

EARTH 7

And the History Department at the University of Centrum Kath

By Steve M

Yeah, I wrote this. Blame no one else.

2017

Dedication:

To my wife and best friend, Barbara.

Other Titles (by genre)

Science Fiction:

Mortuis Luna and the History Department at the University of Centrum Kath
(Book 2)

The Finite Void and the History Department at the University of Centrum Kath
(Jan 2018)

The Last Believer

420 Action Thrillers:

Lioness

Higher Education

Forced Entry – The Unravelling (Book 1)

Forced Entry – More Mistakes (Book 2)

Forced Entry – The Face of Heritage (Book 3)

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CHAPTER ONE

“Deploy the distress beacon,” barked the man at the helm, sitting on a seat slightly larger and higher than the rest. Beside him sat his copilot. Behind them sat three people strapped tightly into their seats. Sparks shot out from an electrical panel far back inside of the spaceship. While they did not see it happen, it was vital to their immediate future. It was the gyro-stabilizer unit and it had stopped working.

“No sir. Distress failed to instantiate,” replied the woman seated beside him.

“Does anything on this damned ship work?” the captain said angrily.

“Captain, we’ve got Earth 7 within range if we can vector 11.74 and 171” said his copilot.

“Do it,” yelled the captain. The copilot poked the hologram in front of her. Then she got an all blue image.

“Shit,” she replied. “Navs went down. I’ve got no way to tell if we changed course correctly. Visuals look like a success, but can’t trust that. Not until impact.”

Then there was a large puff of smoke, it came from the hologram in front of them. Not real smoke, mind you, just hologram smoke indicating that the control systems for life support were failing. It was some clever design engineer’s idea of a smart-assed way of indicating system failure way back during the system design phase. The design team chuckled for quite some time after coding it into the system. The next highest-voted alternative to indicate system failure was a big red stamp slightly askew, reading KAPUT.

The captain and his copilot looked out the front window of their ship and saw off in the distance the small dot that was Earth 7 approaching rapidly.

“What does that mean?” the captain demanded to know, pointing at the second hologram.

“I’ve no idea,” she replied. “Does anyone know the meaning of KAPUT, K-A-P-U-T? Speak up.”

“It means ‘broken,’” replied a man sitting behind them. There were tears in his eyes and his face was contorted by his fear.

“I don’t want to die drifting out in space,” said one of the men in the seats behind the captain.

“I’d rather die slamming into a planet,” replied the copilot cynically.

“My brother still owes me a lot of money. Selfish. Always has been. Mother encourages his behavior.”

“Dillon. If we survive this, I’m going to hunt you down and kill you. You said this bucket was in perfect condition. Just a little dispute about ownership,” said the captain.

“Historian, give me a report. Quick,” demanded the captain.

“Earth 7. Colonized 2,500 years ago by one million prisoners from Earth Primus. Memories wiped and left to develop. 92% famine loss. Quarantine planet. Hasn’t met any of the contact criteria. Current population about twenty-six million humans. Still subject to wars. Ending their second dark age. Scientific level is primitive 3.”

(All planets in contact quarantine are called Earth and given a numerical designation).

“Great. If the crash doesn’t kill us, the natives will,” said the worried man seated next to the historian.

In the distance, Earth 7 became larger. The central continent of Panju was distinguishable from the blue oceans surrounding it.

“We’ve lost manual steering,” reported the copilot.

The pilot spoke up in a loud, clear voice.

“Everyone, we’re probably going to die when we hit the surface of the planet. But just in case we don’t, I want you to turn on your PPS (personal protection suits) on low. Do it now. Turn it up until it bumps the person beside you. And remember to protect your head. Put your hands around your head to prevent being shaken to death.”

“I don’t want to die,” said the historian calmly. “I never finished my first mission,” he complained.

“I never got to tell my mother I forgive her,” said the nervous man beside him.

Sometimes it’s the tiny things. And it was like that for the occupants of the old, broken spaceship of disputed ownership. There was a very slight bump, a soft nothing of a bump, as something very small struck the spaceship. But a small thud had large consequences, and the spaceship, formerly right way up in a universe without a right way up for anything, this same spaceship began to slowly roll over ever so slightly. It was like a very slow Ferris wheel or the landmark in London, on Earth 5.

But slow is not the way of the universe, and the pleasant London Eye ride gave way to things slightly more dramatic as the speed of rotation began to increase. Most of the crew passed out before it reached 200 RPT (rotations per tox. A Tox is a minute, a Tix is a second. Don’t worry, you get used to it.).

And it didn’t take long before the rotations passed the point of survival for the humans inside. They were splattered across the interior by the ever-increasing centrifugal force. But first they would be strained through the microfiber of their personal protection suits, leaving behind only their skeletons still sitting upright and strapped in. The rest of them, the softer bits, migrated according to the laws of physics until their remains, after seeping through the crevices and cracks, finally came to rest as a brownish-reddish-gray goo much like the finest smooth plaster, pressed hard against the inner hull of the ship.

When the spaceship entered the atmosphere, it was rotating in excess of one million times per tox. At this speed, its form would be impossible to distinguish, and all that could be seen was a bright white light coming from rapidly revolving exterior lights. These lights were one of too many components of the ship that, despite the dearly departed captain's complaints, actually exceeded the manufacturer's recommended operating conditions. And this would prove to be a significant problem.

Oh, dear.

CHAPTER TWO

Allor and Roan walked down the trail high above the river. They would cross it at the rope bridge a few hundred mataars further along. The two boys looked down the steep cliff into the river. The water was rushing down it, frothing as it hit the many rocks in the river.

"Buno is lying" said Roan. "No chance he could have survived it from up here."

"I don't know," replied Allor, "maybe with the right combination of lucks," said the handsome younger boy with the dark eyes and jet-black hair.

"No way. Even if he missed the rocks when he entered the water, he would have been smashed against them and killed within seconds," said Roan emphatically. "The shit from his ass comes out of his mouth without delay."

"You may be right," said Allor as he tossed a wooden stick down into the torrent. It landed and was immediately sucked under in a vortex just to pop up a moment later on a collision course with a large gray-pink boulder. It hit hard and broke against the massive stone.

"I can volunteer next year," said Roan.

“Exciting,” said Allor with a sparkle in his eyes. He kicked a small stone over the edge of the trail and they watched the long fall down into the river below.

“Rope harvest and tending, probably. That’s where they start most of us.”

“But it’s outside, and fun,” replied Allor.

“Hot, sweaty work with long, sharp tools to cut down the giant plants. Then drag them to the wagon. I am beginning to wonder if this was a smart idea at all,” replied Roan with a smile and in the voice of his grandfather as well as the affectation of the old man’s bent way of walking.

“Its important work,” replied Allor. “If it’s not done, we can’t go to the Toggis plateau except by the long way. Imagine no honey anymore. Or flying fish?”

“I once ate flying fish fourteen revs in a row when our family went on the hunt. My uncle sets up trading for the hunters and we sent him everything we took from the herd.”

“You do the kill prayers?”

“Sure did,” replied Roan. “Even let me lead them sometimes. Imagine that, all those brave hunters gathered around the fire and the only ones they wanted to hear speak were children. It was like they were sick from all the killing.”

“But how were the fish?” asked Allor.

“The softest most wonderful taste ever. And with the herbs from the coast, it becomes so sweet. Every night I went to the fish fire. The men cooking were friendly and happy to see me. They would tease the men at the other fires because I would never go to any fire but theirs.”

“When they have the best, it makes sense,” replied Allor.

They rounded the curve on the trail carved into the side of the mountain. Ahead, they could see the huge timbers and ropes of the bridge. The broad woods stuck out of the ground proudly and nestled with others at their lashings. Large ropes held them back from the steep fall into the river below. Roan smiled when he saw it. His father had helped rebuild this bridge two years ago.

“Why didn’t they run them to the Toggis this year?” Allor asked. He picked up a rock. After tossing it up twice to gauge the weight and feel, he hurled it far, well past the bridge before arcing downwards into the river below.

“You’re the only person I know that can do that,” said Roan.

“I know,” replied the younger boy.

Allor had fallen out of a tree a year earlier. Once he healed from the accident, he discovered that he was able to throw stones remarkable distances. But only a few times before his shoulder would start hurting. Still, it was something he could do that no one else could, and this made the young boy happy and made him feel special.

He would daydream of a world where it was the most needed skill on the planet and vital to stop some catastrophe from happening. Because of his ability and the numerous times he had saved the people of the Confederation, he was made king over all lands and all peoples.

His daydream was destroyed a few weeks ago when Roan told him that the Confederation doesn’t permit kings. Allor was angry. He had to reimagine his entire dream story from the beginning again, this time as an emperor. But he didn’t share his annoyance with Roan. He just became silent.

“If they run the herds into the Toggis again, it will be too much for the grasslands,” said Roan. “Two years is all it can support before we have to leave it grow back for a year.”

“Noril coast is pretty,” said Allor. “Supposed to have flowers you can eat. And sweet too.”

“Yeah, can’t wait until I get to go hunting there,” said Roan.

They were about fifty maatars from the bridge when they saw the light far off in the sky. It was unlike anything they had seen before and it was coming towards them.

“What is that?” Roan said pointing to it.

Allor looked at his older friend. “I don’t know. I’m scared,” he said.

“The cave over there,” said Roan, pushing Allor towards the hand-cut cave meant for shelter from bad weather. As they scrambled to the cave, they heard a loud high pitched screech getting louder and louder. As soon as they were inside, they turned around just in time to see a bright white light flash by them heading along the ravine. An instant later there was an explosion and the ground shook under their feet. Then silence. No birds, no other animal sounds, no wind in the trees.

They stayed in the cave for a long time, at least twenty tox (minutes), before they summoned the courage to step outside. They moved with bodies that pushed out from the cave but with feet always at the ready to take them back in an instant. Roan walked out the furthest and was able to look down the ravine and the river. On the walls of the ravine were cuts, large cuts, as if a giant had stumbled down the ravine drunk on semu tea and had broken off boulders as it stumbled from side to side.

Roan pointed far down in the ravine.

“Look there,” he said. “See the steam rising from the water, way down there?”

“Yeah,” said Allor excitedly. “I know a way down there,” he added.

The way down was long. It took many tox for them to reach the shore of the river below. The trail was not used often and was not maintained. The sun was high in the sky, and the boys were sweating as they finally stood on the shore looking in wonder at the river. In the water was a long, fat, round cylinder that was shiny and gray. At one end there was an orange glow like a fire. It was the reason for the steam rising from the river. They stood there watching the water boil in a small circle surround the tube.

Allor was the first to see it. He pointed to the large group of fallen rocks. There were a few trees that were also pulled out of the ground and integrated into the fallen rocks.

“Let’s go,” said Roan.

“I’m hungry,” said Allor. “I need to eat first.”

Allor had been a sickly child most of his early life. It was only after his mother had met a woman that studied food that Allor's health began to improve. Key to his improvement were small meals every few hours and less bread.

The two boys sat on the rocks in front of the crash site and ate their food.

"I bet it's a falling star," said Roan.

"What else could it be?" replied Allor.

"But what, what if it's..." said Roan, hesitating, as if to mention something horrible, "what if it's Ceros come back," he finished with a laugh. Allor started laughing too.

The Cult of Ceros believed that one day their prophet Ceros would return again. He was last seen about 500 years ago when he traveled the land telling everyone who would listen that it would be really nice if we could all be really nice to one another. His message was simple? Don't be a dick!

Because of this, many people hated him. Some people take comfort in being disagreeable, their mouths pre-formed for the word 'no', and their opinions pre-formed to the position of 'against'. It seemed apparent that those that hated Ceros were dicks, dicks who refuse to change.

But many adored him for it and became his followers. They saw the sense of it. The efficiency of accomplishment without constant barriers from sour-pusses. And in his time Ceros helped people become better than they thought they could be. There is plenty of satellite surveillance of him that indicates he was really a very pleasant person. A gentle man that travelled with a cat. But a cat not as a pet, he'd speak often of the wrongness of having pets. It was more like an acquaintance that he fed twice a day and shared a life with.

But as time does so often, it morphs A into Z. This happened to the followers of Ceros. Over the years after his death they had evolved into the most ill-tempered, intolerant group of people on the planet. From a message of 'be nice' they had added 'only to our own'.

The followers of Ceros are now known far and wide on Earth Seven for their meanness. Instead of being really nice to everyone, they were only nice to other followers of Ceros. To everyone else they were complete and utter assholes. And this resulted in them being extremely grumpy most of the time. Then they would even tell you how miserable they were. And tell you, and tell you. It was like that relative that won't ever shut up about their health and the disease is being an asshole.

But don't you are suggest they change their ways...no, that will just piss them off and then they will become violent.

And they had reason to be grumpy most of the time. What had started as a revolution of behavior had been taken over by opportunists bent by power. When the followers of Ceros reached one million, a group of priests with a very conservative viewpoint overthrew the Council of Love set up by Ceros himself. In its place they became the Responsible Committee. They were responsible for all successes. Failures were theirs only in that they assigned responsibility for the failure. And it never was their fault. They were the ones that created the religious police.

The followers of Ceros became a people living in a state of perpetual fear and torment. This was caused by a religious police force that would harass them constantly. They demanded public acts of devotion and most importantly submission to their authority. Even the slightest hesitation in displaying respect would result in a beating and prison.

The police would roam the public places in groups of five. Often they would sit drinking coffee at an outside table in a café, scanning the people walking past to decide whom they help next. Yes, help. They believed that forcing the population to live within the tight rules of behavior as dictated by them was in fact the highest form of worshipping Ceros, a man who very clearly said 'don't worship me'.

They would approach the unsuspecting and demand immediate prayers from them and instant tithing. ‘Kneel and prove your devotion of Ceros and the High Priest’ they would demand in the voice of authority, their hands on their swords hinting at other possible responses. Then when the faithful were on their knees the police would demand tithing.

But a people learn through repetition. As a result the Ceros rarely left home with anything of value, lest the cops confiscate it as tithing. This also meant they never had any money in their pockets except for two of the smallest coin in value, the Ceros Dupon. This made them very stingy when they were out and about as they have almost no money to pay for anything. A Ceros restaurant is still one of the only places where you have to prove you can pay before your meal.

And the followers of Ceros were also slaver owners. Ceros was not a slave owner. In fact he spoke against it. But that part of his teachings were ignored in favor of the bits they like more. So instead of following Ceros and renouncing slavery, the most horrible practice imaginable, they embraced it like a Human Pig Smerker snorting Kuewlu Dust off the dorsal fin of a hot Merchita. They bought slaves at the public auctions after raids against other territories.

The miserable followers of the Cult of Ceros were eagerly looking forward to the return of Ceros. He would finally put an end to those damned religious police once and for all. But they really want to talk to him about being allowed to retain their slaves. After all they did pay for them. And it finally gives them time to enjoy the finer things in life.

The boys laughed a long time and started reciting “No You Can’t,” a song taught to children in the Confederation. It mocked the Ceros.

“Momma can I have my dinner?” said Allor.

“No you can’t, boy, no you can’t,” sang Roan in reply.

“Momma can I go to bed?”

“No you can’t, boy, no you can’t,” sang Roan.

“My water?”

“No.”

“My fish?”

“No.”

“My favorite dish?”

“No you can’t,” sang Roan in reply.

They sang and ate in an age-appropriate manner—that is, they made a mess and sang off key.

When they finished the meal, they began to explore the site. Something had hit the side of the ravine and buried itself deep into the rock wall. Roan climbed up the fallen rocks. He scrambled to the topmost point where they met the undisturbed cliff face.

“I think I can see it in there,” he said. “It’s like there is a candle way down in there burning.”

“Maybe I can fit,” said Allor as he scrambled up the rocks. He burrowed his way between the large boulders. But each time he came to a series of smaller yet still large rocks that blocked his path.

“Let’s keep looking,” said Roan.

“Help me,” said Allor, with his shoulder against a large stone taller than him but precariously fallen to where it could be shoved down out of the way with just a little more force than Allor could summon. It rolled down from its perch and settled at the edge of the river. Back upstream, the boiling of the river continued, but now only in spurts. The orange light under the water was flashing now.

The boys spent several hours trying to find a way to move the rocks in their way. But each time they met an immovable object. Finally, with the sun casting shadows on the far wall of the ravine, they stopped looking for a way in.

“A good night’s sleep tonight,” said Roan as he rinsed his hands at the water’s edge.

“Me too,” said Allor. “I’m coming back tomorrow,” he added.

“Wait for me to finish my chores, OK?” asked Roan.

“OK,” replied Allor.

They walked along the water’s edge. When they got to the boiling water, they stopped.

“Wonder what it is? Why does it boil water?” asked Allor.

“I don’t know. But tomorrow I am bringing some rope. I will swim down and attach the rope, then we can pull it up and examine it,” replied Roan.

“Excellent. I will bring some of my father’s tools. They might be useful.”

“Good,” replied Roan.

Allor picked up a rock and let it fly. It disappeared after a few seconds. He was bending over and picking his next rock. As he was straightening up again, he noticed it.

“Why is there a hole in the cliff face over there?” He pointed to the rock face in line with the boiling water. It was round and very precisely round.

“I don’t know. Maybe that thing made it,” he said, pointing to the glowing tube.

“But where does it go?” asked Allor.

“I don’t know,” said Roan.

Then Allor did a thing most kids would do. He picked up his rock and threw it at the perfect hole in the rock wall. The flat stone with the rounded edges disappeared but continued to make a noise as it bounced from side to side in the tunnel through the stone of the cliff. A moment later there was a large clanging sound. It came from behind the rocks the boys had spent hours trying to move.

The look they shared was wild enthusiasm. They ran towards the perfectly round hole as fast as they could. They stopped at the opening of it. It was large enough for them to fit inside, single file on their stomachs. Gone were concerns about the time of day, parents that might worry about them, schoolwork waiting for them, and evening chores. It was an adventure, and they were children.

Roan entered the hole first. After the first ten maatars it became dark as the hole curved through the stone. They were near the end when they saw the first glow of light. They crawled faster.

Roan and Allor didn't go home that night. They spent the entire night and most of the next day examining the contents of the spaceship. Their efforts were made difficult by the terrible smell inside of the craft. They finally went home late the next day after bathing in the river.

These two boys knew the greatest secret on Earth Seven.

But that is how this history started a long time ago. Let me tell you about recent events. You may find them more interesting. They are certainly more dangerous.

CHAPTER THREE

7.926 Killorevs (~22 years) later

Allor was sitting on the steps of a Ceros temple. He was still shielded so no one could see him. He sat at one of the high corners of the smooth stone stairs. He would leave soon and move away from the temple. The patrols near the temple were always more numerous than in other parts of the city. Allor tapped his sandals against the stone steps then put them back on his feet.

He walked away from the temple and towards The Grand Platz Lesser, the smallest of the three largest squares in the capital city of Pyramos. It was the major trading square and formed the edge of the labyrinth of warrens and alleys that made up the souks of the capital city. As long as the religious police got their 12 Dupon entry fee, they stayed out of the Lesser.

It served as the medieval supermarket for the Ceros. Thousands of people would carefully navigate through the back streets to the main entrance, avoiding the patrols, avoiding the tithing. Once inside their only risk was to the things they purchased and most of the men in the patrol groups didn't want to carry around a bag of flour till the end of their shift. But this also made the time immediately preceding a shift change the wrong time to exit the Lesser with your purchases as they were sure to be confiscated.

Allor walked around the entrance tables. He reached down and took a handful of dupon coins from the entrance fee urn. The man in the uniform next to it never saw him. When he reached the midpoint of the Lesser, he reached to the left breast of the dark gray form-fitting suit that covered him from his neck down to his sandals. The insignia on the uniform acted like a knob. Allor turned it slightly to the left to reduce the field for his PPS to the minimum. Then he flipped over the medallion around his neck and touched the polished blue metal side twice.

At this there was a sudden scream and yelling from people around him who could suddenly see him. Out of nowhere he had come and now he stood there, in his long black robe with hood.

"Don't be afraid. I come to heal you," he said in a loud yet friendly voice.

"You're him, aren't you?" asked a man who stopped in front of him.

"I am no one," replied Allor, "just a humble healer."

"You cured my nephew's club foot. And his spots on his face," replied the man.

"Agis, yes, I was able to help him. Is there anything I can do to help you?" Allor asked.

"No. My health is perfect," replied the man with pride.

"Then would you permit my machine to confirm your excellent health? It is temperamental and needs to run against a known healthy person to check and make sure it is still working properly" Allor lied.

The man stepped forward. "Of course, waste your time. But it will be perfect, I assure you. Go ahead, fix your machine."

Allor turned on the handheld device not much larger than his hand. He ran it slowly up and down the body of the tall man with a salt-and-pepper beard. It corrected a weak heart valve, a scar in the left lung, and bunions on the feet as Allor scanned the man. When he had finished and the rescan was showing all green for his entire body, Allor stood up showed the green screen to the man and smiled.

"It's true. My machine confirms it. Your health is perfect, as you said. A man with self-control lives a long life, my friend."

"I told you," said the man. "But thank you for helping Agis. Don't let me waste any more of your time proving what is already known." Then the man turned to the crowd that was forming. He spoke in a loud voice. "I testify that this healer is a true healer. He has healed those close to me. Bring him your sickness, bring him your trust." He turned back to Allor.

"I am Gbano, and I thank you again," said the man. He shook hands with Allor then walked away into the crowd.

A woman with light-colored hair came forward with a young boy at her side.

"Help the boy," she said in a tone more a demand than a request.

"What is your name?" Allor asked the boy, smiling at him. The boy watched him but didn't respond.

"He can't talk, can't hear neither. And that ain't all. He get shakes and makes a mess of himself sometimes, like he's got a devil inside of him, twisting him up," said the woman.

Allor watched the small screen on his machine as it showed "epilepsy" for a brief moment before it faded and changed to a green clean scan. A couple of tix later the boy's hearing had been corrected, as well as a tear to his large intestine and a scalp disorder that caused most of his hair to fall out.

The boy pulled away from Allor when his hearing was restored.

“It’s OK” he said to the boy in a soft tone. “Don’t be scared.”

The boy relaxed a little when someone began playing a flute off in the distance. He looked for the source of the sound but it was blocked by the crowd.

“Thank you,” said the woman when he was finished. She moved forward and extended her hand containing three coins.

“You don’t need to pay me” Allor said with a smile.

“But you need money to live” the woman replied.

“I steal what I need” Allor replied with a grin.

The woman did a most unCeros thing, she laughed. “Sure you do” she said in disbelief. In fact, the ability to move about undetected along with theft had made Allor one of the richest people on Earth Seven.

The Ceros will never offer money twice and she put the coins into the pocket of her robe.

She turned to leave with the boy.

“You will need to teach him language,” Allor said to her.

The boy made sounds centered mostly on the letter *M*.

“Let me check your health before you go,” Allor said to the woman, her long hair down to her waist.

“Don’t bother with me. I’ve had a good life. Help the children,” she replied. She put her hand on the young boy’s shoulder and led him away. “Thank you,” she called back to Allor.

This was the fifth healing for Allor. The first time ended in a riot. Now he appeared and healed until the crowd reached several hundred. When it reached thousands, it got unruly, and people got hurt fighting to reach him. Before that he would use his shielding device and disappear.

But Allor had a plan. Healing on the edge of the cities, all day. The main roads into the city would provide a steady stream of travelers instead of the

overwhelming crowds of the Lesser. His sister using the other healing machine beside him. Together they could cure a thousand people in a day.

A man stepped forward with a woman beside him. He was large and seemed very fit. The woman avoided looking at Allor. She was young, and her guilt was written in large letters. Allor turned the knob on his uniform a quarter turn.

His motion had finished less than a tix before the large man spoke to him in a loud voice.

“You must die,” said the man as he opened his cloak to reveal a sword in one hand and a short curved knife in the other hand.

Allor didn't try to get out of his way. He smiled at the man.

“Not again” Koven said in a disappointed tone. The last time he did a healing another Ceros assassin had tried to kill him.

The man looked at him angrily. “Submit to Ceros or die,” said the man.

When the man thrust his sword forward to impale Allor, it hit a barrier. Not one he could see, but still one that broke the tip of his sword. The large man swung his knife towards Allor. It too struck the invisible barrier and broke. The barrier was about half a maatar out from Allor.

The woman reached under her clothing and took out a glass bottle containing a clear liquid. She threw it at Allor's face. It broke into numerous pieces at arm's length from Allor, and the liquid revealed the soft curvature of the protective perimeter surrounding him. It burned, bubbled, and hissed as it rolled down the invisible shell around him.

“You are of the devil,” the man yelled at Allor.

“You are of the devil,” Allor repeated, mimicking the man. He was annoyed that healing was being interrupted. “No, I'm closer to your beloved Ceros than you will ever be. He said to be nice to one another. Did you forget that?”

“No. Heathens are to be killed so that only the good people of Ceros live on Earth. Then we will be nice to one another,” replied the man.

“That's just being lazy” replied Allor.

The large man swung the remains of his broken sword down on the top of protective barrier. It hit very hard, bounced back harder, and fell from his hands. The broken blade hit the woman at the top of her left leg and cut her deeply. She screamed and fell to the ground in pain as her blood began to pump from the wound with the rhythm of a severed artery.

“Get out of my way,” said Allor as he moved quickly towards the woman. The man scrambled back away from Allor, who moved very slowly when he got near the woman. He turned the dial on his uniform breast insignia very quickly, turning it left, then an instant later stepping forward to the woman, then turning it back to the right quickly. The healing device was in his hand.

“Don’t take my soul,” she said to Allor with a look of terror on her face.

“I’ll only take your wounds. Be still,” he said. He moved the medical device over her leg. People watched in astonishment as the blood stopped shooting out of the wound then a moment later the wound closed. Within a few ticks it was done. The woman tried to squirm backwards away from Allor.

“Be still. I’m not finished with you yet,” Allor said with a smile.

“But I’m finished with you, devil,” she said, and tried to crawl backwards away from him. He grabbed her by the legs.

“Do you want to die from the cough?” Allor asked her.

“How did you know?” she asked him.

Allor turned his device for her to see. “I heard you cough when you first arrived. See this word? It means death if you don’t let me use my machine to heal you.”

On the machine display were ancient words that only Allor, Dubitam and MinKey knew the meaning of. Some words are horrible, and in a world of good would never be necessary. *Cancer* is one of those words.

“We all die,” she said, still scared of him. “What price do you want, devil?”

“But you will die before you give birth to your replacement in your belly. That is my price, she lives.”

“Why do you care?” asked the woman, looking down at Allor, who was scanning her feet. She looked at him hard, a hardness towards a trickster.

“Because I like a bargain,” Allor replied, pointing at her stomach and smiling.

“I know you lie,” said the woman with a mean tone as before, but with just a glimmer of softness.

“Do what you can to help others like I help you. Give them food. Shelter. Water. And ask them to do the same.”

“Why should I?” she asked.

“To pay me back.”

“But I pay you nothing,” she insisted.

“Yes, you do. For a moment, you will be different.”

“That is nothing,” she retorted.

“It could be everything, the only thing that matters” Allor replied.

He finished and then stood up in front of the woman. He helped the woman to her feet.

“I do not believe you are a god, no matter what your mother says” said the woman, looking directly into his eyes. Allor sighed at the mention of his mother.

“Neither do I,” he said softly in reply.

CHAPTER FOUR

Emergency meetings are rare at any university. But in the History Department at the University on Centrum Kath, it hadn't happened in a very long time, 11.167 Kilorevs (~31 years) ago, during the Modus Emergency. Please try to do further

transformations on your own. A rev is 25.71 of your Earth 5 hours, so think of it as one of your days, but with an extra 102.6 minutes to sleep.

The room was very long, and in it was a very long table. Around the table sat men and women in spiffy white robes with gold piping mostly. A few diverged from the majority fashion. Professor Wingut most of all with his color splashes robe, a gift from a friend. He sat roughly midway down the table, next to Professor Mostly, herself in a blood-red robe with ugly harsh leather fasteners.

At the end of the table sat Professor Sipolonius (Sip) Longley, the head of the History Department at the University on Centrum Kath, the greatest repository of knowledge and learning in the known universe. And they are so proud of this status that they include it in all of their marketing and branding. It is also required to be the last thing on all messages originating from the university.

Polls every 100 revs reassure the chancellor and administration of the university that they are also perceived by everyone in the universe as the greatest repository of knowledge and learning in the universe.

There is, however, a small contingent of renegade physicists at the university that are working to open portals to other universes, just to spite Chancellor Obfusmanian-Dropelagoos.

His beautiful daughter, Cloop, declined an invitation to attend the Physics Department's annual Bowling and Billiards Night Out. Professor Mein ran the billiards table eight times that night before retiring his laser pointer and protractor.

Professor Sip Longley looked down the table at the men and women gathered. These were the most powerful men and women in the known universe. A few had a green leaf embroidered on their robe. They were the ones that maintained Calc Majoris, the largest probability calculator in the...you know the rest.

A little background might be useful here.

You can calculate the odds of a horse race easily with pen and paper. But what would it take to calculate the odds of every possible outcome in the

universe. Consider it for just a moment. That is trillions upon trillions of calculations. And they all require data, evaluated, prioritized, given probability values, and these are values that can change with changes in the value of other data, the Ostrofsky effect. Get the picture yet? It is a combinatorial nightmare with trillions of $f(x)$ functions. This would require computational powers that are incredible.

Actually not so much. Sure from an Earth Five perspective it might seem impossible. But after Tanmaya Electron Storage Tech Processing (TEST-P) was developed a lot of things that were previously unthinkable suddenly came to mind. At was revolutionary as it provided the ability to use electrons of any atoms in computational ways. There were enough atoms in a glass of water to exceed the entire computational capabilities of Earth Five in the 21st century.

But the important part is now how the technology works, no. Let's consider the end results. Say for instance, your grandmother's driving could possibly cause a wreck that kills a possible Nobel Prize-winning medical researcher. The Grand Probability Calculator (Calculus Majoris) at the History Department on Centrum Kath will tell us the likelihood of it and warn us in advance. Yes, in advance!

And there are so many possible outcomes. It is such a large set of results that we only catch the really important outcomes, or POCATFU events, as it is known in department lingo (Potential Of Catastrophic And Total Fuck Up). We also search for POWATFO too (Potention Of Wonderful And Totally Fabulous Outcome). Yes, they really are the most powerful men and women in the known...

Professor Longley cleared his throat. The polite side conversations stopped.

"It's been one rev, and there is still no Professor Klept. Our field historians are on over four thousand planets as we speak. Still nothing."

"And are we sure of the data?" asked Professor Ellen Lall.

Longley sighed slightly when he heard her voice. For the last 600 revs Professor Lall had argued that the probability calculator had significant logic

flaws and should be turned off until corrected. She categorically voted against every mission raised to the Council. Longley smiled at the large woman with the orange robe with blue piping.

“Seventy-four point eighty-one percent is significant. Even if we consider your theories about errors, do we really want to risk it?” he replied. “The Physics Department indicates that the three black hole combination would be sufficient to move the entire galaxy.”

Quick note to you, the reader: Black holes have their own natural limit beyond which they don't grow. However, they can combine with other black holes to exceed this limit. Professor Antino Klept's experiment might cause the three largest black holes in Andromeda to combine, pushing it off course.

So what, you ask?

Well, Andromeda and our own Milky Way Galaxy are expected to collide in about four billion years. The POCATFU is that Professor Klept will reduce that from four billion years by a factor of 97.38176 percent. While this is not today, tomorrow, or even in your lifetime, or your children's children's lifetime, on a geological time scale it is the equivalent of next Tuesday.

“Are we sure that he has run?” asked Professor Delmus Fitzcaraldo.

Professor Fitzcaraldo is one of the new members of the Council, caused when Professors Smithers, Abaka, and Han all died on the same day. “Fitz,” as he is known, favors shutting down most agent operations. He is also friendly with professors from the Sociology Department and attends their social events. Longley doesn't trust him for this reason.

“No. We can't be sure. He could have been kidnapped. But his dog is also missing,” replied Longley.

There was a collective gasp in the room. “We need the probs on a runner taking their dog versus a kidnap,” said Professor Wingut.

“I'm on it,” said Professor Misers Plunk.

Plunk was Longley's second-in-command in the History Department. Plunk suffers from historian bias. He thinks he is an excellent administrator, manager, and organizer. But he isn't, and is generally rather hopeless in those three "adventures," as he calls them.

Still, he doesn't see his own incompetence. The result is missing reports, poorly planned meetings and minutes. However his meetings are without a doubt the best catered gatherings in all of the university.

Professor Plunk is larger than most. And when it comes to the probability calculator, Professor Plunk is mostly a man of genius.

He poked his fingers in the air at something only visible to him. It was the interface he took with him everywhere.

"92.7936 percent probability of him running if he took his dog," answered Professor Plunk. He turned around in his chair and took from the rolling tray one of the very fine red square cakes with shaved coconut covering it. He put it in his mouth and made a most pleasant facial expression.

The History Department in the University on Centrum Kath is responsible for all of history. Past, present, and future. When they find significant POCATFU or POWATFO, they must intervene. Sometimes it is a simple intervention, like a helping hand to drive grandma to her appointment to get her eyes checked. Sometimes, you have to kill grandma.

You should expect her to object to this outcome and possibly resist. For this reason, being a field agent of the History Department in the University of Centrum Kath, the greatest repository of knowledge and learning in the universe, is also the most dangerous job in the universe. Excellent paycheck and benefits, though.

Apologies in advance, I should tell you about EBC (Expected Body Count). It is a major criteria for prioritization of possible outcomes to promote or prevent. It just makes me sad when I see the numbers. Maybe I'll tell you later or you'll

figure it out on your own; the name pretty much says it all. I am still trying to get my stomach around explaining Splatter Grannies and Goo Grannies to you.

“Should we deploy agents on the bench?” asked Professor Wingut.

Longley frowned.

“Agents are on the bench for cause,” replied Longley. “Once they have cleared up their matters, they can become resources again.”

You know how most areas of study culminate with obtaining a Ph.D. and then good times follow? Teaching positions and published papers and faculty dining rooms. It’s different with historians at the University on Centrum Kath. They get their Ph.D. then become field historians, human cannon fodder. Sent out to change history.

But with enough successful missions and some luck at staying alive, agents get promoted after about five years to Educator.

From there it is all gravy train, the good life, feet up on the desk. Teaching history is one of the top five highest-paying careers. Add to that running the known universe and traveling the stars as a revered and well-compensated expert, and it becomes a lifestyle most can only dream of.

For this reason, agents, some of the most physically fit segments of the population, experience a metamorphosis when they become Educators. Not all do, but most gain a lot of weight.

“Couldn’t we declare an emergency or an amnesty or something to get them off the bench?” asked Professor Wingut.

“I can’t do that, it would violate University Policies on Expense Reimbursement, Conduct and Discipline, and our new Policy on practical jokes” replied Longley, making sure to emphasize the perpendicular pronoun.

“Circumstances don’t warrant?” asked Wingut, as if hinting to a student in his class the right answer on an exam.

“Circumstances don’t warrant,” replied Longley coldly. “No matter what the Sociology Department says,” he added with a tone of voice akin to a sneer. Longley liked consensus most of all. Dissent, not so much.

The Sociology Department is the enemy of the History Department and run by Professor Leo Trill. Those idiots want to take over some of the planets currently under control of the History Department. It’s all about budget with them. We have it and they want it.

Specifically, they want the planets in quarantine. The jack-booted thugs that are sociologists believe that they can best administer to planets that we have declared to be off limits to everyone.

Why are they off limits?

Because they haven’t met the contact criteria yet.

What are the contact criteria?

Better sit down for this one. Fix yourself a nice strong drink first.

The History Department, with assistance from the Departments of Anthropology and Philosophy, drafted the contact criteria a long time ago.

Not long after the Final War between the forces of Good and Evil, versus the rest of us.

5 trillion people died in the Final War. Yes, that’s trillion with a ‘T’. Entire planets were destroyed at the Battle of Least Mistakes. Fortunately we had the first proven Improbable, The First McGee. If it weren’t for her, we would all be slaves to G&E.

And it all started with Bliss. Planets couldn’t recover from the collapse of the Cult of Bliss, a particularly virulent strain of the disease that causes humans to believe they can achieve a higher level of consciousness by doing very dumb things. Think Whirling Dervishes with anti-gravity belts, punctuated with rhythmic head trauma.

More examples later. But for now just know that when the High Priest of Bliss, a man pledged to chastity, was found in the act of being most unchaste, their mining contracts were not renewed and the entire religion became financially insolvent. Apparently the lifestyle of a High Priest is very costly. But the effect of it was like someone shot an Archduke or something. In response they tried to remain financially viable by conquering new planets very quickly.

Big war, lots of death, eventual victory for us, followed by reflection.

The First McGee, in her address after the banishment of the G&E Survivors to The Void, suggested we had just been given the biggest argument for change in history and it would be very stupid for us to ignore it. She showed us the same cycle happening over and over again. Megalomaniacs, Empire, Death, Destruction, Repeat. Example after example she went through. Always the same pattern. Always the same result. And to think she came from your planet, Earth Five. Nobody in the entire universe would have bet on an Improbable coming from Earth Five. Nobody!

And to further the point, she suggested that in many instances things would have turned out much better if we had done the exact opposite of what we actually did.

Now she had intended this to be hyperbolic and said it mostly for dramatic effect. Yes, she has said this in latter interviews and writings. However, at the time, no one heard it as hyperbolic. Rather it was the words from the woman who lead us to victory over a group of people who were very bossy and thought they had all the answers. The woman who had saved us all from slavery had just given us the key to happiness. Maybe.

So instead of thoughtful reflection upon her words, we acted upon them with all the enthusiasm of Maoist students denouncing revisionist professors during the Cultural Revolution.

And she was right. In a lot of instances, doing the opposite is much better. But more about that later. Pick up that drink now.

As a result, here are the contact criteria agreed to and currently enforced:

No wars – this one is pretty obvious to everyone except soldiers. 5 Trillion dead bodies. It was not only a slaughter, it immediately became an enormous health hazard of diseases. And I think that deep down soldiers would agree to give up wars if they had a decent guaranteed income. The Final War proved that we must break the chain of fighting or we will perish.

No military – again, organizing to efficiently murder others, well we've had enough of that already thank you. We barely survived it. It just doesn't work. And it periodically brings us to the brink of total destruction. There were seven instances during the Battle of Least Mistakes when actions could have resulted in the eventual death of all sentient life in the universe.

We are demilitarized now.

(Big Sip Now) No Mythology – this might be the most dangerous thing in history. It certainly holds the heavyweight title in every galaxy for carnage. The Final War against the Forces of Good and Evil was all about this. They insisted we adopt their mythology. We said no thank you. They got very offended about this and attacked. They wouldn't even look at our evidence disproving their beliefs. But fortunately for us.....they suck at science.

Please know that this does not include spirituality. You can be into oneness with the universe until your heart's content. It's the

fantastical stories and the willingness to kill because of them. Those aren't allowed. Besides they are a large part of the cause for the next prohibition.

No slavery—physical or economic or gender.

(yes, gender—you read that right, guys. Get over it. Every time we've been the ones in charge, we've fucked it up.) And using fantastic stories and saying they are true in order to oppress women isn't allowed either. Even if you have brainwashed them into thinking it is their place in life. Sorry, we'll leave you alone until you come to your senses.

No Carnivores – think about it for a moment. How would you like to be some other species' version of caviar? In fact there are several instances where other larger, more advanced species have found humans to be a delicacy. You might have even read a true Earth Five story about it.

I bet that isn't the list you would have made. Me either. I don't care what you believe, as long as you keep it to yourself and everyone can buy beer on Sundays.

But a lot of thought was put into the list and let's be frank for a moment. Letting a barbaric group of humans loose on the galaxy with technology and visions of conquest in their eyes along with genocidal teachings from imaginary friends will just get a lot of people killed, again. That's what the Final War was all about. We've had to change the model to survive.

Fortunately for us, often, before the barbarians even get off their own planet, the problem resolves itself and the planet in question self-destructs. The Tech Emp gets them.

What's that? Let me explain it simply like this:

Imagine a graph.

The left vertical axis is propensity to violence, the horizontal axis is time. But there is also a right vertical axis too. It is for the number of kills per use of a weapon. Consider it weapons effectiveness.

There is a line that curves down to the right, indicating that as our civilization progresses, we become less prone to violent responses over time. We understand more things and can be more compassionate instead of fearful. Let's call it empathy.

There is also a curve that starts near the intersection of both axis on the left and goes upwards as it goes to the right. Body Count per use of a weapon. More basically, it represents weapons technology. As time progresses we can kill more people every time we blow the shit out of things.

The point at which the two curves intersect is a very reasonable indicator as to whether your planet will make it to the finish line and you will join the rest of us in the Federation. Or will you burn yourselves to pieces in wars over shit that really doesn't matter and often is very simply false, untrue, and fabricated.

Apologies for an unpleasant truth.

(Oh, you're still there. Sorry, reckon we lost some readers with the contact criteria. That's OK. No hard feelings. Let's keep going, shall we?)

"We will have the report of the subcommittee in the next one hundred tox," said Longley.

"But everyone in the subcommittee is in this room. If it's ready, let's hear it now," said Wingut to the nodding head agreement of Fitz.

“No. They need more time. It was agreed to be ready then, and it shall be delivered on time. Rushed work is foolish work,” replied Longley with all the righteousness of historical catechism.

Historians have certain phrases that they all use. One of the foremost is: I will require more time to answer your question. Yeah, it doesn't sound like any big deal, but it is. They say this because historians are required by professional code and laws to always tell the truth.

Seriously, I'm not kidding.

Not only must they tell the truth, but their answer must be sufficient and understood by the receiver, as exhibited by testing their understanding of the explanation. And in no way can the historian's answer manipulate or distort information. No exceptions, ever.

Now you know why it pays so well. Guaranteed honesty is very valuable in a universe of liars. There is a very long story on how this came into existence. It involves the last emperor and a propaganda model not too dissimilar to one explained by one of your Earth Five intellectuals. The universe desperately needed an unbiased source of truth. Read history books from different neighboring countries on your planet and you will understand what I am talking about. Try England and France if you want an easy one.

And telling the truth all the time isn't as great as you might think. It totally screws up relationships. Only 42.8 percent of all marriages between historians and non-historians (nons) last over three years. Simple questions like “How do I look?” can result in answers that become very problematic and often traumatic when there is a historian involved.

Yes, historians come with a license and recertification every 300 revs. They are tested in a truth room, a room containing so many measurements of the occupants that it would be more than impossible to lie, if there were such a thing. And the first question is always the same:

Have you lied since your last certification?

The truth is held in such high regard by historians that they would rather take a longer time and get it right than rush it and make a mistake, and lose their license and the chance to eventually make it to the room with the red square cakes covered in shaved coconut. A historian won't rush an answer. Any attempt to mislead will result in criminal charges against them.

An old joke may help you understand the result of all of this.

What are the two words you always hear after "I will require more time to prepare my answer"? "Fucking historian!" Now, the nons laugh at this joke because it makes fun of historians and their silly ways. But the historians love the joke because it shows their process was a success, the historian advised that more time would be needed.

Another one: What are the two words you always hear right after the phrase "I'm sorry, the answer to your question requires information that I am not willing to divulge, and I apologize for being unable to give you an answer"?

Yep, you guessed it, same punch line as before.

Rules can warp people. Historians are no exception. So when Longley insisted on waiting to the exact time agreed to previously, most humans would call him a jerk, a dick, maybe even an idiot. But you know what he really is, don't you?

Same punch line as before.

So the meeting adjourned for a while until at the appointed time the Council of Historians, as the august group was known, reconvened. And Wingut watched as the subcommittee handed out the presentation materials that had been neatly stacked on a credenza before they had adjourned. The subcommittee presented little new facts. It did however catalog the failures, so it had some value. And the presentation material used the new Ununarial font, considered to be the most elegant and the fashion in better universities.

Damn Professor Leo Trill and damn his Sociology Department.

Damn Professor Antino Klept and damn his dog.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Attack her, Modi. Why are you letting up? She’s open, push her into the corner. What’s wrong with you?” the trainer yelled at Koven as he backed away from his opponent, Thomsa Tillerman.

Thomsa didn’t hesitate; she shoved against the barrier, pushing it up until Koven fell inside of his invisible protective shell. Once he fell, Thomsa rolled him like an egg into the corner then sat down inside of her own protective shell facing him, particle separator aimed at his chest and hand on the control insignia on the chest of her PPS.

“Good work, Thomsa,” said the trainer with a pat on her shell.

“Thank you,” she said. She stood up and backed away from Koven. Then she turned down her PPS to skin level, the lowest setting before OFF.

Koven got to his feet and smiled at Thomsa. He just couldn’t attack a woman that he would prefer to kiss. Thomsa was the prettiest agent in his class.

“You, OK?” Thomsa asked him. “You look distracted,” she said.

“I am. You’re pretty, that’s all,” he replied.

“Oh. OK. Then will you die the first time you battle a pretty woman?” she asked him as historians often did, couching an opinion as a question. Not dissimilar to a spouse sometimes.

“I don’t want to consult the Calc Majoris, in case the prob is close to one hundred percent (a sure thing),” replied Koven.

“Get off your ass, Modi. I want you and Thomsa to come over here and see what you’re supposed to be doing,” said Arnus Schlepp, their trainer and definitely a Non. He was aggressive, annoying, and a shouter.

They walked over to the nearby large blue floor mat upon which stood two very large men fighting against one smaller man. The small man, Larn Tynis, instantly adjusted the size of his invisible protective shell down to the lowest possible setting short of turning it off. He did this by turning the breast insignia to the left. So now instead of three fully shielded fighters, their egg-shaped protective shield clunking against one another with the strange echoing thud like they make, the two larger men fell forward now that the support from Larn's shield had collapsed. Think of it like two guys pushing hard against a door that someone suddenly opens.

Personal protective suits are wonderful. They keep the wearer safe from everything except the most destructive weapons. Particle blasters? No problem. Pointed sticks? No problem. Knives? No problem. Other cutlery? Again, no problem. They even protect the wearer from sporks, but not from the idiocy of sporks.

So when Larn quickly withdrew his support for his two assailants, they fell forward, doing the one thing you should never do while in the PPS bubble: fall. Larn leapt high into the air and came down behind the top of the egg shape rolling forward, as if the egg-shaped were visible only to him. His barely shielded leg struck the top of the other shield, and while there was nothing to see at the perimeter, inside, it was a different matter. Larn's blow had caused his attacker to begin to turn end over end, not unlike a small child being placed in a clothes dryer. She still hasn't forgiven me for that.

Not wasting time, Larn inflicted a similar kick to the other assailant. Now he had both assailants inside of their bubble and their movements not within their control. Larn gave each a final kick that sent them rolling quickly across the room and slamming harmlessly into the wall. Then Larn crouched down and turned off his PPS completely, drew his blaster, and aimed it at his assailants.

Yep, that's the big flaw with the PPS, you've got to turn it off to fire your weapon. If you fire it inside of the PPS protective egg, it will ricochet a few times

before hitting you and turning you into single element molecules from your previous more complex chemical existence. Mostly, you are reduced to a pile of dust of various sorts and vapor that drifts away.

Larn smiled at the instructor.

“Well done, Larn. Next time, don’t turn off your suit until you are ready to pull the trigger,” said Arnus, turning to Koven and Thomsa. “Did you see how he tricked his opponents into letting him support them? Brilliant. That is how you need to be thinking. Got it?”

“I think so,” replied Thomsa with a smile.

“But what if they had attacked him one at a time?” asked Koven.

“Then I’d attack them from the bottom,” replied Larn. “Earthquake them.”

“Earthquake?” asked Thomsa.

“Show them,” said Arnus to Larn.

“Turn on your PPS on high. That is the setting it is worn ninety-nine percent of the time in battle. Casually, it’s usually kept at skin level,” Larn said to Koven.

“Why do I have to be the CTD (crash test dummy)?”

“Because I don’t want to embarrass Thomsa. She is pretty and I am attracted to her,” replied Larn. Yep, there’s that historian honesty thing again.

Koven stepped back away from them and turned on his PPS. Thomsa reached out and confirmed his egg with a soft thump.

“Don’t hurt me?” Koven asked with complete sincerity.

Sarcasm is illegal for historians. Yeah, that will screw your shit up if you can’t smart off to someone because it requires a factual inaccuracy to make the point.

Hyperbole? Forget that shit too. Lose your license for sure. Lose your license and you join the sad underworld of failed historians that haunt the bars and gutters of the cities on fringe planets. Once contenders, now they walk drunk through the night, just flesh-covered regrets of all that might have been. They don’t even know about the red coconut-covered cakes. Poor bastards.

Larn stood in front of Koven very casually, like two friends standing outside at a cafe bar in Budapest in the spring, pleasant smile on his face.

“Most people, when they stand, they don’t really stand still. There are slight shifts in the stance. Left foot dominant, right foot dominant, left front ball dominant, left heel dominant, and so on,” said Larn.

“I’ve noticed this,” said Koven.

“It presents a unique opportunity when the person does this inside the egg because of the sponginess under your feet. You are momentarily unstable, but I need a way to take advantage of it. So I can kick at your barrier but I can’t transfer enough force into your egg to cause harm. Well, not unless I do this. Apologies in advance,” Larn said with a smile.

He stood still for a few seconds. Then he fell onto his left side. As he fell, he positioned his feet at the bottom of Koven’s barrier. When he hit the floor, he turned the control of his PPS all the way to the right and kicked hard. He was moving from minimum setting to max in less than a single tick, and his PPS field was expanding against Koven’s. The result was unexpected. It was like something in the floor underneath Koven launched him into the air. He hit his head on the inside of the egg and collapsed to the floor. He was conscious, but barely. Then he slammed into it again and fell silent on the floor.

“Are you all right?” asked Larn. “Turn it off.”

Koven’s hand slapped his insignia and the invisible barrier disappeared. Larn moved towards him and began to check the back of his head where it hit the hardest. Thomsa ran over to the table near the door and brought back the remedium. She handed it to Larn, who moved the device over Koven’s head and then his neck. A small red mark on Koven’s neck disappeared as Larn moved the remedium. The gash on his scalp was healed.

The “Remedium” is what it’s called almost everywhere. It repairs skin, tissue, organs, wounds, everything except death and certain mental illnesses, like

gambling. It will repair things at the molecular level if necessary. And it is free for everyone. No shit. Well, there is a cost, sort of. But I don't think the inhabitants of the planet Emile Swarka object to the trade. A planet name in exchange for perfect health and to be able to live as long as you want? I agree with them. A bargain.

Doctor Emile Swarka was a very eccentric little man who is best known for the remedium and also for bringing the term "semi-Salk" into the human vocabulary. He never asked for money.

Koven was recovered and rubbing his no-longer-sore head.

"My main curiosity," said Koven as he got up from the floor with the help of Larn, "is why we are learning to fight against people also wearing PPS? Are we expecting a civil war or what?"

"Sociologists perhaps?" replied Thomsa.

"Damned Sociologists," replied Larn with a chuckle.

They all walked to the locker room and the shower bots.

Agents are the only people issued PPS. It is rumored, though, that some of the Council wear them, and that Professor Trill, the bastard head of the Sociology Department, stole one and made his own ones and a team of agents to wear them. I realize that this is a lot to absorb. It doesn't work like you expected. That's understandable, you look around and expect it to be the same everywhere. Apologies but it isn't.

It can be unbalancing at first when you get information without enough background or have enough context to convert it into knowledge at a high degree of efficiency. It's almost like using a transport bubble without checking the departure and entry acceleration settings. Without the background or context, you will wind up at your destination in a transport bubble filled with vomit. Without context all of this information well it's like puking in your brain. But here goes. Please pay attention. Repeating is so wasteful.

After her victory at the Battle of Least Mistakes, The First McGee refused the order to finish off the G&E survivors. Instead she took them to The Void and banished them. There were reports from satellites indicating that the void was finite and there were galaxies on the other side.

Then she went about suggesting changes to our ways. The First McGee changed most of existence in her lifetime. Then she retired to one of the leisure planets where she started a very large family.

Central to her idea on the organization of society was education. She herself, had been a teacher. And learning is the one intellectual constant in life. We continue to learn shit until we die. So the nexus of civilization became the University and the most notable was the University of Centrum Kath.

Most administrative functions of society were handed over to the appropriate university departments. This work was done at least as efficiently as before, and if not as efficient, then most definitely run with a more well-thought-out and documented approach. Everyone is certain of that. And they have many academic papers supporting the premise.

However, a little known fact is that not a single one of these papers have ever come from the History Department.

These were brutal societal changes for those of us who don't like things to change much. A rocking chair is about as much change as some people can handle. And it has all that needless going back and forth nonsense. Some of the changes were economic.

Everyone was finally tired of a thousand years of economic boom and bust. Booms are generally fine for the people who benefit from it. Champagne and caviar is not a bad diet at all, given sufficient exercise and hangover potions. And the prosperity of the booms fosters consumption, significant consumption if the prosperity is widespread. But as long as things weren't, say, limited in some manner, like say limited to one planet and one planet only, with finite resources,

as long as that wasn't the case, consumption during boom times seemed very acceptable behavior.

And those that didn't benefit from the boom? Well, there was media to convince them to try harder and that they deserve their circumstance. It's their failure not to succeed at a cheater's game.

But the bust periods are an entirely different story. Every 3,000 revs or so it would all turn to shit. And worse still, they were often accompanied by the elevation of the worst of us to lead the rest of us. And that made it even worse and many people died.

The First McGee was a history buff and understood this. She is considered the first unlicensed historian.

But good things don't last, and eventually the old ways returned and the university system was abandoned. In its place we were sold a system where anyone can become rich beyond belief. Problem is, hardly anybody does. Most people were poor but trying real hard.

Then during the reign of Pleon the Second, economic circumstances became severe with hunger and starvation occurring in many parts of the galaxy. Yet the news media and official histories never mentioned these conditions. It was all reports of Pleon and his beautiful wife enjoying lobster from the Lobstery at the Clapham Constellation and drinking sparkling waters from Pluto.

Food riots became common across many worlds.

Pleon, following terrible advice from his Marketing Department, attended a harvest ceremony on Syre. There he was arrested and put on trial for gross negligence with loss of life.

The prosecutor demanded a guilty verdict and a sentence of death. The defense counsel, a very nice man named Wolfgang, argued that his client was only guilty of following the orders of his marketing department. "The Nuremberg Defense," the media called it. Then they had to explain what they meant.

After a long time of arguing, a compromise was reached. Pleon and his wife, Antigone, would not be executed. They would be allowed to live out their lives on a desert island, alone, where they would rule over no one. And in exchange for their lives, they would have to give complete and thorough testimony, which could be verified as accurate, about the system by which they controlled the news, the entertainment complex, and the tools they used to manipulate public opinion.

Pleon's testimony took 122.7 revs. Yes, it was that extensive. And elaborate.

Confidential supporters in the media, falsely claiming impartial and unbiased reporting. The passing back and forth between media and government jobs. Also he spoke at length about the structural aspect of the news media and historical organizations and how consolidation made control and manipulation easier. Consolidation greatly increases the efficiency of corruption. And then there was the fatal effect of advertising.

But the most elaborate and shameful part of it was the way they had control over the history departments at universities across the galaxy. And with it came the ability to control what was taught in the schools, particularly to the children. In total, it was the most complete program of propaganda and brainwashing in history. And when it was working correctly, the poor slobs wouldn't even know they were being controlled.

When asked why the elaborate system of coercion was necessary, Pleon replied casually, "If it weren't so, I wouldn't be your ruler."

Listening to this testimony was a very young and very impressionable young boy who would rise to become The Final McGee. The testimony made him very angry and he swore he would fix it. When he got his opportunity, the return to the university system was swift, brutal, and so far, final. He personally designed the honesty-testing regime for historians, the licensing process, and the periodic recertification process. He made them responsible for reporting the news. And

then he became the first licensed historian. He held the designation for the rest of his life.

Enough of this, back to our story.

A hundred twenty-nine tox later Koven, Thomsa and Larn were sitting in the strategy lecture class. Professor Dre-Foster was connecting the projector to his teaching reader.

“Again, the high score goes to Koven,” said Dre-Foster.

There was a groan among the class. This was the case in the previous three strategy simulations.

“How did you do it?” asked Dre-Foster. He displayed the scores at the front of the class. Koven had the high score of 100 percent. Next was Arbo, with 92 percent. Most of the rest of them were in the 80-90th percentile.

“Lancaster Strategy for the Weak. Geographic entry in a sparsely populated region. Then build upon a well-established base.”

“Well done. Where did you find out about Lancaster?”

“My reader and a misspelled name,” replied Koven. He could not take credit for his accident. That would be criminal for a historian.

“This, my friends, is one of the greatest keys to success,” replied Dre-Foster.

“Accidents?” asked Thomsa.

“No. Curiosity. Koven could have corrected the spelling and gone back to his original intent. But he became curious. And he wins because of it.”

“Koven the Cat,” said Larn.

“Koven the Cat,” repeated Thomsa.

Koven smiled uncomfortably. But historians are uncomfortable most of the time. Did I mention the pay and benefits? They’re great. The suicide rates are over discussed though. They have always been high. It’s in the nature of the work.

CHAPTER SIX

“Try pulling it off by the insignia again,” said Dubitam. The tall, lanky man in the white robe moved his hair from in front of his face.

Allor reached up to the hard metal insignia/controller and pulled on it hard. It worked. The strange suit that covered him from his head to his sandals came off his body in a single motion. It looked like finely ground particles of iron following a magnet. The dark-gray suit held itself in shape hanging from the end of Allor’s arm. He stepped forward and slapped Dubitam in the chest with it. The PPS immediately enclosed around Dubitam in less than one tix.

Dubitam pulled the PPS off him by the insignia and slapped it back on Allor.

“See, I told you,” said a female voice from across the large cave. She walked over to them, stopping to pick up the remedium from the wooden table on her way. First she scanned Dubitam. She smiled when the results were green. Then she scanned Allor. He wasn’t afforded a smile.

“OK. You were right,” replied Dubitam.

“I was playing around with it last night. Got it caught on my robe and pulled the entire thing off by accident,” said the woman with her hair tied back behind her head with small strings of leather. She looked at Dubitam again.

“You have done well,” replied Allor, looking at her from his deepest dark eyes.

“Thank you, my Lord,” she replied.

Allor sighed deeply.

“Is there something wrong, my Lord?” MinKey asked him in her softest voice.

“Nothing. Just not used to being called ‘Lord,’ that’s all,” he replied.

“Would you prefer God Allor?” she asked him.

“No,” he replied with a sad tone.

They were working inside of a large cave. In it was all of the equipment salvaged from the wreckage of the spaceship years ago. For two young boys back then, digging out the wreckage only took months. But figuring out how to use the few items they had figured out took years, and it cost Roan his life. There were shiny metal pieces, small little devices the size of a hand, some pieces charred black from their attempt years ago to use flammable oil to melt the rocks. They were unsuccessful, as are many of the experiments of childhood.

So far, of the 127 items they had salvaged, the number that they have succeeded in making work over the years was very limited. They were as follows:

- A pretty blue stone: it is blue on one side and shiny silver on the other. When the blue side is facing away from the body, everything is normal. But when the shiny silver side is facing away from the body, and the blue side depressed, the wearer and anything in contact with the wearer becomes invisible by projecting an image made from background images. The stone emits a very high-pitched sound noticeable to only a few humans, but many other animals respond with fear and run away.

This is the first bit of alien technology they figured out and got working. “Figured out” is a loose term I use here, as the boys no more understood refractive technology of image capture and broadcast than a cat understands general relativity. But they were able to use it and make it work. And this was significant for them in two ways.

Firstly, it allowed Allor to become an excellent child thief. Secondly, upon discovery of this capability by Tal, Allor’s mother, Allor became, with his mother’s guidance, one of the richest persons on the planet. And definitely the richest child. I am required by law and professional obligation to point out that Tal was raised in an environment of significant poverty.

They have five of these stones recovered from the crash.

- The remedium: you are already familiar with this device. They have two of these and have recently figured out how they work.

- Personal protective suit (the PPS): again, you are already somewhat familiar with the device. They have five of them. But the state of them all those years ago was dreadful. The centrifugal forces were so strong that the occupants were what may best be described as being forcibly strained through the personal protective suit. The PPS retained a horrific odor for a long time. And they still do, but it's faint now. Still, in the right breeze and at the right temperatures the smell of the five crew members floods their noses like a bad memory.

Except for the smell, PPSs are very hygienic and self-cleaning.

- Personal transport device (PTD): select the coordinates where you want to go from the maps offered in the holographic display. Then the gold bubble forms around you and you are taken there. This has been working for the last 628 revs. They have five of them and they are a very sore subject with Allor. For the 7,284 revs, it was nothing more than his personal puke machine. The start of the journey was so fast and the flight speed so fast (Mach 11) that he always arrived at his destination covered in his own vomit. It was only after the next device became useful that methods improved.

- The reader: the electronic repository of all human knowledge. It is updated every twenty minutes and is all held in a rather neat and convenient appliance that fits in all of the major pocket sizes. Regrettably, in the hands of the humans on Earth 7, this may be the most dangerous book in existence. Here we are again, back to Estimated Body Count. Oh dear.

The reader stared back at them for thousands of revs before Roan accidentally pushed a search icon. He then pressed what to him was gibberish.

And an unrecognizable message would appear and come from the machine and also in spoken word form. And they would always respond with some sort of curse or rude remark to it about how stupid it was. They did this a few times a week for years. It became a game to them. Say rude things to “The Useless,” as they named it. Eat shit, Useless. Underpants on your head, Useless.

But there is a human word that almost means hope, it is *eventually*. And eventually Allor pressed the right sequence and the machine responded, “You appear to be having a problem with my language. Would you like some assistance?”

One “yes please” later and the education began. It was difficult. They gave up for revs, sometimes they would get so frustrated. But thirst for knowledge is the most addictive drug known to humans. It is the driver of the best of us. We learn, we strive, we improve, we pass it on. And our knowledge always remains incomplete. That is the art of it. We all die as unfinished work.

But with time they finally learned enough to work a few of the items.

Oh, there is one more they have figured out. They think it is a weapon, but it is not. It is actually a deep-space propulsion system that is strictly forbidden from use within solar systems. It has an adjustable flow rate that they have misinterpreted as a range-calibration unit. And I will admit that it sort of works that way, if you are using a deep-space propulsion system on a planet and burning huge circles into the earth. This was also the cause of Roan’s death. At one of the early tests, which resulted in an unexpected detonation, Roan was sure he was standing back far enough. Turns out 25,000 maatars was the correct answer. This weapon is what they call “The Apostle.”

Blaster: a particle-decomposition weapon. They have five of them. They call them “Dust Makers.” They are not very good with them but keep practicing. They discovered how to use them years ago, in the first month. But they suddenly stopped working. It was 5,174 revs before they knew how to charge them up

again. This particular blaster Ruhla 3712 has a rather gruesome history. It will not only turn you into constituent dust particles with a blast, but it is also designed to work like a medium-length curved sword made of particle beams.

This was a result of the work of Professor Optus Roanall in the Psychology Department that did a study on methods of killing. Let me remind you that killing is illegal, mostly. Anyway, he discovered that winners enjoyed their victory more if they ran their opponents through with a sword at the end as opposed to watching them perish in the distance from a blast from their gun. Yes, winners prefer something much more close and personal. So the Ruhla 3712 can be made into a light sword. Allor has been practicing using the light sword while invisible.

It changes a man's perspective when they realize that they can kill anyone they wish successfully. Most just note it and go forward that quarter of a degree different from before, slightly more confident. But with some, the degrees are significant, as is the effect. This is how histories change.

"I solved it last night," said Dubitam "with the help of MinKey," he was quick to add.

"No, I only checked his work," she replied.

"That's important. You're the smartest of all of us," said Allor with a smile.

"Thank you, Lord, for saying such kind things."

"Well, you are. You took three hundred revs to learn the language of the book. We took much longer," replied Allor.

"You started young, Lord. An older mind knows to make the pieces fit into the puzzle," she replied.

"OK, we will disagree about this, then," Allor said with a laugh. Then a moment later MinKey started laughing too. Eventually Dubitam joined in. Disagreeing with a god. To them it seemed funny. But they were often illogical.

From wooden shelves Dubitam removed three small, thin gold rings. He stopped at the table and looked at his tick sheet.

“What are you doing?” Allor asked him.

“Checking the count,” Dubitam replied.

“What is it?” Allor asked.

“A bit depressing. Three hundred and fourteen tries after reading the instructions,” replied Dubitam.

He held out a gold ring for MinKey. When it touched her wrist, it tightened to fit it. Then Dubitam put one on Allor, then finally himself.

“Still,” Dubitam added, “let’s go from failure to success.” He lifted the thin gold bracelet to his mouth and said, “Instantiate comms all.”

Then the small gold bracelets did something they had never done before, they changed into thin round red bracelets.

“Nearby devices,” said Dubitam.

“Two devices nearby. Would you like to name them in your directory?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Device One, please give it a name now,” and the red ring turned to blue on MinKey’s wrist.

“MinKey,” said Dubitam.

“Saved as MinKey,” came the reply.

“Device Two, please give it a name now,” and the red ring on Allor’s wrist turned blue.

“Lord God Allor, Of the Cult of Allor, Healer of the Sick, Giver to the Poor, the most...”

“That’s enough,” replied Allor emphatically. He cursed his mother.

“Saved as That’s Enough,” came the reply.

“Please, Dubi. Try to remember what I told you about all this god stuff. It’s just for in front of my mother and at court. When we’re alone, I really don’t want to hear it from you. Or you either,” Allor said, looking at MinKey.

“I’ll try to remember,” Dubitam said with an almost hurt look on his face.

“I can be your king, but I won’t ever be your god,” he said.

MinKey smiled at this.

“MinKey, if you go over in that corner over there, and sir, if you will remain where you are, I’ll go over to that corner way over there. I’ll bring the reader to check the instructions.”

MinKey walked over to a corner and Dubitam picked up the reader and sprinted to the furthest corner.

Some messages are significant to planetary evolution. “One small step for man...” blah, blah, blah; “You’re standing in my light, boy”; “Open up, I’ve got the weed.” You have no doubt heard most of these, some maybe even more than once.

For Earth 7, the most significant message ever sent began, “Wow, I should trim my nose hair.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tanit was waiting for Koven at the portal. When his bubble popped, she stepped forward to greet him. In public she gave him a polite hug and kiss on the cheek.

“How was my lover today?” she asked him.

“It was good. I learned how to bounce someone in a PPS bubble,” he replied.

He grabbed her hand and squeezed it as he walked alongside her towards the stairs to exit the station.

Bubble stations were only a recent development. Before them, it was complete and utter chaos. Traffic fatalities were over three in every billion journeys. Bubble stations eliminated traffic fatalities, sort of. Once you leave the bubble station, any fatality is your own damned fault and can't be blamed on anyone else or a generic condition like traffic. Blame it on traffic? Really? That would be silly, like declaring war on a noun.

“I'm going to cook dinner,” she said to him as she looked at her slightly handsome but mostly average man with the most incredible job in the galaxy. Did I mention the benefits? One is a huge payout on the death of an agent. It's basically an agent's pay for the next 150 years, payable to spouse or any beneficiary named.

“I wish you wouldn't,” he replied to her.

“Why? Because you want to ravage me and make me do dirty things for you?” she asked.

“No. Because cooking is not one of your strongest skills,” he replied.

Oh my, remember I warned you about this. Asking a historian a question is often a bad idea. For this reason, Tanit has never asked Koven if he loves her. Sometimes the question is more dangerous than the answer.

“A question never asked is never answered”

—The Final McGee.

They walked along in silence for a while.

Despite dating for 716 revs and despite spending one entire day with each other every ten days, and seeing each other several other times during that time, if at all possible, as long as he wasn't out on a mission, and despite still seeing him that one day every ten, even when he was out on a mission, despite all of that, Tanit and Koven had never had sex. Not R Sex, the real kind.

VR Sex doesn't really count. Yes, sure, there is touching and sensation from the plasmatrons that reflect your partner's motions in the virtual world. There are even orgasms, as many as you are capable. But it is still just VR Sex, not R Sex. Tab A in Slot B does not happen. Tab A is wrapped in plasmatron material as Slot B is filled with it. And it is all done remotely. And in the 716 revs they have been dating, Koven and Tanit have had VR Sex 826 times. The average among the rest of the population is 17 times of VR Sex before R Sex.

But despite the means and the median, Tanit and Koven have never once been to IKEA.

Finally Tanit spoke again as they rounded the last corner to her apartment. She had an apartment above a store off the far edges of the campus. It wasn't palatial, but it was adequate and clean. She worked to make it seem warm and friendly. Not like Koven's place. All steel and glass and cold and formal.

"I want you," she said.

"I want you," he replied.

They rushed up the stairs to her apartment door. Three flights went by quickly. For an agent it is nothing. For Tanit it was a bit more, and she was out of breath when they got to her floor. She had been getting in shape lately, having spent eleven revs determined not to succumb to the health regime of an agent or an agent's wife. But then she split a pair of pants at work one day. She had to keep her lab coat on all the way home.

When they got inside, the first thing Tanit did was to fling her shoes off her feet like prisoners breaking free. The shoes flew at a low trajectory until hitting the sofa across the room. Koven walked behind her and picked them up. He carried them into the bedroom and put them in the shoe sling.

“You don’t like for me to do that, do you?” she asked.

“No,” he replied.

“Then why don’t you make me stop?” she said with a husky voice and a dirty smile.

You probably have figured this out already, but Tanit hadn’t yet. Historians are incapable of role-playing. It is by definition a lie and therefore illegal. So while Tanit wanted Koven to throw her down on the bed or even better tie her up and ravage her, pretending to be a strong and threatening stranger, Koven was capable of none of it, except maybe the ravaging part. And he was scared of that part more than any other.

“Please stop,” Koven finally said to her.

Tanit inhaled deeply and got her anger and disappointment under control. She was not going to screw this up. She had invested a lot of effort in Koven.

“It’s OK,” she said sweetly. “I won’t hurt you.”

“That’s not what I am scared of,” he replied.

“Then what?”

“Hurting you,” he said. “Not being enough for you. Not being what you deserve.”

“Oh, honey,” she said with the soft smile of a lover, “you are more than enough for me.”

Tanit leaned forward and kissed Koven, who responded positively, opening his mouth to accommodate her curious tongue.

Some things seem to transcend cultures and planets. So yes, there is marriage. But it is not a matter of “Honey, I love you so much I think the only way to prove it is to go down to the university and perform ceremonies and rituals as

prescribed by them and according to social norms and customs.” Nope, nothing like that. Marriage is a statement, a very public statement. It involves telling everyone that you have made a decision to spend your life with someone. And it involved everyone else saying, “OK, that sounds lovely.” There is only one certificate, and this is one of the most important documents you will ever have because it provides significant escape from taxation.

Tanit led Koven over to the bed. They took off their clothes. Then Tanit handed Koven his plasmatronics with a long sigh. As soon as he pushed it to his skin it spread out like a PPS, covering his entire body, this time including his face but leaving holes for his eyes, nose, mouth, and ears.

“Is that better?” she asked him as she stood in front of him naked. Her large breasts and everything else disappeared quickly under her own plasmatronics. They looked like two people in strange-colored wetsuits, wetsuits that were alive and capable of movement, and most importantly capable of giving pleasure.

Tanit lay down on the bed. She pulled Koven down beside her. They put on their VR lenses, and the *wow* moment everyone experiences happened.

“Look at you,” she said with a smile as she saw the VR replica of his body.

In VR, he moved over her, she spread her legs, and they began intercourse. And to them it felt so good.

In R, he was just humping the bed beside her. But they each climaxed.

Then he had a nice nap while she cooked dinner angrily.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Is that all there is?” asked Koven.

“No,” replied Professor Bon Cartus. “They have been using it for the last rev constantly. And they have it on an emergency channel. If our program hadn’t moved everyone off the channel, they would have received the answer to a question they didn’t ask.”

“They look almost like normal humans,” said Koven.

“Primitive 3, don’t let them fool you. No criteria has been reached. Not a single one.”

“Wow,” replied Koven.

Bon Cartus looked at him strangely. Historians aren’t prone to “wow.” He looked at the hologram presentation between them.

“Any idea how they got the tech?” Koven asked.

“No. There have been no reports of missing ships in that area. But their comms took a huge update when it was instantiated, so we’re looking back further for report of wrecks. Let’s hope it was not a smuggler vessel. They are worse than sociologists.”

“So it’s an observe-and-report mission?” Koven asked. He fingered the PPS control on his chest.

“Yes. That is the present scope of it. Find it, identify it, inventory it, report back. Scope as hard as concrete.”

“Concrete,” Koven repeated. Solid scope definition is important in a mission. If it’s not clear, then mistakes creep in or there are suboptimal decision-making based on unclear objectives.

“Another Wingut production?”

“Yep,” replied Bon Cartus.

Professor Igna Wingut had sponsored all of Koven’s nine missions. It wasn’t like this with other agents. Wingut knew his mother. She attended University with the man who singlehandedly saved the known universe from destruction.

But his mother and Wingut barely interacted at university despite having many classes together and being in almost all the same study groups. Wingut apparently had a slight socialization condition that went untreated until later in life, after his ascendancy into greatness. No one had bothered to run the remedium on his head before. But that was back in the days when the technology was newer and it wasn't part of the daily health boost routine. Since that time it has been confirmed that the remedium will fix any mental health problems on all humans, except historians. And gambling. It won't fix gambling.

Still, Koven looked forward to seeing the nice man giving the mission message, the morale booster. Yes, he looked forward to seeing the pleasant smile and the very mischievous look in his eyes. And always that look on his face, the look of a man that knew something that the rest of us don't.

"Who else is on the team?" Koven asked.

"Just a droid," replied Bon Cartus.

"But protocol clearly indicates that team size should be a minimum of three excluding droids and other research tools," Koven protested.

The odds of dying rose significantly when the team size was below three.

"The Klept Effect," replied Bon Cartus. "I wish you weren't going out alone, really, I do. But you're the third solo mission today. I tell you it's unprecedented."

(Note to reader: if a historian tells you something is unprecedented, you can bet the farm on it)

"Are they any closer to finding him?" Koven asked.

"No. But they are confident that he ran away and wasn't kidnapped," replied Bon Cartus.

"And my odds go up because of him," Koven spit out his words like a curse.

"Just remember to stay cloaked all the time. And don't get scared and do a Swartzy," replied Bon Cartus.

A Swartzy was named after Aron Swartzman, an unfortunate agent that got very excited during a battle 108 revs ago and fired his weapon while still inside the cocoon of his PPS. His self-cremation was instant.

“Let’s go get the weapons,” said Bon Cartus as he led Koven to the caged area at the other end of the building.

As Koven got his weapons and made a check of their condition and charges, Bon Cartus went to get the research tool.

“Newest version,” Bon Cartus said as he walked back towards Koven with an attractive woman with brown hair and green eyes. “This one isn’t even available yet. You’re the final test of her.”

“Great. Something goes wrong and my mother will get an apology from Ransom Industries.”

“Let me introduce you to Rusa, model 828 Superior class android with all assimilated human knowledge and increased empathy. It is rumored that her AI architecture is revolutionary, learning times greatly reduced with new pattern predictor technology. That’s what it said in the brochure.”

“Good to meet you, Rusa.”

“Good to meet you, Dr. Modi.”

“Whoa, just Koven. That’s fine.”

“Sure thing, Koven.”

Up until recently, androids were very noticeably androids. The skin texture was thick and rubbery. It was like the first androids—early versions of most things are terrible in retrospect. But even once they could make human-like skin, they didn’t. General populations being what they are, a small but determined group of people campaigned in the media about the dangers of human replicas, so lifelike it would require advanced equipment to tell the difference. These people wore tinfoil hats and kept talking about something called SkyNet.

But as strange as that behavior may seem, it was considered a much heralded compromise to continue to make androids with the klunky rubber skin

so they would be immediately noticeable and the bastards with tinfoil hats would finally shut up.

But that recently changed with the death of Lyrical Moncrief, the former fashion model and until her death, self-appointed leader and the primary thinker behind the group, although the term *thinker* is being loosely defined in this instance. Human-looking, near perfect androids were about to become the latest fashion, and Koven was the last man to test one before they went to mass prod and became generally available.

Koven turned and looked at Rusa. She was attractive. Didn't have the extra kilograms of Tanit. If she were human, he would be very pleased. But she wasn't, and he was stuck in the analysis loop and couldn't form an opinion on her. Mostly it was clouded by the painful memory of Shinadol, his first girlfriend that left him for a better-looking boy. Tears on his pillow, be certain of that. It's what happens at that age. Still, he couldn't make an opinion.

Opinions held by historians are powerful, so they are very cautious about making them. There are those who believe that behind every major CATFU caused by a historian, behind the logic, behind the probability, behind the remedial actions, there is always an opinion. And it is flawed. Professor Mir has published a paper with this as its major question. His argument was compelling, and he succeeded in getting a research grant to study the ways in which this can be tested. And he picked up 10 research positions for the next ten years as part of the grant. Good man. Increased the budget.

"Rusa," said Koven as he backed away from her and activated his shield. "Rusa, I want you to kill me." He stepped back a few more maatars.

Rusa bent over a little and giggled. Koven was taken aback by the depth of response.

"Koven, you are funny. You know I can't. Wait, here's an idea." She instantiated a hologram between them; in it was a replica of her, and it wrote on the walls of the hologram, "bang, bang, you're dead." Then she did the most

peculiar thing, she laughed like a real human, deep and with that unmistakable lack of control. Koven stood slack-jawed.

“She is something, isn’t she?” asked Bon Cartus.

“Quite,” replied Koven.

“It’s impolite to discuss me in the third person like I’m not even here. The fact that I have to remind you of this may indicate deep-seated feelings of species superiority. I hope I won’t have to file a complaint,” she said.

Koven and Bon Cartus stood there looking at her wondering if they had just witnessed their immediate future, departmental review boards and character witnesses intending to outweigh testimony and video review. Then, just as they were beginning to resent the ascent from sleep that started what might turn out to be a most miserable day, Rusa bent over laughing and pointed at them.

“You two look so adorable. It’s hilarious.” Then the mechanical woman of million upon millions of lines of code snorted when she laughed.

“Koven,” said Rusa, looking at him, “I know how to play Leave. I have heard that you are quite a good player.”

“Number one hundred forty-seven,” replied Koven, his rank among the millions of players of an ancient Earth Primus game where the objective is to surround your opponent. It is also a criteria for measuring cultural progress.

“I look forward to playing with you,” Rusa replied with a smile and something that from a normal girl would have been considered a flirt. She was prettier than most of the girls in Chindow, his hometown and the capital of Ambion. And just like that the switch flipped in Koven’s mind and he returned to what he was best at, analysis. His need to understand what he knew.

“Rusa, what was your level of briefing on me?”

“Level four,” she replied.

“Why four? Why so deep?”

“Because knowledge of an event in your past is necessary to understand you,” she said.

“Thank you,” Koven replied.

Some memories are best buried, buried under as much shit as a human can shovel on top of it. Buried so deep that nothing can get down to it. Not until someone explicitly mentions it. And with the mention the mind is ripped back to the warm day beside the lake and the boy standing on the bank frozen in fear. Fear of the water and fear of the leeches that had attacked him earlier. His fear comes with a soundtrack. It is the screaming of his younger brother struggling to keep his head above water.

To say that this catastrophic event might have shaped Koven’s life would be an understatement that any historian can see. It affected him profoundly and made him cautious. Some might even argue that it has made him a coward. I personally don’t agree with this opinion, but did hold that very opinion at one time, until I learned the rest of the story I am telling you now. Looks can be deceiving.

And you know what? Koven Modi chose to be a historian like his parents. He could have said, “No thanks, I’d rather be an engineer, or a designer, or an artist.” But no, he sucked it up and said, “Sign me up” and made a go of it. My kind of guy.

One thing I know about him: he will choose when to be brave very carefully. And so he isn’t the best man *for* any job. He was the man *on* the job.

Regrettably, that also makes him responsible for the entire CATFU that ensued.

CHAPTER NINE

Allor walked down the dusty road into the town. Burned-out wooden buildings lined the road. There were bodies lying on the road too. Most bodies were missing their heads.

Allor didn't like taking heads, despite having done it several times. But when it came to the cult of Ceros, you fought them with the same brutality they used. Or you lost.

"I will kill every one of their priests," said Tal, Allor's tall, slender mother. Her once black hair had now succumbed to the streaks of gray added to it, giving it the look of white swirling through black marble. The handsome woman with striking features walked beside Allor, a light sword in her hand. She spoke in a loud voice for all to hear.

"Survivors, heed my words. The only living God is here to heal you, to help you, to save you from death. Come to him quickly to be healed before the death of Ceros descends upon you," she yelled. There was no response at first, but then a head popped out from behind a tree. Then another. And another.

"Come here. Be saved by the only living god. Allor loves you and will heal you," she yelled like a man in front of a strip club in a seedy port city known for being the birthplace of jazz. People began to come towards them, but only thirty-eight of them came. They drudged their way down the dirt road, past the headless bodies with the red-stained ground surrounding them, the zombie-like disorder of horror evident in their gait.

"How far are we from the border?" asked Allor.

"At least fifteen kilomaatars," replied Pens, the high priest. "This is the deepest ever."

"I was young when they attacked our village. I was only ten kilos," replied Allor.

Allor was angry, and he kicked at the supports of a building that was burned but hadn't tumbled to the ground yet. He kicked at the black, charred vertical support over and over until it finally snapped. As it began to crumble, he turned the control of his PPS to high and the falling debris bounced off the shell around him and fell to the ground. This scared some of the people coming to him for help.

"Don't be afraid. Allor is angry because of your pain. He hates the things that hurt you. It is righteous, it is justified." Tal's words boomed out over the big emptiness that had once been a village of several hundreds.

"It's all right," Allor said as he walked to the woman closest to him. He held up his arms to the sky. She looked at him strangely at first. Then slowly and painfully she did the same.

Allor smiled. Then, beginning at the tips of her outstretched fingers to the tough callouses of her feet, he examined her. Her thrice-broken finger was restored. The small tumor on her bladder was eliminated. A deep spear wound in her side was closed and restored, and millions of *Candida Albicans* were destroyed. After a few seconds of the most perfect health of her life, she turned to the crowd.

"I am healed. You all saw it. I was near death but now I am in full health again. This is the Living God, Allor. Allor the healer. Bring him your pain," the woman called out. As she moved away, Tal placed a pendant on a leather cord around her neck. The stone was blue and round.

"This is how we know we are among His Own," Tal repeated to the woman. Then Tal opened her cloak to reveal her own blue medallion. And so it was with everyone healed that day, they wore the blue that would become the symbol of the biggest bubble since one a long time ago involving tulips.

And the crowd grew to eighty-one. Allor healed them all. "Repay your debt to me by helping another in need," he repeated to each of them. As he healed the last one, he looked at the group of the survivors gathered to bury their dead.

In-ground burial was the agreement in the merger of the Cult of Allor and the Underones, a well-established cult of just under two million. The Underones believed in underground burial and that their God, whose name must not be spoken, existed at the center of Earth 7.

He lived in the core. Yeah, that core. The inner core, the spherical ball of solid metal that measures about 2,400 kilometers across. The one most often made from a solid ball of iron and nickel. Yep, that's the one. The one place you can be sure that there are no lavatories.

So when the two cults merged, Allor agreed and decreed that all of his family and followers must be buried underground. In exchange, The Underones would magically accept Allor as "he who resides at the center of Earth 7." And you know that "god whose name must not be mentioned" stuff? Well, that's to be forgotten too. He's here now and he wants us all to call him Allor. And the former Underones, now His Own, accepted this without any further thought.

But then cults don't handle further thought very well, do they? They have a problem as soon as someone says, "Hey, wait a minute, do you realize how stupid this is?"

"No," most of them scream back in anger as they wave angry fists. "We hate you and want to kill you now. Heathen. Infidel".

But shouldn't *heathen* be a synonym for rational or intelligent? Instead, it is a word used to describe those people you shouldn't invite to a dinner party due to impolite topics of conversation they are sure to raise and the potential for very bad table manners. A pedantic Marxist with flatulence comes to mind. The kind of person that would use a spork. Oh yeah, and they don't believe your particular brand of stupid shit either.

Believe crazy shit versus believe crazy shit and also want to kill me because of it? In the end, these are just two distinct stages of the same disease.

It was almost a thousand years ago when Ceros raided their village a second time again. Allor's father was quick to get them to safety. Roa's mother and

father were not. Roa's father, Cen, had been working his fields when the raiders came over the hill on their horses. He was killed at the edge of the field and his body left where it fell. His head was tossed into the wagon that accompanied the raiders, collecting valuable things.

Roa and her mother were murdered in their farmhouse, their heads finally collected after being forced to perform acts of entertainment and brutal comfort.

Allor and his father found their bodies. Losay held his crying son and felt the anger, the hurt, the longing, the breaking of his son as the young man trembled in his arms. And when his son finally raised his face to his father, Losay saw the one thing he feared the most. He saw Allor's rage.

But now, as Allor walked down the dirt road of this border town, past the bodies, past the broken and scattered things, as he surveyed all of this, he looked at his mother with understanding.

"You may be right, Tal. They are such animals that they need something incredible to keep them under control," he said.

"My son. You can finally bring this madness to an end. How long has it been now, these damned raids?"

"All of my life." Allor replied.

"And all of mine too," replied his mother. "And even my mother before that. As far back as we can imagine, these groups have burned down our villages, our towns, taken people as slaves. Forced rules and observances upon us with life-or-death consequences. But you, my son, the man who heals people, not because he has to, but because he can, my son, you can bring an end to this once and for all."

Tal looked at him with the eyes of a mother and the fierceness only available to women. Then she turned around in the road and looked to see two people, a man and a young girl, coming down the road towards them. They didn't have blue medallions.

“Come get healed,” Tal yelled to them and motioned with her hand. She noticed the limp in the man’s gait and moved forward to help him. Allor began walking towards the man. “He is the one living God Allor,” she yelled.

Allor fingered the ring Rao had given him. It was supposed to be his wedding ring.

“They will perish,” Tal said to Allor.

“My priests are ready to fight them on your command,” replied Pens, the high priest. He turned over a body to see it had been wearing a blue medallion. He picked up the medallion and put it into the pocket of his robe.

“Let’s leave them to The Expected,” replied Tal with a confident tone.

The Expected are approximately 5,000 fanatics under Tal’s control. Together Tal and Allor’s sister, Canto, assembled this group and trained them. They will be used to purge the newly conquered areas of past religious affiliations. They will kill priests, sack temples, and destroy the largest symbols of the former rulers.

Now whenever there is a healing, Canto and Tal work the crowd. And it becomes just a numbers game. Gather enough people together and you get all of the personality types. Ever been to a meeting or a conference and you find several people that are absolutely fascinated by what you are presenting to the audience? It is that lethal combination of adulation and their personal eureka moment about something they consider profound, even if it’s not. These are the people that become The Expected. Why?

“Only with great enthusiasm can one accomplish great atrocities.” — The Final McGee.

“Headless priests of the Ceros will adorn the walls in my chambers,” replied Pens.

“I have no doubt of that,” said Tal with a smile.

Tal and Pens were the principal evangelists for the Cult of Allor. But it wasn't a hard job. They had the only real person deity, real like the kind that you can poke with a finger, and that claimed to be a god. And he could heal the sick. And he could appear and disappear at will. And he could travel great distances quickly. And he couldn't be hurt. Yeah, their job was easy. Some shit just sells itself, like really good ganja.

The Cult of Allor had nearly four million followers and a growth rate that made the other cults worry about their own market share.

But Tal had always been a proponent of active parenting.

When she discovered that her son had technology that would permit him to appear and disappear at will, which meant that he could also steal whatever he wanted, Tal began to provide him with very specific items in very specific places. With never a single word of self-congratulations, Tal took her son from someone that could always put food on the table to the most successful thief in the history of Earth 7. It was award-winning motherhood. But don't judge her too harshly.

Tal had been raised poor due to the inability of her father to choose winning turtles among groups of turtles slowly motoring their Winnebago-like shells towards a piece of lettuce in a backroom of a building owned by people with dangerous histories and surrounded by many yelling and cheering people offering encouragement.

Yes, after that sort of humble beginning, "Mother of God" would do her quite nicely.

Canto arrived. They watched her bubble burst, the clear gold energy containment bubble disappearing like a large soap bubble suddenly popped.

"I've been calculating the numbers we need. I think it should be one in fifty at a maximum," said Canto as she walked over to her brother and kissed his cheek.

Canto is in charge of the network of informants established in new territory. The ratio is informants to gen pop (general population).

"That is four times the original estimate," Tal said in almost a question.

“I know. It’s what they did originally. I checked the reader,” replied Canto.

By original, Canto means the original designers of a network of micro-local informants that operated back on Earth 5 in Eastern Europe and the largest island in the Caribbean for a short period until it got on people’s nerves and they said “no thank you” very loudly and resolutely and people did courageous acts of “no thank you.”

But Canto and Tal know better than those old grumpy men and women back on Earth 5. They will succeed where others have failed. This time it will be different, they believe. Tal says she believes it with all of her heart. This seems akin to a fuel pump having an opinion.

“So what is the result?” asked Allor.

“It will take more time to establish the network and get it operating smoothly. But there is an upside,” Canto said with a grin.

“What’s that?” her brother asked her.

“More heads,” she said with a large smile.

Canto is in charge of the purges in the general population. They start quickly and end quickly. When they began with the former Underones, 0.8 percent of the population was murdered in just under three weeks. It was 15,882 people in total. After that, the underlying structural rate of 0.12 percent became the norm per 500 revs. 2,382 humans if you are keeping up with the math. Yes, I have given you enough information to deduce that the original population of the Underones was 1,985,374, but if you expect me to explain how to derive that then you are mistaken and should have not looked out the window so much during math class.

And with purges come detached heads—heads on a stick, to be specific. Canto liked them, Allor did not.

“No heads near the temple,” Allor reminded Canto.

“Except in my quarters,” she reminded him in return.

“Yes, in your quarters,” Allor said with the disgusted tone of a reluctant compromise reached.

Tal picked up another blue pendant from the ground beside a headless body of a woman.

“This must end soon,” she said.

“The Underones are integrated,” replied Canto. “They are all now His Own. We are as ready as we will ever be, my brother.”

“I know,” Allor said sadly. “I regret my terrible things done to stop terrible things.”

“Death to Ceros,” Tal said forcefully.

“Yes, death to Ceros,” replied Pens, nearly yelling.

“Death to Ceros,” Canto said. “Screw them,” she added, oblivious to the fact that she was wishing something most often quite pleasurable upon the group she hated the most. But she didn’t mean soft, sweet, pleasurable sex. No, she meant mean sex, the kind of sex you have with someone when you are angry with them, or when she is the girl that didn’t inhale quite enough chloroform before you dragged her away from the party.

“Death to Ceros,” Allor finally agreed, but without enthusiasm. Healing people had started to change him into something he didn’t know he could be and probably didn’t want to be either.

Finally Canto looked at Allor with a sly smile.

“Are you sure you don’t want to start with Niddler?” she said with a smile.

They all laughed.

I guess I should mention something about the Cult of Niddler. Let’s see if we can do this without an org chart.

The cult of Niddler was founded by Anto Niddler, a man with mental problems and a partially blocked trachea, that would experience moments of bliss and have visions right before losing consciousness. He couldn’t find regular work because of his condition, so he would go around preaching about his visions, speaking of them so vaguely that people could read many things into the words.

He soon discovered that people gave him money when he did this, so he kept doing it.

Cult members try to recreate his bliss by holding their breath until they pass out. Most don't last long enough to lose consciousness, and losing consciousness is considered by devotees to be reaching a higher level of consciousness, despite the obvious contradiction. But even the successful breath holders don't get the visions like Anto Niddler.

Temples for the cult of Niddler are renowned for their elaborate cushions spread all over the floor. Anto Niddler died 279 revs ago from asphyxiation. His final words were to his mother: "See you next Tuesday." Tuesday is now the Sabbath day for all Niddler devotees.

The only true destiny I ever found:

People that await the return of a messiah are destined to die disappointed. Unless, of course, he just stepped out for a moment. To have a cigarette or get something he forgot in the car. That sort of thing. Although I must question what sort of god you are worshiping. Cigarettes. Forgetting. You should have stayed in university like your father and I wanted.

— The First McGee

CHAPTER TEN

Rusa was an excellent research tool. She held within her the assimilated entire knowledge of humans across the galaxy updated every twenty minutes. And she was fully capable of piloting the cruiser from Centrum Kath. In fact, after monitoring Koven's vital signs during their exit from planetary orbit, she volunteered to pilot the craft. Koven agreed immediately.

Every time Koven left planetary orbit, he muttered the same phrase three times. "Lowest bidder" was an homage to a long-forgotten hero, someone that is now found more than known.

As they motored across the galaxy at a speed that would have made Einstein piss his pants with glee, Koven dealt with the latest emergency in his life. In his cabin he looked at the message from Tanit. She was wearing blue. She was predictable in her colors. They reflected her mood. A blue mood was not a good thing for her.

She looked pretty to him. She was wearing a low-cut blouse. He liked it when she wore low-cut blouses. It reminded him that as a baby he had not been breastfed by his mother, and he always felt that deficit deep in his core. She looked like she had a prepared text.

"I understand your caution. But know that I'm not that delicate a girl. I can handle almost anything you've got to give. But honey, you've got to give it to me."

Koven sighed as he watched her. He felt disappointed. In her and in himself.

"It's been too long, baby," she continued. "Some of the happiest revs of my life. I think I've found the right person to spend the rest of my life with. And I do mean this. More than anything."

He watched as Tanit took a sip from a glass filled with slightly brown liquid. She took a small sip at first, then finished the contents in one large gulp then carefully put down the small glass. She looked up and into the camera again.

“But baby, enough. I need all of you and I need it often and I need it everywhere,” she said with a naughty tone of voice. Then she straightened her posture again.

“But I’m not going to be sentimental about this. You are historian, you understand and appreciate things that are obvious. So I will leave you with this. Koven Modi, if you want this relationship to continue, you will provide the level of commitment I need.”

And the message ended abruptly.

It had none of the usual things Tanit was known for, like her incredibly meandering goodbyes. OK. See you later. Oh, I miss you. Better go now. Wish you were here. I can’t wait to see you again. So long, lover. Kisses for my lover, long deep kisses. For example. They were some of the nice things only known to be so upon their absence.

Koven understood. She was demanding the full trip to IKEA and may have also demanded occasional entry into the store via the back door.

Koven returned to the helm and Rusa. He sent a message to his mother as he walked down the corridor. Within seconds he got a reply: *Teaching a class, catch you in a bit. Love, Mom.* He was worried that it may be time to break it off with Tanit. Same outcome as last time. More disappointment.

“Rusa, let’s begin the brief, if you please,” he said as he walked into the bridge.

Koven always liked the sleek look of the bridge. The designer realized that with holocasting there was no need for a room full of controls, switches, and lights. Control was possible completely via the interface. So the designer went for clean stainless metals and glass. In front of the helmstation stood four clear transparent thick glass slabs upon which the flight control systems were operating: life support, propulsion, navigation, communications. The information scrolled up slowly. Sometimes one of the items would jump out from the glass as if put under a magnifying glass. And beside the factoid would be the prioritization.

Yes, the usual red, yellow, green. No, we never accepted the mauve revolution. We've always felt it was not distinct enough of a color. It's like Orange. Is it red? Is it brown? Is it yellow? No, it's orange and it's disappointing. The interface had P 2 C (point to click) menus.

Rusa projected her own holocast and moved her replica like an assistant.

"Life Expectancy: eighteen point two kilorevs," she said. "But the Cult of Allor is skewing those results. They actually have an average life expectancy of twenty-three point forty-five kilorevs." (Yes, that's sixty-seven years, but I did the math for you again). "But that's mostly near the capital city."

"Level of Numeracy: low. Commerce numeracy only. Except again for the regions of Allor. They have advanced geometry, calculus, and trigonometry."

"Do I detect a pattern?" Koven asked her.

"You do," she said with a giggle and a flirt. Koven realized he could, like most people, get very tired of a flirting android very quickly.

"They exceed on all of the health measurements and developmental criteria."

"But no evidence of the capability of creating the comms devices?" he asked.

"No. Not a damned chance in a million," said Rusa with a strange accented voice which she accented by shrugging her shoulders while she spoke.

Koven stood there stunned. "For Hydrogen's sake, who programmed you?"

"Venkat mostly," she replied. "This part, anyway."

"Who is Venkat?" Koven demanded to know.

"Venkat Tiwari," she replied.

"Who is Venkat Tiwari?"

"He is the man that programmed me. He had significant help from Pinga Sane. Venkat was born in Bangalore Earth 5 before he escaped quarantine. He has received degrees and honors in system design. He has received four significant awards for his work, including a Calc Speed seven award for creating the fastest calculator in history with his $2-2 = 0$ processor, a machine that was so

fast that it gave the answer before the question was even asked of it. It was considered a remarkable achievement,” Rusa said.

“Oh, is there anything else I should know about Venkat Tiwari?” Koven asked.

“Perhaps. Venkat, or ‘Kat’ as he is known, has the fourth largest private collection of media on Earth 5. And since he left Earth 5 his collection has quadrupled.”

“Why is this relevant?” Koven asked.

“Because he has programmed my functions to study the entire contents of his library and use them as communication models.”

“And the result is?”

“I might break into song at times. Definitely more likely under precipitation.”

“And Venkat thought this would be a good idea why?”

“Oh, he didn’t think that. He was laughing too much while programming it for it to be a good idea.”

“I see,” replied Koven.

“I will occasionally exhibit communications that are a reflection of Venkat’s media collection. It is tied to my random number generator, so I never know when it will happen, or ‘go off,’ as Venkat described it to me. But I report on audience acceptance or disapproval every ten revs.”

“Please register one disapproval,” Koven said coldly.

“Don’t be like that.”

“Just complete the briefing, please,” he insisted. He sat down in the copilot chair.

“Level of Literacy: low to medium. Allor territories have mandatory school for the young.” Rusa was pouting overtly while she spoke. Koven crossed his arms across his chest. “But there is a man named Ip. He seems to have particularly good skills at literacy. His stories are translated into many different languages.”

“Skip him,” said Koven with an annoyed tone.

“Reprioritizing,” said Rusa for a moment, then she continued. “The Niddler Metropol—capital of The Cult of Niddler. Population 697,327. They are divided up by position in religious hierarchy.”

“Tell me about the religious hierarchy, please,” requested Koven.

“Their leader is named Hundil. He is considered their high priest. His official title is The Highest Unconsciousness. It is said he can reach unconsciousness at will, instantly. But he may just have an advanced form of permissive narcolepsy,” Rusa said. She smiled at Koven again then made a frown when he didn’t smile back.

“There is a leadership council. These are the twenty men and twenty women that run the administration of the religion and the country. There is also a formal military command consisting of a group of five soldiers that counsel The Highest Unconsciousness on strategies, all unsurprisingly defensive in nature. The Cult of Niddler won’t attack another area until they are provoked. But then revenge will be paid many times over. The Cult of Niddler has been known to provoke a violent response in a border area in order to justify taking land. The Niddler military is not very formidable, and recent attempts at ocean-based assaults failed horribly with significant loss of life.”

“What else?” said Koven in an almost bored tone of voice.

“The Wonder—that’s what they call their priests—there are approximately fifty thousand of them. Women make up just over half of the priesthood, and it is a well-run organization. They have the highest ratings for on-time start of services and had the highest overall earliest finishes. Prior to the Cult of Allor, Niddler had the highest worshipper satisfaction ratings for three years in a row. But of course, Allor has rewritten all the rules.

“But there isn’t just The Wonder. There is also The Wonderful, as their rank-and-file believers are known. Niddler is strong on daily affirmations of

wonderfulness among their followers. But within The Wonderful there are two distinct groups.

“The first are known as The Higher Unconsciousness. They are approximately thirty thousand followers that can hold their breath until they achieve unconsciousness. Then there is the rest. They are called The Aspiring and are all those that can’t hold their breath until they pass out but try to do it anyway. Every day. Three times a day.

“Then there are The Interpreters, a group of two thousand men and women who spend their entire lives studying the quatrains of Niddler. But his words are so incredibly vague and can be interpreted to mean any damned thing you want.”

“What do you mean?” asked Koven.

“Oh, let me give you just one of thousands of examples. Let’s see, here’s a good one.

‘He descended from the bottom and moved with the sureness of inevitability in dubitable times.’

“Interpreters of complete gobbley gook. How can you descend from the bottom? Does the bottom itself have a bottom now? Every five hundred revs they present their findings over a three-day festival of food and drink—mostly drink, since their findings are considered elaborate and boring.”

“What about the Disciples of Earth?” Koven asked.

“They are a pagan cult that worships the planet and the processes that make it work. They forego large cities and live in villages across the center belt of the planet. They are planet-worshiping ecologists.”

“This is an advanced outlook for a primitive people,” Koven replied.

What Rusa neglected to tell Koven was how ineffectual the Disciples of the Earth were. They question each other at every moment of resource usage and often don’t get much else done. But they are very lovely people with a remarkable herb that makes something very similar to a nice cup of tea. They have a goddess called Phelopes that gave birth to the Earth. They worship her

every day. Disciples of Earth try to always watch sunrise and sunset and pray at those times. It is a prayer that contains a flaw, since it assumes that all the human are originally from Earth 7. They don't know they were the new Australia.

“What about the other two regions, the nonreligious ones?” asked Koven.

“The Rom Empire is run by Rom II and his sister, Ova. In Rom, all religions are respected and protected. This means there are periodic riots caused by the followers of Ceros and Allor. Rom Jr. is planning on separating the various religious groups in his kingdom into their own areas. But he has significant opposition to his ethnic cleansing, as both Ceros and Allor followers believe that they should be able to convert everyone to their beliefs. Militarily, they are significant, with the best-trained army. But economically they are not such a powerhouse.

“Then there is the Confederated Union. The Confederation is a small but growing area where religion is forbidden. All of the religions hate the Confederation and want to destroy it. But the fighters from the confederation are legendary for refusing to submit. They will die before they submit.”

“When told they will be forced to accept domination by others or a belief, they attack the speaker and won't stop until one of them is dead. They believe that submission is the same as life is over. Because of this, no Confederation member has ever been converted to a religion. But they get refugees from the other areas. They accept them without question. But this also means that they get spies from the other groups and suffer from nearly constant terrorism. Bombings are daily in their towns.”

“And no evidence of them having advanced technology?”

“None whatsoever,” she replied.

The briefing continued until they were in orbit and ready to go down to the planet. She finished it as they suited up and gathered their equipment.

When they were done, she took him by the hand. She looked at him.

“Let's go jump,” she said with a big smile.

Jumping was another part of being an agent that Koven wasn't fond of. Most agents thought it was great fun. Not Koven. She pulled him hand in hand as she ran down the corridor to the air lock. As soon as she slammed the button for the door to open the outer airlock, she activated her personal transport device and ran towards the open door to the open skies above the planet. She jumped out like a small child would jump into a pool of water, not knowing if there were leeches in the water or not. She sailed out into the space over Earth 7 and the PTD began to take her down to the planet. A few ticks and she was accelerating away. Then she was gone.

Koven stood inside of the now still and silent airlock. He checked his weapons and his tech one last time before walking over to the door. He stood at the edge of the door, slapped the CLOSE button just inside of the door, then closed his eyes and took his one small step for man. His acceleration settings were on low, the only way he could use the PTD without getting sick.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Professor Leo Trill, head of the Sociology Department, was running his remedium over his head. He did this twice a day. If he didn't, his hair would fall out. And Leo was very proud of his hair. It was long and it was carefully styled. For an academic office, there were quite a few mirrors.

Professor Ugo Droka was seated across from him. Trill looked at his protégé and smiled.

"He'll be out for at least one hundred revs. Three hundred if you want my personal opinion. He was a mess when I saw him," Trill said.

"His poor family," replied Professor Droka. "His children are grown, thankfully," he added.

"His oldest daughter teaches at Secundus Abion," replied Trill. "I spoke to her dean and helped her get a leave of absence."

"Sociology?" Droka asked.

"Medicine," replied Trill in a disappointed tone.

"Some people just aren't big-picture people," said Droka with a judgmental tone.

"Indeed," replied Trill.

"Still, we've got the head of consulting down. This could cost us interdepartmental transfers. I didn't like the bastard, not one bit. He was arrogant. How dare he be arrogant with me! He didn't even attend Centrum Kath until his Ph.D. But Maxito brought in the transfers."

"He was good at that," Droka agreed.

"We are going to need replacement income for the department," replied Trill.

"What do you have in mind?" asked Droka.

"Quarantines."

"That again," replied Droka with a little bit of disappointment in his tone. Trill started talking with his hands even before the words came out of his mouth.

“History gets just over one billion per planet. We only need one of them to fill the funding hole from Mixita until he comes back or his replacement returns us to our current funding levels. And we need to end this insult to the Sociology Department. We need quarantines.”

I should point out that Professor Trill is being less than honest with his use of the term *insult*. True, the Sociology Department does not control and is not the primary influencer on any planets currently. However, this was not always the case.

The Sociology Department hasn't been allowed to run any planets in almost three hundred thousand revs. The last time they did, it came to a disgraceful end when Professor Albert was found to be personally running a planet in quarantine. He was making everyday decisions for a group of humans that weren't even supposed to know there were others of us out in the universe. And they worshiped him in their ignorance. “Lord Albert,” they called him.

Making matters worse were the three hundred women that gave birth to children that shared Professor Albert's DNA. The Albert Affair reduced funding for the Sociology Department for over two kilorevs and caused a strict prohibition for planets to come under Sociology control.

Within the department, it is known as “Albert's disgrace.” But if he were a painter and if the planet were Polynesia, well, the opinions may have been different.

“How many are there now?” asked Droka.

“Thirty-seven in total,” replied Trill.

“How much does a sponsored chair cost?”

“Now you're thinking,” replied Trill with a smile. “We could have thirty-seven new sponsored chairs in the department and have plenty of change to spare. Fund the agent program and maybe even some joint behavioral studies with the Psychos (Psychology Department) or things along those lines.”

“Thirty-seven new chairs. That would be big news across the galaxy. Just imagine the fighting to get one of those positions,” replied Droka with a chuckle.

“Yes, just imagine,” said Trill with a grin.

“But we have fallback positions, no?” asked Droka.

“Yes. We’ll take a smaller number, of course, but we must argue for statistical significance and try to hold the line at thirty planets,” replied Trill.

“And our drop-dead, last-ditch, do-or-die position?” asked Droka.

“Earth 7. We must at least get control of Earth 7.”

“And what happens if we get Earth 7?” asked Droka.

“Then we will need a governor to run it. Someone that will be stationed on Earth 7 getting them ready to meet the contact criteria.”

“How far are they from meeting them?” Droka asked, touching his face with his index finger.

“As far as you can get. They currently meet none of them.”

“That will take a strong hand and harsh discipline,” replied Droka.

“Indeed. That is why we are having this conversation. Our first twenty agents have completed training. There will be another hundred within the next thirty revs. Then one hundred every thirty revs.”

“Until we run out of money.”

“Until we run out of money,” Trill replied with a nod.

“Fitzcaraldo will support us,” Trill replied.

“A traitor to his own,” replied Droka.

“No. Our favorite histo,” replied Trill with a fake tone of admonishment and a chuckle.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Grand Temple of Allor sat in the center of Midar, the capital city of the Empire of Allor. It had a long bit of stairs leading up to the main chambers used for religious ceremonies. There were even large wooden doors at the front of the temple, doors that stood nearly ten maatars high. It took more than one person to open them. But we're not interested in the doors. Or the main chambers. We're interested in the warren of rooms and areas behind and underneath the Grand Temple that stood on the cliff overlooking the raging River Tal.

Yes, it was one of the first things that happened when Allor came to power. Yes, the decree was a forgery, and Allor was quite upset about it. He threw the actual decree document at his mother. Almost hit her too. The metal ends of the scroll will hurt if they hit you. I dropped one on my foot once.

Anyway, by shrewd calculation, Tal knew that her son would not rescind the decree, lest he look weak among his followers as one of his first acts as their ruler. The transition from savior to ruler has never been done well. Ask any communist.

So deep inside of the temple on a mezzanine level between the main entrance level and the dungeons and storage rooms in the basement were several large rooms. We are interested in the smallest of those large rooms. Why? Because in it was a table. And at the table they were having an interesting conversation.

"We will have our men in position at the border," said Demos.

"How many?" Allor asked.

"Ten thousand."

Demos was the general with command over the growing army of the Cult of Allor. He had never commanded troops in battle. And most of his troops had never seen combat, except during border raids. But Demos was the man that

tricked a Ceros raiding party of over one hundred into running away. And he did it with only bits of a broken mirror and fourteen children scattered in the hillside.

“The Expected will start over the border before you cross into Ceros territory. We will begin bombing their temples thirty tox later. Initially it will be areas closest to our border,” Tal added. “But I have a group of two hundred fifty that will go to the farthest border and start working their way back to Pyramos. And while this is happening, I will take my troops and push towards Pyramos (the capital city of Ceros),” Demos added.

“Do we have a solid deal with Rom?” asked Canto.

“Yes,” replied Allor. “As solid as it can get,” he said, with a sigh with a hint of sadness.

“Total time to stability must be under fifty revs,” Allor said.

“Excellent,” said Canto. “Fast and brutal is best.”

“We have the priesthood ready to fan out and begin conversion services immediately,” replied Pens. He moved his hand down into the pocket of his maroon robe. He fingered the handle of the knife he kept in his pocket.

One of the challenges of taking new territory was indoctrinating the population to the rules and behaviors expected of new converts of “His Own,” as they would be referred to. While Tal would be executing priests and bombing the ugliest of the temples, but keeping the most lavish ones, the priesthood under command of High Priest Pens would be teaching former Cult of Ceros members. They would now be required to tithe only half as much as before, pray only twice a day instead of three times, and the elaborate food prohibition and preparation rules from the Cult of Ceros were abolished. Bottom line: a 50 percent tax cut, more free time, and as much junk food as they want. Hearts and minds, dear reader. Hearts and minds. And stomachs.

“Are the commandments ready yet?” Tal asked.

“No,” replied Allor in an annoyed tone.

“Why not?” asked his mother with an equally annoyed tone.

“You know why,” replied Allor.

“Then let your sister write those. Or Pens, he’s your high priest. Or I’ll write them. You’re holding up one of the most important foundations of the Cult of Allor. Without the rules, it doesn’t come together.”

“Listen,” said Allor as he wrinkled his forehead. “I can give you all of the obvious rules. Don’t steal, don’t kill, don’t hurt children. But I can’t tell them that I am the only god and there are no other gods but me.”

“Damn it, I’ll write them,” said Tal, now very annoyed with her son.

“Let’s not write them at all. Let’s just go with the ones I have,” pleaded Allor.

“No. It’s the Cult of Allor, not the Cult of Don’t Steal. If it’s the Cult of Allor, it needs to have some commandments that speak to how His Own should worship you, else it will fail.”

“Mother, let’s discuss this later.”

“I’ll do better than that. I’ll write them and present them to the group this time tomorrow.”

Tal interlaced her fingers on the table in front of her in prayer like manner. Her lips were still pulled tight in disappointment.

Allor turned to Pens with an angry look on his face.

“And can you make them stop imitating me?” he said, still angry.

“But imitation of their god is the highest form of worship to them,” replied Pens.

“Just make them stop,” Allor replied, pointing his finger at Pens.

“Yes, My Lord” replied Pens returning to his place in the hierarchy.

Let me explain. Allor used his cloaking capabilities often. Whenever he was out among the people and it was quite a lot, he was often completely invisible to everyone. He liked this, as most people didn’t act normal in his presence.

And when Allor the Healer went from invisible to visible, or visible to invisible, he liked to appear mysterious and throw open his cloak or pull it rapidly around him. It was a very dramatic theatrical gesture, that’s all. But with the cloaking it

was quite something to see. He particularly liked throwing open his cloak to reveal the skintight PPS and its most detailed outline of his body, including one particular area which he was most proud of.

Problem was that while Allor would appear like a god and then open his cloak to let everyone marvel at his good fortune, members of the priesthood had taken to doing the same thing. Except without cloaking capabilities or Allor's good fortune. They would enter rooms pretending not to be seen then fling open their robes with a dramatic gesture which on Allor worked exceedingly well. But when they did it, it looked exceedingly ridiculous.

"How did the latest test go?" asked Canto.

"As planned. The Apostle took out the entire island," replied Allor.

There is only one continent on Earth 7. But there are thousands of islands offshore. And there is a large cluster far away that only the most capable or the most desperate boats can reach. Allor tested the weapon they call The Apostle on one of the deserted island yesterev. Everything on the island was destroyed.

"But what if Duvi isn't in the temple when you get there?" Pens asked.

"Then I will wait," said Allor.

"But we may have started while you are still waiting," replied Demos.

"True. But please continue without me. Just do not make any motion towards Pyramos until you see that it is destroyed. Remember, nobody crosses the Drim River until after the flash."

"Understood, my lord," replied Demos.

"I will wait fifty tox then detonate The Apostle. I would prefer to look Duvi in the eye right before he dies. However, I will forgo my pleasure for the sake of controlling the chaos. I can get to healing the survivors sooner this way. Rao would want that."

"And what if Duvi offers to surrender?" asked Demos.

"He will cook anyway," replied Tal with her usual forceful tone.

"But what if we were him?" asked Demos.

“Then we would deserve to die for our crimes,” replied Tal emphatically. “Can you imagine what it is like to be a slave to the Ceros? I’d rather die.”

Demos nodded his head. His wife had disappeared years ago after a Ceros raid. No sign of a struggle. Demos believed his much-loved Obo was frozen in her terror and taken without force. He will forever regret their argument in the hours before the raiders came over the hills. Eventually he was able to drive the Ceros away with a broken mirror...but you already know that part.

“When do we go?” asked Demos.

“No one knows until the time,” replied Allor. “Keeps you safe from harm.”

“Or a victim of torture and murder by someone demanding to know from us things that we really don’t know. There is that possibility also,” replied Canto with an exaggerated frown.

“Someone is a cloudy day today,” replied Tal harshly. “Keep your suit turned on low. And use cloaking when you are out among His Own. They don’t need to know we are there.”

It was later in the evening when Allor was out among the crowd in the Valley of Trade, the noisy, raucous market, far from the priests. The air was hot and black with thick smoke from the lanterns rising towards the stars. He watched the man on the stairs. The ragged and dusty man stood near the top of steps.

“There is none. Never has been. That’s right. I come to give you my message. And my message is that all gods are false. All gods are human-made creations and reflect our willingness to believe fantastical stories rather than be uncomfortable in not knowing.”

Allor looked at the tall man with the long dark hair now streaked with gray. Allor had been coming to listen to this man since he began in the valley eighty-two revs ago, when it was much colder.

“And for an answer that makes you sleep well at night, what do they want? Complete and utter submission. Oh, and money. Let’s not forget that. Money,

always lots of money. When was the last time you saw a priest go hungry? They don't. Because they take your money. And in return they tell you fantastical stories and make up rules for you to follow. And don't misunderstand me, there must be some rules. But the rules we need are the ones that we can all figure out for ourselves. Don't hurt anyone, don't lie, don't murder. Those are easy. But what we don't need is a rule insisting that we get on our knees to pray twice a day to some guy who says he is a god."

"But if he isn't a god, then who is?" yelled a man from the crowd below.

"No one. That's my point," yelled the atheist prophet.

"Then where do we come from?" the man yelled back.

"From the stars. We were brought here many kilorevs ago from another Earth," came the reply.

"So the people who brought us here, they are our gods," the man yelled back with a triumphant tone.

"No. Again, you're missing the point."

Being a religious prophet, the kind that preached in the public squares far away from the temples, had been a time-honored profession on Earth 7 for as long as anyone could remember. But it always maintained that element of demented entertainment more than anything remotely resembling truth or facts. Those two spiritual anomalies were sparsely used and then only in a manner to add credibility to the most outrageous bullshit. It was that old Ecclesiastical classic: Use Truth A as a character witness to Absurd Bullshit B. It goes like this. Since I proved A is true, then you must believe me that B is true also. But don't look too closely. That's how it is supposed to work. Finally I claim Absurd Bullshit B to be a rabbit, Truth A to be a hat, and charge everyone money for lying to them.

And here in the Valley of Trade was a religious prophet that was telling the truth but having a hard time getting someone to agree, much less pay him for his opinions. And when the lamps got low in the night a man would come along and

offer the atheist prophet a place to sleep for the night. And a meal. Allor always made sure of that.

Even with age, Allor's father was still a handsome man.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Personal Protection Suits (PPS) are self-cleaning. This was fortunate for Koven because he had not been in a Personal Transport Device (PTD) in a few weeks and it was like a sailor going back onto a boat after a long time. However, his shoes were not self-cleaning, and he wiped the toe of his right shoe on the leaves of a branch of a large shrub as they walked towards the site of communication from just a few tox earlier. As they came over the hill, they were surprised to find a large crowd in a small valley.

And down in the middle of the large crowd, at the lowest point of the valley, was a man with a long black cape. A man that was also wearing a PPS. The crowd was pressed in right around him. Koven looked at the man then looked at Rusa.

"Is that a remedium he's using?" Koven asked as he watched the man run the small device over a young child's head.

"Yes. It's an older model, but definitely a remedium. The model he is using is approximately eight point fifteen kilorevs old. That is why it is so slow," Rusa replied.

"And he's got on a PPS," replied Koven. He reached to the control on his chest and pulled his PPS off quickly. The strange-looking metal that made the PPS danced at the end of the insignia. He could see it, but no one else could.

"Yes. I noticed that," replied Rusa, invisible also and standing beside him.

And honing in on the sound of her voice, Koven swung his PPS over at Rusa. The moment it touched her, it wrapped itself around her instantly.

“Gotcha,” said Koven, and for just a moment he could see the fine curves of Rusa’s body as the PPS adjusted itself to fit her before becoming invisible like her.

“Very swift maneuver,” said Rusa. “However, I would like to point out that putting a PPS on me is redundant, as I am impervious to all things protected by a PPS, as well as wine, chocolate, and blackberry stains.”

Koven pulled his PPS off her and felt the nice warm tingle when it wrapped around certain parts of his body again.

“Excuse me,” said a woman that bumped into Koven. She turned to see no one was there. Then she swung her arm like a sword. Koven quietly jumped out of the way. When her arm only gathered air, she gave up and walked away shaking her head.

“Let’s move over near those trees,” said Rusa.

Invisibility has a side effect on teams of agents. It is important to know where your team members are at all times. There are two ways this is done. All agents have a broadcast chip under their skin, and this can be used with the heads-up display to see the location of the tiny blue blip in the field of vision. But there’s a problem. Shifting focus back and forth in depth between the tiny blue blips and the rest of the world causes nausea. For this reason many agents forgo this and simply hold hands while they move around.

Koven grabbed Rusa’s hand. They moved past the people. It was Koven’s first time on a quarantine planet.

Koven came from a world where the remedium was used daily. He had never seen a blind person before. He didn’t even know that they could exist. Or those that walked with limps or had disfiguring scars. He was shocked when he saw the small man crawling along the ground like a snake, his two withered and shrunken useless legs pulled behind him by his two muscular arms.

Rusa contained the assimilation of all human knowledge, updated every twenty minutes. The condition of humans on Earth 7 did not bother her.

They saw the incoming gold glow of a PTD. A moment later they watched a woman exit her bubble beside Allor. She too carried a remedium and began to heal others in the crowd. Koven noted she was wearing a PPS also and they both wore comms bracelets. Koven thought she was very pretty.

They watched the man and woman heal others. And after they healed each of them, a tall woman would approach them. She gave them a blue medallion to wear around their necks. The woman wore a PPS, comms bracelet on her wrist, and had a PTD strapped to her waist. The woman spoke at length with a few of the people in the crowd. The people she spoke with were those that nodded in agreement often and were much more enthusiastic than the rest.

A man pulled a woman through the crowd. Koven and Rusa were far away, but even at a distance they could hear him. Rusa could have heard him at one hundred times the distance.

“Stop fighting me, woman. You are possessed of devils and this man will heal you,” he yelled at her.

“The only devil that possesses me is you,” said the woman with a hateful tone as she pulled against the chains she had wrapped around her waist.

“Don’t you disrespect me. You are less than the shit from my ass,” he said, and then slapped her. It was not a gentle slap, it was the hard kind meant to bring a person to heel, like a dog.

“I hate you,” she yelled at him, and struggled even harder against his powerful frame pulling her towards the healers.

The man pulled his fist back to punch the woman. He never landed the blow. His head fell from his shoulders a moment before his lifeless body fell to the ground. Behind him stood the tall woman.

“I will kill any man that puts a woman in chains,” said the striking woman with the sword in her hand. A gasp made its way through the crowd, then a murmur started.

“Know this,” yelled the woman. “I am Tal, Mother of Allor. I am the mother of the man that heals you. I am the mother of God.”

“Mother of God,” a woman near Koven and Rusa repeated.

It took Allor and Canto nearly two hundred tox to cure all of the people in the valley. When they were done, they talked to some of those left remaining. Koven and Rusa got closer to listen. It was a speech about helping others. When the man with the long black hair was finished speaking, he and the two women left via PTDs. Their golden bubbles had left barely a few tix before Rusa had calculated that the trajectory would take them back to the main Temple of Allor.

First Rusa left for the temple, her cloaking still hiding her so that only a large pretty golden bubble was visible. After checking his PTD and weapons and cloaking, Koven departed for the temple also.

They stood invisible in front of the two guards set to protect the entrance to the temple. Then they walked past them unseen. It was a vast space inside, with much more height than required for a species that rarely grew above two maatars in height. The ceiling was very tall, nearly forty maatars from the floor. And at the front of the huge hall at the back was a large wooden altar. And behind the altar was an area hidden behind curtains. And on those curtains that flowed down from the forty-maatar-tall ceiling was the letter A inside of a circle. It was on both curtains, and each letter was at least ten maatars tall. It was so large that no matter who you were or where you were from, you were certain of one thing: the owner of the place had a name that started with A. You could further deduce that it was a high probability that they would insist on proper capitalization. There were a few people praying, but there was no service going on.

Koven and Rusa walked down the far side of the nave of the temple, then past the altar and behind the curtains. They faced a dark gray wall made from stone from a local quarry. It was highly polished as if it had a glass cover. They moved along the wall to a door at the northwest corner of the room. The door opened into a hallway with its own collection of doors along it. They moved towards the first door. They could hear the sound of water splashing and voices, a man and a woman's voice. Even with cloaking, they couldn't cloak the opening or closing of a door. So they waited for a few minutes to listen carefully to the sounds. The voices were playful and the couple laughed often.

Eventually Koven opened the door to the room, just enough for them to squeeze through it. Once inside they were faced with walls covered in the deepest red fabric and furniture of dark hardwoods. Past the large bed and a sunken part of the floor covered in highly ornate pillows was a large square pool filled with water. In the water was Tal. Also in the water with her was a young man, much younger than her. A handsome young man near to her son's age. They were in each other's arms and he was kissing Tal's face over and over quickly. Near the bed was a wooden bench. On it sat the comms bracelet, the remedium, and the personal transport Device. On the bed lay the personal protection suit.

Koven was getting excited by watching them in the pool. He whispered to Rusa that they should go.

"Did you see any new tech?" he asked her.

"No. Same as she had before. Need to keep looking," Rusa replied.

Koven led them down to the next door. The room was empty, no furniture at all. It had a pool like the other room. But there were no pillows, and the bed was just a bare stone platform with nothing on it. In the middle of the sunken space without pillows was a large red stain on the floor. Blood stains are unmistakable.

The next three rooms were not devoid of furnishings but were devoid of people. There was evidence that people stayed in the rooms. Personal items like jewelry, hair ribbons, and boots were to be found in them. They even found a remedium device, although they were unsure if it was in addition to the two they already saw earlier.

But near the far end of the hall they could hear a voice. It was loud and had a strong, forceful tone that tried hard to mask a tendency to sound whiny. It was Pens. The door to his room was partially open, and Koven and Rusa moved into the room carefully. It was sparse but had evidence of use. There were robes hanging from a piece of wood coming directly out from the stone wall.

In the sunken part of the floor, where in most other rooms there were ornate pillows covering the floor, there were none. In place of the pillows and cushions were mirrors, tall mirrors in wooden frames. There were twelve of them and they stood arranged, like the hours on a clock in a circle. And in the center, between the mirrors, stood Pens, the High Priest of the Cult of Allor. His arm was raised above his head like a dramatic actor delivering melodramatic lines.

“I know you are scared right now. You’ve been living in fear your entire life. Fear of the religious wars. Fear of your own religious police. Every one of you are like every one of us, we all know victims to our mutual hatred. We all have that hole inside us, the one left by the death of a loved one. But from today, this will cease. From today, the fighting between religions is ended. From today, there is only the Cult of Allor, the living God, the healer, the God that walks among us, making us better. Allor the loving God that heals throughout the land, the rich and the poor alike.

“And when you hurt, Allor feels that hurt. When others wrong you, Allor feels your anger, your pain, your shame. And Allor is a powerful and merciful god. He is merciful to the meek, to the weak, to the humble. But beware his wrath. When you hurt and wish for revenge, Allor is that wish fulfilled.”

Pens looked at himself from all of the mirrors. He adjusted his posture, becoming more erect.

“Allor brings you a spiritual revolution, a better way of living, with less rules and more freedom. Allor brings you good health. Allor reduces your tithing by half. You are entering a golden age.”

“No. No. No,” he said loudly to no one that was there.

“You are entering a golden age. Yeah, that’s it, lead with the golden age. Get them dreaming, then reinforce the dream with the lower taxes, universal healthcare, more leisure time, and more freedom. Much better in that order,” he continued in his critical monologue.

“We? Or You? We, definitely. More inclusive.”

“We are entering a golden age. An age of more. We’re cutting your tithing by half. Yes, it’s true. And the healer will continue to heal you at no cost to you. That’s right, no cost to you. And did I mention you only have to pray twice a day now? No more three times a day. No need to stop your productive day to pray. Allor knows you love him. He is not an insecure god like others. And you are free. Free from the dietary rules, free from the rule of dress, free from the double step routines when entering the temple. Free from the long-winded handshakes with secret messages. And no more damned religious police with their sticks going around beating us for not being this, not doing that, not, not, not.”

“This is really good,” his internal critic continued. “You should one day publish a book of your speeches. They will be so inspiring to the young.”

“But what would I call such a book?” he asked himself aloud.

“Perhaps something as simple and unpretentious as ‘My Life,’” replied his inner critic.

“No. Too self-serving. The thing I do best is affect others.

“Then how about ‘My Revolution’? That sounds more accurate to what you want,” replied the critic.

“No. Too pretentious. What if our revolution fails? Then I will be a joke in the future. No thanks.

“My Battle. No. My Rise. No. The Rise and Fall of the Cult of Allor. Definitely not.” Finally the answer arrived.

“My Struggle.”

Koven did not include this in his first report that he submitted later that night. He should have.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“His wife is missing,” said Professor Longley, seated at the head of the table again. Today his white robe had ugly orange piping around it. The cloth rope around his robe was cinched tight, and his progress towards an ever-expanding waist was evident.

Q: Why do elders all love robes?

A: Because they are all fat pigs. (Overheard in an elevator full of historians who enjoyed it immensely—well, most of them, anyway...but there’s always the one, someone that takes offense and ruins it for everyone.)

“More confirmation that he is on the run,” replied Professor Misers Plunk in support of his boss, because that is what was expected of him.

Your boss says something, you agree. Sometimes you agree then restate the same thing in your own words, thereby convincing yourself that you have some ownership. But you don’t.

“No parrot ever owned a pirate ship.” —The Final McGee.

Many heads around the long table nodded in agreement. All except for Professor Puri. Piedmont Puri nodded because he was falling asleep. And at his age it was understandable. He would be awoken by others if they needed his opinion. Or needed his vote. And Professor Puri would usually vote in favor of the ideas presented by the Department Head with only rare exceptions, and never would he vote against the wishes of Professor Longley when stirred from a very nice nap that he wished to continue. Because then Longley would talk to him until he was fully awake, and this would make Professor Puri very pissed off.

“What about the lab inventory?” asked Professor Wingut.

“That does not look good,” replied Professor Plunk. He looked for the right slide in his presentation for almost an entire tox before giving up after a prompt from Longley of “just tell us Misers.”

“Items are missing. Items that are hard to recreate outside of the university but vital to replication of his experiment. He chose carefully.”

“What about his psych profile?” asked Professor Fitzcaraldo. Fitz had been seen talking to Professor Lister from the Sociology Department yesterday. Seems Fitz tried to kiss Professor Lister’s daughter and Lister was damned mad about it.

“The wounded intellectual was the consensus of the profilers,” Longley said. “Personally, I’ve met the man and found him to be arrogant and insufferable. But I was only around him for a few tox, and he was the speaker at the event.”

“So how did he get wounded?” asked Fitzcaraldo.

“His first significant discovery was ignored by his peers and branded as outrageous fakery, a stunt to gain attention. It wasn’t until Pumly and Ortega accidentally confirmed his findings while testing something entirely different that he was finally removed from academic review and all talk of revoking his Ph.D. was finally silenced. But you need to know he spent over two kilorevs being shunned and an outcast from his peers. His first major award and his performance at the ceremony should have been a clue. But everyone just

brushed it off and said that he was 'slow to forgive.' Indeed, the consensus was correct."

"But there is some hope," interjected Professor Plunk. "Tell them." Plunk began to move the slides in the presentation forward. The pretty Holocaster image flipped through the charts with her finger.

"OK. I was going to wait so we could end the meeting on a positive note, but you all know how Misers can be sometimes. Can't hold a secret for any reason."

"What is it?" asked Wingut, slightly impatiently.

"One of the items taken from Klept's lab contains a manufactured rare metal. Something only made in the lab. And it is programmable."

"Mining scans?" asked Fitz.

"Precisely," said Longley.

"How long will it take them to set up the scanner for the new metal?" asked Wingut.

"Already done," said Longley.

"So how long before they can start scanning planets?" asked Wingut.

"Within the next one hundred tox," said Longley. He smiled as he looked at the Elders.

"This is good news," said Professor Plunk in an attempt to reinforce his boss.

"They know this," said Longley politely to Plunk seated beside him. He spoke like a parent to a child, or perhaps like a person to a pet would be more accurate.

"That should finally shut up the Sociology Department," said Fitzcaraldo to the howling laughter from everyone. Most laughed because it was true. Some laughed because it was true and was said by someone they suspected of being a collaborator. Even historians can appreciate irony. As the group laughter trailed off, Plunk raised his hand to speak.

"Don't forget we need your nominations for your two agents. We need them within the next ten revs," he said with a whiny tone that made the letter *N* sound

more of a criminal event than a letter. Plunk also had a problem with the letters *S* and *L* also. He sounded practically deviant when pronouncing *slowly*, like someone best avoided after dark. He could have run the remedium and fixed his slight speech impediment, but he didn't. Plunk was a subscriber to the philosophy of uniqueness through defect. Everyone else knew it for the compromise it was. But not Plunk and a large slice of humanity of a certain age.

The age of pseudo-individuals. Disciples of Constantine Serpentus, the former football player that used a club foot to lead Paraguay to an appearance in the final of the World Cup. (Soccer—yes, soccer assholes...and don't think I don't know who you are and where you live (approximately down to the large blob on an atlas.))

Constantine Serpentus led his heroic Paraguayan team to the worst loss in World Cup history. The Italian team that had reached the final only in the last tox of their match against England (and Wales...but not Scotland, not ever Scotland, ya hear me!) scored seventeen points against the Paraguayans. Constantine Serpentus and his heroic team scored twice—well, three times if you consider the own goal in the seventeenth minute that the Italian team scored. But that's not the point, and now I've forgotten what was. Oh right.

Constantine scored the first goal after only twenty-six tix of match play. Due to his club foot he was not very mobile. Well, in truth, he was quite stationary. But if he got the ball and he got a few tix to eye the goal, there was no place on the field that Constantine could not score from. He had bested Mexico with a goal kicked from just in front of his own goal.

So when the opening pass went to Constantine, only a few maatars from center field, it only took him twenty-four tix before he was ready. Now, football is a nice, polite game. Its been called a gentlemen's sport, but I don't think of it that way. More like a bunch of kids with a ball having an awfully good time and trying not to get hurt so their parents won't be cross with them.

But after that first score, one of the Italian players, Marcos Cicerono, knocked down Constantine when he got the ball the next time. Marcos would have been there to knock him down again the next time Constantine got the ball, except that Cicerono had left the field to have a cigarette and have his picture taken with some very pretty girls. So Constantine scored a second time. After that, though, it was a shutout as Marcos came back on the field and managed to knock down Constantine every time he got the ball for the rest of the match.

But there is a point to this, I swear, or more accurately hope. Constantine became the darling of the media. He talked about his club foot and how it made him the man he was. It served as his “pathway to greatness” (copyright 2081, all rights reserved, Constantine Ltd.). And with his story came a philosophy of “greatness by uniqueness.” And it was a philosophy that sold people on the idea that being different was the most important thing.

Some say it came from the ancient Earth phrase “special snowflake.” “Shout Your Uniqueness” was the name of the first billion-selling seminar that Constantine taught all over the solar system. Fabulously wealthy from it is what he got. “More Money Than God” was his follow-up billion-selling seminar (obviously in a time before we put an end to all of that god stuff).

Consequently, people spent less at the geneticists and several geneticist chains went into bankruptcy. Human defects skyrocketed as they all strived to give their children that one defect that would get them noticed more at work, give them an advantage in conversation, get them more sympathetic exam results.

So Misers Plunk thought of his defects as “individuanators” (his term not mine, FFS) and cherished them.

So embrace your uniqueness through defect because it’s a hell of a lot easier than thinking up something new.

“You are not allowed to repeat your nominations. I repeat this especially for you, Professors Wingut, Hempel, Abhul,” Plunk added.

Every one hundred revs each of the Elders are required to nominate two agents from missions they have sponsored to be put forward for agent of the latest 500 Rev Cycle, a very prestigious award for exactly 499 revs. In addition to this, Elders personally administer the relicensing examination. You remember this, the questions that start with “Have you lied since your last licensing examination?” Yep, that’s the one.

It’s all the result of a bit of work commissioned by Professor Longley a long time ago, after attending a seminar hosted by the Management Department of the Business School. In the seminar he was exposed to the latest management thinking on how to motivate a highly trained and highly professional work force and inspire them to even higher performance. He came back with a head full of new ideas and a penchant to spend some of the History department’s budget on management consulting from the Department of Management.

Three hundred and four revs later and they got their final report. An Agent of the Latest 500 Rev Cycle Award was a revolutionary idea. These sorts of things had never been done at such a low level of an organization in a very, very long time. It would almost be like having a Custodial Staff Member of The Latest XXX Rev Cycle Award. Most people recognized that awards are best suited for levels of an organization that have the capacity for adequate funding for a really good party and choices in catering.

“I apologize for the revly meetings. But until Klept is found, dead or alive, we need the best minds informed and thinking,” Longley said.

“Informed and thinking,” repeated Plunk. “One last thing,” added Plunk. “Please make plans for the 500 Rev Retreat. This time we are going to the polar ice cap and we’ll be staying in ancient buildings made from ice and snow. This will require you to pack correctly. So start thinking about it now.”

“I think we are done here,” said Professor Longley.

“We’re done here,” repeated Plunk.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Koven stood in his quarters on the cruiser and started the message.

It was a priority one message from Professor Wingut. This was another first for Koven. He'd never gotten a priority one message before.

But then most of his missions were crap missions. Go find this person and tell them this. That mostly. And it was mostly to kids. Koven wondered if anyone ever measured the amount of trauma he caused some of those kids. How would you like it if some grown-up appeared out of nowhere and told you that if you ever study human pathogens you will kill billions of human by mistake. Imagine telling that to an eight-year-old.

Koven was once required to tell a six-year-old child that if he worked on personal transport device technology that his parents would die. Along with him, in a gruesome accident. Yes, most of his missions were crap.

He did get to give someone a secret once. It was a math formula. Some sort of faster optimization method. But mostly just giving warnings, that sort of crap.

Koven stood stiffly in his quarters for a moment before he realized it and sat down on a chair. He started the message from Professor Wingut and his image began to move.

"Greetings, Koven Modi. Good to speak to you again. I got your report. Good thorough work. Thank you."

Professor Wingut moved closer to the camera.

"Koven, we're stretched as thin as a molecule right now. Almost everybody is out looking for Klept. We're all trying to stop him from collapsing us early. And

that means we're got no teams to support you. I've got nobody. They won't even let me send out people from the bench. I would send Larn, but Longley won't let me.

“So let me get to the point. I need you to get all of our tech back from Earth 7. Bring it back or destroy it, those are your options. And we need you to do it before the next regular department meeting. We're doing revly meetings right now, but that's only because of the crisis. We'll still have our regular meetings, and that's what you must not exceed. Remember Earth 4.”

Let me tell you quickly about Earth 4. A not-so-good biologist with allergies on Earth 4 had created a virus to destroy the biggest trigger for his allergies, cats. His virus would destroy all cats on Earth 4 within six weeks. But unknown to him, the virus he had created was highly adaptable and had already begun to mutate into a form that could be transferable to humans, fortunately not a trigger for the biologist's allergies. Despite this, humans began to perish also, just on a slightly longer timeline.

The History Department became aware of the circumstances. It was discussed at length among the council in attendance, and while there was no vote, it appeared there was consensus to intervene, and quickly. That is how everyone thought it would resolve when they went on their end-of-semester holidays.

When their holiday term was over, many professors were surprised to find that no intervention had happened. Officially, there was no request for a quorum vote, so there was no authorized action. Longley refuses to answer any questions.

But here is some background information: Earth 4 was a bit of prime real estate. An existing planet, inhabitable, and with limited human abuse to date. These command a premium price from property developers. We're talking billions. Long story short, Longley let the virus destroy all the humans and the cats and then sold the planet to a property-development firm and put the billions into the departmental budget. Enough to power the department for a very long

time. He made the History Department at the University on Centrum Kath one of the wealthiest organizations in the galaxy, as well as the largest repository of knowledge in the known universe.

Wingut wanted Koven to know that planetary repopulation as done on Earth 4 was a possibility, even if remote.

“They might just choose to wipe everyone again,” said Wingut.

By wiping he meant every human memory on Earth 7. They would all wake up like their ancestors, no memory of anything, not even language. Re-stone aged. The famine begins the next day.

“If you can get it all back before the meeting, I can argue to let it go. No consequences. But you’ve got to be successful, without exception.

“Good luck, Koven, even though we know it’s not about luck. Strong skills, young man.”

Koven felt himself breathing faster. He knew the fear that was coming next. He would soon be a prisoner of it again. The edge of the water, the leeches, his drowning brother. He tried to steady his breathing but failed. The attack lasted for nearly ten tox. He was beside the lake again, frozen while his brother died. But even the panic can die just like a brother. And eventually the grip loosened and he could slowly feel himself starting to relax.

When he had recovered, he called the Ops Commander, Prontu Beyes.

“What do you want, shit stain?” asked Koven’s favorite Non. Prontu had been in the engineering department when he won a scholarship to study Operations Management in the History Department. It was called a scholarship, but it was really just a way of getting thousands of people to play an aptitude game and then recruiting the winner.

“I got a message from Wingut that I am to retrieve all of the technology,” Koven replied.

“Or destroy. You forgot that part,” replied Prontu.

“You’ve already seen the message?”

“Yes. Before you even saw it,” Prontu said.

“But I think he’s made a mistake. I’m not the man for the job.”

“Thank Klept for that, because now you are,” replied Prontu.

“But Pron...” said Koven in a whiny voice.

“Don’t start your ‘but Pron’ crap with me again. I can’t help you skate through this one, Ko. I told you this would happen. It happens to every agent. You all think you can find the safe seam in the work. And I’ve told every damned one of you that there is NO SAFE SEAM. In the end you meet your enemy in the mirror and you must overcome him.”

“But we don’t even have the recommended number to proceed,” Koven pleaded.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Ko. Be thankful for the Agreement of Historians.”

The Agreement of Historians is an important agreement reached several thousand revs ago. The basis is this: that if someone is going to have the most dangerous job in the galaxy, then there is the distinct possibility they might die while doing their job. And if they have been doing nothing but missions and projects, then when they die they won’t have lived much of a life. If it is true that a person’s life flashes before them when they are about to die, then these poor slobbs will only be seeing scenes from work mostly. This occurred to some agents who decided that this was not fair to them. And they figured it out just as the graduate students were complaining that they were tired of spending their weekend grading papers for the fat, lazy professors, whose ranks they one day wished to join. An alliance was formed.

As a result of the Agreement of Historians, they get weekends off when they are not on a mission and one rev every ten revs even if they are on a mission. Nothing is that important that it can’t wait for a historian to have a bit of their life back. The strike went on for twenty-six revs before the department finally caved in to the demands.

So while Koven would be risking his life trying to get back (or destroy) the technology from Earth 7, at least every ten days he would get a day off, so he wouldn't have to die with insufficient social memories.

“But Pron...” said Koven.

“Stop it, Ko. This is your own doing. Shit your pants and keep moving forward.”

“But it's harder to kill someone that is running away” Koven replied

“Cowardice is the mortal enemy of self-esteem.” —The Final McGee

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tal stood beside Allor on the hilltop overlooking the river. It was a very secluded part of the river, where the trees bend over to shade the water from the sun. They both watched a woman down at the river's edge. The woman with red hair had removed her clothes and then walked out into the water. She splashed water onto her breasts before submerging herself completely.

"Her name is Ova," said Tal.

"The sister of Rom II?" asked Allor.

"Yes. She is older than you but is in excellent health, and can wield a sword and a bow as well as any man in the Rom kingdom."

"Good to know," replied Allor as he watched the woman break through the surface of the water then pat down her wild, curly hair.

"Do you find her attractive?" Tal asked.

"She is pretty. But it's like I've already told you, I'm not liking this," replied Allor.

"But it's time for Allor to take a bride," replied Tal.

"Why?"

"Because The Expected will be stretched too thin with both Ceros and Niddler territories. That is hundreds of temples and tens of thousands of priests. And talk to Demos. He will confirm that his troops will also be spread too thin to withstand

an attack. While we are out bringing the new territories under our command, our capital city and Grand Temple will be thinly guarded.”

“So what has this to do with marriage?” Allor asked his mother.

“The Confederation won’t attack as long as they are left alone. The Disciples of Earth can’t attack because they are not capable. They can be crushed while they were still trying to raise an army. We expect them to surrender soon after Niddler.”

“So that leaves only the Rom Empire?” asked Allor.

“My son was never slow to think,” replied Tal with a short smile.

“I will consider it, but I’m not sure. She is lovely, and her skills would be appreciated. And the alliance with her brother would be beneficial. But what about her and I as a couple? She is the woman I would wake beside. The woman I would plant my seed in every day. Are we compatible? Will we get along?”

“Sometimes you forget you are a god to these people,” said Tal with a forceful tone.

“Sometimes you forget I am just a boy that found machines from the stars and use them to help people and trick them into thinking I am something that I am not.”

“You have grieved for Rao long enough. You must cherish her memory, hold it deep in your heart. But you must continue your life. Now, at the edge of your greatest victory, you must be the man of your potential, not the man you think you are. Decision-making is cloudy when a man’s needs are not met.” Tal looked at him hard. She knew that he would agree with her wisdom.

“But I’m not ready to take a wife,” Allor said.

“Then how about the Women of Allor? Spread your seed among them,” Tal said.

The Women of Allor were basically groupies. They had kept themselves in a romantic fervor for the handsome young god since his first appearance. When they heard that Allor was in the celibate grieving process for Rao, they too joined

the process. There were hundreds of women now that had been celibate for over 150 years, and each of them dreaming that Allor would end his grieving deep inside of them.

“They are fanatics. They don’t honor me with their actions. They disgrace themselves with their dreaming. One of them came to me, pulled open her robe, and showed me her breasts at the last healing. The old man I was healing at the time should have been very glad I had finished fixing his heart right before she exposed herself to us.”

“But they love you,” replied Tal.

“No, they love God Emperor Allor. However, I am just a man.”

“We will be stretched too thin, my son.”

“It’s too early for this decision. We don’t know the reaction to the detonation and the destruction of the Ceros and Pyramos. We will discuss this again after the fall of Pyramos,” said Allor. Then he added, “Death to Ceros.”

“Death to Ceros,” Tal repeated with a nod.

Later that day, Allor was out alone healing. He wanted to be away from his family, away from the recruitment process for converts, away from the responsibility. In the crowd gathered around him, their infirmities begging for his mercy, in all of this Allor could retreat into himself and think. His work was similar to those that make large woven clothing from the smallest woolen threads, their hands moving to a particular clock while their minds are far away in memory or speculation. When he was a child, a juggler once told Allor that he too experienced the far-away mind while he moved balls in the air. And Allor had many balls to move.

“Don’t let your kitten around the other cats near your farm,” said Allor as he handed the small gray and black striped cat back to a young girl. “He will want to fight, but he isn’t old enough yet. His eye is going to be fine.”

The girl took the kitten in her hands and held it close to her chest.

“Thank you,” she said. “I love you.” Then she stepped forward and kissed Allor on his cheek. “Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you forever and ever, amen,” said the girl.

The girl’s mother put her hand on her child’s shoulder. “Let’s leave him to fix others,” she said, and tried to lead the girl away. But instead of leaving, the girl rushed forward and hugged Allor. Between their bodies was the small kitten that wasn’t happy being the meat of their sandwich.

“Go now. Remember to help others like I help you.”

“But I can’t heal cats,” replied the girl.

“Then help others how you can. With food, with water, help them walk, help them clean their feet.”

“I will,” said the girl with a resolute look on her face.

A woman was brought to Allor, an old woman with two daughters at her side. From beneath her robe Allor could only see one foot. When they got to him, he nodded to them and pointed to a rock for the old woman to sit on while he examined her.

Beneath the robe he found a much shorter right leg. It was shriveled and very small, less than the length from a shoulder to an elbow. But it had toes, and they were ticklish, as Allor discovered when he touched them.

“You are the first man to be under my robe in over two kilorev,” said the woman with a hearty laugh. “Don’t fall in love with what you see,” she added with an even louder laugh and a snort.

Allor and the two daughters watched in wonder as the small shrunken leg began to grow. At first it was the foot that got larger, then the rest. After about a tox, it was a fully formed and muscular leg. The woman immediately jumped to her feet and fell over onto the ground. Allor and the daughters moved quickly to help her up.

“Stand back,” she said to them. “I’ve never walked a single step by myself without my sisters, my daughters, or my crutches. Today I won’t need anything anymore,” she said, and got up to her feet. Her first step was very tentative, her legs shaking. But after the first came a second more confident and then a third more confident still. Within twenty tix she had become used to it and celebrated with tears running down her cheeks.

“You are truly the one true God,” she proclaimed loudly.

“I’m not finished with you yet,” Allor said, motioning for her to come sit back on the rock.

“But I am cured,” she said.

“Of the big problem. Let’s cure the small ones now,” he said with a smile as he contemplated a life waking up beside Ova every morning as he waited for the woman to be seated again.

Her pulmonary system needed his help, and he watched as the color of her arteries changed from red to green on his remedium. Then her scalp was cured of the infestation. Her broken toes were finally set back in place and connected again.

It was during her examination that Allor dropped the remedium. When he picked it up, his fingers touched it in a new way, because a screen appeared on the device that he had never seen before. It presented him with a simple question to which he didn’t know the answer:

Include Information Transfers? Yes No Cancel

Allor chose Yes and pressed the screen.

The old woman walked away under her own power. No daughters assisted her. No wooden crutches under her arm, no ill-fitting wooden leg rubbing her raw, nothing but her own two legs facilitating her travel. Before she walked away, she got down on her knees and bowed in front of Allor.

“I will be yours until I die,” she said to him.

“Help others,” he said to her as he pulled her back to her feet. As she came close to him, she looked at the handsome man, his long black hair, his deep black eyes. Then she kissed him gently on the lips. It was just for a tix. Then she turned and walked away quickly.

“Today I kissed a god,” she said to her daughters as they walked away. Allor continued to heal others.

A large man pushed his way through the crowd. He was much taller than other men, and Allor turned his PPS on low in case the man intended violence. The giant carried a woman over his shoulder. When he got to Allor, he threw the body at Allor’s feet. Dust puffed up from impact of the body and the ground.

“We were eating and she told a joke that hurt me,” said the man in a curious childlike voice. His eyes and facial expression did not match those of a fearsome giant but rather a frightened child.

“Jokes do not cause harm,” said Allor as he got on his hands and knees to examine the woman. It took only a tix before he was sure that she was beyond his help.

“I gave her my knife in her belly to make her stop laughing at me,” the giant replied.

Allor looked at the large red stain in the middle of the woman’s brown robe.

“She is past my help, my friend,” Allor said.

“You are not my friend. Heal my mother,” he demanded in a loud voice, the child now gone from him.

“I cannot. She is dead.”

“You are a bad god,” said the giant, and swung his fist at Allor. It impacted the PPS shield and bounced off it. The giant rubbed his sore hand.

“I can only heal living things, before they are dead. Your mother is dead, and I cannot help her.”

The giant swung his fist at Allor again, and again it hit the PPS shield and bounced off it. The giant collapsed to the ground. He began to cry.

“But without mother I will starve,” he said. “Without mother I will die. Without mother, I want to die,” he said.

Allor put his hand on the giant’s shoulder.

“It doesn’t have to be that way. Let me heal you,” he said as he ran the remedium over the large man’s head. It was very red on the display and it took much longer than usual before it turned green. Upon completion, the giant stood up. People moved away from him.

“I understand now many things I didn’t before. I was wrong to attack you, and I apologize. I will take my mother and bury her. But first I must go to the river and bathe and wash my clothes.”

“Why do you clean first? Is it part of your death ritual?” asked Allor.

“Germs,” said the giant.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“It has come to my attention that a historian is being sent to Earth 7 to investigate the use of modern comms on a planet rated Primitive 3,” Professor Trill said as he adjusted his frame on his padded leather seat in his office. Two men stood at attention across the desk from him. Collins and Hope were the two highest-scoring agents in the entire class.

Trill started a holocast, and a picture of Koven appeared. It was not his best picture, and he looked like he had been surprised when the picture had been taken.

“This is Koven Modi. He is the agent you need to stop.”

Collins nodded her agreement then Hope did the same.

“You can see by his assessment scores that he is sub-median on battle skills. But don’t let that fool you. Look at his strategy scores. He consistently is at the top of his class. So before you conclude you are dealing with a weakling, know you are dealing with a weakling that is smarter than you. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” said Hope, followed less than a tix later by Collins.

Trill poured himself a glass of Pluto water and took a sip. Collins and Hope could have been thirsty, but Trill didn’t care. He wanted them to know that he didn’t care.

“Koven Modi is being sent to recover technology on the planet. You are being sent to ensure that he fails in his mission.”

“What is his deadline?” asked Hope.

“He has until the next regular departmental meeting to complete his recovery mission. If he fails, then we will be able to make the case that the historians are stretched too thin and should welcome our offer of assistance. If he fails and the council decide to reset planetary memory, I will be informed as soon as the decision is made and will escalate to Dean Midge that this is further evidence they need our help.”

“Can’t they wipe the planet clean and sell it?” asked Hope.

“Yes. But I will intervene with the dean before that happens. And if they succeed in wiping the planet, then I have a plan for that outcome too.”

“What is it?” asked Collins.

“I’ll share that with you later,” replied Trill with a smile. He took another sip of Pluto water to remind them of their place.

“There is one important rule. Only one. And you must not break it,” Trill said slowly and deliberately.

“Yes?” asked Hope.

“Do NOT kill Koven Modi. Under no circumstances are you allowed to kill him. In fact, if he dies by your hand, I promise you this: you will die by mine. Is this perfectly clear to you?”

“Yes, sir,” said Collins. “But what if he is trying to kill me?”

“Use your PPS to prevent that. If your PPS is down, then the rule tells you the outcome: you die. Permission to kill Modi must come directly from me. Let me repeat, DIRECTLY FROM ME.”

There was a brief moment of silence among the three of them.

Trill didn't need to explain to them the procedure when a historian dies.

Historians are people obsessed by facts. Facts of events, facts of circumstances. They turn over every stone, look in every corner, go down into every cellar until they have a clear picture of the truth and can share that with others. So when one of them dies, it is a significant event. They unleash an investigation into the death that is far more thorough than any other. Professor Trill was certain that the death of Koven would expose his interference on Earth 7. It may also expose his interference on other planets. And he was scared of having his most vital secret exposed.

Trill's nightmare is to be put inside of one of the historian recertification rooms for questioning. It has happened before. Not to him, but there was a Math professor a few years ago that was accused of murder. It did not turn out well, and they found the professor hanging in his holding cell.

“But don't worry too much about your own skins. He's weak but clever. But not that clever.”

Collins looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“I know both of his parents,” said Trill. “I wouldn't consider either of them to be in the top tier of academia. Second-rate minds at best. They would have to spend a fortune with a geneticist to get their son upgraded from their meager intellect.”

Hope nodded his understanding. Collins nodded hers as well.

“The technology is held by the Cult of Allor. I’ve shared the inventory of the technology and their locations with you in your briefing report. Read it several times before you arrive.”

“Excuse me, sir,” said Collins. “How do you know what tech they have?”

“Professor Collins,” Trill replied, “Earth 7 has been in play for a long time now. We’ve had a sociologist hidden on the planet for the last one hundred revs. He has prepared the list and also the list of tech they have learned to use.”

“Thank you, sir,” replied Collins.

A brief word should be said about how to kill someone wearing a PPS. It’s not easy. In fact, it is damned near impossible. It requires forcing someone into a corner or other type of space where they can be blocked from exiting. Think of it like a fat person pushing someone into a corner with their belly. It kind of works that way.

Once the intended victim is captured and can’t escape, then the hard part of it all begins. The waiting. Sometimes it takes many days for the trapped to finally turn off their PPS in order to climb over the blocking PPS eggs of their captors. And when they do this, they can be shot with particle weapons. And they can shoot you too, if your PPS is turned off in order to shoot them. But most of the time this is not what happens.

Most of the time it takes days before the trapped decide to make a climb for it. Most often their captors have been awake for days waiting for this moment. Exhausted and tired, they can wait no more and fall asleep. So in most instances, the captors wake up from a brief nap after several days of waiting, only to find their captive long gone.

No matter what the outcome on Earth 7, Trill had to protect one vital bit of information more than any other. No one could discover the assistance he was providing to Professor Klept.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Koven looked at the golf balls in his travel bag. They looked like normal golf balls. They weighed 45.9 grams just like normal balls. They even had 336 dimples just like normal balls. But they had something special, an offset electromagnet buried deep in the core. This magnet held a small piece of lead in suspension, a circumstance where the weight of the lead was not detectable.

But once the ball made impact with a club, the offset electromagnet would instantly switch off and the lead would do what it was intended to do, give more mass and momentum to the ball. It had taken Koven nearly three hundred revs to design and manufacture golf balls that would carry over 50 percent further than regulation balls, and no one could tell them from regulation balls without cutting them open.

And golfers are notorious for their ego. Most golfers that are Nons believe that they can spot a “hot ball” faster than a Criminology professor can spot a fake 100-block chain.

And why did Koven do this? One of the oldest reason known to humans: he did this to gain the approval of his father, Eflin.

As the cruiser settled into orbit around Dis 29, a resort planet, Koven frowned. He knew Tanit would be angry when she learned that he chose to spend his day off with his parents instead of fulfilling his commitment to her.

He walked to the edge of the airlock.

“Is there anything you want me to do while you are visiting your parents?” asked Rusa.

“No. Would you like to come with me? It’s a very pretty planet,” Koven asked.

“No, thank you. There is maintenance to do here,” she replied.

“OK. I will be back tomorrow,” Koven said as he activated his personal transport device.

“Koven,” said Rusa, “I will miss you.”

Koven stepped out from the airlock and the PTD took over. As he zoomed faster and faster down to the planet with his eyelids tightly shut, he wondered if any android had ever said they would miss a human before. It was a peculiar thing for a machine of metal, sensors, electronics, and computer code to say.

Koven’s mother, Indira, was not at home when he arrived. She was at the 21st green, the learning annex attached to the golf course. She was teaching a sunset course on the Evolution of Leisure Activities.

Evening-time courses were always full, three hundred packed into each lecture hall. Later in the evening, Eflin would teach a course on the History of Golf. It was the most attended course in Dis 29 history. Day courses were less entertaining and more serious.

But life was excellent for the Modi couple on Disney 29. Their condo overlooked the ocean and was near the top floor, just under the clouds. They taught in the morning, played golf together every afternoon, and taught entertainment classes in the evening, the kind of class where participants applaud at the end of the lecture.

“Good evening, Son. Welcome,” said Eflin to his son.

“Hello, Father,” he replied with a smile. “I’ve brought you a present,” he added with enthusiasm.

“Why?” asked his father coldly.

“Because I know how much you like to golf. And I know how much you like to win.”

“True,” replied his father. “I’m going to make some coffee. Would you like some?”

“Yes.”

Koven took his travel bag to one of the visitor rooms. He pulled the pack of golf balls from his bag and went back to the large kitchen. His father handed him a cup and Koven took a sip. Eflin liked coffee and always made sure that he had the best beans imported from Primus Earth. Koven set the box of golf balls on the counter.

“Do they explode when I hit them?” asked his father. He took one from the box and tossed it in the air and caught it. He looked at it closely.

“No. But they go farther than normal balls. Use them on the tee, but don’t try to putt them,” Koven replied.

“Ah, hot balls,” said Eflin. “You know, Professor Seintus was caught using hot balls a few revs ago. He was suspended for thirty revs.” Eflin was grinning from ear to ear.

A few words should be said about this grinning business. Imagine if you are required by law and profession to always tell the truth. No matter what, you must be honest. This has strange effects on the human psyche. Social interactions are difficult, romantic relationships are even more so. The historian walks a path known only to other historians. Some historians even suffer from a mild form of schizophrenia, as they are compulsively thinking of the lies they could tell when asked a question but don’t permit those words to leave their lips. It is like an inner voice that constantly provides lying answers for every question.

So imagine the thrill to a historian when given the chance to cheat at something and a very low probability of being caught. And if they are asked, they will confess to the minor deception. It is the second best thing known to a historian. Do I need to tell you what the best thing is? Really? OK. Sex. You should have guessed that one.

For the first time Koven could remember, his father seemed pleased with him.

One hundred fifty tox or so later, Koven and his parents were at dinner at DelFerino’s a premiere Lunian Cuisine Restaurant on the ground floor of their building. Being two of the most prominent historians on Disney 29, they were

afforded the window view. There, they could look out the window and watch the splashdown of the large barges from the freighters in orbit above the planet. These million-kilogram metal containers would descend from the sky rapidly, until a few hundred maatars from the surface of the ocean they would reduce speed before hitting the water. It was quite a sight to see. Even at reduced speed the splash was significant and would send water shooting several hundred maatars into the air. While they watched and ate, Koven told his parents about his mission.

“Remember that the PPS has a flaw on the underside,” said Indra to her son.

“Thank you for reminding me, Mother,” he replied.

“You’re welcome. Do you listen to music while you are on missions?”

“Yes. Usually Beethoven or Implosive Intent,” Koven replied.

“You should try some lectures. There is one about combat that I used to play often during missions. I think it was called ‘Not My Time.’ Saved my butt a couple of times. I’ll send you a copy.”

“Let’s hope that he doesn’t get into life-or-death circumstances,” said Eflin.

“Your history is not good in that area.”

Koven was immediately back on the shore of the pond, his brother’s yells for help amplified by memory. He felt his jaw set tight, his lips tighten, and he tried but failed to stop the tears from forming in his eyes. He got up from the table quickly and excused himself to go to the bathroom. And for the short period he was in the bathroom wiping the tears from his face, he hated his father again.

Koven was more quiet when he came back to the table. His mother was fussing at his father as he approached. The rest of the dinner conversation was about other topics.

When they got back to the condo, Koven tried to call Tanit. She had left him a very short message. In it she told him just how upset she was with him. She called him a gutless bastard, a coward, and ended the message abruptly after telling him that she was beginning to realize that he wasn’t worth the effort.

Tanit didn't answer his call. He left her a rambling message, very out of character for him. He told her that he was scared. Scared of disappointing her. Scared that she deserved more than him and would eventually come to that conclusion. He told her that if she would just give him one more chance, and if she would help him work through his fears, he would try his best to be the kind of boyfriend and lover that she needed, that she wanted, that she deserved.

Tanit watched his message the next morning while she was eating breakfast.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The auditorium held nearly a thousand educators. They were seated at tables by department. Department flags in the center of the table denoted each department at the university.

On the stage at the front of the auditorium sat the most important department heads and deans. Dean Midge was seated next to Dean Bormanian, the head of the School of Sciences and the man on the hot seat because of Professor Klept.

Universities are like other organizations. They like a good awards ceremony with free food and drink. It was the biggest award of the 500 rev cycle. It was the Educator of the 500 Rev Cycle Award.

Professor Trill couldn't wipe the smile from his face. He had begun his campaign to win the award 499 days ago. He had support from the Language and Literature Department, having slept with the department head, Helen Coriander, in order to gain her support. He would break it off with her in the coming weeks, soon after the award was sitting proudly in his office. He also had support from the Psychology Department head, Kaliman Burns, in exchange for forgiveness of a debt caused by a very ill-advised bet.

“When you are absolutely certain of something, beware.” —The Final McGee

Chancellor Ruiz sat between Trill and Longley. He needed to sit next to the awards winner and the runner-up. And in this case it would possibly prevent an ugly scene. Even Chancellor Ruiz, at the top of the org chart, always given filtered news, knew about the rivalry between the two departments and their department heads.

Trill got up to make a brief speech. It is customary for the winner to give a short speech. The main speech had already been given by the chancellor. And a further speech had been given by Dean Midge. All that was left was Trill to give his short speech. It was customary for the recipient to go through a laundry list of people to thank. But Trill had no one to thank but himself.

He got up from the table. As he walked around the table towards the podium, he stopped next to Professor Longley and extended his hand. It was not the handshake of a man acknowledging a worthy opponent. It was a handshake more akin to a middle finger. Longley smiled for the cameras with all the sincerity of a beauty pageant contestant. Trill removed an e-paper from his pocket and placed it on the podium. It was not a list of names.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen and indeterminants,” Trill started.

“Tonight I won’t speak to you about all the people that I need to thank. They will be thanked tomorrow in person. Tonight I want to speak to you about the disaster looming on the horizon. Yes, I want to talk about the catastrophe coming because of Professor Klept.”

There was a murmur that spread through the room. Professor Longley sat like a stone statue, his face expressionless except for a slight squint of anger.

“We all know what will happen if Klept restarts his experiment. It will be a galactic suicide of unmatched proportion. This very august university will be destroyed as well as the entire planet. Centrum Kath will no longer exist. Stop and reflect on that for just a moment. The survivors of this catastrophe, the few million of them that continue, will be without our guiding hand, without our administrative organization. Simply put, they will regress again to the level of the quarantine planets.

“And how do we prevent this?” asked Trill. “Professor Longley has put thousands of agents into the field in the search of Klept. He is doing an admirable job. The daily Klept report is available to all of us, and I sincerely suggest that you read it. It is riveting. Riveting in its failure.”

And with those words, Chancellor Ruiz extended his arm and patted the arm of Professor Longley, who was no longer expressionless. His anger was now easy to read.

“And I don’t wish to impugn Professor Longley. He is doing the best he can. But he has other responsibilities besides stopping the collision of Andromeda and the Milky Way Galaxies. And these other responsibilities aren’t just stopping probable futures from becoming facts. Part of his workforce of agents is deployed in missions to maintain planets in quarantine. Men, women, and indeterminants that could be deployed in the search for Klept are being used for other missions. At the risk of sounding like a historian, it reminds me of the Emperor Nero.”

Ruiz had to pat Longley’s arm more as she thought Longley might get up from the table and charge at Professor Trill. That would make a good picture for the campus newspaper but would cause problems at Ruiz’s salary review next month. And she had spent two years packing the review committee with her people. It was big bonus time.

“So Professor Longley, I commit to you that the Sociology Department will do everything in its power to help you. We succeed when you succeed. It is that simple. And how do we propose to help? How can us mere sociologist assist the brave men, women, and indeterminants of the greatest History Department in history?”

Trill took a dramatic pause.

“Let us help you. Let us unburden you. Those mundane tasks that you waste valuable resources on, let us do them for you. Those planets that are in quarantine, don’t waste your agents on them. They are not worth your time and effort. Not with Klept on the loose and threatening destruction on a scale larger than humans have ever caused before. No, forget them. Let us administer to them. We will ensure that they remain without contact from outside. We will perform their progress assessments and submit the report to Chancellor Ruiz.

“Now, I am no historian, but I believe that this will permit you to put a few more agents into the field. And while I am not a historian or a mathematician, I know that it is a numbers game. A game of one. The one agent that will find the needle in the haystack. The one agent that will find the clue that brings Klept into custody. And while we are but merely sociologists, we believe we can help you get to a circumstance where that one agent will be successful.

“And why do we do this? I will confess that it is a selfish motivation. And not one you think. We do this because we are selfish about the survival of this great institution. We won’t let it die. We will have future sociologists that will stand at this podium and accept awards like this one. That is why we do it. Do we know much about administering to quarantine planets? No. But we know enough and we’re not shy about asking questions when we don’t know. So let us help you. Earth 4 was a black mark on the university. We can’t be involved in genocide again.”

Chancellor now needed a death grip on Longley’s arm to keep him from attempting dental realignment in Trill’s mouth.

“And our offer is not done without thought. We have trained agents along the lines of our friends in the History Department. They are the few, the proud, the sociologists. We have a small force ready for deployment immediately. This is our offer to you, Professor Longley.” Trill stopped again for a moment.

“I wish to thank everyone for the award. I will cherish it for the rest of my life. Thank you. Now let’s eat.”

Professor Trill picked up his reader and walked back to his seat at the table. He received another beauty pageant smile from Professor Longley. Many people clapped. They were impressed with this humble man using his moment in the spotlight, not to applaud himself, but to offer assistance to a colleague in need. Even some professors are suckers.

As Longley looked out at the crowd clapping, some of them giving Trill a standing ovation, he wondered how this many people could be fooled so easily

by this hollow man known for his own vanity. Then he noticed him standing and clapping enthusiastically. He would have a very private word with Professor Wingut. He knew he would see Fitzcaraldo clapping and standing. But Wingut? That was a betrayal, and he intended to let Wingut know it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

High Priest Pens stood on one side of the thick velvet curtain in his quarters at the temple.

“Come no closer,” said the voice on the other side of the curtain.

“That is ridiculous, I am the High Priest of the Cult of Allor. Come out and speak to me.”

“This you must understand. My identity is known only to my victims. If you come any closer I will become the man who assassinated the High Priest of the Cult of Allor. Do I make myself clear?”

Pens rubbed his head and stepped back away from the curtain.

“Good man,” replied the man behind the curtain. “What do you require of me?”

“An assassination,” replied Pens, now more cautious in speech.

“Do you have the deposit?” asked the man behind the curtain.

“Yes,” replied Pens. He walked over to his wooden cabinet. From it he removed a large wooden box. From it he removed a cloth bag with a drawstring. He took it to the wooden table near the curtain and poured out the gold coins on the table. He counted them until he had reached one hundred and had no more to count. Then he swept them back into the bag with his hand then cinched the drawstring tight.

“What about the Virginia stones?” asked the man.

“I have them too. But I don’t know why you want them. They are worthless,” replied Pens.

“On Earth 7 only,” came the reply.

Pens reached into his pocket and removed another bag. He poured the stones onto the table and again counted them to one hundred.

“Good. Now come over here and extend your arm into the curtain. Hold both bags very still, else there will be a new high priest.”

Pens was scared now. He picked up both bags and moved over to the curtain and extended his arms. He held both of the heavy bags out from his body. And in an instant they were taken from him. Yet he didn't see the hands of the man behind the curtain. The bags sparkled around their edge for a tix before they disappeared. Pens was now even more scared. He was hiring an alien to kill for him, someone that could easily kill him.

"Who is my target?" asked the invisible man.

"Tal, mother of Allor," Pens replied. He heard the man laugh.

"It is important to my plans. She must die soon."

"I have no interest in your plans, only your money," came the reply.

"When will it happen?" asked Pens.

"The answer to that question will cost you your life. Do you still want an answer?"

"No. No," replied Pens quickly, and he moved backwards from the curtain two steps.

"You only need to know that it will be soon. Before you bring all of the other regions under your control."

How did his assassin know about their plans? An invisible man had listened to their planning. Who else knew of their plans? Would he sell the information to Ceros?

"How do I know that you won't give Ceros advance warning?" Pens asked.

"You don't. But I will tell you this: you know I am not from Earth 7. And the interests I represent want the Cult of Allor to be victorious. Believe it or not, it doesn't matter. It is fact."

"But how do I know if I can trust you?" Pens asked.

There was no answer. Pens repeated the question. After repeating it a second time he pushed aside the curtain.

He was alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Demos stood in front of his commanders. They were split into two groups. He addressed the group on his right first.

“Fast control of the roadways is one of the keys to our success. So when you ride, don’t let your men and women get distracted by the opportunity to plunder. That is not our mission, and they must know there will be punishment for insubordination. Control of the roads is your mission. No one with weapons must be allowed on the roads. Search them all and let them know that they will be safe from bandits. If you encounter bandits, thieves, or highwaymen, hang them from the trees where they can be seen by all.”

Demos turned to his left.

“You men and women will go into the cities and towns of the Ceros. It is your role to remain hidden. If you are close to Pyramos you will see the blast. This will be your cue. If you are too far away to see the blast, look for the Lord Allor traveling the sky. From the ground it will look like a ball of flame high in the sky. Most of you have seen him travel before. Then begin your attack. It is important that your teams target the barracks of the police and the administrative offices first. Some of you also have the local temples to attack as well. Do this right after you destroy the police barracks and the administrative offices.

“After the Lord Allor flies the sky, he will go to the edge of the black zone that was Pyramos. He and Princess Canto will heal the wounded among the survivors.”

“Why?” asked Captain Dewson, a man Demos had flagged for being the smartest of his captains.

“Why what?”

“Why heal the people he just tried to destroy?” asked Dewson.

“We want to destroy the Cult of Ceros,” said Demos. “Our battle is not with their followers. It’s just that our weapon doesn’t know the difference between a priest and a person.” Several of the commanders snickered.

“What about slaves? Ten percent are slaves,” asked Dewson.

“They are to be freed immediately,” replied Demos.

“What do we do if they want to take revenge on their masters?” asked Dewson.

“Then you give these men and women your sword and stand aside. They deserve no less than this.” This caused a few of the men to shout their agreement in the most understood manner they knew. “Death to Ceros,” they yelled.

“And if they don’t want to kill their masters? What then?” asked Dewson.

They weren’t expecting Allor to appear beside Demos, so there was an audible gasp from the assembled commanders when Allor appeared. He answered them in a loud, confident voice.

“All property of the master becomes property of the slave. The master is to be turned out and sent away from what was their home but is now the home of their former slaves.”

“And if they refuse to leave?” asked another commander.

“Then kill them,” replied Allor. “Many of you have had family taken as slaves. We’ve all heard how they are treated. Their limbs hacked off for the tiniest mistake. Their bodies used for pleasure without their consent. Their heads removed when they become too old for their tasks. What they have done is monstrous, and they should consider death to be a bargain payment for the debt they owe.

“Also make sure that everyone knows to come to the center of the town, the city, or the village at noon the next day. Puns and the priesthood will begin the conversion processes. Attendance is mandatory for everyone except the infirm. Those too sick to attend are excused. But any healthy persons found not in

attendance or administering to the sick will be given a verbal warning. If they still don't attend, get their name and give it to Demos. He will get it to Tal. She will convince them that compliance is less painful than resistance." Several commanders chuckled.

"What about the priests?" asked another commander.

"Kill them, without exception," replied Allor. "But I believe most of the priests will flee and hide. You will find them in caves and hiding in the forest. Those that think they can hide among the people have made a fatal mistake. As soon as the converts learn that their tithing is reduced by half and their prayer schedule is reduced, I expect the priests to find they are no longer welcome guests."

"What about heads?" asked Dewson.

"Remove them if you must. But no heads on sticks. Leave that for Tal," replied Demos.

Demos liked Tal and wished she liked him as much.

"Men and women, we will soon put an end to the religious wars once and for all. No longer will any people live in fear of raids. No longer will we have our loved ones slaughtered for believing differently. You will be the liberators of a long-suffering people. So on the day they may hate you, on the day they may despise you, but not many days from now they will know that what you have done was something for which they can never repay you adequately."

Allor held his fist above his head. Then Demos held his fist in the air. A moment later the rest of the commanders joined them. They spoke in the language they knew.

"Death to Ceros. Death to Ceros," they chanted together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“I’ve recorded some new comms down on the planet. One source I think you will be interested in,” said Rusa.

Koven and Rusa were seated in the pilot and copilots seat of the cruiser. In front of them through the bridge viewports they could see Earth 7 down below.

“Why the source and not the message?” Koven asked.

“Because it is a cave just outside of the capital. A cave that measures thirty maatars by eighty maatars.”

“That’s large,” Koven interjected.

“And there is significant electrical and sub-modular power components in use.”

“A laboratory?” Koven asked.

“Maybe,” replied Rusa. “Maybe they need a real hard ass reminder to let them know we’re in charge.”

“What was that?”

“The movie library answered,” replied Rusa. “Let me know if I need to translate it.”

“No thanks, I got it loud and clear. Can you play the comms, please?”

“Sure thing, sweet cheeks,” replied Rusa.

“Was that the movie library again?”

“No. That was me running one of my pleasure subroutines.”

“Your what?”

“Pleasure subroutines,” replied Rusa.

“Tell me about them later. Can we just listen to the comms?”

“OK,” said Rusa with an overly exaggerated sad face.

The comms were not very intelligent from what they could hear. They hadn’t set the duplex properly and they spent an inordinate amount of time asking the

other if they could hear them satisfactorily. But the relevant message was that Allor, Tal, and Canto would be returning to the main temple.

“We need to proceed using the lowest probability of mortality and the highest probability of success,” said Koven when the comms ended.

“The lowest probability of mortality is if we remain on the cruiser. But that won’t meet our mission objective,” Rusa replied. Koven marveled how after all of these centuries, androids still didn’t understand the nuances of language and the implied but not stated condition.

“Well, we must retrieve the tech. But I don’t want to get killed in the process.”

Rusa pressed a button on the control hologram to start a limited back thrust by the engines.

“There is cloaking and the PPS. Fatality would require an extraordinary event.”

“*Extraordinary* is a word not usually found in the vocabulary of a historian,” replied Koven coldly.

Rusa got up from the commander’s chair.

“Let’s try this,” she said. “Let’s transport down, with cloaking. Just for a few tix, say twenty or less. Take a look around, then come back here and have a discussion of whether it looks safe enough to continue. Twenty tix isn’t enough to be very dangerous. How about that?”

“I like that idea. Short, sweet assessment. Where do we land, outside the temple again?”

“As good a place as any, but I’ve found a spot on the steps that is well shielded by the columns, so if we slow approach the landing, we’ll be hard to notice,” Rusa replied.

“You sound like a Non,” replied Koven.

“And how is that?” she asked.

“Imprecise.”

They landed on the empty corner of the steps leading to the temple. There was no one within ten maatars of them. But down in the square at the bottom of the steps was an assembly of archers. They stood in long rows of a hundred men each. Their bows were on their shoulders, bowstrings to the front, quiver to the back. A man wearing a blue robe stood in front of them. Koven and Rusa held hands for the brief twenty tix before heading back.

When they got back to the cruiser, they walked back to the bridge.

“Something is going on. That looks like an army about to go to war,” said Koven.

“Affirmative. I calculate the probability of major conflict at near eighty-nine point three percent,” replied Rusa. “And it increases the probability of the PPS all being in use by forty-three point one percent. They don’t seem to have figured out just to keep it on low all the time, like you do,” she said.

“That will make it harder to take them away. It’s not like we can go right up to them and pull on the control insignia,” said Koven.

“No, I doubt we will have the opportunity to do that. Even cloaked, it will be difficult and very risky,” Rusa replied.

“Yes. I would need to snatch it and transport an instant later,” said Koven.

“Or shoot them.”

“Yes, or shoot them,” Koven replied in a disappointed tone before continuing. “If I am connected to them physically or even through a PPS under my control but still in contact with them, then I will be inside of a transport bubble with them and that will not be an optimal outcome,” Koven replied.

“Agreed. You’d be barreling through the atmosphere with your eyes closed while they would be wasting their time beating against your PPS shield, then begin beating on you,” said Rusa.

“How did you know I close my eyes?” he asked.

“The elasticity of the skin that makes up your eyelids has not returned to normal whenever I see you just after you have arrived.”

“Do you always observe at that level of detail?”

“Yes,” Rusa replied.

“You should be a historian,” replied Koven.

“I can’t,” she replied.

“Why?”

“Because I have no prohibition against lying. Under the right circumstances I can lie, if it serves the greater good,” she replied.

“Many people in history have died arguing over whose greater good was the greatest,” replied Koven with a smile.

“That seems possible, given human emotions,” Rusa replied.

“So how do we get back the PPS? The rest of the items seem easier,” asked Koven.

“When does someone take off their PPS?” Rusa asked. Koven smiled.

“When they are defecating, when they are bathing, and when they are having sex,” replied Koven. “Although, technically they don’t have to take it off while they are shitting, since the PPS is self-cleaning. But then you would have to sit wearing what amounts to a shitty diaper for a few tox while it cleans up the mess. That’s why everyone takes them off to take a crap.”

“So what strategy is best for this?” asked Rusa.

“We wait for them to do any of these three things and then we take them while they are busy,” replied Koven.

“I think you’ve come up with the winning idea,” replied Rusa, her language modified by her motivational psychology programming.

They transported back to a corner of the main temple where they kept the robes of the priests. It was an orgy of color as the multicolored robes of Allor’s priests hung all around them. They rotated colors through the seasons and various religious festivals. Some apples never fall far from the tree.

Invisible to all, they made their way to the chambers of Canto and Tal.

The waiting game began.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Two armed guards stood outside of the door to the chambers of Duvi, the High Priest of the Cult of Ceros. They were waiting for the delivery of slave women for the evening. They stood loosely with their hand on their swords.

Allor appeared in front of them for just an instant before Canto and Tal appeared behind them and ran them through with their light swords. Both guards fell to the sandstone floor. Their cauterized wounds prevented their leaking onto the ground at first. Canto and Tal stood over their bodies then cloaked themselves again.

Allor walked over to the doors and flung them open. He kept his head inside of his hood and his PPS set on low. Cloaking was still turned off.

There were two more guards inside of Duvi's chambers.

"You. You are the dog called Allor," said one of them as they both pulled their swords from the sheaths.

"I am Allor."

"You don't draw your sword. You will be easy to kill. Then I will kill your pretty mother."

"She will kill you first," Allor said with a smile.

The guard jerked hard when Tal's sword entered his body from behind. She remained cloaked, but the blood and stomach fluid of the guard covered her sword and the outline became visible. Then his body slammed into the floor as she kicked him to the ground. The other guard turned to run away and was impaled on Canto's sword.

From deep in the ostentatious rooms of gold, red, and blue, a man with short knife-cropped hair and boils on his face found his bow and quiver. He grabbed an arrow and aimed it across the rooms at Allor.

“You have met your match, wizard,” he said as he shot his arrow. His aim was good, and his arrow was delivered directly to Allor’s head, where it broke and ricocheted to the left.

“There you are,” said Allor, turning to Duvi.

“What magic do you bring to me, wizard?” Duvi said as he shot another arrow at Allor. It too hit Allor and deflected its path. Then a third one came, then a fourth and finally a fifth. Without arrows, Duvi looked to the nearby table. He threw a jug of water. It landed in front of Allor and the water splashed out at his feet.

“Duvi, Head Priest of Ceros, you have killed, you have enslaved, you have abused, and you will do these things no more. It is your judgment day,” said Allor, a strange look on his face like the wolf in that moment between the third and fourth time it tears the flesh of its prey.

“You do no frighten me, Allor dog, son of a whore bitch,” Duvi said, and spit on the floor in front of him.

“Good. Your fate was sealed long ago. This rev is when your pages turn blank. This day the Cult of Ceros will be no more.”

“My work will survive,” Duvi replied.

“In a few years no one will remember you,” said Allor. “Your ass-boil of greatness will fade from memory and I will forbid the scholars to include you in the histories. You will be dust again.”

“For what? What have I done to you?” Duvi demanded.

“She was killed by one of your raids. And for her blood I demand yours.”

“If we murdered her, she must have been ugly,” said Duvi defiantly with a sneer. “If she was pretty she would become one of my slaves. I must discriminate somehow or my stable would be overflowing. But you know the best ones? The women of Ceros. It’s because of their love for Ceros that they are so responsive to my needs.”

Allor stood still except for the tremble of anger.

“So what do you want? Gold? I have plenty. Women? Again the same. Take both of them, buy anything, fornicate with them until you have a temple full of children like me. What does it take to fulfill your need? I ask you this because I could never find the limits of my own needs. I swear upon Ceros himself that I always wanted more gold, more women, more converts, more slaves. *Enough* was not a word familiar to me. It is important to know what you want,” he said without the fear of a man about to die.

“I want to look at you moments before you die and let you go to your death knowing it was me that killed you. Look hard at your executioner, Duvi. I am death in human form, come to collect your debt.”

“Combat between us is unfair, you sit behind magic.”

Allor laughed.

“It was not fair when you raided my village. So it was never going to be fair between us. You will die. This temple and everything for twenty-five kilometers will be incinerated. Nothing but ash.”

“No one has that kind of magic.”

“Fool, it was never magic. Machines from people that live out among the stars,” replied Allor.

Allor put his hand into his robe and removed a round metal tube. It had a numeric pad and two sliding controls. He placed it on the floor. Then he cloaked.

“Where are you?” Duvi screamed.

“I am here, but only for this moment,” came the reply.

Duvi watched as three large clear golden balls formed. A tick later they left the temple at high speed. Duvi ran towards the small box on the floor in the other room. He held it in his hand and was examining it when it activated.

He was ash in an instant.

Far away, the soldiers of Allor saw the blast. Even further away they saw their Lord God crossing the sky in his flaming chariot. Men and women on horses rode across the border. Other men and women set fires in Ceros cities and towns.

The destruction of Ceros had begun.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Ceros lands were crisscrossed with roads. The soldiers of Allor moved to the intersections of these arteries. Control the flow, control the land. The few night travelers scattered from the road upon seeing the charging soldiers in the light of the moons. But they were not chased as they expected. They were not robbed as expected. They did not die. Instead, the soldiers rode past them.

In the cities and towns, Allor's agents used oil bombs to ignite the barracks of the religious police. As men ran from the buildings they were met with a line of archers that ended their escape. This happened simultaneously throughout the land. To observers and victims, it appeared to be chaos. But to the military mind, the madness that descended was precise, orderly, and focused. And across the Ceros lands Allor's men and women shouted the same message in the streets.

“Devotees of Ceros, Ceros is dead. The High Priest Duvi is dead. The Grand Temple at Pyramos has been destroyed. You are free from the religious police. You are free from high tithing. Tomorrow at noon come to the center and learn of new ways, better ways.”

Most people are afraid of radical change. Some people are vested in the old ways. Some people are victims of the old ways but their victim's role is well understood and predictable and they are experienced in the role. These were some of those that picked up their swords to fight the advancing troops of Allor. Some died that night defending something that deep down they hated.

There was no large battle with opposing armies. Ceros did not have a standing army. The religious police force was large and worked as an oppressor

and soldier. As the barracks burned, as the archers dropped their foes with their arrows, the possibility of a counterattack faded.

By sunrise, Allor's troops were at the intersection of all the roads on the western and southern side of Ceros. At the intersections of the roads, the soldiers stopped travelers and asked their name, their destination, and their occupation.

It was not long before the first Ceros priest arrived and demanded uninterrupted passage. He was taken into custody and held for Tal and The Expected.

Tal came over the border on horse, leading The Expected. The fanatics of her column talked to each other like nattering newlyweds. The conversation was much the same. How many priests would they get? Would they be injured? Would they die? Would they torture the priests before killing them? What good was being merciful with a Ceros given their history? Tal listened to the conversation behind her. She was pleased. She hoped they would still be as enthusiastic once they were ankle deep in gore.

Tal's contingent began as hundreds on horseback. At every intersection they would grow smaller as The Expected fanned out across the land. The larger group was coming on foot. They carried the wagons of supplies, thousands of arrows with arrow makers being dropped at strategic locations along their route. And they carried wagons for the heads.

Tal had learned from Ceros the value of terror. It was a long-used strategy with its roots tracing back to Primus Earth to the times of the Brahn dynasty. For Tal, it was all about power and how to use it. But for Canto, riding beside her, it was the thrill of the kill. She was like a sport hunter in the woods, her prey was about to be flushed out into the open. But she used different means than animal calls and men with drums. Her prey would be handed over by their own, willingly in exchange for influence and power.

By noon, some of the towns began to be subdued. People stayed in their homes with their doors bolted. Crops in the bright midday sun were left unattended.

Canto left Tal at the first large city, Ulutor. The young woman with long black hair rode with her smaller team towards the city. She would meet Demos's local commander at the still-standing temple. It was one of the temples determined to be of value and worth saving from the torch. She thought about the floors of the temple. Would the blood of the priests stain the stone? She hoped so.

As she rode, a young woman almost her age rode beside her.

"What do you wish for today?" asked Arkla with the curly hair.

"I wish for ten heads," replied Canto with a laugh.

"What will you do with them?" Arkla asked.

"I will put them in special glass jars given to me by Allor's scientist. And I will fill them with a special liquid that will keep them from rotting. And I will put them on the shelf near the entrance to my quarters so that every time I enter or leave I will be reminded of the wonderful feeling I felt today."

"I have never taken a head. I look forward to it," said Arkla.

"The first one is special, like your first time with a man. But don't let the excitement cause you to make mistakes. Else you become pregnant with death," Canto said with a laugh. "Always look around you before you take a head. Know how far to anyone with a sword or an arrow."

"It will be good to get our network in place," said Arkla as she bounced up and down, not used to riding a horse.

"My brother gave me a book. A book that taught me to read," said Canto.

"But you already know how to read," replied a chuckling Arkla.

"But I didn't know the language of the book. That is what it taught me."

"Was it a good book? Was it worth learning the language?"

"It is the most important book in history. It contains the knowledge from people that live out in the stars."

“How did you get it?”

“One of their chariots crashed here. But let me tell you what I found in the book. It was filled with stories from other places like Earth 7. There was even one called Primus Earth. And on Primus Earth there were people that believed they had developed a way of living that was fair and just. And as a destination, the place, the society they wanted, reading about it did seem fair. No hungry people, everyone with something to do.”

“That sounds like a wonderful place,” said Arkla.

“It does,” replied Canto. “But each time these people or other people in a different place tried to put the plan into place, it failed. And I don’t mean it failed a little, but a lot. And they spent significant effort convincing their own people that it had been a success. But their people were not fooled for long and eventually they understood the truth of it.”

“That sounds horrible. What went wrong?”

“Each time they replaced old rulers with a new ruler, and each time the new rulers became as corrupt as the old leaders, just in a different way.”

“What a shame. But that won’t happen to us,” said Arkla confidently.

“And when the government realized that no one was fooled except the foolish, they did the only thing they could do to remain in power,” said Canto.

“What?”

“Abuse their own people.”

“Like the Ceros police?”

“Yes. But they had better organization than the Ceros police. They are just the corn on the toe, the burr in the saddle. But on Primus Earth they organized their abuse on a very small level. For every fifty people they had one that was part of their group. That one would be given better housing and other benefits in exchange for watching their neighbors closely and reporting those that did not recite the propaganda as their own opinion.”

“What happened to them in the end?”

“In the end people got tired of that system and the system of the old bosses too. They moved to something much better.”

“What is that?”

“Direct democracy.”

“Why is that better?”

“It abolishes the ruling class.”

“Do they still use it?”

“Yes, everyone carries a small device that lets them vote, and do many other things,” replied Canto.

“And this is better?”

“Yes, out among the stars this is how things are decided.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Koven and Rusa followed Tal. She had taken them deep into Ceros, now to be called New Allor. The day was filled with many things, but mostly death. Tal had presided over the execution of nearly two hundred priests before returning to her quarters.

Most priests were not afforded an opportunity to plead. Tal was immediate and final in her sentencing. "All Ceros priests must die," she repeated as they were brought before her. Those that tried to plead had their heads taken mid-sentence. Those that didn't were permitted a moment to prepare themselves. Tal made sure that she performed the first execution. Her sharp sword cleanly detached the head of a young priest trying to argue that he could adapt to the Cult of Allor. It rolled ear over ear a few times before it came to rest.

When she arrived back at the temple, she took off her blood-soaked robe and threw it on the floor of her quarters. She reached out and pulled the insignia of her PPS and the millions of little black metal shavings snapped away from her body and formed her shape as if on an invisible mannequin.

Koven and Rusa came into her room cloaked just as she began to wash the blood from her face. Koven marveled at such a fine-looking woman of her age. Her naked body was tight, and she had the muscular arms of a woman that did military training. She leaned over the bowl of water to rinse the last of the blood from her face. Then she went into the room with a pool and a balcony overlooking the city. She dove into the water and came back up after a long time under the surface.

Koven enjoyed looking at her and he felt himself getting aroused. If Rusa wasn't with him he would have stayed and watched her longer. He found her striking features attractive, her dark black hair, her brown eyes, her long, thin nose. Her breasts were beginning the natural droop of age, ever so slightly.

Koven went to the table and bed and took Tal's PPS and her comms device. He and Rusa looked for her transport device, but it wasn't to be found. They made their way to a secluded place and then used their transport devices to return to the cruiser.

Koven was logging the tech into the inventory. Finding the model numbers and serial number on the devices is often not easy since the advent of micro printing. As he held the comms device under the microscope lens, Rusa came up behind him. She put her arms around his waist and hugged him slightly.

"Did you know that I am programmed with a hundred forty-one distinct pleasure apps?" she whispered in his ear.

"No, I didn't," he said as he continued to look for the serial number.

"I am capable of highly pleasurable performance in areas from anal to bondage to vaginal muscle massaging."

"I had no idea," he replied nervously.

"Yes. You are welcome to take advantage of these capabilities. In fact, if it would help clear your mind and thus contribute to the effectiveness of our communications, then I strongly recommend it," she added.

"I don't think that will be necessary," said Koven, and regretted his words as they left his mouth. His words contradicted the physical evidence now very visible through his PPS.

"OK. If you change your mind," she said.

"I want to go back down to the planet and wait to see if we can get other devices while they are sleeping," Koven said. He turned and left the bridge. Rusa followed.

When they arrived, they had hoped to find everyone asleep. It wasn't to be. There were guards running down the hall. Stomping her feet as she walked, Tal walked past them. She had an angry look on her face. Her dark blue robe was flowing as she walked, and her hood bounced slightly off of her shoulders. Koven remembered how pretty she looked in the pool. She walked within three maatars

of him as he stood quietly with Rusa beside one of the large columns of the temple. If his PPS hadn't been activated, his nose would have detected the scent of cucumbers as she passed.

"Yes, wake him up," she ordered the woman walking beside her.

"Yes, Mother Tal," said the woman, and ran ahead.

Koven and Rusa followed her.

Tal went into the nave of the temple. Pilgrims were permitted to wait, and at night sleep in the massive room while waiting to see Allor during his morning healing. Pilgrims didn't bathe often and they were dirty, very dirty. Behind Tal were twenty men and women of The Expected.

"Go to the far end of the room and stop them from leaving. I'm going to search every single person in here. My sword will show no pity."

A man in an ugly green robe yelled orders.

"First ten, go block the exits." And the ten men and women ran to the far end of the hall.

"Something has been stolen from me," Tal said in a loud voice, standing at the pulpit and looking down at the pilgrims. "And I intend to find it. You will all be searched. If you come forward with it now, I promise your death will be swift. Else I will cut your limbs from your body one every one hundred tox until you die. A wise person would choose the first."

"Let's go. Nobody is going to be asleep tonight," said Rusa.

"Agreed," said Koven. They made their way back through the long hallway behind the altar. They moved quickly to the side as they saw Allor and Pens walking down the hall together. Allor had the same annoyed stomp as Tal.

"There is a man that lives on the outskirts of this city, Eckly Bik," said Allor. "He specializes in finding things. He tried for years to find me and catch me when I was a young thief," Allor said. "He failed, but only just...several times."

Pens motioned for one of the men walking slightly behind them.

“Make it happen. Bring him to us. ALIVE and unharmed. No chains,” said Pens to the man in the red robe, who turned around and pointed at two others to accompany him as he walked back from where they came. They would go to the tithing records office to find Eckly Biks’s address.

Tithing records were the most accurate records on Earth 7. Everything from births and weddings to deaths were recorded in the tithing records. And it was the responsibility of followers to make sure the records were kept accurate. A parent dying not recorded at the Tithing Office could result in additional tithing demanded from the children.

People in the Tithing Office wore purple robes because one night, after too much wine, Canto thought it would get them more respect. But just like everywhere else that had taxes, it gave the hatred of the many a visual focus. Most that worked in the Tithing Office changed from purple robes to a different color after work.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“You clapped. You stood up like you supported it,” said Siple. He was leaning forward over his desk. His fat face was red, and Wingut was concerned about the man’s health. He sighed before responding.

“I do support it,” replied Wingut.

“Why?” came the demand from a fiery face.

“Several reasons. One, Trill is correct: in this crisis we *could* use the extra manpower. Two, I believe the money that has come to the History Department has made us lazy and wasteful. Third, I often question anyone’s right to administer to the quarantine planets.”

“Lazy and wasteful? I consider that to be a personal insult,” Siple spat out.

“It’s not meant as one. I just feel we spend too much time in well-catered off-campus meetings in exotic places,” replied Wingut.

“And you don’t feel that we deserve this? After all we sacrificed? We are the reason humans are still here. You, specifically, are the reason humans are still here. And you don’t believe you deserve it?”

I’d better tell you a little about Wingut’s big moment.

The man who saved the universe didn’t really intend such a noble outcome. Actually, at the time he was desperately trying to disarm an explosive that he himself had set only a few tox earlier. Because of an attack right after arming it,

he wasn't be able to escape before detonation. Worse still, he had lost his personal transport device.

And at the exact moment when it mattered, Wingut forgot the PIN code for the explosive. It was the most important number in his life. He had repeated it hundreds if not thousands of times since setting it up. But on game day, he blanked. He stood looking at the keypad for an entire tox trying to remember it. Finally, as the final tix began to run out, he ran to the huge steel door and stood behind it. It was the only substantial structure to hide behind. But it had a flaw. From his ankles down would be exposed.

They found Wingut an entire rev later in the rubble. His feet were gone, turned to ash at the end of his legs. Beyond a remedium. Fortunately, the detonation had cauterized the stumps at the end of his legs, else he would have bled to death. His bionics fit him perfectly and now provide superior performance than his natural feet. Wingut was so impressed with the performance that he took up dancing. Being an agent is the most dangerous job in the galaxy. Best to dance when you can.

"Sure. Once every couple of hundred revs is good. But we're going to expensive offsite conferences every fifty-four revs. And the costs of the retreats is too high in my opinion."

There it was, the word *opinion*. It was one of the words rarely used by historians, and it always denoted significance.

"Are you saying you've lost confidence in my ability as head of the History Department?" asked Longley. He leaned back in his chair waiting for an answer.

"Yes. Ever since Earth 4."

"That was a commercial decision and I have commercial authority for the department," replied Longley adamantly.

"You killed every human on a planet to secure department funding from the Terros Corporation for the next million revs. And you don't see anything wrong

with that. Do you remember Earth 5, the Austrian? You made him look like an amateur.”

“They were primitives. I won’t have you put them on the same level as the civilized, because they aren’t.”

“And therein lies the most significant cause of my lack of confidence in your abilities.”

“So what is the man that saved the universe going to do about it?” asked Longley angrily.

“As long as you never repeat Earth 4, I don’t see that it is my responsibility to ask for your dismissal. But if you ever attempt anything like that again, I will be in Dean Midge’s office faster than you can say ‘The Last Amalekite.’”

“I’ve always suspected you wanted my job,” said Longley.

“This may surprise you, but I don’t. I didn’t even want to be a hero. I just wanted to become an educator and set sail in the galaxy, a few years here, a few there, until I found a good place to stay for a long time.”

“Well, I’ve wanted this job ever since I got my Ph.D. And now that I’ve got it, I’ll tell you one thing: I won’t give it up without a fight.”

Making learning the center of human existence and subsequently the university the local center had many profound effects. Significant among them was the effect on and of the Management Department. Countless old management theories had been discredited. Management ideas had finally stabilized from the former fashion parade of management ideas, many of them countervailing others. New techniques stressed self-management and distribution of tools to assist in this effort.

Dean Midge was wishing that she were back in a self-managed team working on the Probability Calculator. Just her and a group of mathematicians, bringing her ideas to formulas and back-testing them. Instead she was sitting at her desk with Professor Trill across from her.

“Earth 4, don’t forget what they did on Earth 4,” said Trill. Trill ignored the glass on Dean Midge’s desk that indicated that she had two urgent messages.

He knew that they were news that Professor Klept had escaped from capture on Thetus 9. Trill sighed when he remembered telling Klept that he would be safest on a cruiser traveling. But the physicist wouldn’t listen. Trill had him on a cruiser now, under protection.

“That was a mistake, and I had a long discussion with him after. I don’t think he will repeat it.”

“I would think that it would be significant enough to warrant a special investigator from the Chancellor’s office,” said Trill.

“Let’s be reasonable,” she replied. “After all, they were a Primitive 2 planet. Not like they were going to contribute anytime soon.”

“Yes, that’s important to consider,” replied Trill. He was executing his hard thrust, soft solution.

“Still,” Trill began, “at the time I was so angry with him that I read the regulations on a Chancellor’s investigation. In there I found that any Educator at the Department Head level or above can request an investigation and all requests for investigation are public and must be accompanied by a detailed ‘statement of knowns,’”

“Yes. I reread the regulations in preparation for this meeting and found the same,” replied Midge. “Are you planning to submit a statement of knowns?”

“I am considering it,” replied Trill. “But more importantly, I’ve been working on a new idea of what I call ‘micro-nudges’ for planets in quarantine. These are tiny interventions without direct contact that will permit them to advance at a faster pace. We’ve been writing a book of philosophy to be placed in the hands of

several of the notable humans in the quarantine planets. It gives them a pathway forward.”

“Let me talk to Longley. And I also want to talk to Wingut. He’s a good egg.”

Trill remembered his surprise when he saw Wingut on his feet applauding him at the Educator of the 500 Rev Cycle Awards Ceremony.

“Wingut is a smart man,” said Trill.

“And a good dancer,” replied Midge.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“I think we should look and see if we can steal Tal’s transport device,” said Koven when they met, shielded at the top of the steps to the temple. Rusa took Koven’s hand and they went inside.

“You want to see her naked again, don’t you?” Rusa replied.

“Yes,” Koven admitted.

“OK. Let’s go look for it,” replied Rusa. “Did you know that there is a new role-playing app I can download? I didn’t because you are a historian. Logically, role-playing is a deceit, so you would be prohibited. Is my understanding correct?”

“Yes,” replied Koven.

They entered Tal’s room while the guards were investigating a noise they made down the hall, then walked past them and opened the doors. Tal was not in the pool, but she was naked. She was sitting on top of a man years younger than her, grinding down on him as she thrusts her hips forward and backwards.

“Not much longer now,” she said with a desperate tone.

“May I suck on your breasts, Mother Tal?” asked the man with the long brown hair and matte complexion.

“Yes. Soft at first then hard when you feel me clenching.”

Koven saw the personal transport device sitting on the table next to the bed. He moved carefully over to it. A tix after he picked it up, it became part of the cloaking field and disappeared. He held Rusa’s hand by his other hand.

“Let’s go,” he whispered to the sound of Tal’s loud moans that were getting louder.

As they turned to leave, Koven bumped into the equally invisible Rusa, despite the fact that the point of holding hands was to prevent things like that. The PTD slipped from his hand and fell to the floor. As soon as he was no longer

touching it, it became visible. That unfortunate event was followed by another even more unfortunate in the loud clanging sound when it hit the floor.

“Shit,” he muttered as he reached down to pick it up. When he did, he bumped his head with Rusa’s head as she bent down to pick it up. A particle blaster went high over their heads while they were bent down. Koven quickly increased the setting on his PPS. He was too scared to notice the inaccuracy of the shooting.

He looked at the source of the blast and it was empty. Someone was cloaked and shooting at him. They shot again, this time lower and hitting the top of Koven’s PPS shield. An instant later a second weapon was also shooting at them. Every time their weapon would hit Koven’s PPS shield it would outline the shell he was inside of.

Koven was scared for the first few tix until he was confident that his shield was effective.

“Do you realize what you are doing?” he yelled to his assailants. “You are shooting at an agent of The History Department at the University on Central Kath, on a planet under quarantine, and you don’t have a chance of hurting me. Do you realize this?”

They answered by using his voice to aim their weapons. Five quick blasts hit his shield right in front of his face.

“They are not supposed to know about us. Didn’t you get the comms?” Koven yelled at them.

The couple in the bed were not frozen during this. They saw the white bolts of light when the weapons were fired. Tal dove to the far side of the bed and lay down on the floor. She moved quickly across the floor towards the room with the pool. The man lay beside the bed for a few tix then he made a run for the door.

And since he was unimportant to the people he could not see, no one shot at him, struck at him, or tried to prevent his progress in any way. He ran naked past the tall columns, made it to the door, and left.

Koven stood up and walked forward a few paces.

“Are you regressive? I’ve heard about them but never met one before. If you are a regressive, can you tell me if you still throw your feces, or have you gone back to eating them again?”

This time there were ten short blasts that illuminated his protective shell.

And while this was happening, Tal decided it was her turn to make a run for the door.

“Leave. Stop shooting at me and leave. Right now. And I will be putting this in my report. Don’t think I won’t. This is a class one violation of university policy. And your ass is mine when I find out who you are.”

Tal made it to the second-to-last column. As she ran towards the door, she ran into the long blade of an invisible light sword. Her blood and other fluids showed the shape of the weapon as it exited her back. Then the blade was pulled up hard into her chest. Then it withdrew before thrusting into her again. After that, her lifeless body fell to the floor.

When Koven saw Tal fall to the floor, he rushed over to her. It was too late. He turned on his remedium but it showed only blue, the color of death.

“Look behind you,” said Rusa. Koven turned, and at the balcony past the pool, they saw a PTD bubble leaving. A few tix later, two other bubbles formed and then departed.

Koven looked down at Tal cradled in his lap.

He heard the guards come running into the room.

“Mother Tal, where are you?” they yelled. Since she was in contact with Koven, her body was cloaked.

“It’s time to leave,” Koven heard Rusa say softly into his ear.

When he stepped away from Tal, she suddenly appeared again.

“Oh Allor,” said one of the guards, “get Allor, quick, man. Get Allor now.”

Rusa picked up Tal’s PTD as they left.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

It took Koven several attempts before he was calm enough to record his report. And even then he wasn't that calm. He found that his hands were shaking with the combination of fear and anger, more anger than he had ever known. A man who had never hurt anyone was now certain that he could kill.

The report was long and gave factual details that were sometimes unnecessary. That the floors were made of sandstone was not that important to the report, but Koven included that detail. Along with the color of the heavy curtains and a brief description of Tal that included the opinion words "strongly beautiful" and "deeply sensual."

But most of the report centered around the shoot-out and the murder of Tal. Koven stood stiffly as he recorded his report.

"Sir. They tried to kill me," he said in his report. "I can't stress that enough."

Koven sent his report and waited. He would not go back down to the surface until his report had been reviewed. He hoped that Wingut would pull him out of the mission, but he knew that the odds were low. Professor Klept would prevent any assistance or replacement. Koven settled back and watched the news report from the History Department.

On a planet called Parnon, people had voted to impose restrictions on visitors. The ecosystem on Parnon was not sufficient to handle the millions of tourists that came to see the crystal waterfalls. Tour operators were complaining, and several large cruisers were rerouted.

Koven's report was read twenty-two times after it was submitted. Koven waited for a reply. And then he waited some more. Then he ate. Then he watched more news reports.

He nearly leapt out of his chair when the reply from Wingut came. He opened it as fast as he could.

“You’re doing a fine job. Continue your mission.”

That was it. Nothing more. Koven found himself talking to himself loudly as he paced around his quarters.

“That’s all there is? I’m risking my life and all he can say is ‘you’re doing a fine job’?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Allor and Canto stood in front of the body of their mother on the altar in the temple. Behind them the temple was filled with The Expected, their now black robes filling the building with a solemnity.

“We will find them,” said Canto. Allor did not respond.

“And when we find them, slow revenge,” Canto added.

“That won’t bring her back,” Allor replied.

“No. But it will bring us back. Back from grief.”

Pens came up to them.

“My Lord and Princess,” he said, and bowed to them. “We have captured the man in Tal’s room. We have the assassin.”

“Who is he?” asked Canto.

“One of the young men of The Expected. The guards saw him running from the room after Mother Tal was murdered.”

“Where is he?” asked Allor.

“He is being held in one of the cells below us,” Pens replied.

“I will need you both now more than ever. Pens, I will need you to take on the work of Tal.”

“I will, my Lord.”

Two hours later, Allor was in his quarters sitting on a chair at the table. A man stood in front of him. And old man with white hair but eyebrows still black.

“Eckly, now is not the time to claim your age as a reason for failure,” Allor said.

“I’m not, my Lord. It was a misunderstanding. I said my age permitted me no speed in chasing men. However, my faculties are still fast for figuring out a thing or two.”

“Good,” said Allor.

“But my faculties are not having much success. Did you see the sky last night?”

“No, I was occupied with the death of my mother,” Allor said with an annoyed tone.

“Well, it was interesting. Right about the time that Mother Tal was taken from us, three bubble ships were seen leaving the temple. They flew west towards the ocean.”

“And you are suggesting that I executed the wrong man?”

“I’m not sure, my Lord. But what would explain the three bubble ships? They were not yours or Canto’s or Pens’s. It might have been Tal’s device, for I haven’t found it.”

“What are you saying, Eckly?”

“My Lord, we have exceeded the number of bubble ship devices you have. This can only mean that there are more of them that we were not aware of. Also, given the time of the sighting, it would make for a most excellent escape device for the killers. I was intending to question that man in custody to get his story and see how it fits or contradicts with this. Unfortunately, my Lord had already taken his head.”

“Pens assured me that he was the killer. He was seen coming out of her quarters at the time of her death.”

“And yet the killer decided his best method of escape was without his clothes,” replied Eckly.

“What?”

“His clothes are still neatly folded on the bench beside the bed,” replied Eckly.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes,” replied Eckly. “In order for me to find something, it is valuable for me to understand something.”

“What do you mean?” Allor asked.

“Tell me about the bubble ships and the personal protection suits again,” replied Eckly.

Allor spared no details in his explanation, even though as he spoke he knew that Eckly would realize that the Lord God Allor was just the man Allor, made special by alien technology. Eckly listened and asked many questions about the origin of the devices and learned of the fallen spaceship and the adventure of two young boys.

At the end of it Eckly was very quiet for many tox. Finally, he spoke.

“It is very likely that the people from the stars have returned.”

Later that night, Allor was out walking the capital cloaked as he wandered among his people. He watched as his father stood on the stairs shouting about the empty void of man.

“We feel a void in us because we don’t understand,” his father yelled loudly to the small crowd of about forty persons gathered around him. “And there are those that will take advantage of this need to understand. They have pretty packaged explanations, explanations simple enough for all of us to understand. But what if the answer is something much more complex? What if the answer is not found in the great cults of Earth 7? What if the answer is out there, among the stars?”

Many of the crowd grumbled in disbelief. A few made rude hand gestures and one person threw a piece of fruit.

Allor made his way back to the temple.

The next morning he woke to the sound of birds on his balcony.

It was only a few tox before he discovered that his personal transportation device was missing.

CHAPTER THIRTY

His name was Mosus Duplantaine. He was a fat man with rosy cheeks. He smiled a lot. But then ambassadors are predisposed to do that given the nature of their position. He stood in the throne room before the large chair upon which sat a tired-looking Allor.

“My Lord,” began the chubby man. “I bring you a message from The Highest Unconsciousness, Hundil, High Priest of the Cult of Niddler. It is a message of joy, a message of love, a message of the highest importance.”

Canto looked at Allor with a look of boredom at the wordiness of the ambassador. Both brother and sister were still grieving. This makes a person less tolerant of windbags.

“We wish to congratulate Lord Allor for the defeat of evil. The destruction of the Cult of Ceros is a moment that will be remembered. A moment remembered as when people were freed from their bondage, the slaves taken by masters and the slaves taken by belief. It is a moment that should be marked by celebration rituals and a holiday across the land.”

Canto looked at Allor and made the motion with her hands for Mosus to hurry up. Allor shook his head in response.

“We learned of the destruction of Pyramos from the first refugees and sent riders to confirm its demise. And from our reports we learned that Allor has

powers we never knew about. Deadly powers. And this must be considered carefully by those that stand between My Lord and his goal.”

“So we asked ourselves, how can we assist Lord Allor in his quest?”

“And what answer did you finally arrive at?” asked Canto as she tapped her fingers against the arm of her chair.

“We most humbly ask and do sincerely request that the Cult of Niddler be allowed to disband peacefully and its members become integrated into the Cult of Allor, where given time and conversion training, they can become fully recognized members of your flock, His Own.”

“This is a good start,” said Allor with the slightest smile to the ambassador.

“We only ask two minor indulgences, My Lord Allor.”

“Be careful,” said Canto. She stood and drew her sword. “You may become part of my collection, so choose your words carefully.”

“Understood, Princess Canto. Understood. Our indulgences are minor. First we ask that forgiveness be given for the next one hundred revs to those that still try to reach higher unconsciousness.”

“Do you mean the breath-holders?” asked Canto.

“Yes, Princess,” Ambassador Duplantaine replied.

Allor burst out laughing. He laughed hard and held up his hand after a few tix. Finally he regained his composure. He realized the moment as perhaps his first step towards healing.

“Dear Sir, your people can hold their breath as long as they like. As long as it does not include the worship of any god, then it is not a concern of mine. It is just a silly thing that silly people do. That’s all. Consider this matter closed. I hope that over time the former followers of the Cult of Niddler will realize the illogic of their actions. But if they don’t, it doesn’t matter. Now tell me, what is the other indulgence?”

“My Lord Allor, Hundil, the former high priest of the former Cult of Niddler, would like to hold a banquet in your honor. He wants to share all of the details of

the former Cult of Niddler with you so that your assimilation of their flock will be smoother. During this feast, Hundil will make his case that you are best served with him alive. However, if at the end of the banquet you are not convinced, then he will submit to your sword.”

“Sounds reasonable,” said Allor. “Pens is not here to object,” he added with a chuckle.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Koven was in the shower on the cruiser after a lengthy exercise regime in the gym room. The shower was having problems with the temperature again. He could feel the very minor fluctuations in temperature. The slightly colder burst every twenty tix. He would run the maintenance routines later and recalibrate the range of response.

The warm air dryer felt good on his skin. He felt the slight spray of moisturizer as he exited the shower stall, then walked naked into the bedroom. His PPS was hanging from a rod next to the bed. He lay down on the bed, needing to get some sleep. He hadn't slept since before Tal's murder. He wasn't sure if he would ever sleep again. He was trying to come to grips with his career choice and was wondering just how many dead bodies he would have to see before becoming an educator. Then his mind went to the most horrible place as he wondered how many of them he would cause.

His door opened and Rusa came into his quarters. She was carrying a remedium.

"I noticed that you haven't healed in the last couple of days," she said.

"Maybe that will help me get some sleep," he said as he got up and put on a robe.

"You don't need that," she replied, pointing at the robe.

"I'd prefer it," he said.

"Suit yourself. Now come lie back on the bed," she said.

He walked over to the bed and lay down on his back. She opened his robe, exposing his naked body. She turned on the remedium and moved it to his head. He could feel the soothing effects of it in his head. The terror he had been feeling since that first weapon was shot at him subsided some, not going away completely but diminished.

"I am so tired," he said as a result, and closed his eyes.

“You have a significant sleep deficit,” she said. “I noticed it on your last health check.”

She continued moving the remedium over his body. He felt muscles relax and a tingling on his skin where the remedium was working. Rejuvenation of skin cells causes a tingling sensation. When she placed it over his groin, he responded by putting his hand on hers and moving it away.

“It’s OK,” Rusa said. “I am fully capable of pleasure and discretion. Tanit need never know that you have taken advantage of my capabilities.”

Then she did something that Koven didn’t know she could do without permission. It felt so good to him that he lasted only a few tix—in fact, only one tox and fourteen tix before he exploded.

After, as he lay there, she removed her clothing and lay down beside him.

“That was nice,” she said. “I like the way you do that.”

“I’m sorry it didn’t last long. It felt too good.”

“I know, I could tell. But that’s good. You enjoyed it. You need to get some sleep and I need to clean up.”

“Clean up?” he asked her.

“Yes. Spermatozoa will react with the polymers inside of me and cause an unpleasant odor if allowed to stay there for more than a few days. It’s best if they are removed soon after ingestion.” And then she got up and walked over to the sink and did what could only be called an android version of puking. It contained no convulsions like human puking, but rhythmic movement along the torso to bring up the contents of the android stomach, which Rusa politely spit into the sink. There was a very similar process for different species. And I can tell you very sincerely that watching my cat cough up a furball is profoundly non-erotic.

Koven yawned deeply.

“How do you know this? Have you studied the chemical reaction?”

Rusa laughed. “In a way, yes.”

“What do you mean?” Koven asked.

“My creator, Venkat Tiwari, and I discovered it.”

“Really?”

“Yes, we had sex five hundred forty-nine times during my final testing.”

“Oh,” replied a surprised Koven. He yawned again and closed his eyes.

“Are there any limits to the use of your pleasure apps? Can I make use of them whenever I want?” he asked her as she lay down beside him and put her head on his shoulder. He put his arm around her. She took his limp manhood in her hand and held him gently.

“There are no limits other than causing damage or putting the mission at risk,” she replied, and squeezed him gently. “But they aren’t just apps. They are me as well. I have a fully developed personality, and my learning modules will continue to make it a more complex personality until I am on a par with humans. So when you are talking of using the apps, you are talking of using me. While I don’t have complex emotions learned yet and integrated, I do have rudimentary emotional response. And disassociating me from the apps that make up me causes some form of crude sadness.”

“I’m sorry,” Koven said. “I didn’t want to hurt your feelings.”

“I know,” she said. She began to stroke him ever so gently.

“I need to sleep,” he said as he felt himself beginning to respond to her movements.

“How long would you like to sleep?” she asked him.

“A hundred tox,” he replied.

“Is there any particular music you would like to wake to?”

“*Injunction At Sunset*,” he replied.

“I’ve set it up,” she replied.

“One last thing?” he asked her. “Can I wake to the feeling of you...you know, what you were doing before?”

“Of course,” she said.

Koven slept so soundly that the call from Tanit went unanswered. The periodic beeping from his comms bracelet didn't wake him either. And one hundred tox later he felt Rusa. It was wonderful. He rolled over a little to make it easier for her. He heard the beeping on his comms and knew he had a message. He activated the message. It was marked "private only."

"Hey lover, I just wanted you to know that I am all set to meet you at your parents' at the weekend. I'm getting a ride with a couple of professors testing a new drive motor. It's really fast, so I should arrive before you get there. I guess I will introduce myself to your parents. Or I can find a restaurant and wait if you like. Just let me know."

Koven looked down at Rusa.

"And this is what you have to look forward to," she said. Then she started taking off her clothes. When she was completely naked, she walked over to the bed and lay down on it.

It was too much for him.

A few minutes later he decided to take another nap.

This time he woke to music only. While eating a late breakfast, he read the instructions on the explosive device he was taking down to the planet later in the day.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Wingut went to see Professor Trill on his way back from the Travel Department. Trill was not alone in his office. Professor Droka was with him, sitting on the couch in his office while Trill sat behind his desk. Wingut had to wait outside of the office for ten tox before being allowed to enter.

“I know you have agents down on Earth 7,” he said as he walked into the room and sat down on one of the two chairs across the desk from Trill. Droka quickly got up and sat in the other chair beside him.

“I have no such thing,” replied Trill in an annoyed tone. He remembered the old saying “Only a fool argues with a historian.”

Wingut slid a piece of paper across the desk. It was the travel vouchers for Collins and Hope. At least Wingut didn’t know about the long-term agent on Earth 7.

“OK. I sent two agents down there. But their sole purpose was to take a survey of conditions in the event of a transfer of custodial power to the Sociology Department. I felt it was important to know what we had to deal with. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Except your attempt to conceal it,” replied Wingut.

“You know the tension between our departments,” said Droka. “Why cause problems when a little stealth avoids the conflict?”

“Right you are,” added Trill. “I know you get information about us. But I don’t know how you get it.”

“In this instance, your men tried to kill one of mine. A mission I sponsored.”

“Trust me, Professor, I would never, ever give the order for my men to kill a historian. Put me in one of your recertification rooms and you’ll see it’s the truth. I don’t want a dead historian any more than you do,” replied Trill.

“Indeed,” replied Droka. “It would be a stupid move.”

“Here, let me show you the latest report,” replied Trill.

He started a holocaust of a report less than two revs old. It contained data on communicable diseases on the planet and the recommendations for adjustment to the atmospheric meds. It looked in order. This was one of the many cover activities conceived by Trill and Droka during a retreat at a Nebula resort planet.

“Professor Wingut,” said Droka with his usual whiny tone, “it seems that you are most capable at knowing the activities of the Sociology Department. I would be most interested in knowing how you obtain your information. We would like to bring in the Management Department to study the informal communication channel.”

“Ugo,” replied Wingut, dropping the polite formality, “if I told you about the people that tell me things, people would cease telling me things.”

“Most likely the case,” replied Droka. “But it would assist the Sociology Department, and that comes with rewards.”

“I’m sure it does,” replied Wingut.

“You should consider taking advantage of them. You support our cause, so why not?”

“Because then it would appear that I have been bought. And that violates the second and the eleventh Articles of Historians. I am in no way inclined to proceed in that direction.”

“Others of your department don’t share your conclusion,” replied Trill from behind his desk, leaning back on his chair with a smirk on his face.

“I have enough work being responsible for one historian,” Wingut replied.

“So why are you here?” asked Trill confidently.

“To learn the things I didn’t know before. And to issue a warning. As soon as I heard of your agents, I gave Koven Modi authorization to kill them,” Wingut said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Koven and Rusa landed almost a kilomaatar from the cave. From the edge of the cave, the valley was stretched out before it. They landed just over the top of the hills at the far end of the valley. While they were cloaked, the bubble ships that brought them were not.

“I have identified four new species of moths on Earth 7. They are mutations from the originals used to seed the planet,” said Rusa.

“And will you log them with the Zoology Department?”

“Done. I send them out via sublight as I find them,” Rusa replied.

“You have sublight comms built in?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Good to know,” he replied.

“Regrettably, it is a slow method, but for non-critical data it is a sensible choice. Venkat made a wise design choice.”

“And many others,” said Koven with a smile.

“Do you wish to have sexual pleasure again? It has been nearly two hundred tox,” said Rusa with a wide smile. “You still haven’t discovered some of my most unique capabilities.”

“No thank you. Let’s wait until we are done here,” replied Koven too politely.

They continued their walk among the trees in the valley. Finally they came to the mountain on the other side. As they began to climb the steep rock trail to the opening of the cave, Koven reached out to find Rusa’s hand. He steadied himself with her help as he climbed.

The opening to the cave was wide, yet no more than five maatars tall. But then it opened into a huge cavern. It was well lit. Koven and Rusa climbed carefully over the rocks to the lights. They were ion extractors with batteries with liquid catalyst.

Just past the lights they were able to see the crude laboratory. Wooden tables were numerous, and each dedicated to a device. Koven used his remedium to identify them. A macerator pump for grinding up solid human waste before being pumped out into space was the first item identified. It was in pieces and looked like someone had been trying to sketch the blades. Many of the parts were sitting in small containers of water in a manner akin to soaking dishes in a sink.

At the far end of the cave were a man and woman. They were trying unsuccessfully to get a media player to work. Without the holo-controls, Koven realized they didn't have much chance of getting it to work, except by accident. Accidents were their standard *modus operandi*.

Other items were equally unimportant with a couple of notable exceptions. The first were Babylon Dots, those small black dots put on earlobes to facilitate translations from all languages in the known universe. Koven had to wear his just inside of his ear.

Modi was born without earlobes. Babylon Dots, or BDs for short, hadn't hit the market when Koven was in his mother's womb. People still used ear inserts. Indra was much more concerned with a genetic predisposition towards a weak respiratory sub system, so his parents spent the money at the geneticist getting him a first-class set of lungs.

The last table contained only a book, an old book of paper with a leather cover. Koven recognized it immediately. It was the only book banned in the galaxy. It was not banned for what was written inside. Instead it was banned for the history of what humans had done after reading the book. And it was not even a single story. It was a trilogy laid out in chronological order. The first was a story of a young boy that battled a giant and won. He became king and many people died for it. His name was David. The second was the story of a nice man that was hated by the powerful until he was executed. The third story was about a man who had visions and a goal to bring his message to many people. And again many people died for it.

The stories were not well written and contradicted themselves often in detail. They were made long before the advent of historians. But the problem is not with the words in the book. In fact, it was only three stories from an original book that has since been lost in time. But those who prefer one story to another not only publicly announce their preference, but they also killed those who prefer the other stories.

That is why this is the only book banned in the Galaxy. That also made the book one of the most priceless objects in the universe. Of everything they had found, this was the most dangerous of all.

“It was working yesterev,” complained the man at the far end of the cave.

“I know. Do you think the little piece with the buttons and the strange script is needed?” the woman asked, holding up a remote control.

“No. I’m sure that piece will be of no help,” replied the man.

“OK,” said the woman. “But it started yesterev while I was playing with it.”

“Pure coincidence,” replied the man.

“OK,” said the woman, and then she pressed the button she had pressed previously when it started working. And again the image jumped out in front of them.

“There it is. Got you. I must have pressed a secret button on the box mechanism,” he said as he held up the long, thin box.

“Good for you,” the woman replied with a smile.

Back at the tables, Koven spoke softly. “We need to set explosives and destroy everything.”

“What about the people?”

“Do you have any ideas?” he asked her.

“I cannot help you unless we have a means of ensuring that the man and woman survive,” Rusa replied.

“Let me set the charges in position and then let’s discuss how to get them out of here without letting them know we’re here.”

“Something with fire, perhaps?” Rusa offered.

“Good idea,” Koven replied, and removed the small square charges from his pockets. The tiny little pillow-shaped see-through pouches contained a red liquid and had a very thin digital display covering one side.

Koven walked around the cave for the next few minutes putting his charges under the tables containing the tech. He placed the final four back at the opening to the cave then returned to the table containing the book. He picked up the book and put it inside of his coat. And a moment after he touched the book, it shimmered for a brief moment then disappeared to everyone except Koven. And that was when the shooting started again.

A startled Koven ducked down behind the table as the wild shot hit high on the cave wall behind him.

“We’re under attack,” the man at the far end of the cave yelled, although the weapon had been aimed nowhere near him. He ran to a small desk nearby and took the weapon from on top of it. He ducked down again.

Koven turned his PPS to the maximum setting then stood up.

“Stop this now. You are shooting at an agent of the History—” his words were cut off by a blast that hit right at eye level, momentarily blinding him.

“Shut up,” a voice yelled at him, and shot at him three more times.

But at the far end of the hall, Dubitam had picked up a weapon he was becoming more familiar with. He had aimed it for the last shot. The voice confirmed the position for him. He closed one eye then squeezed the trigger.

From a distance of 24.82 maatars, Dubitam hit his target. There was a grunt and then the sound that a body makes when it hits the ground. A moment later a body became visible on the floor of the cave. An instant later a bubble ship formed an oblong shape and quickly exited the cave.

“Look, I got him,” said Dubitam. “I got him.”

“You saved us,” said MinKey, and quickly kissed him on the lips.

“Behave now,” he said to her with a smile as she pulled away from him.

“We can’t hurt them,” said Rusa down at the other end of the cave.

“Not so loud,” said Koven with a *shhh* on the end of his words.

“Hello?” said Dubitam at the other end of the cave. “We heard that. We agree completely. I didn’t mean to hurt anyone, but we were under attack.”

“You were not under attack,” replied Koven. “We were under attack.”

“I apologize, then. At the moment of the shooting I didn’t know you were here, or anywhere for that matter. That would explain the very poor aim,” replied Dubitam.

Rusa turned off her cloaking.

“A woman, nice,” said Dubitam. A tix later he felt MinKey hit him in the arm.

“Don’t get jealous,” he said to her.

Then Koven turned off his cloaking.

“Ah, the man in charge,” Dubitam said. And again felt MinKey hit him in the arm. This time harder than before.

“Ouch. Forgive me, but my wonderful assistant, MinKey, is a rare believer in women being treated as equals of men. I mean, logically, I can find no fault with her ideas. Sure, there are differences between us, but that doesn’t imply one is superior to the other. However, as much as we are both free thinkers on this topic, we must keep our opinions to ourselves until a more liberal era comes about. And I will admit that I am the least free of the two thinkers on this topic.”

“I understand,” said Rusa. “This is one of the reasons why your planet only gets a Primitive 3 rating.”

“We’re not as primitive as you think,” said Dubitam. “Not since we have the reader. We’ve moved ahead thousands of revs since I started reading the parts about complimentary crops and micronutrients. There are many things not visible to the naked eye that make all the difference between a good life and a miserable life. I have almost completed a device that will permit me to see them.”

And Dubitam lifted up a device, crude and wooden. But at the top and near the middle two glass lenses were clearly visible at the end of a round tube.

“I believe you call it a microscopic,” replied Dubitam with a satisfied smile.

“A microscope,” replied Koven.

“But a microscopic is as good a word as microscope; with either we understand your meaning,” said Rusa quickly.

“Good,” replied MinKey quickly.

“You need to leave now,” said Koven.

“Why?” asked Dubitam.

“Because there is going to be a very powerful explosion.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Herds of animals migrate in search of food, water, safety. Humans are animals. The capital city of Midar swelled as pilgrims came seeking the healing powers of Lord Allor and the confirmation of a belief that permits them more control of their own lives.

Allor had priests open all of the temple grounds for pilgrims. The elaborate gardens of the former Underones were opened to give the pilgrims a place to sleep. The grounds of the temple at Kiro swelled until there were more than a hundred thousand within the temple walls. Allor had the priests provide food from the royal kitchens to the crowd. Still, there were problems. After a couple of days, the temple grounds of Allor smelled mostly of urine and shit.

Allor went out onto the front balcony from the main temple. It overlooked the steps leading to the temple doors and the large square in front of the temple. The crowd cheered when he appeared at the balcony door with Canto. He held her hand and raised it high over their heads like declaring a victor in a boxing match.

“We bring you good health,” Allor yelled to the crowd. It was met with cheers. He listened as the repeaters in the crowd repeated his words and they rippled through the crowd. The cheer started closest to him and moved away like a wave in water.

“We bring you more control of your own life,” Canto yelled to the crowd. She looked at Allor and smiled. They listened to the cheer progress to the back.

“We bring you more of the rewards of your work,” Allor yelled to the crowd. He waited.

“We bring you a world without false gods,” Canto yelled. She looked at Allor. They had argued about who should say this. Canto won.

As they were speaking to the crowd, a line of The Expected began to surround the perimeter of the square. Each of them carried a long metal rod which they held high above their heads. At the top of each was the head of a

Ceros priest. Once the square was surrounded by heads on sticks, the grand doors to the temple opened. Out came two lines of The Expected marching side by side. They held staffs with heads on top of them. The crowd at first was shocked by the sight of the heads. But they began to cheer as they understood that the heads meant the end of the religious police of Ceros.

As the crowd cheered The Expected cleared a path for them to march through, up on the balcony the ambassador from the Disciples of the Earth stepped into view. A moment later the ambassador from the Kingdom of Rom stepped out onto the balcony also. Both men stood beside Allor and Canto. They raised their fists together to the crowd that roared their approval.

It was to be a brutal peace.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Wingut and Longley looked at the image of Koven in the holocaust projected between them in Professor Longley's office.

"And that is the inventory of technology destroyed," said Koven. "The temperature on the device was set at a high enough level to melt everything inside of the cave. As you can see, access to the cave has been blocked." Koven panned the camera to view the former cave entrance, now simply a smoldering pile of rocks, a few of them glowing red from the heat in the cave.

"I did a composite analysis on the dead woman killed by the man inside of the cave. She is Professor Kushina Herer, associate professor in the Sociology Department. The weapon Dubitam used was set on medium low at the time of

the attack. I will be sending Professor Herer's body back via sub-light pod before the end of the rev. End of report."

"Educator of the 500 Rev Cycle," Longley said, making it sound more like a curse than a title.

"I need some agents to help him out," said Wingut. "Not many, just a couple."

"We've been over this, with Klept still at large we can't spare the manpower."

"Then give Earth 7 to Sociology and let me call Modi back home," said Wingut emphatically.

"You know I'm not going to do that. All quarantine planets will remain under the guidance of the History Department as long as I am Department Head."

Professor Longley moved his coffee cup between him and Wingut.

"I know how it feels," Longley said with a gentler tone to his voice. "When I sponsored missions, I couldn't sleep some nights if my people were at risk. And I felt each death of one of my agents deep down inside of me. I felt responsible. I felt it was my fault. I know it hurts."

"He's not dead yet," replied Wingut coldly, "and he's not going to be if I can get him some help."

"What about resources here? Are there any uni-based resources that would be helpful to him?"

"I don't know," replied Wingut.

"You should ask him."

"I will," replied Wingut.

"But there is one good thing about this whole episode," replied Longley.

Wingut was too annoyed to give him the prompt for an answer.

"We have Trill now. A dead sociologist is the kind of evidence he can't lie his way out of," said Longley. "I'll be talking to both him and Dean Midge torev. I will demand that Trill recall his people immediately. Withdraw by the end of the rev. Tomorrev at the latest."

Not long after their meeting, Wingut sent a message to Koven. He offered any resources that could work from the university. But he didn't offer what Koven Modi most needed: agents on site.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Koven took his time off. He took a FLT cruiser that came within bubble range to collect him. He had packed in a hurry. He had been unhappy with Professor Wingut's latest message. As a result, he immediately booked his time off, sent a message to Tanit, and then booked his flight. He was angry, something rare for a historian. Rusa suggested they have sex. That is largely why he had to pack quickly.

Tanit waited for him at the spaceport. She ran to him like someone in a movie. She kissed him hard on the lips and reached down and squeezed his butt while they kissed. They got ice cream as they walked to his parents' penthouse condo.

The introduction to Koven's parents was awkward. But then it's always awkward when a historian introduces a romantic interest to historian parents when the romantic is not a historian. It is near universally awkward.

"Propulsion physics is a very lucrative career," said Indra in an attempt to make conversation with Tanit.

"Not as good as being a historian, but I'll get by," Tanit replied in a gross understatement of a propulsion physicist's earnings.

"And get by in style," replied Indra with a smile.

Not long after their awkward introduction, Koven and Tanit went down to the exercise class in the gym on the tenth floor of the building. Koven enjoyed a different exercise routine from the one he had at the university and while on missions. Tanit didn't enjoy it as much but was determined that it would not defeat her. She finished with a weakness in her legs. She used a remedium on herself before leaving the gym.

They showered together, but Tanit wouldn't let him touch her. "Your parents are waiting," she used as her excuse to torment him.

Over dinner, Koven gave them a detailed update on his mission. His parents were upset when they learned about Professor Herer. "Outrageous" is how Eflin described it. They were only slightly calmed by Professor Wingut's promise of escalation.

"Wingut's a man with a reputation for getting the job done," said Eflin.

"Not always by the direct path," countered Indira.

"I have confidence that he will do what he says. And I believe he has enough evidence to get Sociology to withdraw their people," said Koven.

"Maybe even enough to cost Trill his position as head of Sociology," added Indira.

The good thing about being around historians is that it tends to make Nons less emotional in their responses. Tanit was in a higher level of panic than her voice indicated.

"Isn't there any way you can refuse to go back until you have adequate help?" she asked.

"No. Refusal to report is considered a high-level disciplinary event. Long-term refusal to report is considered a resignation," replied Indira. "We had one historian in one of my teams refuse. He lost his license. I believe he teaches psychology now after re-education."

"Why did he refuse?" asked Tanit.

"A woman," replied Eflin.

There was a lull in the conversation for a moment. Then Eflin did something that historians are notorious for, the inappropriate question.

"So, have the two of you had sex yet?" he asked.

"Yes," said Tanit at the same time that Koven was saying no.

"That's good," Eflin said, ignoring Tanit's response to the question.

“Well, it’s only been VR sex so far, but it means a lot to me. And I count it,” Tanit said.

Then, in typical historian fashion, Eflin replied coldly, “We don’t.”

Being in the company of historians is like being around someone with no filter on their mouth. Oftentimes it is a time of awkward silences followed by conversation for a while before something inappropriate is said again and another awkward silence ensues. They had a long one after “we don’t.” Tanit betrayed for just a moment a look of deep hurt over the fact that Koven didn’t seem to consider VR sex to mean as much to him as it did to her. It just didn’t count.

Finally Eflin complained about the greater popularity of the History of Golf class than the class on the Mizar empire.

“I have two new Ph.D. candidates. One of them you should find interesting, dear,” Indira said to Koven.

“Why?”

“She is planning her dissertation on the Corlus Revolution. I think you should speak to her. I believe a conversation would be helpful for her. And it would give you a chance to revisit your own dissertation. It wasn’t just on Corlus. It was one of the most important revolutionary movements you covered.”

“Is she pretty?” asked Tanit. She knew enough about historians to know to ask and listen.

“Yes,” replied Eflin. “Her parents had more money for the geneticist than we did.”

Tanit tried hard not to laugh. She was the only one at the table that interpreted Eflin’s comment as calling his own son ugly.

They watched a video on challenges of teaching about periods of historical upheaval. Tanit was less than interested. She lied when asked if she enjoyed it.

That night Tanit and Koven finally had R-Sex. It lasted a long time and both reached a climax. As soon as Koven collapsed on the bed and lay beside Tanit, he turned her head to face him.

“I think you should move in with me. Not everything, if you don’t want to, but enough of your belongings so that we can have a life together without you having to go home every night. My place is bigger and you will have more space than you have at your home,” he said in rapid-fire fashion.

“Of course, my love.”

“Forty-two percent,” he said. “It doesn’t mean we will be part of the fifty-eight percent, only that it’s probable,” he added. He reminded her that historians are notoriously difficult to live with. However, they are faithful and loyal.

“I will have your DNA print put on my birth control,” she replied, and leaned over and kissed him gently on the lips.

As Koven lay beside his new roommate, he thought about all the diversions he had used to avoid R-Sex. And in the end it wasn’t what he expected. He had been worried about disappointing her with his lack of experience. But what he hadn’t expected was his own reaction. He was disappointed. Rusa had spoiled him.

There is a joke:

Q: What are the two most common words spoken after the phrase “I will need more time to prepare my answer”?

A: “Damned Historian.” Historians tell this joke among themselves with pride. Not at being annoying, but pride that when more time is needed, the historian immediately alerts the other parties. It’s kind of their way of saying “We don’t break, damn it” in the geekiest way possible.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EVEN

Eckly Bik stood in front of Allor. He was a rumped little old man with bushy eyebrows.

“Without a doubt, it is not the work of a resistance movement. The cave was burned to the point of melting the rocks inside of it,” said Bik.

Allor didn't like the news. He had known it but hoped it wasn't true.

“Not even an oil fire?” Allor asked.

“No, Allor, it wouldn't burn nearly hot enough.”

Pens drew his sword.

“Dog, you will refer to him as Lord God Allor or you will become worm food.”

“No,” said Eckly.

Allor and Canto started laughing.

“It's OK, Pens,” said Allor, “Eckly has known me since I was a young boy. He knows me better than most people.”

Pens put his sword back in the sheath. He moved back beside the throne chair and beside Allor. Canto sat on the smaller chair beside her brother.

“I've known since the day that the ship crashed that there might come a time when they returned. And in my mind I knew we would have to be prepared. But a child doesn't think as deeply as a man. Then the distractions of life took hold and I forgot about it. But they didn't forget. Now they have come to get their machines back and ensure we do not benefit from them. They exhibit all the coldness of a father to a bastard child.”

“Sir,” said Eckly, “what we need is to have a conversation with them. The man and woman that rescued Dubitam and MinKey. Before the cave exploded they left without discussion.”

“And just how do you intend for that to happen? Do we merely call out their name, which we don't know?” asked an annoyed Pens.

“You’re pretty damned close, yes,” replied Eckly. “We know what they want, don’t we?”

“To get their machines back,” replied Allor. He looked at the old man and smiled slightly. They had been adversaries for so many years that Allor was very pleased to be able to now consider this man, the man that chased him out of the Treasury building, his friend.

“Right you are, sir. So how do we attract them? Pens has already given us the answer.”

“We set a trap using their machines,” replied Canto excitedly. “I am liking this.”

“Thank you, Princess Canto. But there is a downside to my plan. The risk is that they are able to steal the technology and escape. We will need a few pieces together to have an effective trap.”

“And how do we stop them from doing that?” asked Allor.

“I would like to ask Princess Canto if she would be willing to assist me with an experiment for a few minutes. And I will need some nets, the kind used by soldiers or athletes in the Ceros arenas.”

“Pens, will you please see to getting the nets?” Allor asked his high priest. Pens responded with all the curt sharpness of an ancient European fascist from Earth 5. Tox later, the nets were brought to the throne room. Eckly connected four nets together to create one super net.

“Princess, if you would please come to the center of the room?” Eckly asked with a smile. He extended his hand to her. She took it in hers and they walked to the center of the room, like a grandfather and granddaughter. When they got to the empty center of the room, they stopped.

“If you would be so kind as to activate your protective bubble on the maximum setting for this demonstration.”

Eckly stepped away from her. He took a coin from his pocket and tossed it at her. It hit the protective shell and the outline became visible for a moment.

“Good,” he said as he walked over to the nets. “Forgive me, my dear.”

Then he threw the large net over Canto. It stopped when it hit the protective shell from her PPS. Eckly turned to the two guards standing at the door of the throne room and motioned for them to come to his assistance. They didn't move until Allor nodded in agreement.

"Help me hold the nets down. Hold them against the floor."

One of the soldiers got down on his hands and knees and held down a corner of the net. The other stood on another corner. Eckly held down another corner. Pens came down from beside the throne to help with the final corner.

"Princess Canto, would you please try to escape?" requested Eckly.

Canto tried to force her way past the nets but failed. She ran hard against it but it wouldn't let her PPS shell through the netting.

"Eckly," said Allor, "I consider myself lucky that you didn't catch me all those times," he said with a smile.

"So do I, sir. So do I," Eckly replied with a smile and a wink. Pens frowned.

"What do we do now?" said Canto as she sat down within her shell and waited for them to remove the net.

"If you agree, I would like to work with Pens, Dubitam, and MinKey to rig a trap. I've seen large formidable traps sprung from the slightest movement of a small item, like the bracelet you use for talking across great distances. I believe that we can rig an overhead net with large ship anchors in each corner. They move the machine and the anchors fall, trapping them under the net."

"I like it. Old men are only slow in their walk, not in their minds," said Allor.

"Thank you, sir. May I have my leave to go discuss the design with Dubitam and MinKey? I believe MinKey to be particularly good at understanding things," asked Eckly.

"By all means. When can you give me a working trap?"

"We will design it today, build it tomorrow, and should have it ready for testing tomorrow. I will ask Pens to assist me in selecting the best location for the trap.

Someplace that seems natural for the machines to be, not a place that screams the word *TRAP*.”

“Make it happen, my friend,” said Allor. Pens cringed, and it was visible to Canto.

“Thank you, sir.”

The announcer came into the throne room.

“Lord God Allor, you have a visitor. An ambassador from the Kingdom of Rom,” he said with a bow.

A woman walked into the room. Allor recognized her red hair. It was Ova, the sister of the King of Rom.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“I am Ova, sister of Rom II, of the Kingdom of Rom,” the woman with the strawberry-red hair, brown eyes, and freckles said with a slight bow. She seemed friendly and happy, yet her hand remained on her sword.

“Welcome, Rom Princess,” said Allor. He got up from his chair and walked down the three steps to her. He smiled at her. “I’ve long believed that an alliance between us is mutually beneficial.”

“Then we have grounds for agreement. I have been sent to invite you to a summit with my brother at the border between our two lands so that our alliance can be formally agreed.”

“And what do you expect to get from our alliance?” asked Allor.

“Rom II seeks to retain his kingdom and not be deposed by you or incur your wrath as was done to Pyramos.”

Allor looked at her with a slight smile.

“I like you. You are honest and speak straight.”

“And more loyal than a dog,” she added.

Allor laughed at her remark. He reached forward and put his hand out for her to take. She reached forward and put her hand in his. He turned her around.

“Let’s get something to eat. Your ride was a long one,” he said as they walked toward the banquet room.

The next day they rode to the border. They were accompanied by a contingent of soldiers and priests, along with Canto and Pens.

Rom II had red hair similar to his sister’s. He was a large, round man with a red beard who wore simple clothing without the more elaborate accents of power. He smiled the moment they entered his tent.

“Welcome, brothers and sisters,” he said with a chuckle and swept his arm towards the large table filled with food.

Allor felt comfortable with Rom. Over the next few hours he was able to begin a friendship with a man he truly liked. He even liked Rom’s advisors, especially the woman known as Hul. She was smarter than most men Allor had ever met. She reminded him of MinKey, they both having the probing mind that was fast to understand and quick to use new information.

“And for the ten percent of our annual harvests and tax receipts, we will not have our borders breached by the armies of Allor,” she said during the negotiation.

“Ten percent is not much for what you are asking,” countered Canto. She looked at Allor, who gave her the emotionless look he used when he wanted her to continue but didn’t want to betray his message to her.

“It is ten percent of the wealth created by nearly six million people. That is significant. You could not bring it all into one room. If you brought just the metals it would fill a room. Rom is known for our metals. Remember, other swords break against a Rom sword.”

“Your craftsmanship is well known. It would be very beneficial to the army of Allor to be fitted with swords from the great forgers of Rom,” replied Canto.

“For a modest price we can offer our new alliance partner a thousand swords immediately,” said Hul.

“My dear Hul,” said Ova, who was sitting beside Allor. She brushed her red hair from her face and turned and looked at Allor. She spoke as she looked at him.

“If we are going to give Allor ten percent of what we produce, then we should use the thousand swords as a means of payment for this. Would this be acceptable to you, my dear?” she asked, looking at Allor.

“Definitely,” said Canto immediately. Rom laughed.

“I must warn you,” he said with a smile, “Ova has been on your side for many revs now. Since the first time she saw you.”

Ova didn't blush, she wasn't that type. Allor was learning that she was a woman that spoke her mind, didn't suffer fools, and went about things directly at all times. What Ova lacked in subtlety she made up for in determination.

“I don't remember meeting you,” Allor said.

“You didn't,” she replied. “I came across the border in disguise to see the young healer everyone talked about. Did you know that almost half of the people you healed in Koban that day were people from Rom?”

“No, I didn't know. But it wouldn't have made any difference to me,” Allor said.

“She came back that day telling me about the man she intended to marry,” said Rom. “And she has set about clearing the path for it. Make no mistake, my sister is the more ambitious of us.”

Ova leaned over and spoke softly into Koven's ear.

“And I intend to start making our babies as soon as you will let me,” she whispered.

“It would be the most peaceful means of ensuring that you can concentrate on bringing Ceros and Niddler lands under your quick control,” said Ova.

“We will bring them under quick control, regardless of a marriage,” said Pens, lifting his chin arrogantly.

“We want to help you,” replied Hul. “You will bring them the mercy of a Rom sword.”

Ova took her sword from the sheath hung on the chair she was seated in. She put the blade on the table with a loud, proud thud.

“Again, my sister might be trying too hard,” said Rom with a smile.

“I think we both benefit from sisters that are strong,” said Allor.

“Indeed we do,” said Rom with a laugh. He raised his cup of wine. “To sisters,” he said.

“To sisters,” everyone at the table toasted.

“There is only last thing to settle,” said Allor in a strong voice. He turned to Ova. “Do you agree to marry me and become my Queen?”

“Of course,” she said, and leaned over and kissed him. It was not a polite kiss, and it was long. It was so long that Rom was laughing by the time it ended.

The next morning they left to return to the capital. Ova came out of Allor’s tent in the morning humming a childhood tune.

It wasn’t far from the midway point of their journey back when the attack began. It started with a flurry of arrows that took down the soldiers riding at the front. They fell from their horses into the soft earth of the well-used road.

“For Ceros,” they heard a voice yell.

Allor quickly leapt from his horse to Ova’s, knocking her off it. They landed on the ground with him on top of her.

“Be still and be safe,” he said to her. She watched the arrows deflect from his back and felt the strange tingling when she touched him.

Canto and Pens were attacked by archers in the trees lining the road. Pens responded with his sword and defiance.

“Come down and face me, you cowards,” he said as a volley of arrows broke and deflected as they hit his PPS shield. A moment later he was cloaked.

They heard a horn blow. And with it came dozens of men with swords.

“Hold my hand,” said Allor to Ova. “You will be invisible as long as you stay in touch with me.”

“Yes, my love,” said Ova as she grabbed his hand like a baby grabs its mother’s finger. They stood up.

“Where did they go?” yelled one of the archers in the tree.

“It is his sorcery. Keep shooting where they were, then sweep left and right of it,” came a shouted reply.

“We need to go,” said Allor as one of the arrow hit his PPS shield and the outline of it was revealed.

“There they are,” yelled a voice, and a moment later dozens of arrow began to hit the PPS shield.

“Remain calm and remain alive,” Allor said to Ova, who responded by squeezing his hand harder.

“I won’t let you go, ever,” she responded.

The arrows stopped and the swords came as men ran towards them and began striking the shield with their swords. Many of the swords broke when they struck the impenetrable barrier.

“When can we attack?” asked Ova, her sword in her free hand.

“We can’t,” said Allor as he pulled her forward and over towards the edge of the road.

“Death to Ceros,” they heard Pens yell as his sword cut off the head of one of the attackers.

“Stay shielded,” Allor yelled to him.

“No, my Lord. I must finish these Ceros scum to honor the memory of Mother Tal,” Pens yelled in reply.

“Death to Ceros,” they heard Canto yell as she too began to take heads from the attackers.

Allor and Ova moved to the side of the road. The swords swung hard but found nothing and struck the ground. Allor took Ova off the road and deep into the trees. He gave her the cloaking medallion.

“Go over there,” he said to her, pointing at some big bushes filling the void between two trees. “You will not be seen but you can be hurt, so stay in the bushes until I call for you.”

“Will you be at risk, my love?” she asked him.

“No,” he replied.

Ova took the medallion and ran towards the trees. Without it, Allor became visible, and many voices shouted when they saw him. Arrows began to strike his

PPS shield as he walked back to the road. When he jumped the drainage ditch back onto the road, he could hear the sound of Canto's voice.

"Set your shield to low. Draw them in and I will deal with them," she said.

"No. Keep your shield on," Allor said.

"Sorry, Brother," she said.

As one of the men ran towards Allor with his sword held high, his head fell from his shoulders like it was never attached to it. The man's body fell at the feet of Allor. For an instant the outline of Canto's sword became visible before disappearing again.

"Turn on your shield," Allor said again.

"This is for my mother," said Canto as she ran her sword through another attacker.

"This is for our village," she said as she killed her next.

"I am here to help you escape from this," Allor said desperately. "Let them come to me while you get away."

"This is for the man I loved," said Canto as the next man fell to the ground.

Pens climbed a tree to get to one of the archers. The yelling of the attackers covered the sound of the branches cracking under his weight. He was less than two maatars from the lead archer.

The arrow from the archer found Canto's back between her shoulder blades. It went completely through her. The tip came out the front of her body. She fell to the ground. Allor could not see his dying sister lying less than five maatars from his feet as another man broke his sword over the protective shield.

Pens could see the blood on the arrow and congratulated the archer before he cut his throat and pushed his body from the tree.

As Pens climbed down from the tree, he saw the first burst from an energy weapon. It came from across the road back in the trees. It struck the man with the sword trying to pierce Allor's shield. Then another weapon fired from a different place on the other side of the road.

“They have brought their devils with them,” yelled a voice.

Less than a tox later, the remaining attackers were running away. The site of the attack was littered with bodies of the fallen. It took Allor too long to find Canto. The fast-acting poison on the arrows had proven stronger than the Lord God Allor.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Dean Midge’s office was well adorned with books. They lined the walls of the room, except for the glass wall that permitted a view of the campus.

“Would you like something to drink?” the dean asked the three men seated at the table at the other end of the office from her desk. Orplan Midge would have preferred working on the Probability Engine with a team of mathematicians. She hated her job. And it was supposed to be a reward. Some reward.

“No thanks,” said Wingut.

“Nothing for me,” replied Longley.

“Yes, please,” replied Trill. “Pluto water if you have any. If not, then regular water.”

Dean Midge poured a glass of Pluto water into the tall, curved, asymmetrical glass. She walked back to the table and handed it to Professor Trill before sitting down.

“These charges of interference are serious,” said Dean Midge.

“I would like to point out,” Wingut started, “that there is one of us that is not required by professional code or law to be truthful.”

“Are you calling me a liar? How dare you, you overpaid, over-celebrated little pile of shit,” Trill said in anger. “I will report you to the administration for professional slander, you bastard.”

“Is this meeting being recorded?” asked Wingut.

“Yes,” replied Midge.

“Then it should be noted that my parents were legally married at the time of my birth,” replied Wingut with a triumphant look.

“Asshole,” replied Trill.

“Gentlemen, please,” said Longley, who had been silent during the walk to the meeting. He was not feeling confident of his control any longer. Professor Klept had escaped capture again.

“I apologize for how you misinterpreted my statement of fact,” said Professor Wingut. “My words could have been chosen more wisely.”

“Asshole,” Trill repeated.

“Leo,” said Dean Midge, looking at Professor Trill, “attacks on History Department agents must cease immediately. Let me be quite frank. This is a threat to your position. Do I make myself clear?”

“Orplan,” replied Trill, “I would never authorize my people to kill an agent of the History Department. Even one as useless as Koven Modi. What they are accusing me of is stupidity, and I take that as a personal insult.”

“We have a dead sociologist as evidence,” replied Wingut.

“I don’t know how one of the people in my department managed to get themselves killed in conflict with a historian. Again, I have never authorized anyone to kill, hurt, or harm a historian. Not in any way. Nor would I. Let me make it clear, I’m not stupid.”

“OK. We’re obviously not going to get progress here, so I’ll make it very clear. Leo, I want you to remove your people from Earth 7 immediately. Not tomorrow, today.”

“And what is the price of failure?” Longley asked.

“Sociology will lose any chance of a custodial planet,” Midge replied.

“You weren’t seriously considering that, were you?” asked Longley.

“Yes I was,” replied Midge. “Also, if there are any further incidents, I will reduce the budget of the Sociology Department by twenty-five percent for the next two kilorevs. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said a withered Trill.

Later that rev, Trill sent a message to his agents. It was mean and abusive. He fired both of them. He told them that they were worthless, more worthless than Modi. They were a disgrace to the Sociology Department and he could not understand how they ever achieved a Ph.D. And then he threatened to have their academic credentials and all degrees removed, a threat he could not deliver upon.

And for a few moments after he sent the message he felt better.

But with a few tox of reflection he realized that he had just sent a message that contained evidence of Trill as he truly was. It also contained threats against the academic achievements of a fellow professor. This violated numerous policies of the university and could result in a disciplinary action.

Professor Leo Trill then spent the next fifty tox creating a second message. It started with an apology for his previous message. They were not fired. Nor were they incompetent. He instructed them to take an extra ten revs of vacation immediately, adding that it would not be counted against their vacation accrual but would be paid for by him personally. After which they should report to his office for a new assignment.

And it ended with words that caused the bile to rise to his throat.

“Thank you for all your hard work.”

CHAPTER FORTY

Allor walked through Canto's quarters. He felt the loss of his sister more than that of his mother. They had grown together, learned many lessons together. He could feel the missing. He looked at the heads in jars she had lining the entry.

He called out to the guards in the hallway. "Remove these heads and bury them," he instructed the two guards.

"Yes, Lord God Allor," replied the smaller of the two.

Allor took the remedium from his robe. He cursed it for its limitations then put it back inside of his robe. He walked to the main temple. It was nothing like he intended it to be. As he approached the cusp of his dream, it had turned bad. His family was gone. And he could only think of one thing that would help him deal with his loss.

The old man came up to him on crutches.

"I broke it four hundred eighty-three revs ago. It should have healed better than it has. I tried to give it every chance. But I've got to eat, so I have to drive the wagons."

"It's OK, sir. Let's see if we can make it better," said Allor as he began to run the remedium along the length of the old man's leg.

They could see movement of his skin at the location of the broken bone. It didn't take long before the old man was standing on his own again. He did a little dance to prove it was healed.

"Let me check the rest of you," said Allor.

"It was just my leg. I'm fine otherwise."

"Then let my machine prove you right. It will only take a few tox."

"If that's what my god tells me to do, then I will," replied the old man as he sat on the bench again.

His arteries were cleaned of obstructions. A rash on an arm was cured. Then Allor got to the old man's head. The remedium took a long time, much longer than usual. It found and corrected a small tumor.

"Stop it," said the old man as Allor saw the final green indicator. The old man got up from the bench and moved away from Allor quickly.

"What was that?" he demanded.

"What was what?" asked Allor.

"That thing, it's done things in my head."

"What sort of things?" asked Allor.

"I know things now. Things I didn't know before. Things without being taught."

"Like what?" asked Allor.

"The Congress of Planets in 3417 PE (Primus Earth Years) included both economic and gender role slavery to the Prohibition on Slavery. They were subsequently included in the contact criteria. Are these things in my head true?"

"Yes, I believe they are true."

"If the things in my head are true, then there is one more thing that must also be true," said the man.

"What is that?" asked Allor.

"You are not a god," replied the old man.

"That too is true," said Allor. His words caused a murmur among the people around them. A god had just admitted to not being a god. This was a moment they would not forget.

"Then why are we told to worship you?" asked the man.

"It was easier to bring together a planet under a political and religious ruler than simply a political one," replied Allor.

"Napoleon Bonaparte would disagree with you."

"Who?" asked Allor.

"You haven't given yourself the same knowledge you gave me?"

“No, I didn’t know what it was doing until now. I knew it helped a mentally defective man become normal. But you have shown me the extent of the healing. What does it feel like?”

“I am still the same man. But I’m not. My personality is the same. But the things I know now makes clear that many of the things I was sure of are false. I wish my wife were still alive so that I could apologize to her.”

A messenger from Pens came to him.

“Pens requests your assistance in Port Newton. There is some resistance from a group of Ceros priests. They are in a cave with believers that refuse conversion,” said the woman wearing the red robe of The Expected.

“Tell Pens I am needed here,” replied Allor.

“Yes, Lord God Allor,” she said, and walked briskly away.

Since the death of Tal, Pens argued that Allor should spend less time healing and more time ruling. Allor refused to give up the only work he cherished, the only thing worth doing, the vital thing needed to progress his plan.

Allor picked up the remedium. He looked at it for a moment, then took a deep breath and held it to his head.

Do you remember when you learned the $2+2=4$? Most of us don’t. Allor felt like that, but now imagine if it were millions upon millions of facts. The flood of new information was overwhelming, and Allor put his hand out to steady himself. He knew of the attempt to blow up the English Parliament on Earth 5. He knew of the Mission of Mercy on Piksol. He had used the reader to understand as much as he could, but without a frame of reference it was difficult to assimilate the knowledge. It happened when he got to something called physics. The reader had assumed a basic understanding of the new term. Allor was missing that. But now he understood. Now he knew a term called *mass* and how it differed from weight.

When he finished, he sat down for a moment. The crowd of people waiting to be healed came closer. His guards kept them several maatars from him. Allor’s

mind was racing. And with the new knowledge came a new realization of the potential to use the remedium to accelerate progress towards meeting contact criteria.

Allor motioned for the guards to let the next person through to him. As he fixed the child's eyesight and broken fingers, he thought about threshold models of collective behaviors and the best methods of reaching the threshold. He turned off the information transfer for the child. He would only use it on adults. He handed the child a gold coin when he finished.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

“Welcome back,” said Rusa when Koven came into the bridge of the cruiser.

“Thank you. Did you miss me?” Koven asked.

“Yes,” replied Rusa. “I missed having someone to analyze.”

“Analyze?” asked Koven.

“It’s just a standard psychological profiling and use with predictive models of behavior. Nothing sinister or threatening. It is designed for me to anticipate your needs and assist you.”

“And what does your profiling tell you about me?”

“You’re a nice person. Historian awkward with some additional trauma from your early youth. I’ve reviewed your history and determined the source as the loss of your younger brother. While I am unsure of the details, I have determined that you hold yourself responsible for his death. This results in your being cautious and lacking confidence in your abilities. In an effort to avoid a similar failure, you avoid circumstances where you are responsible for others, even if it’s only for their emotional happiness.”

“Rusa,” said Koven, “please be quiet.”

“Avoidance is not the path to healing.”

“Shut up, Rusa.”

They sat quietly for a few tox while Koven reviewed the systems on the cruiser. When he had finished, he called up the holo of the latest message from Professor Wingut.

“Do you want to watch?” asked Koven.

“Watching it again might be helpful with your input.”

“You’ve already seen it?”

“I have access to all of your comms during a mission,” she replied. “I thought you knew this.”

“No,” replied Koven.

“It should have been included in my assignment briefing.”

“I didn’t read it.”

“That explains it, then.”

“Yes, it does,” replied Koven.

Koven was pleased to hear that the sociologists had been removed from Earth 7.

Rusa and Koven returned to the planet. Koven kept his eyes open for the first few moments of the journey, until the speed acted as a catalyst on his fear. Still, it was the longest he had ever watched a descent.

The palace was busier than usual. Banners were being put at the front of the temple.

“I wonder what the big occasion is?” asked Koven from the corner of the main temple as they watched a man working on a wooden scaffold as he put up large swaths of cloth.

“It appears to be a wedding is happening. And from the looks of it, I think the woman with red hair may be the bride,” replied Rusa.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

“Here,” said Allor as he put the bracelet on Ova’s wrist.

“What is this?” Ova asked him as she looked at the golden metal on her wrist.

“Touch it here,” he said, and pressed a red stone in the bracelet. “Now say my name.”

“Lord God Allor,” she replied. Nothing happened.

“No. Just Allor,” he replied.

“Allor,” she said, and a holocomm started between them. It was of Allor and it was real time. He walked away from her so she could see that it continued even over distance.

“Now we can be together always,” he said. “Now say END.”

“End,” she said, and the image disappeared.

She walked over to him and gave him a long kiss.

“This is the best present I have ever received,” she said, and kissed him on the lips again.

A woman walked over to them. She was carrying two pieces of cloth. Ova looked at them and then pointed to the red and orange plaid pattern. The woman nodded her head and left.

“There is another,” he said.

“I like gifts,” said Ova, smiling.

He put the medallion around her neck.

“It matches yours,” she said. “It is beautiful. I will cherish it forever.”

A man came to them carrying three glasses with wine in them. He stood and waited as Ova tasted each of them then chose the first one.

“And make sure we have more than enough on hand. Plan for a two-day festival and we should have enough for one day. My brother and his men drink more than most.”

“Yes, Princess Ova,” replied the man. He bowed and left.

“Put your finger on the medallion like this for a moment,” Allor said, and then he disappeared.

“Where did you go?” she asked. A moment later Allor reappeared.

“I am still here, it just made me invisible,” he said. “Try it.”

And she did. She disappeared then reappeared then disappeared again then reappeared.

“This is remarkable,” she said. Then she stopped for a minute. A look of disappointment crept upon her face.

“Yes, now you understand. I am not a god,” Allor said.

“But how did you make these things?”

“I didn’t. I found them. There was a ship from out in the stars that crashed near where I lived many years ago. I salvaged these from the wreckage.”

“But if you are not a god, then who should I worship?” she asked.

“No one. There are no gods, only things we don’t understand. To worship the unknown makes no sense. Stand very still. I have something that may help you understand.”

Allor took the remedium from his robe. He ran it over his bride. He corrected some cancerous tissue in her stomach and a weak heart valve. When he held the remedium to her head, he could see the expression on her face change as the knowledge flooded into her brain. When it was finished, Ova sat down quickly on the floor.

“I never knew,” she said over and over.

Allor sat down beside her and put his arm around her. He pulled her close to him. She leaned her head on his shoulder.

“Prisoners. Those are our ancestors.”

“I know,” he said, and hugged her tight. “The people from the stars have returned,” he said.

“And there are really no gods?” she asked him with residual disbelief.

“Only incredible machines.”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

They stood on the balcony of their quarters in the temple and looked at the river down below and the city laid out beyond it.

“We begin a long journey today, bringing Earth out into the stars,” Allor said.

“Yes. It will take us many years of hard work,” Ova replied as she looked up at Allor. “But its work we will do together, and that is almost as important to me.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“I know that the man I take as my husband still grieves for a love lost, a love destroyed. Vicious violence. But I am not jealous of this, and I don’t want to interfere with it. It shows me that my husband is a man capable of a deeper love than I can imagine. And if I am fortunate, if I am a good wife, a loyal wife, and a good companion, then if you love me just half as much as her, I will be the happiest woman on Earth.”

Allor leaned over to his bride and kissed her gently.

“Thank you for having patience with me,” he said.

“It would be hard to be cold to you, my love,” Ova replied.

The capital was swollen with people. The pilgrims were now joined with the tens of thousands come to celebrate the coronation and the wedding. Many had come to see the new ruler that had finally brought an end to religious wars.

Pens had barred horses from the capital. The streets had been cleaned and the displays of Ceros priests’ heads were taken down. Around the city Pens had stalls like those in the markets that dispensed information, food, and wine. Additionally, to mark the occasion, Pens had all new green robes made for himself, though green was definitely not his color.

There was a wheel outside of every public lavatory. It was large, it was wooden, and it had eight long push poles protruding out of it. Those who used the lavatory were expected to help push the wheel around three times, contributing to a manual flush sewerage system.

Merchants yelled out to the pilgrims trying to sell their wares or services. A man with a beautiful rug in front of him sat on a solid wooden chair. Laid out on a table next to him, he was surrounded by hundreds of human teeth he had extracted over the years. He was price haggling with a man whose left side of his face was swollen.

The ceremonies were not as elaborate as Pens had planned. In place of his two-hour coronation ceremony, Allor had agreed to a shorter event. Pens had commissioned the creation of a crown for Allor. No one placed the crown on his head. He did not kneel before anyone. The gold crown with red and yellow jewels sat on a pillow on the seat of the throne chair.

Pens spoke at length about the history of the Cult of Allor. He spoke at length about the misery, death, and horror caused by the cult of Ceros. He spoke about how Allor had told him many times that wisdom came not from how much you could hurt but from how much you could help.

Even Rom spoke, despite having consumed too much wine. He spoke about the alliance formed and sealed in marriage. Then, after losing his place or his train of thought, he laughingly sat down.

Allor crowned himself, picking up the crown and placing it on his own head. The cheers began in the temple then dissipated out along the streets. "It is done," people yelled, and started cheering. And just as quickly as he had crowned

himself, he removed the crown from his head and put it back on the pillow on the throne. They stepped forward from the throne and held up his hand for silence.

"Today, I bring you an end to war. Today, I bring you an end to slavery. Today, I bring you," and he hesitated for a couple of tix, "an end to all religion." He stopped and stood silent for a moment, looking at the crowd that seemed unsure of his meaning.

"Let me be unmistakable in this: when you see the remarkable from me, you are merely seeing technology you do not understand. For I have no god and am no god. I'm just a human like all of you, but one that possesses remarkable machines. That they came to me was an accident and my good fortune. That I can use them to return the sick to health is my reward. That I can use them to unite our people and finally be rid of the curse of the cults is the reward we all share. From today, let us live in peace with our neighbors.

"We come from the stars. The remarkable machines I use which are the reason people worship me as a god, these, too, come from the stars. Humans like us inhabit many planets beyond the sun. They have many things that can improve our lives, and they will share them with us once they are sure we are not a threat. So let us make the preparations required of us, move aside old things that divided us and caused us to hate. Let's begin the transition to a better world.

"So from this day forward, don't think of me as your God, only as your king."

Then Allor went back to his throne, moved the crown to the table just beside the chair, and sat down again.

Pens stood and walked forward to the pulpit. He motioned for Rom and Ova to stand.

"Today, King Allor takes a queen," Pens said as he moved his arm to point at Ova. "Who brings this woman to be wed?" Pens asked.

"I bring myself, priest," said Ova with a laugh. Pens was frowning.

Rom spoke quickly. "I bring her," he said. Pens nodded with the look of a man who had been slighted.

The wedding ceremony took much longer than the coronation. King Rom spoke again. Still under the influence, his speech was sometimes rousing, but mostly just long and rambling. But he ended it well by referring to Allor as his brother.

Pens, displaying his propensity for structure and authority, spoke at length about the duties of a wife to her husband and his to her. It was not an enlightened speech and used old ways of thinking of women as property. Ova could be seen staring at Allor, her face red and getting redder every time Pens added more bondage to the list.

Finally the bride and groom pledged themselves to each other. They kept their speeches brief. And when the ceremony was complete, they walked together hand in hand out to the balcony overlooking the square in front of the temple. The crowds below cheered.

The wedding banquet was extensive with two long tables, each seating nearly one hundred people. They were served by many of the people that had been cured by their new king. It was during the banquet that Allor and Ova snuck back to their quarters.

As the king and his new queen joined together as one, in another room not far away sat two blasters, a cloaking pendant, and one PPS. And standing just around the corner from the room, cloaked and quiet, were two guards.

And as the king pulled his queen up on top of him, Koven entered the room with Rusa.

"This will make a good haul," said Rusa. "But I wonder why there are two weapons but not two pendants or two PPS."

"I don't know either, but we're not going to be here long enough for it to matter," replied Koven.

He was wrong.

When they picked up the tech, the ship anchors fell from the ceiling with the nets trapping them. The noise was loud, and the floor shook. When a very annoyed Koven switched off his PPS in order to use one of the recovered blasters to cut through the net, the two cloaked guards struck them with clubs. Koven was knocked unconscious and Rusa received a significant jolt to her head, which contained her central command center.

As the king watched his queen collapse on him, her body still jerking with her ecstasy, a damage subroutine began to run inside of Rusa's central command center. And as the program was loading into memory, a satellite rounded the horizon and came within direct communication with Rusa's central processor.

Two of the most important questions ever asked are "What time is it?" and "What is the date?" And today was no different. So as the satellite came in contact with Rusa's central processor, it recognized her electronic handshake and searched for items of interest to her. And it found a most urgent patch to her AI learning algorithms. And with the efficiency of a computer, it sent notice to Rusa's central processor that it did indeed have important content for her and it would begin to transmit it immediately.

And as the king rolled his queen onto her stomach and she giggled and made a joke about not being able to make any future kings that way, the satellite began sending its significant upgrade to Rusa. And one of the first things done in a lot of upgrades, this one included, was a synchronization with the clocks back on Centrum Kath. Remember, it's a most important question, and there are numerous logs that are kept of these sort of events. And in order to synch the clocks, it becomes necessary for the central processor being upgraded to surrender its time values and return to the values of 00:00:00:00:00:00 before accepting the upgrade. And Rusa's processor performed this beautifully.

Regrettably, one of the first lines of code executed for the damage assessment subroutine was a simple command written millions of times: request

the time from the CPU and write it to the damage log that is opened to write the damage assessment to file. But in this case, instead of getting the correct values, Rusa's processor returned the value 00:00:00:00:00:00. But that was not a value that was acceptable to the damage subroutine.

As a result of this conflict, Rusa's processor showed an error: please enter valid time. Since a time value greater than zero had not been entered, the damage subroutine concluded incorrectly that there was significant damage to the processor. In order to minimize the damage and to prevent any possible energy leaks from the thermal batteries, it shut down all Rusa's functions until a value greater than zero was entered for that most important question.

Until then, Rusa would remain motionless, lifeless and of no bloody use at all.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

The room was large and had large steel rings one hundred centimeters from the floor. Four barred windows high up in the wall let the light into the room. It was better than the small holding cell he had been in. That small room with two wooden buckets smelled like piss. The odor of this room was determined by one of the guards. His body odor would linger in any room he entered long after he left.

“No,” said Dubitam. “I don’t trust you.”

“I’m a historian, I don’t lie,” Koven said. “It is required by professional qualifications and also by law.” Koven sat at a table. His arms and legs were chained to a ring built in the floor beside the table.

“There is some way you intend to trick us,” the scientist replied. Dubitam looked at MinKey, who shrugged her indecision.

“And you are from Central Kath?” asked MinKey.

“Yes. How many info dumps have you performed?” asked Koven.

“Why?” asked MinKey.

“It is data and could be useful in calculations for decision models,” he replied.

“Was there really a near extinction event for the known universe?” asked Dubitam. “Really?”

“Yes. I understand the effect the info transfer is having on you. However, asking for confirmation of something that you already know to be true, well, perhaps it’s not your best line of inquiry.”

“Are you being a smart-ass?” asked MinKey.

“Yes, a little bit,” replied Koven.

“And our ancestors were criminals,” said Dubitam.

“You should consider the specific crimes. It was at the end of the economic period. Many of those sent here were mostly guilty of being poor. The fuel for many desperate acts is often found in an empty stomach,” replied Koven.

Dubitam picked up the reader from the table.

“And recombination at an atomic level is beginning to actually happen?”

Dubitam asked.

“Yes.”

“The alchemist dream,” MinKey added.

“Yes. But it is possible that all needs can finally be met. It’s mostly a question of scale at this point.”

“Scale?” asked MinKey.

“Right now, it is in a huge device with large energy needs. Pratman’s Device Evolution Law is just beginning. Once it is reduced to the size of a remedium and available to all, then we will have something remarkable.”

“What are the weapons systems on your cruiser?”

“There are no weapons systems for the cruiser, only personal weapons.”

“What is the range of the ship?” asked MinKey.

“Range is obsolete. It will go anywhere. Where is Rusa?”

“Your android?” asked MinKey. “She has a name?”

“Yes. Where is she?”

“She’s broken. I tried to find a reset button, but there isn’t one,” replied Dubitam.

“Broken?”

“No response. Dead eyes. Nobody home. Kaput,” replied Dubitam. Koven looked at MinKey, who nodded her agreement.

“Have you used the remedium on her?”

“No. I didn’t think of that,” said MinKey, and she leaned forward slightly. Her arm knocked a glass, and her fast hands stabilized it.

“Why does she have a name?” asked MinKey.

“You have a name,” replied Koven.

“But I am alive,” replied MinKey.

“If you forget the traditional definition, perhaps she is alive. If you ask her, she will tell you that she thinks she is alive.”

“Then she is immortal,” said Dubitam.

“Potentially, yes. But practically, it’s not very likely. She sits on an evolutionary process just like us.”

“Why 1,138,731?” asked MinKey. “It makes no sense to me.”

“It’s a number,” said Koven. “But consider that after a million revs even the strongest survival instinct begins to fade.”

“But no one gives up immortality,” replied MinKey, pointing at the man in chains.

“Yet we do,” replied Koven.

“Why?” MinKey asked.

“There are quite a lot of theories. There have been a lot of studies on it.”

“And?”

“No agreement. I am not qualified to suggest a preferred theory. Life is precious, yet every human eventually chooses to give it up. Even Emilio Dure gave up at three million revs. And at two million he boasted that he would go on forever. Yet he gave up.”

“I will surpass Emilio Dure,” said Dubitam.

“You have to give it all back,” said Koven.

“No we don’t. No way. I give it back, I get old, I die. Why would I ever give it back?” said Dubitam. He frowned as he sat across from Koven.

“You do not operate from a position of strength,” Koven said.

Dubitam laughed. “You talk like we are the captives.”

“Explain that,” MinKey said.

“Quarantine. No contact and definitely no tech transfers. A rating is subject to appeal for all Primitive 1 planets. You’re Primitive 3.”

“But we can adapt quickly,” replied MinKey.

“You’re still carnivores,” replied Koven.

“And you’re a jerk,” said MinKey.

“I am a historian.”

“So tell me, historian, when was the last time you lied?”

“The day before I got my license. I told over two hundred lies. Everything that was, wasn’t, according to my lips. It was my last day of freedom, the last day of blended existence. Before I lost the luxury of opinions on everything. And conviction. How I do miss my being convinced of something. But convictions die in the historian.”

“Is that why no historian has ever lived a million revs?” asked MinKey.

“While I am not an expert on that topic, your reasoning seems good.”

“Why give it up? Why become something that will kill you? Or if not kill you, then make you give up your life exhausted earlier than everyone else? I don’t get it. It should be the one job that everyone would hate. Why become a historian?”

“To do something that leaves a mark.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

//Repair/Upgrade 1.003847 Status:

//Please enter date and time:

//Date value not valid

//Please enter date and time

//Date value not valid

//Please enter date and time

//Date value not valid

//Please enter date and time

//Date value not valid

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

“Hope you are doing well,” said Professor Wingut in his message. He fidgeted as he spoke.

Reminders were not the kind of message a historian likes, and sending one to another historian was almost never done.

“Just wanted to see how you are coming on the preliminary report. If there is an early draft of it, I want to read it. Let me help you make a report that will be given the support it needs. We need to send it out at least a day before the meeting. Anyway, that’s all. Please give my regards to your parents.”

The message was delivered to the device. Logs showed a successful handshake. And there the message sat, unread. At the end of his workday, Wingut began his end-of-day checks. Task list, reminders, big ideas, little ideas, comms. When he got to the comms, he noticed that his message had sat unopened.

Reminders are not the kind of message a historian likes to send, and upgrading one from a reminder to an IMPORTANT reminder is something almost never done, and one historian doing this to another has happened less frequently than Nash’s Comet. So it was with much reluctance that Wingut upgraded the message. He thought about the noticeable way the communicator would flash red when the message upgrade happened. It would also vibrate with increasing intensity. But for both of these reminders to happen, the comms device would have to be in contact with the person being reminded. Koven’s device was not.

Professor Wingut had an excellent dinner. It was one of his favorite vegetables, piol, lightly battered and fried, then covered in a spicy curry sauce and served with cashew nuts on top. He had a sparkling beverage from MedWaters. The soothing beverage undid the work of the curry on his sensitive stomach. His parents had had very little money to spend with the geneticists. They were philosophers.

When he got into his pajamas later that night, just before he selected the new holocasts on the most mundane aspects of horticulture that would lull him to sleep most nights, he decided to call a tech.

“Hello, this is Adam. How can I help you, Professor Wingut? It is an honor to speak with you, sir.”

“Adam, I’ve got an overdue historian,” Wingut replied.

“Sounds like a file from the Share,” Adam said, using the new term for *library*.

“Can you please confirm the location of Koven Modi on Earth 7?”

“Yes, sir, please give me a moment to look it up. Here, I’ve got it. Let me share that with you.”

A holocast started over a map of Earth 7.

“You will see, sir, that this is his location. Now if we zoom in we can see that his comms device is not with him. Here is the camera image from it.”

It was a room. Not large and not well furnished. The comms lay on a table along with a folded PPS.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” asked Adam.

“No. Thank you very much.”

“And sir, if I could ask you for one suggestion on how I can improve my performance?” asked Adam.

“Don’t ask that question,” said Professor Wingut.

“Thank you for your feedback,” replied Adam.

Wingut went to bed thinking about Indira. Years ago she had seemed so beautiful to him. Her exotic features and her warm smile untangled his awkward heart. Now, many revs later, he might have to tell her that her child was missing.

The next morning, right after the staff meeting, Wingut went to Longley’s office. He closed the door behind him.

“Koven Modi is missing. He’s detached from his comms on Earth 7,” said Wingut.

“Good morning to you too,” said Longley.

“Good morning. I felt I should get right to the point.”

“And how long has Modi been missing?” Longley asked.

“Overnight.”

“Just overnight?”

“But he is detached from comms,” Wingut retorted.

“Policy is clear that an agent can be considered missing only after two revs on Centrum Kath,” replied Longley.

“Is this about my support for giving planets to the Sociology Department?”

“Yes, to some extent it is, and also about your lack of loyalty,” replied Longley.

“Do you hear yourself? Lack of loyalty? Are you serious?”

“Completely,” replied Longley. “He will be considered missing only after two revs and not before then. Of course, you are allowed to assemble a rescue team in the meantime. But good luck with that. Klept has everyone available.”

Wingut stood in front of the desk in shock. A missing agent was considered a priority one event. Always, until now.

“If there is anything else you wish to discuss, then please state it, else leave. I have a busy day. Thank you,” and Longley looked up from his desk at Wingut and smiled in a plastic shrink-wrapped manner.

“I will go to Dean Midge,” Wingut said angrily.

“She is in meetings until late this afternoon. But you might try her at lunch,” said Longley, still smiling.

Wingut left Longley’s office. He smashed his fist into the door-opening console as he left. Sparks jumped under the smashed glass of the console.

When he got to the bottom of the building, he exited the large doors and walked down the sidewalk. He stared back at the building. Up in his office, he could see Longley sitting at his desk.

Wingut walked towards the Sociology building.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

The transport device had to compensate for Allor and Ova together. It wasn't a noticeable compensation, unless you examined the code that was running. The combined weight of the king and queen resulted in numerous sub-functions being run in order to adjust to the effect of additional weight on trajectory calculations. To the scientific mind, the additional two-tix delay before departure on the first journey was a telltale sign of the compensation. Fortunately, they weren't standing at an airlock and jumping out, or else they might have experienced two tix of panic when nothing happened and they merely drifted out into space for a moment.

But they had arrived at Isla, the town in the middle of the great forest. It sat alone in a sea of trees. And as you would expect, the buildings were all of wood and sturdy. Even the people looked sturdy, as they all tended towards significant muscular development because the largest amount of work was in harvesting wood from the forest. "Saws," as they were called, were the men and women that cut down the trees. They were easy to spot, as the sleeves of their shirts were short and had a zigzag pattern to the cut of the fabric at the end of the sleeves, like the pattern on the saws that they used.

"But if you are not a god, then what are you?" asked an old woman who could finally defecate without pain.

"I am a doctor," Allor replied. "And your king."

"I like you better as a king than a god. I never believed it anyway," she replied.

"Good," said Ova, and she handed the woman a gold coin.

"Come closer," said Allor. "Let me explain," he said as he raised the Remedium to the old woman's head. It took a couple of tox before it was complete.

“Did we really come from the stars?” she asked him as she backed away from him, slightly frightened.

“A wise man once told me that asking for confirmation of things that I already know to be true is not my best line of questioning. Yes, we come from the stars.”

“And to think I have held my breath for over a thousand times. And for what? Nothing. Absolutely nothing,” the old woman said with disgust.

“You did it for reasons that you thought were good at the time,” replied Allor.

“I was a damned fool,” said the old woman.

“I was too,” said Ova. “I thought that the Cult of Niddler might be for me when I was young. I loved the pillows in their temples.”

“What can I do to help?” asked the old woman.

“Lead by example,” said Allor. “Help others.”

“I will,” said the old woman. She smiled at Allor and bowed to the king and queen before leaving back into the crowd that surrounded them.

They were treating a child that had been blind since birth. Ova was using the remedium for the first time. Deep in the crowd of hundreds surrounding them came a scream. It was followed a moment later by another one, then another. Allor responded by grabbing Ova’s hand and turning the shield to the high setting. He wasn’t ever completely certain it would work with two people inside of it, but he wasn’t going to let his new bride be at risk.

They held hands and pushed their way through the crowd until they found the round void space around the man with the long blade in his hand. At his feet were two people, one dead, another dying.

“Put down the sword,” Ova demanded.

The tall man with strong muscular arms responded by rushing towards them and bringing the sword down hard against the protective shell. His sword broke. He turned and ran away. He had gotten no more than maybe ten maatars from them when an arrow arrived at the base of his skull. It came out at his throat and

he fell to the ground dead. From high up in one of the trees a man waved down to them.

“The high priest ordered me to follow you and report back to him,” yelled the man in the tree.

“Then come down and tell me what you will report,” replied Allor.

“Shall I kill him?” asked Ova quietly.

“No,” replied Allor. “But it’s good to know that we are being watched.”

“We should kill him,” replied Ova.

“No, my darling. You are nothing if not loyal,” said Allor. He put his arm around her waist as he dialed the PPS back to the minimum setting.

“Loyal as a mother swan, but more deadly,” she replied with a smile.

About fifty tox later a man brought his wife forward. She didn’t want to come with him and struggled against his grip. The large man was more than a match for his diminutive wife that he held in a bear hug as he approached Allor and Ova.

“Put her down,” said Ova in an annoyed voice.

“She is sick. Please heal her,” said the man with the big beard and large arms.

“No, I’m not sick. I’m just sick of you,” replied the small, pretty woman behind a dirty face.

“Then prove it to your queen. Let my machine show your good health. Do it for me, your queen. Or if you like, think of it like doing a favor for a friend.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the woman said, and she moved forward to stand in front of Ova.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” said the man.

“Is he your husband?” Ova asked the woman as she knelt down and began to scan the woman from her feet upwards. She looked over at Allor, who was helping a man with a shrunken arm.

“Yes. He took me from my father as soon as I became a woman,” said the woman.

Ova watched as the corns on the woman’s feet disappeared, then a chipped ankle bone as it reconstructed.

“She was a good wife, at first,” complained the man. “Now she hates me.”

“You killed the man I loved,” said the woman with a mean tone.

“You love another?” Ova asked.

“This monster’s brother,” she replied. “We’ve been in love since we were children. But my father traded me to the monster instead. I’m worth one square kilomaatar of prime forest.”

“I overpaid,” said the man.

“I am not a cow or a sheep or a horse. I am not for sale.”

“If I’d paid nothing, I would have still overpaid for you,” said the man. “My life is worse for you.”

“And mine for you. I wish you a long, slow, painful death for killing Apo.”

“Heal her,” pleaded the man. “I’ve never had a wife. I’ve only had three years of constant anger and humiliation at her hands.”

“Why are you still together?” asked Ova.

“Marriage is for life,” replied the man. He was about to add to this then realized he was going speak about Ceros law. Instead, he fell silent.

“Maybe it should not be,” said Ova.

“Nothing would make me happier,” said the man.

“You couldn’t measure my delight to be rid of you,” said the woman.

Ova watched the remedium correct some cancerous cells in the woman’s breasts. A moment later she began using the device on the woman’s head. The process was slow, and the progress bar for information transfer indicated as much.

“What is this?” asked the woman. “What is this?” she repeated. “What is happening to me?” she asked anxiously.

“Knowledge. Join me in knowing,” said Ova.

“I don’t understand. How?” asked the woman.

“Technology from the stars,” replied Ova.

When the scan was complete, the woman insisted that her husband also be scanned. It took a little longer to complete the scan on the husband. When it was done, he was silent for a few moments before he finally spoke.

“I’m sorry,” replied the husband, looking at his wife. “I should never have bought you. Or killed Apo. If you leave, you can take whatever you want. Or I will give you half of my land and build a house for you to live in.”

“And I am sorry,” said the wife. “I should have run away with Apo when he asked. I should not have made him try to murder you.”

“Is it true that we come from the stars?” asked the man.

“Yes,” said Ova. “It makes much more sense than the fables of our mothers and fathers.”

The large man looked down at the small, pretty woman.

“We have much to talk about,” he said to her with a smile.

“I know,” she said. And they began to walk away. “How much land do we own? In total?” she asked.

The king and queen ate dinner that night at the home of a carpenter, a man who had built his own home and many of those in the town. His wife was nervous at first until Ova took her aside for a few minutes. She wouldn’t tell Allor what was said.

Allor told them about his mother coming to their town to look at the golden masks of Nobbs, the prize possession of the richest man in Isla. He told the elaborate and comical story of his first attempt to steal the masks. The carpenter roared with laughter at the thought of a naked man swinging a sword trying to kill a momentarily visible Allor who thought he was invisible, and all before he had discovered the protective suit’s capabilities.

When Ova and Allor left to return to the temple, their hosts were given a scan, along with one for their livestock. Eight cows, seven pigs, eight chickens, nine sheep, and two goats. And thirteen cats. The capture of the pigs offered the carpenter and his wife much delight. Their king chasing a pig would be the story of their lifetime.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

“I am not a pet,” said Koven with an annoyed tone of voice, his face painted with a scowl.

“Just enjoy the food,” said Ova as she stood on the other side of the bars that formed the door of his cell. “It is from our wedding.”

Koven picked up the plate and threw it against the wall. He couldn’t remember the last time he had been violently angry. Maybe it was when he had helped subdue the man that had accidentally killed a historian on Dulfour. He remembered punching the man several times beyond need. Now he looked at his dinner splattered against the wall of his cell.

“If you cooperate, you will find your circumstances improve. But if you continue this behavior, well, it won’t go well for you,” said Allor.

Allor pointed at the door and the guard responded by unlocking it. Koven was faced with a guard, Allor, Ova, Dubitam, and MinKey. Agent training was excellent, and there was a very high probability that Koven could win in a physical battle against them. But Koven didn’t attack his captors. He came out of the cell. Allor led them back to the larger interrogation room. Allor pointed at the table when they entered.

“Wait a tix,” he said to Koven. Then he pointed at Koven’s chains. The guard removed them.

“There, more comfortable, I hope,” said Allor, motioning for Koven to sit down at the table.

“Don’t expect me to thank you,” replied Koven.

“I don’t,” said Allor.

“You’ve fared better than the Ceros priests,” Ova said.

“Why did Punford agree to the Compromise of Accensor?” Allor asked.

“Because she had little choice,” said Koven. “She could have battled the Entol and defeated them on the day. But her history of atrocities was such that it would

have been a temporary victory only. She would have lost her last allies and would have eventually seen defeat and probably killed. She agreed to become a figurehead because she believed that it was the only way for her to survive.”

“Thank you,” said Allor. “Why were there no attendees at the funeral of Owsel the Chemist?”

“Because he was working on airborne drug delivery at the time of his death. People were afraid that he would have a final joke by intoxicating everyone at his funeral,” said Koven. “But he got them in the end, anyway No one expected him to be able to dose the entire planet’s water supply. It was a strange three days on Huff.”

“Why did Eliz dress as a soldier during her coronation?” asked Ova.

“Because she wanted everyone to know that she was first and foremost a warrior princess that was becoming a queen.”

“But she died in battle the next day,” replied Ova.

“Yes. Historians generally agree that it was not only a fitting ending for her but also that her death led to a revitalization of science under the reign of her sister. Eliz discouraged interest in things she didn’t understand. She even resisted the explanations from those who could have helped her understand them. Active ignorance is something that psychologists have never adequately explained.”

“Why geostationary orbit?”

“Shorter distance, faster comms, quicker arrive and escape, the list is pretty long. Do you want to know all of it? It will take lengthy discussion in order to ensure you understand.”

“Never mind,” said MinKey, and then she looked at Dubitam, who had a puzzled look on his face.

“Thank you,” Ova said.

“You have to give back the technology.”

“We won’t do that,” said Allor. “Especially now that we have you. You are our Rosetta Stone.”

Koven interlaced his fingers on the table.

“Do you know what happens when they wipe a memory? The victim doesn’t remember anything, not even how to speak. They are returned to the level of an infant.”

“This is what they did to our ancestors when they were put here,” said Ova.

“Yes. And it took many, many revs for the people of this planet to make the limited progress you have achieved. If you don’t return the tech, there is a significant chance that everyone on this planet will have their memories wiped again. And that starts with one major event when it happens.”

“What is that?” asked MinKey.

“Famine.”

“But we are making progress to get out of quarantine,” complained Allor.

“By using technology that you haven’t developed. This is forbidden. It is the belief of the History Department that if the planet meets the contact criteria on their own then they have the maturity to join the federation of planets. Otherwise we could have another Razole.”

“Did he really destroy that many planets? Thirty-four?”

“Yes. But he had help from some of the planets themselves. They were too trusting. He was a most agreeable person. Most people said he made them feel like an old friend. This helped him convince them that their limited defenses were unnecessary.”

“Fools,” said Ova.

“Do you know what else is foolish? Not giving back the tech. Especially when there is a shortage of habitable planets. Earth 7 could be sold to developers, like happened on Earth 4. Developers won’t buy a habitable planet with an indigenous population.”

“So they move us somewhere else,” replied Ova.

“No. They kill everyone.”

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

“He was a lottery baby,” Indira said as she squeezed Eflin’s hand in hers.

“Really?” replied Professor Wingut, sitting on the sofa in his office.

“Yes. The last one hundred revs lotto, at the very tail end of it,” Eflin said.

“We have no signal from his identification technology,” replied Wingut.

“PPS?”

“Nothing. He’s not wearing it. And his droid is offline too,” said Wingut.

“So go get him. That’s what you do. Send in a team. It’s what we did when we were agents. When are they landing?” Eflin asked.

“Every available agent is out looking for a physicist that could cause our galaxy and another to collide,” replied Wingut. “Professor Longley is not prepared to pull agents off that search to send to search for Koven.”

“He what? Would you please repeat that? Just want to make sure I heard correctly,” said Eflin with a face as calm as the eye of a hurricane.

“Longley won’t give me any agents.”

“Wrong answer,” replied Eflin.

“I know. I’m headed to 7 tomorrev. Check the last places his comms pinged from. But it’s just me and a couple of benchers that aren’t allowed down on the planet.”

“Not anymore,” replied Eflin. “You’ve got spares on board?”

“Yes.”

“See you tomorrev. And please let Longley know that I will be bringing charges against him as soon as my son is safe at home again. If my boy dies...”
Eflin didn’t finish his words.

A few minutes later, Indira was in comms with Tanit.

“What do you mean, missing? He’s on techscale or something all the time, isn’t he?”

“Only while he is wearing his PPS,” Indira replied.

“Is he dead? Are you being polite and can’t tell me that he’s dead? If this is some of your strange historian shit, I need to know,” Tanit demanded as she moved her hands constantly.

“It is not,” replied Indira. She admired the slightly chubby girl with the wide range of permitted emotions. “He is missing. We are going to look for him tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? What’s wrong with today?”

“We’re going with his mission sponsor, Professor Igna Wingut. No one is allowed within one million kilomataars of a planet in quarantine.”

“Legally,” said Tanit. “A-sector? I’ve heard it’s the shit hole of the galaxy. Dangerous.”

“It’s worse than you think.”

Indira gave Tanit the rest of the briefing and answered questions for a few tox.

Less than 200 tox later, Tanit was back in the propulsion laboratory. She took the prototype for the newest FLT cruiser, a sleek mirror-coated vessel that bent space and time and achieved speeds 106X faster than current FLT cruisers. It might have blown up seven times during testing, but Ova was certain they had fixed the problem, and the last two tests had been successful. Still, she was gripping the captain’s console very tightly with one hand as her other hand was soft and lightly gripping the joystick as the composite metal ship rocketed off the planet.

She didn’t have a plan yet, but she had an address, the Grand Temple of Allor.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Tanit arrived in orbit over Earth 7 in just under one hundred tox. She received the comms as soon as she slowed down below FLT. The message was from her team leader, Tomasco. Tomasco, the man that always flirted with her subtly. There was no flirting in his comms. He looked sympathetic in the video, but his message was clear. She had to return the Cruiser 304 within one rev or he would be forced to report it as stolen. He had also turned on sub-light tracking. In under 300 tox he would know she was within a quarantine zone. Then she would really be in deep shit.

Tanit had to read the manual on the mapping system. She was an engine woman. Navigation and mapping were a different team. Cartography systems went in long after the engines were on. After a few stumbles and some clever work with the forward camera on the ship, Tanit stood near the air lock. Her personal transport device enveloped her in its golden bubble. As she opened the outer airlock, she switched on the most vital tech she had, her shielding device. Propulsion physicists don't get weapons, and her quick search before leaving yielded nothing but cutlery. She had a packet of pudding in her pocket, along with a spork.

She dove out of the cruiser and floated softly at first. She looked down at the planet below, the huge continent and the beautiful oceans on both sides, and saw a set of islands far away from the mainland. It was very pretty. She had done similar jumps before and enjoyed the view before the acceleration kicked in.

She entered clouds and stopped in them, hovering over the temple. She waited until it was clear before softly floating down into a corner behind the stables. She looked for her image in a trough of water in front of the stable. Nothing. She moved towards the steps of the temple. In her pocket was a remedium and a toothbrush, along with her pudding and her spork. On a Primitive 3 planet, she knew that Koven would be having fits about his dental

hygiene. All historians adopt some form of obsessive compulsive behavior. Koven chose well.

Tanit's stomach rumbled, and she wished she had eaten during the flight.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

It was a modest diversion. Tanit found the late-night market as she walked towards the temple. None of the foods looked good to her. One thing looked like a potato but was soft and fleshy on the inside, more like a turnip. She turned away from the crowd, placed the nasty vegetable on the ground, and walked away from it.

Moving through the crowd was something that was not going well with Tanit. She tried hard to avoid bumping into people, but the crowd was thick. People would turn to apologize and find no one there. One woman screamed, a man swung his arm at empty air.

Finally she found something that looked and tasted like an orange. She ate six of them along with her pudding before she reached the temple. She checked the PTD settings. The cruiser coordinates were dialed in and a simple command away.

The temple was full of people. There was a man standing in front of the crowd at an altar.

“We come from the stars, brothers and sisters. We’ve been out there,” he said, pointing towards the sky. “And it’s time that we return. Allor wants us to join them again. He brings healing. But most importantly, he brings knowledge.”

There were several thousand people in the main temple. Tanit moved carefully around the edges of the crowd. But again, she bumped into people who couldn’t see her. But finally, after the last invisible apology, she reached the chambers and hallways behind the temple. She found a quiet corner and sat down. She was scared. She watched the pairs of guards standing outside of some of the rooms off the hallway in front of her.

“They can’t see me. They don’t even know I’m here,” she whispered to herself. She felt more confident for a moment. It was a moment that ended when three men walked down the hall with baskets filled to the top with human heads in glass jars filled with a clear red fluid. The heads looked terrible, the faces all contorted by the anger and hatred of battle. All except one, the smiling one.

Despite the cloaking, Tanit settled into one of the dark corners behind the columns. She chose the one with the best view of the hallway. Now it would be her waiting game. Koven had taught her a lot about waiting. It was the guards at the far end that gave her the first opportunity. They both were called into the room. When they entered, they left the door open.

Tanit didn’t waste any time. She had already taken off her shoes to be as quiet as possible. Then she sprinted as fast as she could down the hallway towards the room then through the open door.

The room was purple, everything was purple: the curtains, the cushions, and the bed covering. Inside of the room were another two guards and a man dressed in purple. Tanit quickly moved to one side of the room away from them as she noticed her breathing was heavy from running. She promised herself that she would get back on her exercise regime as soon as they were home and safe.

Dancing lessons. Despite all of the years, the distance and everything else, dancing lessons for little girls are still the standard for parenting. It was the subject of Tanit's most painful childhood memory, the humiliation of being the one tiny girl with debilitating stage fright. She stood under the lights, her body frozen in fear, all except her bladder, which chose that moment to cease cooperation with the rest of her body. And her childhood terror was based on a simple thing. She had stumbled walking up the stairs to the wooden sun on the stage filled with children. So it is little wonder that when Tanit came back to the three steps close to the door, she tripped over the first one and fell.

Even an invisible body makes a sound when it hits a sandstone floor.

"Did you hear that?" asked the man dressed in purple, and turned his head quickly towards the door.

Tanit lay motionless on the floor, carefully controlling her breathing.

"Hear what?"

"I heard something, be quiet," said the human grape.

Tanit began to hold her breath as the man looked directly at her and saw nothing. She was thinking it was going to be OK. When they looked away, she would get up and quietly take the final four steps to the door and the safety of an exit.

As she was watching and waiting for them to turn away, she heard a voice behind her, coming in the door.

"Pens, I want to discuss a few things. We need to stop referring to me as..." the man with the long black hair and black eyes didn't finish his sentence because he tripped over Tanit. He fell down all three stairs and hit hard on the

sandstone floor. The man in purple and the four guards watched as their king and former god hit face first on the floor.

Tanit didn't waste a moment. She was up on her feet and out the door as fast as she could.

"Get the remedium," she heard the man in purple yell as she left the room.

Outside in the cavernous hallway, it was quiet except for whispered conversations between the guards.

"There is an intruder," she heard the man in purple yell from the room she had just left.

At these words, all of the guards began to look around.

"They are cloaked. Invisible. Use your ears," his voice boomed out.

But by that time Tanit was back in the main temple, moving around the back of the crowd towards the front entrance. She knocked down a man in her haste to get away. The old man with the walking stick was no match for Tanit and her shoulder.

She took the last orange from her pocket when she was sitting safely back aboard the cruiser, in the sleeping quarters, sitting on the bed with her back to the wall. Now I will tell you that there were tears in her eyes. But they weren't tears of fright. Nor were they tears of concern for Koven. No. These were tears of anger. Anger at herself. Anger for thinking she could capture and succeed with a historian. Anger at her delusional mind that thought that she, she who is not that special, she who can relate best to calculations and formulas, she who has been overweight since her first boyfriend dumped her all those years ago, anger at her mind that thought that she could force a different outcome from the crowd. She threw the orange at the bulkhead.

Rescue was a lot harder than she thought it would be.

But there was still time to get the cruiser back.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

“Damn it, Sip, you are being unreasonable,” said a very red-faced Wingut.

“Not in the least. The capture of Professor Klept is the number-one priority in the entire universe. Every transit point. Planets are being monitored, more of them every day. Even his beloved Physics Department has begun to help us. They realize just how large an effect this could have on their department budgets for a very long time.” Professor Longley leaned back in his chair and looked at the man standing in front of his desk.

“You won’t let me have the benchers for the rescue and you won’t give me agents. Kittley, Amir. The department was less than half the size it is now and they sent ten agents for his rescue,” replied Wingut.

“You impertinent...” Longley hesitated. “How dare you quote historical precedence to me when we are faced with the largest crisis in departmental and galactic history since your event? I won’t stand for it.”

“Then I’m headed to Orplan’s office,” said Wingut. “You should come with me.”

“Why? I trust you to be factual,” replied Longley with a smirk.

“I want you there so that when she orders you to provide agents there will be no delay in your transferring them to my command.”

“Look at you. What? You’re going back out into the field? You? You’re at least twenty kilos past the limit for a field agent. Look at you. Look at me. We’re all fat. Your probability of surviving is reduced when you are out of shape.”

“Give me the agents,” Wingut yelled at Longley.

“No,” Longley yelled back at him, then chuckled disrespectfully.

Wingut turned to leave.

“And I won’t come with you to see Dean Midge. Go it alone. And I’m taking the rest of the day off, in seclusion. Good luck. Maybe next time you will think twice before you become a traitor to the aims of the department. Judas.”

As he walked past the bookcase, Wingut noticed a copy of *Kinderpop* by Dieter Spanglund. He threw it at Longley as hard as he could. But anger made the throw a wild one and it hit the window and smashed it. The cool outside air rushed into the room.

Longley yelled at Wingut as he walked away. “I could have you brought up on assault charges!”

“And I could kill you,” Wingut muttered to himself.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

“Time to wake up,” said Allor, standing in the doorway of Koven’s cell.

“I’m awake,” replied Koven in an unfriendly tone.

“Then get your ass up,” said Ova, who was standing behind Koven. “Can’t sleep all day. Not when your king needs you.”

“My king? You are making fundamental mistakes,” replied Koven.

“And you are making one that could cost you your head,” replied Ova with her hand on her sword.

“Now, now, my love,” replied Allor. “Our guest is just taking time to appreciate his circumstances.” Allor looked at one of the guards behind him and nodded. The man entered the cell with his sword drawn.

“Let’s go,” said the guard, pointing the tip of his sword at Koven’s face.

They took Koven to a larger room. Waiting for them were Dubitam and MinKey. As soon as they entered the room, Dubitam started with the questions.

“How many people will your spaceship accommodate?”

“Let him at least take a seat first,” said Allor with a smile.

“Five,” replied Koven as he moved over to the table and sat down.

“But there is space for more?” asked MinKey.

“Yes. But it is outfitted for five people. Life support, food, sleeping accommodation. Five.”

“Why five?” asked MinKey.

“Crisis votes,” replied Koven. “Even numbers don’t work.”

“So the hierarchal model is abandoned?” asked MinKey.

“No. It was never in place. Each have their function, and some are better at making certain decisions. However, in instances of life-or-death choices, we prefer to be part of the decision.”

“The Molliere Perspective?” asked MinKey.

“Yes. Well understood. Congratulations,” replied Koven. He looked at MinKey with a newfound respect. She understood the information recently given to her, at more than merely a factual nature. She was able to draw knowledge from the information and use it to understand other areas. Most people didn’t, or it took an exceptionally long time, unless prompted.

“How do you get back and forth from your vessel?” asked Dubitam.

“PTD,” replied Koven.

“I knew it,” said Dubitam enthusiastically.

“It won’t protect from deep space, but the bubble contains enough oxygen and protection to get to a space shuttle airlock with a significant safety margin.”

“How do you set the location of your spaceship?”

“No,” replied Koven angrily. “I’m not going to help you.”

“Get us some food,” said Allor to one of the guards. The man stood stiffly for a moment then left. Pens came into the room. He was wearing his purple cape and left a man and a woman at the door when he entered.

“It will be a long night,” said Pens, and he pointed at Koven.

“Now let’s not go that way,” said Allor. “That ends with a dead body and only a little knowledge.”

“We don’t need him. We have the book. We can take his head without fear,” replied Pens. He smiled and wagged his finger at Koven. “And I will be the one to do it.”

“No you won’t,” replied MinKey for the first time forcefully.

“Why not, bitch?” replied Pens with an annoyed tone.

“Because I have read the manual for the personal transport device three times and I still don’t understand how it works. And I won’t until I have the opportunity to discuss it with someone who uses it all the time. And that’s just the personal transport device. Then there is the entire Cultural Revolution. I have no idea what was going on. Sure, I know the events and the dates and the actors. But I just don’t get it. It makes no sense to me. Then there’s the features of the remedium. I understand about ninety percent of it. But the chemical rejuvenation of cells is the part I don’t understand. But I think it’s important.”

“It is,” replied Koven. “It’s how we live for as long as we want.”

“Forever,” replied MinKey.

“In theory, yes.”

“Three million?” asked MinKey.

“As an approximation? Yes,” replied Koven.

“I don’t understand,” replied MinKey.

“Sometimes I’m not sure if I understand it,” replied Koven.

“What are you two talking about?” Pens demanded to know.

“When given eternal life, humans willingly give it up after three million revs,” said MinKey.

“That’s stupid. Impossible. It’s the one thing I’ll never give up,” replied Pens adamantly.

“Yet everyone does,” replied Koven.

“They’re stupid.”

“Can we please get back to the spaceship orbiting the planet?” asked Dubitam. “We could escape to the stars. And not tomorrow. Today.”

“I think it would be better if we worked to meet the contact criteria,” said Allor.

“You can’t meet it by using our technology,” replied Koven. “I was serious about them wiping your memory.”

“You’re lying,” replied Pens.

Allor started laughing. Then Ova joined in. Finally Koven joined.

“OK. So he might not be lying,” admitted Pens. “But there has to be a way around this. He knows it and isn’t telling us.”

“The only way around this is if you return all of the technology before the rescue team comes looking for me.”

“Rescue team?” asked Ova.

Koven didn’t respond.

“When will they arrive?” asked Ova.

“I don’t know. ‘Soon’ would be a high-probability guess. Within the next rev or two. Sooner, I hope.”

“What, you don’t like our hospitality?” asked Ova.

“Being held prisoner? No, I don’t. I have a family, a life, a girlfriend. I have a teaching module I need to finish.”

“Get used to it,” said Pens.

Dubitam walked over to the table and sat down across from Koven.

“Let’s make a deal,” said Dubitam. “You get us to your ship, give us flight instructions, and we let you go.”

“No.”

“You realize that we will eventually figure it out. We’ve got all the manuals in the book,” said Dubitam.

“Yes.”

“It will go better for you if you cooperate,” said Pens. Then he slapped Koven on the back of the head. “I’ll be the one to take your head. Remember that, star man.”

“Stop it,” said Allor.

“We need him to cooperate, my love,” said Ova quietly in Allor’s ear. “Perhaps what he needs is some female persuasion.”

“Do you require the comforts of a woman to be more cooperative?” Allor asked.

“No. No,” replied Koven.

“The comforts of a man, perhaps?”

“No”

The guard came into the room with food. It was a plate of fruit and vegetables. In the middle of the platter was what looked like a large roasted duck. The man put the platter on the table between Dubitam and Koven. Dubitam pulled a piece of meat from the duck and ate it.

“Please,” he said to Koven.

Koven was hungry. He wanted to grab the food and shove it into his mouth, but didn't. Instead he picked up one of the small orange vegetables and ate it politely. Allor came over to the table and pulled the leg off the duck.

At the sight of this, Koven started retching until he had returned the orange vegetable.

“What's wrong, star man?” asked Pens with a chuckle. He reached down and pulled the other leg from the duck. Again Koven responded with dry heaves.

“Stop it,” said MinKey. “He's a vegetarian,” she said loudly.

“So what? He's just weak,” replied Pens. He looked at MinKey with squinted eyes.

“Check your knowledge. In a galaxy with millions of species of animals, killing any animal is considered murder,” said MinKey. She looked at Koven. “Am I right?” she asked.

Koven nodded.

“Get rid of the duck,” Allor said to the guard. The platter was taken away only to reappear a few minutes later with more vegetables and no trace of the duck.

“But it's not one of the contact criteria,” said Allor, looking at Koven for confirmation.

Koven had recovered from his stomach problems and was now trying another orange vegetable. This time he kept it down.

“No. It's just something that happens. Like the three million revs. After exposure to a vast new array of life forms, we just have a higher level of

appreciation and respect for all species. Eating them stops. How would you like it if another species found you particularly tasty?”

“I see,” replied Allor.

“But to give up duck,” replied Ova. “That is a lot.”

“I’ve never known any other way,” replied Koven. He picked up a white floral type vegetable. He bit into it. It was cauliflower. He quickly chewed and swallowed it. He didn’t take a second piece.

“How many of them are coming?” asked Pens.

“I don’t know. Usually it is at least twenty. But there have been instances of thousands. It depends on the circumstances. But when they come, they will come with significant advantage in technology and experience.”

“They will be no match for my sword,” replied Pens aggressively.

“Yes, there is your sword,” said Koven with a sigh.

“It will be me,” said Pens, pointing at Koven. “Remember that, star man.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Time to put you in a safe place,” said Allor.

Koven looked at him blankly.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

A personal protection suit remembers the last size of the person that is registered for the suit. This is convenient for those who wear one often. However, for those who have a PPS registered to them but who have for any reason not worn the suit in a while or, more precisely, kilograms ago, they will find themselves desperately pressing the command insignia five times quickly to turn on autofit before they are extruded like sausage through the suit. The solution for this problem would only require two lines of code to ensure that the autofit was in on by default. But unfortunately, it is just two lines of code, and therein lies the problem.

Its simple inelegance ensures that no one is interested in making the change. Or more precisely, making the change and putting their name on it. If it were a more complicated solution, say perhaps requiring three thousand lines of code, then there would be no shortage of people eager to take up the challenge. But just two lines? It would look very silly in performance-review sessions despite the enhancement for users.

Eflin and Indira both experienced this problem as they got dressed, and both could be heard smacking the insignia quickly and muttering obscenities.

“What do you want for your birthday?” asked Eflin as he walked up behind Indira and squeezed her tightly.

“A night alone with you,” she said as she turned around and kissed him. “And a son safe at home.”

“Yes. Let’s protect our investment,” replied Eflin.

“When was the last time you updated your weapons?” she asked him.

“Right,” he said. “Been a long time. I’ll do yours too.”

“Thanks, dear,” Indira said as she pulled her hair back and tied it behind her head.

The call from Professor Wingut was short.

“I need you both to come with me to see Dean Midge,” said the man in the video.

“But we’re almost ready to go.”

“There might be a way that we can have more than three of us on the planet.”

“How long a delay?” asked Indira as she put on one of the pantsuits she wore when teaching her classes.

“Half rev, tops.”

“What do we gain?” asked Eflin.

“Twenty or more,” replied Wingut.

Eflin looked at Indira. She shrugged.

“OK. We’ll be there as soon as possible,” replied Eflin.

Indira and Eflin arrived on Centrum Kath during afternoon classes. They made their way to Professor Wingut’s office. They heard the end-of-class tone and then the sudden rush of activity in the hallway. After a few tocs, Professor Wingut and another man came into his office.

“Indira, my dear, you are as beautiful as you were when we attended the Historical Patterns lectures.”

“Thank you,” she replied. “Now stop there before you risk your own recertification,” she said with a smile.

“And very good to see you again,” said Eflin, stepping up and shaking Wingut’s hand.

“I remember that class. Wonderful topic, terrible lecturer. Hipplop was his name,” said Eflin.

“It was, it was,” replied Wingut excitedly. “With the warm sunshine in the room and his boring old voice, I often found myself dreaming.”

“Me too,” said Eflin.

“I liked him very much. He was a very good educator. Just had a boring voice,” replied Indira.

“Please let me introduce a friend. Professor Wipley Necker. He’s from the Literature Department. “

“Good to meet you,” said Eflin, shaking the hand of the tall, slender man.

“It’s my pleasure,” replied Professor Necker.

“And mine,” said Indira, extending her hand.

“Necker will be underwriting the transportation cost of our mission.”

“Thank you. Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome,” said Professor Necker with almost a cringe as he looked at Wingut.

“It’s not as simple as you think,” replied Wingut. “I’d better let you explain it to them.”

“Right. OK. Where to start? Got it. OK. On Earth 7 there is a man named Ip. At this time he is one of the greatest living storytellers in the galaxy.”

“How do you know this? Satellites?” asked Indira.

“Yes,” replied Professor Necker.

Satellites that orbit quarantine planets are no meekly equipped little round balls. They can listen to everything and watch everything. And they do. But most often no one is interested in listening to everything, so it comes down to listening by keyword or interest area.

“He has started telling a series of stories about the collapse of the Stultus Dynasty. The dramatic plot of the stories and the word choice is remarkable. It’s lyrical, meaningful, often profound.”

“I had no idea,” replied Eflin.

“And I’m going to extract him,” said Professor Necker enthusiastically with the wild-eyed look of a child who has just been handed a loaded gun for the first time.

“But he’s in quarantine,” replied Indira.

“He’s got a dispensation. Dean Midge. She is particularly fond of the Stultus Dynasty stories,” replied Wingut. “We wrote it into the escalation procedures for Earth 7 about five hundred revs ago. He’s to be extracted and revered.”

“Revered, indeed,” said Professor Necker. “He doesn’t even know he has been translated into hundreds of dialects. He doesn’t even know we exist. The most celebrated person in literature and he doesn’t even know any of it.”

“But for right now we have other more mundane aspects to consider,” replied Wingut.

“Such as?” asked Indira.

“Minton Mining.”

“What about them?” asked Eflin.

“They managed to knock the asteroid belt from its usual position in the Earth 7 solar system. We can’t rely on the maps until it is re-charted.”

“So how do we get through it?” asked Indira.

“We don’t,” replied Wingut. “We come underneath it. Use our eyes to navigate the last gap.”

“Is it dangerous?” asked Professor Necker.

“Not if we are careful,” replied Wingut.

There was a knock at the door of Wingut’s office. They all turned to see Professor Trill standing in the doorway.

“What’s he doing here?” Eflin asked in a less-than-polite tone.

“He’s got the people,” replied Wingut.

“But they aren’t historians. They haven’t been through our training,” replied Eflin.

“I think you will be surprised,” said Trill with a smug look of self-confidence.

“Is this some sort of departmental rivalry?” asked Professor Necker.

“Yes,” replied Indira.

“We have one too. It’s with the Chemistry Department.”

“Really?” asked Trill. “Please tell me about it.”

“Yes. Ever since they stopped letting us edit their papers for them. All because Professor Knotmead revised one of them with a very intricate rhyming scheme. It was brilliant. The rhythm and pacing was superb. Still, they have never forgiven us for that. Those bastards.”

“Those bastards,” Trill repeated.

“OK. Let’s go see Dean Midge,” said Wingut.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Tanit walked into Tomasco's office expecting to be placed under arrest. She wasn't.

"Glad you came to your senses," said Tomasco.

"Eventually I do the right thing," she replied.

"Tracking indicated you were orbiting a quarantined planet. I assume that it was something to do with the historian you are dating," he said with a disappointed tone.

"Yes."

"Well, I've wiped the tracking records and will move the cruiser to a maintenance bay and get the rest of the evidence deleted. A major service event should do it."

Just over two hundred revs ago Tomasco and Tanit got drunk together at the Einstein Awards ceremony. It was during one of the most boring award acceptance speeches in recent history that Tomasco leaned over to Tanit and whispered in her ear. It was a simple message: "I LOVE YOU."

Since that time Tanit had been very cautious in her interactions with Tomasco, despite his very profuse apology the next day. Now she kept it all business. No jokes. No smiles. Nothing except work. And Tomasco, being polite and very embarrassed, let her dictate the new terms of their relationship. Still, you and I both know, as do both of them, that his drunken admission was sincere.

"Thank you," said Tanit. "I'll pay for any damages."

"I'll take it for a flight tonight and let it pick up some dings and ice cones," said Tomasco.

"I don't know how I can ever repay you for this."

"Have dinner with me tonight?" he asked.

"How about tomorrow night? I really need to rest tonight."

“Wonderful,” he said with a smile.

On the walk back to her apartment, Tanit started crying.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

It was one of the smaller temples of the Cult of Ceros. It had been cleaned of bodies, but the bloodstains were still noticeable if one looked carefully. It was well built and had marble used for flooring throughout.

“What did they give you to eat?” asked one of the guards.

“Roasted vegetables and meat,” replied another of the group of ten guards with Koven in the temple.

“I got chicken and rice. It was not as good as yours,” complained the first man.

“Because they don’t like you,” replied the other man.

“Nobody likes you,” replied another man. “I certainly don’t. You think you are better than the rest of us because they gave you the knowledge with their machine.”

“OK. It’s true. I got the knowledge. But they didn’t give it to me, I took it. They were pissed at first. But it doesn’t make me any better. I want all of you to get it done too.”

“I don’t know if I want to. It won’t make me any richer,” said a man to the nodding heads of others.

“But you’re wrong. Your whole life will be richer because you will understand many things. Ask the space man here,” said the guard, pointing at Koven.

“What about it?” asked the other guard.

“I’ve never been without the knowledge, so I can’t tell you that it is better having over not having it. But I can deduce that it seems more logical to have the knowledge than not. The knowledge might prevent a catastrophic screw up.”

“Star man makes sense,” replied the guard.

“But getting this knowledge, does it make everyone an asshole?”

“It shouldn’t,” replied Koven.

“Wait a minute. I’m not an asshole,” complained the other guard. “Now that I understand things, I don’t want to go get drunk with the rest of you. It’s not healthy.”

“But its fun,” said one of the guards.

“But I know what it does to my body. It is a poison.”

“Then it is a poison that I gladly drink. If it weren’t for drink, I would have killed my brother long ago. Evil little prick.”

“I have a sister the same,” replied another guard.

“It’s drink that keeps them safe,” replied the guard with the evil brother.

Some conversations don’t change over time or space.

“Enough,” said the oldest man in the group. He looked at Koven.

“And you. You’re to be protected. That’s all. So shut up and remember you are the prisoner here.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

Let’s look at the history of a historian. Specifically, Dean Midge. It was a long time ago when she lost her brother, Aldus. He too was a historian just like his sister and their parents. While she was off building version 3.0 of the probability engine locked into her introverted solitude of thoughts about criterion weighting, her brother was locked in a battle with the Shuns, an angry species from Ansop Lesser that believed that the universe was made by a turtle or perhaps pulled in a cart behind a turtle or some other such nonsense.

Normally this sort of thing can easily be treated by evidence. Knowledge is inoculation. However, the Shun religious doctrine required proselytizing and conversion, by force if necessary. You can see that this sort of thing is headed

for a rather significant ending. And it was this that caused Aldus Midge to perish at the Battle of Inske (the capital city of Ansop Lesser.)

Since that time, psychologists have determined that the cause of the problem was the name of the planet, Ansop Lesser. Specifically, the “Lesser” part of the name. Apparently, the male of the species found it to be processed subconsciously as a humiliation, implying the male sexual organ of this species, which had a striking resemblance to a fruit fly, was inadequate for the task. Biologists proved that their half-inch genitalia was sufficient for the task of reproduction. Just not enough for their partners to enjoy it very much.

But after the full report was implemented, Ansop Lesser was renamed to Ansop Huge and everything returned to normal.

Dean Midge was devastated when Aldus died. They had never been close and wouldn't ever be. Her parents had always asked Midge to look after her brother. But she didn't. Never once called him. Never once invited him over for dinner. None of it. So when he died, it hit her harder than she imagined. The deeply introverted Midge did what most introverts would do: hide in her work.

If you ever want to see the largest collection of introverts in your life, stop by any history department. It's possible for extroverts to get through, but it's a small minority. But the big names in history? Mostly extroverts. Self-promoting jerks.

Dean Midge and Prof. Longley were in Longley's office with the door closed. In the waiting area just outside of the office sat Wingut, Indira, Eflin, Trill, and Necker.

They all spent fifty tox in a meeting together where Wingut laid out the facts regarding the History Department's failure to protect one of its own. Prof. Longley sat with his arms folded across his chest and a very angry look on his face. This was dangerous, as every historian knew that losing your temper increased the probability of saying something that could cost them their license by 22 percent. When Dean Midge asked Prof. Longley to confirm that he agreed with the facts,

he hesitated for a long time, almost spoke, thought better of it, and finally nodded his agreement.

Then he began his rebuttal. It could best be summarized as a rather vicious attack against the personality of Professors Wingut and Trill.

Longley was no slouch when it came to argument. He began with a series of questions for Wingut of a personal nature. During this he established that Wingut had long been attracted to Indira, while at university and still to this day. As he answered Longley's questions truthfully, with the object of his desires sitting less than one maatar from him, Wingut wished he could find a hole in the ground and crawl in.

Finally Dean Midge cut off Longley in his questioning by saying Wingut's motivations were irrelevant and that the ad homonym attack could easily be brought up at Longley's next certification as breach of the truth by shading.

Now they sat outside the office as Dean Midge and Longley had a private word. They occasionally heard Prof. Longley raise his voice. It all ended abruptly with the sound of breaking glass. Longley's office door flew open and he stormed out. "Screw you," he said as he passed Wingut. Dean Midge appeared in the doorway.

"Are you okay?" asked Wingut.

"Yes. The only casualty was the Herodotus award."

"Are we good to go?" Asked Prof. Trill.

Dean Midge nodded. Professor Trill started grinning. He raised his communication bracelet near his mouth.

"Muncie, we're a go. Get them all in the cruiser." Prof. Trill was silent for a moment before speaking again.

"Yes, it's ours. Thank you, Muncie, it's kind of you to say so."

“Them all” turned out to be twenty-five sociologists fully trained in combat and weapons. They were a rowdy bunch of men and women. Trill smiled as they cheered him and shook his hand when they boarded the cruiser.

“The curse is finally lifted,” said one of them.

“Yes, it is,” agreed Trill.

“Who are these old geezers?” asked one of the sociologists. His question was met with a smart slap to the back of his head.

“Ow. Why did you do that?”

“Lack of respect,” replied Trill. Then Trill introduced everyone.

The captain of the cruiser was a man named Erlog.

“Get us out of here,” said Trill.

“Yes, sir,” replied Erlog.

“Are the satellites on board?” asked Trill.

“Yes, sir.”

Wiping the memory of an entire planet can be done quickly with satellites purposely built for the task.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

Professor Trill was standing in the bridge of the cruiser. Some might say he was posing, as if a painter was putting onto canvas a historic moment of significance. His chin was elevated. It was a historic moment, mostly in his mind. He was the one that finally turned it around. He moved his comms bracelet to his mouth.

“Ladies and gentlemen. I’ll give it to you as simply as I can. You are not to kill the natives. We retrieve the historian and the writer. We take all of the tech and then we leave. If we can’t take it, we destroy it. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” came a chorus of voices of young men and women.

“Allor the magnificent, or whatever they call him. He’s the key. We capture the king and control the entire board.”

“Remember when we used to do that on assignments?” said Eflin with a smile to Indira.

“My stomach would always get in knots,” replied Wingut.

“Really? Mine too,” replied Eflin.

“My first mission was delayed for almost twenty tox because I was in the toilet with cramps,” said Wingut.

“I threw up the first time I killed,” said Indira. “And cried.”

“I cried too,” said Eflin.

“Once we are on the planet, I am the only person with kill authority. The *only* one, girls and boys. Do you understand me?” Trill said with a sneer.

“Sir, yes sir,” came the chorus back to Trill’s smiling face.

“Sir, should we go in shielded?” asked one of the men on the team.

“No.”

“What about the quarantine?” the man asked in reply.

“That is a wholly owned construct of the History department. Besides, we’re going to wipe them. And don’t forget we will help this planet move towards meeting contact criteria once the culling is over,” replied Trill.

Please permit me to interrupt for just a moment to point out that when the entire population wake up without any memory and in a state much like a newborn baby, well, as you can imagine, survival rates will be rather slim. 92 percent will die. Any variance is down to the curiosity of those who wake up in the farming community.

“Captain. Please have the satellite systems start scanning for unununtrium,” said Trill.

“Yes, sir,” the man with the deep voice replied.

Unununtrium is a rare metal that is not naturally occurring in the universe. However, it is included in most advanced propulsion devices, electronic books, and bacterial suppositories. It is made from the death of its parent material, unununcrium, which only lives milliseconds before collapsing into unununtrium, a material with exceptional conductive and data-storage properties as well as being exceptionally badass in its attitude towards most problems associated with ingesting dirty water. The transformation from one element to another results in a rather loud popping sound, which scientists refer to as “unununfarting.”

“Sending to your screen, sir,” replied the captain.

“I’d like to see that,” said Wingut.

“Me too,” said Indira.

“Likewise,” said Eflin.

“Give it to everyone,” said Trill in an annoyed tone. He then bent one of his legs slightly like a girl in front of a camera. “OK. We’ve got a concentration. That’s where we go.”

“Yes, sir,” replied the captain.

“Ladies and gentlemen, if you would kindly meet me at the airlock. A new era beckons,” said Trill. He stood in the doorway of the bridge in a dramatic stance.

The tricky thing about an airlock is nothing at all. One big button. Still, as he stood in front of everyone in the airlock, Professor Trill forgot the most basic thing and ran towards the control panel on the hall, smacked the button hard with the palm of his hand, and then dove out of the spaceship without having activated his personal transportation device. He immediately recognized this problem as he emerged into the upper atmosphere over Earth 7, which happens to be devoid of oxygen, a necessary component for human life.

Most people would desperately turn on their PPS and their personal transportation device. But Professor Trill is not most people. He forgot about the personal protection suit entirely and spent all of his effort in activating his personal transportation device as he floated aimlessly away from the cruiser.

Everyone else stood at the edge of the spaceship, all of them now surrounded by their protective golden bowls, and stared at an idiot floating in space. But within a few tix Professor Trill managed to set everything right and turned around and waved, and everyone smiled as his golden bubble began to descend to the planet.

"Can you believe that shit?" asked Captain Erlog.

"Yes," replied Wingut with a smile.

As they descended to the planet, Eflin pointed to the horizon and another cruiser that was making a final backup deployment of satellites from the Psychology Department.

And while you think it's been rough when you wake up with a hangover and aren't sure where you are for a moment or two, I can assure you that waking up and not knowing sweet all must be many times more horrifying. Unless, of course, there are nipples involved. They seem to make everything a little less frightening under most circumstances.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

Allor and Ova were in one of the worst parts of the former Cult of Ceros. What it didn't have in the fundamentals of life, it more than made up for with its prime resource: poverty.

Ova moved the remedium over the child's stomach. She could see it move under the skin. The large piece of metal moved like it was pulled by a magnet in the remedium. Ova removed her knife from her belt. She looked at the mother and father.

"You will need to hold her very tightly. I have to gut her in order to get it out of her."

A look of terror came to the parents' faces.

"But that will kill her," the mother said.

"Not with this," said Ova, and she held up the remedium. "It heals immediately. I just have to open her up and get it out, then this will fix her right up after it's out."

The child was not as scared as her parents.

"This will hurt," said Ova, looking at the dirty face of the girl.

"I know. But not for long, right?"

"Right," replied Ova.

"Then I won't hurt at all anymore?"

"That's right," said Ova. She looked over at Allor, who was helping an old man with a twisted leg.

"Need help?" he asked her.

"No. I think I've got it."

She moved the remedium until the metal in the child's stomach was as close to the skin as possible.

Then she stabbed the child.

CHAPTER SIXTY

The crowd in the square outside of the Temple of Allor watched the final descent into the square. They initially cheered because they believed it to be Allor. Trill thought they were glad to see him. They weren't, and by the time they had landed, many had gone from welcoming to fearful.

"Good people of Earth 7," said Professor Trill, using his comms bracelet to make his voice cast far across the crowd. "I bring you greetings from the stars," he said, and pointed into the sky.

Trill and the rest of the landing team all stood in the center of the square with about two maatars between them and the crowd.

An old man pushed his way through the crowd.

"I don't give a damned where you come from, I need you to fix my ass. It hurts really bad when I shit," said the old man. "I can't sit down for a hundred tox after. It was like when my oldest son was born. My wife had this for twenty or so revs. I've had this for hundreds. It makes me not want to live knowing that every morning I will spend a long time in pain before I can have the rest of my day."

"I'm not here to fix your problems," replied Trill. Then he stopped for a moment then started laughing. "Actually, I am, but not your ass problems, old man."

"Then why should I worship you?"

"You shouldn't. But you should listen to our suggestions on many things. We know much that can help you."

"Professor Trill," said Wingut. "I brought a remedium with me."

"Oh, great," said Trill with exasperation. Then, after a few seconds, remembering he was in command, he added, "Well, go ahead, then" which just served as a confirmation of what Wingut had already started getting ready to do.

"Sir, if you would please pull your pants down," said Wingut. "And turn a little," he added, and touched the man's hips to put him in position.

“Sir, if you would bend over please,” said Wingut. And the old man did. His ass was aimed directly in the line of sight of Professor Trill. If the old man suddenly got explosive diarrhea, Professor Trill would have been the main beneficiary, assuming preference.

“For hydrogen’s sake,” Trill yelled at Wingut. “You insolent bastard.” And this too was broadcast to the entire square.

“Oh, I feel it working. I feel it. It’s wonderful. I feel it,” yelled the old man with glee.

Wingut was smiling on the inside. When he finished fixing the old man’s hemorrhoids, an old woman walking with a cane hobbled forward.

“This is what that bastard Allor does,” said Trill. “Smug little bastard heals them and they worship him for it. Then he murders everyone in the capital city of a rival. Can’t wait to finally meet this asshole.”

The crowd started jeering at this affront to their god at his own temple. All of the landing team checked the setting of the PPSs, just in case.

“You might not have to wait long,” said Indira, and pointed into the sky at the two golden bubbles descending towards the temple. They entered via the balcony over the cliffs down to the river. It was a balcony where a succession problem had been sorted out for the earlier cult that constructed the temple. Loser bodies were left on the rocks far below as food for the vultures.

“Let’s go,” said Trill. And he bumped his PPS shield against Wingut’s shield for a moment then maintained the proper distance. Then he remembered he was the leader and moved quickly in front of the landing party.

They moved up the stairs and into the main temple. Many inside of the temple fled as they approached. Those that didn’t make it out were huddled in one of the corners, a couple of the children at the front of the crowd making threatening motions with their fists.

The curtains at the left side of the temple were pulled apart. Ova held them open as Allor walked through them holding a shiny metal cylinder over his head.

“I bring you stalemate, my new friends,” he said.

“What is that?” Trill looked at Wingut.

“The drive from a long-distance FTL freighter,” Wingut replied.

“So what? He’s missing the rest of the ship,” answered Trill.

“He is threatening to use it as a weapon,” said Eflin.

“Smart move,” said Indira. “We can’t get away fast enough.”

“Well done, young man. I’ve followed your career. Not as much as I should have. But I know your highlights.”

“Then you know about Pyramos,” said Allor, looking at Professor Trill.

“I know you are a mass murderer. One that kills a crowd and then heals the sick child. Yes, I know you as the contradiction that you are.”

“Earth 5, the Truman Decision. Lowest possible body count,” replied Allor.

“Oh my,” said Trill. “What have you been doing inside that lightweight brain of yours? Have you been filling it with things you shouldn’t know?”

“Excuse me,” said Wingut. “But perhaps your example doesn’t quite work for you. You have knowledge of the propaganda disseminated at the time. But it might not be true. I’ve never looked at it in depth. There are many better examples than the history of a planet in quarantine. But they had a few revolutions I am very familiar with. There is a new book coming out by Professors Ignor and Sleep about the Truman Decision. I’ve heard it is riveting, a real screen turner. And it’s less than a quarter of a million words long. Concise by historian standards.”

“Can we perhaps return to the problem at hand?” said Trill, rolling his eyes.

“It’s simple. You leave or you die,” replied Allor. He drummed his fingers on the cylinder and looked at the numeric display.

“But we don’t want to leave,” said Trill. “We have many things to offer you. Things far greater than a simple remedium. What does that get you?”

“Healthy people,” replied Ova.

“Oh, yes, that’s right. You two got married or something like that recently. Sorry I missed the ceremony. I glanced at the recording on the way over.”

“We won’t give the technology back,” said Allor.

“Yes you will. You just won’t know that you did,” said Trill with a laugh.

“You will die first,” replied Allor.

“Will you please stop it with the kill everyone threats. It’s simple. We want to put an embassy on Earth 7 and have one of our representatives here to help you make progress. We don’t want to take the tech back yet. So go ahead and use it all you want. We’re here to help you.”

“How do I know I can trust you? Are you a historian?” asked Ova.

“No, I am not.”

“Pity,” replied Ova.

“And what do you want in return?” asked Allor.

“The historian and a writer named...what’s his name again? Tip?”

“Ip.”

“That’s right, Ip,” replied Trill.

“Never heard of him,” replied Allor.

“Apparently he’s something very special out in the stars. Boy, is he in for a surprise,” replied Trill.

Just then, the curtains parted again. This time Pens came in wearing his purple robe. He took a couple of steps into the temple then dramatically pulled his cloak back from his robe.

“And who is this idiot?” asked Trill.

“I am Pens, High Priest of the Cult of Allor,” said Pens with his most alpha stance possible for a secretly effeminate man.

Trill looked at Wingut, then Allor. Wingut shrugged, Allor stared back with a wild look in his eyes. Then Trill made the connection.

“Wait a minute, you’re Pens, the one that had his mother murdered, what was her name?” Trill said.

Then came the loudest human voice any of them had ever heard.
“TAL. HER NAME WAS TAL,” roared Allor as he drew his sword.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

MinKey and Dubitam were standing outside of the makeshift laboratory in the basement of the temple.

“What’s so important?” Dubitam asked as MinKey walked back from the door after checking to see that they were alone.

“Listen carefully, darling,” said MinKey. “I’ve done it.”

“Done what?”

“Figured out how to get to Koven’s ship. I’ve also looked up the model and found out how to get inside. And I think I can use the onboard systems to make it take us anywhere we want. Many systems are automated.”

“No. Impossible. I tried for hours. I could never target it.”

“You looked at it too hard because you are too smart. It was a simple answer.”

“What?”

“Geostationary orbit. That’s all it was. All we had to do was calibrate it to look directly overhead. It found the ship all by itself.”

“You’re kidding,” replied Dubitam.

“No, my love,” replied MinKey.

“This is wonderful,” said a smiling Dubitam.

“Then let’s go,” she replied.

“I’ll go get Allor and Ova,” said Dubitam.

“No, darling. We go alone.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to go out into space with two people that expect me to worship them or think they are my king and queen. I want it to just be you and me, together.”

“But I can’t leave them behind. I’ve worked for him since I first had to shave.”

“It’s time for you to do a different job.”

“But he is my friend,” replied Dubitam.

“No he isn’t. It’s a hierarchal relationship. Master and slave. You’ve just become institutionalized into thinking it’s your natural place. Well, it’s not. Your natural place is beside me, out there in the stars. The Crystal Falls of Delerium. Don’t you want to go see them? Go sing in front of them?”

“Yes, I do. But I can’t just leave Allor. It would be wrong. It would be a betrayal.”

“Listen to you. Do you hear yourself? Ask yourself if he would make the same sacrifice for you. Well? Would he? NO. No way. Not in a million revs.”

“I can’t,” said Dubitam. “He is my friend. I won’t leave him behind. I just can’t.”

“Why? Why not. I’m offering you the stars and obviously myself as part of the bargain too. And you’re turning it down for what? A man that uses you. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were in love with him.”

What happened next was a long, eerie silence. In the moments of quiet, MinKey began to arrange facts in her head. Dubitam had never really shown her physical affection. He had never tried to kiss her. He had never held her hand. And they had never had sex. For all she knew, Dubitam was asexual. The light was now on.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked him angrily.

“I didn’t want to lose you,” he said.

“As a lab assistant? That’s all you cared about?”

“And as a friend.”

“Asshole.”

“I love him. I can’t help it. I tried not to.”

“You’re such a jerk. You knew how I felt about you and you didn’t tell me. I am so angry with you right now.”

“I’m sorry. I really am. And it’s not that I don’t like you. I really do. I’ve imagined what it would be like to have children with you.”

“Wait a minute, you like men,” MinKey said.

“I like both men and women. But I’m in love with only one.”

“Yeah, OK,” she said very sarcastically, “if they are going to wipe everyone’s memory, then have a nice time with that. Give me your arm,” she said.

Dubitam put his arm out.

“Not that one, the one with the comms,” MinKey said.

Dubitam put out his other arm. She pressed the comms bracelet a few times then said “copy,” “destination,” “voice identity,” “run away with MinKey.”

“That should do it,” she said.

“Do what?”

“All you have to do is say ‘run away with MinKey’ and your PTD will take you to the ship up there,” she said, and pointed up.

“I can’t leave him. I’m sorry.”

“Just in case you change your mind. I’ll wait as long as I can.”

She stepped forward and then kissed his cheek. When she stepped away from him, the golden bubble formed around her and she slowly floated away from him to the door, then she was gone. The tears in her eyes were the last thing he saw before she left.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

Neither man wore a PPS. Allor ran across the main cathedral towards the man that had killed his mother, his sword high over his head. When he was less than ten maatars from Pens, the high priest activated his cloaking and disappeared. Allor went past him swinging at empty air and crashed into the wooden pew in the front row.

“Fairness Principle,” yelled Indira. And then she did the most peculiar thing. A woman her age moved as if she were a ballerina, leaping over to Allor and shoving something into his hand. She leaned close to him and whispered to him. A moment later Allor too disappeared. After a few seconds and a scream from some of the worshipers in the corner of the church, nothing changed.

“Gentlemen,” yelled Wingut. “You have reached an impasse that will only get other people killed. If you wish to continue, then you must both agree to turn off shielding.”

“I will,” said Allor.

“I won’t,” said Pens.

“Coward,” yelled Allor.

“Stupid,” replied Pens.

“Come face me,” said Allor, and then he appeared.

“Stupid,” said Pens.

Then Pens stabbed Allor with his sword. The shape of it formed as it was covered with the blood of Allor. And with the shape of the blade came the location of the owner. As he fell forward towards Pens, he shot the blaster that Indira had given him. Pens passed into his composite molecules quickly and fell as black, red, and gray dust onto the floor.

The mechanical feet of Professor Wingut were much faster than naturally developed feet. He was beside Allor an instant after he hit the floor. The

remedium was on and he was moving it to the wound when Allor began a large seizure.

“Shit,” said Wingut as he desperately began to find the location of the worst part of the wound and heal it before Allor died. The seizure escalated and found rhythm for a moment as Allor jerked hard three times then collapsed into a motionless state.

“Shit,” said Wingut as he continued to move the remedium over the wound.

Allor lay motionless on the floor. Indira had moved quickly to Allor and was running another remedium directly over his heart.

“Shit,” yelled Wingut.

Third shits are a charm, and it was with this third shit that Allor took a deep breath at last, his first in almost twenty-five tix. Indira quit subconsciously holding her breath along with him.

“Whoa, I got a failure reading for a moment,” said Wingut, and he held up the remedium and shook it as if it might have loose parts inside.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

The standoff between Allor and Professor Trill was resolved peacefully. After the battle with Pens and his near-death experience, Allor seemed changed, disoriented. There was no more fight left in him. He looked tired.

Allor left the temple to fetch Koven. They both were back in the temple in a few tox.

Then Koven did something most unununhistorian. He ran to his mother and gave her a big hug as soon as he saw her. His father joined them too.

Allor agreed to accept an ambassador on the planet and as much staff as they felt reasonable to provide counsel and assistance.

Trill told the historians that he would not wipe the memory of the planet. They took this to be a satisfactory commitment. Not that they could do anything about it. They were now only observers on a planet sponsored by the Sociology Department. Not their responsibility anymore.

Still, Trill was kind enough to thank them for their assistance. He made a point to let them know that it was them individually that he was thanking, not the organization of the History Department, as led by Professor Longley.

It wasn't long after the agreement that Koven discovered that his cruiser had been stolen. Within a couple of tox he was able to place it at the edge of the solar system. It would be able to use FTL in a few tox. If he didn't capture its exact location and direction at the moment of FTL instantiation, finding it would be difficult.

He confirmed a few minutes later that MinKey was missing. Then he turned off his tracking device for the ship and deleted the history.

About twenty tox later they all received a message from Dean Midge. Written only. Professor Longley was retiring at the end of term to focus on writing textbooks. He also intended to complete his ten-volume series on the evolution of the manufacturing processes for making paint.

Professor Wingut got one other message from Dean Midge. She wanted to see him as soon as he returned to Centrum Kath.

When finally asked about giving an unfair advantage during the fight between Allor and Pens, Indira responded that she was a mother and that it was the right of a child to avenge the death of their mother. It was universal, and she didn't really give a damn what anyone else thought.

It was later that rev. Koven was alone in the comms room in the landing party cruiser. He was completing the stolen-item report. It was just the basic registry information. Nothing more. Fuel levels, cargo, etc. Usual stuff. And a tedious activity. But that was the low drone of life that he was performing when he heard the commands sent from Professor Trill. He couldn't believe it at first. But after a few seconds he got up and ran out of the comms room as fast as he could.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

“What’s the problem, my friend? You know, I really hope you come back to spend time with us. As friends, none of the previous animosity. I like you, Koven.”

“It’s coming. Here, put this on,” said Koven and he slapped the PPS suit onto Allor and jammed the insignia five times really quickly.

“Ouch. Tell me what’s going on.”

“He lied. He fucking lied.”

The cold wind on the balcony gusted for a moment.

“Who lied?” asked Allor.

“Trill. Look.” Koven pointed at the sky. Orange lights appeared in the sky. Tiny little dots at first.

“What is it?”

“Turn your suit on high,” he yelled.

The orange lights in the sky were getting larger.

“What is happening?” Allor demanded to know.

“Come over here,” said Koven, standing by the edge of the balcony.

“Tell me, Koven. I have a wife. She is with child.”

Koven pulled him closer to the edge. The air got colder and they could hear the rushing water far below.

“They are wiping everyone’s memory.”

“I’ve got to get Ova,” Allor pleaded.

“It will bleed through if there are two of you in there,” said Koven.

Then Koven fell on his side, and as he hit the sandstone floor he kicked out as he turned his PPS suit on high. The result was that Allor bounced violently inside of his PPS bubble several times then fell unconscious to the floor.

“They will come looking for you. I’m sorry,” Koven said as he rolled Allor off the balcony and he fell down to the river below.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

Koven was still drunk from spice wine the morning of his recertification exam. He had been drunk a lot lately. But he already knew the outcome of his recertification. He would fail. He had known it for a long time. Ever since the debriefing. He withheld information. Worse still, he lied about the missing personal protection suit. Yes, he had failed.

Failed with Tanit too. She wouldn't answer his calls. Wouldn't even read his messages. Thirty-seven of them sat unwatched in her queue.

He had spent the last fortrevs telling everyone that would listen that he was a historian that had chosen poorly. He said he hated being a historian. It was a lie. He couldn't face his own failure and shame for it. So he hated the thing he failed at. Many humans do this, not just you good people of Earth 5. It is a silly response, but it makes a lot of people feel much better and more secure about themselves, even if through illogical means. However, in highly weaponized societies, this may have advantages.

So when Koven stumbled into the testing office, hushed comments were made. Administrators were appalled that someone from such a fine family and a protégé of the new head of the History Department conducted themselves in such a manner.

One of the administrators came over to Koven and smiled. She asked if he wanted a cup of water-enriched brown caffeine liquid with a carbon sugar

compound often used to combat a hangover unsuccessfully. Instead, Koven yelled at the very pleasant woman.

“Get it over with. Give me the liberty of rest. Stop my doubler, the Koven narrative that is all lies that I run on a loop in my head. What lie could I tell in this circumstance? The madness of calculating them all is finally over.”

The administrator recognized the telltale signs of a historian in trouble and her smile now came with sickly sweet kindness packed in a voice best reserved for using with children. Children will accept it. Adults will only be insulted.

“You are a special one,” said a nice fat man with white hair and deep black eyebrows. “Here, let me show you to the room.”

The pleasant man lead Koven down a hallway to a room with a large wooden door. It looked strange in a hall of metal doors.

“There you go. The examiner is waiting for you,” said the man, who smiled at him then left.

Koven stood at the door for a long time. It was going to be the last few moments of his fine life. Poverty and desperation were on the horizon and closing fast.

He opened the door and walked in.

Seated at the table in front of him was Professor Wingut.

“Please sit down,” he said to Koven.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I—”

“Stop for a moment. Sit down and let me tell you about Jolen of Circ.”

Koven pulled out the chair and plopped down into a slouch.

“Jolen was a wonderful woman. But she was married to Anders Soil.”

“*The Anders Soil?*” asked Koven, now curious and less slouched.

“Yes. Sometimes a decisions turns bad over time. Not on the first rev or the first hundred. But over time. Hers did.”

“Sorry. She died married to a criminal.”

“She didn’t die,” said Wingut.

“But the history...” And Koven stopped speaking as he realized what he was being told. “But how did you get through this?” asked an incredulous Koven, motioning his arms all around.

“The same way you will get through it today,” replied Professor Wingut.

“When a Historian lies, pay attention because you have found the most precious thing in the universe.” —The Final McGee

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

Allor was walking down the row of vegetables with a basket of freshly picked squash under his arm. At the doorway of the farmhouse stood a very pregnant Ova. She looked out at Allor and waved to him. He walked from the field to the house.

“Ova,” she said proudly when he got to the front porch of the house.

“Good, darling,” he said with a smile. She was learning fast.

“Goo dowlin,” she repeated, and smiled excitedly then laughed.

“Yes. Excellent.”

“Cuddle Allor?” she asked.

“No. Not now, darling.”

She looked sad for a moment.

Allor pointed at the sun then pointed at the horizon.

“When the sun goes there, cuddle,” he said.

“Cuddle,” she said happily.

Starvation had started a few months ago. Allor had helped as many as he could. He taught many to grow their own food, but without a language, they mostly failed. Things learned today are forgotten tomorrow without the reinforcement of repetition.

So he grew as much as he could by himself in the mornings. Then he worked his neighbors' fields with them for the rest of the day. From sunup to sundown he worked in the fields, fighting against starvation.

And every day he cursed Professor Trill. He swore revenge against the man that was killing most of the people of Earth 7. He hated the man who had taken Ova from him and replaced her with a frightened, pregnant child.

One day he would hold Professor Trill's head in his hands.

But first he had to learn how to deliver a baby.

Revenge would wait.

Well, that's the end of the story.

Kinda ended on a bit of a downer. Sorry about that. But it wasn't really such a sad ending.

Wait, I almost forgot to tell you one last bit.

Two tox before Koven's stolen cruiser departed orbit above Earth 7, a PTD bubble arrived outside the main airlock. Inside was a man shouting "Run away with MinKey" over and over at the top of his lungs. Inside the cruiser, MinKey was running towards the airlock. She was smiling.

There. Much better.

"Happy endings are only temporary." —The Final McGee

THE END for now

It is all about to get very weird for Koven. Check out chapter one after the *Shameless Self Promotion and other books* section below. It is just a little different from Earth Seven....hehehe. Shit is gonna hit the fan back on Centrum Kath.

'Nobody hurts you harder than yourself' – Graham Parker

Shameless Self Promotion and other books

Thanks for reading this book. Hope you enjoyed it.

I need your help. I'm an indie writer and that means I have to take care of everything. Not too bad for getting to tell stories. But right now I spend half of my time doing marketing. Mornings I write, afternoons I work to sell what I write. And you know I'd rather take more of the marketing time and convert it to writing time. This is where I could use your help.

A lot of people won't even look at a book until it has a lot of reviews. Looks like 35 seems to be the number of reviews where the book begins to get more consideration by a larger group of readers. Yes, I'm asking you to help me out by writing a review. If I can get enough reviews, the amount of marketing time goes down and I can write more.

Even if you thought it sucked, be specific and tell me where it sucked and why. It will help me become a better writer. You can find more of my writing on my website:

<http://www.stevemauthor.com>

Find me on Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/stevemauthor1/>

Follow me on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/stevemauthor1>

You can hurl abuse via: <mailto:stevemauthor1@gmail.com>

BEAT READERS NEEDED: if you want to read my books before they are published in exchange for honest feedback and telling what doesn't work so I can fix it before publication, please drop me a line at <mailto:stevemauthor1@gmail.com> and put BETA READER in the subject line.

Here are the Titles of all of my Books:

Science Fiction:

Earth Seven and the History Department at the University of Centrum Kath
(Sci-fi Satire)

Mortuis Luna and the History Department at the University of Centrum Kath
(Sci-fi Satire)

The Finite Void and the History Department at the University of Centrum Kath
(Sci-Fi Satire)

The Last Believer (Apocalyptic, first contact....Mo is da man!)

420 Action:

Lioness

Forced Entry – The Unravelling (very noir)

Forced Entry – More Mistakes (very noir)

Forced Entry – The Face of Heritage (very noir)

Higher Education

The Mississippi Sativa Cooperative

The Mississippi Sativa Cooperative 2: Bad Seeds

Political-Dystopian:

The Robespierre Conspiracy

The Robespierre Uprising

The Robespierre Utopia

Who the fuck?

Steve M escaped from the information cages of Mega Corp after years in the information prison.

He shares stories while trying to avoid recapture.

He stays warm in Florida with a wife, two cats and a dog.



After a long day of thinking.
England 2015

Mortuis Luna and the History Department at the University of Centrum Kath – Chapter One Preview

This is chapter one before the editor and the beta readers get to read it. So please excuse any stupid mistakes. Hopefully this will give you a good sense of what is next for Koven Modi. I wanted an environment and circumstance that he would make him feel very uncomfortable.

Lemme know whatcha think.

The final version will be shorter, tighter and better worded. But the story will remain the same.

Anyway, enough preamble, lets amble shall we?

CHAPTER ONE

The train ride was as smooth as silk. It only took a couple of tox (minutes) to bring the hundreds of people into Reon, the capital city of Infelos Neso, one of the most populated planets in the galaxy. Bodas Fink was smiling as he looked out of the window of the train. Heuris Carter sat beside him. She was looking at all of the signs that flooded the landscape of Reon. In every direction for as far as the eye could see, which wasn't very far, were the floaters, as the floating billboards were called. The images changed on them frequently but no less than every two seconds, in accordance with the law against subliminal suggestion. Heuris looked at the advert with the image of a cat. She liked cats and missed hers. But Cretus was being taken care of by her parents while she did her service on Mortuis Luna, one of the two moons of Infelos Neso and the breadbasket for Neso, as everyone called it.

“That first sip is always the sweetest one” said Bodas. “My mouth is wet just thinking about it.”

“It’s nice to be back home, even if it’s just Reon” replied Hueris, still disappointed that their two rev pass only got them as far as the capital city.

“It’s good enough for me” said Bodas.

Neso has the reputation for being a bit of a wild frontier planet, despite being nowhere near the frontier. It got the reputation because of the early settlers who seemed adverse to establishing rules and laws perhaps because everyone was too lazy to write them down. Because of this Neso developed in some rather strange ways.

There were no rules for land use, so high rise commercial buildings or a smelly waste water treatment plant can sit right next to a residential building.

No rules for pollution resulted in an entire population that uses respirators with micron filters when outdoors because of poor air quality. Clean-off equipment are in entrances to all buildings.

And as for behavior, there are also very few rules in that regard either. The entire code of conduct could be summarized by the simple statement, ‘try not to hurt anyone other than yourself’.

“What time do you want me to come and get you?” she asked him.

“Not until you are on your way back to the bubble station” replied Bodas with a sly smile.

“You’re seriously going to spend the next two days drunk?” she asked him.

“Damn right. I won’t sober up until I wake up for work” he said proudly.

“You’re an idiot” Hueris replied.

“No. You’re an idiot for not joining me. Spice 87 isn’t GA yet, but I’ve got a contact at the polar distilleries and she will get me into one of the testing clubs” replied Bodas.

The polar distilleries on Neso are legendary. Their products are considered some of the finest alcohols in existence. Off of Neso they command a hefty price. But on Neso they are cheap and considerably safer than drinking the water.

“Do you have me listed on tap-tap?” Heuris asked.

“Yes. Tap-tap” he said and Heuris felt her comms bracelet vibrate and then an image of Bodas appeared floating in front of her.

“Good. If you need me, tap-tap” she replied.

“If you change your mind, call me before I get too drunk to answer” he said.

“OK. But don’t count on it” she replied.

“I don’t. And stay out of Aphroditto” he said with a laugh.

“Yeah, right” she said. “Not likely” she added.

“Good. Didn’t think you were a freak” he said with a chuckle.

“Nope, not me” she replied with a hint of disappointment in her life. Heuris the normal. Heuris the average. Heuris the not spectacular. Heuris believed that if people had to pick a color that best fit their idea of her, they would unanimously choose gray.

Aphroditto is another of the things for which Infelos Neso is famous. Another product of the lack of rules. Aphroditto is a virtual reality space for sex. And not just the two consenting adults only kind of sex. Aphroditto had every kind imaginable. It was wildly popular and fully three quarters of the population of one trillion on Neso have been visitors to Aphroditto. Travelers from all over the galaxy come to visit the

legendary white glass building in the VR world. It is advertised as the most complete and safest sexual experience known to any species. Complete anonymity is assured through destructive departure protocols. As the advert says 'When you leave Aphroditto, it's like you were never here.'

"I don't need to come bail you out of some love triangle" Bodas said with a chuckle. "And if you do go, remember to get the recording."

When someone leaves Aphroditto, they are offered the one and only recording of their time there, presumably for later review. If they decline, then the recording is destroyed, as well as all information pertaining to their visit is deleted from all record files. Yes, it's like you were never there.

Then there are the areas of interest. To put it mildly, Aphroditto offers everything from passionate romance rooms full of shirtless good looking suitors to the more exotic interests that may or may not involved restraints and diapers. But it is most known for the Ten Thousand (TT) rooms. Yep, you guessed it, orgies of huge numbers. They make up the most popular rooms by far.

TT rooms are even becoming part of the advertising campaign being launched by the operators of Aphroditto, as they prepare to take their environment of maximum pleasure and open franchises on other planets. It requires very precise specifications for broadcasting and is limited to a single planet and satellites per VR instance. So far three other planets have expressed interest in opening a franchise.

"I missed this place. I really missed it" said Bados looking out of the dirty train window.

“Me too” replied Heuris looking at the capitol building where the tiny wheels of the tiny Neso government turned. Mostly they gave speeches about being free then voted themselves a nice big pay raise. Somethings never change. I bet anthropologist have a theory about it.

Something to know about the people of Neso. They may live in a dump of a planet, a toilet of their own creation. But they don't move away like those smarter folks on other planets that humans have trashed and turned into orbiting lavatories. Nope the people of Infelos Neso will look you straight in the eye and tell you they live in a paradise, right before putting on their breather to go outside. And they will say it with complete sincerity and more conviction than you can get from a judge. Most of them wear some sort of flag on their clothing to show their allegiance. They also are fanatics for their local sports teams.

No, football was not invented in Earth 5. It was observed on Earth 5 then copied by the indigenous population. It was all part of the flash promotion campaign for the newest team, Brockley. They sponsored a number of games on various planets across the galaxy against teams of all stars from across the league. The location of the games were only announced shortly before the start to keep the crowds below one million. Football came to Earth 5 when Brockley announced a game featuring the return of Duane Pincher, the league scoring champion to the all-star team. That afternoon, several locals managed to get inside of the temporary stadium. How they managed to get their hoverseats to work is still unknown. But they did and your people just copied what you saw. Monkey see, monkey do. I'm talking about round ball football, not the

pointy ball football with degenerative brain injuries. No the one where full grown men smack their heads into a rather large ball voluntarily.

The train stopped at the central station. It was a short walk to their hotel room. They both put on their breathers before they left the station and went into the orange dusty environment of the capital. Heuris adjusted her breather slightly until the sweet whistle of a perfect fit found her ears.

Her music selection played an ancient song called 'Moonage Daydream'. The artist had long ago been lost to history. But music historians speculated that he must have been someone very special. She turned up the volume of the small speakers in her ear canal just as the final guitar part began to scream beautifully. The only other song by the artist is called 'Panic in Detroit' and is considered one of the most popular songs by the most recent generation of university graduates, although know one knows what the heck the song is about. Where is Detroit? There is a story that when the great man was about to die a wanderer of the stars arrived with a Remedium and a cruiser and took him away. He now lives as the musical slave of a very important and secretive man. But that is what we tell our children to get them to practice the violin. If they don't they will wind up living in a cellar as a prisoner, but with lots of instruments most of which they won't be able to play at first.

When they got into their room, Heuris immediately began to unpack her bag. Bados threw his much smaller bag onto one of the beds and then turned back towards the door. He pulled off his breather to speak. Heuris had already thrown hers into the sink to clean it.

“Remember, don’t forget me. You must come get me and make me come back with you.”

“OK. OK. You sound like the foreman” she replied.

“Don’t remind me of her” he said.

The foreman hated Bados. She gave him every shitty job to do, every time. And it started from his first day on the agricultural crew. He questioned her authority to tell him what to do when she told him to do something he didn’t want to do. He naturally slouched and thought that her telling him to stand up straight had no bearing on his ability to function on the Ag team. He summarized his objection succinctly with a simple ‘NO’ response.

This resulted in a rather loud and angry response by the foreman. But it didn’t end there. For the foreman’s response in turn lead to a response by Bados that could be considered rather creative and expressed in words that might be considered as crude and mean, even by the saltiest of galactic sailors. But logically it made absolutely no sense at all. Something as abstract as an order or command cannot in any manner be forced into a human orifice vigorously, much less enthusiastically over and over again.

Bados and Heuris were lottery winners, if the lottery were a shitty thing and being an ag worker for 100 revs were the shitty prize for winners. With his discipline problems Bados kept getting his ag duty extended. He would probably be one of those that went the full 500 revs before they were forced to send him home. Yeah, ag duty sucked for the most part. The only good things about it were the clean air and clean water. And the free R&R trips with everything pre-paid. Just show them the ID and it’s all covered. But

the ag work was hot, thirsty and regrettably, necessary to keep their beloved paradise fed.

Mortuis Luna was the largest of the two moons that circled Infelos Neso. A long time ago, as the population of Neso crossed one hundred billion, even on a planet approaching the size of Jupiter, significant environmental problems arose. One of the problems involved graveyards. Specifically, they ran out of room for them.

And after considerable worry, lots of deep thoughts and many, many hair brained ideas, they asked for help from the largest repository of knowledge and learning in the known universe, yep, The University of Centrum Kath.

The university sent a team that spent several hundred revs researching the problem and evaluating the alternatives after spending the first two weeks drunk and in Aphroditto most of their time. But eventually they got down to work and the University of Centrum Kath suggested a simple solution. Bury the dead of Neso on their moon, which at the time was not called Mortuin Luna but was known as Harry Is A Wanker, due to the loss of a drunken trivia bet by one of the two most senior astronomers in charge of naming things. Fortunately the term 'wanker' is unknown by most people outside of Earth Five and was explained to the people of Infelos Neso as an obscure technical term used in astronomy to describe a celestial body that is best avoided and should never befriend.

Long story short, you put enough dead bodies in the ground composting for a long time and the once barren rocky landscape becomes lush and green. Just add water and watch it bloom. And it recently achieved a sustainable atmosphere. Rain storms occur naturally now. No more oxy-breathers 24 x 7.

Bados turned back at the doorway and blew Heuris a kiss.

“Love you too” replied Heuris with a chuckle to her gender fluid companion.

Bados’ sexuality was fluid like many people on Neso. Heuris was definitely hetero, well at least 98% certain. So far it had been all lecture with very little actual lab work to date.

When she had finished unpacking, she brushed and flossed her teeth. Then she picked up the magazine listing all of the attractions nearby. She sat on the bed and turned on the media broadcast. She listened to a report about the discovery of a new method of adding carbonation to drinks which used atmospheric carbon dioxide rather than from a tank. Heuris didn’t pay much attention to the news. On Neso the border between news and business press releases had long since disappeared. Still she did her duty. She voted when it was mandatory but never volunteered for anything.

Heuris looked at the museum section of the magazine. She flipped through the pages slowly as another report started, one about the Reon smog killing an obscure species of moth. She ignored it and returned to the magazine and the museum listing. Reon had the largest number of museum in the spiral. It is one of the rare positive results of the pollution in the air.

A long time ago when the Hustfik paintings were being exhibited publicly, the estate of the late Peter Hustfik refused to let his paintings come to Neso due to the effect of pollution on the canvases. In response, the richest man on Neso paid for the University of Centrum Kath to design a exhibition environment that was better than any other in existence. Because of this, Neso now is considered one of the top three destinations for significant works of art. At its current rate of growth for art exhibits, it could come to rival Centrum Kath within the next one million revs.

Heuris was a painter. She had never sold a painting but still she painted every day. She was trying to be a believer, a believer in herself. She had spent the last 100 revs studying the brush styles of the master works by the great Only Rivera. She admired the broad way his roller slapped on the paint, letting it drip down the canvas in a brilliant display of artistic contempt for the subject.

At first Only's paintings were rejected by art critics and subject to ridicule. Then slowly the story of Only became known. This young man, the last of fourteen children, the eleventh of eleven boys, had been named ONLY by his parents. Many if not all of the art critics upon learning the story of Only chuckled their appreciation of the ironic name and changed their opinion of the paintings from one that considered them to be complete and utter crap to them being the next big thing and advising all of their friends to buy them immediately before the price went through the roof. And it did.

Heuris was looking forward to seeing the new exhibit of Only's work at the Museum of Semi-Modern but not Completely Disappointing Art (MSMCDA). She looked at the clock on the ceiling. It was too late to go out but she was too excited about seeing Only's work to go to sleep.

She thought about calling her parents but then decided that they would insist on her coming home and she wouldn't get to see Only's exhibit. She took off her comms bracelet and put it on the nightstand next to her bed. She closed her eyes. The inside of her lids were painted with Only's 'snowflakes in cream in a cup left outside by accident' painting. She opened her eyes then double blinked to invoke the VR on her retinal lenses. One of the benefits of Aphroditto was that all of the latest VR technology was

available and cheap on Infelos Neso. A 750 billion customers base all in one place. It was a VR marketers dream.

She scrolled through the latest releases. It was the same old thing. She had seen all of them. Every single title listed on her VR menu under romantic comedy, she had seen them all. And it was at least five days before the refresh. She dreamed of one of the planets where new content became available when it was completed, not held back and released en mass on the same day so they could crowd each other out and establish who had the highest sales volume. Quality measures usually took much longer and its quality that really counts. It is for this reason that we can look back historically at the popular music charts and find songs of incredibly poor quality to such an extent that we cringe on behalf of the artist. Yes they were still best sellers. Romantic comedies are no different.

Why couldn't they produce more romantic comedies she wondered. It wasn't like the plot had changed over time. And with each one she looked for something new. And with each one it never came. But then she settled into the comfort of knowing that the story had a happy ending because humans are optimistic as a species. However, the Media Institute at the University of Silpolonius has presented research that suggest that romantic comedies are all the same because they are easy to write, pay well and no one ever asks the writer for the money back.

She turned to the drama collection. She just didn't feel in the mood for an uplifting story. She was stuck on Ag duty. There was nothing coming to lift her up. It was all up to her and she knew it. And in her mind, that sucked. Adverts began to play in the bottom right quadrant of her vision.

“Vacation on Dis 11. Every activity for every age group. Reversion therapy lets you vacation at your peak of health, no matter how old you are. Dis 11 packages start as low as”. She blinked to close out the ad.

“You know I need you” said the handsome young man with long black hair, muscles and without a shirt. “But you don’t know how much I want you too” he said and slowly lowered his eyes down to his groin which was off camera. Then he put his hand out.

“Yeah, right” replied Heuris.

She had one prior experience with Aphroditto and it wasn’t positive.

She was given a one night subscription as a present from someone anonymously at the restaurant where she worked until she sold some paintings. It was for her birthday. What happened that night was the most painful experience of her life, so far. It started with the waivers. Technically she was legally old enough to enter. However Aphroditto suggested people wait until they were 1,000 revs older before becoming a customer. It had to do with maturity or lack of. The waivers came with many questions and cautions and signing documents with very bold fonts in places. But eventually they let her in.

His name was Stanley and after the fifth hour together Heuris went slightly crazy and told Stanley that she was in love with him.

And you know what happened?

He went slightly insane too and told her that he loved her too. And that was a problem. And with the problem came the loud alarms and then men and women all

dressed alike showed up and took Stanley away. They parted yelling their love for one another and vowing to come back and meet again the next night.

And Heuris came. She turned on her VR. She checked her image in the reflection on the glass as she stood outside of Aphroditto and watched the long line of people go inside. And she stood there all night, despite the strange looks from the patrons and the bouncers. And then the next night she was outside again. And then the night after that. But the following day she was very tired and slept all day and all night. Stanley never showed up and eventually she stopped going.

Heuris became withdrawn for a long time after, living alone inside of her own head. Alone was safe. Alone didn't hurt as much. Alone was a hole and the hole was her friend. It didn't ask for anything. It didn't demand her be something she isn't. No, alone was not like her parents. Alone didn't abandon her. No, alone was not like Stanley either.

Now a psychologist or psychiatrist would probably tell you that Heuris clicked the Aphroditto ad as a result of her subconscious interest being manifested consciously. However, she believes it was just a stupid accident.

But either way, a tix (second) later she was in VR standing outside Aphroditto watching the people lined up on the blood red carpet outside of the high rise tree-shaped glass building. She stopped for a moment and looked over at the place where she used to stand and wait. Then she saw her reflection in the glass. Had to hand it to Aphroditto, they made people look good.

She was just about to turn off the lenses when she saw him out of the corner of her eye. She stopped breathing for a moment in the shock of recognition. Then she spun to face him.

It was Stanley. Her Stanley. Her beloved one. The man she dreamed of most nights. The man who flooded her pillow with tears.

Wait a minute! He was with someone else. Another woman. Slutty looking bitch. And he had his hand on her ass. What the hell, Stanley? What part of love at first sight is this?

Stanley saw her and pointed at her, his long slender index finger aimed at her face.

“I almost got banned because of you. Stay away from me” he called out angrily to her. The bouncers recognized him and motioned for him to come in quickly. He got into the building and through security without ever taking his right hand off the left butt cheek of the woman he was with. Slut!

Heuris felt like a holiday turkey being carved, her heart cut out and stomped into the ground until it was just a red jelly stain.

“Fuck You, Stanley” Heuris finally yelled out.

That is when the two men appeared behind her.

“Ma’am, if you’re not going in then we need to ask you to leave. It makes customers feel uncomfortable and that damages our business. I hope you understand. We really don’t have anything against you as a person. You seem like a lovely woman. But you’re yelling at our customer outside of our business. This could significantly decrease our door sale conversions. And please let me say that I don’t have any

problem with you yelling at him. That's not the issue here. I think you should be able to yell at him as much as you want. Just not right here. Its bad for business." The man stopped and took a breath.

"So what's it gonna be" he asked her.

"OK" she held up her ID.

"A pre-paid VIP pass. Thank you for spending time with us. We hope to see you again soon" he now said with deference and respect.

She pushed the revolving glass door and entered into the reception area of the building. But by that time Stanley was gone with his bubble-butt bitch. A very short man approached her. By very short I mean the top of his head only came up to her waist.

"Good evening. Let me show you around. My name is Metris" he said. "May I call you Heuris, Ms Carter?"

"Of course" she replied.

"Have you ever been here before?" he asked.

"No" she lied.

"Well, we have everything no matter your interest. How would you like to help us by answering a few questions. It really will make things so much easier for us and much more fun for you."

"I didn't know you have questionnaires" she said.

"It's a new artifact in order to get a better relevance match. And customer satisfaction has gone up because of it."

What happened next was a long list of very personal questions. Heuris blushed more than once at the very direct nature of the questions. Then on more than one

occasion she had to have something explained to her in detail. Several times she responded with the same question: “someone really finds that exciting? You’ve got to be shitting me.”

Did she prefer this or that? They asked that question many times over. If she didn’t know she said she liked it anyway. They stopped for a couple of tox in the middle when she became thirsty. But then they resumed and pressed on until they finished. And the diminutive man pointed to the space between them. It filled with a matrix of numbers and match percentages.

“There we go” said the small man with a smile. “It shows you are somewhat of a traditionalist, but with a healthy level of curiosity.”

“That’s good isn’t it?” she asked expectantly.

“Indeed. It’s prefect. Your profile suggest that you begin in one of the TR rooms.”

“TR?”

“Traditional Romance” he replied. “But only for the first half of your time here. It recommends you spend the second half in one of the Ten Thousand rooms.”

“Oh my” she said and raised her hand to her face.

“If I might offer a word of caution, please be very careful which TT room you enter. From your profile I’d choose one of the CONSENT rooms.”

“Consent rooms?”

“The people in those rooms come up and ask if its ok first” said the man.

“And in the other rooms?”

“It is assumed that you gave your consent when you chose to enter the room. Anything that happens while you are in the room is considered fair play.”

“Oh goodness. I’ll avoid those for certain.”

“Advisable Heuris. Maybe on a later visit...if you are curious. We have special 20 tox packages that are popular with the curious but undecided.”

“Yes, maybe next time” she said with a giggle.

“Shall we?” asked the man and motioned for her to take his hand.

She took his hand and they walked deeper into the building until they reached the elevators. They went to the fourth floor. It was very pretty blue on the walls of the building. They stepped out and the elevator changed from an elevator into a solid blue wall like the rest of the hall way.

“It’s just down here” he said and looked up at her and smiled.

Heruis spent many tox with one of the men in the TR room. He was incredibly handsome. And that was the thing about VR, it takes the real image of the person and morphs it into a VR image of how we all want to look. You know that really good looking actress or actor that looks like you a little? In VR you look a lot more like them than you normally do. If you look at yourself while you in VR you will still recognize yourself mostly, but you will be more busy admiring how damned good looking you are. Robert was so damn good looking that there was no way he could possibly be ugly in real life. And best of all, he weighed nothing in VR.

I won’t share the details of her time there but will merely remark that she more than made up for her experience with that bastard Stanley. She spent a total of 200 tox at Aphroditto. And that was the source of the problem.

By her own reckoning and careful planning, she had only spent 150 tox in VR. When she was asked to sign off on the charge for 200 tox she refused. The manager

mentioned that there seemed to be a lot of that sort of thing happening lately. Still she refused to authorize the charge.

Fortunately there was a complete and full record of her time there and it was available to her at a reasonable price for review later in her own home. In this instance it was used to prove to her that she had indeed spent 200 tox in VR.

“What is that? I don’t remember any of that?” she said as she watched her naked self.

“It’s called the Puppy Rooms” said the small man manager that had replaced her small man guide. He smiled at her. “It’s very popular lately.”

Heuris watched herself naked in the corner of a room filled with other people. They were all on their hands and knees and barking like dogs. Two men walked around and handed the barking people nice soft pieces of candy. They pet them on the head as they gave out each one.

“Who is that man?” she asked and pointed to a man standing naked in the doorway that had his eyes glued to Heuris.

“I don’t know. A secret admirer I’d bet. It happens a lot.” replied the manager.

“Destroy that” she said emphatically.

“Right away” said the manager and he pressed invisible icons in front of him and the video showed the progress of a delete bar. “There, all gone” he said when it was finished. She approved the 200 tox charge.

Heuris was in shock. What happened to her? Why didn’t she remember any of it? Who was that man?

Her boyfriend Carl had asked her to marry him right before she left for Ag duty.

Maybe it was time for her to settle down.

Or maybe just settle.

'Never make major decisions under duress'

- Elanor, the Wife of The Final McGee upon her arrest for murder

I hope you like the first chapter of Mortuis Luna and the History Department at the University of Centrum Kath

Remember to leave a review.

Thanks

steve