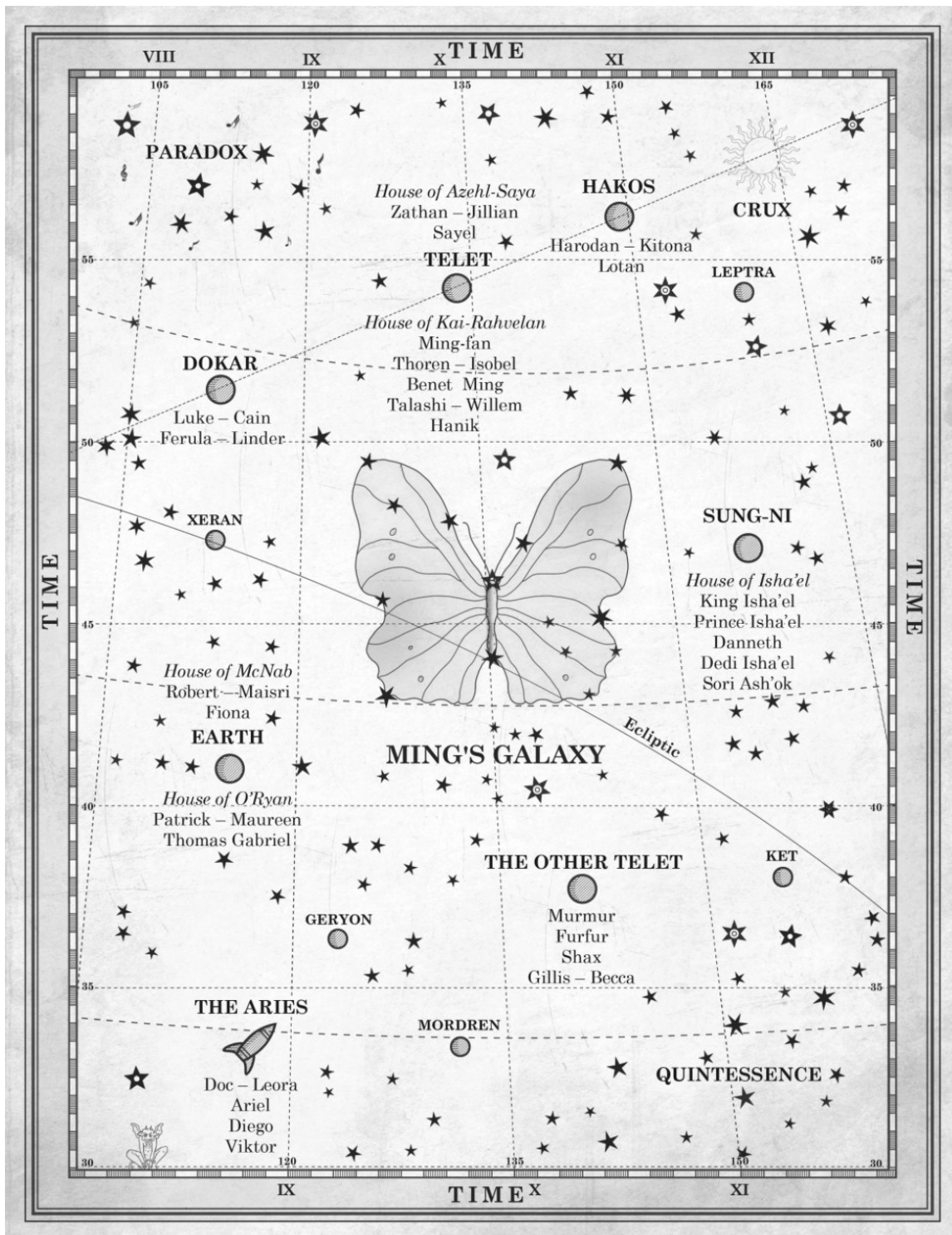


MING

R.L. Gray



1 The 4th Dimension

Shadows played a lazy game of tag against a backdrop of midnight velvet. Moving back and forth behind his eyes, the impartial tranquility of slow rhythms ticking like a clock was soothing, cradling him in peace and contentment.

He sighed, and for some reason that simple exhalation brought an unexpected moment of clarity. He realized that the swinging of the pendulum had ceased, as if that one small breath had caused time itself to stop. Everything hung suspended, waiting for the next tick, for the next movement of the air, the next thought.

A prickling of warmth teased him, daring him to leave the time-bound night behind. Instinct stirred and thoughts began to coalesce. Invisible hands pushed the heavy curtain aside and he saw ... what?

What was it? The word was so close—it was right there at the edge of his mind's eye. He struggled to retrieve it, pushing himself to focus. It was a small word, but a vital one. It seemed like the answer to everything.

He tried to concentrate, but whispered clues rushed past before he could grasp the murmured messages. Feeling suddenly fevered and adrift, he gave up the effort. His newfound awareness was ebbing, forcing him to relax into the soothing embrace of death once more.

When he opened his eyes a second time it was because he thought he heard something. He strained to listen, but there were no sounds. He supposed that just because he could see didn't necessarily mean he could still hear.

Whatever was left of him felt much better now. The fog in his brain was lifting and he could sense the jigsaw pieces of his thoughts resuming their proper order. Recalling how upset he'd been earlier, he had to laugh: the word he'd been groping for was simply 'light.'

He took in a tentative breath and felt his chest rise and then fall. There was oxygen here. So, there was light and air in this place, wherever he was. Cautiously tensing the muscles in his arms and legs he experienced a rush of profound relief that, even though was sure he'd been blown to bits, somehow his limbs had managed to follow him into the afterlife.

Like an echo from childhood, his name made its way back to him. It was Gabriel. He heard his mother's voice saying, *'An angel's name, for my angel.'* He missed her. Swallowing the ache in his throat, he wondered whether she knew yet that one of her worst nightmares had come true.

He still had no idea when, or how, he'd gotten to this place, but recalling who he was seemed to help. Memories started to flicker. He could see himself at the controls of a ship, the pinprick lights of a star map winking above his head to show his position in the heavens. An airlock hissed and, all at once, a rush of images spilled over and surged into the empty corners of his

mind.

He was in the navy.

There was a bomb. A nuclear warhead had been activated on a dead planet. He could still hear the ominous ticking sounds counting down to detonation. He'd been tasked with disarming it, which he was more than capable of doing. The thought that it might end badly had never crossed his mind.

Of course he would have given orders about what to do in the event of a negative outcome, but that was no more than routine. Confident that he could defuse it, he had. It had been a textbook job until he stepped out of the shell of a building where the bomb lay, concealed from some long-forgotten enemy.

He decided that he must have stepped on an ancient land mine. Although if ground explosives were present, his ship's instruments should have detected them before he landed. And it was odd that he hadn't triggered it going in. The path had been narrow and it was his habit to retrace his footsteps in situations like that.

But just when he'd let himself relax and consider what he'd have for dinner to celebrate a job well done, the loudest noise he'd ever experienced literally burst his eardrums. Surprisingly, there hadn't been any pain. Just a stab of intense shock followed by the dawning realization that his body was gone. It had been completely blown apart.

He stretched out his hands, flexing his fingers. Holding them up to his face, he gazed at them front and back. Not a mark on them. Relief flooded through him once again that his body was whole and clothed in his uniform which looked like it had been cleaned and pressed while he slept, the insignia of his rank gleaming against the dusky green fabric.

Moving cautiously, he sat up. He appeared to be sitting in an endless green meadow. Could this place be Heaven? He wasn't at all sure that he deserved Heaven. Hopefully dying in the line of duty counted for something.

So now what? What came next? He was here, wherever 'here' was. He was conscious and aware. If Heaven was nothing more than a place to sit around on dew-covered grass all day, they could take it and—

His thoughts were distracted by a sound. Pleased that his hearing was intact, he cocked his head toward what seemed to be strains of music. Far off and barely audible at first, it grew in volume, and the louder it became the more the air around him shimmered, as though the music was coloring far outside of the lines.

A voice sang, *"It's a long way to Tipperary, it's a long way to go!"*

The music stopped abruptly. The atmosphere around him glowed. And then a voice spoke directly into his ear.

"Ah. I see you are awake."

Gabriel started violently, reflexively putting an arm up to shield his eyes from an intense light. Squinting against the brilliance, he could make out a head, pointed ears, and was that a tail?

Genuinely alarmed, it took a few seconds for his brain to work out that this was not some kind of demonic hallucination. It was that bizarre creature from the fourth dimension, Paradox. As the glare receded he could see that, as usual, its vaguely feline form was floating a few feet off

the ground with its own personal light show flashing like diamonds, highlighting its infuriating smile.

"It's always music with you," Gabriel said, with a derisive snort. "Why is that?"

Paradox yawned hugely, displaying an impressive set of teeth. "I've tried explaining it to you before, but you have a marked tendency not to listen—at least to the things that don't suit your mood."

"Look," Gabriel snapped, "a few minutes ago I couldn't remember my own name."

"Oh all right," it said, heaving a sigh. "I am a creature of the mind and there are countless things going on in my consciousness at any given moment, just like any other sentient being. You may not realize it, but if I amplified all of your thoughts it would produce a veritable cacophony. Besides—"

"Wait, a veritable what?"

"A lot of noise."

"Then why didn't you just say that?"

"Besides," Paradox went on, "I felt the tune was eminently appropriate, under the circumstances."

"My dad used to sing that song to me at the beginning of a trip," Gabriel started to smile, but then he shook off the nostalgia, and said, "You know, for a minute I thought I might have taken a trip to Heaven. But if you're here, then I am definitely not there."

Paradox's shimmer turned from golden to a lurid chartreuse. "Where do you think you are, Gabriel?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Because you are wherever you think you are," Paradox explained. "That's how this dimension works, you see?"

"I don't see! I mean, I can see, but I don't know what I'm seeing."

"What do you want to see?"

Gabriel ignored this. "Where is this place? I assume I'm dead, right?"

"Your corporeal self was destroyed, yes," Paradox confirmed. "To be honest, you left your space-time continuum fairly dramatically. And now, you are ... wherever you believe you ought to be."

"Stop talking in riddles, Paradox. If I'm dead, I believe I should be dead."

"All evidence to the contrary," the creature remarked dryly. "In reality, mortals go wherever they think they should go. When the soul—the essence—exits linear time in the third dimension, it either moves to a different dimension, or it ceases altogether. So evidently, in your heart of hearts, you believed you would continue. At least to the extent that your soul would make a beeline for this pleasantly pastoral setting you've created ... in order to do what, may I ask? Knock on Heaven's door?"

"Well, I can promise you that I never dreamed of continuing in a place where you and I were the only inhabitants, so something is definitely wrong with your theory," Gabriel said glaring.

"*Humph*. I thought you'd be pleased to see me."

"People don't say *humph*, Paradox."

“But I do. It’s one of my favorite expressions.”

“I know, and it always sounds stupid.”

“How rude!” The lines of its body blurred and the light show dimmed. “I’d go, but since this is your reality, whether we like it or not I’m stuck here with you. Or at least, what’s left of you.” The creature propelled its head around Gabriel and popped it directly through his chest, coming out the other side.

“Stop that! Don’t do things just because you can.” Standing up stiffly, he put his hands on his lower back and grunted as he stretched from side to side. “My body appears to have regrouped corporeally, in case you hadn’t noticed. And it aches. I don’t think that’s supposed to happen in Heaven, is it?”

“At the risk of sounding redundant, it all depends upon what you want,” Paradox said, as its body reappeared. “You must expect it to ache. It’s all in your head now. But eventually, you’ll grasp it. You are here to learn and you *will* learn,” it added with a dismissive shrug.

“More riddles.” Gabriel frowned.

“Oh no—not riddles. Just facts, which will be difficult for you to comprehend, until you do.”

“When will I understand?”

Paradox grinned. “Lesson number one: there is no more ‘when.’ But you were formed and lived your life in linear time, and old habits do die hard. You see, here we have what *was*, what *is*, and what *will be*. All of the time!” It burst out laughing, the shimmer cascading in showers of tumultuous fireworks.

“What’s so funny?” Gabriel asked testily.

“Sorry.” It waved a paw. “Just a bit of fourth dimensional humor. I said, *all*—of the—*time*.” It giggled. “Get it?”

“I’m the captain of a space cruiser, not a physicist,” Gabriel muttered. “Look, you say I am wherever I believe I should be, and I say Heaven cannot be this frustrating. And I categorically refuse to believe that you are God. So could we please just have a few minutes of normal conversation about whatever’s really going on here?”

As the words left Gabriel’s lips, Paradox lost all color, the light show flickering in various shades of pale. “Goodness no,” it said, clearly humbled, “I am certainly *not* God. The Light of the Universe exists on a much higher plane than you could possibly fathom, at least in your present state. It’s a long journey from here. But don’t worry, you’ll find it will be well worth the trip. For now, just think of me as your guide.”

“Guide to what?”

“To navigating in the fourth dimension, of course. What did you think?”

“I think ... therefore I am?” Gabriel ventured.

“Excellent.” Paradox beamed. “Got it in one.”

“So, do I actually still have a body or do I just think I do?”

“You think you do, and so you do. But you won’t feel hunger or physical pain anymore, unless you want to. Your body is an anchor for your sanity at the moment, and it happens to be a very nice body.” Donning a pair of round, tortoise shell spectacles, Paradox peered at him. “As far as I’m concerned, there’s nothing wrong with keeping it for now.” The spectacles vanished.

Suddenly, a thought struck Gabriel. “What did you mean before when you said, ‘or it ceases altogether?’”

“Was it like a blow to the head?” Paradox snickered.

“What?”

“The thought that just struck you.” It dissolved into another fit of hilarity.

Beginning to understand the game, Gabriel imagined himself deliberately shoving the creature’s face firmly into the damp grass.

“You see?” Paradox said with a wry look. “You’re learning already. In a nutshell, reality is whatever you’re willing to make of it. Beings that exist within the boundaries of linear time spend their lives making countless, utterly individual, conscious and subconscious choices. These choices are made by necessity in their minds. And so it is their minds—more specifically their *intentions*—that define their personal realities. Unfortunately, your species has a knack for ignoring the old truism: there are consequences to our actions. And actions, after all, are born of intent.”

Condensing its body down until all that was left was a gigantic mouth, it opened and blared, “Remember, as Shakespeare so wisely wrote, ‘There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so!’ You see, there are many unfortunate souls in your dimension who never manage to expand their consciousness at all, and so they never get anywhere.”

“You mean like—babies and, um, simple people?” Gabriel asked.

“No, no,” Paradox replied quickly, “not them. The innocents are special cases and are treated with special care. No, I was referring to souls who allow their minds to shrink until they’re small enough to fit through the tempting keyhole that leads to the place where pride runs roughshod over humility, greed over generosity and envy over love.” The long tail swished sharply, as though it wanted to sweep the words away. “They end their days never comprehending the simple fact that choosing to be *good and fair* is what would have led to an enlightened existence, followed by all of the astonishing possibilities an afterlife has to offer.”

Gabriel frowned. “So you’re saying we truly are the keepers of our own souls and that everyone is supposed to instinctively depend on intangibles? Isn’t religion supposed to be the path to enlightenment? Are you saying religion is unnecessary?”

“No, not at all. It can be very necessary. At least to the souls who aren’t fooled by the sort of false prophets who promote financial prosperity. Their own in particular,” Paradox replied, with a sly wink. “But it might surprise you to learn that the faithful far outnumber those who embrace organized religion and that depending upon intangibles, as you put it, is actually instinctive to most souls.” It sighed. “The problem is that an unfortunate number allow themselves to be talked out of their instincts ... frequently by themselves.”

Gabriel wasn’t sure what this existential discussion had to do with him, since he’d obviously managed to avoid these pitfalls. But he considered the creature’s words carefully. “Then what about the people who are convinced they’ll go to hell when they die?” he asked.

“They do, of course.” The creature’s body turned bright red as the malevolent smell of sulfur filled the air and tiny yellow flames shot from its coat. “That’s where religious dogma typically comes into play because there’s hell, and then there’s Hell—if you see what I mean.”

“Ugh, that’s nasty.” Gabriel waved a hand. “Will you please stop assuming that I see what you mean? I don’t understand anything. Not yet, anyway.”

The flames disappeared and Paradox puffed out its cheeks and blew, the tinkle of invisible wind chimes clearing the air. “The point is that there are many souls in your dimension who believe that they deserve to be punished. And so, when they leave linear time, their consciousness presents them with whatever idea they had of hell when they were alive.”

“Purgatory?”

“Gesundheit!” Paradox replied, and waved a large white handkerchief under Gabriel’s nose. “Please stop labeling things. It’s not useful.” It stuffed the cloth tidily into a non-existent sleeve. “In any case, most of them tire of it eventually and manage to rise into higher, much more pleasant planes of existence. Even the ones who imagine their own unique brand of Heaven typically come to understand (sooner or later) that it’s no more than an illusion and that there are much better, and much more important, places to go. But there are others,” it added quietly, “who *choose* evil, which is a different thing altogether.”

Threatening dark clouds appeared overhead, blotting out the daylight.

“As I’m sure you know, Gabriel, there is Darkness in the Universe. It’s a powerful force that attempts to recruit more souls from the third dimension every day. Once the Darkness has been chosen and fully embraced, it ultimately takes a soul to a realm that is constantly being reinvented by the consequences of evil, and so it’s not something that can be pictured or comprehended in one’s mind ahead of time. The hell imagined by tormented souls may be thoroughly unpleasant, but it’s nothing when compared to the Darkness of,” its voice dropped to a whisper, “*actual Hell*.”

“But, how do you know if a person is truly evil or just misguided?” Gabriel challenged. “I mean, what exactly constitutes evil intent?”

“It is any deliberate act that causes harm to other living things unnecessarily,” Paradox replied. “Make choices like that often enough and you’ll create a real mess for yourself. You see, what goes around really does come around in our Universe. But it’s extremely important to remember that evil intentions can be forgiven.”

“You mean forgiveness from some kind of deity?” Gabriel asked doubtfully.

“Not necessarily. It’s sufficient to forgive yourself, since doing that demonstrates an understanding of the fact that your actions have consequences.” It gave a slight shrug. “The Light of the Universe doesn’t want to rule over you—it wants a relationship with you. The way it works isn’t complicated. It’s just that the Darkness does its best to make it appear that way.”

While Gabriel considered this, the creature amused itself by turning several languid somersaults in mid-air which cleared away the gloom. A shaft of sunlight shot through the clouds, restoring the rainbow prisms.

“Paradox, you meant it when you said I get to decide what happens here. My consciousness—my reality, right?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.” It continued to undulate, while singing quietly under its breath, “*Goodbye, Piccadilly, farewell Leicester Square. It’s a long, long way to Tipperary ...*”

“Then, are you real? Or am I just imagining you?”

“You tell me!” It giggled.

Time seemed to pass while Gabriel attempted to put his thoughts in order. Then he reminded himself that time didn’t exist in this place. He tried: ‘time is a thing of the past,’ but somehow that didn’t work either. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he began to pace.

“Would you like to sit down? You can, by the way,” Paradox said, waving a helpful paw in the direction of his backside.

Glancing around him and seeing nothing to sit upon, Gabriel looked doubtfully at the damp grass.

“Think, my friend,” Paradox urged. “Think about sitting in something comfortable. Picture it carefully in your mind. That’s right. Think hard about a chair ready to receive you and just—sit.”

Gabriel visualized the command chair on the bridge of his cruiser, the *Aries*. Keeping his focus on Paradox and bending slightly, he sat. Amazing! As he allowed himself to settle into it, the chair materialized around him and felt comfortably solid. Leaning back, he smiled as images from the ship tumbled into his mind.

He saw Ariel entering navigational coordinates into an aircscreen, and Benet looking thoughtful. He heard Doc telling a joke, and Ming’s laughter ...

MING!

The memory hit Gabriel like a fist to the gut. His Ming ... He could feel her hands, beautifully smooth and capable, caressing him. He felt her breath on his cheek and he tried to put his arms around her where they belonged, but they met empty space.

“Paradox, did she die too? Is she here?!”

“No. Ming is still living in the reality you just left,” Paradox replied.

“Why didn’t I think about her right away? Why have I spent all this time thinking about—other things?!” Gabriel spluttered. “The only reason I know *you* is because of Ming. What’s wrong with me?”

The creature suddenly morphed into gigantic black cat, tail thrashing, ready to pounce. “Be careful, Gabriel. Remember, you create your own reality. I know it’s not an easy concept to grasp, but you have to try. Thinking of Ming must be painful. You’ll begin to miss her now. You could have avoided it and experienced a very different reality. From this point forward you need to think more clearly about the choices you make.”

“She survived, then ... thank God,” Gabriel murmured. “Is she all right? Can I see her?” A terrible physical longing for her flooded his senses. He flexed his hands, desperate to touch her.

“Yes, Ming survived. But it wouldn’t be a good idea for you to see her. Not yet.” Paradox shrank back to its usual size, and the shimmer became an obstinate, steel gray haze. “Conjuring another sentient being is complicated. Much more complicated than thinking pieces of furniture into solidity. You’ll need to learn many things before you can do that.”

“I have to see her.” Gabriel left the chair abruptly, raking his fingers through his thick black hair. “You can show her to me. I know you can. Let me see my wife!”

“Be careful what you wish for, Gabriel,” Paradox said, with unusual sadness in its eyes. “Are you sure you want to see the Ming that exists in the life you just left? Do you want to see her as she was in the hours after you arrived here?”

“Well, I don’t want to see her as a child. I want to see her alive and, yes, as she is now.” He shook his head. “Or I guess—in what was my now. Please, I have to know that she’s all right.”

“You have no idea how kind I’m being to you,” Paradox said, “and it’s kindness that keeps me from showing you what you ask. Please, try to trust me. It’s not an image that will help you. Not at this stage of your adjustment.” The haze rapidly condensed into silvery bubbles all bearing the word ‘NO,’ which hovered protectively around the creature’s head.

“I have to see for myself that she survived and that the contingency plan worked,” Gabriel said stubbornly. “I need you to show me that I managed to save her. Please!”

As Paradox considered this, the bubbles scattered like beads of mercury. “You won’t like what you see. Believe me when I say that there are things you must understand first. The image I can help you see will only hurt and confuse you. You assume it will satisfy you in some way, but it won’t.”

“Then I want a new guide!” Gabriel blazed with anger. “I want someone else who will show me my WIFE dammit!” Squeezing his eyes shut, he willed the image of Ming back into his mind.

“Oh, all right!” Paradox rose abruptly and hovered in the air above his head. “I can see that if I don’t show you, you’ll make a clumsy attempt on your own, which would be much worse than showing you myself. But don’t forget—I warned you.”

All at once, there was the feeling of a strong wind trying to push Gabriel backward. He had to struggle to stand upright against it. The atmosphere around him grew clouded and gray with fog.

As the wind died down, he saw colors swirling together in a blur that slowly resolved into objects. Sunlight streamed in through tall windows, with drapes that looked vaguely familiar. There was a large bed and a chair, and he could make out three figures in the room. Two of them were on the bed and one was sitting in the chair next to it.

A shriek splintered the air like the whistle of a freight train barreling out of a tunnel. As the images grew sharper, Gabriel could see that Benet was on the bed behind Ming, keeping her pinned against him as she struggled. Her face was pale, her fair hair wild and tangled, the tendons in her neck straining as she tried to wrench herself from her brother’s grasp. Ming-fan sat in the chair, staring at her grandchildren in stoic silence.

Ming was in agony. Rolling screams gave way to panting and a few words gasped out between the breaths. She was pleading with Benet. She wanted him to let her die.

Benet remained as expressionless as his grandmother, holding on to Ming more tightly as the cries began again. This time, it was a name that ripped out of her.

“Gabriel!!!”

Then the image went blank. The breeze, once again, blew the clouds lazily toward the horizon. Silence was restored.

Painful emotion welled up and Gabriel covered his mouth with both hands as tears gathered and spilled over. “No ... oh please, God, no. I didn’t know the healing would be so painful. I swear to you, I never imagined—”

A fresh gust of wind cut him off and, with a flash, Paradox expanded until the sky was filled with a blinding white incandescence.

“There are reasons for this, Gabriel. You didn’t let Ming down. You honored her by being

yourself with her and doing your best for her. But there's much more to Ming's life than her time with you. And there is still something you can do for her—something that you must do. In fact, it's the reason we're here.

“And it is *time* to begin.”

2 Xeran

The porter at the transport station tipped his cap politely at the stranger. “Welcome,” he said. “Is this your first time on Xeran?” He could see that the man wasn't a native and they didn't get many repeat visitors. His first guess was Martian, but then he landed on Teletian.

Although the names of the two races sounded alike, people from Mars were inveterate travelers while people from Telet were not known for making sojourns off planet. The classic traveling clothes and sturdy boots didn't look very well worn.

“It is, and I'm hoping you can help me. I've come to visit a Teletian woman who built a house here not so long ago. Her name is Ming—”

“Say no more,” the porter interrupted with a broad grin. “It's the Big House you want.”

“Thank you. Is it far from here?”

“That depends on how far you think far is,” the porter said, scratching the back of his head. “But it is a long walk. I can give you directions, if you like.”

“Yes, please.” There were plenty of air taxis lined up waiting for customers, but he didn't want to sail over the countryside. He wanted to see the land close up and get a feel for the place.

A strapping lad, who had just finished loading his wagon with supplies, overheard their conversation. “Are you certain you do not want a ride, sir? I have to pass right by the property on my way home. Me and my old hover cart move slow, but it will be quicker than walking.”

“If you're sure you don't mind, that sounds perfect.” He had expected to find staff who spoke English at the station, but it was surprising to hear it from a country boy. He couldn't help smiling at the way the young man's gold coin eyes shone like twin moons in his dark face. Tossing his pack on top of the pile, he climbed aboard and introduced himself. “I'm Sayel che'Azehl-Saya.”

“And I am Haigha Fisbee,” the young man said, nodding pleasantly as he guided the cart onto main road.

Eying his work-worn khaki overalls and bare, muscular arms, Sayel said, “I'm guessing you're a farmer. Do specialize in a particular crop?”

“Yes—hay!” Haigha replied, with a boisterous laugh. “I never realized until just now that my name sounds a lot like my specialty when you say it in English.”

“How do you say it in your language?”

“You probably could not pronounce it.” Haigha winked.

Having been warned about the puzzling nature of the Xeran language, Sayel chuckled appreciatively as he took in the scenery around them. If he hadn't known better he would have sworn he was on Earth. There were trees lining the road that looked surprisingly like maples, oaks, and silver birch, the overhanging boughs creating intervals of welcome shade as they floated peacefully along.

Patches of wildflowers brightened the landscape. Long-stemmed red blooms similar to poppies sat among tiny pale blue flowers with yellow centers like forget-me-nots. He turned his face up to the blazing afternoon sun, enjoying the hypnotic undercurrent of insects humming their gratitude in murmurs that rose and fell like waves on the breeze. He ducked instinctively when a good-sized blue jay sailed past, giving its raucous cry.

"I'm seeing a lot of things that don't look like they belong here," he remarked.

"Oh yes," Haigha said, nodding sagely, "both flora and fauna have a way of sneaking out of Miss Ming's property from time to time."

They were surrounded by a chorus of birdsong. Sayel had counted more than a dozen different calls so far. He was about to ask Haigha about the species that were native to the planet when he noticed the young man's eyes were closed and he appeared to be nodding off. Recalling that he had a virtual information pamphlet that the stationmaster had given him, he pulled it out and scanned the highlights.

Evidently, Xeran had a moderately advanced, cooperative society populated with farmers who worked hard to supply other worlds with many sought-after crops. It was neither a tourist destination nor a commercial one, since very little manufacturing was done on the planet. What they needed in the way of modern farming equipment, processors and transport, was purchased from other worlds with the proceeds from their "famously bounteous harvests."

Sayel smiled, remembering the sight of the massive flower farms he'd seen from the windows of the transport ship while they were in orbit. Planted in spiral patterns across each continent, the vivid colors turned the globe into one gigantic work of art.

Haigha jerked slightly and his glittering amber eyes flew open. "So," he said, clearing his throat, "are you a relative of Miss Ming?"

"No," Sayel said, tucking the pamphlet into his shirt pocket. "Her brother, Benet, is a friend of mine. Why do you ask?"

"You remind me of her. You know, I helped build the Big House."

"Is that really what she calls it?"

"No," Haigha admitted, "that is just our name for it. No one else around here has a house anything like hers, set in the middle of a forest of trees. Tree roots get in the way of our farming practices and so we have always limited their growth. But the people who originally owned Miss Ming's property decided to grow fruit orchards and trees for sap, since this area happens to be rocky and hilly and lends itself to such crops. They left it to a nephew, but it turned out he had no interest in farming. He departed Xeran at the first opportunity and so the land was left to grow wild. Having the Teletians come along to revitalize it was a wonderful thing. We Xerans do not like to see land going to waste."

"But isn't your planet the top producer of the special plants used for treating firewood?"

Sayel cocked an eyebrow at him. "That seems odd for a planet without forests."

Haigha straightened his back. "Endora oil plants," he intoned, "produce a substance that will make wood burn for several days, leaving little or no ash once consumed." He gave a shy smile. "That was one of the first things I learned to say in English, back when I was in school. We allow trees to grow in our yards, and near our lakes and rivers, for shade. Things grow so rapidly on Xeran, there are always some ready to harvest for firewood while others are growing tall. But ever since Miss Ming got here, as you can see, we now have trees in other places. The farmers around here are quick to uproot any that grow too close to their crops, but overall, I think it is a nice addition to the countryside."

"I agree," Sayel said. "I'm looking forward to meeting her." He had known about Ming for a long time but somehow their paths had never crossed. He supposed it made sense that Haigha would assume they were related.

Half-blood Teletians were extremely rare. He, Ming, and her brother Benet, were the only half Teletians presently in existence as far as he knew, whether half Human as they were or half anything else. Considering their particular uniqueness, he'd always thought it was strange that Fate hadn't brought Ming into his life before this.

"You have never met her?" Haigha asked. "Then you are in for a treat. But may I ask about your ears? I thought all Teletians had two points at the tops of their ears. How is it that you and Miss Ming only have the one?"

"It's a mutation." Sayel explained. "We both have Human mothers and Teletian fathers."

"Really? Imagine that. But, now that you mention it, I can see that Miss Ming is definitely a little bit of both."

"What makes you say that?" Sayel asked curiously.

Genetically speaking, Humans and Teletians were very similar, at least in all of the basic ways. The biggest difference was that, unlike Earth, the entire planet of Telet housed not just one race, but one single ethnicity. Generally taller than most Humans, they all had dark hair, smooth olive skin, and sharp cheekbones that gave their large green eyes a slight upward slant. But Haigha was right: their most distinctive features were doubly-pointed ears that sported a lazy 'M' shape at the top.

"I think you will find that Miss Ming is a puzzle. Perhaps you will be the one to solve her," Haigha said with an enigmatic smile. "And here we are."

They rounded a corner and a pair of formidable metal gates came into view. Set into a high stone wall, they were surrounded by a thick forest of trees. As the cart slowed to a halt, Sayel jumped down and grabbed his pack.

"Thanks for the ride. It was a pleasure to meet you."

"Same here," Haigha said, tipping his wide-brimmed hat, as he continued on down the road.

Looking around him, Sayel wasn't sure what to do next and realized (belatedly) that he should have asked Haigha how he was supposed to gain entry. There was no buzzer or bell that he could see. Only a sign that read 'Private Property' which simply restated the obvious.

Just as he was considering whether he should scale the wall, the gates parted and swung silently inward. Someone knew he was here. He passed through and they shut behind him as

stealthily as they'd opened. He stood staring at them for a moment, wondering just what he'd gotten himself into. But then, settling his pack more comfortably on his shoulders, he left the gates behind.

The path was simply a narrower version of the road. Made of the same smooth paving material, it was littered with a carpet of pine needles that crunched pleasantly underfoot. He saw patches of the wildflowers he'd encountered earlier and farther along there were daffodils, hyacinths and lilies of the valley, flourishing in the spots where the sun came down in long shafts, warming the ground between the trees.

A gentle breeze caressed his face and there was a babble of twittering and gossip in the branches high above his head. He breathed deeply, enjoying the aroma of evergreens and the occasional whiff of wood smoke. The path turned to the right as he made his way up a steep incline and, when he reached the top of the hill, he stopped and took in the view.

The house was truly one of a kind. Set into the middle of a small valley, it certainly was a big house, made of fieldstone walls that were framed with a dark wood. Built around a central courtyard, the flagged terrace had a charming three-tiered fountain at its center, the lively sound of the water providing a percussive counterpoint to the woodwind piping of the birds.

Teletian style hexagonal-shaped rooms sat at the four corners of the main level and also above, creating a second and in some spots a third story, each capped with blue and gray slate tiles that curved slightly as the roof rose to peaks above each elevation. It might have been a hodgepodge, but the design and roofline were artful and somehow gave the impression that the house had simply grown out of the fertile Xeran soil.

Completely captivated by the sights and sounds, Sayel didn't notice her at first, standing in the shadow of the entryway. But then the edge of her tunic fluttered in the breeze and the crimson color caught his eye. Grinning as he made his way down the hill, he spread his hands and called out, "You have a beautiful property!"

Arms folded, she leaned against the doorjamb regarding him with slightly narrowed eyes. But then her expression lightened. "Do you know," she said, with a laugh, "I just now figured out who you are."

"Didn't Benet tell you I was coming?"

"He was in a hurry, as usual." Pushing herself upright, she smiled at the mention of her brother. "He said you were a good friend and former student looking for an out of the way place to take a holiday, but he didn't tell me that you were the one—and only—Sayel."

"Just as you are the one and only Ming."

He stood a few feet from her now and could see that she was uniquely beautiful and, at first glance, he thought she looked nothing like her brother. But then he realized there was something about the planes of her face and the set of her shoulders that reminded him very much of Benet, after all.

She was tall and slim, with long blond hair that undoubtedly came from her Human mother. And her ears, unlike full-blooded Teletians, came to a single delicate point at the top, just like his, displaying the rare genetic mutation Haigha had commented on.

Walking out into the sun, she squinted against the glare. "Not the one and only Ming. It's a

very common name, as you probably know. But it is nice to finally meet you. I've been curious about you for a long time." She frowned slightly. "Are you sure we haven't met before? You seem awfully familiar."

Sayel felt it too. The sense of recognition was strong. "I expect it's just our similar heredity, no?" he said, lifting one shoulder in a half-shrug.

She regarded him then with what her grandmother would have called a cool Teletian gaze. Sayel was as dark as she was fair, with striking hazel eyes framed by thick, nearly black eyebrows. His teeth, like hers, were excellent and very white, making a marked contrast to his tanned skin when he spoke. His nose was a bit too large for his face, but she decided it added character, which something less bold would lack. And it was nicely balanced by a wide mouth, its quirked upper lip managing to convey both wit and a well-developed sense of irony.

She found him extremely appealing, and her reaction surprised her. Maybe she really had been alone for too long (as her parents were forever pointing out). Still, she had the strangest feeling that they'd met before, but the memory of where and when was blurred. Like a dream upon awakening, it kept scooting out of reach.

Reminding herself that she was the hostess here, she smiled warmly at him. "Well, we know each other now. Welcome, and please come in."

Sayel followed her into the house. Setting his pack down in the tiled foyer, he shrugged off his jacket and looked around with interest.

The living area incorporated design elements from both Telet and Earth. It was open and airy with polished wooden floors, whitewashed walls, and dark beams high overhead. Floor-to-ceiling windows ran all along the front and the back of the house letting the greenly dappled sunlight pour in, and the far end of the room was dominated by a handsome cut-stone fireplace with a cherry wood mantel, in which a small fire crackled and danced.

"Did you walk from the town?" Ming asked, ushering him into the kitchen. It was a cheerful room done in yellow and blue, with shiny copper pots hanging over a generous center island.

"No, I got a ride from a nice young farmer who I met at the transport station."

"Haigha?"

"How did you guess?"

"He's an old friend. And he's fascinated by foreigners."

"I noticed," Sayel said chuckling. "I was surprised to see a lot of plants along the way that looked like they came from Earth."

"I brought cuttings of my favorites with me when I moved here. Once in a while, when the protection field around the property is open, errant seeds and the occasional bird find their way out on the wind."

"But you haven't lived on Xeran that long, have you? Some of the trees are huge."

"The soil on this planet is phenomenal and the weather is perfect. Things grow at fantastic rates." She took a pitcher out of the cooler and set it on a tray.

Sniffing something delicious, Sayel lifted the edge of a tea towel covering a round basket on the counter and the comforting scent of buttermilk biscuits filled the air. "Did you actually make drop scones?" he asked.

She nodded as she took two tumblers out of a cabinet. “I did. It’s my Grandma Margaret’s recipe. Go on, take one while they’re still warm. And I made iced Teletian amaset tea, unless you’d prefer water?”

“Iced amaset sounds perfect. Thank you.” He took a bite and chewed blissfully. For some reason he couldn’t stop staring at her. There was an undeniable feeling of recognition.

Ming met his gaze, but then she deliberately lowered her lashes and finished assembling their afternoon snack. “Come on,” she said, “let’s sit outside. It’s a lovely day.”

“Here, let me take that.” Shoving the rest of the scone into his mouth, Sayel took the tray from her and followed her through French doors that opened onto a large patio. He set it on a round table surrounded by chairs, and surveyed the yard.

The patio was lined with polished wooden benches, cleverly carved into a low fence that sported a well-developed tangle of grape vines growing along the back. Three broad stone steps led down to a lush lawn that a hover drone was presently skimming and trimming to the perfect height, while birds swooped down one at a time to perch on the fence rails. Cocking their heads, they peeked curiously at the newcomer before retreating back into the safety of the dark green boughs.

“Sláinte,” Ming said, raising her glass.

Sayel sat down across from her and reached for his own drink, replying automatically, “Sláinte mhor.” Taking a sip, his eyebrows shot up in surprise. “This isn’t from a processor. This tastes fresh!”

“Remind me to show you the greenhouse, later on.”

“Why does a woman who could have everything provided for her with processors choose to grow her own produce?”

She tilted her head to one side, considering this. “I grew up in the middle of some fairly famous gardens and spent as much time as I could with Talashi and Willem, our cook and gardener. I loved nurturing something from a seedling and eventually taking it into the kitchen, so we could turn it into dinner. After I left active duty and moved here, I rediscovered my love of cooking. This place is my own little paradise.”

“It’s a long way from Earth, and from Telet, for that matter,” he remarked. “I have to say, this isn’t exactly what I expected from a former lieutenant in the navy, who was also the wife of Captain Gabriel O’Ryan.”

Ming’s expression clouded over at the mention of her late husband. “I really did enjoy my time in the service, but I missed things like having a house and a garden. Gabe was the one who hated the idea of leaving the *Aries* and settling down.” She sighed. “I grieved for a long time, but building this place and getting settled here has helped,” she said, glancing up at the sky, as if she hoped to see his face there. “Of course, I’d trade all of this in a heartbeat to have him back.”

“I’m very sorry for your loss. He was a great man and a good friend.”

“Friend?” Ming realized that Gabriel had been fairly well-known because of his reputation, but she’d never heard him mention Sayel.

“I’m sorry—I just assumed you knew. We almost always got together when he visited Scotland.” Uncomfortable now, he made a feeble attempt at a joke. “The man could never say

no to a pint.”

“True enough,” she agreed, laughing a little. “But I had no idea. You’d think he’d have told me about you.”

“He never even mentioned my name?”

“Not that I recall. Wait—my *brother* knew that you were friends with my husband?”

Sayel hesitated before answering her, but in the end he had to admit that their visits typically included the three of them. They knew the inside of every bar within fifty miles of the Naval Academy in Aberdeen. He could remember suggesting more than once that, considering their unique similarities, they should invite Ming to join them. But Gabriel had always been quick to give a reason about why she couldn’t.

“I’m sorry. I hope that doesn’t upset you.”

“No, it doesn’t matter,” she said dismissively. “I’m sure there are lots of things Gabe did that I never knew about.” This was patently untrue, but it was the only polite thing she could think of to say in the present situation.

“Considering your special gifts,” Sayel ventured cautiously, “I suppose I figured you’d have been able to read his mind.”

“How much do you know about my condition?” Ming asked, mildly startled.

“No more than what all Teletian children are taught in school but I always suspected there was more to it than that,” Sayel admitted, suddenly wondering whether he should have brought it up at all.

But she smiled politely and nodded. “There is definitely more to it.”

Ming was what the Teletians called a Mapek Kahrisi, a granite butterfly. There were only ten women in Telet’s recorded history known to have been born with the genetic anomalies that gave them extraordinary healing powers. Their gifts made them as strong as granite, but left them completely defenseless while their bodies suffered through the grueling recovery process.

“To be perfectly honest, I’ve spent a lot of time wishing I could forget about what I am.” She wrinkled her nose. “I always hated being treated differently. I know I should be grateful for my gifts, but there are days ...”

“When I was growing up,” Sayel said, “I thought the Mapek Kahrisi were like Earth’s unicorns. Nice to imagine, but not something you’d ever expect to meet.”

“Well, we’re almost as scarce,” she agreed, with a wry smile. “We only come along every four hundred years or so. I caused quite a stir since no one could believe that a half-blood Teletian was born with such a rare gift.” She could still remember the hushed tones and sidelong looks she’d gotten from the women in the temple when her grandmother, Ming-fan, introduced her so many years ago. “I try not to let it define me, but that’s easier said than done.”

“I can’t imagine wishing away gifts like that,” Sayel said, lifting an eyebrow.

Ming looked down at the hands that contained such incredible power, thinking as she always did that they looked surprisingly normal. “It’s just that my condition was very ... isolating. I spent most of my childhood learning about how to use my gifts. No school dances, no regular school for that matter.”

“So, no boyfriends?” Sayel asked. “No fooling around in the back of an airvan?”

She barked a laugh. “Oh no. My grandmother made sure of that. We imprint on a mate through a transference of fluids. Once things get physical, it’s virtually impossible for a Mapek Kahrisi, or her mate, to have a relationship with anyone else. I always knew that, for me, the first serious relationship would bind us permanently, and that the healing between us would become automatic.”

“So the bonding is biochemical,” Sayel mused. “But I assume you can heal other people, right? Besides yourself and your mate?”

“I can heal anybody of just about anything if I choose to, but I didn’t have a choice with Gabe. After we were physically joined, if he was injured it passed to me automatically. His wounds would disappear as they moved from his body to mine, and then my body would take care of the healing for both of us.”

If that were true, Sayel wondered why she hadn’t been able to save her husband. But it seemed too soon to ask a question like that. “Were you,” he groped for the right word, “allowed to grow up at home? Or were you sent off to live in the Temple of Mapek, or somewhere that was considered sacred?” Visions of rites, rituals, and billowing incense flitted through his mind.

“No.” She smiled, picking up on his thoughts. “I lived at home. But I studied at the temple. Historically speaking, the ability to heal has always been thought of as miraculous so, in ancient times, they thought healers like me were miracle workers and worthy of a temple. Our ancestors believed we represent the race in its purest form. But so few of us have been born, as the centuries passed, people’s interest in the subject faded. Since there’s virtually no illness on Telet, it wasn’t until we branched out into the galaxy and discovered species truly in need of healing that a resurgence of interest in the Mapek Kahrisi occurred.”

“If you don’t mind my asking,” Sayel said, “what happened? How did your family figure out what you are?”

“I was in our gardens talking to my secret friend, and my grandmother overheard me.”

“Do all healers have secret friends?” Sayel asked, intrigued.

“Yes, we do. And frankly, mine can be a real pain in—”

Ming was cut off by a sudden gust of wind and a blare of noise that resolved into brass instruments combined with the music of strings and the wail of a singer. A thing that could only be called a ‘mother ship’ materialized. A grandly majestic spacecraft, covered with impressive flashing lights, shimmered in the sky above them and slowly began its descent.

Thoroughly bewildered, Sayel started up out of his chair, ready to defend Ming if necessary, but he saw that she was motioning for him to sit and looked mildly amused.

“All right, Paradox,” she said, “we know you’re here. Sorry if I offended you, but you know you’re supposed to wait for an invitation.”

The music faded as the image of the ship dissolved and an extremely large mouth appeared in its place. It exploded with a peculiar noise, and then it spoke.

“I *distinctly* (very nearly) heard my name. Tut-tut Ming. You of all people should know that you must never name a thing unless you wish to call it.” A glimmering face that was cat-like, complete with whiskers, began to materialize around the mouth.

Sayel gazed at the spectacle, wide-eyed, realizing that he’d seen an apparition like this before,

though he still had no idea what it was. Since Ming obviously wasn't threatened by it, he deliberately relaxed his muscles and allowed himself to consider the possibilities of what it might be. He was, after all, a theoretical physicist.

Striving for nonchalance, he leaned back in his chair. "Was that a sneeze you opened with?" he asked casually.

"No. It was meant to be a *barrumph*, or something like it." The creature added a body to its head: a glittering, gray furred body with four paw-like appendages and a long tail. It regarded Sayel, turning toward him as it floated above the table. "Do you think I am a *fabulous* monster?" it asked hopefully.

"Down, Paradox," Ming said, with an air of calling the meeting to order. "You'll have to forgive him, Sayel. He has an irritating fondness for the ancient tales of a Human author called Lewis Carroll."

"Dodgson! Charles Lutwidge Dodgson," the creature corrected. "Lewis was merely his nom de plume. And 'ancient' is a relative term where I come from." It giggled and turned back to Sayel. "He wrote with great style about creatures like me, you know."

"Oh, come on, Paradox," Ming said. "The man didn't write about creatures from other dimensions. He was an author of fiction, not a scientist." Addressing Sayel, she said, "I was about to explain that my so-called secret friend is a fourth dimensional being, who has a habit of taking teasing much too far—"

"You wound me, Ming," Paradox interrupted, shimmering indignantly. "You could so easily have been saddled with a personality-less fourth dimensional drone that might have taken little or no interest in you. You really ought to be more appreciative of my charming wit. Besides, you've never taken afternoon tea with Mr. Dodgson and I have. Where in the Universe do you think his ideas came from? I was clearly the inspiration for his Cheshire Cat." Before she could formulate a retort, it raised a paw. "Don't be rude," it warned, "it's not nice."

"Um, excuse me, but I felt distinctly mocked," Sayel said, drawing his thick eyebrows down and giving it a pointed look, "speaking of manners."

Paradox was unfazed. "If you felt mocked, then I must apologize. Actually, I was attempting to judge your sense of humor." It blinked its large eyes dolefully at him. "So far, the jury is still *out*."

Then, almost as quickly as the creature had appeared, it began to fade. The air around it shimmered like desert heat. When the mouth was all that remained, it grinned broadly. "It's extremely entertaining to see the two of you together again. I have waited," it snickered, "*a long time* for this." And with that, the mouth, peeling with laughter, slowly faded to a mist.

Sayel turned to Ming and was surprised to see that the color had drained from her face. "What is it? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said, shaking her head a little as if to clear it. "It just occurred to me that, technically, you shouldn't have been able to see him. It's been so long since he came to me when someone else was around and, of course, my family can see him, but ..."

"In that case, I should probably tell you that this isn't the first time I've seen it—or something like it," Sayel confided. "But it never actually spoke to me before."

Ming reached for her tea and took a restorative gulp. “Evidently, there’s more to you than meets the eye, Sayel.”

“Hah! Look who’s talking.”

That put things into perspective rather nicely and she relaxed her shoulders, lifting her long hair off her neck for a few seconds before letting it fall. “Touché. But I’m sure there’s an explanation. As I said, each Mapek Kahrissi has a connection with a being from the fourth dimension. They seem to be attracted to us. We can’t actually cross dimensions, but some of our abilities allow us to reach into theirs. Evidently, when I perform an act of healing or start a fire using my thoughts, it shows up like a tiny beacon in their dimension and they’re drawn to it. Like *flies*,” she added, raising her voice.

There was another puff of wind, like an exhale in each of their faces, and then it was gone. Although he hadn’t noticed it had ceased, Sayel realized that the birds had suddenly resumed their chorus and wondered whether the animals had been disturbed by what was probably a temporal disruption.

“He comes and goes as he pleases,” Ming complained, “but he’s so sweet, I always feel guilty when I find him annoying.”

Sayel smiled. “Another paradox, eh? Has it ever interfered with your plans?”

“Not really. He says there are laws that govern their kind and, even though they’re allowed to make suggestions, actual meddling is against the rules. But nothing stops their curiosity. The thing is, only people who’ve joined with my mind telepathically have been able to see Paradox, until now.” She eyed him thoughtfully. “Anyway, he first came to me a few days before my third birthday. I had recently discovered that I could levitate things and I ended up breaking a piece of my mother’s crystal. I tried to move it from the sink back into the cupboard, but I lost my nerve. It dropped on the floor and shattered. I panicked, and just when I decided to hide the evidence (rather than confess), he introduced himself and then he taught me how to repair the glass, using my mind.”

“Weren’t you frightened?” Sayel asked incredulously.

“No.” She grinned and shook her head. “Paradox is very clever. Before he appeared to me physically, he came to me as a voice that asked whether I needed a fairy god-creature. Since that was exactly what I needed, and since I was deeply fascinated by fairy tales at that age, I took his offer in stride. By the time he finally materialized, we had become friends. Sort of.”

“Ming, you’re joking about something that the scientific community would consider revolutionary.” Now that the shock was wearing off, Sayel’s mind had started to race. “Physicists have been studying other dimensions for years and we still only have theories to work with. We know there are other dimensions beyond our space-time continuum, but we’ve never been able to reach them. Now you’re telling me that for thousands of years in the Temple of Mapek, on our home world—our Telet—there are people who’ve had regular contact with extra-dimensional beings?”

She nodded. “Yes, although I don’t think anyone truly understands what they are. And, as far as I know, fourth dimensional beings like Paradox only show themselves to the Mapek Kahrissi and the people closest to them. The fact that he allowed you to see him is puzzling.” She gave a

resigned shrug. “Maybe it’s because you’re a physicist and he finds your research intriguing.”

“Has it ever described its world to you? I don’t suppose you’ve ever seen it?” Sayel pressed, his scientific curiosity completely overwhelming his good manners.

Ming smiled at his enthusiasm, and she was curious herself. Paradox had never appeared to anyone outside of her immediate circle, and the casual implication that she and Sayel had met before had not escaped her notice. “I’ve never visited the fourth dimension myself, but he says it’s a realm of pure thought. Since it’s outside of time, he and his kind can view whatever interests them, whether it’s in the past, present, or future. They live in a world of contemplation and most importantly, according to Paradox, intention. He says that’s how they travel—not physically, but by forming specific intentions to gain access to past or future events.

“I have to say, it’s amazing to me that it looked so three dimensional,” Sayel said. “Scientists have always hypothesized that a creature from the fourth dimension would look as strange to us as our three dimensional form would look to something that exists in two dimensions: incomprehensibly bizarre. Seriously—a gray tabby?”

She giggled. “I know it seems strange. But Paradox claims he doesn’t actually have a physical form. What we see is a projection generated by his thoughts. I guess it’s possible that another fourth dimensional creature might perceive him differently. If you ask him about it though, he’ll just tell you that you see what you want to see.”

“Why do you refer to Paradox as a he?” Sayel asked. “Is it male?”

“I have no idea,” Ming replied honestly. “It’s just easier, I suppose. And he does have a rather deep voice. I’ve always thought of him as male, but he’s never told me whether or not he has a gender.”

Crossing his arms, Sayel eased himself back more comfortably in the chair, stretching his long legs out under the table. “So, he’s immortal?”

“As far as I know. Paradox says there are lots of beings in the Universe living their lives outside of the third dimension. I asked him if he was an angel once,” she said, smiling at the memory. “It’s one of the few times I’ve seen him look vulnerable, almost shy. He said that he’s not even close. Apparently, real angels live in one of the highest planes of consciousness, many dimensions beyond his.”

“Can you call it ‘live’ if you never die?” Sayel teased.

“Okay, he *exists* in his particular realm which he claims is the fourth dimension, or whatever the next one is after ours. When I asked him if it ever got boring, living on and on with no end in sight, he just laughed and asked how it could possibly be boring when they have all the time in the Universe to explore all of Creation. Besides, from what I’ve been able to gather, that’s his job.”

“Is his name really Paradox?” Sayel asked.

Mildly embarrassed, Ming admitted that she had come up with the name herself. “It’s a tradition that each Mapek Kahrisi chooses a name for their extra-dimensional guide. When he asked what I thought his might be, I came up with the name Paradox because,” she sighed, “he cannot be, and yet, he is.”

“Very creative,” Sayel said approvingly. “I probably would have called him something

boringly scientific—like Unexplained Phenomenon.”

Ming laughed. “Did you always want to be a physicist?” she asked.

“I did. Actually, I’ve dreamed of having an experience like this all my life.” Sayel shook his head in wonder. “But, what’s with the music?”

“Ah yes, the music,” she said. “Supposedly, everyone has something like a soundtrack going on in their head, and Paradox enjoys sharing whatever’s going on in his mind out loud. For some reason he’s entranced with music from the twentieth century on Earth.”

“That would explain the hard rock entrance.”

Ming rolled her eyes. “Of all the music in the Universe, he claims that music from nearly a thousand years ago speaks to him the most clearly. But my mother happens to be a professor of history and she specialized in the that century, so I’ve always wondered if it’s because music from that time has been a part of the soundtrack of my life.”

“Does he always look like a cat? Does everyone perceive him that way?”

She nodded and took a sip of her tea. “As far as I know. If you ask Paradox about it, he’ll tell you that he has a fondness for cats. He admires what he calls their glorious independence and says that of all living things, they have the most expressive bodies. He likes to play with that sort of thing. And, as you heard, he claims to be the reason Lewis Carroll wrote what he wrote about Cheshire cats in Alice’s Looking Glass World.”

“Honestly,” Sayel said, “I was prepared for him to try to convince me that your friend Haigha actually has a friend named Hatta.” He gave an exaggerated wink.

“Good one! As far as I know there aren’t any Mad Hatters or March Hares here on Xeran. But Paradox has a very dry sense of humor, so you have to take a lot of what he says with a grain of salt. He can be a terrible tease.”

“Have you ever seen another one?” Sayel asked hopefully. “Are you sure he’s one of many?” He’d spent years trying to picture what a fourth dimensional creature would be like, and now he’d not only seen one, he’d actually been introduced.

Ming hesitated before answering him and looked out at the yard, her gaze lighting on a robin that was hopping across the grass. She was feeling a bit rattled. Even after all these years, a visit from Paradox was still an extraordinary experience, and having Sayel thrown abruptly into the mix had unsettled her.

“I’m afraid there is no short answer to that question,” she said. “How long do you plan to stay?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a week? Less, if that will be inconvenient.”

“Not at all,” she replied graciously. “Your company has already proved fascinating and you’ve been here less than an hour.”

Sayel reached for his glass and took a long drink. “Mmm ... I’d forgotten how good fresh amaset is. I’ve lived on Earth for so long, I’ve grown accustomed to black tea. So tell me, do you resent the fact that you were born a Mapek Kahrissi?”

“No ... not really,” she said, with a crooked smile. “My grandmother taught me that I should be proud, and grateful for my gifts. The Temple of Mapek is an amazing place filled with history and incredible works of art. I was always happy to spend time there. But it wasn’t much fun

being constantly sheltered and watched.” She sighed. “Unfortunately, there are races in our galaxy who believe a Mapek Kahrisi would make a great trophy. I think that was the worst part: knowing that I could be viewed as a commodity, rather than a person. Being as strong as granite when it comes to healing myself and others is a fine thing, but I don’t actually have to be in love with a mate for the permanent biochemical bonding process to work its magic.”

“Seriously?” Sayel’s eyes widened. “I’ll bet worrying about that gave your parents a few sleepless nights.” He chuckled. “And how much trouble did it cause when Ming the Mapek Kahrisi decided to attend the Interplanetary Naval and Trade Alliance Academy and then joined with a full-blooded Human?”

“That,” Ming declared, “is a long story.”

Ω

Gabriel stared in fascination. At first he thought it was simply a dream, born of wishful thinking. But as he watched his beautiful wife interacting with his old friend, it slowly dawned on him that it was real. He was viewing events occurring in linear time with a bird’s-eye view from the fourth dimension.

“So,” he said thoughtfully, “Ming finally built her own house. Good for her. But I’d like to know what Sayel is doing there. And why could he see you if he’d never met Ming before?”

Paradox gave a shy smile and its glow became a massive silver shimmer engulfing them in waves of song. “Soon all shall be revealed, Gabriel. You asked to see Ming in the present, and I have granted your wish. Now pay close attention. I am going to take you seven years into Ming’s past. You must see how the story unfolds from the beginning if you’re going to have any hope of influencing the outcome. We will begin our journey on an obscure little planet called Sung’ni ...

3 Sung’ni

King Isha’el leaned against the parapet on the roof outside of his private apartments, surveying his lands. It was a breezy day and a pleasantly warm one, with mountainous white clouds sailing along like galleons on a south wind. A neat patchwork of farmsteads decorated the lushly green and golden rolling hills, some outlined with fences and dotted with animals. The brilliant sunlight of morning sparkled and danced on the water in the irrigation canals, making a glittering pattern that defined the panorama.

It was a sight that usually pleased him, but at the moment the King was not pleased. He was not pleased at all. Turning away from the wall and the wind, he went back around the corner to the more sheltered terrace and began pacing, lost in thought.

After months of negotiating and endless sessions with his parliament, their planet still had not been invited to become official members of the Interplanetary Naval and Trade Alliance, commonly known as the INTA. Having been fed countless excuses regarding the delay, Isha’el was ready to choke on them.

While it was true that getting all of the continents on Sung’ni to agree to be ruled by one

government had been difficult (and bloody) to achieve, that particular membership requirement had finally been met. They had worked together as a unified planet for over a year now. True, there were still skirmishes here and there: disaffected youth rebelling against the notion of a united world, for the most part. But things were peaceful and prosperous enough to keep the bulk of the population happy.

However, the King mused as he walked back and forth, his sandals slapping monotonously, what was the good of achieving the capability of interplanetary travel if you couldn't mingle profitably with whomever you chose? In a nutshell, the INTA claimed that the people of Sung'ni still lacked—what was the latest term the officials had employed? Cohesion. That was it. Supposedly, Sung'ni lacked the *cohesion* they deemed necessary for trading within the exclusive interplanetary market.

Until they were formally accepted into the group of planets that made up the Alliance, Sung'ni was forced to remain nothing more than a token player in the marketplace. Without the assistance of INTA cruisers, both for protection and the additional hauling capacity they could provide, it was nearly impossible to get ahead. They made small deals here and there, mostly for their precious metals and ore. But Isha'el truly believed that his planet was destined for greatness and that the time for it was now.

Halting his march, he leaned against the crenellated, pale pink stucco wall and picked moodily at it, pushing the small pieces he loosened with his thumbnail over the edge. He grimaced, thinking about how old the Palace really was. Parts of it were hundreds of years old. He dreamed of rebuilding it as a monument to his achievements, but when would the Fates consider him worthy?

The INTA assured them that their day would come, claiming that they had dealt with planets like Sung'ni before and regarded the situation as being simply a matter of time. But, even though Isha'el was an intelligent man and could, as a politician, see their point to a degree, unfortunately he had never been a patient one.

He could remember his father, the old King, lecturing him about it. "Isha'el, my son, you must learn the lessons of tolerance. Let things happen in their own time. Work hard, love your family, and the rest will fall into place."

He missed his father. Although, he reflected rather cynically, the only things tolerance had gotten the old King were a crumbling castle and a bunch of lazy brats. Isha'el's younger siblings were spoiled rotten, in his opinion. He was the only one who had any drive.

Pushing himself upright, he dusted his fingers off on his heavily embroidered purple robes and resumed his peregrinations, clasping his hands behind his back.

He decided that what he needed (planetary cohesion be damned) was some sort of lever: an association with one of the INTA officials that would help to pave the way. And just recently, a plan had started to take shape in his mind. He needed something that would help him worm his way into the good graces and perhaps even into the life of someone important within the Alliance. If he could manage that, he believed their membership would be granted, regardless of the actual cohesiveness of the various tribes on Sung'ni.

Initially, he had turned his eye to Earth. Sung'nians were close cousins of Humans when it

came to genetics. To outsiders, it was hard to tell which was which. They had no difficulty recognizing one of their own which was due, in part, to the vast differences in their linguistics. Still, there was a basic connection between them that Isha'el had hoped might work in his favor. But so far, none of his schemes had borne fruit among his contacts on Earth. And so he had shifted his gaze to the planet Telet.

When Isha'el was a young man, he had lived on Telet for a year as part of his education, and, as a result, he was fluent in the one language spoken there. It was a popular destination for off-world students who wished to study its uniqueness: it was the only planet known to have evolved with a single language and culture, revolving around trade.

Never having adopted the capitalistic ways of money and gain, Telet maintained a purely self-supporting society in which everyone shared, trading what they had for what they needed, with no one thing being considered more valuable than another. For them, art was as necessary as food since they believed it fed the soul. Sometimes Teletians actually traded offspring when it came time for apprenticeships to commence. If the son of a baker wanted to be an artist, or the daughter of an artist wished to study oceanography, amicable shifts would be made between families during the years when it was customary for young people to choose and learn a trade.

Open-air markets thrived all over the planet. On any day of the week, you could find fresh produce, jewelry, made-to-order clothing, or sculpture—whatever your heart desired. Isha'el smiled, recalling the ordered bustle of the crowds basking in the brilliant Teletian sunshine and the amazingly efficient virtual stalls that invisibly deflected the elements when the huge skies opened with soft rain. And the food! His mouth watered just thinking about it.

He recalled an exceptionally pretty Teletian woman who made confections. Her stall had been one of his regular stops. "What have you got for me today, my lady?" he would say, eyeing her wares with pleasant anticipation.

"I had a feeling you would be coming by, sir, so I made your favorite, red berry cream cake."

He had wanted to think she was flirting with him, even though he knew better. He was sure that she had a good, solid, and hardworking husband at home.

They all did.

Still, there was no denying that the Teletians were a talented bunch, experts at living in the moment and enjoying each one. They took great pride in the peaceful flow of their society, which had supported itself in this way, quite marvelously, for centuries. And there continued to be satisfactory occupations for everyone.

The fact that, in general, Teletian couples rarely produced more than two offspring helped considerably. Even with their long lifespan, averaging two hundred and twenty-five years, they had never faced the problem of exponential population growth. Slightly larger in mass than Sung'ni, there were presently a mere four hundred million inhabitants spread over the eleven continents spanning their globe.

Once Telet broke the barrier of space and achieved interplanetary travel, other planets had been quick to realize that they were trade experts. No one could negotiate like a Teletian, since peaceful barter had always defined their way of life. And so it had become the natural port of call for all who wished to offer what they had in exchange for what they did not.

Isha'el had learned a great deal from the Teletians and, to his credit, he had attempted to apply much of it to his style of governance. But he was enough of a realist to know that in his lifetime, given the vast diversity of the peoples and cultures on Sung'ni, his world would never come close to achieving the sort of planetary accord that Telet had.

While he lived there, besides eating dozens of memorable meals and regularly sampling their excellent wines and ales, he made a point of introducing himself to every Teletian dignitary he came across. Frequenting the local taverns as he did, he was able to meet people while at the same time picking up on rumors and finding out the latest news.

It was in just such a venue that Isha'el had heard the tale of the Mapek Kahrissi. Some thought it was no more than a legend. "Are you asking whether there are healers in the Temple of Mapek? I have never seen one. Some say they are protecting their secrets, but I say it is just an excuse for wasting time. If these women are so laudable, why are they not out among us, sharing their talents with our society, as they should? Do not waste your time, sir. There are many things here on our wonderful planet more worthy of your curiosity."

But whether the local population believed it or not, the story fascinated Isha'el, and he'd never forgotten it. Just recently, he had arranged to have some carefully orchestrated digging done and had been amazed to discover that, not only was the ancient tale true, it was said that there was a young one currently in existence who was not yet mated. Even more amazing was that the father of this genetic anomaly was none other than Thoren che'Kai-Rahvelan, Telet's head trade representative. And, it just so happened, King Isha'el had a son (also named Isha'el) who was exactly the right age and, more importantly, possessed the sort of temperament needed to effectively woo such a prize.

Why in the Universe a planet like Telet had been gifted with the ability to produce such wondrous beings was beyond Isha'el. As he had discovered long ago, most of the people didn't care, shrugging it off as an old wives' tale, which, even if it were true, was best left to those who had some reason to study it. Moreover, ancient Teletian tradition foolishly dictated that the Mapek Kahrissi should be free to go their own way and choose their own path, setting aside their tradition of arranged marriages for the one creature that was truly worthy of a contract.

Such a waste!

Isha'el felt sure that if he could find a plausible reason to arrange a meeting between these two young people, his son would be able to capture the girl's affections easily. Then Sung'ni would be assured of a place in the Alliance, and his son (once he bedded the creature, and if the legends were accurate) would benefit from the tremendously increased lifespan that all of the Mapek Kahrissi and their mates enjoyed, thus ensuring that King Isha'el's blood would continue to rule for centuries.

It would be a fantastic coup, but how to start? He had attempted to mix with the more influential families on Telet many times, but had always been thwarted. Flattery and compliments meant nothing to them. He had actually been introduced to Thoren some years ago, but the man was like all of the rest of his kind: seemingly impervious to charm. Oh, they were friendly enough, outwardly pleasant. But at the end of the day, Teletians were reluctant to mingle with outsiders.

However, Isha'el knew that Thoren, most unusually, had a Human for a wife. So he had mingled at least once, which had given Isha'el some hope of making a connection. All he needed was a reason to reach out, something benign, something completely innocent without so much as a whiff of politics attached to it. He needed—an *enticement*.

Hearing a quiet cough in the room behind him, he turned away from the bright light, irritated at having his thoughts disturbed. When his eyes adjusted, he saw that his steward was waiting for him. The muted stripes of the man's robe blended perfectly with the color of the walls, rendering him almost invisible.

"Yes, Danneth, what is it?"

The steward bowed. "My lord, you wished to review the colonial budgets this morning. I have them with me, if you would like to look them over now. I can come back at a later time, if you prefer."

Isha'el sighed, knowing that he wasn't going to like what he saw. But now was as good a time as any. "Yes, all right. Come outside. The day is too pleasant to waste sitting indoors." Motioning for Danneth to follow him, he returned to the terrace and arranged himself at the table, shoving the remains of his breakfast out of the way.

"Has no one cleared this for you? I will see to it myself. I am sorry—"

"It is all right." The King cut him off with a wave of his hand. "I left orders that I was not to be disturbed. See to it later on and help yourself to a cold drink," he said, nodding at a pitcher on the table, its sides dripping with condensation.

Finding a clean goblet on the sideboard, Danneth poured himself a cup of the King's drink of choice: pale wine mixed with fruit juices. "Thank you, my lord. And you are right, the day is fine. Oh look, sire!" He pointed at a flotilla of hot air balloons drifting past, each one decorated in bright colors.

Isha'el had forgotten about the equinox. Celebrations were, no doubt, going on all over the continent. But here in the capital city they were especially elaborate. The Warm Weather Festival was an ancient tradition on Sung'ni, celebrating the official end of their winter season. Strains of dancing music and the smell of roasting meat wafted up on the breeze.

Wistfully, Danneth wondered whether he'd have time later on to join his family, who were probably in the thick of the merriment. Unfortunately, it seemed that the King didn't feel like celebrating. Sensing his master's disposition, after a few seconds he turned away from the spectacle and went back to the table.

Unrolling a large sheaf of papers, he spread them in front of the King. Then he secured each corner with the heavy coasters kept just for that purpose while privately shaking his head at such old-fashioned habits. Most of the planet had moved to using the airscreen technology now commonplace throughout the galaxy. But Isha'el continued to resist, claiming that he still preferred to see things in black and white.

After scanning the pages moodily, the King raised his eyes to his steward. "Too much ore sits in the ports awaiting transport. Are all of our ships in service?"

Danneth frowned, considering his reply. It was best to be precise when dealing with the King. "We pulled three for necessary upgrades, leaving just twelve active. Eight of those are presently

on their way back from their normal runs.”

“And the other four?”

“Two are being prepared to receive new shipments, and the other two are held in reserve, per your orders.”

Active interplanetary travel was still relatively new to Sung’ni. The King had recently gifted his son, Prince Isha’el, with the prototype of a small ship that was proving to be a great success. But it would be years before they could be produced in quantity.

As with many planets at their stage of development, Sung’ni’s early efforts with propulsion had relied on fossil fuels, which they possessed in abundance. Like ancient Earth, their first forays into space were primitive and cumbersome. However, after being observed for many years by the INTA, the same year as it happened that King Isha’el was born, their planet received a visit from the Welcoming Committee.

It was a job that required rigorous training and tremendous tact. Many planets, never having been visited by off-worlders before, had a tendency to shoot first and ask questions later. Besides introducing the INTA and what it stood for, the committee had found that a willingness to share its advanced knowledge of zero-point energy and photon technology caused most welcome mats to be rolled out with enthusiasm. While it was true that, in general, developing planets were left to evolve on their own in most ways, promoting the use of advanced propulsion techniques kept the galaxy a lot cleaner. It was never difficult to get the new kids on the block to embrace the latest in quantum physics.

It was well known that one of the biggest challenges post-war Earth had faced was disposing of nuclear and chemical waste. The amount left to deal with after the war had been appalling. It taught the Humans many painful lessons, and it took a long time to convince other worlds to allow them to offload it onto a dead planet in a far corner of an otherwise uninhabited star system. It had been expensive, time consuming, and (frankly) embarrassing having to admit that their forebears had produced something deadly that they could not safely destroy.

Isha’el brooded, thinking once again how much Sung’ni would gain by acceptance into the Alliance. But he plugged along until they had gone over everything. He signed off on all of the changes, and then Danneth excused himself so he could load the new information into their data banks.

“Do you anticipate needing me this evening, sire? I had hoped to perhaps join in some of the festivities.”

The King grunted in acknowledgment. “Please do. Someone from the Palace should be seen to participate. I fear I am in no mood for a party.”

The sun was high overhead now, and Isha’el retreated into the dim coolness of his rooms. Virtual fans hovered near the vaulted ceilings, moving the air and stirring the delicate curtains at the long windows, giving the shadows a languid, aquatic quality. Heading for his desk, he was startled to see that Dedi-Isha’el, his seventh wife, had entered his chambers.

Petite and dark, with exotically painted eyes, she stood with her head bowed, waiting for him to give her permission to speak. She was a fairly recent addition to his household, having been

with him for less than two years, and, so far, the King was pleased with her. Quiet and biddable during the day, she was a temptress in his bed at night. He hoped she would give him several sons before he was finished with her.

“Yes, wife, what do you want?” Isha’el was gruff.

Cautiously meeting his eye, Dedi spoke softly. “My lord, you instructed me to study the planet Telet and to tell you if I discovered anything of interest.”

He recalled that he had. Smiling indulgently, he motioned for her to join him on a low couch. “My pretty Dedi, you take your studies so seriously. It pleases me. Tell me, what have you learned?” He leaned toward her, leering at her breasts, which were barely covered by her low-cut, red gown.

She kept her eyes averted. Dedi was still wary enough of the King that she seldom dropped her guard—except when he took her to bed. She loved and had come to trust the man he became when she was in his arms. It was during the days when his tendency to rant made her nervous. Isha’el wasn’t a particularly tall man, but he was an imposing one, muscular and solidly built, with piercing eyes and a booming voice.

Still, all things considered, it was a satisfactory arrangement. The King had a new, young wife who excited him, and Dedi could now enjoy the unbelievable luxury of having daily access to advanced technology. Seventy-five percent of Sung’nians lived an agrarian lifestyle, only mildly mixed with automation, which was comfortable, and the people were content. But those who demonstrated curiosity and aptitude were absorbed into the upper echelons of their society and were educated in the ways of complex machinery. And little Dedi possessed an extremely curious nature.

“I believe that Telet’s head trade representative and his wife have a strong interest in ancient Earth. I have learned that the wife is a Human and was once a teacher of Earth history. This made me wonder whether they might be pleased to be gifted with one of your artifacts.”

The King had a large collection of antiques from various alien cultures: weapons for the most part. Many of them were still functional. There was a very nice .45 caliber automatic pistol he used for target practice when the mood struck him.

“But would the Human female be interested in weapons, my sweet?” He frowned. “Her Teletian husband would not. Surely their interests run more along the lines of, hmm, works of art, or books?”

Dedi gave him a small, conspiratorial smile. “Yes!” she said. “It is a book that I am thinking of, my lord. The weapons you acquired at the end of last year came in a trunk with some other items in it, remember? You said you did not want anything but the guns,” she added defensively. “You told me I could take whatever I wished.”

He didn’t remember, but it hardly mattered. He humored her. “Of course I did. What about it?”

“As it happens, this book was published on Earth during the time period the Human female favors. It is a children’s story about a boy named Pee-tair.”

Isha’el threw his head back and laughed. “Hah! An absurd name. Earth is such an odd place. But were you able to read it? Surely it must have been written in an Earth language.”

Dedi nodded. "It was. But an old friend of my family had a Human mother who taught her many of the words of one of their languages, called Angle-eesh," she said, preening slightly at her superior knowledge of what she clearly viewed as arcane. "She read the book to me several times before she died a few months ago. I cannot read it now, but I remember the story well. And there are marvelous pictures in it."

"I see," Isha'el said, his patience beginning to fray. "And what is the tale that it tells?"

Recognizing the signs, Dedi replied quickly. "Pee-tair is a boy who magically refuses to grow out of childhood, and he spends his never-ending youth flying like a bird." That she remembered clearly, but the rest was a bit hazy, and she groped for what she could add with any confidence. "He—um—he has many incredible adventures. It is really a beautiful thing. I—I only thought ..." She trailed off, unsure of his mood.

The King stared at her with his mouth hanging open before he realized it and snapped it shut. "You must bring me this book, Dedi. At once!"

As she scurried out of the King's chamber, Dedi allowed herself a moment of unguarded exultation. She wasn't sure why he had agreed with her that the book was valuable, but it didn't matter. She couldn't wait to wave her triumph in the faces of the other wives.

The King paced restlessly while he waited. By the Fates, this could be it. Exactly the kind of thing he needed to win a casual audience with the very man who had the power to catapult Sung'ni into its rightful place in the galaxy.

Who would have thought that his little Dedi was capable of such perspicacity? And it was so deliciously apt: a book about a boy who refused to grow older could become the perfect tool for a king who wished for his son to win the hand of the one creature in the known Universe who could ensure that he would retain his youth.

Isha'el positively adored symmetry.

The King's favorite son and heir, Prince Isha'el, had just turned twenty-five. Intelligent and charismatic, had he been born on Earth his looks would have been considered classically French. He was average in height, with a medium build. Brown-haired with gray eyes, he was exceptionally well-mannered, his gestures effortlessly elegant. He also possessed blindingly white teeth, which sat at the heart of a devastating smile.

His sport was fencing, at which he excelled, and he'd been blessed with a facility for languages. He was fluent in all of the Sung'nian dialects as well as four of the most common interplanetary languages, including English and Teletian. Destined to become a brilliant statesman, his father had been grooming him carefully for the role from the day he was born.

On this sunny afternoon, the Prince was in the huge courtyard of his father's castle practicing parries and thrusts with one of his men. Suddenly a young page called to him. "My lord!" He waved his arms, interrupting the Prince's riposte.

"Watch out!" The Prince continued to lunge. "Get out of the way!"

Dodging the blades yet again, the page came close to being gutted as he stuck the summons on the end of the Prince's sword.

Having no choice but to stop and remove the note, the Prince glanced at it and abruptly

announced that the practice session was over. This came as an enormous relief to the his unfortunate opponent, who was starting to feel like a sieve; his fencing costume was covered with tiny holes. Young Isha'el tossed him his sword and, stripping off his gloves, he hurried inside took the winding, polished stone steps that led to his father's apartments two at a time.

Something was up.

Ω

"So, old King Isha'el knew that Ming was a Mapek Kabrisi," Gabriel mused. "I assume that's important." Paradox nodded. "Everything I show you is important."

4 A Very Different Telet

Meanwhile, on the far side of the galaxy, an event of great significance took place on a planet that no one connected with the INTA had ever heard of. A being on this faraway world made a startling discovery. He was called Murmur, and he was stunned to learn that he had an opposite, a mirror image of himself out there in the Universe.

Murmur had always believed he was unique, and he was—at least among his own race, the Teletors. There had been those before him who possessed the same anomalies he'd been afflicted with, but each of them had met their end before another of their kind was conceived. And so it was assumed that each new iteration was simply an extension of the last, born to be what they called the Garesh Ordak: The Destroyers of Souls.

Their singular condition put them in the middle of a complex web of dominance and retribution on their world. Besides being telepaths with telekinetic powers, these creatures continually became ill. It was as though they were lightning rods, gathering to themselves all the blights and diseases that the people of their world conveniently avoided. Infirmary of any kind was virtually unknown among the populace.

But the Garesh Ordak also possessed a special ability to rid themselves of any illness they contracted by inflicting it on someone else. Murmur had what the Teletors considered the gift of being able to administer the most severe punishments ever conceived on their pristinely healthy planet.

Prisoners of the government were brought to him whenever an illness blossomed. When a new and virulent disease had Murmur in its jaws, he would wait impatiently, suffering until the necessary arrangements could be made for him to push the illness out of himself and into the condemned. His own agony would finally cease as the affliction passed to the unfortunate recipient.

It was a thing he'd done so many times, the fact that he had to kill another being to accomplish it didn't bother him anymore. The damned were simply a convenient receptacle for

his particular brand of waste.

Murmur lived alone in a tower that had been built eons before to house the Garesh Ordak and keep them far away from everyone else. Situated five leagues south of the largest city on the planet, it rose up out of a vast, otherwise empty plain ringed with majestic, snowcapped mountains. It was a bleak place, and eerily quiet.

Shaped like an enormous obelisk a thousand feet high, the tower was made of smooth black volcanic rock. It sat in the center of a large channel filled with water that was surrounded by a wall three times the height of a man, with a single, narrow bridge that led across the moat to the fortified entrance.

An apartment had been built at the apex of the structure. Five rooms, stacked one on top of the other, with nothing below them but a long, windowless stairwell that wound its way down through the center of the tower to the ground.

Seen from the sky, Murmur often imagined that his domain must look like an enormous eye, with the top of the tower staring upward like a gigantic black pupil surrounded by a murky iris.

A Teletor soldier and his son, who were hiking in the foothills of the mountains, gazed at the forbidding sight before them. The drab colors of their battle fatigues merged with the landscape, providing effective camouflage from prying eyes.

"Is it true, Father, that you have been to the tower yourself?" the boy asked, staring at Murmur's home in awe.

"I have," his father said grimly. "We are fortunate that the wind is blowing away from us today. Otherwise you would smell the stench of the rotting bodies that the Garesh Ordak heaves into the moat, once the terrible deed has been done."

The boy shuddered. "Why does it become ill, Father? Is it a punishment for something the creature did?"

"No one knows. But let it be a lesson to you. Follow the rules, be a good citizen, support your fellow soldiers and the mission of your battalion. If you stay on the proper path, you need never experience the agonies that the monster inflicts."

The discovery of the Garesh Ordak and what they could do had been the perfect answer to the Teletors' need for a supreme penalty. It was something that their (supposedly fearless) leader feared more than anything; more than pervasive goodness, more than difficult times or opposition, even more than battle wounds. Illness was the stuff of nightmares.

"Can it be healed?" the boy asked. "Is there no way to stop the sickness?"

"I don't think so. Besides, why would we take the time to study such things when it only afflicts one out of millions? We don't question our good health. Do you remember when I lost these fingers?" He held up a mutilated hand. "I finished the battle without them, and by the time our squadron triumphed, the wound had healed beautifully. And when your mother bore your younger brother, did she suffer from the process?"

"No." The boy giggled. "But she was annoyed that he came out when she was making our dinner. The soup ended up being cold."

"Yes, she was furious at your brother's ill-timed entrance." The man laughed at the memory.

“Still, it was only a matter of minutes before she was back to normal. But I have spoken with you about those who oppose our world government, the simpletons who cling to a belief that there is a power greater than our leader. They must be punished. Using the Garesh Ordak as executioners has always been our way.”

“But why must their punishment be so horrible? Why don’t we just shoot them?”

His father stared at what he and his compatriots called the Plain of Dread, which surrounded Murmur’s home. “You will learn as you grow that unless you make an example of anarchists, there are those who would put them on a pedestal. We shoot our foes in battle. To use such a simple method for those who resist conforming to the teachings of our leader wouldn’t be nearly as effective as a deterrent.” He looked at his son. “War is the way of our world, and we’re not afraid of it. However, in order to discourage the dissenters, there is a need for a punishment that strikes fear in the heart.”

The wind changed and a sudden gust brought the stench of the moat to the air around them.

“Ugh! The smell is truly awful, Father. Is there nothing that can be done about it? Or is that important as well?”

“Our leader is beneficent. He allows the waters to be infused with a special acid that causes the bodies to dissolve. The smell, even a year past, was one hundred times worse than it is today.”

“How does it work?” the boy asked curiously. “I mean, what do you have to do when you go there?”

“We bind the prisoner’s wrists and ankles and carry him on a stretcher to the gates. The gates are so heavy that four men are needed to open them. That’s one of my duties.” He flexed his muscles proudly for his son to admire. “Then our captain and his first officer carry the condemned across the moat and deliver them to the Garesh Ordak. Normally, we’re able to close the gates and leave before it attacks.”

The boy gripped his arms and shivered. “I want to go home, Father.”

As they made their way down the path, the boy speculated about just what the creature did all day. His father had explained that there were typically no more than fifteen or twenty illnesses each year, so what did it do in between? Did it sit alone, staring into space, contemplating its cruel fate?

Teletors were raised as members of a collective and never did things by themselves. After all, there could be no war without group effort. Conflicts were part and parcel of the way their planet functioned as a whole. Battles were won and lost, but the Teletors cared little about actually winning the war. It was simply their way of life.

That was why they thought the people who opposed their government were simpletons. They assumed that anyone who would choose to live such a singular and rebellious existence must be an idiot.

The boy felt sorry for the monster in the tower, being forced to live all alone. But he was extremely grateful that their leader had seen the wisdom of keeping it in a cage. Even the possibility of illness could not be allowed to wander freely among them.

When they reached the slope that would take them back to the city, neither of them looked

back.

Although there were times when he was lonely, Murmur managed to keep himself quite busy. He was a voracious reader. But he also spent a considerable amount of his time dealing with the miseries that came with his condition, resting when the pain became too fierce, or applying ointments to the open sores that frequently covered his body.

He made the medicines himself using age-old recipes: mysterious infusions and decoctions that had been carefully perfected by his predecessors. A fastidious person, he typically dressed in black so that stains and nasty wet patches were less noticeable.

His afflictions were capricious and unpredictable. There were times when months would pass with no illness at all, and then two or three episodes would occur in quick succession. But they never varied in their virulence. The diseases he suffered always proved fatal to the recipient.

The Teletors would have been surprised to learn that there was one regular visitor in the Garesh Ordak's life. It was a being Murmur thought of as his spirit guide, a remarkable being that he had christened Quintessence.

He'd read about the four basic elements: fire, water, earth, and air. To his mind, it represented a mysterious fifth element—if an absence of light could be called elemental. Never having shared its real name, the creature had said from the beginning that Quintessence would do nicely.

"It's the best name I've been given yet. Your predecessors were not so clever. Well done."

"What are you?" young Murmur had asked.

"Haven't you figured it out yet? I am *nothing incarnate*," Quintessence replied, laughing at its own wit with a horrible, wet, wheezing sound.

It certainly did seem to be made of shadows and bad dreams. When the demon came to Murmur, it filled all the corners of his consciousness with a profound dark stillness that was astonishing in its depth, occasionally punctuated by cries or rumbles that pricked the silence like distant thunder. Quintessence jokingly referred to the sounds as Radio Hell, which Murmur didn't really understand, other than to assume the sounds emanated from the demon's home.

A spirit of middle rank in the armies of Darkness, Quintessence had interacted with the Garesh Ordak ever since they first appeared on the planet some five thousand years before, using them for its own devilish purpose of leading the pure of heart to an untimely demise. It had shadowed Murmur's Telet from the planet's beginnings, steering the inhabitants toward barbarism and destruction from the days when they first walked upright.

The Teletors had a technologically advanced society capable of producing incredibly creative weaponry, but their methods had never produced environmental pollutants. Quintessence had realized early on that there was no need to manipulate the inhabitants into causing damage to their physical world. The people were cruel and petty enough to satisfy the need the demon had to turn all beings away from the Light, without also causing the slow deterioration of the ecosystem. Besides, keeping the planet healthy facilitated the uninterrupted cycle of war and annihilation.

However, much to Quintessence's dismay, integrity and the longing for love and peace had

persisted over the centuries among a small portion of the populace. The underground movement was small and had little hope, but there had always been a select few that opposed the beautiful ruthlessness of the government. These champions of the Light were a thorn in the demon's side, but, once they were captured, it made sure they were sentenced to the most horrifying end imaginable.

The Garesh Ordak's talents as an executioner were truly exemplary.

Depending on the severity of the illness that plagued Murmur at the time, he sometimes allowed the prisoners to lie at the foot of the tower, watching from above as they tried to find a way out of their bonds before he descended the long stairway to put them out of their misery (or rather, put them deeper into it). But he was usually uncomfortable enough that he made sure he was there ahead of time, waiting impatiently for the prisoners to arrive.

Laying his hands on them and ridding himself of the pain and suffering as quickly as he could, he would watch them die a slow death as they lay on the small patch of ground at the base of the tower that bordered the moat.

Occasionally, if he happened to be feeling generous, he heaved them into the deadly waters as soon as the affliction had been transmitted. He thought of it as an act of charity. Quintessence continually warned Murmur about the dangers and futility of charity. Nevertheless, the concept intrigued him.

Murmur's condition had been discovered when he was three years old. He'd shown signs of brilliance early on and had already learned to read when a large tumor started growing in his chest, which, naturally, no one could see. And so his father hadn't believed him when he tried to tell him that something was very wrong.

Little Murmur even stood on his father's chair to peer into the view screen, making a clumsy attempt to find information about it in the planet's massive Library of Knowledge. But of course, there wasn't any. Teletors believed that ill health represented the nadir of all existence and was not something worthy of study.

When the pain became intolerable, Murmur reached out to his mother for help. "Please, mama, the problem is inside me," he said, pressing his small hands to his heart. Desperate to find a way for her to understand his agony, he'd placed his hands on her, not knowing that what he was doing would ultimately kill her.

Murmur's father realized what must have happened when he found his wife dead with the child lying on top of her, sobbing hysterically. He had immediately taken Murmur to the security branch of the government so his condition could be verified. Mightily embarrassed by the screams, he dragged the small boy through the cold, cavernous lobby of the specially fortified building with all of the people staring at the spectacle. Teletor children were taught not to cry.

"There is no doubt that the child is a Garesh Ordak, sir." The official was grim. "Do you wish to say good-bye? He's asking for you."

But Murmur's father had declined. "From this day, he is no longer my son."

And so the boy was taken to what the Teletors called *sa' Pekchau*, the Temple, in a specially fortified box (to keep him from touching anyone in case an illness was brewing). He was given a few cursory instructions about using the food and clothes processors and how to contact the

prison warden with the wave broadcast machine.

Then he was carefully prodded out of the container with sharp sticks, the gates were locked, and Murmur was left alone to ponder his fate. When a cold rain started to fall, he'd shakily crossed the narrow bridge over the moat and went inside. It had taken him almost an hour to reach the rooms at the top on his three-year-old legs.

Quintessence had been anticipating the boy's arrival ever since his elderly predecessor had expired. The demon manifested itself as the child sat alone, crying in the darkness. Murmur had seen what looked like a gigantic bird of prey materializing out of thin air.

A crown of black feathers ringed the back of a bald head, which was tethered to a winged body by a scrawny neck. Bulbous, empty yellow eyes sat on either side of a long, pointed, red beak with a gray-lipped mouth. The mouth was toothless except for two saber-sharp fangs that flashed in the gloom when it spoke. Gigantic wings that folded into its shoulders gave it a hulking, hunchbacked look. Instead of legs, it had two arm-like appendages, each one ending in five vicious talons.

Its feathers appeared rather oily and had no discernible color. They looked black in the enveloping gloom. But upon closer inspection, Murmur had discovered that the feathers were actually peculiarly defined empty spaces that overlapped across its body.

It was positively hideous. But Murmur was so grateful to have someone there to talk to and ask questions of that (hideous or not) instead of being fearful of it, he immediately welcomed this apparition as his ally. Indeed, it was the closest thing to a friend the child had ever known.

And now, all these years later, Quintessence, heralded as usual by the obliteration of all light and sound, mentioned quite casually that there was a planet on the far side of the galaxy that was a mirror image of Murmur's home world—opposite in every way—although it had the same name. It was called Telet, which, after a moment's thought, Murmur realized was simply the name of his own world spelled backward.

The irony made him smile.

This fascinating tidbit had come to the demon accidentally. It never observed things that took place in the Light—at least, not if it could help it. But lately it had been plagued by the maddening creatures that were its own mirror image in what was known as the fourth dimension, the ones who fought for the other side, the enemies of the Darkness.

The demon knew the Teletors believed they were experts when it came to great wars and warriors. Even so, they would have been staggered by the terrifying generals that commanded legions of armies, battling beyond space and time in ways mere mortals couldn't possibly fathom.

After the creatures of the Light had mounted their latest attack, one of them had made the mistake of leaving behind the echo of a thought, a very interesting and familiar thought about a mortal being similar to Murmur. Even though it had been painful to look (the appalling Light was always so bright), the demon had struggled through it and had been amazed at what it learned.

"This other Telet is the birthplace of your doppelgänger," Quintessence said. "You—in reverse. It is female and, rather than destroying, it heals. It restores good health as easily as you

take it away.”

Murmur sat on his throne pondering this surprising piece of news, stroking his trim black beard with a long-fingered hand. He peered through the emptiness and out of the window at the stars in the night sky, having no idea that a miasma of evil sitting atop the planet’s atmosphere caused them to appear much duller than they actually were. Instead of twinkling, they were merely insipid spots of white against the black. But Quintessence had explained what they were, and now he wondered which star, which sun, shone down upon this female—this intriguing opposite.

“Well, well,” said Murmur. “I wonder ...” he mused, tapping a finger against his lower lip, “I wonder whether she might be useful. Let me see her, Quintessence. You must show her to me.”

“You don’t command me, Murmur,” the demon sneered. “I offer you a juicy morsel, and you get pushy. I’m disappointed. Perhaps you should try to find out more about this other Telet and this bizarre healer on your own.”

Murmur tried to find a more comfortable position. Suddenly his clothing felt too tight. He was sure he could feel a growth starting in his left thigh. Making a mental note to contact the prison warden, he regarded Quintessence thoughtfully.

Over the years, he’d learned it was possible to get what he wanted from the demon if he was careful in the way he went about it. But he was in pain and was feeling impatient. “Why did you tell me this, then? What’s the point?”

The huge wings ruffled with indignation and stretched out to an impossible width, making the darkness emptier before settling back into place. Quintessence enjoyed making Murmur suffer and had originally intended to simply tantalize him with something that was out of reach. But then it wondered, *what if?*

What if it could bring the Mapek Kahrissi and the Gareesh Ordak—the ultimate cure and the ultimate disease—together? The very idea gave the demon chills.

“Think about it, clever boy. There’s nothing else pressing on your schedule today, is there?” It gave a nasty snarl, and the emptiness receded in the blink of an eye.

Adjusting his position yet again, Murmur did think. He thought long and hard.

Ω

“Paradox,” Gabriel said, “who is this unbelievably creepy guy? Why are we seeing this?”

“It’s complicated,” Paradox said with a sigh. “The battle against the Darkness continues, as I’ve said. It’s rare for one of my kind to make what appears to be a mistake. When something like this occurs, we know that it is meant to be. And so we watch and we wait.”

“Wait? For time to pass?” Gabriel asked dryly.

Paradox winked, acknowledging the jibe. “We wait for the next thing, just as you used to do. Except that here, it’s never the last thing.”

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