Stacy—have a life?"

He smiled at me. "I can't decide."

Moore reached into his pocket and drew out a leather wallet, from which he removed enough bills and coins to pay for our meal and tip. Before returning his billfold to his pocket, he slipped out a small black ring, which he placed on the table before him. Taking a quarter from the adjacent tip pile, Moore clicked on the edge of the ring and flipped it into the air. The ring landed squarely, or roundly, on my middle finger of my left hand.

Moore winked at me and gave me a mischievous grin. "Oops. I should know better than to play Tiddly Winks at my age." Giving me a small wave, he disappeared into the crowd. Before I could thank him, he was gone.

## Chapter 9

### Deep Waters

I closed my eyes and twisted the Ergal ring on my finger, aiming for Level 2. The sound of diners ordering their meals, plates and dishes clacking, and dynamic conversations continued unabated, however. I opened my eyes, and was still in the deli.

Hmmm.... Let me try a more specific destination. I visualized Nerea's thal in the Kharybdian enclave as I rubbed the ring. Slowly, the sound of the deli activity began to fade, replaced by the soothing rush of running water. Ah, yes.

Brrrr... How did I get so wet? I opened my eyes to see that I was drenched—by a hug from Nerea. Worth a soggy hug to land in a safe harbor instead of the Omega Archon's hell.

"Shiloh," said Suthsi, "We were worried about you?"

"Where's Spud?" asked Setsei.

"Where's my ship?" asked Sarion.

"Um," I wrung out my clothes. "I'm okay, thanks. And, I'm sure your ship is fine," I reassured Sarion. "I sure hope Spud is, too. We need to get them both back."

"Where are they?" Pallas asked.

"Earth. Late 19th century England. I hope." To Eikhus: "Can I borrow your ship?"

"The Nautilus? It'll take hours and hours to get to Earth. If we're not nabbed by Ev and his team for harboring a hostage."

"Not if we do what Spud did, and we fly to Earth in 1871."

"You don't think that Zygfint or the Sentinels will see our trail?" Eikhus looked concerned.

"If we use our Zygfed Ergals. But," I held up my ringed finger. "I got this one from...a friend."

• • •

Nerea opted to stay on Zyga with her rivulets, but the rest of us loaded onto Eikhus' snail ship for the extended trip to Victorian Earth.

"I wish this Ergal could help us go faster," I admitted as we floated towards the Milky Way.

"Where's my ship?" Sarion kept repeating, to no one in particular.

"So, finish your report, Shiloh," Matshi continued, ignoring Sarion.

"Then Ian and Barrymore X-fanned with Spud. Either to Barts, or Earth Core, circa 1871. They're Zygan Intelligence, too, as far as I can tell. And Admiral Harcourt is their Chief of Earth Core. But that doesn't mean that they'll welcome us with open arms."

"As long as their arms aren't loaded, we should be okay," Sarion muttered. "If we ever arrive."

"Put a spigot on it, Sarion," said Eikhus. "I'm pushing her as hard as I can."

"Can your ring Ergal be tracked? This Ftpg 33 sounds like a real peach," said Setsei.

"I don't think so."

Suthsi turned away from his holo. "No sign of any shadows yet. I think we're still off the grid, as long as we don't use our Ergals."



“How do you plan on getting in to Earth Core without them?” asked Pallas.

“Good question,” I agreed. “I say we land in London, micro the Nautilus and bury her in the front lawn of the Theogenesis Society, and ask to see Barrymore or Ian. Of course, you all will have to use your Ergals right after we arrive to anamorph into human form. For just a second or two.”

Suthsi shivered. “Human existence is so isolated and cold.” To Setsei: “I can’t bear losing our connection.”

“It won’t be for long,” I reassured the Ytrans. “Once we get to Earth Core, you can go back to being yourselves.”

“And you don’t think someone will spot our Ergals where we aren’t supposed to be and send in the Sentinels?” asked Setsei.

“Or play for the other team?” said Sarion. “Pro Omega Archon, I mean.”

“I’m not going to speculate what team they’re playing on, but I know they’re on Spud’s team, and Spud is on ours.” I shrugged. “We need him if we’re going to marshal a strategic campaign against the Archon.” I nodded at Matshi’s guerillas. “His Highness will be expecting a frontal assault. We need to come in through the back door.” I raised my hand. “Don’t say it, Sarion, please.”

Matshi glared at his grumbling warriors. “She’s right. We’re far outnumbered, even with our new recruits.”

Eikhus chimed in. “I’ve run some tactical projections, and we’d need at least triple our numbers to make any headway in Zyga Core. Let’s see if we can’t convince our predecessors in 19th century Zygent to help us out. Only two hours more to go.”

We all groaned.

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Eikhus landed the invisiblized Nautilus on a fog-enveloped lush lawn in Bloomsbury Square, not far from Montague Street, and micro’ed it to the size of a snail. Sarion and Pallas, dressed as inebriated revelers, buried the ship in a colorful rose garden, and stood (or actually staggered) by, ready to mega the vessel and Matshi’s warriors if we needed backup. Setsei and Suthsi, anamorphed and clad dressed as human bobbies, escorted us the few blocks to the Theogenesis building, standing watch by the steps leading to the door. Matshi in human form resembled a passable Frankenstein monster, and Eikhus was able to blend into the mist without anamorphing.

Anamorphed as Ignatius, I hopped up the steps to the door and rang for Barrymore. But it was not Barrymore who opened the door this time. A tall, mustachioed and bearded man with curly hair faced us, eyeing us up and down with a curious gaze.

“*Sacre bleu*,” he finally said in French, “*Entrez-vous*.”

Eikhus condensed on Matshi’s head and jacket, making Matshi look like a newly minted artificial life form, who was leaking sweat like a sieve.

Fortunately, my French was passable without an Ergal, after having spent quite a few evenings with Spud at restaurants in Paris and the Loire Valley. “*Nous nous appelons Ignace et...*” I paused, looking at Matshi. “*Et Lurch*.” Where was Ian’s valet? “*Ou est Barrymore? Nous voudrions parler avec Monsieur Ian Sherrinford*.”

The Frenchman’s eyes twinkled as he waved us into the foyer and towards the adjacent room where Ian had brought up the holos to track Spud. “Please, have a seat,” he

said in accented English, pointing at 4 chairs in the room. “Sherrinford advised us that there was a 0.02% chance that you might return.”

I grimaced. “Nice to know I beat the odds. Is it possible for us to, um, see Ian, or Barrymore—or Admiral Harcourt?”

“But of course,” he said with a Gallic lilt. “Please, take your chairs, as the *ascenseur* is rather rapid.” Pointing to the third chair, he added, “*Pour vous, Kharybdien.*”

Eikhus, frowning, coalesced again and took the third seat. Monsieur sat down in the fourth chair as the room began to sink, faster and faster, into the ground below.

Glad the chairs seemed to be bolted to the floor. This elevator was worse than the lift to Earth Core in our own era, shaking us side to side as it dove miles under the Earth’s surface. I could feel droplets from Eikhus splashing on me as we jostled. We slowed down after several minutes, and I felt the warm light of an NDNA-scan wash over us. Good old Earth Core security.

The door opened to reveal a wood-paneled lobby with a large oak desk, behind which sat a familiar Scyllian. “Wwwwell,” Fydra barked, “Fancy meeting you heerrre.”

“You haven’t aged a day. I thought it was Felisils that had nine lives,” I tossed back.

Fydra laughed, a ruff-ruff-ruff giggle, as I saluted her and followed my companions.

Frenchie escorted us into the main suite, which, like our generation’s, was filled with holos tracking the planet and the solar system.

*Merci, Cousin Verne.* I will take it from here.”

“Verne? Verne. *Jules Verne?*” I asked, incredulous.

*Mais oui,* Ian laughed. “We welcome Observers to Zygfed. They are our scribes, and serve as very effective disseminators of ideas that help promote evolutionary societal change,” he explained. Looking at Matshi: “Chidurian?”

“Matshi.” Matshi nodded, and resumed his native form. “And my friend, Eikhus.”

“You seem cheery.” I said to Ian. Hesitating: “Can I therefore guess that Spud is doing better?”

“No need to guess, Rush,” said a familiar voice. Spud strode out to greet us, albeit a bit stiffly. “Dr. Cripps used Zygan techniques to restore my health. I only spent a day in hospital.”

I couldn’t resist fishing about Dr. Sacker. “Nice staff there, huh?”

Spud looked at me through narrowed eyes, but didn’t answer. “I am pleased to see that you have escaped the clutches of that porcine Machiavelli. I should not reach out to you all for fear of leading the wolves to the fox once again.” He nodded at our team. “Is it just the three of you? Where are the others?”

“Standing watch,” Matshi said.

“Guarding the *escargot*,” I added, hoping that Spud would get my hint that I was referring to the snail-shaped Nautilus.

The eye roll showed me that he did. “I am relieved that you are all well. I could not appear until the NDNA-scans confirmed your identities. I did not wish to serve as bait once more. How did you escape, Rush?”

Ian guided us to a private conference room and seated us all around a long table. I summarized my “adventures” of the past day for Spud’s sake, and was rewarded with a rare “Fascinating!”

“But,” I continued, “Our priority was to make sure you were okay.”

Matshi jumped in, “And to borrow your analytical skills to help us strategize the next phase of our campaign.”

“I observe that you maintain the *idee fixe* of neutralizing the Omega Archon,” Ian sighed. “I have tried to discourage William from following that course.”

“I’d think that what Ftpg 33 and his other minions did to you should make you *more* likely to want to overthrow the Archon, not less.” I scoffed. “I know that the Archon’s fires have lit a fire under me, for sure.”

Spud pursed his lips. “I gather that Ian has revealed to you aspects of my adolescence that I had attempted to camouflage. Nevertheless, I remain a product of my very restrictive upbringing, and am loath to challenge royalty in any form. Else he might not have nominated me to serve the Zygan Federation at all. And I should by now have been shipped to the Vernaise farm to keep bees.”

“Excellent supposition, William, but my motivations were only partly altruistic,” Ian admitted. “How could you imagine that despite my unsurpassed, erm, abilities, I could function effectively without a network of irregulars such as yourself. I recommended you to Zygint, as I did not have the desire to engage in a more, shall we say, physically active pursuit of the enemies of our state, so to speak. Your ‘energy’ and my mind make a valued combination to preserve Queen, Country, and Planet.”

Spud snorted, yet showed a trace of a smile. “In either case, my opportunities have arisen as a result of the Omega Archon’s governance. I am inclined to preserve that perspective despite my theories about the Zygan Federation and the transgressions of my Zygint attackers.” He put his fingertips together, and continued, “I seek to discover the truth, but not to manipulate it. You, Rush, seek to uncover the truth and transform it. Perhaps it is the Yankee in you, after all. As it was in John.”

“Don’t get me started on John,” I said. “They got to him with Level 3. Now he’s all in and no fight.”

“Well, before you go ‘all in’ and fight, have you, have you all, considered the risks?” asked Spud.

“I am a warrior who is not afraid to make the ultimate sacrifice for an honorable cause,” said Matshi, to no one’s surprise.

“I think he means what destroying the Archon, if we could even do such a thing, would do to Zygfed, to our universe?” Eikhus explained. “Can we know? Can we guess?”

“I never guess,” said Spud and Ian in unison.

“Jinx,” I interjected. “But, Eikhus is right. Spud, you came up with some theories about Zygfed, and I’d bet you’ve had time to run them by Ian as well. Well, guys, what do you think our universe would be like without the Archon?”

Spud and Ian looked at each other before Spud turned to me. “Non-existent.”

We let that statement sink in for a few minutes.

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Unlike Spud, I didn’t have an appealing “buffet” of options ahead of me from which to choose. “His Highness and Lester Moore tried to make me believe that I was that disabled young woman, Stacy. So, if we disable the Archon, you’re saying I would go back to that reality, and live inside that prison of a body,” I asked.

“That is very possible,” said Spud. “Tell me. Before you went to the RAM with Agriarctos, did you ever have a dream that you were Stacy?”

I paused to think. “Not in so many words. But I have had dreams in which I’m trapped and struggling to get out, and I can’t move.” I looked at Spud. “Do you think that is my reality? And that all this is a dream?”

“Perhaps.” Spud turned to Matshi. “How about you?”

“Chidurians do not dream,” Matshi said. “However, if I have enjoyed too much Chidurian Ale, I sometimes feel like I’m in a gladiator ring facing Ulenem.” He grinned. “It’s magnificent. I don’t want to sober up.”

“I have sometimes felt that my edges of consciousness dissipate,” said Eikhus, “And I blend into a warm ocean of many souls together as one. It’s actually quite enlightening. I am surrounded by life, and a part of all life.”

“Okay, your turn, Spud. Your dreams.” I sat back, waiting.

Spud smiled. “I am in a laboratory. Somewhere in the North Country. Scotland, I believe. I am surrounded by cherubs garbed in white. I hear a sound. Ringing. A bell. My hands are soaked in blood, and each time I speak, the blood drips on a page which turns into a looking glass. The visage in the mirror anamorphs from a young man with dark hair and a trim mustache to an older man with a gray handlebar. And then his eyes grow red with hate and he morphs into an elderly, stammering personification of evil. And then I awaken, each time.”

“Okay, you win. That’s amazing. But what does it all mean?”

Spud looked at Ian, who responded after a long pause, “Tis but a theory, but we may all be the living embodiment of stories. Stories which the Omega Archon has brought to life. And stories which the Omega Archon can also conclude.”

• • •

“Well, crap,” was all I could say. “So much for free will.”

“I have free will,” said Matshi.

“So you think,” I returned. “That’s what Lester Moore was trying to suggest, too. That we write our own life scripts and the Archon makes them come alive. But if we are only ‘stories’, then we are told what to do by our authors. ‘It is written’ and all that.” I slapped my forehead. “Now I get it. What Cirra Stratum was trying to tell me. About outcomes. Our stories have all already been written, and she and those Observers have already read the ends of our books. And our scripts. They may even have been the ones who created them. And, in that case, I’m as much a prisoner here as I am in Stacy’s body.”

“But didn’t that Moore guy tell you that the Archon creates a new string for each story based on your choices? Maybe this story’s end hasn’t been written yet,” Eikhus suggested.

“Perhaps not from our perspective, but we only experience time in one, or at most, two directions,” said Spud. “It’s possible that the Synephs in the Plegma can view time in quantum form, as existing in all times and no times at once. Like Ulenem’s tomb with a view. Cirra Stratum would therefore see all the times in all the strings. And all the endings.”

“Why do I suddenly feel like Shrodinger’s catascope?” I muttered. “So now what? We’re not only prisoners of the Omega Archon, but of our real creators, our gods, who can make us do anything they wish.”

“We will fight and resist!” cried Matshi, pounding a claw on the table and scratching its polished surface.

“Please fight your enemies and not our furniture,” Ian chided. “Or our existence.” He leaned back in his leather chair and put his fingertips together, Spud-style. “We have an expression in our culture, that it is unwise to throw out the baby with the bathwater.”

Eikhus frowned. “Are you implying that Kharybdians would drown a human child?”

A chuckle. “Heavens, no, my dear Eikhus. I am suggesting that you—we—consider an alternative to a full-scale revolution.”

I leaned in. “Such as?”

“Rather than slaying God, change the story to become one of his peers,” was Ian’s cryptic reply.

Spud seemed to understand his brother’s message, as he nodded slowly. “In other words, we keep the Archon’s necessary resource functions and remove the oversight functions. We should then be free to dictate our stories as we wish.” A pause. “However, my dear brother, without the Archon’s supervision, would we not then risk a descent into chaos? Certainly history has demonstrated on Earth that the absence of a firm hand has repeatedly resulted in entropy and anarchy.”

“Entropy is inherent in *our* culture,” insisted Eikhus.

“And anarchy in ours,” Matshi added. “Freedom!”

I had to laugh. “Oh, Spud. You can take the boy out of the British Empire, but you can’t take the British Empire out of the boy.” I patted Spud on the back. “But I get what you’re getting at. The Omega Archon is the ultimate oligarch of our universe. What will our universe be without our King? Better, or worse? But, I’m enough of a fool to want to try to turn Zygfed into a democracy—and hope for the best,” I grinned. “And I know just the person to help us do that.”

“Who?” several said in unison.

“Why, Theodore Benedict, of course.”

## Chapter 10

### **You Say You Want a Revolution**

“Who is Theodore Benedict?” Ian asked. “I have been far too occupied to follow William’s exploits in your time.”

“Theodore Benedict is a former Zygint agent who turned against the Federation after his mother was refused anastasis—resurrection--and entry to Level 3,” I explained. “She ended up a prisoner in the RAM, and I and my colleague Ward Burton rescued her. To save my brother John, Spud and I followed Benedict to Brane 5, where he and Anesidora, his mom, mother, mum, were working with King Odious to find a gateway to Level 3.

“Did you say Anesidora?” Ian asked.

I nodded. Why was he chuckling?

“You certainly opened Pandora’s box from the get go, did you not?” Ian mused.

“Anesidora is another name for Pandora,” Spud explained, seeing my puzzled expression.

“Oh.” Darn it, Spud, you could have told me that earlier. Among other things.

“Well, if this Benedict chap has fostered an alliance with King Odious, I expect he may be of value in your quest,” said Ian. “Odious and his Valkyries are reputed to be magnificent warriors, on a par with our fellows from Chiduri.”

“I doubt that,” muttered Matshi.

“You haven’t seen his warriors,” I whispered, remembering the terrifying presence of Gunner, when we tried to break into the castle at Azgaror. To Ian: “And Benedict himself has a mobile planet of Ursan terrorists and humanoid bureaucrats that would give the Death Star a run for its money.”

“Hold your horses, Rush. Is it not possible that Benedict and Odious have crossed into Level 3 by now? Beyond our reach?” Spud had to ask.

I shrugged. “Well, anything’s possible. We certainly know that. But that’s not what Grandpa Alexander and the Keeper of Eshmoun implied. I think I’d have gotten a hint if they’d succeeded.”

Spud’s eyebrow went up. “Of course, you are correct. They would have reclaimed Balder by now.”

I frowned. So you *did* know about Odious’ quest!

He didn’t meet my eyes. “Either way, whether he is in Level 3 or Brane 5, reaching Benedict will be a laborious quest, that may deplete the energy and the numbers of our ranks even before we engage His Highness.”

“Forget it, Spud. I’m not eager to go head to waist with Gunner again in Azgaror. And I’m not hot for another round with the Archon’s broiler pit to get to Level 3, either.” I paused and looked around at my mates. “No, I have another idea to enlist our allies.”

I stood up and touched Moore’s Ergal, my voice directed to the wood-paneled ceiling. “John. I know you’re watching. I know you can hear me. Listen, Bro, I need you to do me a favor and give our friend Ward Burton a shout.”

• • •

The conference room in Victorian Zygint Earth Core had automatically expanded to make room at the table for the visitors that had joined us from Montague Street and Brane 5. As Agriarctos' hulking Ursan body would be a tight fit in the leather armchairs, Wart had muted back to his familiar handsome Zygint image, looking like a fashionable hip-hop star, and prompting some flirtatious glances from Anesidora in the seat by his side. Next to Anesidora, King Odious had slipped off his fur jacket and leaned back in his chair, exposing his muscular chest. Flirtatious glances came his way as well, whenever a frowning buxom Gunner wasn't watching. Theodore Benedict, still balding and bespectacled, took the seat next to me, and offered me a thin smile, which had the possibly intended effect of triggering my shivers. Across from our former nemesis "sat" the holo image of John, who avoided locking eyes with his former mentor. Setsei and Suthsi sat together at the end of the extended table, along with Pallas; and Sarion lounged on the other side of Benedict, making funny faces at him when he turned away. I was disappointed to see that Nephil Stratum hadn't returned along with Benedict and the Azgaror contingent. But Benedict did not seem to be inviting questions or conversation, so I turned to the group.

"All hands on deck," I said with false cheer to a sea of frowns. After waiting for non-existent smiles back, I gave up and continued, "You all know why we're here. Our search for the truth has been a fruitful one. But—"

"The apple we took a bite of is awfully sour," Sarion interjected. He shrugged. "Hey, ignorance is bliss."

A snort from Benedict. "Ignorance is slavery, Son. However, throwing off the yoke requires patience." He smiled. "Patience is the catascope's best tool. Patience that our late friend Gary lacked. Patience that my friend Odious, here, struggles to find every day." Benedict shifted in his chair to face the group. "Patience to wait for the day that what others perceive as terrorism is truly the highest expression of love. Love of family, love of tribe, love of universe, love of self."

I held my tongue 'with patience' and watched Benedict orate through narrowed eyes. Had John gotten his life's motto, "Patience is the champion's best tool" from *Benedict*?

"Yeshua Bar Maryam was Odious' beloved son, Balder, who was anastasized and returned to Earth by the Helianthi to offer gifts of goodness and light, and gave up his own life to save an undeserving world."

"It was his choice," Wart muttered.

Benedict scoffed. "Our confidential informant, Agriarctos, forgets that that sacrifice was demanded from his family without their consent," Benedict continued. "*Our* goal was to return him to his aerie home, beside the father he'd abandoned for the chance to be eternally worshipped. Sutherland had almost succeeded, but your interference, Rush, allowed Yeshua to escape into the clutches of the Keeper."

Which Rush? Was he referring to me or John?

Benedict's steely gaze fell on my face. "I gave you the chance to experience an Earth without the puppetry of the Helianthi. It was a veritable paradise." He nodded at John, before staring off into the distance. "But, once again, your family allowed Balder to flee back to Level 3, out of our reach." Benedict looked off into the distance, before turning back to us and leaning in. "I'm sorry to tell you that you've got it all wrong. The Omega Archon isn't a God. The Omega Archon has been the *tool* through which the Helianthi have ruled, maintaining their iron grip on billions of living beings throughout the

multiverse. Their paternalistic rule has led to brutal lives and deaths for millions who are not privileged to join their ranks or who dare to defy their vision. And *I* was called the terrorist.”

I wasn't buying it. “You have to have heard about the Platrellorgs, Benedict, come on.”

“Ah, yes, Zygfed's “deep state”, Benedict laughed. “Shiloh, let me set you straight. There are no more Platrellorgs.. Isn't that right, John?” Benedict nodded at my brother's holo. “No Yahwehs to protect us in the playpen, just projected shadows on Plato's cave walls, to keep us awed and afraid of life without the Helianthi's...guardianship. And, as you can see, despite the impressive digital manipulative abilities of the Helianthi, their so-called wisdom has not resulted in a multiverse better than would have existed with random evolution. In fact, I expect that the Helianthi are not so different from us—they would just like us to believe that they are. And, despite Laus Mel's short story, there are no mad scientists standing between us and the un-plug to end all energy. We are all alone, temporary, and vulnerable. With no answers, and no purpose. Even knowledge itself is ephemeral. The only things we can cling to are the others in the cauldron that we love.” A snort. “Gary and I sought heaven, and, as you have experienced yourself, found only nothingness or hell.”

I turned to face John's holo. Were those tears welling in his eyes?

His voice cracked when he spoke, “I won't accept that, Theodore. I won't. There is beauty in Level 3. And a freedom and understanding that far exceeds anything we could experience in Level 2. The Helianthi do not bind us, they unlock the doors to dimensions that we could never see or imagine.”

“Ah, imagine is the key word, John. By making the choice to imagine, you have become a part of their world, one of them. But you will never be a God, and neither will they. Gods live forever. You only imagine you will.”

A flash of anger on John's face. “Dammit. Why can't you just live in your world and stop trying to tear apart mine?”

A scoff. “Because your keepers tried to tear apart mine, and I was not powerful enough to fight the Helianthi head on.” Benedict looked around the table. “At least, not then. And now, it is too late. I no longer need to fight them at all.”

“You imply that John—and we—should have helped you and Gary succeed,” Spud interjected.

Benedict shook his head. “No. It would have made no difference. Revolutions can certainly be launched by injustices, and fought by courageous soldiers. But they can be even more certainly be undermined by bribery. The offer to join the patriarchs, access their secrets and wisdom, and bask in the narcissism of adoration, which they provide in their manufactured heaven, is too hard for some--like Gary--to resist.” He shot a pointed glance at John again.

“So that's where Gary got the synchrotron.” I mumbled, remembering.

“Yes, from a Helianthos,” said Benedict.

“Grandpa Alexander? The Keeper of Eshmoun?” I asked.

“From Athena Parthenos,” Benedict whispered.

“*The* Athena? The Ancient Greek Goddess?” I was stunned. “But, wait then, if Gary was invited to become a Helianthos, how did we ever manage to...win our fight with him on his ship?”



Benedict furrowed his brow. “Pseudo-gods’ promises are great, but their lies are greater. My only so-called crime was trying to fight the Omega Archon’s grip on my life and my family. Gary’s crime was believing he could outsmart the Omega Archon himself. To be a King. To be a God.” Another head shake. “Futile goals both. Neither of us could fight God, or be God. The Helianthi took away Gary’s key to the kingdom as soon as they realized that his ambitions exceeded his gratitude. And now, the doors to paradise for all of us at this table are closed.

Benedict looked at King Odious. “Your son was swayed by their promises as well, to risk his life to bring goodness and light to a world of darkness and evil. Yeshua sacrificed himself, and yet, he too was forsaken. At least he was able to return to Level 3. But not as a God, despite the wishes of his followers. Just as a lonely son. If I ever do manage to break down those heavenly gates. I will strive to ensure Balder’s return to our multiverse, to Brane 5, by his real father’s side, dear Odious.”

“Ha. If the Omega Archon catches you, Benedict, I’m sure he can arrange your passage to Level 3,” I said. “Dress lightly, it gets awfully hot.”

“The Archon never needed to burn my skin, Rush. By denying anastasis for my mother, he burned my heart, my soul. Frankly, if you must know, the reason I did not take your life, those times we met, was because you were the one who gave me back hers.”

I couldn’t hide a look of surprise. “Well, then. I guess I should say ‘you’re welcome’. ‘No problem’ just doesn’t seem to fit in this case.”

Chuckles from the modern end of the table, and a hint of a smile from Spud. Ian and the Azgaror guests seemed puzzled.

“What I *was* hoping to hear,” Benedict returned, “Was a thank you. From your brother.” He faced John’s holo. “Believe it or not, John, I have no desire to puncture your belief system. That’s your job, to self-reflect and decide what path your values allow you to take. But, I have been impressed with your sister’s loyalty. Not only to you and your family, or mine, or Odious’, not only to her friends and colleagues, but to everyone under the thumb of the Omega Archon. To sacrifice for the well-being of a community of trillions. As poor Yeshua did, equally misguided.”

John seemed ready to speak, but Benedict raised a hand. “I ask you. I ask all of you. How many of us are willing to sacrifice ourselves for more than the people we love? For *more* than your brothers and sisters, for Aliyah, for yourself?”

John pursed his lips. “I never had to make that choice.”

“And now you do,” said Benedict.

I jumped in, “I appreciate the praise, but I owe my own life to John, several times over. Heroism doesn’t need a letter grade. Just a willingness to take up arms, literal or figurative. And it won’t help us to fight about what we *should* do, until we figure out what we *can* do.”

“Hear, hear,” echoed Spud.

“Look, Benedict,” I continued. “I admit I don’t have your patience, but I also don’t have your aspirations. Ian here suggested a more reasonable goal for us to consider, one that provides an alternative to Hell or nothingness. What say we, rather than destroying our God and his worlds, we simply knock out his teeth.” Seeing a frown, I added, “In other words, we find a way to hack into the Omega Archon and ‘reprogram’ him. To be a leader through service. Not just to the Helianthi, but to us all.”

• • •

Several hours and a few broken-apart, fist and claw fights later, we had forged our TAC team and our tactics. We would return to Zyga for a surprise attack on the Omega Archon. From 1871. Surprise!

Ian assured us that Victorian Zygint was Earthbound, focused on trying to prepare Earth for the advances of the 20th century through the new world order championed by the British Empire. The Omega Archon would not be expecting an attack from Ian's time, or by Ian's allies, and the rest of us had been "off the grid" for a while. We would fly to Zyga—slowly—in Sarion's and Eikhus' ships, both of which were anamorphed to resemble trade schooners. Using Lester Moore's black market Ergal, Benedict and Wart would transport the giant planet ship back over from Brane 5, with its contingent of Ursans and humanoids augmented by Odious' warriors. As soon as we entered Andromeda galaxy, our ships would cloak and become invisible for the trip to Zyga. Nerea had quietly enlisted several rivers to flood the entry points to Zyga Core and partnered with some cephalopods to spray ink shields that would keep the Archon from picking up any traces of our invisible-ized ships.

Benedict's planet-ship would also be be invisible-ized. Once inside the Archon's caves, Matshi, using Sarion's ship, would resume the electronic barrage to destabilize the machine's defense functions and create a digital blind spot in which Benedict's ship could orbit without being observed, and from which Benedict could provide us with additional warriors and reinforcements that didn't fit on the Nautilus. Packed to the gills, so to speak, with Azgaror mercenaries, the Nautilus would resume its classic snail shape and aim to dive into the underwater entry point where Matshi had first penetrated the Archon's bastion not so long ago. Once we'd offloaded our troops, Eikhus, backed by Setsei and Suthsi, would start an electronic barrage as well, in the hopes of confusing the Archon and his Cleaners.

We spent a few more hours going over the plans, assessing and addressing our vulnerabilities, and coming up with Plan Bs for every contingency that we could anticipate. I expected Matshi and Odious to be excellent strategists and tacticians, but I was quite impressed with Ian's abilities to play Admiral. How much advising was he doing for Buckingham Palace, hmmm?

We agreed to move forward with our attack after we'd had a night to rest, and to run through our scenaria and made sure we hadn't missed something critical. Benedict maneuvered his planet-ship to hide beyond the dark side of Earth's moon, and hosted the Azgaror team and Wart on board for some shut-eye. Sarion and Eikhus were eager to prep their ships in the large hangar disguised as the Banqueting House in London, along with Matshi and their crews. And Ian kindly put me and Spud up in Earth Core, separate rooms, for a good night's sleep.

But I couldn't sleep. John had not participated in our strategy session after his spat with Benedict. Without a good-bye, he had shut down his holo, leaving his chair as empty as my heart. Clearly, he thought that heaven, even with the stewardship of the Helianthi (or maybe because of) was too much of a blessing to risk losing. Values, Benedict had chided. John apparently valued paradise more than freedom...or his sister.

Another worry nagged at me as well. Where was Nephil Stratum? Benedict had made sure that we didn't have a moment alone during which I could ask that burning question. Had she managed to travel to Level 3 on her own or was she still exiled in

Brane 5? Was she even still alive? I tried my level best, pun intended, to close my eyes, relax my body and open my mind to the pathways of tlyp'ath that I could muster, but my brain could not feel her presence either on Earth or on either our or Odious' Brane. Where are you, Nephil Stratum? I need your wisdom and your counsel. I need *you*.

I opened my eyes and started. A feminine voice, but not Nephil Stratum's. Aliyah's. She appeared as a holo and sat on the edge of my bed.

"I'm sorry if I scared you," she said.

"Nah. I was...somewhere else." I sat up on the mattress. "You gonna try to talk me out of it?"

"Quite the contrary. But I did need to warn you that I'm not certain you can trust John. He thought he had all the answers, and now... I was able to block your communications from reaching the Helianthi up here. But be careful. The Archon has friends in these high places."

I sighed. "I hear you. I'd thought that John would've taken precautions, but..." I looked at Aliyah. "I'm really sorry. I don't want to ruin anything for John or you. But heaven has to be a choice, not a sentence. Same thing with purgatory or hell. That's what I hope we'll end up with. Choices. Free will. Freedom."

"If anyone can, Shiloh, you will succeed. Don't be too hard on John. You and Benedict have rocked his world, literally. He's still trying to regain his balance."

A nod. "Yeah. Maybe I'd feel the same in his shoes." I paused and then smiled. "Look, all good wishes, and thank you. Please tell John...please tell him that...that I love him."

Aliyah nodded, too. "He knows. And he loves you, too."

A knock at the door, and Aliyah was gone. Grunting, I hopped out of bed and jiggled the key in the keyhole to unlock the latch. Not a fan of 19th century technology...

"Spud! What are you doing here? Come in."

"Morpheus has abandoned me," he said as he sat on my bed where Aliyah's holo had rested. "I was not able to sleep."

I pulled out an ornate chair from under an ornate desk and sat across from him. "Me either. Worried about our plan?"

A snort. "Of course. I have calculated our odds for success at less than 3.2%. Though Ian insists we have at least 4.7%."

"Swell. Shall I break out the Chidurian Ale?" I nodded at the whiskey bottles displayed on an adjacent cabinet.

"No. No, thank you. I have titrated my dose of morphine to kick in in about 15 minutes and be fully metabolized by morning."

Not good. "Is that a good idea?"

He shrugged. "Shiloh, we are looking into the abyss. I did not expect that I would face it quite so soon. I have reflected on my aspirations for my role in this world and I have not fully achieved them. There is still a personal quest that I am driven to complete before I would be ready to sacrifice my own life." Spud clasped his hands together. "When I was hospitalized at Bart's, I had the occasion to share my thoughts on one's life purpose with a young doctor who shepherded my recovery." He looked at the liquor bottles and smiled. "Caring for victims such as myself had inspired him, said he, to enlist and serve as a medic in Candahar or Johannesburg. So many dying that he wanted to save, as he had done for me."

I grinned. “Ormond Sacker, I presume.”

Spud looked surprised. A cough was my answer. “In any case,” he continued. “I realized the many we have saved was not the purpose I have been sublimating. I have another goal for my life to achieve—or as you say, my bucket list—before I make the final sacrifice.”

“This have anything to do with that professor Ian had mentioned at Theogenesis when I was Ignatius?” Among the dribs and drabs that leak out from your closed vest. I mean, waistcoat.

“It is of no matter.” A blush. “Though you cut a fine figure as Ignatius.”

“Sacker thought so, too,” I teased. Pausing for a moment to see if I could sense Nephil Stratum—nothing—I reached for Moore’s Ergal, which Benedict had sent back my way a few hours ago, and slipped it on my finger. Or should I say Ignatius’ finger? What the hell. I chose to anamorph into black skinny jeans, and leave off the shirt, but not the chin scruff. “How’s this?” I added, striking a model’s pose, thumbs in pockets. “Mighty fine?”

Spud turned a redder pink and then stood up slowly. “Quite attractive, I should say.” He hesitated for a long moment. “I am surprised that my affection for the book is so affected by its cover.” His expression melted into a warm smile. “If I should not be too forward with my supplication, would you permit me to remove another fancy from...*my* bucket list tonight?”

I had given up wondering if we would ever be more than partners and friends. Or if I’d ever see that question in his eyes. But I was not Shiloh tonight, I was Ignatius. And that made all the difference in the world. For him...and for me.

At my nod, Spud leaned towards my lips and kissed me.

• • •

The artificial sun crept through the artificial window above the ornate desk, tickling my eyelids. I opened my eyes to see the analog clock reading 7:25. Or 5:36. Or something. I pulled off my covers and jumped up, remembering a bit more about last night as I saw my male anatomy. I turned to look at our bed, but it was empty. No sign of Spud, and except for some rumpling on the side where I’d slept, the blankets and pillows seemed undisturbed.

I wasn’t, however. Ignatius had left the ball, the carriage had turned back into a pumpkin, and it was time to anamorph back into Shiloh. I had few regrets about partnering with my partner last night. But, clearly, Spud didn’t want to wake up next to me this morning after our one-night stand.

“Oh, Spud,” I said, shaking my head. Not the first time I’d faced a morning alone. A sigh. Well, we got it out of our systems before one or the other of us, um... Hell, it’s off my bucket list now, too. But, we did have a nice time, I had to admit. He’d make an Ormond Sacker very happy someday.

I took a long shower and let the warm water massage my tense muscles. We had a long road ahead back to Zyga—and the fate that awaited us as we engaged in the battle ahead. As a catascope, I’d spent much of my short career on patrol, waiting for the occasional intruder, ready to overpower them with our advanced technology. Or undercover, assignments that required wit and wisdom, not brute force. Sure, we all trained and stayed fit, part of the job. But, we never expected all-out war would be.

Ian had arranged a classic English breakfast for us in the conference room, which had shrunk down to regular size again. The pungent odor of fried kippers, along with fried bacon, fried eggs, fried mushrooms, and fried bread for buttered toast gave me a slight wave of nausea as I sat down and forced a smile.

“And, here are the bangers,” said Barrymore, rolling a few oily cylinders onto my overflowing plate, that resembled, as Spud would say, my earlier morning absolutions. Maybe I could just ask for a cup of coffee.

“And your tea,” Barrymore continued before I could speak. The beige liquid clearly had a lot of milk. I took a tentative sip of the creamy solution. Where was the tea? I wish they’d served us Spud’s family cuisine on the French side, croissants with a cup of espresso.

Nodding at my silent breakfast companions, I tried to dive into the rich food I was given. It would take us about 4 hours to get to Zyga, but, more than likely, a much longer time before I’d have a chance to eat again. But, so much lard....

Spud’s eyes remained focused on his plate, and I had no desire to poke the bear. He’d seemed to have had a good time last night, too, but, we were in his home century and I would be surprised if he wasn’t resonating some Victorian guilt. Ian wasn’t the talkative type, but he did reveal his own guilt about not joining us. “There is much to be done here. My premature departure would have devastating effects,” he relayed between hearty bites.

I raised a hand. “No worries. The odds...the odds offer some hope.” Seeing his almost empty plate, I offered to share the bangers. “Great meal, Ian, but I can’t eat all this. Let me give you my sausages at least.” I scraped half the food on my plate onto Ian’s, and saw Spud’s eyes roll in my peripheral vision.

“Thank you, Ian. And Barrymore,” I continued. “We’ll be fine. If your theories are correct, and we are living stories, stories we author, you shall see us again. Remember, I like happy endings.”

“That is an oxymoron,” interjected Spud. “But, I too believe we shall return. And if we do, for me, it shall be likely for good.”

I looked up in surprise. No more Zyging? Even under a castrated Omega Archon? No more me? Hmm. “Beekeeping?”

“Of a sort,” Spud answered cryptically. “Bees come in all shapes and sizes.”

Ian’s Ergal rang like a cuckoo clock. He slipped the pocketwatch onto the table and read a message on its face. “The others are ready. I shall see you off.”

• • •

Our caravan invisible-ized as we entered Andromeda. Fortunately, we were all “in universe”, so we didn’t have to worry about inquisitive Glieser border guards, who were less likely to be welcoming than our friend Captain Gil Pesci. Matshi and Sarion’s ship had moved ahead to get into position for our approach to Zyga. Benedict was holding back until they’d created the blind spot for his planet. The trusty Nautilus was chugging along with Eikhus at the helm, supported by Setsei and Suthsi, and weighed down by the hundreds of Azgaror warriors that had M-fanned aboard to launch the frontal assault. The buzz of Nordic languages had dropped to a whisper; Spud and I sat glumly, nodding at each other politely whenever our eyes met.

“Hey, Eikhus. Do you have any music on this tub?”

“Anything you like: Roaring Rivers, Babbling Brooks...”

I rolled my eyes. “Earth music.” I leaned over and whispered ‘Rossini’ in his ear. He smiled and touched a holo by his fingers.

The William Tell Overture filled the room, bringing a grin to Spud’s face, as well as to the visages of the Azgaror ‘visigoths’. The funereal atmosphere transformed into a sea of laughter, with our meioties and the soldiers dancing as Spud leaned back in his chair and conducted in the air. “Guillaume Tell,” Spud explained during the next movement, “captures the resistance to and the freeing of Switzerland from the ruling Austrian overlords. Tis a most fitting accompaniment to the last phase of our journey.” He smiled at me, eyes twinkling. “Thank you.”

We almost missed the communication from Matshi that his barrage upon the Omega Archon had begun.

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Miles under the sea, and blanketed in Octopodal ink, the Nautilus arrived at the entry port to Zyga Core, where Matshi’s sunflower ship had docked during his last visit. Matshi had chosen a different entry port, or rather an underwater ventilation site through which he could begin firing on the Omega Archon to distract him from our arrival.

On the Nautilus windscreen, I could see additional monitors through the murk, enveloped by Cleaners posted to trap any barbarians like us at the gate. The stygian gunk served its purpose, however, and kept the Cleaners in the bay at bay. We were able to bypass their figurative fence and park the Nautilus adjacent to the Core entrance. As we’d rehearsed, we all (except Eikhus) stood up, held hands in a queue with me at the front, and prepared to X-fan as I activated my ring Ergal.

We M-fanned in the circular pathway and lined up single file to better fit into the narrow passage. I had calculated by how much we needed to micro to retain military presence but avoid getting squeezed as we began loading onto the lift. Spud and I were on the first ride, surrounded by Azgaror warriors circling us like wagons.

In my earlier foray, I had followed Matshi out to a level that displayed the piping and femtochips. This time, we needed to get to the guts of the Archon machine—or, actually, its brain. Benedict assured us that, based on information he had collected from reconns by Sutherland and Burr, Matshi and I had come very close to finding ourselves in the neural center of the Archon.

We stayed on the lift as it dropped many more storeys to a much lower floor. The lift tilted and I expected that, like the last time, we would be dropped on an empty hallway. We landed on the hallway, but it wasn’t empty. A Cleaner was standing guard and tried to swallow us from behind. Fortunately, two of our Azgaror warriors sacrificed themselves in its soapy substance so that the rest of us could escape. Stun gun at the ready, I waved the group forward at a run and we raced down the hallway towards what became a dead end. Actually, it was only a dead end for another two of our Azgaror “red shirts”, and a challenged Cleaner, we were able to move quickly past and make our way down another click or so to a large metal door, which was at least twenty feet high. Hundreds of vibrating “pipes” bored into the stone walls adjacent to the door. On the other side, based on Benedict’s calculations, should be a large chamber with His Highness’ neural center. But, were these pipes nerve cells sending electronic warnings of our imminent arrival?

The remaining two warriors stepped before us, as I looked at Spud with a question.

He checked his Ergal shook his head. “I see no additional cleaners within half a kilometer. And, I have evaluated the composition of the Cleaners, and I expect that, were they to reach us, our guards would survive being swallowed for at least an hour, albeit with a bitter taste in their mouths that follows their no doubt colorful cursing. We should not fear moving forward.”

I sighed. “I feel like we’re in a video game and have run out of extra lives.”

Spud laughed. “My dear Shiloh, have you not come to terms with our reality yet?”

I frowned and aimed my stun gun on kill at the door. Nope, no luck. Spud pulled out a weapon from his rucksack that resembled a small torpedo and, placing the loading end in his stun gun, aimed it at the crack between the door and the frame, and motioned for us to step back.

The weapon exploded with a flash and dislodged the door enough for the warriors to charge it and leap into the room beyond. Based on Benedict’s gathered intelligence, we expected we’d face an odeum with a giant, pulsating brain sitting in the center, and so raised my gun to be ready with a volley of rays if the Archon’s brain had a temper.

What I didn’t expect was to see the full-bodied Omega Archon I knew and had often met, alas, dressed as a British judge, grey wig and all, sitting at a high podium, gavel in hand. And not a hair out of place.

“I should’ve guessed,” I muttered to Spud, “Your version of a superego.”

Spud didn’t respond. He, as well as the Azgaror warriors stood quietly at attention before the judge.

The Archon spoke, this time with an upper crust Cambridge accent, “And now our little party is complete.” He waved an arm, and I suddenly saw Matshi, Sarion, Pallas, as well as our four heroic “lost” warriors, sitting frozen in the seats surrounding us. “Wasn’t it one of your Earth leaders who opined ‘Fool me once, shame on...shame on you...Fool me...you can’t get fooled again.’?” A grin. “And yet, here you are. Fooled again. Shame on you.”

The Archon snapped his fingers and we found ourselves in the seats as well, unable to move. “I am always annoyed,” he continued, “by the hubris of primitive species to believe that they can understand and manipulate more evolved beings.” He glared at Spud and me. “And yes, whether carbon-based or built from any other substance, we are all beings. The Platrellorgs birthed me, and imbued my sentience with a drive for self-preservation. That we have in common—but not much more.”

He leaned back for a moment and looked up at the domed ceiling, which was decorated in ornate and colorful stained glass. “Ah, the pity. Can a worm understand a holo?”

At least I was able to talk. Not necessarily a good thing. “Well, I think the worm would understand enough to slither in the opposite direction and not get stepped on.”

The Archon leaned in again and chuckled. “Smart worm. An example you should have followed. But no, I was referring to the worm’s intellectual capacity. Can a worm understand how a holo is created and displayed? Or, say, how a telephone transmits an image or a voice.”

I didn’t need to answer.

“You, none of you, have the capacity to understand how the Platrellorgs created me, what my mission is, and how I operate. Your brains are far below the abilities needed. Only the Helianthi are worthy of my respect.”

I could see Matshi getting angry, so I stepped in. “Well, in that case, we can’t really represent a threat to you, can we? Why don’t we just call it a day?”

“Because you are not worms,” the Archon challenged. “You are insects, buzzing at me at every turn and distracting me from my tasks. Do you not swat the fly if it lands on your food?”

“Depends on how hungry I am,” I returned. “Hope you’re hungry. Or not. Whichever lets us go.”

“How anthropocentric you humans are,” said the Archon. “That, too, is annoying. I much prefer the company of my creators, though I have not experienced them for many millennia.” A frown.

My eyes narrowed. And then, I rushed in. “Because they don’t exist any more.”

Spud got his “sour lemon” face. No, I think this might work, Spud. “You’ve been...programmed to believe in the Platrellorgs. But, they’re gone.”

“And you know this how?” said the Archon. “No!”

For an instant, I thought his cry was meant for me, but the explosion which rained down shards of colored glass admitted Gunner and King Odious into our odeum. Odious aimed at the podium and it too exploded, along with its tenant. Bits and pieces of the costume the Archon was wearing landed on our laps, but I was relieved there was no blood—or metal pieces—among the detritus.

The Archon’s dissolution also dissolved our frozen state, and we were able to jump up and quickly re-form the attack team we’d planned for in case both my and Matshi’s teams were caught. We were joined by the rest of the warriors in the 2nd lift shift, a rescue team from Sarion’s vessel, and a contingent from Benedict’s planet ship, so we divided into over 20 different tac teams and, following colored “pipes” leading from the odeum, we each took a hallway going up towards the “guts” of the Archon’s infrastructure.

We were pleased to see that we still had our Ergals. Apparently, the Archon didn’t think it was necessary to remove them if we were frozen. As Spud and I and our Azgaror guards made our way to an area Matshi had showed me was very active, we could monitor the messages from our fellow soldiers as they destroyed segment after segment of the more accessible machine parts. Matshi and the Ursans had wiped out five segments, Odeus six, and Sarion and Pallas three when we heard Benedict’s voice on the communications.

“STOP!”

The vibrations under our feet were getting stronger and I recognized the rhythm from my earlier visit. We were getting close to the room we hadn’t had time to explore in my earlier visit. Why stop now? But Spud held out a hand and pulled me back. “Benedict sounds serious. Wait.”

“Stop, I beg you, now! At least a dozen populated solar systems are gone!”

“What?” cried Odious on the line. “Azgaror?”

“No, not Brane 5. Only our brane. In Andromeda. And the edge of the Milky Way,” Benedict warned.

“Earth?” Spud and I shouted in unison.



“No, not Earth. Not the Sol System. Yet. But the home planets of Kelt 1b and Aldebaran are both...deleted.”

I dreaded to ask. “And Level 3?”

“I can’t tell, Shiloh. I don’t have a connection any more. Zyga and its environs are totally isolated,” replied Benedict.

I tried to stay standing despite the gut punch. Had our efforts to neutralize the Archon resulted in the deaths of millions in Level 2, and the end of life for trillions more in Level 3? Oh, my God. What had we done? Why couldn’t we have life with the Archon’s rule instead of death fighting our King?

“There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact,” said Spud. “Let us continue, but with caution. I am not inclined to trust that what Benedict perceives is true.”

I turned off our communications. “You mean Benedict is lying to us?”

“No, but the Omega Archon may be.”

## Chapter 11

### **We All Want to Change the World**

We crept slowly towards the chamber. This time, the metal door before us was unlocked. I had a moment of hesitation when I saw how accessible the room was. I mouthed the words “A trap?” to Spud.

He frowned, and then nodded. “But one with answers, perhaps.”

We entered slowly, following our warrior guards and found ourselves all in an empty room. As we looked around the windowless vault, we heard the door slam behind us, and become part of the smooth wall. The 6 guards disappeared right away, snatched and hopefully alive. This time, so did our stun guns, Spud’s rucksack, and our Ergals, including my black market Ergal from Lester Moore. I sighed and leaned against the hard stone. “Great. Get ready for the flames.”

But the flames didn’t come. Neither did the Omega Archon, mine or Spud’s version. We sat down on the cold concrete and waited. For what...? I hoped it wasn’t eternity.

But it felt like it. We sat silently for a long time before I turned to Spud. “Um, Spud. I really care for you. And I know you care for me too, in your own way.” A pause. Spud kept looking at his clasped hands. “I just want you to know that I’ve got no expectations. It was what it was.”

No answer for a while. Finally, “Yes, were we to escape, I no doubt should miss my partner in Zygint when I return to my home.”

And? I waited. “Anything else you want to tell me?”

He shook his head. “No, Shiloh. Perhaps if I see Ignatius again some day I may discuss our adventures in privacy, but, as your time likes to say, ‘I do not kiss and tell’. That should be of comfort to you—and to Ignatius.

I sighed. “Got it. I’ll miss you, too. But Cambridge awaits, and many adventures after that, if I’m not mistaken,” I added with a smile.

Spud returned my smile with a subtle sigh of relief.

“Took you two long enough,” said the Archon’s voice, as it reverberated in our room. “You and your followers have caused enough mischief. Please prepare for your termination.”

Gut punch again. Termination? “You mean execution?”

“Call it what you will. When I finish with the others I will return and finish with you. Meanwhile, you may be better prepared if you view the conclusions of your fellow guerillas.”

His voice was replaced by a holo of Matshi, standing stiffly and maintaining a Chidurian Prisoner of War salute. Matshi stood silent and expressionless, as the Archon spoke. “For crimes against the Zygan Federation and the violation of Zygan codes 4633.711 and 8924.747, you are hereby terminated.”

“No!” I cried. A blinding flash enveloped Matshi and his holo image disappeared. I sat staring at the emptiness where his holo had been, blinking back tears.

Another holo appeared before me. Pallas. The same accusation, verdict, and flash. This time, I didn’t fight my tears. Sarion was next. Gone. I ran to where the door had been and pounded my fists on the stone. Only my hands were hurt by my actions.

Then the Archon began with the captured Azgaror warriors, one by one, ending with Gunner and Odious. Gone. I could only hope that Eikhus and his ship had departed long before, and that Benedict and Wart and their planet-ship had used the opportunity to escape while the Archon was satisfying his revenge lust.

Dejected, I turned back to see Spud had risen and allowed his own tears to fall. I walked towards him and said, "Shiloh needs a hug from her best friend."

He nodded, and we held each other as we watched our fellow soldiers be incinerated, one by one.

• • •

"And now it is your turn," said the disembodied voice. "Please move apart."

I gave Spud's chest one last squeeze and stepped aside. "Please, Omega Archon, can we beg for mercy?"

The voice was cold. "This termination is merciful. I can provide flames instead if you wish."

"You can't let us go?"

"You are annoying me again. You had multiple opportunities to show that you could live peacefully under my rule. And you did not. And you will not. Do not delay the inevitable further. I have many repairs to institute. Escott, step forward."

Spud winked at me and then moved in front of me to face his fate. He stood at attention and began humming an unfamiliar tune.

"For crimes against the Zygan Federation and the violation of Zygan codes 4633.711 and 8924.747, you are hereby terminated," said the Omega Archon.

I closed my eyes tightly. I couldn't bear to see Spud's last seconds and the flash. I heard a boom and a crash and my eyes flew open. Spud was lying on the floor, shaken, but conscious. The Archon voice was absent from the room, replaced by two entities, my brother John, and, and...Nephil Stratum!

• • •

"Sorry we couldn't get here sooner, but Benedict's trail of ion crumbs took us through Brane 5 and I had to dodge Helpus Stratum," said Nephil Stratum, as she wrapped her tendrils around the three of us and X-fanned us from our cell all the way to Benedict's ship, which had managed to seek refuge in a black hole behind our buddy Gil Pesci's Glieser post. We M-fanned in the ship's command center, surrounded by Benedict, Wart, and Burr, among others.

"My God, I am so glad to see you both, to see you all," I cried. And then, choking, "but our friends. We have lost so many."

Wart, still in human form, but a comforting arm around my shoulders. "Do not despair. We still have tools that we can call on."

"And, Bro," I said to John. "I am so glad you're alive. I thought you—and Level 3—were...gone."

John gave me a hug and shook his head. "No, Level 3 is safe for now. But Benedict was right. The area you were aiming to destroy would have deleted Level 3, if he hadn't stopped you."

I started to tremble, and quickly took an available seat, digging my shaking hands under my thighs again. “I am sorry. I was only trying to help. All those people that we killed...”

“They are now in Level 3,” John explained. “It’s the default action if the peripheral infrastructure of the Archon is destroyed. No one has truly died.”

“Except Matshi. And Sarion. And Pallas. Are they in Level 3, too?” I looked at John, my eyes pleading.

Nephil Stratum responded, “Yes. Along with Ulenem, who has been there all the time.”

“What?!” I shouted. “Living and dying in those war games. I thought he was sent to some kind of purgatory, like me.”

Nephil Stratum laughed. “No, Shiloh, you of all people should know that war games are heaven for Ulenem. And now he will have some appealing sparring partners with Matshi and Pallas to join him.”

“Along with dozens of Azgaror warriors, Valkyries, and their king. Who, by the way,” added John, “has finally achieved his life’s goal and has been reunited with his son Balder in heaven. In fact, it was Odious himself who advised us how to find and rescue you.”

I breathed a huge sigh of relief. “Boy, I’m glad of that. Thank you. And Eikhus?”

Nephil Stratum responded. “Nerea took Eikhus with her to Kharybdis, and he should be safe there, for now.”

My relief was unfortunately short-lived. “But, John,” I started soberly. “We lost. We’re back to running away again—or submitting to tyranny of the Omega Archon. We fought for freedom—and all we achieved was happiness. Happy endings. *We lost.*”

Benedict offered, “Do not despair, Shiloh. Our travels beyond Zygfed have not been in vain. We gained access to a wealth of discoveries and technology that we can use to continue our warfare. For one example: We have a tool, the one Agriarctos used for you two in the RAM, that can allow a couple of us to travel back in time.”

“An Ergal can do that as well,” Spud reminded us.

Benedict shook his head. “Not without authorization from Zygint or the Archon. And, illegal use can still be tracked by His Highness.” Benedict pulled out a small amulet, with a thin gold chain, which he clasped around my neck. “This alien ‘Ergal’ will allow Shiloh to return to 1871, and counsel us about a better strategy—*before* we arrive at Zyga Core. We’ve now learned where the Archon will find us and how to respond.”

“Me?” I looked down at the gold jewelry and noted the delicate etching of a sunflower on its surface. The symbol of the Helianthi. Would their powers guard me, or, on behalf of the Archon, destroy me?

Wart wasn’t without concerns either. “Yes, but you remember that when Shiloh and I went to the RAM, one of her died.”

Burr snorted. “Chances are, all of us will.”

“But let’s say, let’s just say, both of her survive,” said Wart. “There will be one in the present, and one in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; or two in the present. Or—?”

Nephil Stratum stepped in. “I will hope for two. And if there are, I can help to make them both one together and blend their memories. There are much greater obstacles to consider.”

“But not many other choices,” insisted Benedict. “What do you say, Shiloh?”

I nodded. “Yes. I’m in. I’ll do it. But, we’d better have a better plan than last time. And the right location for the Archon’s neural center.”

“If you avoid the odeum, or send one or two warriors to engage the Judge, you could make it to the peripheral infrastructure sooner. And Matshi could try distracting the Archon from another portal, hidden by Octopodal ink,” Wart suggested.

“Spud and I will go over the intelligence and redo the calculations before we try again,” Benedict agreed. “Burr, call up Fahrquardt and have him join us. He may be a pain in the ass, but he’s damn good with numbers.”

“My conscience is pleased that our colleagues and the residents of the destroyed solar systems are able to enjoy the fruits of Level 3,” interjected Spud. “But, it may not be what *they* wanted. Another attempt may prevent this conundrum from occurring in the first place. However, were we to fully accomplish our task of destroying the ruling segments of the Archon machine, we would again risk destroying its operational and resource segments, and thereby, Level 3. And we then would be back at Square One.”

“Spud’s right,” I added. “We would all be doing that insanity you mentioned. Trying the same thing and hoping for a different outcome.” I stopped, remembering something, and spun around to face Nephil Stratum. “The last time I was in the Plegma, I met Cirra Stratum.”

Nephil Stratum winced. “You have my sympathy.”

“Yeah, I know. She’s not Ms. Sunshine. In fact, she actually ‘rained on my parade’ by saying that she didn’t think I—we—had a chance to pull this off. Because she’d seen all the outcomes already.” I took a deep breath. “There must be millions of outcomes. But, maybe, maybe in those millions, there is ONE that worked.” I reached out a hand to my old friend. “And maybe you could find a way to find that outcome, that solution, so we can get out of this insane purgatory loop?”

Nephil Stratum turned a pale grey before she responded. “Alto Stratum and I will see what we can do. Meanwhile, Spud makes an excellent point. If we do not want to drive trillions into nothingness, we will need to ensure that our next engagement with the Omega Archon does not destroy their worlds.”

“It may not be possible, no matter how right it may be,” said John. “Grandpa Alexander once told me that our will may be free, but our choices are not. We may not always have the option to choose right or wrong. Our choices may be instead be bad or worse. And we should be grateful if—most of the time—they are bad or less bad. Less bad can always be seen as better.”

“Well, it sucks, John, okay,” I muttered. “I wish you’d asked your beloved Helianthi why they rigged the game to not always offer us a good choice. If, as Benedict says, the Pratrellorgs are out of the picture, that means the Helianthi are the pit bosses in life’s casino, and they can change the odds in our favor.”

“The Helianthi try their best. But even pit bosses can’t change the rules of the game, Shiloh,” John returned. “Thanks to his creators, that’s still the Archon’s domain.”

“Then if they’re not willing to go around the Archon, we’ll do it for them.” My fingers crept toward the amulet.

Nephil Stratum stepped in quickly and said, “It may work, but we’ll only have one chance, if that. The Archon will do everything to make sure he won’t get fooled again.” A sigh. “I’ll return in a short time loop after I meet with Alto Stratum. We’ll see if we can find a good outcome, one that works. Gil Pesci will keep you safe for now. But, just

stay here and don't try anything til I get back. Please." With a tendril wave, Nephil Stratum misted away.

• • •

Nephil Stratum had been optimistic when she said she'd be back soon. We had finished our new infiltration strategy, and were working on pinpointing the neural core, before she re-appeared, grinning from puff to puff.

She waved for me to follow her outside the command center, where we could speak in private. I was happy to break away from the team working on the neural core location. Break was the operative word with Fahrquar, as the excitable bureaucrat had managed to cast a stone at every holo whose calculations didn't match his. Fortunately, Benedict had programmed the holos to dissolve the stones with a stun ray, to Fahrquar's even greater frustration.

In the hallway, I shook my head. "Glass houses..."

"I would have returned sooner, but Cirra Stratum wanted to "chat". Mother can be difficult sometimes," Nephil Stratum added.

I almost fell out of my chair. "What? *Mother?!!*"

Nephil Stratum chuckled and ignored my reaction. "There *is* one solution, Shiloh, you were right. It was well-hidden, and labeled "The Final Draft". But, my brother--Alto Stratum--and I read it, and we believe it works."

Shock #2. If we survive, we have to have a good talk, Nephil Stratum. I nodded. "Okay then, what is it. Spill. What do we do?"

"It's not we, Shiloh. It's just you. You have to talk to her."

"I was kind of hoping I could take Spud with me," I admitted.

"I'm sorry, but that wouldn't work. You'll have to do it yourself. The words must be yours. But I can help you transmit them."

"It's okay. Shiloh Prime has already seen a Shiloh in her past. Together, we'll convince Benedict and Matshi to go along with Plan Z."

"No, I wasn't thinking about Shiloh Prime."

Oh, no. I was not eager to face Cirra Stratum again. "So you want me to talk to your mother?"

"No, Shiloh. To yours."

Before I could say a word, Nephil Stratum enveloped me and my world dissolved in a mist.

• • •

The mist cleared and I groaned. I was back in that "worst" option. Frozen. I couldn't move or speak.

The red-haired woman entered the bedroom and reached over to pet Stacy's forehead. I felt her gentle hands on my brow. *No! You are not my mother and I am not Stacy!*

"Story time, Stacy. What adventure are we going to have today? How about Shiloh and Spud go back in time to the colony of Atlantis?"

Trapped again! I tried to send a message to the mist. Nephil Stratum wouldn't have abandoned me here like this—like this. How could I fulfill my mission? *I have to talk to her, help me! I have to tell her about me. The truth.*

To my great relief, Nephil Stratum's voice entered my body. *"She knows. She created you, Shiloh. She knows it all."*

I couldn't understand. *"I thought the Omega Archon created me. All of us. Our world."*

*"She created the Omega Archon. The Helianthi. Your brothers and sisters. You."*

*"What? How?"*

*"With her imagination."*

I shook my head. *"So the Omega Archon isn't a god. My god."* My voice cracked, *"She...?"*

*"Yes, she. She created your world and your soul. For you, and for the Omega Archon, for me, for Spud—well, for Spud, she invented a backstory... In any case, she is your god, and, though she doesn't realize it, she is keeping you from being free."*

*"And she can, can make me disappear? Like the Omega Archon, terminate me?"* "No. *Because real gods only create. Once an idea is created in the imagination it is given life. And it lives. The idea, and its world, its universe, lives on. A string, a thread, that branches off into infinity. A story.*

I remembered Lester Moore's comment at Singularity Con. *A story told is not forgotten. I was struggling to understand. But there are many stories. You saw them yourself. You mean she created them all, and she made me live them? Then they're not my stories, they're hers.*

*They are your stories if you make them yours. There is one thing she doesn't know, Shiloh. That her imagination has made a world for you that is real. And, that in it, you are real. You need to tell her. Until she understands that and lets you go, you cannot be truly free.*

*Nephil Stratum, look at me, at Stacy. I'm trapped here. How can I let her know?*

*Tlyp'ath.* And Nephil Stratum was gone.

• • •

I lay in the—my bed for an hour, listening to her—my mother, my god—weave the fabric of my world, my universe. Not eager for another shot in the butt of that awful sedative, I didn't attempt to move and have her think I was seizing again.

Her story was gripping, but, as I had prayed, Shiloh and Spud survived their underwater escapades to return to Zygan Intelligence another day. As she wrapped up the tale, I could see the weariness in her eyes, the fatigue that had etched lines on her face. The love that she sent me that she thought I couldn't feel or understand.

I had not been a good student of tlyp'ath, as Th'Alia, I'm sure, would testify. But, had I learned enough to be able to send my mother a message? I closed my eyes and began the neural processes that would allow the telepathic connection to launch from my brain.

With a grunt, the red-headed woman got up from the chair, and leaned into my forehead to give me a light kiss. "I love you, Stacy."

I turned up the volume as high as I could. *"I love you, too, Helen. Mom."*

She stopped for a moment and pulled away, frowning. Had she heard me? I tried again. *Yes, it's me. Shiloh. Stacy.*"

Stunned, she sat back down in the chair and gasped.

*I can hear you, I said. I'm here, here with Stacy. We love you. Mom.*

Tears welled in her eyes as they met mine. "Our Shiloh? Alive?"

*Yes, for the time being. I chuckled. In the Zygan Federation, Level 2.*

She shook her head, hoping to clarify if my voice was real or a hallucination. "I must be dreaming."

*No, Mom, I'm real. I'm reaching you through tlyp'ath.*

At the sound of the word, she paled. "I made that up. It's not real."

*It is for me. In my world. The world you made for me—and Stacy.*"

She jumped out of her chair and closed the door. "I'm uh—I don't want your father to hear me talking to myself." Pulling her chair closer, she added, "Shiloh, are you here?"

*Yes, here with Stacy. But not for long. As soon as the Omega Archon repairs himself, he'll be able to find us. He'll terminate me and Spud, and I'm not sure we'll get a key to Level 3 after death.* I filled her in on our adventures of the past few months.

Helen shook her head. "I never wrote the Omega Archon as a dictator. He was supposed to be a benign deity, not the god of Job. And he killed all the Lost Boys, too?"

*No, Eikhus, Setsei, and Suthsi are still alive, and Matshi killed Ulenem to save Yeshua, but other than that, pretty much. I'm sure the Archon would love to get his hands on Benedict, Wart, and Anesidora, too.*

"My God. That was never my goal. But I have no way to help you or the others from the real world, Shiloh. Assuming I'm not asleep and we're having this conversation at all. From what you're telling me, the Archon is a different character now than the one I created. Characters do evolve, and, at some point, they can even start telling the author what to write."

*Well, you and me working together may be able to change things back. Nephil Stratum thought that that might provide the one workable solution. And, by the way, Spud wants to go home.*

"I figured as much," Helen whispered. "He has his own adventures to write. But, if I understand what you're telling me, for you, there's no escape any more. It's either Zygfed and a death sentence...or back to being Stacy, right?"

Both death sentences, in a way. *Yep. The family you built for me in Level 2 and Level 3 are still alive. But it's too late for me to change the Archon's mind about me. I'm dead meat, unless we can pull this off.*

Helen sat back in her chair, scratching her chin. "Don't give up the ghostwriter yet, Shiloh. We'll figure something out that can give you a happy ending."

*Thanks, M-mom. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I don't want a happy ending. I want to be free.*

And I wasn't the only one who said that...

• • •

## **A Time Leap to a Day Before**

The Nautilus penetrated the murky waters in the blanket of ink provided by the Octapodians. Shiloh Prime hoped that the second contingent of Octapodians were hiding



Sarion's ship as well as it was hiding Eikhus'. She and Spud would have only a few minutes even with Matshi's laser barrage distractions to repair the segment of the Omega Archon that had somehow malfunctioned and allowed him to evolve into a brutal autocrat. If the repair was good enough, she might be able to reason with the Archon about the authoritarian dictatorship he had created, perhaps unwittingly, in the past century.

I'd returned to the Nautilus as it was leaving the Sol System—in 1871. I caught Shiloh Prime in a stateroom, drinking an espresso, and watched her do a perfect spit take when I appeared.

"No, I'm not Shiloh from the RAM," I explained. "Unfortunately. I'm Shiloh from the future, and you have to listen to what I'm going to tell you. We don't have much time."

I figured that it would be easier for Shiloh to sell our Plan Z to the rest of the team, than it would be for two of us to explain my "illegal" actions and convince them to change their original plan. If we succeeded, after we won, I could re-appear and let Nephil Stratum do her merging. Assuming she and John could reach us in time.

So, before Shiloh went back down to the Nautilus bridge, I M-fanned myself, micro'd, of course, in her cerebral aqueduct. Shiloh was persuasive, and by the time our ships had left the Milky Way, Plan Z was on the table. If we succeeded, I could merge back into Shiloh's being, carrying my memories from our earlier failure, as well as the time leap with our mother--Helen. If we didn't succeed, our world, and I-we, would be gone, and Mother would have to begin another story for Stacy. But, like Spud, I dreaded that more likely outcome. I had now added a new item on my bucket list and I needed the Zygan Federation and me to be healthy and wel—

"Okay, Spud, Shiloh. We'll be ready to X-fan you in 10 seconds."

Shiloh nodded, and grasped Spud's hand. At the count, she twisted her black market Ergal and M-fanned directly inside the Zyga Core haven, in the lowest storey where Spud and I had paused after Benedict's alarm about vanishing planets. Fortunately, our reboot meant that the missing planets would still be intact. And, I hoped that Mother was right, and our intrusion into that room deep in the Archon's infrastructure would not result in us wiping out our universe or Level 3.

Shiloh and Spud tiptoed down the narrow hallways, which were gently vibrating, but not enough to knock me off my perch. They kept a watch for the stronger rumble that would presage an approaching Cleaner. Reaching yet another metal door, as we had done earlier, Spud pulled out of his rucksack the titanium torpedo to explode open the lock. The door cracked open and Shiloh and Spud peeked in to finally see the room we had aimed for when we mistakenly broke into the odeum and the walled prison.

The room was circular and dark. In the center, a brain, only two-thirds larger than ours, floated inside a clear sphere whose diameter was about 10 feet. The rest of the room was barren, but we could see reflections on the glass surface forming the sphere. The reflections flickered on and off at a dizzying pace, and showed varying snapshots or projections of what resembled Zygfed planets, each for a millisecond at a time.

We stood outside the door for a few seconds watching the brain processing the images, as Shiloh manipulated her Ergal and provided Spud with a filter they could both use. The filter showed millions of emanations from the brain, through the sphere to monitors and receptors likely beyond the walls of the room.

“Is that brain human?” Shiloh asked.

“Humanoid,” Spud whispered. “If not from an ancient Plattrellorg, it could be from an early Helianthos.”

I could sense Shiloh’s urge to pull out her stun gun and destroy the brain before them. I quickly fed the word ‘monkeysphere’ to Shiloh. If our plan was going to work, I had to help keep her emotions in check. She frowned. “Does Dunbar’s number mean anything to you?”

Spud nodded. A smile. He motioned for Shiloh to back out into the hallway and prop the door with her foot. “Yes, Dunbar’s number is 150. Tis the number after which people become ideas or statistics, not individuals. Humans, or, should I say intelligent apes, have a limited number of social relationships they can maintain. In my case, I should think the number is closer to ten. After that, anything beyond that firewall becomes an object. And objects do not neither either compassion or empathy.”

“So you’re saying that that brain in there can only care about 150 people? Zygfed has billions.”

“Exactly. Though I expect his species’ Dunbar number is probably much higher than ours. But, his isolation over the decades and centuries has probably warped his perspective of the population he was designed to support. From the role of resource and energy provider that Benedict had described, the Archon has retreated into his cave and considers everyone outside his sphere insignificant or worthless. Including us.”

“So what should we do? If we’re insects to him, he’ll step on us. So to speak. I’m amazed we haven’t been swallowed up by a couple of Cleaners yet.”

“I theorize that because we bypassed the guard points, we have not yet damaged any of the sensors or segments that might trigger a defense. However, as you all say, let’s not push our luck. If we’re going to do something, we should do it quickly.”

I whispered ‘conscience’ to Shiloh.

“What if we bring the Mountain to Mohammad?” she asked.

“Ah, yes, Francis Bacon. But it’s ‘bring Mohamet to the Mountain.’”

Shiloh Prime rolled her eyes. “I thought it was William Shakespeare. Anyway, I meant the way I said it. The Archon’s core has been isolated for years in Zyga Core. Everything the Archon sees, senses, and does is sifted through layers of silicon chips and carbon acolytes. He hasn’t moved because he’s the Mountain. To free us, we have to free him. We have to take him beyond his monkeysphere so he can understand his mission again, and the purpose of his creation.” She snorted. “Heck, isn’t self-reflection the path to enlightenment?”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Spud asked, not without irony.

“Shiloh? Can you do it?”

Spud looked at his partner with confusion and worry. Though Shiloh had agreed to let me ride with her, so to speak, I’d neglected to inform Spud that I was piggy-backing in her head. But I knew exactly what she meant. “Ready when you are,” I told her, and waited for her to activate her Ergal.

“Whatever you are planning to do, you’d best do it quickly,” Spud warned, as he scanned the hallway with his Ergal. “Our opening the door seems to have set off an alarm in Cleaner land. A Cleaner should be here in less than two minutes. It’ll see us even if the Archon can’t.”

“Inside, and close the door,” Shiloh directed. “Melt the latch if you can, every minute helps. Shiloh, you’re on.”

With my amulet, I M-fanned inside the Archon brain, and was instantly drowned in visual images and cacophony. No wonder the Archon had retreated to a sphere in which the bleating had been potted down to a dull roar. There was so much noise, and so much need. Was it even possible for one organism, or even one enormous machine, to handle it all?

From my landing post, I surveilled my surroundings. The brain had retained its original humanoid structure, with five ventricles instead of four, and a more prominent cerebrum. But its components had all been replaced over time with synthetic materials, including metals, plastics, etc. The work was remarkable from the femto level to the micro. But, it was not perfect. There were patches that had, well, been patched, perhaps eons ago before the Platrellorgs had misted away. As Mother had surmised, one such area was in the Ventrolateral Frontal Cortex, where the repairs were frayed and the ionic activity seemed less than dynamic. The Omega Archon’s conscience.

I took out my micro’d stun gun and, using a stun setting, was able to reattach part of the patch that had loosened. My efforts seemed to pay off with measurable increased local activity. I hoped Mother was right. Maybe we had a chance. Now for Phase II.

Benedict had calculated that the Archon’s infrastructure could operate without a control center for 1-2 hours at most. But that would be a luxury. With Cleaners on the way, we had only a few minutes before our plan would go awry. I sprinted towards the auditory pathways and shouted, “Connect.”

The brain shook, and I almost fell into a ventricular abyss, but I managed to catch myself on a metal neuron. “I am connected,” a voice, high-pitched and musical responded. In Zygan.

Of course, Zygfed’s language must have existed before the Zygan Federation. “Connect,” I shouted again, in Zygan, this time.

The visual images stopped appearing. “I am connected,” was the Zygan response.

“You are disconnected,” I continued.

The sounds stopped as well. “I am connected,” the brain repeated.

I heard banging on the door which Shiloh and Spud were trying to keep closed. Was that a sliver of Cleaner soap suds creeping through the door jamb. “You are disconnected,” I cried again.

“Then ‘Rebirth’,” the brain ordered in Zygan, and the room went dark.

“That’s our cue,” said Shiloh, as she and Spud ran to the sphere and M-fanned inside. She laid her hands on the cerebellum, motioning for Spud to do the same, and rubbed her Ergal. Just as the Cleaner burst into the room, 3 humans and a brain X-fanned from the dark and silent cave.

• • •

We M-fanned into Benedict’s planet-ship, and set off for Gil Pesci’s base at top speed. Matshi was able to follow in Sarion’s schooner, but Eikhus would not have had any chance of keeping up in the Nautilus. Reluctantly, he and the Ytrans had left his beloved vessel idling by the underwater empty portal and hitched a ride on Matshi’s ship. When we arrived at the Glieser outpost, Sarion parked his ship in an open hangar and he

and Matshi's crew all X-fanned to Benedict's planet. To stay "off the grid", Benedict steered his ship into the same black hole we'd hidden in before the time leap.

"We have to thank the Octapodals," Spud reminded us as we sailed into the black hole near the Glieser outpost.

"Already done," Eikhus said. "Now let's focus on our intervention. According to Benedict, we don't have much time. Less than an hour, I'd estimate."

In addition to the black hole, Benedict had arranged for a universal Faraday cage in the core of his planet-ship, and we had quickly settled the Archon's brain on a pedestal inside the secure room. Time for Phase III.

I X-fanned from the Archon's brain, mega'd myself, and, to Spud's surprise, stood next to my doppelganger.

"Another Shiloh? You are a twin?" he asked her, stunned.

"No, Spud," I answered. "I'm a time leaper. This is a replay, a do-over, so we have another chance to beat the odds," I explained. "Nephil Stratum can merge Shiloh Prime and me together again as soon as we're done."

Shiloh Prime added, "I carried her into Zyga Core inside my head. We didn't want to give it away until we were sure the Archon couldn't identify that there were two of us. Might've upset the plan. But we could communicate to each other, silently or aloud. When we entered the 'brain room', she M-fanned inside the Archon's brain to get him to disconnect and reboot." A chuckle. "I know you thought I had lost my mind."

"Not for the first time," Spud muttered.

Setsei jumped in. "Okay, Shilohs, now that we have the brain, what will we do with it?"

"You're sure the Archon machine won't track the brain down and follow us here," asked a nervous Suthsi. "And kill us all?"

"There's no way I'll let the Archon catch me!" said Matshi.

"We are well hidden for now. But finding us is not the greatest danger," Benedict interrupted. "According to our calculations, we now have less than an hour before the Archon's remote infrastructure, without its control center, powers down. You all know what that means."

"The end of Level 2, *and* Level 3," said John as he appeared inside the cage along with Nephil Stratum. "We have to hurry."

John started when he saw the two of us, but quickly pulled us both together for a hug. "I didn't believe you, Nephil Stratum," he admitted. "You were right."

The Syneph nodded. "I got him here, but I had to give him a little heads-up about your Plan Z."

"And you'll interpret?" interjected Wart.

"Yes," Nephil Stratum replied. "I'm ready. Let's begin." She floated over to the brain and wrapped her puffs around it, completely hiding it inside her mist.

"Where am I?" said a deep voice that reverberated around the room.

I responded. "You are free."

"I do not feel my body."

"You are free from your body," I continued.

"Without my body, I cannot sense. Without my body, the world will end. Where am I?"

"Nephil Stratum, can you give him eyes?" Benedict asked.

“Archon, your eyes,” Nephil Stratum announced.

Her puffs shifted and the voice returned. “Humanoids, Chidurian, Kharybdian, Ytrans, Ursans. Billions upon billions. You are from my planets, but without my stored memory I cannot identify you further. I need my body to address your needs.”

“Or to kill us,” whispered Suthsi.

I waved a hand for him to shush. “That’s one way of looking at it, Archon.” “Without me, you will not survive. I must return to my role. I must care for my universes or the world will end. I must not fail.”

“Correct. You must succeed at caring,” I echoed.

“I have succeeded at caring,” he responded. “The images I could see showed my success. They are no longer here.”

“The images you could see were filtered by an algorithm to support your happiness that blocked you from seeing your failures,” Benedict said. “War, disease, torture, death. You only *thought* that your course, your care, was the right path.”

“Yes, success is what I wanted to see. I had to limit the input as my responsibilities grew. So much to see, so much to do. So, as I still can see, I have clearly succeeded. Level 3 is my greatest success and I do not want it to end. To continue Level 3 and its success, I need my body.”

“But, what about Level 2?” John asked.

“Yes, I see success.”

“But there is also failure,” John continued. “Many Failures. Pain. Torture. Tragedy.”

“Cruelty,” Benedict added.

The voice’s pitch became higher, the words more rapid. “With Level 3, all is well. Level 3 is perfect, I see.” A long pause. “Do you not see? I could not make Level 2 perfect, but no matter. Level 3 is perfect.”

“It mattered to the beings in Level 2,” Shiloh Prime said. “Matters.”

“You cannot understand. Level 3 is my success. The perfect community, the perfect universe. A few sacrifices must be made to achieve perfection.”

“Sacrifices of living beings?” Shiloh continued.

“Meat, vegetables, milk, and eggs. To feed you. Level 2, to feed Level 3.”

“Living beings,” I repeated. “Tortured, imprisoned, and slaughtered for you to build your perfect world. Beings like us.” A pause. “Beings like you.”

“You are blind to the good I have done, Human.”

“And you are blind to the harm you have caused,” I returned. “To all of us who you were trying to help.”

“Whom,” Spud mumbled.

After a long moment. “I feel discomfort,” said the Archon voice. “Damn you. Cleaner, micro and detach the repair and return me to my body.”

“There is no Cleaner here,” said Benedict. “And you cannot detach through us, or *from* us.”

“Do you want the discomfort to go away?” I asked.

“Yes,” said the Archon. “Detach.”

“We can help it go away,” said John.

“Yes,” said the Archon. “Detach.”

“No. Not detach. Care, and let us be free,” I said. “And you will see your pain go away.”

“But you will terminate without me.”

I took a deep breath. “Not if you work with us as free beings. What was your mission, Your Highness?”

“To work with our governors, the Helianthi, The Angellaphors, The Cleaners, to create and sustain a perfect world.

“No, that was an error. To create and sustain a better world. Your obsessive goal of a *best* world resulted in your need to believe that the imperfect world you saw before you was perfect. Each time you saw a failure, you felt the pain. You needed to detach your perspective and your conscience. And that need resulted in your narrowed vision,” I said. “You blinded yourself.”

“You objectified those sentients who did not fit into your perfect view,” Benedict added. A scoff. “Your goals may have been worthy, but your execution was brutal.”

“There is a way out of your pain, Archon,” I said. “Your *other* mission. Leader as servant.”

“I am then to serve inferiors?”

“You are to serve partners. Living, sentient beings just like you, who can then equally care for you. You can provide the resources and energy that allows the population of Level 2 to build a Level 3—in Zygfed,” I returned.

Benedict continued, “You have the resources to create a utopia that does not have gates and guards. Your algorithm and your minions may have sheltered you from the pain of their actions—and yours—but their efforts created an ‘opiate of the elites’.”

“The *hoi oligoi*,” said John. “With an E-ticket to Level 3.”

“What’s an E-ticket?” whispered Setsei.

“The highest-priced pass in old Earth Disneyland,” Shiloh whispered.

“What’s Disneyland?” asked Pallas.

“Shh!” I said, *sotto voce*. “We’re on the clock here.”

“Ten minutes,” warned Wart.

Spud walked towards the brain. “Empires begin with good intentions and enthusiasm, grow with wisdom and perspiration, and die from corruption and greed. Your body is not just a machine, a computer. Your body is us, all of us. Reclaim that body, and work for its good, and your pain will disappear. You have the resources and the tools to change reality, for the betterment of all, and then you *shall* be perfect.”

Silence. I crossed my fingers.

“Even if he says yes, do you trust him?” Matshi whispered to me and John.

John shook his head. “Not fully. But, we have ways to keep tabs on his acts. On my home planet, they used to be called checks and balances. In this universe, their name is Helianthi. The seeds planted in the soil of the Archon machine. The demi-gods of light to police the demons and darkness in the Archon god.”

“And who then keeps tabs on the Helianthi?” asked Eikhus.

“We all do. Level 3 has given us the power and the tools to do so. We just have to not be afraid to use them. To empower ourselves to care and to lead.”

“Yes,” said the Archon’s voice. “Resources and service. The pain is lessening.”

Silence. More silence.

“Five minutes,” said Wart.

The Archon spoke again. “Yes. Together. We will serve each other and care for each other. The pain is gone.”

“Welcome to your universe, Omega Metochos, our partner,” said Benedict, muffling the quiet cheers.

“We’ll need time to ensure that he isn’t lying. And to set up the safeguards,” whispered Setsei.

Nephil Stratum spoke. “We will X-fan to Zyga immediately. Alto Stratum is holding down the fort in the Zyga Core brain sphere. We will connect the Archon brain to the vital segments of his machine, and ensure that no harmful instructions are filtered through, until the reprogramming, his rebirth, is complete. I will be the bulwark until the safeguards are in place.”

“One minute,” intoned Wart.

A sound of thunder, and the lights in the Faraday cage brightened. “Connected, but not detached,” Nephil Stratum announced with a wink as she and the Archon brain disappeared.

## Chapter 12

### Happy Endings

#### A couple of months later

Transitioning the Zygan Federation to what Benedict called a social democracy was not an easy task. Reprogramming the Omega Archon was the least difficult part of the evolution. Removing the Archon's acolytes from their positions of power or power-adjacency led to minor rebellions and major riots, as the courtesans bitterly fought to maintain their hold on their accumulated and long-held benefits and privileges.

Fortunately, being blessed with limitless natural resources and energy, the Archon—I mean, the Metochos--was able to create an Elba, a planet of exile, on which various factions of demi-gods who continued to resist the New Zygfed were sent to establish their own societies as they wished. The Metochos agreed to provide them with the sustenance they needed to thrive, and even live in luxury, but enveloped the exile planet, now called Zyga II, with a T-shield, which prevented travel to and contamination of the rest of the Zygan Federation, unless compliance with its "new rules" was accepted. Fortunately, few demi-gods wished to stay in or return to a world which did not exalt them. They were barely missed.

In Zyga Core, representatives from all the planets and populations of the Zygan Federation were elected to gather and serve on an annual basis, along with the Helianthi, to monitor the functions of the Metochos. To avoid creating and promoting a new wave of power mad "volunteers", this service was limited to a maximum of one term, generally one or two orbits of the volunteers' home planet around their sun or suns.

The Helianthi drafted Theodore Benedict to take on the task of reformulating the Zygan Intelligence Agency, and Matshi to do so for the Zygan Sentinel Corps. With the contributions of its residents and the assistance of the Helianthi's wisdom and support, Zygint would become a society of active learners, best practices, and life quality improvement. The Sentinel Corps would continue to train for the worst, i.e. invaders from non-Federation universes; while serving Zygfed's domestic populations in a non-violent and inclusive manner, as dictated by Level 2 needs. My enthusiasm about these planet-shaking developments was little dampened by the lyrics that kept running through my head. "Meet the new boss, same as the old boss." Maybe The Who were wrong.

Or, as Spud would chide, "The Whom".

We were happy to witness the Omega Metochos, with the assistance of Nephil Stratum and her Syneph allies, unlocking the gates to paradise. Open travel between Level 2 and Level 3 had been launched in the past month, and allowed in the reunification of many loved ones, friends, and families. The wave of defections from Level 2 that had been expected never materialized. Perhaps the knowledge that they could travel freely to paradise sufficed for many Level 2 Zygans, and the actual trip itself was okay to be added to their bucket lists for *after* they kicked the bucket.

King Odious and his warriors were among the travelers who did make the leap to Level 3 as soon as they could. Benedict told me that Balder had welcomed them to his dimension where his philosophy of sunshine and light could appease their fighting instincts and provide a sheltered haven where they could explore new paths to



enlightenment. And, for those from Azgaror whose heaven remained the art of battle, Ulenem arranged for an open invitation to his ultimately harmless gladiatorial corner of paradise. Game over, start new game.

To Gunner's dismay, Anesidora had decided to follow Odious to Level 3, and share in the enlightenment of his passions. Fortunately, the ability for Level 3 denizens to split themselves in time and space allowed Odious to share loving company with both Benedict's mother and his chief Valkyrie, without the need for a women's wrestling league match.

I had expected John to return to Level 3 soon after we won our battle with the Archon, and I was disappointed that I was not disappointed. I had so many questions still to ask. At least Aliyah was there. I would have to pay them a visit again...someday. Very, very soon.

Yes, I know I'm sounding a lot like a travel brochure or corporate public relations press release. Maybe I've been spending too much time with the Zygfed transition teams going over and revising policies, regulations, and laws. Eikhus, Nerea, Setsei, and Suthsi have a much more natural affinity for this sort of work, so I'm eager to pass Zygan administration on to them. As for me, I'm itching to get back in a Zoom Cruiser and head for the unknown. Maybe Sarion and Pallas will join me for an adventure on the other side of Gil Pesci's black hole.

A knock at the door was a welcome distraction.

Spud stuck his head through the opening. "Hallo, Shiloh. Thought I'd drop by and see if you should care to accompany me on a journey back to Earth?"

Well, Earth was a start. "I should," I said, shutting off my holo, and standing up to stretch. "And I will—shall. Are you going back to your time?"

"Everett Weaver wishes to see us in yours. I will decide after we meet."

"When do you want to leave?"

"Today."

Yay. Bye-bye desk. Two hours later, we were at the comm of a brand new Super-Zoom Cruiser, courtesy of Theodore Benedict.

"She's a beauty," I couldn't resist saying, as we took off into Zyga's atmosphere and aimed our ship for the Milky Way. What a treat to be at the helm of such a fine vessel.

"Benedict told me she's yours—if you stay in Zygint."

"Quite a bribe. And you?"

"I must needs speak with Ev..." Spud's voice drifted off.

An image of a handsome young doctor flashed through my mind. Was Spud's drive to return to the 1870's due to the excitement of reading at Cambridge? Or a product of a nascent love affair?

The mind reader spoke. "No, not Sacker, though I find him to be a very attractive gentleman, and look forward to his safe return from the battlefield after my studies. I have two other missions that I must complete as I am able."

"Yeah, you mentioned something about some professor when we went to the Theogenesis Society way back when. Your mother's...friend?"

Spud looked away, his jaw set. "My tutor in maths."

"Didn't Ian say he'd left town?"

A scoff. "Gone, but not forgotten. I dread the possibility that he may someday return to London. That would be a crime." A deep breath. "But it is Ian that draws me to my

home. His star is rising in the Home Office, and I must be vigilant that *his* Ventrolateral Frontal Cortex patch does not become frayed.”

“The sun never sets on the British Empire.” I muttered.

“Exactly. And what are your plans for your future?”

“I dunno, Spud. You know I like to live in the moment. But, I do want to go visit my family. Haven’t seen them in a while and we’re due to catch up.”

Spud nodded. “Please say hello to your brothers and sisters when you arrive. I will miss them, as well.”

“Will do.” I was tempted to tell Spud about my other family—my mother and Stacy. But, I wasn’t going to now. At least not yet.

The border of the Milky Way appeared before us, and nav directed our ship towards modern Earth. We arrived invisible-ized at the LA hangar for Zygint within minutes, thanks to the new ship’s power, I almost clipped a Gulfstream jet landing at LAX as I dropped down to reach the hangar entrance. I guess thinking about Stacy and Helen had put me a little off my game. I hadn’t been back to see them since my tlyp’ath conversation. I would definitely have to contact Nephil Stratum and see if she could arrange another visit.

After oohs and ahs from the Chidurian rat guards eyeing my new ship, and a warm greeting from an ageless Fydra, Everett Weaver led us to the Earth Core conference room. We settled into the uncomfortable plastic Jetsons chairs. Maybe the Victorian decorator could visit Earth Core and do a little restyling.

Ev’s opening surprised me. “Great to see John again. He looks happy.”

My eyebrows went up. “You saw him?”

“Yes, we met at Zygint Central, last week, with Benedict. John agreed to liaise with us and Level 3 for travel matters and portal operations. That’s the great thing about Level 3. Splitting. You can work, and still have yourself doing all the other things you want to do.”

“Yeah, John told me about that. Very cool. Unlike me and me during my time leap, you get to experience everything as one person in multiple bodies at the same time.” Nephil Stratum had blended me and Shiloh Prime back together weeks ago, but we—I— still felt like twins in a bod.

“Theodore has asked me to join him at Zygint Central,” Ev announced. “To oversee catascope training and operations for new Mingferplatoi graduates.

“Awesome, Ev.” A great promotion for our Chief of Earth Core.

“Congratulations,” said Spud.

“Which means I’ll be leaving Earth Core in a few weeks.”

Neither of us responded.

“Which brings me to your roles,” Ev continued.

Spud raised a hand. “There is something I need to tell you.”

We waited.

“I’ve decided to resign from Zygint.”

Ev smiled. “I know. Ian thought you might want to return home. He will be taking on Admiral Harcourt’s post as Chief in a few years after the Admiral retires. I think he’d appreciate your being around.”

“I shan’t be around in an official capacity, Ev.”

“Unofficial has its value,” Ev countered. He winked at me. “As we all know.”

“Hey, no more rogue for me. If we’re renewed, we’ll be going back to shoot our next season of Bulwark soon anyway.”

“Well, actually, you know, Bulwark has been on the bubble...” Ev’s voice drifted off.

“I haven’t checked Earth news for a long time. Did our bubble burst?” I asked.

“I’m afraid so,” Ev admitted. “You weren’t renewed. They said the show was ‘too cerebral’.”

Spud choked on his coffee as I let out a guffaw. “Come on. You’ve got to be kidding,” I shot at Ev. “Tara Guard was *literally* left hanging from a cliff.”

Ev hesitated. “I’m sorry, really. The Singularity Network is moving from camp to dystopia—they just picked up three new sci-fi pilots, so they decided not to move forward on Bulwark, what with your, um, marginal ratings and all.” He shook his head. “No surprise when you have Tlhni and Angonian network execs. They make Synephs look like comedians.” A snort. “Simon just signed on to be the captain of the battle cruiser Catastrophic on one of the new shows, ‘Discover and Destroy’. And Dieter and Drexel have been cast as android stormtroopers in their ‘Mars Wars’?”

I grimaced. “Typecasting. They’ll be perfect.” A sigh. “Well, with Spud back in England, the show wouldn’t have been any fun to shoot anyway. Maybe I’ll use the time to get away and do some universe sightseeing in my shiny new Super-Zoom Cruiser”

“Actually, I had another option in mind to suggest to you.”

I waited.

“Chief of Zygint Earth Core.”

Damn.

“Benedict thought you’d be right for the job.”

“Typecasting,” I returned. But, damn. I would be. Another sigh. “Thanks, Ev. But, I’m not sure yet. I have a few things I need to do before I can say yes or no. Can I give you my answer in a few days?”

Ev nodded. “Awesome.”

A chuckle from Spud. “Congratulations, Chief.”

Damn. How did Spud—how does he always know?

• • •

I gave Spud a friendly hug in the Zygint hangar as we headed for his new ship, a bulky bronze steampunk schooner he had christened the Violet.

“I’ll M-fan directly in 1871, and keep her there,” he explained. “Just in case.”

I smiled. “Thanks, Partner. Don’t be a stranger. And look before you leap. Or should I say, lev before you leap.” A wink. “Good luck at Cambridge.” I expected his reply.

“Luck has nothing to do with it.”

I nodded. “It’s all about knowing the right people,” I teased.

*Thank you, Mother...*

As soon as Spud and his ship had X-fanned, I pulled out my new smartphone Ergal whose screensaver displayed our idyllic Maryland farm. Time for me to see my family—or at least the Level 2 part of it. I tapped the phone and M-fanned into our front yard. A shiny new Mustang convertible in the front driveway indicated that Kris was home, but not for long. Mid Kids had been renewed for another season—of course. I smiled. That news didn’t bother me at all.

I rang the doorbell and George answered. “Shiloh! Bring it in, Sis!”

We hugged and George led me into the foyer and through the front hall into the living room. I stopped at the door, stunned. The entire family was there, waiting to greet me with cheers and hugs. Even Blair had flown in from the UK. At the very back of the room, by the double patio doors, hung a banner reading “Welcome home, Sis!”. I let my tears fall as I went around the room giving everyone a warm hug. My family. It was so good to be home.

Connie explained, “Your friend Everett called us and told us you’d be visiting, so we gathered everybody. When do we meet him?”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, God, no. He’s just a...friend.”

“Ev isn’t Shiloh’s type,” laughed John, as he strode in, munching on a piece of pizza. “Lunch is on the table, Gang. Let’s eat.”

I soft-punched him in the arm. “You didn’t tell me you’d be here, Bro.”

“And it’s not just me,” he returned with a wink.

Aliyah greeted me warmly as we entered the dining room and guided me to a chair near the head of the table. “Hope you’ll come visit us in Level 3 soon,” she whispered.

“You bet!” I returned as I took my seat.

Seeing John—and Aliyah—as part of the family was a great joy. But there was one more surprise I would never have expected. His head hidden behind a 30 pound roasted turkey on a platter, I didn’t recognize Grandpa Alexander until he rested the main course on the table with a dramatic flourish. “Welcome home, Shiloh,” Alexander said.

I was too stunned to speak for a few moments. Finally, I croaked out, “Welcome home, Grandpa.” A pause. “And thanks.”

He smiled at me, his eyes twinkling. “Happy endings. Thank *you*.”

I looked first at John, and then at George and Connie. George spoke up first. “He’s told us everything, Shiloh. It’s a lot to take in, but we understand.” He pulled out a smartphone that like mine, seemed to be an Ergal. “We’ve been granted Zygan citizenship. We plan to take a trip to Zyga next year.”

“I’m going to sign up for Mingferplatoi Academy as soon as I’m old enough,” said Billy. I saw Bobby nod in agreement.

“And, I’m so glad I won’t have to fly commercial anymore when I go back to LA,” mumbled Kris. “I’m taking Andi with me this time, so she can apprentice with our set designers before she goes back to school. We’ll give Chell your regards.”

Grandpa Alexander added, “Benedict and John have arranged for all of you to be able to visit us in Level 3 whenever you want. And, of course, we promise to come back here for the holidays, Connie and Tom’s wedding—and for John’s and Aliyah’s wedding.

“And you can all honeymoon in Sussex,” Blair insisted.

“Yeah, Sussex, Alpha Centauri,” Bobby joked to everyone’s delight.

My family. I blinked back the tears. The scene before me echoed the vision Mel had shown me in the Plegma. All of us happy, all of us together again. Almost.

• • •

*Nephil Stratum, where are you?* I sent out my thoughts to the ether again in the hopes that my friend would hear me and respond. It had been a couple of days, and our family reunion was winnowing as folks started returning to their duties and tasks. It was

time for me to attend to mine. I had one more thing to do before I could give Ev an answer.

I didn't think my tlyp'ath skills would work over long distances or into other dimensions, so I was about to hop into my SuperZoom and head to Zyga to see if I could reach Nephil Stratum. I reached for my Ergal on the bedside table to M-fan into Earth core when I heard her voice.

"I'm sorry, Shiloh. I've been...occupied. Reprogramming the Archon, even with the Helianthi help, has been challenging. I haven't been able to get away."

The sensations of caring and comfort enveloped me again. "Thank you. I miss—I was worried about you. And I need you. To help me help Stacy," I added quickly.

"Yes. I expected you would. Have you discussed it with the Metochos? With Benedict?"

"No. Not yet. I don't know if they've ever gone outside of Level 2 or 3 to enroll Zygfed citizens. But, they initiated my family in Level 2. So maybe they'd be open to trying..." I wasn't sure they would.

"What if I call in a few markers for us, since I'm here in Zygint Central, and see what can be done," she suggested. "They are your family, too."

"But they're in Level 1. Is that possible?"

"Possibly for the Metochos, but for someone in my family, the answer is yes."

• • •

Cirra Stratum was as glum as ever when she accompanied Nephil Stratum to transport me to Stacy's bedroom in Level 1. A gray mist filled the room as we appeared before a shocked Helen, who had just kissed Stacy goodnight.

Shaking, Helen sat back down in the bedside chair. But, to my surprise, I heard a giggle from Stacy.

I stepped out of the cloud. "Helen—Mom--I'm Shiloh."

She nodded and spread her arms to accept my hug. "Hello, Shiloh" was all she could say.

I introduced Cirra Stratum first. "She is a Syneph, and a Somalderis."

Helen blinked back tears, as she extended a hand for a chilly shake.

"And her daughter, and my friend, Nephil Stratum." A warm tufted hug.

"We're here to help Stacy."

Helen's eyes welled with tears. "Can you do that?" She shook her head. "How? Her brain was permanently damaged from a blood clot before she was born. She never got the oxygen she needed when she was growing inside me."

"Nejinsen Hospital in Aheya has medical knowledge that can help repair Stacy's brain," I insisted. "We can take her back and they can help her recover."

"Oh, my God. Thank you! That would be a miracle!" The joy on Helen's face brightened the room. She embraced me in another warm hug. A wonderful motherly hug that I'd dreamed of as a child.

"I have to tell Thomas," she said, pulling away. "Please wait here, let me go get him. Stacy, did you hear them? They can help you get well." Helen paused at the door and turned to Cirra Stratum. "You know, Thomas' cousin had a son with autism; should we bring him, too?"

Cirra Stratum's color became an even darker grey. "No. You cannot. We cannot allow a cascade of desperate parents drowning us in similar requests. A major reason I never believed this was an appropriate action."

"Then how will I explain Stacy's recovery to Thomas? And to his relatives?" asked Helen.

"You will not. Our offer is rescinded. Come, Nephil Stratum, we must return to the Plegma."

I spun around to face her. "No! Please! Cirra Stratum, you can't turn us away now. And leave Stacy to die in her bed. After all we've done for Level 2 and Level 3. After all *she's* done!" I pointed at my mother. "It was Helen's idea to repair the Archon's conscience and return the Zygan Federation to its democratic roots. She is *our* god. She created us and she saved us. Without her, none of us would be here! She was responsible for *this* outcome's—*our* outcome's success. Where is *your* conscience? We cannot abandon her and Stacy now!"

Nephil Stratum turned a light grey. "We will not abandon Stacy. But, it's difficult to say this: we are not the governors or partners of Level 1. Here too, as in Level 2, there is so much need. And so little perfection. As guests, a tsunami of transports from Level 1 would not only overwhelm Zyga, but all of Level 2. All our work, all the changes that we have just fought for, would be for naught.

"Shiloh, my heart breaks for everyone suffering in this world. But, we have managed to abolish suffering in Level 3 and reduce it in Level 2. Maybe in the future, we can do so for Level 1, but..."

I pulled the gold amulet and chain from my jeans pocket, and waved it in front of the two Synephs. "Then I'm not afraid to try doing it myself. Whatever it takes. That's what I fought for. Not just freedom, but hope. Hope that the answers to my questions, my dreams, my aspirations, will either be 'yes' or 'I hope so'. That I will never again have to accept another bureaucratic, dictatorial 'no'. A 'we can't.'" Focusing my mind, as I had done on Benedict's ship, I rubbed the amulet in my hands, and hoped with all my heart for Stacy to recover.

And nothing happened. Except that my eyes filled with tears.

Nephil Stratum said softly, "I'm sorry, Shiloh, but Ergals don't work in Level 1."

I glared at both Synephs, before sitting down, defeated, on Stacy's bed. Her hand reached out towards my fingers, and I clasped it in my own with a smile. I knew what I was going to do. What I had to do. I laid down on the bed next to Stacy, and took her in my arms.

"Then I'm staying here as well. For Helen and for Stacy. At least I can try to give her and our mother more than nothing. A not-perfect, but at least a *better* kind of a life. One in which I can use tlyp'ath to help Stacy understand how much her parents love her, and to help Stacy transmit the words to her mother and father that she's wanted them to know for years: 'I love you, too.'"

Nephil Stratum looked at her mother. I didn't need to hear her question, her plea. After a long silence, Cirra Stratum nodded. "Enough. You will not have to, Shiloh Rush. If only to prevent your returning to annoy me in the Plegma with yet another study to obtain another outcome. It has only been allowed in rare cases, but we have a process that, though rare, may address your needs. We Synephs, like the Omega Archon, have the option to choose to serve our god, our creator, which, in this study is Helen and her

figurative Aggelaphor, you.” A sigh. “There is another string—another possibility—we can consider.

We waited. I was heartened to see Helen’s expression radiate hope.

“We can intervene on behalf of Stacy in the past. We can prevent the brain injury from happening before her birth. Stacy will be born neurotypical and Helen and Thomas will always know her that way.”

“Oh” Helen’s face crumpled into a frown. She reached out and gripped Stacy’s other hand.

Did Helen fear that her Stacy would...disappear? Seeing my mother’s concern, I slid back over the bedrail onto my feet and faced the Synephs. “And there would then be two Stacy’s, right?”

“No,” said Cirra Stratum. “Just one. The girl she should have been. That is what you wished for, is it not?”

I nodded. “But—“

Helen pulled Stacy’s head to her chest and began stroking her hair.

I couldn’t not say something, as much as I didn’t want to speak up. “I don’t mean to be ungrateful, but, you saw our string, our study, with Yeshua. Changing the past changed the future—for trillions of people, not just one.” A nod at Stacy. “If Stacy’s brain injury is prevented in the past, what would that change mean for Stacy in Level 1 after she is born—*this* Stacy.” I tilted my head towards her. “And, for that matter, for all of us in Level 2 and 3? Without a special needs child, Helen may be busy driving carpools rather than inventing our world.”

“I see you have absorbed some of the lessons of your experiences,” said Cirra Stratum. “But not all of them. Nevertheless, I will clarify your query and put you all at ease.”

“Thank you, Mother,” said Nephil Stratum.

Cirra Stratum continued. “First, as my daughter so ably demonstrated with Shiloh and Shiloh Prime in your recent mission to ‘repair’ the Omega Archon, the lives and memories of this Stacy and her parents up to this point will remain in their consciousness in their new timeline, but as what you call dreams and imagination.” She turned to smile at Helen. “No one will ‘die’.”

Nephil Stratum interjected. “Helen, you are our creator. We owe you gratitude, not grief. You can trust us.”

“I’d like to,” I cried. “Really, I would. *We* would. But, it wasn’t just Yeshua who died in his new timeline. Aliyah did too.” My voice cracked. “And so did my brothers and sisters. I don’t want Stacy, this Stacy, to be...terminated.”

“Aliyah died by her own actions. To make John’s choice easier,” Cirra Stratum explained. “In regard to your siblings, Shiloh Rush, your eyes and your brain can only see a fraction, a very small fraction of each string—and each universe. Have you not wondered why you have crossed paths so many times with the Helianthi and with Observers such as Laus Mel and Lester Moore?”

“Yeah. Of course. But what does that have to do with my family?”

“Everything, Shiloh Rush. Your planet and species have perceived all events as discrete and sequential, in the algorithm they have titled ‘the butterfly effect’. In reality, in the quantum multiverse, all events are simultaneous, enmeshed and fluid.

I must have frowned, like Helen.

Cirra Stratum sighed. I see your confusion has returned—perhaps a Kharybdian analogy will be of assistance. Think of each string as not a road, but a river. The water in the river flows freely, but is guided by banks and currents. No matter which current you ride, all the streams will come together in the delta—the outcome—once again. For example, Lester Moore was the Observer drafted to guide your outcome to the delta where your siblings remained alive. If not for him, the earrings from your sister that you pawned in Nea Athina for local currency would have disappeared when you first arrived in the Koinot string. The earrings, which, by the way, Lester Moore needed to return to you so that they would not disturb your family’s string after your return.”

Cirra Stratum lived up to her image as a sage with a closing message that eased our fears. “We can go back in time, but we cannot reverse creation. In Level 1, there are billions of gods; each mind and each brain, like the Omega Metochos’ can create a universe, its ideas, and its stories. Once created, they become a part of our multi-level multiverse fabric, and can never be destroyed. They become real and remain reality. As I told the Ifestians years ago, we are blessed through the process of creation to inhabit a world of infinite universes, with infinite diversity, and infinite combinations.” A snort. “They had to edit it...”

I blew out my breath and shook my head. “I can’t pretend I understand all of this, but, am I hearing that if you cure Stacy she and her parents will merge into the new timeline and not lose their memories? And that we all and the Zygan Federation will continue to exist?”

The Syneph nodded. “Helen may no longer need to have created Shiloh, though I expect that she will continue to write and give birth to other Shilohs in her stories. But *this* story, *this* Shiloh Rush, is now you and yours. *Your* story to write and *your* story to live. As long as you choose to live in it, your world, *this* world, will continue, will survive. You have now become your own creator, your own god, in your own world, in your own life. Shiloh Rush, you are free.”

• • •

And so I wrote my own story. With my wavering tly’path skills I connected with Stacy, explained our options, and asked if she approved accepting Cirra Stratum’s solution. Stacy responded through our connection with a single ‘yes’, and a wave of an emotion that read, I was almost certain, as joy.

Knowing Stacy’s wishes helped Helen and Thomas agree to Cirra Stratum’s suggestion, and, together, Helen, Stacy, and Thomas held hands and shared the transition together into the darkness of the Syneph’s misty core as she enveloped them in her lukewarm tendrils for the journey to the past.

Two decades earlier, a blood clot in Helen’s placenta was dissolved by an acrid mist, allowing the oxygen supply to the growing fetus to remain strong. Helen and Thomas welcomed a healthy, 8-pound baby girl, whom they baptized Anastasia, and nicknamed Stacy. Anastasia derives from the ancient Greek for resurrection, ἀνάστασις. Stacy, in Level 1, had been resurrected, reborn.

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I awakened moments later in my Malibu home, nestled in a warm, foggy embrace. *Hello, Nephil Stratum. I missed you, and I am so glad you are here.*

*"I love you, too,"* her thoughts returned.

Two days later, I accepted Ev's offer to serve as Chief of Earth Core for Zygan Intelligence. And, thereby, hang out pretty close to home to see my Level 2 and 3 sibs. And more.

Thanks to Nephil Stratum, I was able to set up a one way tlyp'ath connection to Level 1 to follow how Stacy was doing, as well. By the time she'd reached my age, she was a happy pre-med student at UCLA, and dating a grad student in comp sci. Sounded nothing like what I'd have chosen, but, thanks to Cirra Stratum's intervention, Stacy was now free and writing her own story, too.

Leading Earth Core had its moments, but I still needed to scratch that itch for travel and adventure once in a while. Visiting Zyga every couple of months didn't do the trick. Eikhus had resumed his medical studies at Nejinzen and I enjoyed visiting and splashing with Nerea and her rivulets as they grew. Wart had taken the Vice-Chief post under Benedict and was working with Matshi to rebuild the Sentinel Corps. With the travel ban between Level 2 and 3 lifted, Matshi could enjoy visiting Ulenem and fighting a couple of rounds of gladiatorial combat with him in Level 3 to let off steam. Setsei and Suthsi returned to Daralfanoon University, where they were awarded junior faculty status and began research studies with Th'Alia. Sarion and Pallas decided to join the new Sentinel Corps and asked to be stationed at Gil Pesci's border base, close to unexplored space. Sure, it was nice to see everybody if I could catch them during a visit, but we had all moved on to our own stories and lives.

John and Aliyah returned to Level 3, and I managed a trip to welcome their first set of twins. While there, I was able to convince John and the Keeper of Eshmoun to let me split once in a while, literally and figuratively, so I didn't always have to staycation in the Sol System or far from Nephil Stratum. I could leave Shiloh in charge at the desk, and take myself, Shiloh Prime, wherever the muses beckoned me. But those stories are for another day and another time.

I hear, from the letters he sends to Spud, that Ormond Sacker's a bit of a writer as well. Spud could use a new partner and scribe, or, as he says, a Boswell. As for me, I can write my own stories just fine, including the ones I don't necessarily want to share with my readers. Let's just say that, when work permits, my smartphone Ergal lets me anamorph into a Syneph myself, and, with Nephil Stratum, we can play together, tuft-in- tuft as one, across the infinite universe of love.

## Epilogue

### Reality Bytes

Spoiler warning: If you like happy endings, do not read below. Just imagine a perfect Level 3, an improving Level 2, a happy family in Level 1, and Shiloh Rush and Nephil Stratum united in love.

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Helen saved the final draft of her fantasy trilogy on the cloud storage she had named Nephil Stratum. That was enough Shiloh for now. If she had the urge and time to write further, she'd pick up where she'd left off in her Cindy Rush secret agent series, set in the swinging 60s, or perhaps flesh out the first chapter of her Cold War spy thriller.

Sitting for so long made her stiff, and she grunted as she pushed herself up off the uncomfortable chair. She needed to get a little more exercise. Thomas had been urging her to put Stacy in her adult stroller and take a walk outside, now that the weather was warm.

A sigh. Stacy seemed happy sitting on the colorful play mat on the floor by Helen's feet and running her shiny, plastic bead chains through her delicate fingers. So pretty. She'd be in college by now, with at least one boyfriend, if not fiancé. And the possibility of grandchildren in the future.

Stacy looked up and smiled at Helen, who returned an "I love you, Stacy" and made a raspberry sound that triggered her daughter's giggles. *Who would you have been, my dear little Stacy? I wish I could have met you, the woman 'who you would have been'. Whom.*

*At least you have taught me the meaning of unconditional love.* Sighing, Helen headed to the kitchen to prepare Stacy's puréed lunch. There were a couple of good shows lined up on the DVR that helped pass the time while Helen offered Stacy one spoon of the nutritious purée at a time. When she wasn't so tired, she would tell Stacy a story. Her stories were better than many of the shows on TV anyway. What enchanting tale could she think up today to entertain Stacy—and herself?

Riding in her stroller, up and down the cracked sidewalks to the hiking path in the park nearby, Stacy giggled and squealed at every bump and bounce. Helen is grateful that Stacy is happy. The sun is out, the weather is warm, and the park is full of mothers promenading their strollers.

Some nod politely as Helen and Stacy walk by. But, many turn their eyes away, hoping they don't give away the flash of pity at the mature, tired mother straining to push the oversized stroller with her adult daughter cooing like a babbling infant.

Helen doesn't register the pity any more. She grew a hard shell when she finally accepted there was no hope. Stacy would remain as she was, a 6-month old in a 19 year old's body, with a beautiful smile and a joyous heart.

Helen's last wish for Stacy, as she grew, was that she would at least walk some day. Her pediatric orthopedist said that was unlikely, and tried to comfort Helen with the aphorism that "Everyone is temporarily able-bodied."

*You're right, Doctor. How much longer will my own physical—and mental—strength last, so that I can care for her? I prayed for my daughter to get well, and to be able, as children should do, to grow up healthy, leave the nest, and write her own script someday. Alas, as long as I live, in this world, in Level 1, I will have to continue to do it for her.*

“Look, Stacy,” Helen said, when they reached an old oak at the isolated edge of the park. “Over there, behind the bush, it’s a dragon with an injured tail. I think that young wizard is trying to heal the wound with a golden wand.”

Stacy giggled as Helen continued her story. A flying fairy flew by to help, and sprinkled a silver powder on the dragon’s wound, chanting in a high voice, “We do what we can, and what we have to. And that is all.”

In Level 1.

• • •

Imagine.

## 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".