

C. N. SKY

WINNER OF
FIVE BOOK
AWARDS

TOXIC
SPHERE

VOLUME 2:
LIARS AND DEFILERS

TOXIC SPHERE

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WINNER OF FIVE BOOK AWARDS!

- Winner, Fiction - Thriller-Adventure, 2020 Manhattan Book Awards
- Winner, Cross Genre, 7th Annual Beverly Hills Book Awards 2018
- Gold Winner, Popular Literature Fiction, Global Ebook Awards 2018
- Finalist, Science Fiction, 7th Annual Beverly Hills Book Awards 2018
- Third Place, Fiction Action Adventure, CIPA EVVY Awards 2017

Toxic Sphere: Volume 2: Liars and Defilers

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TOXIC SPHERE

VOLUME 2:
LIARS AND DEFILERS

C. N. SKY



MINDSTIR MEDIA

DEDICATION



When my brother passed away, the world barely noticed. Neither news agencies nor celebrity tabloids announced his death.

He lived a quiet, unassuming life, but when someone needed help, he was the first to offer a hand. He didn't do it for recognition or because he expected something in return. Few knew his name. My brother was that unknown Good Samaritan who stopped to help those in trouble. He then went along his way without seeking fanfare or reward for his efforts. When I look back on his time in this world, I see the many sacrifices that he made for others.

I dedicate *Toxic Sphere, Volume 2: Liars and Defilers* to my brother and others like him who desire to make the world a better place for all of us.

FOREWORD

“Perilous times are not uncommon in the annals of human history, but every now and again, events align in ways that ensnare the whole of humanity in madness. Be such times the product of random occurrences or deliberate design, I believe, down to the core of my soul, we have entered one of these eras.”

*Bob Fullerby, Investigative Journalist
Andecco News Service
Year 1007 of the Enlightened Epoch*

Investigative journalist Bob Fullerby, leaders of the Back-to-Basics Club, and President Demnar Tarish of Domataland have one thing in common. They are searching for Leeha Rit-sagin. She has what they want: the mysterious Guiding Light document.

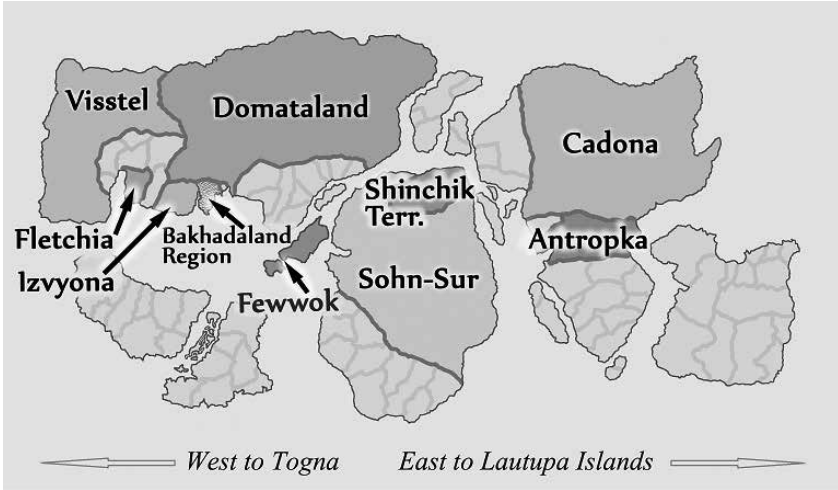
The Guiding Light isn't the only disruption to Leeha's quiet life. A virulent illness strikes, and an unexpected friendship blossoms in the midst of tragedy.

The world beyond the walls of Leeha's little apartment also roils in turmoil. Senator Bradley Seldortin postpones retirement and joins Bob Fullerby in a desperate attempt to save Cadona, the world's mightiest nation, from falling into the hands of unscrupulous leaders. Bob, Bradley, and their allies fear the battle may already be lost. A bloody attack sets the Warm Sea ablaze, and an anxious world prepares for war.

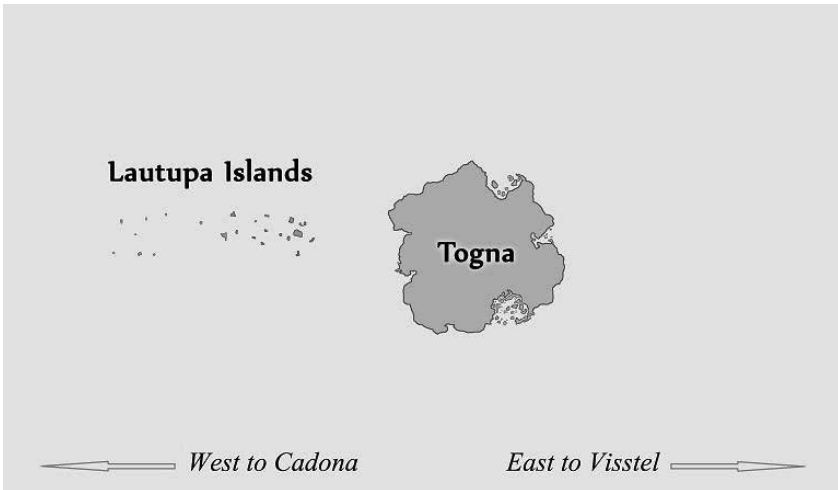
The key to victory is the Guiding Light.

MAPS OF THE WORLD

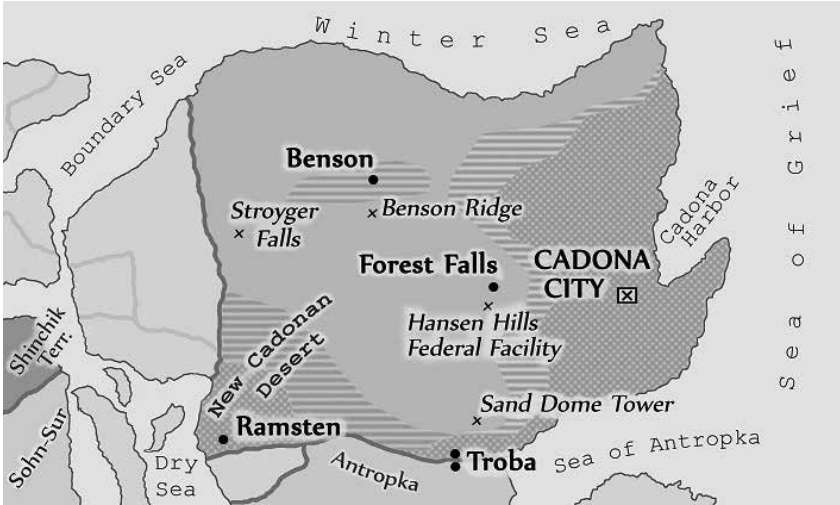
THE PRIMARY HEMISPHERE



THE LOST HEMISPHERE



CADONA



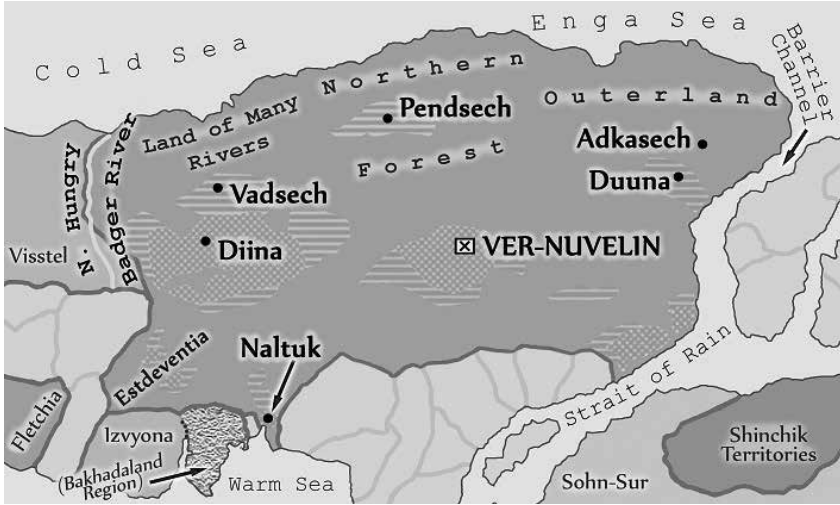
Legend



Population: 1,998,000,000

Capital: Cadona City

DOMATALAND



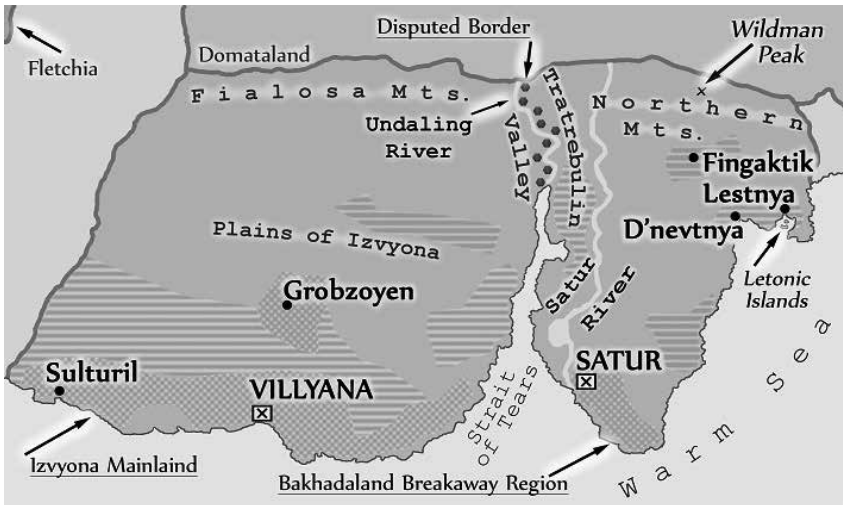
Legend



Population: 780,000,000

Capital: Ver-Nuvelin

IZVYONA AND BAKHADALAND



Legend



Population: 122,000,000

Izvyona Mainland: 70,000,000

Bakhadaland Region: 52,000,000

Capital: Villyana

* *Bakhadaland Region considers itself an independent nation and names Satur its capital. Only Domataland, Fletchia, and a handful of other nations recognize Bakhadaland's independence.*

VISSTEL



Legend



Population: 1,500,000,000

Capital: Loraden

CHAPTER 1

WRATH OF JUSTICE

Cadona City, Cadona
Monday, April 3, Year 1007 EE
6:00 a.m.

Leeha Ritsagin leaned against the wet, chipped concrete of a decrepit building. She listened for pursuing feet. It was difficult to hear over her pounding heart and wheezing breath. Always, the hunters had been right behind her. This time, though, no sounds of danger echoed through the decaying city.

She peeked around the corner. The dark, garbage-strewn alley to her right was empty except for a drunk slumbering in a soiled alcove. Leeha bent forward a little farther to get a wider view. Rain was dripping around a crooked lamp that stuck out from a pockmarked wall. A glaring bulb revealed only misty rain and shiny puddles.

The stillness did not last. The shadow of a human stretched across the damp street. Had they found her? A man emerged. He was not one of the pursuers. He staggered away.

Something scraped the ground. The noise came from her left. Leeha squinted into the shadows. She saw nothing except a waterlogged chunk of cardboard flopping in a gust of wet wind. "It's okay," she said aloud, "I'm safe now."

Leeha heard a crackle, as when a person steps on gritty pavement. She strained to listen. The only sound was water gushing from a drainpipe.

An odd puff of air brushed by her neck.

"Safe?" a bag lady said. "Mary, Mary, you're not safe."

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They're coming for you. Your friend Nancy, too."

"My name isn't Mary. It's Leeha. My name is Leeha."

"You're Mary to them. We're all Mary. Or Nancy, if you'd prefer."

"I'm neither Mary nor Nancy. I've done nothing wrong. Why are they chasing me? Do you know?"

A grating cackle spilled from the old lady's pus-covered lips. "The ship is in the harbor, Mary. The ship is in the harbor."

"Ship? What ship? I know of no ship."

A gurgling cough followed a raspy laugh. "Mary, haven't you learned anything? Are you so naïve? They don't care if you know about the ship. Don't you see?"

"No! I don't understand."

Through the darkness a man's voice cried, "This way!"

Leeha poked her head around the corner. At least a dozen men were coming for her. Dressed in black and their faces covered, they ran, weapons in hands. Leeha bolted down a pitch-black alleyway. She didn't know where it led. Shaking flashlight beams danced about her. The footsteps grew louder.

The old woman's laughter bellowed in the night. "Run, Mary, run!"

Cloth draped over Leeha—some kind of netting. Drawstrings cinched the mesh bag around her hips. She tumbled to the ground. Leeha clawed at the fabric. It would not tear. Then she saw pale light. It came through her bedroom window. How did she get home?

It was another nightmare.

Sweat glued the baggy bedsheet to her back. Leeha peeled the material from her skin. As she straightened out the bedding, she heard music and a man speaking. Was someone there?

"For heaven's sake! It's just the sound array," Leeha told herself. She had forgotten to turn it off. News was playing—Andecco News Service. The voice was familiar. It belonged to investigative journalist Bob Fullerby.

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“The president of Izvyona sent a diplomatic protest to Domatland’s foreign minister demanding the immediate withdrawal of the Goodwill Ship from the port city of D’neotnya. Domatland’s president, Demnar Tarish, responded by saying the ship will remain in the Bakhadaland Breakaway Region according to the announced schedule.”

They were still talking about ships. No wonder she was dreaming of ships. Leeha turned off the news.

Goodness, she was tired! Her personal device showed it was six o’clock in the morning. In just an hour and a half, she’d have to get up and go to the interview at Altage Enterprises. Leeha needed more sleep, but something vile hovered in a dark corner of the bedroom. Did the unwelcome visitor mock her, or did it bring dire warning? Either way, she wanted it gone. It pointed through the doorway and into the kitchen. Leeha lay down and buried her head beneath the blanket. She knew what the phantom wanted her to think about: the *stupid* document that had mysteriously appeared in the back seat of her old, brown Monarch sedan. “Forget about the document,” she said to herself. It was stashed away behind a loose floorboard beneath her kitchen cabinets. No one would find it down there. Everything was going to be okay.

The specter faded, but still Leeha was haunted by images of men hunting her in the night.



Cadona City, Cadona
Monday, April 3, Year 1007 EE
6:30 a.m.

Mary Kronvelt angled her arm so the stark hallway light would penetrate the scratched crystal of her wristwatch. She didn’t have much time.

Her fingers pulled a key from a deep pocket on the side of

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the satchel that she was carrying. Mary had barely the strength to unlock the thick bolt of the door. She dragged herself into her grimy, one-room apartment. The light from the corridor faded as the door slammed shut behind her. The satchel felt as heavy as a stack of bricks. The bag slid from her hand and dropped to the ground.

Mary's janitorial and laundry duties were done for the day, but her job cleaning bins at the deep-fried frozen food plant would begin soon. She must rest before heading out again.

Enough light from streetlamps slipped through uneven window blinds for Mary to make her way from the door to a reclining chair. The tattered cushion folded around her aching hips. She breathed a painful breath. A weight pressed on her chest. Her heart raced and her stomach rumbled. She should fix something to eat. Mary tried to stand. The room spun. Her body fell into the seat. The little refrigerator, dented microwave, and portable hotplate seemed impossibly far away.

Later. She'd fix something to eat later.

She didn't know what to do. Everything was getting more expensive. Her landlord jacked up the rent in January. Why did he jack it up again? Still, he charged less than anyone else in the neighborhood. Many other people in the huge, old building ended up on the streets. Mary missed that fate by a thread. She'd heard about an old guy who collapsed at work. Mary got the dead man's job. The pay was low, the hours long, and the work tiring and hard. With three jobs, however, she could pay the rent, afford blood pressure medication, and buy pain pills for her back and teeth. Yet this schedule was killing her. Twice, Mary had taken a roommate. Finding another was too risky. Janet stole what little Mary had and vanished. Patsy had a boatload of shady relatives, especially her cousin Jib. Mary wasn't the first woman whom Jib raped. Why Patsy let him in ...!

Mary's body jerked in the chair as her chin fell to her chest. She must be careful, or she'd fall asleep and be late for work. Mary found just enough strength to reach over and switch

on an alarm. She wished there were another way to keep a roof over her head. Mary knew how it worked; once you were homeless, holding down any kind of job became more difficult. People with addresses were also looking for employment. Such people would be better groomed, less likely to carry contagious diseases, more likely to show up for work on time, and less likely to fall over dead.

She had heard tales, though. Beautiful tales. Stories that brightened her spirit. Mary closed her eyes. A land of trees, grass, and fresh air filled her imagination—the wilderness. People had gone there. Escaped. They saved money, packed up, and left. Mary had a plan. First, she'd figure out where the wilderness was. Then she'd borrow someone's personal device and find a way to get there. "I'll go someday, I will," Mary told herself. A smile crossed her lips as she pictured her money jar hidden behind her coffin-sized shower. The money would pay for transit fare to escape this hopeless, dirty city.

Mary heard a noise—metal scratching metal. It came from the direction of her apartment door. All fell quiet. Red then replaced black behind her eyelids, as if a light shone on her face. The world grew dark again. She slumped deeper into the chair. But then she heard more sounds: soft, short, clicking noises. She saw flickers, as if solid objects were passing between her and the light shining through the little window. Something smooth touched her face and brushed by her ears.

No air! She couldn't breathe. Mary opened her eyes. Her vision was blurred, like looking through fog. What was happening? A stroke? Heart attack? She was only twenty-eight.

She needed air. Get up! Break the window! Her body refused to pull away from the backrest. A great weight pressed on her shoulders.

Her apartment lights popped on.

Mary realized what was happening. Someone had broken in. She heard at least three sets of footsteps.

What did the intruders do to her? Something covered her face. She was suffocating. The covering clung to her nostrils

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and mouth.

Dreaming! She must be dreaming. She owned nothing worth stealing.

Strong hands grabbed her arms. She saw black gloves. Mary fought to free herself. The assailant was too strong. He held her wrists together. A man stepped into view. He was skinny and dressed in black. Black fabric covered his head. Featureless he looked, his face an empty oval. He held something in his hand. What was it? Tape! He held a roll of tape. He bound her forearms together. Why were they doing this? It didn't make sense. They could take what they wanted. The tape was tight. Numbness invaded her fingers.

Mary gasped for air. Plastic rubbed against her tongue. She bit hard. Her teeth didn't puncture the material.

Then, from behind, hands slipped under her armpits. Another man with broad shoulders grabbed her ankles. She kicked. As hard as she could, she kicked and kicked. The skinny man also took hold of her legs. The men were strong. They picked her up from the chair. They carried her toward the door. Where were they taking her?

They let go. Her tailbone slammed into the floor. She was free of their grip. Mary tore at the plastic that covered her face. Her fingers barely moved, but the slightest bit of air seeped into her left nostril.

An unseen male pulled her hands away. "Don't you be doing that." The voice belonged to a stranger.

She heard shuffling sounds. Someone stood right by her head. Strong hands pulled up her torso. Mary saw her legs and bound arms. A man's lips were close to her left ear. "Your suffering has only begun, murderess." He then said, "Cut her."

Skinny pulled out a knife. He sawed through the tape. Her arms sprang free. Blood oozed from wounds.

The knifepoint pricked the skin at the base of her throat. With violent swings of the weapon, Skinny slashed open her clothing. Blood drained from gashes on her rib cage and belly.

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A fat man peeled the torn fabric from her body. Mary was naked and bleeding. She saw it all.

The blade neared her face. She struggled. Big hands held her head steady. The plastic ripped open. Air rushed into her lungs. Her mind cleared. How many attackers? She counted four: Skinny, Fat, Broad Shoulders, and the one with a deep voice. Soon, her cheek stung. Warm liquid slid down her face. The taste of blood filled her mouth.

The men's grip weakened. Mary kicked her body free. The satchel she had dropped by the door was within reach. With arms that didn't seem her own, Mary swung the tote bag. The knife flew out of Skinny's hand. The shiny metal gleamed as it spun across the room. The weapon smashed into a wall and clanked as it hit the floor.

Mary asked, "Who are you?"

Fat said, "Avenging angels. This is your judgment day, murderess."

They wrestled her back onto the floor.

"Take anything you want. What do you want?" Mary said. "Justice."

These men weren't thieves. They were madmen. A power rose from the earth itself and spilled into Mary's chest. "Help me! Somebody! Help me! Please!"

"Shut the witch up," Fat said.

"Help me! Help! Help!" Mary swung her head from side to side. One of the men held it still. Broad Shoulders shoved a rag into her mouth. He pushed and pushed. Mary's jaw snapped.

Skinny walked into the kitchen. He rummaged through her cabinets. "Missy's cupboards are bare." He returned with a greasy bottle of cooking oil.

Powerful hands jerked her head backward. The bottle approached her face. Vegetable oil oozed into her nose. Spasms blocked her windpipe. She struggled to free herself. The men's grip held.

Air again reached her lungs. Skinny returned to the kitchen. "Let's see, what else do we have? Ah, looky here. Dish soap!"

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He towered over her. "Let's see how she likes this." Mary struggled, but soap poured into her nose. Her stomach retched. Liquid sprayed out her nostrils.

Mary's body weakened. It had been a while since her screams. No help came. No knock on the door. No footsteps in the hall. Only one siren, but it faded away.

Daylight peeked in between the window blinds. If a rescuer didn't come soon, this would be her last morning on earth. Mary longed to see another sunrise.

Broad Shoulders held a rusty club. He raised it above his head. The wide end of the metal object slammed into Mary's stomach. Burning fluid filled her throat. A sickly wheeze rattled in her chest. He lifted the club and struck again. Her vision darkened.

Light returned to her eyes, but air would not fill her lungs. Fat grabbed her right wrist. He pulled her hand out to the side. Mary fought against his grip. She was powerless. Broad Shoulders held two daggers. He raised one of them high over his head. He heaved the weapon downward. Pain pierced Mary's palm. Instinct pulled her wounded limb toward her body. The weapon tore at her flesh. The rag in her mouth muffled a scream. Fat then stretched out her left arm. The second dagger anchored her left hand to the floor.

Skinny picked up a bar tipped with three rusted spikes. He dangled the spiky end above her eyes. He said, "Looky what we have here. Not too sharp. No need to worry. It will only hurt—a lot!" Skinny howled with laughter.

Fat and Broad Shoulders stretched her legs apart. Skinny dragged the bar along her bare belly. The spiky tip slipped over her pelvic bone. The pointy object stabbed her flesh. Skinny said, "Ah, here's the hole I'm looking for."

The pointed rod tore deeper and deeper into her. Never had Mary felt such pain.

What an awful smell! It stank like livestock guts in a meat processing plant where she once worked.

A male's voice boomed through the room. "Hear me, God!

Vengeance is done. Death for death. We send this witch to Hell.”

Mary’s vision grew dark. But the shadow did not last. The world was blurry at first, but the image cleared. She found herself in a glade in a forest. Soft, green grass tickled her bare feet. Trees surrounded the clearing. Smooth bark glowed white in soft daylight. Bright green leaves fluttered in a warm breeze. The music of trickling water met her ears. Bird songs whistled overhead. The fragrances! Mary had never smelled anything as pleasant.

A viewplane appeared at the place where an earthen path met the forest. Happy times in Mary’s life raced before her eyes. The list was brutally short. The last good memories were of her grandmother.

The final scene was one of sorrow; Mary watched her grandma’s funeral.

The viewplane faded away. There, where the path met the trees, stood her grandmother, robust and healthy. “Grandma?”

The old woman held out a hand. Mary ran to her. She felt her grandmother’s comforting touch. How Mary had missed her! Now Mary was no longer tired, no longer in pain. At last, she was where she dreamed of being: in the wilderness among the trees. Her journey of despair had ended.



“Hey, hey, Lars,” Zoff said, “you can stop rammin’ her. She’s gone.”

Lars pulled the bloody rod from Mary’s body. He stood up. The rusted metal object fell. It clanked against the floor. “We did her good, didn’t we, Zoff?”

Zoff put a hand on Lars’ shoulder. “We did. We did good.”

Lars raised his arms above his head. “Justice is done! The wrath of justice. I can feel it. God’s angels are rejoicing.”

“Come on, gentlemen,” Zoff said, “let’s decorate the place.

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Good-old-boy Detective Carl Brunish will be here soon.”

“Brunish won’t find out for a while,” Lars told him. “I doubt anyone in this shitty neighborhood would bother calling the police ‘cause some bitch screamed her guts out.”

“Not sure it matters if someone calls the cops,” Zoff said. “That damned Brunish smells blood like a werewolf. And that son-of-a-bitch isn’t on our side. He’s trouble.”

Lars wiped up a pool of Mary’s blood. “Frick, this place is a dive. It’s so dingy in here, it’ll be hard to read our writin’.” He carried the dripping rag to the shower. “How do you like this bathroom? It’s not even its own room. They just shoved the shower and shitter in the corner.” Lars wiped Mary Kronvelt’s blood on the flimsy shower stall. Streaks of red covered the white surface. The word he spelled: *fetus*.

Zoff and Rips hung a tattered bedsheet on a drab wall. They wrote the word *revenge* upon the cloth in blood.

Footsteps clicked in the hall—quick, loud steps, like a woman walking in heels. The men froze. The walker in the hallway paused near Mary’s door. Axle readied a knife. Then, at a quickening pace, the footsteps continued until they faded away.

“Hurry up,” Zoff said, “let’s hide our tracks and report in with the Justice Group.”

CHAPTER 2

LECTURES FROM

MY SON

Cadona City, Cadona
Monday, April 3, Year 1007 EE
7:15 a.m.

Pastor Leon Walls heard Mark Walzelesskii's voice. "Dad, Dad, are you all right?"

Leon stirred. The bed was comfortable but unfamiliar. Then he remembered; he wasn't at home in his own grand bedroom. Rather, he had bunked in the True Followers of God Church headquarters for the night. Leon sat upright. Light flooded the room. He placed a hand in front of his face to shield his eyes. He squinted at Mark.

"Dad, are you okay?" Mark asked. "What are you doing here? Why didn't you go home?"

Just great. Another lecture from his son. "Yesterday was a long day, Mark. I didn't want to wake your mother by coming home in the middle of the night."

"She was up all night worrying about you, Dad."

"You knew I was here. Why didn't you tell her?"

"Because I just found out myself. Senator Rineburg asked me about you."

"What did John want?"

"He wants to know when you're getting up."

"Is John here?"

"Yeah, he slept here last night, too. So did Senator Fischer

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and General Willirman," Mark said.

"They're waiting for me?" Leon asked.

"Yes, but Dad, why don't you go home and get some rest. You look exhausted."

"I'll rest after I find out why Mitch, John, and Dougy need to see me."

"Dad, you need to focus on God, on things of the spirit. Let the politicians take care of politics and the generals run the military."

Already Mark was annoying him. "Son, I am not going to argue with you. Mitch, John, and Dougy are waiting for me." Leon's right hip ached as he stood up. "Tell your mother I'm okay and I'll be home in a bit. By the way, why don't you sit in on my discussion with the fellows? You just might learn something."

"No, Dad, our place as pastors is not in politics."

Was Mark ever going to come around? "Have it your way, Son, but a day will come when you will need to take your place as a leader of men to bring God to the masses. The sooner you get involved, the easier it will be."

Leon heard the groan in Mark's throat. "Dad, when will you go home? Mom will want to know."

"When I'm done working," Leon said. "Tell Mitch, John, and Dougy I'll meet them in the auditorium in five minutes."

"Okay, Dad, I'll tell them. And I'll call Mom. But I won't attend your meeting."

Leon took a long drink of coffee and then pulled open the auditorium door. All the lights were on. Workers were busy setting up equipment and cleaning. Senator Mitch Fischer, Senator John Rineburg, and General Douglass Willirman were huddled together along the back wall.

Mitch spotted him. "Good morning, Pastor. How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad, but I could use a little more sleep," Leon said. Mitch appeared rested even though he had been awake for

as long as Leon. Fatigue did, however, show on John's and Doug's faces.

Dark circles hung beneath John's eyes. "I hear you, Pastor. I can't stay up 'till all hours like I used to either."

"So what's going on?" Leon asked. "Mark said you wanted to see me."

"Yeah," John said, "with all the excitement this past week, we thought we should discuss the Back-to-Basics gathering tonight."

Leon shivered as he imagined the innumerable things that might go wrong. "I don't know if we should go through with it. We cancelled the March twenty-seventh meeting. We should cancel this one, too. The Guiding Light is still missing. What if Pettock has it? What if she uses it against us in front of everybody?"

"We have to go through with it, Leon," John told him. "We're the leaders of the Back-to-Basics Club, not Pettock, and we're closing in on the bitch who stole the document. It won't be long until we find her. When we do, if Pettock is involved with the Guiding Light's disappearance, we'll thrash her along with her thief."

Leon dabbed sweat from his cheeks. "It's too dangerous. Until we find the woman in the brown Monarch, we need to be careful. We don't know to whom she sent the document. We don't know who read it."

"Gentlemen, I agree with Leon," Doug said. "It might be a good idea to delay the meeting until we know more."

Mitch shook his head. "We can't delay it. John is right. Our meetings are too public. We'll look weak if we hide. People will believe that we canceled one meeting because of electrical problems, but not two meetings in a row."

A worker approached. "Excuse me, Pastor Walls, sir. Everything's ready. All the equipment is running. Is there anything else, sir?"

"No, thank you, Wally," Leon said. "That'll be all."

The workers trickled out. Leon, John, Mitch, and Doug

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were now alone in the auditorium. John was staring at his personal device. His face turned white. Then anger surged in his eyes. Leon grew worried. What happened now?

Mitch noticed John's expression as well. "John, is something wrong?"

"Mitch, it would seem we have yet another problem. Mary Kronvelt is dead."

Leon rubbed his tired eyes. The name was somewhat familiar. "Mary Kronvelt? Who's she?"

Doug seemed worried, too. "The first name on our justice execution list, Leon."

"Did our people do it?" Mitch asked.

"Yep," John told him. "Zoff's team."

Leon's face flushed. "Oh, this is just great! I thought we agreed to postpone the execution until we figured out what happened to our document."

"I did order the Justice Group to call it off," John said. "Apparently, it was too late. The team was already in motion."

Leon's heart pounded. "What a nightmare! What are we going to do now?"

Doug checked his personal device. "I don't see her death in the news yet. John, can we get your people over there and get rid of the body? Maybe we can make Mary Kronvelt disappear."

"Too late. Detective Brunish is already at the scene."

Leon brushed sweat from his forehead. "Isn't Brunish the cop who arrested Agel Yungst?"

"Yep, the very same pest: Detective Carl Brunish," John said.

Leon bit his nails. Brunish was trouble. The bastard caught Agel Yungst just hours after Agel shot and killed seven servants of Bezgog at Hughes Medical Center. If not for loyalists on the police force and in the Prosecutor's Office, Brunish may have exposed several members of the Soldiers of God Justice Group. Who knows how far up the chain Brunish might have pulled the threads? Maybe all the way to the Back-to-Basics Club.

"How the hell did Brunish get wind of Kronvelt's execution so quickly?" Doug asked.

"Best I can tell from this message," John said, "someone, probably a woman wearing heels, was in the hallway while the death sentence was carried out."

Leon's knees trembled. "Things were going so smoothly. Now everything's falling apart. *Damn* the witch who stole the Guiding Light! She's in league with Bezgog himself. She has to be, to be causing so much trouble."

Mitch placed a hand on Leon's shoulder. "Calm down, Leon. We need to focus. We need to plan our response. We need to keep cool. Keep our heads."

"Calm down? Keep cool?" Leon said. "Mitch, you're the one who wanted to call off the justice execution in the first place. *Mary Kronvelt's name is in the document, you said. We can't let whoever has the Guiding Light know it is a living document, you told us.*"

"Leon, Mitch is right," Doug said. "We need to keep our cool. Let's think about this. Kronvelt lived in a violent neighborhood. She walked home from work in the middle of the night. Her slayer followed her home and killed her in her apartment. There are murders all over this city. Few are ever solved."

"Except those Brunish investigates," John said.

Leon's body swayed. He grabbed hold of a chair to steady himself. "Wonderful. Just wonderful. This cop, Brunish, is going to follow the breadcrumbs right to our doorstep."

"Brunish won't be able to link the justice execution to us, Leon," John said. "There are too many players between us and the teams on the street."

"Are you sure?" Leon's heart rattled in his ears. "How can you be sure?"

"Leon, John, Dougy," Mitch said, "we can't undo Mary Kronvelt's justice execution. But there are things we can do. Number one—if Senator Pettock has the Guiding Light, we need to be prepared in case she reveals it at the Back-to-Ba-

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sics meeting tonight. Number two—we've got to identify the woman who stole the document, and we've got to learn if she gave it to anyone. Number three—we need to postpone all future justice executions until we get this straightened out. We've much work to do, so we'd better get busy."

"Let's go to Leon's office," Doug said. "It's the safest place to talk."

Leon's legs felt numb as he, Mitch, John, and Doug left the auditorium. Two locals, both Cadona City police officers, guarded the door. "Don't let anyone in," Leon told them. "Only the four of us are allowed to enter unless we say it's okay. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," both young policemen said.

Mark hovered near the door to Leon's office. "Dad! You look beat! Let me drive you home."

"Not quite yet, Son." Leon set a hand on Mark's shoulder. "Son, promise me you'll attend the Back-to-Basics meeting tonight. I really need your support. It could get rough."

"Okay, Dad, I'll go."

"We're doing some planning for the meeting in my office right now. Care to join us?"

"No, Dad. How long will you be?"

"As long as I need to be." Leon followed Mitch, John, and Doug into the office and shut the door.



Cadona City, Cadona
Monday, April 3, Year 1007 EE
7:25 a.m.

When Andecco News Service Investigative Journalist Bob Fullerby opened his eyes, the low ceiling of the old print shop building hovered above him. The back room lacked windows,

so he didn't know if the sun had risen. He pulled his personal device from his arm patch. It was early, not quite seven thirty a.m., but someone already left a message. Then he heard a sizzling sound. Something smelled good. The military surplus cot creaked as he rolled onto his side. Little Rona Betler stood by the stove. She was scooting a spatula around inside a frying pan. Her fair, pink skin glowed in the stark light. The copper highlights in her light brown hair sparkled. Bob's neck and shoulders protested as he pushed himself up onto an elbow and swung his chubby legs over the metal frame of the old cot.

"Sorry to wake you, Mr. Fullerby," Rona said.

"You didn't, Row. It was my PD. Got a call. Where are Kever-o and Ang?"

"Kever-o went to the climbing gym, and Ang left for combat forms training. Want some coffee and breakfast?"

"Boy, do I ever. Thanks, Row." Bob struggled to his feet and limped to the table.

Rona set a cup of coffee and a plate full of food in front of him. "Are you feeling okay, Mr. Fullerby?"

"Yeah, just stiff." Bob recalled his younger days when sleeping on a cot didn't make his back hurt.

Rona put silverware and a paper towel next to his dish. "So who called?"

"Don't know yet. Suppose I should look." Bob took a sip of coffee and a bite of toast before checking his personal device. "I'm a popular guy today."

"Why's that?"

"Three messages."

"From whom?"

"Good news, Row. Defense Secretary Karther finally returned my calls. He wants to meet with me next week."

"About what? The thing with Izvyona and Bakhadaland? The Goodwill Ship?"

"He didn't say. He used a code to tell me that he will only talk in person. The good fellow is worried about something."

Rona took a sip of purple juice. "Must be important. Who

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else called?"

"Ah! Detective Carl Brunish. Hmm, interesting. There's been a murder. He's at the scene. Wants me to run over there."

"I'll go, Mr. Fullerby," Rona said.

"It's not a good neighborhood, Row."

"Mr. Fullerby, I'm nineteen. When you were my age, you were a video man reporting in war zones. Anyway, it's morning and the police are there. Let me go, please!"

"It sounds like a nasty murder. A twenty-eight-year-old woman was tortured and sexually assaulted."

"Mr. Fullerby, when you were my age, you saw bodies get blown to bits. Please let me go."

Seeing bodies blown up was the mild stuff Bob had faced when he was Rona's age, but he wanted to protect her. Yet he couldn't keep Rona locked in a hideaway office forever. She was a budding reporter, and a darned talented one. "Okay, Row, I'll let you go, but it's against my better judgment."

"Wahoo!"

"Here's the info. Take a look at the pics Brunish sent and see if you still want to go."

Rona ate breakfast as she flipped through the gory pictures. "Wow! Look what they did to her hands! There are knives going through them. Gross! Why would someone do that?"

"Row, if you changed your mind about going it's okay."

"No way! I want to go. Whoever did this is a real sicko. It'll be fascinating."

"Well, dear, you better get going while the story's hot."

Rona grabbed a rain jacket and her big, faux-gem-dotted purse. "See you later, Mr. Fullerby!" The back door of the old print shop building slammed shut behind her.

The third call came from Pastor Mark Walzelesskii. Mark had left a message as cryptic as Richard Karther's. Something serious must have happened; Mark didn't want Bob to return his call. Maybe Mark learned more about the missing Guiding Light document that Pastor Leon Walls was so worried about. Even better, perhaps Mark had learned the identity of

the mystery woman in the brown Monarch. She was the last person known to be in possession of the Guiding Light. If Bob found her, it could break the Drop Case wide open.

Bob hadn't finished his breakfast when his personal device buzzed. "Bob here."

"Mr. Fullerby, it's Mark."

"Good morning, Pastor. What can I do for you?"

"Things are getting crazy. My dad never went home last night. He slept at the True Followers headquarters. So did Senator Mitch Fischer, Senator John Rineburg, and General Douglass Willirman."

"Do you know why?"

"Dad said they were working late, and he didn't want to wake Mom. But it's not only that. The four of them got back together. They're in my dad's office at the headquarters. They're really worried about something. More worried than ever. My dad pleaded with me to attend the Back-to-Basics Club meeting tonight. He told me he needed my support because things might get rough."

"Why?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think it has to do with the document. While my dad was dressing, I overheard Senator Rineburg speaking with Senator Fischer and General Willirman. Senator Rineburg mentioned a document. I can't imagine they were talking about a different one."

"Are you going to go to the meeting tonight?" Bob asked.

"I don't want to, but I promised Dad I would. He actually looked scared, like he thought something really bad might happen."

"Have you learned anything about the mystery woman in the brown car?"

"No, nothing. Everything's so messed up, Mr. Fullerby. I'm trying to figure out what's going on, why my dad's afraid. At the same time, I feel like I'm spying on him."

"I know, Son," Bob said. "Things are messed up. You're in a position to learn information, but, Pastor Walzelesskii, what-

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ever you do, please, be very careful. Whatever is going on, it could get dangerous. Don't take unnecessary risks."

"I won't. Thank you for being concerned, Mr. Fullerby."

CHAPTER 3

THE INTERVIEW

"CadTranS, Keeping Cadona City Connected."



Cadona City Transportation System Motto

Cadona City, Cadona
Monday, April 3, Year 1007 EE
7:30 a.m.

An obnoxious chime rang in Leeha Ritsagin's ears. She didn't want to get out of bed. Nightmares had stalked her all night. "Man, I'm exhausted," she said with only herself to hear. "Why am I going to this stupid interview anyway?" Leeha silenced the alarm on her personal device. "Crap, I'd better go." Attending the interview would be good practice. Maybe she'd soon get an interview closer to home.

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She flung the threadbare covers from her body and shoved her feet into a pair of well-used slippers. The old house shoes had long ago stretched out of shape. They slapped against the pockmarked linoleum as she stomped to the bathroom. A shower didn't improve her mood, but gobbling down a stack of pancakes sticky with butter and syrup sure did.

Leeha checked her personal device. Butterflies fluttered in her belly; it was almost time to leave. Her homemade suit, already pressed and clean, hung in the closet. She examined the jacket. No visible wrinkles or stains blemished the gray-brown fabric. The matching skirt also seemed to be in good shape. Leeha held up the pale pink blouse so light would shine on it. Snags poked the delicate cloth. "Just great! That's all I need," she said. "Oh, well, the jacket will cover it."

She stepped into her skirt and closed the zipper. The skirt's waistband wasn't this tight the last time she had worn it. Leeha had no choice. This skirt would have to do.

A full-length mirror leaned against the wall. Leeha studied her reflection. A roll of fat drooped over the top of the waistband. She put on the jacket. Perfect! It hid both the snags on the blouse and the extra weight around her middle. "Nice and professional," she told herself. "Okay, let's do this."

Leeha grabbed her purse, swung a tan raincoat over her arm, and stepped through the doorway. The door to her unit clicked shut behind her. "Oh, boy! Here goes nothin'," she said aloud. Her heart thumped as she walked along the hallway and then down the gray-walled stairwell.

Warm, damp air rushed into her lungs and collected on her skin the moment she left the apartment building. Wow! It was muggy. No rain, though. A good thing, since kids stole her umbrella at the grocery store the other day.

The silky shirt beneath Leeha's suit jacket stuck to her arms and back as she walked to the CadTranS stop. What if she got lost again, like last week? The trip by rail should be a straight shot, though. She'd be less likely to lose her way if she traveled by train instead of by car. Not that she had a choice. Helmsey

street thugs had beaten up her brown Monarch sedan. Her automobile was in the repair shop.

The Helmsey District attack still haunted her. What a gruesome day! It was the same awful day that the weird document mysteriously appeared in the back seat of her old vehicle. One good thing had happened: she met a nice policeman. He helped her file a report after the assault. *Officer Dailey* was his name.

Leeha joined a crowd of grumpy people at the CadTrans stop. A signal clanged. The train was coming.

She squeezed into a crowded wagon. Leeha found a vertical bar to grasp just as the train lurched forward.

Many passengers looked as exhausted as she felt. A young couple and a dog were sitting atop soiled sleeping bags. Had the three passengers been riding all night? Did they have anywhere else to go? Hollows dented the man's cheeks. The woman's dirty ankles were as skinny as twigs. Ribs showed through the uncombed, red-brown fur of the panting dog. The man caught Leeha observing them. She averted her eyes; he might get mad.

Leeha smelled something icky. A chubby, balding man was standing next to her. He raised his arm to change his grip on the support bar. His body odor would knock out a gorilla. Long, thin strands of dark, greasy hair arched over his bald crown. He sure had lots of dandruff for someone with so little hair.

"I haven't worked for almost eighteen months," the stinky man said to another passenger. "I don't know what I'm going to do. Since they lowered the unemployment benefit, I'm afraid I'll get kicked out of my house." He seemed on the edge of tears. Leeha noticed a tremor in his hand as it clutched the bar.

The man next to him shook his head. "That's a long time with no job. I'm going on nine months myself. My wife dumped me. She doesn't want me to see the kids. I'm going to scare them with my doom and gloom, she says."

A woman about Leeha's age was squatting on the floor.

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The lady said, "I got you both beat. I hit two years yesterday. I found a job right after I graduated, but the company shut its doors. Now my blasted car broke down, and I can't afford to get it fixed. If a job isn't near a rail or bus stop, I'm sunk. And rents certainly aren't going down."

The doom and gloom *was* scary. Leeha's own job was once full time. In order to avoid layoffs, the company reduced hours and pay. Rumors continued. The reductions may not have been enough. Layoffs may come. The whole company could go bust. "Don't panic," Leeha told herself. "You're not unemployed yet. You have money saved up. If things get too bad, you could live with Mom on the farm."

The skirt's waistband pinched Leeha's stomach. She slipped a finger between jacket buttons and pulled the band away from her belly. If only the thing weren't so tight!

The train slowed. A recording announced their location: *stop seventy-nine*.

Leeha's stop was after this one. "It's okay, Leeha, you can do this. It'll soon be over."

The stinky man shifted positions. Maybe getting off wasn't all bad.

The train began to move again.

The recorded voice announced stop eighty. The train doors slid open. Leeha walked onto an elevated, concrete platform. On all sides, huge skyscrapers frowned like angry stone monsters. Yet, they had a desperate look—old, tinged with gray, and brooding. Moist, smoggy vapors swirled around the towers. Raised rail lines and highway overpasses twisted and curved around the behemoths.

A man in a black business suit banged into Leeha's right shoulder. He clenched his jaw. "Why don't you watch where you're going?" he said.

"Sorry!" Leeha doubted he heard.

A beggar stood nearby. Sores covered her wrinkled skin. The lady limped toward the man in the suit. She stretched out her bony, dirty fingers. He shoved her aside. How mean!

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Leeha dug through her purse and dropped a few coins into the woman's filthy palm.

A low rumble shook the platform. The train was leaving. Somehow, the train connected her to home. Now she felt abandoned, and she had no idea where to go. A crowd was gathering to her right. She followed the gaggle.

"Hey, lady," a sweaty man said, "wait your turn."

"Sorry."

"Fat bitch," she heard him say.

Leeha pushed her way deeper into the crowd.

Finally, she figured out why people were huddled there. Eight scratched and dented elevators lined a concrete wall. A door on one of the lifts opened. The elevator's interior was every bit as dirty and marred as the outside. People pressed into the confined space until it was impossible for anyone else to fit. Those vertical coffins were nothing but death traps. She must find another way down. Leeha peered over the platform railing. The world spun. She knew the platform was high, but not *this* high. The ground lay far below. Cars, the size of mice, packed the streets. Then she noticed broad steps leading down from the platform. Thank goodness! Stairs!

Leeha's legs soon ached. She was accustomed to the stairs in her apartment building, but this was like climbing down from the moon. Leeha stopped to rest. She studied a maze of ramps leading from the staircase to nearby buildings and covered skywalks. Perhaps she could find a shortcut. "Don't do it," she said to herself. "You'll get lost."

Relief! She made it to the sidewalk. Her legs shook. Perspiration dripped down her back. Hair stuck to her neck and cheeks. Great! Just what she needed—to get all nice and sweaty for the interview. Huge buildings, however, kept sunlight from warming the earth. Stale dampness filled the air. The place reminded Leeha of a not-so-run-down Helmsey District. Like scurrying ants, people clogged the sidewalks. Despite heavy

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traffic, pedestrians crossed streets wherever they pleased. Horns honked and engines growled. Lights from businesses fought against the urban darkness.

Over the din, she heard music. Tinny and sometimes discordant notes grew louder as she walked along. Still, the song had a catchy rhythm. Leeha spotted a band. Four young people stood on a corner. A girl sang and tapped a tambourine against the dirty, black tights covering her shapely thighs. Two skinny boys played guitars and a pretty girl blew on a dented, dull trombone. A few coins rested in a can sitting on the ground near the musicians' feet. Leeha fished change from her purse and tossed the money into the can. She didn't have time to listen to the music or see a potential smile of thanks for the donation. For several blocks, Leeha flowed down the street with the torrent of human bodies.

She read a street sign: Essent Street. Altage Enterprises was close now. Thank goodness! The tight waistband was suffocating her. It scratched her skin. Leeha shoved her way past two women and stepped off the curb. A horn screamed in her ear. The long, dirty mirror of a rumbling truck almost hit her head. A greasy, giant wheel rolled next to her feet. Another honk. Leeha jumped back onto the curb. "That idiot almost ran me over," Leeha said aloud. No one made eye contact. No one cared. More than ever, Leeha wanted to go home.

At last! She reached Vandvire Street. Altage Enterprises should be right on the corner. She stopped walking. A man smashed into her right side. A woman bumped into her from the left. Leeha longed to get off the crowded sidewalk, but she didn't see a sign for Altage. Where the heck was it? It was supposed to be right there. She saw a man who didn't look as grumpy as the rest, and he wore a nice business suit. "Excuse me, sir, do you know where—" He ignored her.

"Ma'am, is Altage Enterprises—"

The woman kept walking.

Again, Leeha tugged at her tight skirt. Did she exist at all? Was she *that* invisible? "Come on, Leeha," she told herself,

"let's get this over with so you can go home."

Maybe someone inside could give her directions.

The building on the corner didn't look like a place Leeha would enter. It was far too fancy with its mirrored glass and polished stone. She pulled on a shiny door handle. Leeha slunk into a big, bright room. Far away, along the back wall, she saw a long security counter. Thick, yellow straps connected to metal posts created zigzag rows that weaved across the glossy but shoe-scuffed floor. Each path led to a security station, but which row was she supposed to follow? Well-dressed individuals filled the queues. The people moved slowly, their unsmiling faces staring at their personal devices or the white floor.

Leeha felt eyes on her. A security guard was watching. She could ask him for help, but he was spooky looking. Even though he was an older man, he was a frightening figure: tall, mean, and strong. Bushy, gray eyebrows topped stern, dark eyes. Yet she must find Altage Enterprises. She'd go for it. Leeha's legs felt as if they were tying in knots. What if she lost her balance and tripped? All these ritzy people would point and laugh. She stuck close to the wall as she walked up to the guard. Her heart thumped. "Excuse me, sir."

His callous brown eyes met hers. He glared as if she were an ant crawling in the sugar bowl. Leeha cleared her throat. "Excuse me, I'm looking for Altage Enterprises."

He spoke with an accent. "You're in the right place, madam." His voice was friendlier than his appearance. "After you go through security, you'll need to go to the northeast wing. The main office for Altage Enterprises is on floor one hundred seventy-four."

"Northeast wing?"

"Yes, madam."

Leeha studied the maze leading to the security stations. "Sir, sorry to bother you again, but what line do I use?"

"Are you a member of the board of a corporation in this building?"

"No."

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"Wife or daughter of such a person?"

"No."

"A major shareholder or member of a board of trustees?"

"No."

"Then any of the twelve queues to the left will do."

"Thank you, sir."

Leeha waited in the shortest line. It was taking a long time. She was glad she didn't want the job. She'd be freaking out right now if she did.

A security official motioned to her. The uniformed woman spoke like a robot. "Place your purse here."

Leeha set her purse on a conveyer belt.

"Raise your arms to the side."

The unsmiling woman waved a wand up and down Leeha's body.

"Walk through the arch."

Leeha stepped through the scanner. Nothing buzzed.

"Proceed down the hall. Don't forget your purse."

Leeha grabbed it from the end of the belt.

"Excuse me, ma'am, how do I get to the northeast wing?" Leeha asked.

The woman didn't hear. She was already screening another person.

A stream of people headed down a passage behind the security counter. Leeha trailed behind them. Then she saw a terrible sight: elevators. The shiny beasts lined both sides of the hallway. Her pulse raced. No staircase was in sight. Not that it mattered. She'd never make it up one hundred seventy-four floors and get to the interview on time.

An elevator door slid open. Leeha followed several other people into the teensy room. Something was wrong. It only went to the hundredth floor. Now what? She pushed the button for floor one hundred and then held her breath. Her heart pounded. Even fancy elevators with big mirrors and polished brass might get stuck.

After floor ninety-seven, only one person remained with

her. He got off at floor ninety-eight. Leeha was alone. All alone. She closed her eyes until she heard a ping. An eternity passed before the door glided open. She bolted out. An airy corridor greeted her. Just seventy-four more floors to go. She might be able to climb that many stairs and be on time. Leeha searched around a few corners. No stairwell. It would have to be another elevator.

A few other people were loitering near the elevator doors, but she alone entered the next lift. Up she went. Seventy-four floors up. Alone.

This time, the door opened into a rose-colored hallway. Ornate chandeliers hung from a gilded ceiling. A brass plaque showed the floor number. She had arrived! No more stupid elevators.

Leeha wandered the unfamiliar halls. No sign for Altage Enterprises. She walked into an office. The place smelled of perfume. A woman behind the reception desk stood up. Perfectly coiffed bleached hair encircled a face plastered with makeup. The woman's exquisite features were unnaturally flawless. The white suit she wore revealed a spectacular figure. A few other women were also in the room. Each of them beauties. Each of them drenched in makeup. With surprise in their eyes, the women stared at Leeha.

The blonde behind the reception desk spoke in a voice as soft as misty rain. "May I help you?"

Leeha cleared her throat. "I hope so. I'm looking for Altage Enterprises. It's supposed to be on the one-hundred-and-seventy-fourth floor, but I didn't see it."

The woman's smile uncovered white and perfect teeth. "Oh, I understand. Altage Enterprises is located in the north-east wing, madam."

"How do I get there?"

"Take the horizontal elevators. You'll find them down the hall to the left."

"Horizontal elevators?"

The women giggled.

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"I'll show you," a red-haired woman said.

Leeha followed the redhead. She looked like a living, breathing mannequin.

The woman pressed a button next to a row of elevator doors. "Will you be seeing Stevie?" she asked.

"Whom?"

The woman giggled. "Stephen Hutchinson, of course."

The name sounded familiar, but the only thing that mattered was finding the office. "I don't think so. I have an interview. Who's Stephen Hutchinson?"

The woman giggled again. "Madam, Mr. Hutchinson is the major shareholder in Altage Enterprises. And Andecco News Service. And many, many other things."

Aha! Now Leeha remembered who he was. She didn't realize he controlled Altage Enterprises. She did know about Andecco News Service, however. The weird document hidden beneath her kitchen cabinets described how Mr. Hutchinson wouldn't sell his controlling shares of Andecco stock. Leeha said, "Ma'am, I doubt I'll be seeing him."

An elevator door opened. The redhead gestured for Leeha to enter. "If you should happen to run into Stevie, would you please tell him *Chantella* says hello?"

"*Chantella*. Okay, I will. If I see him."

Chantella pressed a button and stepped away. The door closed.

"Ha! Like Mr. Hutchinson would have anything to do with me," Leeha said to herself. The elevator took off. She stumbled. They weren't kidding. There really were such things as horizontal elevators.

Leeha rushed out the moment the door opened. She found herself in a hallway paneled with wood of a most soothing color. Rows of small, round lights peeked down from the ceiling. She spotted an office door. It was made of wood and had a white, opaque window built into it. Black letters were printed on the window. Altage Enterprises! There it was. Leeha liked the feel of the place. Something about it reminded

her of a detective movie she had watched with her grandparents many years ago. Leeha grabbed the doorknob. It stuck to her sweaty palm as she opened the door. Leeha stared into a long, spacious waiting area. Padded chairs filled the room. Most seats were taken.

Several people gawked at her. Fear covered many faces. Did these folks expect to see a machine-gun-toting gangster standing in the entryway? As Leeha made her way across the cushiony, carpeted floor, she noticed the expensive clothing that the interviewees were wearing. Some of the people looked like they just came from a beauty parlor. Although dressed to kill, the people were quiet, their bodies stiff and alert as if something terrible was about to happen. Leeha chose a seat facing a wall.

A classy woman sat nearby. She watched as Leeha settled into the chair.

"Hi," Leeha said.

"Hello." The woman's single word dripped with sophistication. Her interest in Leeha soon faded.

Leeha studied the lady. Unseen clips anchored salon-perfect, dark hair in place. Not a renegade strand to be seen. Bright, intelligent eyes beamed from a face of delicate features and flawless skin. The dark suit she wore oozed style. A peach-colored blouse peeked from beneath a formfitting jacket. Dark hose without sags, snags, or crinkles covered the woman's long, slender legs. Her high-heeled shoes, shiny and black, must have come fresh off a store shelf. Leeha tucked her chubby legs, aging hose, and petroleum-jelly-polished shoes under the chair.

The pretty woman's every motion was deliberate. With slender fingers topped by smooth nails, she opened a thin, black briefcase. The briefcase was probably seeing its first workday. Leeha fingered her own brown purse, the only one she possessed, the same one she carried to work and the grocery store. Leeha pushed her well-used handbag farther back into her lap.

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Someone else walked into the waiting room. Everyone watched a young, athletic man prance across the floor and take a seat. His tailored suit fit flawlessly. His complexion glowed.

Leeha slipped her hand under her jacket and pulled at the snug waistband of her skirt. "Oh, boy," she told herself, "I don't fit in at all. *'Me thinks I'm out of my league.'*" She spotted the pretty lady's reflection in a decorative mirror that ran along the wall. The woman's fair skin contrasted with her glossy hair, large eyes, and full lips. Leeha observed her own reflected face. Everything about her blended into the woodwork. Acne blemishes stood out more than her eyes and lips. Her handmade suit, which seemed so dressy in her bedroom mirror, seemed old, worn, and crude. Leeha glanced around the room. Her stomach burned. She was the ugliest person there. Compared to these people, she looked like she crawled out of a dumpster in the Helmsey District. Leeha closed her eyes. She dared not cry, not in here, not in front of these successful, classy people. Maybe she should just leave—pretend she got an important call and had to go.

A voice came out of nowhere. "Excuse me." A young, heavysset woman was standing right in front of her. "I'm sorry I startled you," the woman said. "Are you here for an interview?"

"Yes."

"I don't remember you signing in."

"Oh," Leeha said, "sorry, I didn't know I was supposed to."

"Not a problem. My name is Katrin Meller. I'm an administrative assistant. It's my job to check such things. What's your name?"

"Leeha Ritsagin."

Katrin read an autopad. "*Leeha Ritsagin*, there you are. We're running a little behind schedule. We should be ready for you in about twenty minutes."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Good luck, Ms. Ritsagin." Katrin walked away.

Leeha liked her. Katrin wore a professional outfit of light gray and pastel pink. Nice clothes, but not as haughty as the interviewees. Also, her reddish-blond hair, though neat, wasn't salon-perfect. Katrin carried extra pounds on her large frame. Leeha was thinner and smaller in comparison.

A stir swept through the room. A well-dressed, slender man emerged from the hallway behind the reception desk. Red tinged the smooth skin of his young face. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead and upper lip. With his eyes focused on the floor, the man headed for the exit. The door slammed shut behind him.

"Wow," Leeha said to herself, "his interview didn't go well, I guess."

A cacophony of whispers swirled in the waiting room. All fell silent again. The pretty, dark-haired woman was turning an object over and over in her delicate hands. Leeha caught a glimpse of a big coin, dark bronze in color, with a serrated edge. A Kettish prayer medallion! It was not something Leeha expected the classy woman to have. She didn't seem the type who would be into religious things.

Leeha recalled her own Kettish medallion. She'd left it in her bedroom in the house where she grew up. Her widowed mother needed protection more than she did. Then a frightening memory intruded. Leeha was a little girl in religion class. All of the students were sitting on the floor. Leeha hunched down, hoping the instructor wouldn't notice her. He did. He called upon Leeha to explain, in front of everyone, what the symbols on the medallion stood for. The sun represented light from God. The sword—courage. The flower—peace. Wheat—the bounty of God's creation. Yes! She still remembered!

More footsteps came from the direction of the reception desk. A stir again filled the room. Along with everyone else, Leeha checked to see who was coming. It was Katrin.

"Ms. Cookie Davis," Katrin said, "we're ready for you."

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The beautiful woman sitting near Leeha stiffened and then stood up.

Cookie Davis, ha! What a fake movie star name. All pretty and sweet and perfect. Leeha watched as Cookie followed Katrin to the dreaded hallway behind the reception desk. Cookie's movements were graceful even in high heels. Her luxurious business suit didn't hide her full bosom, round hips, and skinny waist.

"Boy," Leeha said to herself, "I'd feel a whole lot better if I could borrow Chantella's body for a while, but I'd need to hang on to my own brains."

Less than fifteen minutes had gone by when Leeha again heard footsteps. Cookie Davis was heading toward the exit. Her lips were pursed, as if to hold back tears. What were they doing to people back there?

Only minutes later, Katrin called out, "Leeha Ritsagin."

Finally! Leeha could get this blazing thing over with and go home.

"Ms. Ritsagin," Katrin said, "you may hang your raincoat here."

Leeha hung her jacket on a coat tree next to the reception desk and then followed Katrin down a hallway. What a fancy place! Nothing shoddy in here. Leeha was walking in a foreign world. Her old shoes squished to the sides each time her feet struck the expensive carpet. The same lighting that brought out the rich texture of the walls revealed puckers in the hem of her homemade skirt. Leeha recalled an old movie she had seen. A young man from a poor family saved a rich man's daughter from drowning. The rich man invited the boy and his family to his mansion. The poor folk dressed in their finest clothing, but still the family seemed better suited to the barns than the rich man's dining room table.

Katrin opened the door to a conference room. Tinted windows lined an entire wall. Leeha counted eight people seated at a long table.

"This is Ms. Leeha Ritsagin, candidate eight hundred ten,"

Katrin said.

Katrin walked to a chair and pulled it away from the table. The eight interviewers were seated on the other side—one against eight.

“Ms. Ritsagin, please have a seat,” Katrin told her.

Leeha walked to the chair. The others watched but said nothing. No one smiled. Leeha sat down. Katrin left.

A woman with wiry, gray hair asked the first questions. Why was Leeha interested in the job? What did she know about the company? Where was she working now? Why did she want to leave her current job?

A balding man with a puffy face and splotchy red cheeks questioned her next. “Ms. Ritsagin, what do you know about the CMLX package?”

Leeha told him.

“So, Ms. Ritsagin, what do you think of it?”

“The approach is novel, sir. However, its connectivity with the event cluster can be unstable. The region funnel can require extra maintenance, so a good sniffer is needed to keep an eye out for splice breaks.”

Not once did the man make eye contact.

Another man who looked to be in his forties then asked a few questions about sniffers. Easy stuff.

The wiry-haired woman then said, “I see you graduated second in your class. This is no small achievement. Your university is known for having a tough curriculum.”

“Thank you,” Leeha said. “It *was* tough. I spent a great deal of time studying.” Not that she had anything else to do in college.

“Do you have any questions for us?”

Leeha had prepared a list of questions the previous week. She remembered them, so she asked each one. She had a new question as well. “When the administrative assistant introduced me, she said that I was candidate eight hundred ten. I’m curious, how many candidates are there?”

The balding man said, “Two thousand. That’s after four

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rounds of screening.”

“Wow! That’s a lot. I’m honored to have been selected for an interview.”

A smile flashed across the wiry-haired woman’s face. “Ms. Ritsagin, you’ve earned it. Do you have any other questions?”

Leeha thought for a moment. “No, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Ms. Ritsagin, for taking time to meet with us. We expect to make our decision in six weeks.” The woman pressed a button on the table.

Katrin walked in. “Ms. Ritsagin, I’ll show you out.”

Yay! It was over. It wasn’t so bad. Leeha wondered why Cookie and the other guy looked so upset when they left.

“Don’t forget your jacket, Ms. Ritsagin,” Katrin said. She handed Leeha her raincoat.

Katrin called another name as Leeha walked out of the office.

CHAPTER 4

TAYSAR

WRISTWATCH

Cadona City, Cadona
Monday, April 3, Year 1007 EE
12:10 p.m.

Leeha Ritsagin's interview at Altage Enterprises had ended. Now she could go home. A sign in the hallway pointed to the left. Restrooms! Thank goodness! She desperately needed to breathe. The skirt was killing her. She pushed open the bathroom door and stopped in her tracks; Cookie Davis was standing by the sink counter. Leeha tried to slink into a toilet stall unnoticed. No such luck.

"Hello," Cookie said.

"Hi." Leeha hurried into the nearest stall and locked the door. She unfastened her skirt and pulled down on the zipper slider until the fabric no longer squeezed her middle. What a relief! But the waistband had gouged her flesh. It left a bumpy line on her skin. The last thing she wanted to do was close the zipper again. While Leeha sat on the toilet she remembered something. Safety pin! She might have one. Leeha rummaged through her purse. She found it! Leeha pinned the zipper closed at a comfortable point. The top of the skirt drooped, but it didn't matter. The jacket would hide it. The interview was over anyway. Time to go home.

Leeha peeked through a gap next to the stall door. Just great,

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Cookie was still there. Leeha hated feeling so outclassed, but she had to leave the toilet sometime. She gathered her courage and walked to the sink.

As Leeha washed her hands, she heard sniffles. In the mirror, she saw Cookie's reflection. Cookie's eyes were swollen and red-rimmed. Eye makeup left gray streaks on the perfect skin of the pretty woman's cheeks.

"Um, what's ... what's wrong?" Leeha asked.

"My interview totally sucked. I hope yours went better."

How *did* it go? It was over. At the moment, nothing else mattered. Yet she had to tell Cookie something. "It was strange. Only three of the eight interviewers said anything to me. I walked in, sat down, and they just started asking questions."

Cookie glanced at her wristwatch. Leeha noticed it was a Taysar. People wore wristwatches for two reasons these days. The first was because they couldn't afford a personal device. The second was for show. A Taysar watch fell into the second category. Expensive. Very expensive.

"Your interview didn't last long either," Cookie said.

"Nope, I was in and out. Really quick."

"Did they cut you off while you were answering their questions?"

"No, not that I remember anyway."

Cookie was crying again. "They cut me off a bunch of times. They didn't seem very interested in me. I don't know what I'm going to do. I've been looking for work for over a year. I've done some odd jobs here and there, but all temporary and low-paying. Even those are hard to find. So how long have you been looking?"

"A long time, too. I've been working part time, but we're all waiting for layoffs. That's if the whole company doesn't go bankrupt."

Cookie was studying her. Why? Was Cookie grossed out by Leeha's old clothes? Fat? Zits?

"You don't look upset," Cookie said.

"I'm not. Not much anyway. I mean, I do still have a job

even though it's part time. It pays the bills."

Fresh tears ran down Cookie's face. "I have so many bills! I don't know what to do. I need this job so badly. It's the first interview I've had for a really good job in a long time."

Leeha's eyes wandered to the Taysar wristwatch. Cookie wouldn't have so many bills if she didn't spend so much on watches, clothes, jewelry, shoes, and hairdos. Then Leeha felt a wave of guilt. In times before the economic downturn, a common corporate slogan in Cadona was, "*To be rich you must act rich.*" Many companies expected their employees to act well-to-do even if the workers' incomes didn't match.

Cookie dried her face. "They told me they would make a decision in six weeks."

"They told me six weeks also."

"I don't think I can wait six weeks," Cookie said. "Things are bad at home. My boyfriend and I were going to get married last spring, but we postponed the wedding. We decided to wait until the economy got better. I lost my job first. Then he lost his on what was supposed to have been our wedding day. How do you like that? After he couldn't find a job, he started to act weird. He started to drink—a lot. He gave up looking for work. He's getting mean, too. Sometimes I'm really afraid of him. Sometimes he gets really mad at me. I never know what will set him off. I want to leave, but I can't afford to. I can't get him to look for help. He doesn't want to help himself."

A total stranger was confessing her most intimate problems. Leeha was always invisible. Why not now? She had no idea what to say. "Sorry," Leeha said.

Cookie dabbed her wet eyes with a tissue. "No, I'm sorry for carrying on like this. I know I'm not the only person with problems. When I get really scared, I forget that. A few years back, things were going so well. I had a great job, and I found this good-looking guy who also had a great job. I thought he really loved me. I thought I knew him inside and out. Then it was like the floor caved in." She forced a smile. "Well, I better

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get going. I work a few hours a week at a Kettish Church—the one where we were going to be married. I help with cleaning and taking care of the grounds. It doesn't pay much, but it helps, and they give me some food as well."

"That's good. At least you have something." What an awkward conversation.

"Yes, thank God for that." Cookie fingered a Kettish prayer medallion and then pressed it against her chest. She forced another smile. "I wish you luck with your job search." Cookie opened the restroom door.

Words flew from Leeha's mouth. "If you need anything, I mean, if you need help ... if you don't have anywhere to go or something like that, you can give me a call." Leeha's mind raced. What the heck did she just say?

Cookie's expression softened. "Thank you so much. You are very kind."

Leeha hoped Cookie would decline. Thanks, but no thanks. She didn't. They shared contact information.

At last, Cookie left.

"You are a total idiot," Leeha told herself. "What a complete ding-dong!" She didn't even know this woman. What if Cookie wanted to stay with her? For all she knew, Cookie was a thief. A mass murderer. What a mess it would be! Someone always there. Underfoot. Bugging her. Jabber, jabber, jabber day and night when she wanted quiet. Who knew what nutty movies Cookie would want to watch. Leeha struggled to calm herself. Cookie would never call. She'd stay with other beautiful people. Why on earth would Cookie want to hang out with her?

Leeha waited in the bathroom to give Cookie time to walk away. The last thing Leeha needed was something else preventing her from getting home. She opened the door just a crack and peered down the hallway. Cookie was nowhere in sight.

After riding in three dastardly elevators, Leeha finally reached the first floor. A wave of panic ran through her. The

broad, bright hallway didn't seem at all familiar. In the distance, she spotted Cookie. How self-assured Cookie appeared as she strutted along the wide corridor. Only moments ago, this confident-looking woman had shed desperate tears. It wasn't fair. Leeha wished she possessed such poise.

Whatever Cookie's destination, she seemed to know where she was going. Perhaps she was heading for an exit. Leeha followed at a safe distance. Finally! Cookie opened a glass door that led outside.

"Pretend like you know where you're going," Leeha said to herself. She stepped out onto the bustling sidewalk.

Another wave of panic struck. This wasn't the right place. She was lost already! "Come on, Leeha, think," she told herself. "The building's square. If you walk around it, you'll find your street." Luck was with her. The road she sought was on the next corner.

Leeha was about to cross a street when the signal light changed color. She stared at the light as she waited on the curb. Out of nowhere, her head felt funny. The light blurred. The world spun. The dizziness passed in a second, but she had almost fallen. What in the heck was wrong? Probably just stress.

The signal changed again. Leeha headed across the street. With no warning, a jolt of pain stabbed her back. She remembered the long walk down from the raised train platform. Maybe tromping down all those blasted stairs made her feel sick. The pain subsided, but weariness came over her. Maybe she was dehydrated.

Just ahead, in the shadow of huge buildings, a sign for Lit's Coffee House glowed red. Leeha peeked in the window. The place looked cozy, and it wasn't too crowded. She went inside. It smelled of coffee, tea, spices, and dough. Leeha had her choice of seats, so she sat down at the end of the counter—the most private place.

A barista appeared. "May I help you?"

"Water, please. Do you have a menu?"

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The barista handed her a menu and a glass of water. Leeha's face flushed. She took a long drink. The chilled water cooled her. Leeha flipped through the menu.

The barista returned. "What can I get you?"

"I usually drink tea, but I'm celebrating. I'll have the latte café today."

"Flavor?"

"Just plain."

"Anything else?"

"Is the price right on those berry pastries?"

"Yep, they're two days old. That's why they're so cheap."

"They look yummy. I'll have two, please. No, wait, make it three."

"Three? Coming right up."

Leeha bit into a pastry. Delicious, hot berries squirted into her mouth. The steaming, frothy coffee complemented the dessert well. Far too much time had gone by since she treated herself to a sit-down café. How wonderful it was to be waited on—even though the super-skinny barista raised her eyebrows when Leeha ordered *three* pastries.

A tall, gray-haired man swung a plump leg over a nearby stool. "Mind if I turn on the news, ma'am?"

"Not at all," Leeha said. She was happy; he turned on Andecco News. Angela Thirgal's face appeared on the view-plane.

"Public anger against the ruling Allegiance Party grows as jobless rates climb to historic heights, and housing prices continue to rise. President Louis Meyfeld's approval rating fell for the fifteenth straight week. Despite his drop in the polls, no Allegiance Party member has challenged President Meyfeld's re-election bid. While Louis Meyfeld plans his campaign, the nation waits for the Freedom Party to announce its candidate for president. The leading contenders: Senator John Rineburg, Senator Mitch Fischer, and Senator Sandra Pettock."

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"Would you like anything else, ma'am?" the barista asked.

"Um, could I get a cup of hot water?"

"Sure."

The image of an attractive, slender man appeared on the wall monitor. Angela Thirgal's voice played in the background.

"President Demnar Tarish of Domataland has made it clear he will not comply with World Assembly Resolution 2060A, which calls for Domataland to immediately pull the Domataree Goodwill Ship out of Izvyonsk territory. The Goodwill Ship has been anchored in the Bakhadaree port city of D'nevtnya since the first of April."

Once again, the world spun. Leeha grasped the edge of the counter. The dizziness passed, but her head felt floaty. Drinking more water helped.

"Police have released the identity of the murder victim. Her name is Mary Kronvelt."

Leeha nearly dropped her cup. Mary Kronvelt? Did she hear it right? A photo of a young, weary-looking woman appeared on the viewplane.

"The twenty-eight-year-old victim was beaten to death in her apartment. Investigators estimate the time of death as today at six thirty a.m., East Cadona Time. Cadona City Police Detective Carl Brunish described the murder as horrifically brutal. No suspects are in custody. Detective Brunish told reporters that the murder is likely linked to convicted felon Agel Yungst. The Cadona City Prosecutor's Office, however, released a statement saying there is 'zero evidence' that the murder was connected with Mr. Yungst. In the opinion of the Prosecutor's Office, the killer followed Mary Kronvelt while she was walking home from work. The official report states it was a random crime."

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Leeha's hand trembled as she took another sip of water. The mysterious document hidden beneath her kitchen cabinets described how a justice group planned to execute one hundred women. *Mary Kronvelt* was the first name on the list. Could the murdered *Mary Kronvelt* be the same woman? Even more terrifying, the document identified Senator John Rineburg as the person coordinating the executions. Without doubt, this was the same John Rineburg who was a potential Freedom Party candidate for president. It couldn't be the same Mary Kronvelt. It just couldn't.

Then it struck again—the dizziness. “No one notice, please,” Leeha said to herself. The spinning stopped just in time; the barista was heading her way.

“Can I get you anything else, ma’am?”

“No thanks.”

Leeha felt awful. She wanted to go home. When no one was looking, she rose to her feet. The floor swayed as she walked to the exit. Mercifully, the crowd on the street had thinned. The vertigo eased as she headed to the CadTrans platform, but pain shot through her back. Her legs grew weak.

It took forever, but at last Leeha reached the base of the elevated commuter rail station. Her eyes followed the winding staircase. The top step lay impossibly far away. She'd never make it to the platform. The door to a graffiti-covered elevator slid open. The lift was empty. “Here goes nothin’,” Leeha said to herself. She stepped inside the claustrophobic chamber. Her heart pounded. Where were the instructions explaining what to do if the elevator got stuck? She pressed a sticky button. The clunky box clanked and ground its way up to the stop. When the door opened, she spotted a waiting train. It was hers! Despite a pounding headache and wobbly legs, she darted toward the nearest wagon. The last thing she needed was for the train to leave without her.

Plenty of seats were free. Leeha flopped into one close to the door. When the pain behind her eyes eased, she scanned the passengers. No one seemed dangerous, and, except for

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one cranky child, everyone was quiet. Leeha's body slumped. She felt terrible, but soon she would be home in her quiet, little apartment.

CHAPTER 5

J2

Cadona City, Cadona
Monday, April 3, Year 1007 EE
1:40 p.m.

National Health Director Vartu Sinje knew something was wrong as soon as he saw Lonna's worried expression. "Doctor Parker, how may I help you?"

She handed him a slip disk. He plugged it into his computer. Images appeared on the viewplane. In less than a minute he understood why she rushed across town to see him. "Lonna, where did these samples come from?"

"Helmsey District, north end."

Vartu studied more lab results. The situation was worse than his model predicted. "When were the samples taken?"

"Yesterday, but the subject they came from had been dead a week."

"What do we know about the deceased?"

"Forty-three-year-old male. Some signs of malnutrition, like most in the Helmsey District, but overall, he was in good health."

Vartu leaned back in his chair. "We need to get more samples from Helmsey dead and infected living. We need to know how widespread this variant of J2 is."

"I agree," Lonna said, "but the city health departments won't listen to me. They act like there's some magic line between the Helmsey slums and affluent areas. They don't understand that the J2 virus doesn't recognize such a barrier."

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I appreciate your assistance, Dr. Sinje.”

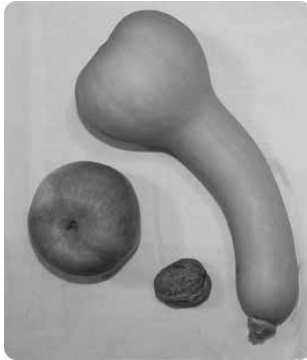
“I’m not sure who’ll listen to me, either,” Vartu told her.
“The politicians have their heads buried in the sand.”

CHAPTER 6

AVITOLOGIC

MESPEROSIS

“For the first time since records have been kept, family-owned farms account for less than ten percent of agricultural output in Cadona. Natural farming techniques are dying out along with small, privately owned growers”



“Family Farms on the Road to Extinction”
Andecco News Service
Year 999 of the Enlightened Epoch

Cadona City, Cadona
Monday, April 3, Year 1007 EE
1:45 p.m.

The commuter train jostled its passengers as it sped toward Leeha Ritsagin’s home in the Warrenton suburb of Cadona City. She rested her throbbing head against the window

frame. Despite feeling worse by the minute, the weird document haunted her. How in the world did the bound stack of papers end up in her car? It was possible that the document had been languishing in her closet for a long time. Then, while cleaning, she might have found the bundle, mistook it for something else, and stuffed it into her pile of recyclables. Was such a scenario possible? How could she forget possessing such a crazy thing?

Maybe the gross guys from the Helmsey District threw the document into the back seat when they attacked her car. They did break her rear passenger side window, and the bundle was in the back seat on the passenger side. Or perhaps the three ladies with the grocery bags were the culprits. They walked by her parked car after the Helmsey District attack, and one of the ladies dropped a bag on the sidewalk. It all happened alongside Leeha's Monarch. But none of it made sense. Why throw the document into a stranger's car? Why not simply toss it in the garbage?

Pain pierced Leeha's temples. She felt awful. She must stop worrying.

Leeha's right shoulder slammed into the frame beneath the commuter train window. She opened her eyes. Her body was slouching low in the seat. Every part of her ached. She pushed herself upright against the rigid backrest. Had she been robbed? Leeha took an inventory of her possessions. Nothing seemed amiss. Through the window, she saw familiar buildings flash by. Thank goodness! She was almost home.

The train arrived at her stop. She staggered out onto the concrete platform. A gentle drizzle greeted her. Leeha headed for home. Every movement she made hurt, but the streets were quiet under a haze of smog. Her neighborhood was much nicer than the Vandvire District. If she landed the job, she'd have to move. Altage Enterprises was too far away for a daily commute. No use stressing about it; with so many applicants, she wouldn't get the job anyway.

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Just as she reached her apartment building, shivers set in. Even though warmth filled the lobby, her teeth chattered. Leeha took a few steps up the stairway. Her quads trembled. The steps swayed. She'd never make it up four flights. It would have to be the elevator.

The lift moaned and rattled as it came to a stop on the fourth floor. Now all she had to do was make it down the hallway.

The walls were spinning. The floor was rising and falling like cloth rippling in the wind. At last she made it to unit 413. Leeha was home.

Every single body part hurt. The air felt as cold as a polar winter. She swallowed an aspirin. Tea sounded good. While water heated on the hotplate, Leeha dug a quilt from the closet and draped the thick blanket over her.

The beverage was ready. The mug shook in her hands as she raised steaming tea to her lips. Still she shivered. Hot food—that's what she needed. Leeha smothered bread with butter and grilled it in the warmer. The soggy toast felt hot going down, but her stomach growled in protest.

Then she remembered the space heater. Her mother had given it to her as a gift a few years back. Leeha found it in a plastic storage box in the back of the closet. She curled up on the living room floor. The heater blew hot air on her skin, but still she shook as if her bones were made of ice.

Leeha woke up. She checked the time. Almost an hour had passed; it seemed minutes. The quilt lay in a tangle on the floor next to her. At some point while she slept, the chill had lost its grip. Leeha switched off the heater and sat up. Her stomach churned. "Oh, God," she said aloud, "please don't tell me I'm going to barf." There was medicine in the bathroom. She tried to stand. Pressure built in her stomach. Leeha plopped down on the floor and closed her eyes. "Don't move, breathe slowly," she told herself. "I will not barf. I will not barf." Her stomach quieted.

Then it came again—the pressure. No stopping it now. She

was barfing. Leeha hobbled to the bathroom. The room spun like a top. Acidic clumps burst into her mouth. She bent over the toilet bowl and then collapsed to the floor. Leeha flushed the toilet with a clammy hand.

Oh, no! Not again! Leeha pulled her head over the edge of the toilet seat.

Wet heavens turned dry.

The next time Leeha opened her eyes, her sweaty body lay sprawled on the bathroom floor. The room felt like a sauna. Leeha rolled onto her side. The world reeled around her, but her stomach, though aching, remained still. The throes of vomiting had ended. Leeha dragged herself to the wall. It felt cool against her hot back. She rested there, but her bed called. Leeha tried to stand. Her legs folded. She grasped the toilet seat for leverage. Vertigo flung her to the floor. More than ever, Leeha wanted her bed. She went on hands and knees. Even crawling seemed a monumental feat.

Shakes returned. Her teeth chattered as she clambered onto her old mattress. Her suit! She was still wearing her suit! She should take it off. Leeha thought about it for a moment. To heck with it.

The shivering eased, but every movement caused pain. Vinegary fumes crept into her throat and mouth. Tears came to her eyes. She hated being so sick. And she was all alone.

The emptiness faded. A gentle sensation, as from a flower's breath, formed above her. Although peaceful, this comforting presence had power. It cut through the shroud of agony and fear tormenting her. The soothing energy delivered a pleasant memory. She heard Grandfather Ritsagin's voice. *Leeha! Come on, honey. Let's go pick peas.* How old was she at the time? Leeha wasn't sure. Maybe six. She smelled sun-warmed earth and the fragrance of freshly husked vegetables. Butterflies danced among nearby blossoms. Birds chirped and hopped in lush grass. Leeha trotted to her grandpa's side. He handed her a bag to put peas in. She and Grandpa Ritsagin then joined her

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mother and grandmother in the garden. After picking peas, Leeha helped gather beans, berries, and mushrooms.

These images, though, were nothing but recollections—events forever gone. “I miss you, Grandma and Grandpa,” she said aloud. Leeha rarely thought about most of the lessons that they taught her. The self-defense training was useful, but not the other stuff. Leeha worked in technology and lived in the big city. Not much use for farming skills in Cadona’s huge capital, or anywhere else nowadays. Few family farms hung on. Before Leeha finished secondary school, her parents were forced to sell. Impersonal suburbs, smelly industrial complexes, and seedy strip malls invaded land that had been in her father’s family for generations. They weren’t the only ones. The same fate befell most of their neighbors.

“I owe you a call, Mom,” Leeha said to herself. Scenes repeated over and over in Leeha’s imagination. Her mother would wander alone in the old farmhouse. She’d open a door and peer into a silent room that once, years ago, was filled with voices, laughter, and the smell of cooking food. Now all was silent. Dust covered unused utensils and furniture. Only memories remained, like fading echoes in an endless void. Her mother would walk outside. A small chunk of the old spread still surrounded the house, but smog now tainted a skyline that was once bright and blue. Her mother no longer worked and didn’t like to drive. Except to go to church or an occasional trip to the store, she rarely left the house.

Leeha felt helpless. The trip to her childhood home was long. The drive from Cadona City took the better part of three days, and her employer had cut back on paid vacation. Leeha needed to save every coin. Her brother, Jeremy, lived even farther away—far to the west in New Cadona. He had the same worries that Leeha did, and he had a wife and toddler. And a baby on the way.

“Daddy, if only you didn’t die so soon,” Leeha said. She pictured him in his healthy days. He would jump down from tall farm equipment and swing heavy bales of hay. Then she

remembered him toward the end as his heart problems took hold. Losing the farm was simply too hard for him to take. Leeha and Jeremy had tried to get him to find other things to do. Her father was good with his hands. Good at growing things. At building things. He could've replanted forests. He could've restored wildlife habitat. So many contributions he could've made! Instead, he sat around and died. Stress claimed him.

Leeha brushed away a tear. She almost heard him talking to her. He didn't want his daughter to suffer his fate. Many paths to joy graced this world: the love of family, pleasurable company of dear friends, clear spring mornings, cooling summer rains, the fire-color of autumn leaves, the sparkle of the first winter snows. More tears spilled from Leeha's eyes. Her family lived far away. She didn't have any dear friends. Cadona City witnessed few clear spring mornings. Chemicals polluted the summer rains. She saw few living trees. Winter snows were gray.

However, as a child, Leeha had known these things. Her mother's parents loved nature. When Leeha was young, Grandpa and Grandma Chavatan took her on long hikes and camping trips. The weather didn't matter. Whether hot and sunny, cold and snowy, or damp and windy, they'd go outside. They taught her many things: how to use terrain and stars to find her way around in the wild; how to build shelters from simple things found on the land; how to cool down, stay warm, start a fire, find water, and forage for food. *Even people who live in cities should know these things*, Grandpa Chavatan used to say. *After all, you never know when you may find yourself in a bad situation. Can happen at any time.* Leeha wished she were more like Grandma and Grandpa Chavatan. They were also farmers. They also lost their land. But they never stopped living. Both enjoyed long and happy lives. They died a few years back—together. A plane crashed en route to a wilderness lodge tucked away deep in the mountains. Her maternal grandparents had no need of cremation. Their ashes lay way

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up high on the bench of a rocky cliff. Surely, their burial place was the best imaginable.

Leeha almost heard Grandma Chavatan say, *Rest now, my little ladybug. You have much to do before you leave this world.*

Evening had fallen when Leeha next awoke. Visions of peas, beans, berries, and mushrooms lingered. She was a little bit hungry. That had to be a good sign. The illness was easing. Wakefulness didn't prove altogether peaceful, however. The strange document hidden beneath the kitchen cabinets called to her. Perhaps she'd search for Mary Kronvelt's name in those printed pages and have a bite to eat as well.

Leeha's stomach ached as she stripped off her suit and put on her old robe. She shuffled to the kitchen. "Better stick with tea," she told herself. Leeha pulled the document from its hiding place and took a seat at the kitchen table. The lines of text jiggled. She covered her right eye. It helped; the words didn't jump about as vigorously. Leeha found Pastor Leon Walls' name many times. Senator John Rineburg's and General Douglass Willirman's, too. But she didn't find Mary Kronvelt's. Darn it, where was that list of women's names? The words *Toxic Sphere* caught her eye. "Hey, that's that new weapon we're building," Leeha said aloud. She stared at odd terms: *avimetronics* and *avitologic mesperosis*. Did she see those words correctly? As her eyes tried to focus, the room spun. She nearly fell off the chair. "Please stop! Please stop!" The room quit twirling. Leeha slid the document back into its hiding place and crawled into bed. The search for Mary Kronvelt's name and the justice execution list would have to wait.

CHAPTER 7

UNHOLY ALLIANCE

Cadona City, Cadona
Monday, April 3, Year 1007 EE
7:20 p.m.

Pastor Leon Walls waited offstage. The Back-to-Basics Club meeting would begin in ten minutes. He wiped sweat from his brow as he stared at huge wall monitors. Leon had hoped people would stay home tonight. His wish did not come true. Members were streaming into the auditorium.

He didn't see Pastor Mark Walzelesskii in the crowd. "Son, where the heck are you?" Leon said to himself. "You promised you'd come." No sign of Senator John Rineburg, Senator Mitch Fischer, or General Douglass Willirman either. Did they all abandon him? Were they afraid Senator Sandra Pettock would have the Guiding Light with her? Were they afraid she would reveal Mary Kronvelt's name to the audience? Detective Carl Brunish, after all, wasted no time releasing details of the Kronvelt murder to the press. Would Pettock explain to everyone how Mary Kronvelt had been murdered as described in the document? Did Brunish uncover more evidence? Did he share it with Pettock? Sweat glued the fabric of Leon's shirt to his body. He guzzled cold water and then held the frosty glass against his wrist.

A burst of excitement swept through the auditorium. People converged on a single point in the huge room. Then Leon saw her: Senator Sandra Pettock. She was walking down the aisle toward her seat in the front row. Confident, smiling, and

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waving, she stopped to chat and shake hands. Pettock was up to no good. She was strutting around like she was the boss.

Still no sign of Mark, John, Mitch, or Doug.

The crowd around Pettock grew. A pack of journalists closed in. All eyes were on the senator from Forest Falls. Leon shook his head. Her behavior disgusted him. She was acting like she was the Freedom Party candidate for president.

The stage manager's voice came from behind. "Pastor Walls, we're on in five, sir."

"Yes, yes, Wally, I'm aware of the time." Five minutes. Just five. Then Leon would have to walk out onto that stage and kick off the Back-to-Basics Club meeting.

On a wall monitor, Leon saw a man bounding down the stairs leading toward the front row of seats. Leon recognized the smiling face. Senator John Rineburg had arrived. Did John really need to wait until the eleventh hour to show up?

John did make a grand entrance, however. He looked ready to go, ready to face anything head-on. John shook few hands. Instead, he made broad waves of greeting. People cheered and clapped. He waved to the audience one last time before sitting down in the front row.

Doug showed up next. He wore his dress military uniform. Walking straight and stern, as a military commander should, he stomped down the stairs and took a seat next to John. No need for smiles and waves. Doug was a soldier, not a politician.

With only a minute to go, Senator Mitch Fischer arrived. He looked healthy and sure of himself. Although he lacked John's flamboyant strut, Mitch had a presence—a calm, thoughtful, compassionate leader. Leon had watched Mitch perfect this image in recent months. He exuded confidence, levelheadedness, and intelligence.

Then Mark entered the auditorium. He stayed near the back doors and didn't take a seat. Mark smiled and waved when people turned their heads to look at him. He seemed like a shy little boy. That was Mark's charm, but it was pansy-assed. It

didn't command respect. Mark must grow out of it.

"Good, we're all here," Leon told himself. The time had come. Leon headed toward the stage, confident that he and his allies could take on anything Senator Sandra Pettock might throw at them.



Pastor Mark Walzelesskii sensed excitement in the room. He watched panoramic images of the audience flash by on the wall monitors. People packed the auditorium. Those who arrived late and didn't have assigned seats sat on the steps or stood along the walls. Yet something else was at work, something beyond the size of the crowd. Conversations buzzed. People shifted in their seats. Energy darted about in the very air itself.

Spotlights popped on. His father strode onto the stage. People cheered. Leon smiled, waved, and made the Mark of the Compass as he paced back and forth. His father looked more a politician than a man of God, but the crowd loved him.

Mark felt a tap on the shoulder. A frail, middle-aged man stood next to him. The man's scalp reflected light through thinning, gray hair. The fellow did not look well. "Pastor Walzelesskii, please, take my seat. Someone such as yourself should not have to stand."

"Thank you, sir, but I'm quite all right. I've been sitting all day."

"If you change your mind, let me know, Pastor," the man said.

Several others offered Mark a seat. All this fuss because of his father.

The buzzing and chattering in the room stopped when Leon walked to the chairman's podium. "Thank you all for coming tonight. Your presence and support honors us. I see my son is here."

Heads turned. Mark felt many eyes upon him.

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“Son,” Leon said, “would you do us the honor of saying the opening prayer?”

What? Mark almost jumped out of his shoes.

Leon flashed his best performer’s smile. “Please, Son, do us the honor.”

No graceful way to opt out. Mark gave his own best public smile and sauntered down the stairs toward the stage. Applause filled the auditorium. Mark waved. He knew the routine. He had grown up with it. Mark showed an actor’s face to the crowd while his mind raced to think of something to say to all these people.

“My son!” Leon said into the microphone.

Leon swung an arm around Mark’s shoulders. The crowd roared. It took a while for people to settle down—another merciful delay. When the rumpus stilled, Leon stepped away from the podium. Mark stood alone behind it. All eyes fell on him. “I—I’m really not prepared,” Mark said. He heard a few sympathetic giggles and saw many smiles. The people in the audience were listening. He was, after all, Pastor Leon Walls’ son.

As Mark scanned the multitude of faces, he decided he did have something to say, something very important. “Being unprepared ... I guess that’s the way it works. We never know when God will call on us. When he does, what can we do? Our world is filled with troubles. Every day we hear terrible things in the news. We see it in the streets. We watch it on WorldLink. The list seems endless: poverty, pollution, crime, extinction, sickness, dishonesty, whispers of war. In all this tragedy, how can we do God’s will? All too often, it feels we have nowhere to turn. But my fellow followers, we do. We have God! God is the one complete and constant truth. God’s truth does not change even as the world changes around us. But God’s truth can be hard to understand because each one of us is a tiny, lowly creature. Yet we are also great and glorious beings. I believe this because God loves every one of us whether we walk on the ground, live in it, live under it, soar

through the air, or swim through the water. God is our only viable path. Always be aware, my fellow children of God—evil is all around us. Sometimes Bezgog's will may seem the logical path. But Bezgog is the Great Deceiver. Sometimes evil dances right before our eyes, but we don't realize it. My fellow believers, ask God to show you the path. Let God's light, and God's light alone, guide you."

Mark then delivered the typical opening prayer. When he finished, Leon met him at the chairman's podium. Leon was pleased. It showed on every part of his father's smiling face. Leon shouted into the microphone. "My son!"

The audience erupted in cheers.

Mark headed back to his spot at the rear of the room. People rose from their seats as he walked by. Many made the Mark of the Compass. Mark waved and smiled. Inside, though, his heart ached. His father failed to understand the message. Leon was on a destructive path. Not only did his father not see it, he was an architect of it.

When Mark reached the top of the stairs near the auditorium doors, a beaming Leon said, "Thank you, Son, for your appropriate and timely words." The smile then fell from Leon's lips. His voice grew stern. "Club representatives, do any of you wish to address our members?"

Senator Sandra Pettock jumped to her feet. "Pastor Walls, I do!"

Leon's expression turned from serious to sour. "Senator Pettock, you have the floor."

Sandra walked onto the stage, her back held straight. From behind the representative's podium, she scanned the audience with her stern, blue eyes. "My fellow concerned citizens, we all know Cadona is on the brink of unprecedented disaster. We are all aware of internal threats, led predominantly by our economic woes. Many of us also see external threats. We suspiciously eye other nations. We share much, however, with the rest of the world. We share the same enemies: unemployment, hunger, depletion of natural resources, breakdown of morals,

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disease, contaminated water, dying oceans, polluted air, and poisoned land. Other countries share our plight.”

A close-up of Leon appeared on a wall monitor. Mark saw his father cringe as Sandra spoke. Senator John Rineburg and General Douglass Willirman also seemed ill at ease. John was leaning forward in his seat. His left eyelid fluttered. Doug squinted and crossed his arms in front of his chest. What was going on? Sandra wasn't saying anything bad.

Mark then recalled what happened after the previous Back-to-Basics Club meeting. Leon, John, Doug, and Mitch were scheming to sneak the Guiding Light out of Cadona City by throwing the document into the back of Annetta Longstreet's brown Cavalier. The men stopped talking about the drop at Hatchets Bar the moment Sandra walked into the room. Could Sandra have something to do with the document's disappearance?

Senator Mitch Fischer's face loomed large on a viewplane. Funny, he didn't look concerned at all. Why would the others worry, but not Mitch?

At the representative's podium, Sandra had more to say. “I know some among us want to draw strict boundaries between us and other lands. And, without doubt, we need to be wary of certain countries. But where we can, we must work side by side with other nations. It is through *cooperation* that we can improve the standard of living for all. It is through *leading by example* that we can inspire our international partners to pursue peace and liberty.”

As people applauded, Sandra lifted a glass of water to her lips. While she was drinking, Mitch stood up. He raised a hand. Sandra tried to get Leon's attention. Leon ignored her. “Thank you, Senator Pettock, for your thoughts. Senator Mitch Fischer, do you wish to speak?”

“I do!” Mitch sauntered to the representative's podium.

Sandra didn't budge. Mitch stood by her side. He waved and smiled at the audience as he wormed his way closer to the microphone.

The showdown ended. Mitch was not yielding. Leon was running the meeting, and he had given the floor to Mitch. Sandra stepped aside. However, she did not reclaim her seat. Instead, she hovered alongside the podium.

"I couldn't agree with Senator Pettock more," Mitch said. "We share common problems with many nations. But, as Senator Pettock also pointed out, some countries we cannot—must not—trust. We must strengthen relationships with our allies. Together with our friends, we must face the common danger of rogue nations."

The audience roared its approval.

Mitch had always been regarded as a capable man—thoughtful, intelligent, polite, but rather quiet and subdued. Something had changed. He held the room spellbound. It was a brilliant maneuver, Mark realized. Sandra had attempted to lead the Back-to-Basics Club in another direction, but the tactic backfired. Even longtime Pettock supporters cheered Senator Mitch Fischer. Mitch not only hijacked Sandra's time at the podium, he managed to make it look like it was all planned. He made it look like he and Sandra were on the same side. With the audience in Mitch's hands, Sandra could do little but stand there, force a smile, and clap.

By the time Mitch finished his speech, he had Cadona, Vistel, and Izvyona allied against Domataland, Bakhadaland, Sohn-Sur, and Fletchia. He painted Domataland as the major source of evil in the world. Domataland controlled too many resources and that was a major cause of Cadona's economic peril. Sohn-Sur was another growing threat. Sohn-Sur was conspiring with Domataland against Cadona and her allies. Mitch raised a fist into the air. "We cannot let the unholy alliance come to pass. The two devils must never be allowed to embrace."

Eager to return to the podium, Sandra tried to grab Leon's attention. He ignored her.

It was then Senator John Rineburg jumped to his feet. John raised a hand.

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In order to be heard over the cheering crowd, Leon had to yell into the microphone. "Senator Rineburg, do you wish to speak?"

"I do!" John leapt onto the stage and trotted to the representative's podium. He put an arm around Mitch's shoulders. John said, "Ladies and Gentlemen!" He waited for the crowd to quiet down. "Ladies and Gentlemen! I present to you the next President of Cadona, Mitch Fischer."

The audience went wild. Mark had never witnessed anything like it. A chubby, gray-haired man wearing a gray business suit climbed onto a chair. Once standing upright, he cheered all the louder. Many others did the same, even women in heels. A group of people scurried about. Mark wondered what they were doing. The answer revealed itself. They had collected paper and shredded it. The pieces flew into the air as confetti.

Mark watched Senator Sandra Pettock on the huge wall monitors. She was standing next to Mitch. Mitch held out his hand. She shook it. John shook her hand as well. The appearances were clear; Sandra was part of the plan to present Mitch Fischer as candidate for President. Reality was quite different. Sandra tried to lead the Back-to-Basics Club away from a policy of confrontation. She lost.

Leon pranced on the stage. He made the Mark of the Compass. Rapture filled his face. "Praise God! Praise God!"

Mark was shaken, but at least his dad was safe. What had started out as a day filled with fear and doom had instead produced a great triumph for his father. For now, the Guiding Light document's disappearance had not harmed him. Despite relief that his father was spared, Mark felt a chill. Somehow he knew that a page in history had been turned. An irreversible step had been taken.

Another presence filled the room, a presence even more powerful than his father and Mitch Fischer. Mark had sensed the gray smoke before, but this time its strength eclipsed all previous encounters. The putrid fumes curled and churned

over the stage and then across the audience. Mark almost saw it: a grotesque apparition. The smoky, human-shaped ghoul towered over the cheering crowd. The phantasm sensed victory. It knew it won.

Evil pricked at Mark like the stab of a billion needles. Mitch Fischer was now the Freedom Party candidate for president. If Mitch won the election, this wickedness would rule Cadona. Mark prayed. He didn't know what else to do. "How could this have happened? God, please, tell me!"

Mark left the room. Two young National Police officers stood in the hallway near the auditorium doors. The officers had no idea what they were guarding. Mark headed home. He needed to talk to someone. Annetta Longstreet came to mind. Although she lived far away in New Cadona, Mark felt better just thinking about her. He dared not tell her about the smoke, but perhaps he could tell her about other things. Bezgog had won a great victory. Anger, hate, fear, and prejudice had bulldozed over reason. Mark recalled warnings from the Holy Books. The Kettish and Lotish faiths foretold the same calamity. A great evil shall rise, and all the earth shall cry in pain. Here, in Cadona City, on this rainy April night, the fuse had been lit. Of all God's earthly creation, one part of it had been deceived. Humankind had turned Bezgog's Legions loose upon the planet.

CHAPTER 8

LIVES AND BODIES

Cadona City, Cadona
Monday, April 3, Year 1007 EE
9:40 p.m.

Bob Fullerby waited for the security system to scan the nodes in his left arm. It had been a long day, and it wasn't over yet. As soon as he opened the back door of the old print shop building, Bob heard peaceful music as well as thumps and groans. He shook raindrops from his jacket before walking into the dimly lit room.

Rona Betler untangled her short, slender body from a twisted dance pose. "Hi, Mr. Fullerby."

"Evening, Row."

Angela Thirgal, however, didn't stop hitting and kicking a punching bag. Sweat glued a sleeveless, white T-shirt to her lean but muscular torso.

"Ang is letting off some steam," Rona told him.

Bob watched Angela leap into the air and slam her right foot into the innocent bag. He shared a glance with Rona. "Row, what's troubling her?"

After a particularly hard punch, Angela said, "Senator ... (*punch*) ... Pettock ... (*punch*) She caved in to Rineburg and Fischer." Angela plucked a towel from the back of a chair and wiped sweat from her face.

Warning lights flashed. On a security monitor, Bob saw a man in a baggy raincoat.

The fellow was approaching the back door. He pushed the hood off his head and flashed a silly, giant grin.

"It's Kever-o!" Rona said.

Angela tossed the towel onto an exercise mat. "Why is he back?"

Kever Carsen walked in. Rock climbing equipment strapped to the outside of his stuffed backpack clinked as he set his gear on the floor.

Rage turned Angela's face crimson. "Kever-o! You're getting everything wet!"

"Oh, sorry, Ang. It's pouring out there." He headed toward the broom closet.

"I'll wipe it up, Kever-o," Rona told him. Like a child at play, she skipped across the floor.

"Kever-o," Bob said, "I didn't expect you back today. You're working like a full-timer."

"Too many interesting things going on right now, Mr. Fullerby."

While Rona mopped up water, she said, "Oh, hey, Kever-o, your PD transferred a call here. A cop asked for you. *Anson Dailey*, I think his name was. He wants you to call him back."

"So what dumb thing did you do now, Kever-o?" Angela asked.

"Anson's a climbing buddy. I'm pretty sure that's what he called about."

"He sounds nice," Rona said as she put the mop back into the closet. "I like his voice."

"Anson's a good guy." Kever pulled a thick sandwich from the refrigerator. He surveyed the room while he chewed a big bite of food. "So what happened? I sense a mood."

"We have a Freedom Party nominee for president," Bob told him.

"John Rineburg?" Kever asked.

"Nope, Mitch Fischer. It was Rineburg who announced it," Bob said. "It happened at the Back-to-Basics meeting."

A grimace crossed Angela's face. "And Senator Sandra Pettock supported it. She caved."

"From what I heard, she didn't have a choice, Ang," Bob

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told her.

“How do you know, Mr. Fullerby, seeing Andecco reporters aren’t allowed in Back-to-Basics Club meetings? And our competition is controlled by Back-to-Basics creeps.”

Bob held up a slip disk. “Barry Kingle still works for News, News, News. He gave me a bootleg raw copy of the actual proceedings. I haven’t had a chance to view it yet.”

Kever poured himself a cup of coffee. “I’d love to see it.”

“Me, too,” Rona said. She took a seat at the old wooden table and turned on a computer.

Images of the auditorium in the True Followers of God Church headquarters displayed on the wall monitor. The video showed Senator Sandra Pettock. She was standing behind a podium and speaking to the crowd.

When she stopped talking to take a drink of water, Pastor Leon Walls spoke into his microphone.

“Thank you, Senator Pettock, for your thoughts. Senator Mitch Fischer, do you wish to speak?”

“I do!”

The camera followed Senator Fischer as he walked to the speaker’s stand.

“You’re right, Mr. Fullerby,” Angela said, “Senator Pettock is not happy.”

“And look,” Kever said, “Pettock’s trying to get Pastor Walls’ attention, but he’s ignoring her.”

The content of Mitch Fischer’s speech was unsettling. He left no doubt; his goal was worldwide war. Yet it was the response of the audience that was particularly troubling. Celebratory cheers poured from the sound array. The racket caused waves in Kever’s coffee. Rona turned down the speaker volume.

“Now here comes Rineburg,” Bob said.

They watched Senator John Rineburg strut to the podium.

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"Ladies and gentlemen! Ladies and gentlemen! I present to you the next president of Cadona, Mitch Fischer."

Kever slapped a hand against the tabletop. "There it goes! Got to admit, it was well played. What could Pettock possibly have done? The crowd is going wild for Fischer. If she argued with him, she'd be political dead meat."

The camera then panned the cheering crowd. Confetti flew into the air.

"Hey, isn't that Pastor Mark Walzelesskii?" Rona asked. "See? The cute guy by the doors."

Bob studied the image. "I think you're right, Row. Zoom in, please."

Mark's face grew large on the viewplane.

"Cute guy?" Angela said. "Look at that crazy kook, crying and waving his arms around."

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" Kever said. "Row, can you replay that last piece, slowed down a fraction?"

"What is it, Kever-o?" Bob asked.

"Mr. Fullerby, Walzelesskii seems upset. It looks like he's saying, *How could this have happened?*"

"Mark Walzelesskii is a fuzz-brain," Angela said. "Maybe he's drunk or on something. Rich and Pastor Walls' son, he can get away with murder ... literally."

Bob wished he could tell his team the truth about Mark, but it was safer for everyone if Mark's identity as the Drop Case informant remained a secret.

The footage ended, but it revealed that the world had grown more dangerous.

"So, Ang, on another topic, any big news about the Goodwill Ship?" Bob asked.

"Not much. President Tarish is not backing down. He says the ship will remain in Bakhadaland for the scheduled time—nonnegotiable. The World Assembly is holding another session in Visstel on April sixth. Apparently, Tarish is going to make a personal appearance. Izvyona is threatening to have

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its ambassador walk out if the Assembly allows Tarish to talk.”

Bob felt his ire rise. “Domataland sure has a knack for causing drama. Tarish isn’t helping things by being so inflexible, that’s for sure. So, Row, the Mary Kronvelt murder, what’s the latest?”

“At first, the Prosecutor’s Office was saying it was a random act of violence, but after Detective Brunish released details of the murder, the prosecutors backed down. Now they’re blaming Agel Yungst copycat killers. Detective Brunish, though, is convinced her murder is linked to the Soldiers of God Justice Group and the Agel Yungst shootings at Hughes Medical Center. The Prosecutor’s Office still denies Agel Yungst is part of an illegal organization.”

Angela’s mood hadn’t improved. “Of course they’ll deny it. They don’t consider the Justice Group illegal. Most of the people in the Prosecutor’s Office answer to the Freedom Party, not the law.”

Kever took a sip of coffee and then said, “If the Freedom Party gets its way, they’ll rewrite the laws to suit their own philosophy. They want laws that dictate private matters of people’s lives—and bodies. Then the Soldiers of God Justice Group can crawl out of the shadows and be a legal death squad.”

“That’s pretty much what Detective Brunish thinks,” Rona said, “but he used more ... *proper* words. He complained about various police departments, even the National Police. He said all too often critical evidence mysteriously disappears, and his superiors shut down investigations even when there’s plenty of proof of wrongdoing. He said these kinds of things are happening more and more.”

Angela had calmed down. “Hey, Keve-o, does your cop friend, Officer Dailey, tell you anything about corruption in the police force?”

“Anson doesn’t talk about work much. If he does, it’s to complain about how the job keeps him from climbing and other fun stuff. But I do sense he’s not happy with the way

things are going at work.”

“On my end,” Bob said, “I haven’t turned up a shred of new info on the Guiding Light document except that Pastor Walls and friends are still worried about it. I take it we haven’t made progress on identifying the mystery woman or her brown Monarch?”

“Not yet,” Angela told him.

“The good news,” Bob said, “is it appears the Back-to-Basics Club isn’t having better luck tracking her down.” Maybe Mark Walzelesskii uncovered new clues. The kid sure seemed upset in the video. Maybe something interesting happened at the Back-to-Basics Club meeting not caught on camera. Bob stood up. “Well youngsters, I have one more stop before calling it a night.”

CHAPTER 9

KETTISH ANGEL

“God manifests himself in all creation, from the littlest blade of grass, to the tallest tree, to the biggest whale, to the tiniest shrew. Is it not haughty for us humans to consider ourselves superior to others in God’s universal family? God loves us all the same.”



*Pastor Mark Walzelesskii
True Followers of God Church*

***Cadona City, Cadona
Tuesday, April 4, Year 1007 EE
6:50 a.m.***

In the privacy of his spacious home that his father had bought for him, Pastor Mark Walzelesskii prayed. All night he had prayed—for his father, for Cadona, for the people in government service and the military. Sinister spirits were massing. As a man wields a sword, so the forces of evil wield men. Mark asked God for guidance and understanding. As disheartening as digging in a mine without striking gold was the result of

prayer. It led nowhere. The sun's rising and the parting of rain clouds brought no clarity. Neither did his chat with Annetta Longstreet. She was thrilled about Mitch Fischer's presidential nomination. *He'll return prosperity and power to Cadona*, she had said. Was Annetta right? Could Mark be so wrong about Senator Fischer?

Mark walked outside into the cool, damp morning. His lush lawn greeted him. Raindrop-covered flowers, trees, and grass rejoiced, unconcerned about the ways of men. He touched a smooth, thick, glossy leaf of a flowering shrub. "How I envy you," Mark said. "You don't carry my worry. I hope you never have to." He strolled down the pebble driveway to the front security gate. Two guards popped to their feet as he approached.

"Good morning, Pastor," Jerry said. "Fine day, isn't it, sir?"

No need to dump the burdens of the world on these good fellows. Mark gave them a big smile. "Fine indeed. The weather is splendid. Looks like the sun will shine today."

"Are you feeling all right, sir?" Jerry asked.

Mark's attempt at acting happy had failed. "Just a bit of a headache. Nothing serious."

"Can we get you something, sir?"

"No, but thank you. I think the medicine I need is a walk in the morning sunshine."

"Yes, sir. Take care, Pastor."

Ambling down the sunny street didn't chase away Mark's troubles. If anything, the absurdity of his depressed mood made him feel worse. Why wasn't he happy? Mark knew how fortunate he was. He had more money at age twenty-five than a whole city of middle-income people would earn in a lifetime. He lived in a splendid home surrounded by a glorious yard. Shiny cars filled his garage. Yet he felt like a prisoner. His father's fame trapped him. People who had never met Mark either loved him or hated him. Few ever searched for the flesh-and-blood human being beneath the flashing lights and expensive clothes. It was difficult to have honest con-

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versations with people. Some were nervous because he was considered rich and famous. Others assumed they knew what he believed. Many of those assumptions were dead wrong, but most never bothered to listen.

Worse yet, although he had every imaginable physical comfort, his spirit ached for a purpose it could not find. Many times he had considered running away from it all. But he lacked courage. To give up wealth and security was too big a price. Mark chastised himself for this weakness. Often he asked God for strength. Once Mark thought he heard a reply: he had to decide for himself what path to follow. God would not do it for him. Mark argued with the answer. Was it really God talking? Or was it chatter inside his own jumbled mind? Or perhaps Mark didn't like the answer. The decision rested solely on his own shoulders. Perhaps he had chosen—even created—his own prison.

At an intersection, a bus rumbled by. Sooty exhaust belched from a shaking, stained tailpipe. It reminded Mark of his smoky apparitions. "God, why have you cursed me with these visions? Something terrible is beginning, isn't it?" He hung his head as he crossed the street. He didn't know what to do. Mark begged God to tell him. He heard no answer, not even a hint that someone was listening.

Mark wandered aimlessly for many blocks until his toe smacked against a ridge in the cracking sidewalk. He didn't know where he was. Most of the buildings were old and in need of repair. Many businesses were shuttered, but the neighborhood appeared quiet and safe.

The day had grown warm and thirst dried his mouth. A cool drink sounded good. Perhaps a store or café was nearby.

To his left was a sight he did not expect to see. Behind a tall, bronze fence stood an old stone building. What a pretty Ket-tish church! Mark admired the gardens. Beautiful they were, well-tended, lush, and much loved. In the distance, he noticed an old man dressed in a priest's black frock. Mark watched

as the man peered up into the wide-reaching branches of a mature tree. From there, the fellow made his way to a patch of flowers. Carefully, as if his back didn't bend well, the man leaned forward to examine a purple and yellow blossom that balanced atop a tall, graceful stem. With effort, he pulled himself upright. He then strolled down a narrow stone path and admired the plants that were growing alongside the walkway.

The priest stopped and stared. Mark felt bad. Maybe he startled the old guy. The man then raised a wide, gnarled hand in greeting. Mark waved back and was about to continue on his way, but the priest spoke. "Good morning!"

"Good morning, Toprit." Mark knew that Leon wouldn't approve of any son of his addressing a Kettish priest by his formal title, but Mark saw no reason to disrespect a man of another faith. Didn't this old priest also seek God?

"Fine spring day, is it not?" The priest spoke with an accent. A coarse crackle tainted his deep voice. Yet his words sounded gentle and full of wisdom.

"It is, lovely day," Mark said.

The priest walked up to the fence. He opened a narrow gate. "Would you like to come in? I noticed you were admiring the garden."

"I was," Mark said. "I'm sorry to have troubled you."

"Trouble? No trouble at all. This garden belongs to all." Stained, chipped teeth showed themselves when the old man smiled. "I think of it as God's garden."

Mark had planned on making his excuses and continuing down the sidewalk, but his feet had other ideas. He found himself inside the churchyard.

"There's something about living, growing things that puts the heart at peace, isn't there?" the old priest said. Underneath bushy, gray eyebrows, his veined, blue eyes sparkled with joy.

"Sure is." Mark liked the old fellow already.

They strolled in silence. Then the priest spoke again. "You look like a young man who is carrying a great burden."

"I am."

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“Would you like to tell me about it? Or do you prefer meditation alone” He raised his hands over his head. “Alone in the garden amid all this life?”

Mark examined the man’s face. Deep lines and weathered skin testified to a long life filled with many trials. Yet there was a glow about him, a youthful delight and an angelic peace. Mark drew a long, deep breath. He took in the scent of sweet flowers and spring herbs. Mark wanted to stay. To talk. Staying, however, meant deceiving this old man. It wouldn’t be right. Mark stopped walking. “Toprit, you don’t know who I am. If you knew, I do not think you would have invited me in.”

The priest’s eyes twinkled. “Of course I know who you are. You are Pastor Mark Walzelesskii. I recognized you when I first saw you. Well, maybe not when I first saw you. I had to move closer. I can’t see so well any longer.”

“My father has spoken ill of the Kettish faith, Toprit,” Mark said.

Once again, the priest strolled along the path. So did Mark.

“Yes, I’m aware of that,” the old man said. “Many have spoken ill of the Kettish Church over the years. Some of the complaints are well deserved, I’m afraid to say. But, in the end, all are welcome here. I read that you are a lover of plants. I have some particularly lovely rhododendrons in bloom at the moment.”

Mark followed him to the back yard. In a corner shaded by great evergreens, grew huge bushes. Flowers blushed with colors ranging from immaculate white to shocking pink to deep purple. Mark couldn’t believe the sight. “Oh, my! How amazing!”

“These shrubs are quite old,” the priest said.

Mark supported a blossom in his palm and admired its beauty.

The priest asked, “So what brings a pastor from the True Followers of God Church to my church?”

Mark wasn’t sure what to say. “I didn’t come here inten-

tionally. I was worried about things, so I just started walking. I'd been plodding along for quite some time and realized I was thirsty. I looked around to see if there was a place to get a drink. That's when I noticed your garden."

"Would you like a glass of water?"

"I would, thank you."

The priest led him to a white gazebo. Carvings as delicate as fine lace trimmed the broad roof. "Please, have a seat."

Mark tried to scoot his chair closer to the table. It wouldn't budge. The furniture was fastened to the gazebo floor.

"Pardon the chains," the priest told him. "The furniture kept disappearing. Having to replace it every couple of weeks was getting expensive."

"What a shame," Mark said. "Nothing is sacred these days—" Mark forgot what he was going to say next. Another beautiful sight caught his eye. A young woman with thick hair the color of raven's feathers walked out of an outbuilding behind the church. She smiled when she saw the old priest. Mark forgot to breathe. A Kettish angel, as beautiful as any flower, stood under the trees. Every problem in the world vanished.

"Good morning, Toprit Lohsar," she said.

"Good morning, Ms. Davis. Would you mind bringing our guest and me some water?"

Her smile widened. "Not at all, Toprit."

Mark's skin tingled. This woman, she was amazing—beautiful, tall, and graceful. There was something else about her, an indescribable radiance and goodness. Fresh honey came to mind.

Her eyes then found Mark sitting in the gazebo. The smile vanished. Acid spewed from her gaze. Mark realized what had happened. She recognized him as the son of Pastor Leon Walls. Unlike Toprit Lohsar, this Kettish believer wasn't as accepting. Despite the scowl, she was lovely. The small, white scarf that she wore contrasted with her dark hair. A white apron hid part of her simple clothing. Mark noticed far

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more details than usual. Miniature flower prints dotted the dark material of her knee-length dress. The dress' thin fabric fluttered in the breeze. Billowy waves of dark hair bounced about her shoulders as she stomped up the steps leading to the small outbuilding. Mark couldn't help but notice shapely calves beneath the dress hem.

"Ms. Davis works here part time," Toprit Lohsar said. "She was starting a career when the economy collapsed. Now she's struggling. So many lives have been shattered."

Mark remembered his worries. "Yes, many are desperate. The time is ripe for people to fall into evil." Toprit Lohsar was studying him. What was the old fellow thinking? Was he wondering what could possibly be troubling Pastor Mark Walzelesskii, son of mega-rich Pastor Leon Walls?

Ms. Davis returned with two glasses and a pitcher of water damp with condensation. The cool liquid looked refreshing. So did Ms. Davis. Thoughts of blond-haired, blue-eyed Annetta Longstreet caused pangs of guilt. But Annetta already had a boyfriend, Sam Crispe.

Ms. Davis stepped into the gazebo. The pitcher wobbled. Mark jumped to his feet. "Here, let me take that." He grabbed the pitcher from the tray.

"Thank you." Her voice rang with formality. She offered no trace of a smile. Not once did she look at him.

Mark set the pitcher down on the table. Ms. Davis filled the glasses with cold water. She was close to him now. He surveyed her face: soft skin; full lips; and enormous, dark eyes.

"Ms. Davis, this is Pastor Mark Walzelesskii," Toprit Lohsar said, "from the True Followers of God Church."

"Pastor." Ms. Davis left no doubt. She would be polite in front of the priest, but she was not pleased by Mark's presence.

"Pastor Walzelesskii, this is Ms. Cookie Davis."

"Ms. Davis." Mark hoped for at least a glance. Perhaps if she looked into his eyes, she'd glimpse something she liked. She didn't look. Cookie returned to the outbuilding. Mark sat down and took a long, deep drink.

"A comment you made caught my attention," the priest said, "about the time being ripe for people to fall into evil. What were you referring to?"

Mark didn't know what or how much to say. Wisdom filled Toprit Lohsar's aged, blue eyes. Mark decided to trust him. "Toprit, deep down in my heart I believe something dramatic has happened. Evil now has physical tools and a focus. Evil always does its usual dancing about, trying to corrupt susceptible people. But I believe this is a time of a concerted goal. I fear a major offensive has begun."

"I agree with you," the old man said. His voice was solemn now. "Pastor Walzelesskii, I know your church considers our Kettish rituals idolatry, but I will share this with you anyway. Last Sunday, while blessing the cleansing water, the water turned as red as blood to my eyes. I know its meaning: great strife has begun. A global catastrophe is coming, a cataclysm of proportions never before witnessed by humankind. It will not be an act of nature, not a comet from space or a volcanic eruption, but rather a human-generated calamity. While all the world is traveling this road, I believe the epicenter is here, in Cadona. And this cataclysm, I believe, is coming soon." A soft smile crossed his face. "So soon, in fact, I may even live to see it come to pass."

A shiver went up Mark's back. Here was a man of a different faith, culture, and generation also having visions of great troubles. "So," Mark said, almost in a whisper, "you see things? You have visions?"

"Rarely, but yes."

Mark felt another chill. Something pulled his attention to the gazebo ceiling. Curling, gray smoke swirled among the rafters. It was the kind of smoke only he could see. Mark knew this structure would not be standing much longer. "Toprit, I occasionally have visions, too. Visions of evil. I also have them rarely, but they've been occurring more frequently over the last year or so. I wish I weren't cursed with them."

"Cursed?" Toprit Lohsar said. "Some would call it a gift."

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What is it you see?"

"This putrid, dark gray smoke. I know it's Bezgog at work." Mark recalled Senator Mitch Fischer's call to arms at the Back-to-Basics meeting. "Toprit, I fear Bezgog is choosing people to be his weapons. I'm afraid a great movement has already begun, and, like you, I think the epicenter is here, in Cadona. We'll start wars—huge wars. And these wars will be based on lies. I fear great swaths of the earth will be destroyed, and nothing can stop it."

"This frightens you?" Toprit Lohsar asked.

"Of course it does."

"Why is that? If I'm not mistaken, your faith, like mine, believes God can stop it. Bezgog is no threat to God."

"Yes, that is what we believe," Mark said, "but why does God allow this to happen? Why doesn't God just end this madness?"

"To answer that question would be to know the mind of God. You and I, all other humans, none of us can know God's mind."

Mark's soul ached. Every now and again a thought haunted him. Too terrible to consider, he had always pushed it away. This time, however, it wouldn't leave him alone. "There is something that frightens me greatly, even more than wars and misled souls," Mark said.

"What's that?"

"I wonder if God allows these evil things to happen because he wants them to. He allows Bezgog to do evil things. Or worse, maybe he instructs Bezgog to do them. Then, as I think such thoughts, I feel the Dark One is getting into my head."

The priest rested his arms on the table. "Pastor, we humans have many thoughts. Many questions. Remember, they are just thoughts. They are just questions. We don't have all the answers. I'm not even sure if we're capable of understanding the answers."

"But Toprit, where is God? Why doesn't God just wave his hand and drive the bad away?"

Toprit Lohsar leaned back in his chair. "Where is God? Who knows? Perhaps God is all around us. In and around everything. Perhaps God looks like what we humans call a bird and lives in the nook of a tree. Perhaps God looks like a human male and lives in a house in the middle of the street. But it really doesn't matter what God looks like or where God lives."

"Toprit, forgive me, but I meant it as a serious question."

Toprit Lohsar's eyes met Mark's. "So did I. Since the dawn of time, we humans have assigned physical attributes to God. A distinct form. An old man with a white beard, for example. Or the shape of the sun. Or a bird. It's easier for us to think of God if we give God a physical shape or a gender. Otherwise, the concept of God becomes too abstract. Too different. Too incomprehensible. We simplify God so we can get our arms around the concept. We do the same thing when we analyze God's actions. We look for God's presence in simplified ways. We expect God to wave a hand and fulfill our every desire like a genie in a bottle."

Tears formed in Mark's eyes. Why did everything have to be so vague? "Then how do we know what we're supposed to do? How do we know if we are doing God's will? I've seen good men suddenly do evil things. These people, they don't see it. How can I be sure that I'm not falling into the same trap?" Mark saw a change in Toprit Lohsar's expression. Mark feared he had said too much. Did he implicate his own father in some wrongdoing?

Toprit Lohsar didn't push him for details. Instead, the priest said, "Pastor Walzelesskii, we humans like to think of ourselves as all-wise and all-knowing. But there is much we cannot understand. There is, however, much we can."

"Like what?" Mark felt helpless and empty.

"Before we take action, we can examine our motivation. Are we acting on fear? Hate? Greed? Anger? Jealousy? Worry? Shame? Loneliness? Revenge? If so, we can be sure it is not God's will. We need to be completely honest with ourselves. It can be hard for mankind to do this. Our egos cloud our

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judgment. Through it all, of course, we must ask God for guidance.”

Despair weighed heavily on Mark. “I ask God for guidance all the time. He never answers.”

“What are you expecting to hear, young man? Do you expect God to appear before you and give you all the answers? If God did that, how would your soul, your faith, ever grow? I do believe, however, God knows your heart, your worries, and your fears. I also believe God throws us breadcrumbs to keep us on track. In order to expand our understanding, though, we must search. Searching inherently isn’t easy. Searching means hard work, pain, dead ends, and challenge.” The priest took a sip of water. His hand shook. For a moment, he looked to be in pain. The smile soon returned. “You know, there is a funny thing I’ve learned over the years. For those who honestly—truly honestly—seek God, if we can’t figure out if it is God speaking to us, Bezgog, or some creation of our own mind, God will take the helm and put you where you need to be ... even if you don’t realize it.”

“I must say, Toprit, I think God forgot to throw me a single breadcrumb.”

“Or, perhaps, Pastor Walzelesskii, God throws you breadcrumbs so often, it seems the norm.”

“I don’t think so. Toprit, it’s more like God has abandoned me.”

“You know, Pastor, in my youth I met an interesting man. I never saw the world in the same way after taking a physics class he taught. He was a lifelong scientist. Not a particularly spiritual individual, but brilliant when it came to science and math. This man was famous for major breakthroughs in his day. He was already old, bent, and gray when I sat in his classroom. On the first day of class, a student asked him how he came up with the Kamrihn Principle. Where was the idea born? The professor told us he was sitting quietly in a garden one day, and the thought just came to him. Just a feeling. A vague sense of some far-reaching truth. It was the seed that

eventually turned into a hypothesis. The hypothesis led to discoveries that changed our world. The student couldn't believe this great mind gave birth to a grand scientific discovery based on some vague feeling. Nothing more than a stray thought revealed in a moment of silent reflection. Do you know how the scientist explained it to the student?"

"No." Mark didn't understand how a scientific principle had anything to do with listening to God. Or what it had to do with God at all.

"The scientist told us we are made of subatomic particles. If we are made of them, why wouldn't we have some innate understanding of them even if we can't fathom the workings in our conscious minds or explain them in our human words." Toprit Lohsar took a sip of water. "Pastor, do you believe God created everything, including subatomic particles?"

"I do."

"So think about it. Look how hard it is for the greatest minds to understand subatomic particles. Only a tiny percentage of the human population can grasp the concepts. Now think about understanding God. God is even further removed from our understanding because it is God who created subatomic particles and all the processes governing them. So why should we be surprised when we find it hard to grasp the concept of God?"

"But humankind has long sought God, trying to find God, fight God, prove God doesn't exist. If God is so removed from us, why do we keep up the search?" Mark asked.

"Why did my old physics professor believe we have an innate understanding of subatomic particles? Because it's what we're made of. So why would we have an innate feeling there is some kind of God out there? Because God made us. Made everything around us. We are born with a desire to find our creator."

All mystery. No certainty. "It seems so confusing," Mark said. "Most of the time I feel like I'm floundering through life. Nothing makes sense. I don't know where to turn or what to

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do. I should be happy. I have everything.”

“Pastor, here’s an exercise. Think of one specific, tangible thing that is troubling you. Now determine if this is a problem you, yourself, can fix, or if it’s a situation where you must accept the world as it is. Next, think of ways to address the problem. Finally, figure out how to implement a plan of action to deal with it.” The priest then stood.

“Toprit, are you leaving?” Mark asked.

“Yes, I have things to see to, but feel free to stay as long as you want, Pastor Walzelesskii. I enjoyed our talk. You may visit whenever you wish. You will always be welcome here.”

Toprit Lohsar walked away. He entered the church building through a back entrance. The heavy wooden door closed behind him. Mark was all alone. Soon, though, sighing evergreens and rattling leaves soothed him. “Pick a problem,” Mark said to himself. “Okay, my problem: my dad is heading down a road of violence, hate, and destruction. He won’t listen to me. I’ve tried countless times to reach him. If he hasn’t listened by now, he’s not going to. Dad listens only to people like Senator Fischer, Senator Rineburg, and General Willirman. I guess I must accept the situation. I have to stop fighting it and just let it be.”

Mark’s soul cried out in pain. He knew better. Doing nothing was the coward’s path. Other thoughts came to him. He had already told Bob Fullerby about the Guiding Light document and the men following Annetta Longstreet. Annetta could still be in trouble. Mark had to protect her. Then there was the mysterious woman who was standing by an old, brown car in the fuzzy photo. Who knew what his dad would do to this woman if he found her. Perhaps Mark could learn other, more valuable, information about his father’s schemes. “That means turning my back on my own dad, my own church,” Mark said aloud. “God! I don’t understand! Why are you doing this to me?”

Mark heard a door slam shut. Beautiful, but grumpy, Cookie Davis stomped out of the outbuilding. She entered the

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church through the same door that Toprit Lohsar just used. Seeing her was like sun bursting through darkness. He took a drink of water. Birds tweeted nearby. "I guess I have my answer," Mark told himself. "If I don't betray my dad, many terrible things will happen."

CHAPTER 10

BEDROOM DOOR

Cadona City, Cadona
Wednesday, April 5, Year 1007 EE
3:30 a.m.

Leeha Ritsagin felt the bed sway in the darkness. Like waves the motion felt. She tasted salt on her lips. Cold wetness covered her. Was it seawater? The sheets, although as damp as her skin, were hers. Leeha touched her forehead. It was blisteringly hot.

The bedroom's single window seemed normal. The door did not. The doorway was three times its normal size. Peculiar noises rolled through the entryway. Some sounds were not discernable. Some resembled hushed voices, others, the clicks of shoes on a hard floor. The living room's nighttime gloom had an odd reddish tinge.

Leeha stood up. Ferocious waves tried to pull her feet from under her. Her body slammed into the wall. She clutched the deformed doorframe. The turbulence eased.

What had happened to her living room? The proportions! They were huge! The walls and ceiling vanished into shadows. A dim, dusty, red-orange glare came from the place her living room window should have been.

Then Leeha saw them: models of ships. Hundreds of them. Some would fit in her hand. Others were tall and long. One stood out as a giant. The tips of the enormous masts disappeared into inky blackness. A faint light shone on a bronze placard. Letters were engraved into the glossy surface: *The Goodwill Ship, the flagship of Domataland*. Leeha tried to read

the words on placards belonging to other models, but it was too dark.

Among the displays, vague human figures wandered about and whispered unintelligible words. The red-orange glow brightened and pulsed. The ghostly figures walked in unison toward it. Leeha followed.

A giant shape emerged from the center of the light. The form appeared to be the statue of a man sitting in a chair. The haze cleared. The huge figure seated in the chair was no statue. It was a man. Only this man was as tall as the pillars in the old Kettish Cathedral near Central Plaza. Leeha recognized him: Senator John Rineburg. An item with a rectangular shape was resting on his lap. He raised the object above his head. The weird document! What he held looked just like the weird document, but much larger. The ethereal human subjects knelt before the throne.

Senator Rineburg opened his mouth. A piercing squeal poured out. It hurt Leeha's ears. She thought the wind might rip her damp hair clean from her scalp.

Black splotches came next. What were they? Bugs! Thousands of them! With stingers, teeth, and claws. The kneeling subjects writhed in pain beneath the swarm.

She must get away. Turbulent seas tossed the room. In her retreat, Leeha clung to one model ship after another. Buzzing and clicking insects pursued. Her bed was near. She dived onto it. Leeha clutched fabric in her hand. She was holding her very own bedsheet. The waves settled down. The bugs disappeared. The sharp cry silenced.

Leeha lifted her head. The bedroom door was back to normal. The reddish light had vanished. She felt her forehead. The scorching fever had faded.

Too afraid to shut her eyes, she lay in bed and stared through her bedroom doorway.

CHAPTER 11

JENTON'S AUTO

BODY AND REPAIR

Cadona City, Cadona
Wednesday, April 5, Year 1007 EE
10:30 a.m.

Degio Ellis pulled the chemical protection mask away from his face. "Turn off that damned news! I'm sick of hearing about the elections and Domataland."

"Sorry!" Candy Fellerman said.

"How can you listen to that junk?"

Candy sent music to the sound array. "You know, this thing with the Goodwill Ship could start a war."

"So what? Those crazy losers over there are always fighting."

"Degio, we could get pulled into it."

"Why do you care, Candy? You're not in the army any longer."

She changed the subject. "You did a good job matching the paint, Degio. This brown is an odd shade."

"The paint's ancient, that's why it looks like shit," Degio said. "Match the color of shit and you've got the right color."

Candy picked up pictures of the vehicle. The shots were taken before Degio made the repairs. "I wonder what happened to this car?" she said. "Weird set of dings, don't you think? How can a license plate get twisted like that? And how could an accident have caused that dent in the hood? Don't

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you think it's weird that the window wouldn't roll up, but the glass didn't break?"

"Who cares, it's a piece of junk Monarch."

Degio completed the last touches. "Okay, Candy, this piece of crap is all yours for the courtesy cleaning. I'm feeling sick as a dog. Would you do me a fave and call the owner when you're done?"

"Will do."

"Thanks, you're a trooper." Degio walked up to a computer.

"Oh, Degio, the computer's down, remember?"

"Damned fricken thing."

"Degio, I'll do the paperwork. Go take care of yourself."

"Thanks, Candy."

She watched to make sure the door to the repair bay shut behind him. Candy listened to the news while she worked.

The courtesy cleaning finished, she washed her hands and dug through a messy pile of paper records. Candy pulled a printed page from the stack. She called the brown Monarch's owner. "Hello, this call is for Leeha Ritsagin. This is Jenton's Auto Body and Repair. Your car is all fixed and ready for pickup." As Candy logged the call on a crinkled sheet of paper, she heard Bob Fullerby's voice coming from the sound array. He said the World Assembly was preparing for an emergency meeting in the Visstellin capital of Loraden.

CHAPTER 12

TICKS AND LEECHES

Loraden, Visstel

Thursday, April 6, Year 1007 EE

1:00 p.m.

Domataree President Demnar Tarish checked the time. Forty minutes had gone by, but Izvyonsk Ambassador Bastril Jusprali was still squealing like the stuffed pig he looked.

Bastril scowled as his eyes panned the World Assembly meeting hall. He pounded a fat fist against the top of the podium. A boom bellowed from the sound array. The furniture vibrated.

Water in Demnar's drinking glass quivered. His stylus nearly rolled off his desk. He caught the silvery writing instrument just in time.

Demnar glanced at the young woman seated next to him. Domataree Ambassador Tezya Chebeliva sat stoically in her chair. Bastril's outburst didn't rattle her. Tezya was young by ambassador standards, but she possessed a strong, solid disposition. Her job, however, was sure to grow more difficult. Soon, Demnar would address the World Assembly in person. Demnar felt the tension in the room from the second he walked in. Hardly a head failed to turn when he took a seat with his Domataree delegation.

Again Bastril slammed a fat-fingered, hairy fist against the podium. Sweat glistened on his gray, oversized, round head. His thick, dry, colorless lips twisted into a snarl. "At once! I demand it! Stern measures must be taken. We must force Domataland to comply with Resolution 2060A. The world

cannot—must not—allow such treachery to go unpunished. Izvyona is violated! It is an outrage! No civilized nation would stand for such barbarism. The Goodwill Ship must depart Izvyonsk territory without delay.”

The gurgle in Bastril’s throat hissed over the sound array. His lifeless, dull eyes stared at Demnar. “There he sits,” Bastril said. He pointed a shaking, crooked finger in Demnar’s direction. “There’s the man who speaks peace with one face and seeks to carve up Izvyona with another. I warn you, Devil of Domataland, we Izvyon are not stupid. We know how you break the ceasefire. You arm our bastards in Bakhadaland. You ship weapons meant for our destruction over passes in the Northern Mountains, through underground tunnels, and from beneath the sea. I warn you, Mr. Devil, Izvyona, too, has friends. We will crush you. We will crush the Bakhadaree ticks and leeches that occupy our beloved peninsula. We will pulverize every Bakhad pest who defecates upon our pure Izvyonsk soil. We will turn to dust every Domat who dares touch that which we have consecrated.”

Bastril’s broad face, as pallid and round as a bleached beach ball, pivoted like a bloated moon as he again scanned the room. “Help me protect my country ... and save yours. Vote for Resolution 2060A to stop Domataland. I ask you, my friends and allies, when will *you* become the target of Domataland’s debauchery? Protect yourselves as well as Izvyona. Do not be hypnotized by the voice from the sewer.” He glanced around the room once more before carrying his swollen body back to his seat.

The Fewwoki ambassador had the unenviable task of serving as the World Assembly Chairman for this session. He tottered to the podium. His skinny, hunched body seemed fragile, as if the slightest wind would send him sailing away. His diminutive voice matched his physique. “President Demnar Tarish of Domataland, are you prepared to address the Assembly?”

A clamor filled the meeting hall.

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The time had come. Demnar rose to his feet. "I am, Your Excellency." Demnar straightened his suit jacket and made his way to the stage. As he neared the podium, he heard jumbled noises behind him. The sounds took on a rhythm. Thump ... thump ... thump, thump, thump.

The chairman's meek, squeaky voice shouted over the din. "Fellow delegates, President Demnar Tarish of Domataland will now address the Assembly."

Demnar took his place at the speaker's stand. Bright lights glared in his eyes as he looked upon row after row of international figures. Members of the Izvyonsk delegation were standing behind their desks. The ashen-faced men pounded the desktops next to their microphones. The delegates of several other nations joined the fray. Smug looks covered the faces of those on the Cadonan team. The Cadonans knew they were the masters of this forum. The Sohn-Suran team members withheld expressions and took advantage of the disruption to stretch and drink. The Fletish delegates stood and applauded. "Let President Tarish speak!" the Fletish ambassador said. The Izvyon booed.

The Assembly Chairman banged the podium with a gavel. "Order! Order!" The rumpus grew louder. A horn's squeal blasted through the room.

The Izvyonsk delegates marched out of the meeting hall. The horn quieted. Those who were standing sat down. Demnar's ears were ringing. Poor Tezya was going to find herself fending off a full frontal attack after all this.

Demnar gave his speech.

CHAPTER 13

STREET-CORNER HAIR

"Farewell, Old Razmor! Bakhadaree hero and legend, Ruzhman Razmor Zendek, age 86, was killed by enemy fire near the village of Lestnya. He was protecting key railroad links from Izvyonsk naval shelling"



*"In Remembrance of Honored Patriots"
Satur War Journal
Year 1002 of the Enlightened Epoch*

***Lestnya, Bakhadaland
Friday, April 7, Year 1007 EE
2:00 p.m.***

Ina Tovaleta watched fat raindrops strike the cafeteria window. Just like tears, the droplets rolled down the glass in long, mournful streaks. In the background, she heard the local weather report for her coastal hometown of Lestnya. More rain clouds over the skies in northeastern Bakhadaland, the

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report said. Good, she felt like rain.

"Hey, Ina, you coming to the staff meeting?" Sulana was peering into the deserted lunch room.

Ina grabbed her autopad. "Yep, coming." She and Sulana headed down a hall.

"Did Rosik call?" Sulana asked.

"No."

"Ina, you know, maybe he's waiting for the weekend. He knows you have a job."

"Why would he wait, Sulana? It's Friday. Friday! He had all week to call me."

"He's on duty on the Goodwill Ship. Maybe he's been busy and hasn't been able to call."

"Yeah, right. Rosik's a lying jerk. Domataree pig."

"Ina! Don't say such things. The Domats are here to help us."

"Not the Domat called Lieutenant Rosik Venkin."

Ina shoved open a door. They walked into a windowless, concrete-walled conference room. Other employees were already seated around the military surplus table. Ina slumped into a hard, chilly, folding chair. Sulana sat down next to her.

"Good afternoon, Sulana," a man said. Ina recognized the voice. It belonged to Taksar Zobabor from the production planning department.

Sulana's reply echoed, as if her words were spoken far away from Ina's ears. "Hi, Taksar, where's Professor Pintar?"

"He's on his way," Taksar said. "He has an update on the parts shipment from Domataland."

Ina drew thick streaks on her autopad. Oh, Domataland, Domataland. Everyone was hearing about Domataland but her. *Rosik, I'm so pissed at you!* she wrote. Ina then erased the words.

Sulana's elbow jabbed into Ina's side. "Ina! Stand up!"

Ina was the last to stand when Professor Pintar walked in. He took a seat. Everyone settled back into their chairs.

The professor's stoic face had a hint of life to it. "Ruzhmen

and Ladies, I have excellent news. The Domataree equipment survived the trip over the Northern Mountains."

Everyone cheered. Ina felt worse. Why didn't Domataland keep their rotten parts.

"What about the decoy cargo?" Sulana asked.

"Izvyonsk intelligence destroyed it," Professor Pintar said. "They hit it with tactical Cadonan-made weapons while it was crossing Kastomstree Pass."

Taksar punched the air with a fist. "Yes! The ruse worked."

Professor Pintar was not as jubilant. "It worked this time. *This time*. Remember, our enemy learns quickly. With Cadonan equipment, they'll learn even faster."

"True," Taksar said, "the Izvyon are masters of destruction."

So was Rosik Venkin. Lying slime!

Sulana said, "I heard on the news Domataland took a pummeling at the World Assembly for shipping us parts."

Taksar's words sounded angry. "It was no surprise, of course, when the Assembly blew off Ambassador Chebeliva's complaint against Cadona for shipping advanced tactical weapons to Izvyona."

"Do as I say, not as I do," Sulana said. "Cadona does love its double standard. I'm glad I'm not the Domataree ambassador. She stood her ground, but it was a brutal session."

Ina drew heart-shaped doodles on the autopad. She berated an entire nation, one of only a few friendly countries, because one young Domataree navy lieutenant didn't call her like he promised.

"We can't do anything about the World Assembly," Professor Pintar said, "but we can do something about the surveillance and communication equipment the national defenders out west need. Lady Tovaleta, do you have news from your brother, Commander Tovalet? What's the status in the Western District?"

Ina cleared her throat. "Solomor says the assembly facilities in the west are functioning at thirty percent capacity."

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"Thirty percent! The reason for the low rate?"

"Mainly Izvyonsk sabotage and power disruptions," Ina told him.

The professor's worried expression belied his coldly professional demeanor. *"Ruzhman Zobabor, we need to bump up production. Our western brothers are going to need our equipment soon. The border is getting hotter every day."*

"Professor, with the new shipments from Domataland, we can significantly bump up production of both the surveillance equipment and the communication units."

"Good," Professor Pintar said. *"For those of you not working the night shift, you may leave early. When the Domataree components are sorted and tested, production staff will be busy. Relax while you can."*

Everyone jumped to their feet when the professor stood up. As soon as he left the room, Ina checked her personal device. Still no call from Rosik.

Sulana was watching her. *"Nothing?"*

"Nothing."

Sulana and Ina walked down the hall to the employee lockers.

"Ina, are you going out with Tarma tonight?"

"I'm going to the Goodwill Ship. I'm hoping Tarma will come with me."

"Why do you want to go back to the ship if Rosik didn't call?"

"Because I'm going to find him."

"And then what?"

"Kick him as hard as I can in the nut sacks."

"Ina! You could hurt him."

"I hope so. He lied to me, Sulana. He said he'd call and he didn't." Ina put her autopad in a blast-proof locker and pulled out her raincoat.

"Ina, please be careful. If he didn't call, there has to be a reason. You don't know what you may learn. You may not like the news."

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"Thanks for the advice, Sulana."

They walked outside into the moist air. The rain had slackened, but dark clouds hung like overstuffed pillows from the sky.

"So, Sulana, are you heading home?"

"I am. Benid has the day off, so he promised to fix dinner."

"Say hello to him and Adela for me."

"I will." Sulana rested a hand on Ina's shoulder. "Ina, I hope you find Rosik."

"Thanks. See you Monday."

Ina rushed home and made a call.

"Hi, Ina," Tarma Nedola said.

"Hey, Tarma. Rosik didn't call. I'm going to the Goodwill Ship to look for him. Want to come?" A pause. Tarma didn't think it was a good idea to visit the ship either, but she'd say yes. Tarma still wanted to find her own man.

"Okay, Ina, I'll go."

Ina removed her Holy Triad pendant and jumped into the shower. She lathered a bar of pumpkin spice soap in her hands. Men's brains were wired to find the smell erotic, Tarma once told her.

"Rosik, you bum, why didn't you call?" Ina said aloud. So many possible reasons. Did he lose interest? Was he playing around when he said he cared for her? Perhaps he was just a sailor a long way from home looking to have a bit of fun in some foreign port. Did he find another woman? Or did his commander forbid him to call? Did something happen to him? Was he ill? Was he hurt? Did he get sent away on another mission?

Ina pouted as she dried herself. He didn't want to call. It was his choice. She just knew it. Ina would show Rosik she wasn't so forgettable. He'd regret lying to her. She'd find another lonely sailor who wouldn't be so fickle.

She pulled a black sweater over her ample bosom. Usually,

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Ina wore the clingy shirt as an undergarment, but not today. She'd wear it on the outside for the whole world to see. Ina studied her reflection. The black dye of the cloth had dulled with time, but it still contrasted with her pale skin.

Snaps held a white collar to the neckline of the garment. Too modest. The snaps clicked as she ripped the collar off. Again she studied her reflection. Without the collar, the neckline plunged, revealing a generous portion of her firm breasts. The fabric clung to her flat stomach, narrow waist, and round hips. Out of habit, she reached for her Holy Triad pendant. Ina stopped herself. She would not wear it tonight.

Her old, faded black jeans hung in the far corner of the closet. She hadn't worn them in quite some time, yet they still fitted her lower curves with precision. She had planned to give the pants to a younger girl. At nineteen, Ina was a bit too old for the style, but now she was glad she had kept them. Tonight Ina would do anything to make Rosik notice her.

Ina curled her hair and piled it on top of her head. She fastened the wavy locks in place with shiny hair clips. Now for makeup: black mascara, thick eyeliner, bright red lipstick, and heavy blush.

Tarma called. "Hi, Ina, I'm ready."

"Me, too. I'll walk down to your house. I'm heading out the door right now." Ina took a last look in the mirror. She barely recognized herself.

Damp air penetrated Ina's thin shirt the second she opened the door. She glanced down at the naked flesh of her plump breasts. Ina grabbed a baggy, black rain jacket. No use being cold until there was a chance she might run into Rosik.



The garden in Tarma Nedola's front yard was overflowing with crops. Tarma bent down and cradled colorful pepper fruits in her hands. If only she had a special man. She would pick fresh vegetables and cook him a scrumptious dinner.

Perhaps she had taken the wrong approach when she visited the Goodwill Ship last week. She wore a miniskirt and piles of makeup. Tarma met scores of Domataree sailors, but failed to find her one true love. Today, it would be a casual pantsuit the color of rain clouds. Her future husband would want a sensible, modest bride. One he could trust.

Motion caught her eye. A woman with street-corner hair disappeared behind the berry bushes lining Tarma's fence. Who the heck was that? The woman emerged on the other side of the shrubs. It was Ina! Tarma hadn't seen Ina in black for ages. Certainly, Tarma had never seen her with street-corner hair.

Ina yanked open the yard gate. Gone were her typical delicate steps. Her brown boots clicked and thumped against the pebble walkway.

"Wow! Ina! I barely recognized you."

"Rosik didn't call, Tarma. You ready to go?"

"Yeah, I'm ready."

Tarma and Ina headed to the outdoor stairs that led down to the main road at the base of the hillside.

"Ina, what's up with the black and the do?"

"I'm going to show him. I'll find one of his friends to spend time with."

"Why?"

"To make him jealous. Make him wish he didn't forget to call. He'll be sorry."

"You're assuming he didn't want to call," Tarma said. "You don't know that. Maybe he couldn't."

"Tarma, really, how hard can it be? He said he would call. He said he'd do anything in his power to see me again."

Ina seemed angry, but Tarma knew that Ina had a broken heart. Tarma didn't bother her with conversation as they followed the road to the train stop.

A large crowd was gathered at the station. As Ina sulked, Tarma studied the people waiting on the platform. She recognized many faces, for Lestnya was not a large town. Her eyes

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settled on a gaggle of babbagurdies. They wore flowery studdabubbas, colorful scarves, bulky sweaters, and boxy shoes. These ladies were young once. It was hard to imagine. Tarma wondered if she would dress in studdabubbas when she grew old. A thought came to her; she wouldn't live long enough to get old. What was she thinking? She was just nineteen, and today she was alive.

A locomotive engine sent rumbles through the platform. Hooray! One of the wagons was Old Razmor. Ina stomped on board. Before following Ina into the car, Tarma touched one of the patched bullet holes marring the side. "God, watch over Old Razmor," Tarma said.

Ina plopped down in a seat. Tarma sat next to her. Ina pouted and glared out the window. The train pulled away.

They had traveled a good distance before Ina spoke. Tears moistened her blue eyes. "Tarma, is my eye makeup smudging?"

"No, your makeup is fine, but are you okay?"

"No! I feel awful. He lied to me, Tarma. I don't want to feel love or desire or any of those terrible things ever again. They hurt too much. I want anger. I want revenge."

Tarma's own emptiness picked at her. She must concentrate on something else. "Hey, Ina, did you hear about the Fletish merchant ship that sank? I heard a rumor that the Izvyon sank it because it was trying to run the blockade."

"Where did you hear that?"

"At work."

"Were there people on board?"

"No idea," Tarma said. "Maybe the Domats will know something about it. I'm going to ask around when we get to the ship."

The train pulled into the station at D'nevtnya. Low, billowy, gray clouds cloaked the sky. At the end of the harbor rested the Goodwill Ship. Deck lights sparkled in the gathering darkness. A thin ray from the setting sun burst through the

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overcast. The great vessel glowed against the stormy horizon. "Ina, look at it! An angel of hope for our people."

"Hurry up," Ina said, "let's get down there."



Ina Tovaleta's heart pounded. Lieutenant Rosik Venkin could be anywhere. Despite the weather, many visitors were on board. White canvas covers provided protection from occasional raindrops. The stark lighting and aging daylight made it hard to recognize people. "Tarma, I don't see him. Do you?"

"Not yet. There sure are lots of people here. Maybe more than last week."

A large hand landed on Tarma's shoulder. A tall Domataree sailor said, "Lady, you were here a few days ago, weren't you?" Two other seamen stood behind him.

Tarma's eyes were sparkling. "Yes, I was. I remember you, too. We talked about string weapons."

"Your name is Tarma, no?" he asked.

"Yes! You remember!"

"We've got a card game going. Want to join us?"

"Ina, do you want to play cards?"

"You go ahead," Ina said. "I'm going to look around."

Tarma leaned close to her. "Ina, I'll see what I can find out about Rosik."

Ina watched Tarma walk away with the sailors.

Ina circled the entire ship. Rosik was not there. Where was the creep hiding? One of these sailors must know him. The time for action had come. Ina removed the loose-fitting jacket that concealed her snug shirt and tight jeans. A gust of damp air chilled her body, but Ina ignored the cold. It was time to choose her first target. A dark-haired sailor was standing next to a piece of old-fashioned navigation equipment. A week ago, on a private tour, Rosik had told her the odd device was a compass.

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"Lady," the dark-haired sailor said, "welcome aboard. Let me know if you have questions about the ship."

This guy should be an easy subject. He tried to focus on her face, but his gaze bounced up and down her body as if a broken spring was jiggling his eyes. Still, she wanted to soften him up before asking about Rosik. She talked to the dark-haired sailor about trivial things. Why did he join the navy? How did he end up serving on the Goodwill Ship? What did he think of Bakhadaland? Ina paid no attention to his replies. The answer to only one question mattered: where was Rosik.

Ina was about to ask, but the sailor spoke to someone else. "Good evening, Ruzhman. Let me know if you have questions."

She heard another voice. "Thank you, young man. I was a sailor myself when I was your age."

An elderly, stooped-over man stood behind her. A messy mop of coarse, gray hair topped his head. He struck up a conversation with the sailor. They spoke of useless things: how to set the sails based on how hard the wind was blowing and how to angle them depending upon the direction of the wind. She wandered off in search of a better target.

Up ahead, she spotted three seamen. They were chatting with a Bakhadaree family. When the family moved on, Ina took their place. "Good evening," Ina said to the sailors, "I hope you can help me with something."

"How may we be of service, Lady?" The man struggled to keep his gaze from dropping to her neckline and hips.

"I'm looking for a friend who's stationed on the ship," Ina said. "Do you know Lieutenant Rosik Venkin?"

The sailors shared nervous glances. "Well, Lady," one of them said, "this ship is only so big, so we at least know of everyone even if we don't know each well."

"So you know him, then?" Ina's heart pounded. Progress at last.

"Y ... yes."

"Is he on board the ship, by chance?" Ina's voice quivered.

"I'm not sure, Lady. Some of us were authorized shore leave and some are below deck."

"Is Rosik on shore leave then?"

"I don't know, Lady."

Why wouldn't the idiots tell her where Rosik was? She had to stay calm. These guys knew him. Ina needed their help. "I didn't see him working up here with the public," she said. "Do you know when he'll be topside again?"

"We don't know his schedule, Lady."

"Is there a way you can find out?" She needed to be careful. Desperation echoed in her words.

"I'll see what I can find." He darted away. The two others dashed after him.

It wasn't long before an old sailor appeared. Ina recognized him from the previous week. He was the man who had gotten into a fight with two pro-Izvyonsk protesters. He ended up with a bloody nose as a result of the brawl.

"Lady, how may I be of service?" His words were polite, but they carried a growl.

"Ruzhman, I'm looking for Lieutenant Rosik Venkin. Do you know where I can find him?"

"I'm sorry, Lady, for security reasons we are not allowed to release information about our crew. This is a politically sensitive situation, you understand."

"I understand well," Ina said. "I live here. I've lived here my whole life. I've had two houses burn to the ground. I've had my place of work blown to pieces. I've seen people I love fall dead at my feet. I'm well aware of the political sensitivity of the situation."

"Then you understand these rules exist to protect our men," the sailor said. Ina caught a hint of empathy on his face. "What's your interest in this man?"

"We're friends. We met last weekend." She struggled to hold back tears. "I was hoping to see him again before you sail away."

"I see. I'm sorry, I cannot disclose the location or activities

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of my men.”

“Is he allowed to contact me?”

“Lady, I’m sorry, I will not release that kind of information.” He walked away.

Ina followed. “Ruzhman, will you at least give him a message?”

“What’s your message, Lady?”

“I want him to know that I was here, and I’m hoping to see him again. My name is Ina. We met last weekend.”

“I will consider telling him.”

“Consider? Please! Will you let him know? Please!”

“I will *consider* delivering your message.”

Again he walked away, and again Ina followed. “Please, I traveled a long way to get here. I waited for him to call all week.”

“Young lady, I have a daughter your age, and if she dressed as you are, I would lock her in her room. If I’m willing to do that to my daughter, I would have no qualms about punishing you. If you do not stop this course of action, I will have you removed from this ship and from the entire dock. Is that clear?”

A cannonball might as well have slammed into her chest. He would not help her find the love of her life. He would kick her off the ship. He meant it. “Yes, Ruzhman, I understand.”

“If you try to pry information from my men, you will be removed from the area. Behave yourself, young lady.” The man disappeared into the crowd.

Ina’s heart was breaking. She would never, ever, see Rosik again.

CHAPTER 14

REAL NICE LIKE

“The Carousel Clock returns! In defiance of Izvyonsk authorities, Domataland airlifted the historic artifact to D’nevtnya. Once again, the antique clock’s shiny face will grace the walls of the Carousel Room, and its chimes will echo throughout its home city”



*“A Victorious Homecoming”
Satur War Journal
Year 1004 of the Enlightened Epoch*

D’nevtnya, Bakhadaland
Friday, April 7, Year 1007 EE
7:40 p.m.

Ina Tovaleta wandered into the shadows and beyond the protection of the canvas covers. The mist falling from the dark sky tapped against her head and shoulders. Even though a

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week had gone by, she had not forgotten a single detail about the night she met Lieutenant Rosik Venkin. A fight had broken out on the ship. The old sailor fought two pro-Izvyonsk protesters. A blow to her back forced the air from her lungs. Gasping for breath, she had taken cover beneath pipes. Then Rosik appeared. He helped her to her feet. When he spoke, Ina realized they had been in love since the formation of the universe. Now, it felt final. Over. Ancient history.

As she had done the previous week, Ina squatted down under those pipes. She folded herself into the same position that she was in when she and Rosik met. This time, it was sorrow instead of fear that enveloped her body as she cowered there. On her face, tears mingled with rain dripping from the weeping heavens. No doubt her eye makeup was running. She didn't care. Let it run. Ina wrapped her arms around her knees and watched people mingle on the ship. Flooded by bright lamplights and sheltered by canvas covers, some visitors were laughing. Others ate or drank. Children ran and played. Music and singing overpowered the sounds of the sloshing waves and incessant breeze. Ina felt numb and disconnected from it all.

A man approached. As he came closer, she saw the pant legs of his Domataree Navy uniform. "Lady, are you okay?" he asked.

There stood the dark-haired sailor who had been standing by the old compass. She didn't know what to say.

"Lady?"

"I'm just having a very bad week. You better not talk to me; you'll get in trouble."

He squatted down. "Trouble? From whom? Jealous husband?"

"No, this old sailor guy. He seems important. He said I was asking too many questions. He said if I didn't behave myself, he'd throw me off the ship."

"What did he look like?"

Ina described him.

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"Oh," the dark-haired sailor said, "sounds like our commanding officer. If he said he'd throw you off, he probably meant it."

"Yes, I think he meant it, so you better not be seen talking to me. We'll both be in trouble."

"Why did the commander get mad at you? What questions were you asking?"

"I better not tell you. He told me not to bother his men."

The sprinkle became a drizzle.

"Well, at least let me help you up. You need to get out of the rain."

"No! I want to stay right here."

"You have a raincoat there?" He pointed at her belongings lying next to her on the ground.

"Yeah."

"Then do me a favor. Please, put it on."

Ina didn't want to, but she didn't feel like arguing, so she obeyed.

"Did you come here alone?" he asked.

"No, I'm here with a friend."

"Where is he?"

"*She*. I don't know where she is at the moment." Then Ina saw the commander. He was heading their way. His features hardened as he moved from the light and into the shadows. He barked a name. The young sailor jumped up and ran to him. Only a few words were exchanged. The young man scurried away.

Just great! She didn't do anything wrong, but he was going to kick her off the ship. Ina rested her forehead on her knees. What a disgraceful end to a terrible week.

Footsteps came closer. They stopped. She was in for it now. Mean old guy. Ina raised her head. Tarma stood there! Thank goodness!

"Ina! What in the world are you doing? Sitting in the rain! Look how wet you are."

Warm tears tumbled down Ina's cold cheeks. "It doesn't

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matter, Tarma. I'm never going to see Rosik again. I got in trouble for asking about him."

"In trouble? From whom?"

"That old sailor guy. Apparently he's the commanding officer. He said if I didn't stop asking about his men, he'd kick me off the ship and even the whole dock."

"He said that? Really?"

"He did. He wouldn't even tell me if he would give Rosik a message."

"Wow!" Tarma said. "That sounds pretty uptight. Domats can be so extreme."

"Well, that's what he told me." Ina dried her face. "You didn't find Rosik either?"

"Nope. I looked all over. I didn't see Rosik, Garrett or any of the others from last weekend. Seems strange. Wonder where they are? You know ... maybe our guys are on the same shift. If they're not working up here, then they must be either on shore leave or below deck."

Ina wiped her nose. "I asked about that, too. No one would tell me."

"Well," Tarma said, "clearly Rosik is not topside. We're not allowed below, but we can look for him in town."

"It's no use, Tarma. I'm never going to see him again."

"Ina, we came all this way. Let's at least walk around town and look for him."

Ina shivered as she pulled herself to her feet. In the distance, she spotted the commander. "Tarma, he's looking this way."

"Who? The commander guy?"

"Yeah."

"I have an idea," Tarma said. "You can go look for Rosik in town. I'll stay on board for a while and see if he turns up. The ship isn't open to visitors much longer. Who knows, maybe he'll show up later. I'll meet you in the Carousel Room after the ship closes for the day."

Ina's mood lifted. "Good idea! We can cover more ground

that way.”

Tarma walked with Ina to the gangplank. “The commander is definitely keeping an eye on you, Ina, and he doesn’t look happy.”

“I know, it’s the weirdest thing. He hates me.”

“Ina, remember, I’ll meet you in the Carousel Room after the ship closes.”

“I’ll remember.”

Tarma strolled back into the throng of merrymakers. Ina left the ship. The crowd had spilled over onto the docks, but Rosik was not there. Ina headed for town. She walked along the liveliest street in D’nevtnya—the one leading to the Carousel Room. A cluster of Domataree sailors went into a bar. Ina followed them. The mean, old commander had no authority here. The place was full. She pushed her way through the crowd. Music blasted. Laughter, shouts, and curse words hit her ears. “Excuse me,” she said to one of the Domats, “do you know Lieutenant Rosik Venkin.”

“Nope, sorry,” the sailor said.

She tapped another on the shoulder. “Excuse me, I’m looking for Rosik Venkin. Do you know him?”

“Who’s he?”

“A lieutenant from the Goodwill Ship.”

“Nope, never heard of him.”

“You sure? You’re from the Goodwill Ship, aren’t you?”

“Look, Lady, like I said, I don’t know him. It’s a big ship.”

“Please, it’s really important. I must find him.”

“Lady, buzz off.”

They were lying. She stomped out of the bar.

In a pub a few buildings down, she saw four drunken sailors. Giggling girls sat on their laps. These sailors would be of no use. They were hardly able to sit in the chairs without falling over.

Her next stop was the Carousel Room. It was even more crowded than the bars. All possible seats were taken. Even standing room was hard to come by. This was crazy! She

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might walk right by him and not see him. Then she noticed people milling about on the lofts. The staircase was open! She went up to the highest level. The view was excellent, but she didn't see Rosik in the crowd.

Carousel Clock hung on the opposite wall. Ina watched its gilded hands creep along its shiny face. The Goodwill Ship would be closing to visitors in a few minutes. Pretty soon now, Tarma would come searching for her.

Ina climbed down from the loft. She shoved her way through the crowd to the main entrance. Throngs of people were arriving. No doubt most just departed the Goodwill Ship. They squeezed inside the Carousel Room. The mass of humanity made it impossible to see, so she went outside and waited on the front steps.

Several minutes went by, but no sign of Tarma. Ina considered calling her, but if Tarma had a plan, a call might ruin it. Ina walked to the street corner. She watched as people made their way up the hill from the docks. The flow of pedestrians slowed to a trickle. They appeared as silhouettes against the scattered lights.

She smelled stale alcohol. Whistling breaths tickled her left ear. Something prickly poked her cheek.

"You waitin' for someone?" The voice belonged to a man. He was standing behind her.

Ina swung around. The man was tall, and he wore a disheveled Domataree uniform. His hat sat far back on his head. The skin of his face gave off a clammy glow in the dull, outdoor lighting. The sailor's body, though sturdy and strong, rocked and swayed.

She put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes, but her voice quivered. "I'm waiting for a friend."

He moved closer. "You're looking terribly lonely."

Ina heard noises coming from the shadows. Two more sailors were leaning on a fence. The men swayed, laughed, and cursed.

Perhaps she should make a run for it. Then she realized

something. They were sober enough to stand. "You might be able to help me," she said to the nearest sailor.

"Oh, I'm sure I can think of a way to help you. Lots of ways. Yeah, oh yeah, lots of ways."

"The friend I'm waiting for, his name is Rosik Venkin. He's a Domataree sailor on the Goodwill Ship, like you. Do you know where I can find him?"

"Rosik!" the man said. "Hell yes, I know Rosik. I'm Rosik. At your service, young lady." He offered a stumbling bow.

"No, sorry, you're not the Rosik I'm looking for. I'm looking for Lieutenant Rosik Venkin. Do you know him?"

"I could be him tonight, little lonely one." He hovered close. The smell of body odor mixed with urine and alcohol.

Ina pushed him back. "But really, do you know Rosik Venkin? Do you know where I can find him?"

"Like I said, honey, I'm Rosik."

If she ignored him, maybe he'd leave. He didn't. Big arms swung around her. Her back pressed into his chest. Ina struggled, but it did no good. Despite his condition, the man was strong. "Let me go! It's Rosik Venkin I'm looking for."

"Hey, honey, forget about him!" Wet, sweaty lips pushed against her cheek. His nose whistled.

The two drunken sailors who were standing by the fence approached. "Go for it, you slime. You got her now!"

He groped her body with his large, clumsy hands. "Oh, you feel nice. Real nice like." His long, wide fingers squeezed her breasts. "Oh, angel, what nice yo-yos. I need more of that, angel, lots more."

"Let me go!"

"Oh, I don't think I'll ever let you go. You feel way too nice to let go."

A group of Domataree sailors were running up the sidewalk. Not more of them! As they neared, she realized these men were clean, their uniforms pressed and neat.

"Release her!" one of them said.

"I'm just having some fun!" the drunk told him. "I'm just

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getting myself warmed up here. It's cold! And look at this nice thing I found. Check out these hand warmers."

"Let her go! Now!"

At last he released her. Sober sailors lead the drunken men away. The man who appeared to be in charge said, "Lady, are you hurt?"

"I'm fine."

"Please forgive the disgraceful behavior of these men. There is no excuse for it. Be assured, they will be disciplined. That is a certainty. May I escort you somewhere? I would hate for you to run into more trouble. People are in a rowdy mood tonight, I'm afraid."

"I'm waiting for someone," Ina said. "Lieutenant Rosik Venkin. Do you know him?"

"No, Lady, I don't believe I do."

"You don't know Rosik Venkin. A lieutenant. Really, you don't?"

"No, Lady."

"Okay, thanks," Ina said. "I'll go wait by the Carousel Room."

The rain had picked up, but Ina didn't care. She stood on the broad steps in front of the building and waited for Tarma. And Rosik.

CHAPTER 15

PADA RAMMAK

D'nevtnya, Bakhadaland
Friday, April 7, Year 1007 EE
10:20 p.m.

Tarma Nedola hurried up the hill. She didn't have good news for Ina Tovaleta. Tarma found no trace of Lieutenant Rosik Venkin. Why didn't he call Ina? He seemed so smitten with her.

The Carousel Room was just one more block away. The building glowed like a pearl against the wet, nighttime backdrop. The grand entryway doors never had a chance to close because so many visitors were coming and going. A sinuous roof sheltered a multitude of people who were loitering on the front steps.

Tarma was about to give Ina a call when she noticed a hunched figure standing alone halfway up the broad staircase. The curvaceous female form stood beyond the protection of the roof. Wet, blond curls drooped over a delicate face. It was Ina! Even from a distance, Tarma saw her shiver. The poor thing looked like a ruins-waif. It was strange, though. Ina was still beautiful, in some ways more beautiful than ever. Men galore gawked as they walked by. Darn it! She was gorgeous even soaking wet and miserable.

"Ina, why are you standing in the rain?"

Black mascara ringed Ina's big eyes. Her full lips quivered from cold and unrelenting sorrow. "Tarma, he's not here. You didn't find him, either?"

"Nope," Tarma said, "I didn't see Rosik, Garrett, or any of

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the guys from last weekend. If they were on board, they never came topside."

A particularly violent shiver rattled Ina's shapely body.

"Ina, let's go in. You're freezing."

"I don't care."

"Well, I do." Tarma took Ina by an arm and led her inside the Carousel Room. "Here's a good spot. We can watch who comes and goes. I'll get us some hot tea."

They rested their steaming drinks on a ledge sticking out from the wall. "Ina, you should see your face. You have mascara running all the way down your neck."

Ina brushed away fresh tears. "I don't care. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters any longer."

"Ina, don't be silly." Tarma wiped long, black streaks from Ina's skin. "Things will matter again one way or another. Either Rosik will call, or you'll get over him."

Tears poured from Ina's eyes. "No, it's all over. There is nothing for me now."

"I know what you need," Tarma said, "ice cream."

"I want buckets full of ice cream. Chocolate!"

Tarma was about to walk away to buy ice cream when she heard a beep. She checked her personal device. It was dark and silent. She heard the sound again. The noise came from Ina's direction. Ina was leaning on the ledge next to her empty teacup, her face buried in a napkin. Tarma moved closer to her. More beeps.

"Ina, that's your PD. Someone's calling you."

"What?"

"Someone's calling you."

Ina squinted as she read the message. "Do you know someone by the name of ... Pada ... Rammak?"

"No," Tarma said, "is there a message?"

"My eyes are too blurry."

Tarma slipped Ina's personal device from the arm patch. "The message says, *Important! You left something at my restaurant last Sunday morning. Please pick it up as soon as possible.*"

"What?" Ina said. "That doesn't make sense. What restaurant? And who's Pada ... whoever?"

"You know, Ina, *Pada Rammak* sounds like a Shinchik name. She must be from that restaurant we ate at with Rosik and the guys last Sunday. Do you remember losing anything last weekend?"

"No, this call must be for someone else."

A thought occurred to Tarma. Was it possible ...? "Well, we don't have anything else to do, so we might as well wander up there and see if you did leave something."

"I don't understand how someone from the restaurant would know how to call me," Ina said. "Garrett paid, and he used cash."

"Well, Ina, if you did lose something with your contact info on it, then you'd better pick it up right away."

"I'm tired. Can't we go another time?"

"No, Ina, we need to go now. Come on. We can get ice cream there if the place is still open. If not, we can stop here again on the way back to the train."

"Okay."

"Good. Come on, Ina, let's go. Don't dawdle."

"Tarma, why are you in such a hurry?"

"Because we don't know how long the restaurant will be open. Come on."

They rushed up the hill, but the restaurant was closed for the day. All was dark except for faint rays of light sneaking out around the edges of the window blinds.

"See, it's already closed," Ina said.

"Yes, but it's been closed for an hour already. The call came just a few minutes ago. This Pada person said to come right away, so let's at least see if someone's inside."

Ina was shivering again, so Tarma knocked.

The door opened. A tiny Shinchik woman appeared. Her colorful robe shimmered in the dim light. Although she was quite old with gray hair pulled harshly back into a bun, joy lit up her round face. "May I help you ladies?" She spoke in

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accented Bakhad.

"Hi," Tarma said, "we received a message a few minutes ago from someone by the name of Pada Rammak. The message said that we left something in a restaurant last Sunday. We guessed this was the restaurant the caller was referring to."

"Ah!" A broad smile crossed the woman's face. "I am Pada Rammak. One of you must be Ina?"

Ina stepped forward. "That's me."

"I'm glad you came so quickly," Pada said. "Please, come in."

Tarma and Ina walked into the empty restaurant. Only a few soft lights shone in the room. Darkness concealed many of the ornate red and gold furnishings.

Pada shut the door and locked it. "Come with me, ladies." Pada walked with short, quick steps across the dining area. She pushed aside a heavy curtain. A dimly lit banquet room came into view.

Tarma noticed two men in the room. They stood in the shadows at the end of a long, narrow table. The men moved closer. "Ina, do you see them?"



Tears clouded Ina Tovaleta's eyes. "See whom?" Then she felt something strange. Heat flowed from the right side of the room. The warmth was not the stark heat of a fire, but rather a gentle sensation, like summer mist rolling in from the Warm Sea. Ina wiped tears from her eyes. Had she fallen asleep and awakened into a wishful dream? Was it really Rosik? His team leader, Captain Garrett Dartuk, stood next to him.

"Hello, Ina," Rosik said. "You cannot believe how good it is to see you."

She wanted to speak, but relief and joy had stolen all words. He walked toward her. His eyes glowed despite the low light.

At last words came. "I don't believe it!" Ina said. "Is it really

you?" Energy pulled them together. Nothing could stop it. No power in creation was strong enough. Her body fell into his. He wrapped his arms around her. Rosik had returned. She didn't know why it took so long, but she didn't care. They were together.

His lips moved close to her ear. "I can't believe how good it feels to hold you, to be with you. Like I'm dreaming. I don't want to let you go."

"Don't let me go," Ina said. "I've been waiting so long. Please, don't ever let me go."



Tarma Nedola heard Pada's voice. "I think those two have sailed away to another world. You ladies are welcome to stay here tonight if you wish. The ruzhmen are staying. We have plenty of room for two more."

"Yes, Lady Rammak, thank you. We would like to spend the night."

"Good! I enjoy the company. I'll set up a room." Pada hustled away.

Garrett handed Tarma a cup of hot tea. "It's good to see you," he said.

"Thanks, good to see you, too." There were many things Tarma wanted to ask. Why meet in secret in a Shinchik restaurant? Why weren't he and Rosik on the ship? "You guys aren't in uniform, I see," she said. They wore clothes any young Bakhadaree man would wear.

Garrett took a sip of tea. "Rosik and I have a request."

"What is it?"

"We are hoping to see more of the countryside. Maybe meet some of your National Defender commanders, if that could be arranged."

"Ina has a brother who's a National Defender commander in the Western District," Tarma told him. "He's stationed on the east side of the Satur River."

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"Yes, Rosik told me about him—Commander Solomor Tovalet. But we're interested in meeting defenders in the eastern and central districts."

"I don't see why you couldn't meet them. Is there something in particular you want to know?"

"Personally," Garrett said, "I want to see how they operate without a defense budget."

"I can tell you that, by looking under rocks and in junk piles. But I can ask around for you. I know some of our local commanders."

"Thank you, Tarma. We would like that."

"How long will you be available?" Tarma asked.

"Two weeks." He then glanced at Rosik and Ina. "I have a feeling those two will be out of touch for a while. You hungry?"

"Starved!"

"Lady Rammak prepared food for us," Garrett said.

Tarma and Garrett scooped stew from a large, black pot.

"So, Garrett, what do you want to do while you're here, besides meet National Defender commanders?"

"Well," Garrett said, "we're hoping you ladies would be willing to show us around."

"I think we can be talked into it." Tarma dropped a glob of jam on a plate and then said, "So, Garrett, do you like opera?"

CHAPTER 16

AS MY HOMELAND FALLS APART

D'nevtnya, Bakhadaland
Saturday, April 8, Year 1007 EE
1:00 a.m.

Shuffling sounds roused Tarma Nedola from her sleep. Where was she? It took a moment for her to remember—Pada Ram-mak's Shinchik restaurant. She was lying on the narrow bed that Pada had prepared for her. More noises crept about in the night. Tarma squinted into the darkness.

Faint tendrils of light from an outdoor lamp seeped in around window shutters. Ina's ghostly form was moving about in the little room. A white nightshirt fluttered as Ina pulled the fluffy fabric over herself. She was as beautiful as a white summer cloud illuminated by the first pale rays of the morning sun. Could she ever look ugly? It was so unfair.

Tarma sat upright. The bed groaned.

"Sorry, Tarma," Ina said, "I didn't mean to wake you." Ina sat down on her own single bed.

"So how did it go with Rosik?" Tarma asked.

"Oh my God, Tarma! It went so awesome swell with Rosik. I am so in love with him. I just can't believe it. He and Garrett want us to show them around."

"Ina, did Rosik tell you why?"

"Why what?"

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"Why they want us to show them around?"

"He didn't say, and I don't care as long as we're together."

"Garrett said he wants to meet National Defender commanders," Tarma said, "specifically in the eastern and central districts."

"Rosik said the same thing."

"Ina, what else did Rosik say?" Ina wasn't paying attention. "Think for a moment. Did Rosik say anything else?"

"He said lots and lots of things!"

"Not the personal stuff, Ina. Did he tell you things like why they are here and what they want to see?"

"Not really."

Ina was useless! "Garrett told me the Izvyon did sink a Fletish merchant ship," Tarma said. "It was running the blockade."

"Sink? What?"

"Remember, Ina? On the train ride over here, I told you about a Fletish ship that sank?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Garrett didn't know if people were on board or what its cargo was, though."

The whimsical tones left Ina's voice. "Rosik didn't say anything about that."

"Did he say anything about Izvyona or Cadona?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Garrett did. More and more people in Domataland think the Cadonan military no longer takes orders from President Meyfeld, and they keep Defense Secretary Karther in the dark."

"There's been a military coup in Cadona?"

"Not a *military* coup. A *Freedom Party* coup," Tarma said. "The Freedom Party is the real boss now. The Cadonan military is backing them. He also told me about a new weapon Cadona is building. It's called *Toxic Sphere*. It's supposed to be way more powerful than any weapon ever built."

"More powerful than Domataland's weapons? More pow-

erful than Silver Star?"

"Garrett seems to think so. Toxic Sphere isn't ready yet, but they're getting close."

"So many terrible things," Ina said, "Toxic Sphere, guys who hate us taking over in Cadona, Cadona sending more weapons to Izvyona. And, in two weeks, Rosik is sailing away forever."

"Don't think so far ahead, Ina. The world may be a very different place by then. You know, if it works out with Rosik, you may end up going to Domataland with him."

"I ... I never thought about that," Ina said. "I don't know if I can leave Bakhadaland."

"Really, Ina? I thought you'd love to go."

"I really don't know how I *could* leave. I need to fight for my country!"

"Depending on what happens between the two of you, Ina, you may have to make that choice." Pain pierced Tarma's heart. Once again, Ina hijacked her dreams. Ina would have her handsome husband. They would live in peace in Domataland. Tarma would be left in Bakhadaland. Alone. Tarma chastised herself. She shouldn't think like that. It was not all roses for Ina. In two weeks, Ina must watch Rosik sail away on the Goodwill Ship. No matter what plans they made, he'd have to leave.

Anyway, Tarma swore to protect Bakhadaland. When it came down to it, would she abandon her country? Her people? Her home? Especially when times were so dire. Would she really sit in some safe place and watch from a distance as her homeland fell apart?

Ina's voice broke Tarma's desperate thoughts. "I wonder where we should take them while they're here?"

"On Tuesday evening, I'm going to the outdoor opera with Commander Samar and his family," Tarma said. "I'm thinking about asking Commander Samar if he'd like to meet Garrett and Rosik, or at least Garrett if you don't want to go."

"That's a good idea, Tarma. I can suffer through an opera if

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it's important for the guys to meet our commanders."

Tarma's sour mood passed. "Hey, Ina, if it turns out Rosik likes opera, would you start going?" Tarma heard Ina's giggles in the darkness.

"Do you want to know something, Tarma? If Rosik is into opera, I'd become an opera aficionada. Yes, I'd go for him."

"Wow! Ina at the opera. It must be true love."

CHAPTER 17

ONE HUNDRED WOMEN

Cadona City, Cadona
Sunday, April 9, Year 1007 EE
9:00 a.m.

“Bastril Jusprali, the Izvyonsk Ambassador to the World Assembly, logged fresh complaints against Domataland and the self-proclaimed Republic of Bakhadaland. Izvyona demands the immediate departure of the Domataree Goodwill Ship.”

Leeha Ritsagin opened her eyes. Light streamed in through her bedroom window. She was thinking about ships again. Was it another crazy dream? No, it was the news—Andecco News Service. Leeha pushed herself up onto her elbows. Her headache was gone! She turned her head from side to side. No dizziness. She sat upright. No pain in her back or knees. “Don’t tell me! Am I finally over it?” Leeha said to herself. She slid her legs over the edge of the bed and stood up. No vertigo! She took a few careful steps. Her body felt stiff, but strength had returned. She shuffled to the kitchen. Eating cereal and toast didn’t upset her stomach. She actually felt okay!

Her personal device buzzed. Jenton’s Auto Body and Repair left another message. Her Monarch was ready. Those stupid Helmsey District guys! If they hadn’t beaten up her car, she wouldn’t have to go out now and pick it up. Maybe it wasn’t such a big deal. Jenton’s did have good shuttle service. Leeha tapped her personal device. What? No shuttle service because Jenton’s computer was down? What did the computer have

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to do with shuttle buses running? Sunday was a good day to venture out, though, especially in the morning. She would do it. With luck, she was well enough to make it on foot.

Leeha walked outside for the first time in nearly a week. The air didn't smell too bad, and the sky glowed clear and blue beyond a veil of tan haze. Best of all, traffic was light, and the sidewalks were deserted. It actually felt good to stretch her legs.

Only a few people stood in line at Jenton's Auto Body and Repair. Leeha took her place in the queue. An attractive face caught her eye. His perfect skin, dark eyes, and cute smile seemed familiar. Degio! Leeha remembered him. He was the guy who recorded the damage to her car the day she had dropped it off.

Of course Degio was talking to a gorgeous girl. As Leeha's place in line took her closer to the counter, she heard him say to the girl, "I've been really sick. I finally started feeling better yesterday. I was miserable for a while."

The girl said, "Me, too. My roommate and I both felt awful."

"Do you remember Ray, the blond guy who works here?" Degio asked.

The girl's voice sparkled as much as her long hair. "Yes, I remember. Nice guy."

"He's still out sick," Degio said.

So Leeha wasn't the only one who had fallen ill.

"Next!" A middle-aged man waved his hand.

Leeha walked up to the counter. She missed Ray. Ray was better looking and friendlier than this old guy.

"Name?"

"Leeha Ritsagin. It's R-I-T-S-A-G-I-N."

"Paying by PD?" he asked.

"Yes." She paid him.

He slapped the keys down next to her hand. "Everybody's startin' to use keys," he said. "What ever happened to using a PD to start your car? Keys, keys, keys. Makes lots of extra

work for us." He motioned to the next person in line.

"Excuse me," Leeha said, "where's my car parked?"

"Slot fifty-three. If you used your PD instead of a key, you wouldn't have to ask. Next!"

Goodness! This guy must have been an executioner in another life. Leeha grabbed the keys. As she walked away from the counter, she saw Degio again. He was pouring himself a cup of coffee from a pot set up for customers. No pretty girls were hanging around. Perhaps today he would notice her. Two weeks ago, when she dropped off her car, she wasn't at her best. She had just been attacked in the Helmsey District. She was gross and sweaty and oily and pimply. This time was different. She was showered and wore fresh makeup.

Degio leaned against the wall next to the coffeepot. Leeha filled a cup for herself. He didn't look at her. She walked in front of him. Degio stared into his cup. Leeha picked up an automobile magazine and flipped through a few pages. Degio gazed past her. He even tilted his head to the side to see around her. She watched as he gulped down his last swig of coffee. He then returned to the counter. Degio gave her not the slightest glance. It was hopeless. "Slot fifty-three," she said to herself. Leeha walked outside.

Her old, brown Monarch noticed her, however. It even missed her. The repairmen did a good job. The license plate looked brand new. A new taillight was in place. The rear passenger side window glowed crystal clear. Leeha climbed into the driver seat. The interior was spotless. Even the powdered sugar that had fallen from donuts had vanished. A stiff piece of paper hung from the frame of the rearview mirror. A note on it read, *Thank you for choosing Jenton's*. A hand-drawn smiley face followed the name, *Candy*.

How nice! The day may turn out okay. She headed for home.

Leeha stopped at a red light. A billboard flashed. The picture of a child appeared. Words printed below the image read,

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Have you seen me? I'm Jamey Weld. The boy's face faded. The sign now read, *Contact the Police Missing Persons Bureau if you have information.* The photo of a young woman displayed next. Leeha hoped her own face never went up there. No use worrying about it. Someone would first have to notice she had disappeared. The billboard flashed again. No way! Did the sign now read *Mary Kronvelt*? Leeha was imagining things. *Martin Romant* was the new name.

That stupid document! She was sick of the stupid thing. Leeha rushed home and pulled the manuscript from its hiding place. She flipped through the thick stack of papers. There it was, the list of women's names. *Mary Kronvelt* topped the list. Next was *Nancy Pitman*. One hundred names in all. Was the murdered Mary Kronvelt the same woman? Leeha found the Kronvelt police report on WorldLink. The spelling of the victim's name in the report matched the spelling in the document. The police report didn't give the victim's exact address, but the address written in the document was in the same vicinity.

Now what should she do? Should she warn the other ninety-nine women that someone may be coming to kill them? What if the document was a fake? Everyone would think she'd lost her mind. However, if the document was real, taking it to the police wasn't an option. The document said the police were in on this justice execution stuff. Even worse, the document said Senator John Rineburg, one of the most powerful people in Cadona, was coordinating the executions.

An idea came to her. A dangerous one. She was crazy for even considering it. Leeha dug through a box in the corner of her bedroom closet. There it was, the little camera her mother had given to her years ago. It would be darn hard to trace a photo taken from this camera. "This is stupid, Leeha," she told herself. "You're going to get into so much trouble!" She snapped pictures of the names and addresses listed in the document.

Leeha's legs didn't feel like her own as she walked out to her Monarch. She drove to Hughes Medical Center. Hughes

was always busy, but she had never seen it as crowded as today. Leeha parked near a fence. That way, if she forgot where she left her car, she would follow the fence and eventually find her vehicle. Leeha's heart pounded as she headed to the door of her dentist's office. Instead of going inside, she made a hard left and walked down the sidewalk. Leeha spotted a sign: *Public Communications Center*. Leeha walked into the enormous room. The place was full. Every link was taken, but soon a young man got up from one of the computer stations. Leeha hurried to the vacant seat and put on a pair of gloves. In minutes, she had created a computer routine. The instructions completed in seconds. She had a file containing a set of messages. That was the easy part. Now she had to send the messages to a public comm-node. Public comm-nodes lacked the biological elements found in personal device technology, so she must be careful. If she screwed this up, the authorities would catch her. She should not be doing this. Should not. Should not. Should not. Her fingers stumbled over the archaic touchpad. Public links didn't have the best user interfaces to WorldLink. Not to mention the added difficulty caused by shaky hands.

Her heart thumped as she examined her work. If someone checked, they'd probably be able to trace the messages to the Hughes Medical Center hub but not to the exact link or public node. She hoped so anyway. If it worked right, anyone investigating would think the messages were created yesterday. Less chance she'd get caught.

Once more, Leeha scanned the computer instructions. Then, with one simple touch, the computer began sending the messages, one at a time, to the public comm-node. If all worked as planned, the messages would be staggered so they would not be sent back-to-back. Eventually, a message would go to each woman on the justice execution list. All but Mary Kronvelt. No use sending a message to a dead woman.

Leeha stuffed the gloves into her purse and headed back to the parking lot. Just as she crossed a street, a siren shrieked.

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Did they find her already? No, they hadn't found her; the siren belonged to an ambulance rushing a rich person to an emergency entrance at the hospital.

The day was warming quickly. The inside of her car was sweltering. A fresh headache pounded behind her eyes. Sending those messages had to be the stupidest thing she'd ever done. Leeha drove home.

Once inside her little apartment, she drank iced tea and lay down. What if she got caught? What if the women on the list sued her? What if she lost her job because of getting arrested? What if she never found another job because of a criminal record? What would she do if she got kicked out of her apartment when she ran out of money? Certainly, her mother and brother would conclude that she'd lost her mind. What if all this stress made her sick again and she missed more work? What if the economy got even worse? What should she do about the crazy document? What if a big war started over this nutty thing between Izvyona and Bakhadaland?

"Just go away! All of you, go away!" Leeha pulled the covers over her head.

CHAPTER 18

BOUNCING RADISHES

Lestnya, Bakhadaland
Sunday, April 9, Year 1007 EE
6:30 a.m.

Ina Tovaleta pushed aside the curtain and gazed out her living room window. It was good to be home. Sunshine poured through fleeing clouds. Raindrops glistened on grass and leaves. Vegetable plants flourished in her garden. She'd make Rosik a killer dinner tonight. Cabbage rolls, nice and hot, with a fresh salad. He'd love it.

Rosik would be coming back from his run soon. If she hurried, she should be able to pick and wash vegetables before he returned.

Ina sent music to the sound array. The opera, *The Sea Nymph's Tears*, was one of Rosik's favorites. She grabbed a basket and walked out into the damp morning. The air carried a chill, but the sun shone warmly on her face. Birds celebrated the end of the spring rain shower. Such a perfect day! She bent down to cut spinach. The scent of wet, warming earth rose up around her. Many plants were ready for harvest. Ina stuffed green leaves, onion tops, carrots, garlic greens, tomatoes, and radishes into the basket. The music flowed into the yard as she worked. This opera wasn't so bad!

The basket was soon overflowing. Ina headed back to her house. She opened the door and froze. Rosik was standing by the sofa and humming to the music. He must've showered because water was dripping from his blond hair. The rills trickled down the rippling muscles of his back and dampened

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the waistband of his snug briefs. He stepped into a pair of tan shorts. The pant legs concealed his bulging thighs but left his powerful calves exposed.

Ina studied him. Such a specimen! His shoulder and arm muscles undulated like waves on the sea as he slipped the Holy Triad pendant over his head. A jagged scar ran just below his right shoulder blade. How was he injured? Fighting terrorists in Estdeventia, perhaps? She longed to run her fingers along the rough line and ask him about it. Did it hurt? Who stitched him up? How easy it would be to touch him. Her own body frightened her. She commanded herself to stay in control. Her heart disobeyed.

Rosik pushed a belt through the loops of his shorts. He then realized that she was there. She should apologize. Walk away. Let him dress. Ina stood stone still. She noticed everything: blond hairs on his chest and legs, smile lines around his pale blue eyes, the silver Holy Triad resting upon the angled muscles of his breast.

He ran his fingers over his unruly, wet hair. The stiff, pale strands were just barely long enough to twist this way and that. Did he guess what was on her mind? His eyes widened. Deeper and faster, his chest rose and fell. Rosik wanted her. He didn't try to hide it. Ina longed to be close to him. So easy it would be! He stood right there. Only a few steps separated them. She should walk away. She didn't.

Thump, thump, thump. Red radishes had rolled out of her basket and were bouncing about on the floor.

"Whoops," she heard Rosik say. "The radishes are escaping."

Ina's body told her to place a hand on his cheek and kiss him. Instead, she bent down to pick up the radishes. She wasn't paying attention; the basket tipped. More vegetables tumbled out.

"Uh-oh," Rosik said.

"I'm so clumsy." Her words trembled. With shaking hands, she stuffed vegetables into the basket. Rosik dropped to his

knees and helped her. He picked up a stack of chard. His hand brushed hers. The touch burned. As he reached for a tomato, Ina picked up onion greens. On purpose, she slid her forearm across his.

"That's all of the veggies," Rosik said.

"Yep, we got 'em." She must escape to the kitchen. Ina was about to stand when she felt his palms on her shoulders. Rosik stared at her. His eyes sparkled. Ina's belly tingled.

"I can't believe someone could look so beautiful after working outside in the ground," he said.

What was it about his voice? It made her quiver. Her fingers longed to unbutton her blouse. She wondered what it would be like to rub her flesh against the tepid, clean skin of his chest. He shouldn't come so close. Her head fell against his shoulder. His skin was warm against her face. Ina felt his breath and heard his heartbeat. She smelled him. His scent pleased her.

Ina heard a buzz. It was Rosik's personal device. He growled—the sound of an ill-tempered animal. "Garrett's calling. He wants to go to the Letonic Islands."

"When?"

"In half an hour."

The perfect excuse! "Okay," Ina said, "I can have the veggies cleaned and put away by then." She grabbed the basket and rushed to the kitchen.

Ina turned on the faucet. She shoved a fistful of vegetables under the pouring water. The tingle didn't stop.

Rosik was watching her. At least he was now wearing a shirt. "Need some help, Ina?"

"I don't think so."

He didn't leave. She said, "Well, I guess you could cut the tops off the carrots and radishes."

"Okay, I think I can handle that."

Even though his body did not touch hers as he sliced greens from roots, she felt him there. His body pulsed. She had to ignore it. At all costs, she *must* ignore it. Ina washed a large,

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crinkled leaf a second time. Just half an hour. All she had to do was fill half an hour. Then they'd have to head out to meet Garrett and Tarma.

Ina took her time, but the stack of unwashed vegetables was shrinking.

"All done," Rosik said.

"I'm done, too." She dried her hands on a worn dish towel and then glanced at her old-fashioned clock. Dang! Still ten more minutes to fill. "Well," Ina said, "I'm going to get cleaned up now."

Rosik stood between her and the bathroom. Ina squeezed past him. She thought that she had made her escape, but a strong hand touched her arm.

"Ina, wait. What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing. I need to wash up." The warmth of his palm penetrated her skin.

"Yes, I know," he said, "but why are you acting like this all of a sudden?"

"Like what?"

"Like you're avoiding me."

"I'm not avoiding you. I only have ten minutes to get ready."

"I don't think Garrett would mind if we were a few minutes late, Ina."

Ina saw hurt on his face. What was she doing? Pushing him away was the last thing she wanted to do. What was wrong with her? "I'm losing control of myself, Rosik. I'm dying. Inside my soul, I'm melting away. I meet you, and the world is a different place. I'm lost. You don't know what it's like."

"Yes, Ina, I do know." He pulled her close. "I lost control the moment I met you."

Where their bodies touched—so tender. If only they were closer. What did she want? She knew. But she was so afraid!

Rosik pushed a lock of pale hair away from her cheek. The touch of his fingertips burned.

"I've never been with a man," Ina said, "not like this."

"It's okay, Ina. Just be with me. I don't care what we do or don't do. But please, don't push me away. This world is getting so crazy, who knows what will happen tomorrow. War is coming, Ina. Our leaders think war will come to my country as well as yours. Who knows what it will mean for us. Right now, we're here. We're together. All I want is to be close to you."

"I'm so sorry, Rosik." Ina buried her face in his shirt. "I'm so scared."

"Me too," Rosik said. "I'm afraid you've changed your mind and don't want to be with me."

"Rosik, I do want to be with you. Desperately! I want it so much."

"Are you sure, Ina?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Good," Rosik said. "Because I want to be with you, too. Always."

A strong, broad hand stroked her back. Warm. Caring. Honest. Then he checked the time. "You'd better get ready, slowpoke!"

"Slowpoke?"

"Get going, girl. What's taking you so long?"

Ina held Rosik's hand as they strolled down the hill toward Tarma's house. "Has Garrett said anything about Tarma?" she asked.

"Yes."

Silence.

"Well? What did he say about her?"

"He trusts her," Rosik said.

"Trusts her? That's all he said?"

"He said she has good knowledge of the local geography, and she has connections with people high up in the local National Defenders chain of command."

"Rosik, does Garrett *like* her?"

"I think so. He wouldn't say he trusts her if he didn't like

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her.”

Rosik was so dense!

They neared Tarma’s house. “Ha, ha! Ina, look!” Rosik said. “Tarma put Garrett to work.”

Tarma was dragging a hoe between rows in her garden, and Garrett was stomping on a shovel. A good sign! Garrett was helping Tarma in her yard.

Garrett waved. “Hey, Rosik! You two ready?”

“We are.”

Tarma’s eyes grew wide. “Ina! Why are you wearing a fancy dress? We’re going kayaking!”

“It’s a sundress, Tarma. The kind you wear outside in *the sun*. That’s why it is called a *sundress*. Duh!”

Garrett and Tarma giggled. They were probably laughing at her. They shouldn’t tease. Ina loved the dress. A bold design of white leaves and flowers stood out against a light blue background. The formfitting bodice and full skirt made it comfortable, feminine, and sexy.

Tarma ran into her house.

“She’ll be right back,” Garrett said. “She wants to clean up.”

The front door opened. Tarma had changed into dull-hued, green shorts and a tight, moss green T-shirt. The colors accentuated her olive-gold skin. Hiking boots, with the laces bound together, hung over her shoulders. A sweater was tied around her waist. The muscles of her strong legs flexed as she walked down her front steps. She was trying to look sexy, too. No use picking on her, though. Tarma was dressed for kayaking and hiking. Ina’s outfit better suited an outdoor café.

“Garrett, you ready?” Tarma asked.

“Yep, let’s go.”

CHAPTER 19

LETONIC ISLANDS

Lestnya, Bakhadaland
Sunday, April 9, Year 1007 EE
7:45 a.m.

Girlish embarrassment taunted Ina Tovaleta as they walked down the hill and then along the beach. She really did love the dress! Rosik liked it, too. Why would Tarma and Garrett pick on her?

Up ahead, Ina saw a red work shed with white trim. It sat anchored, as it usually did this time of year, in the pale sands of the cove.

"Wait here," Tarma said. "I'll get the kayaks."

"Good morning, Ruzhman Delik," Ina heard Tarma say.

Ruzhman Delik's round, creased face appeared in the window. His expression was that of a grumpy bulldog. "Good morning, Lady Nedola. Your kayaks are ready." The drooping lids of his puffy eyes opened as far as they could. He cast long, stern looks at Rosik and Garrett. "So, Lady Nedola, who are those two ruzhmen? I don't believe I've seen them before."

"They're friends. They're visiting from the Northern Mountains."

Ruzhman Delik pursed his thick lips and glared. "They look strong."

"They are," Tarma said, "they're woodsmen."

Even from a distance, Ina saw doubt in Ruzhman Delik's eyes.

"Our kayaks, Ruzhman," Tarma said. "Which ones are

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they?"

"Oh, yes, yes. They're over there." He pointed. "The red one and the orange one."

Ina saw Tarma hand paper money to Ruzhman Delik.



Tarma Nedola watched Ruzhman Delik count and straighten the cash. Tarma didn't know where or how Garrett had gotten his hands on Bakhadaree currency. No use asking. Garrett would keep his secrets.

"Have a safe trip, Lady Nedola," Ruzhman Delik said. "It's a fine day to visit the islands. The sea is calm." He cast suspicious glances at Rosik and Garrett before returning to his workbench.

Tarma adjusted the sweater tied around her hips. "Come on, Ina, we'll take the orange kayak."

Garrett said, "It's too late, Tarma. Ina already has Rosik trained."

Rosik carried the orange kayak to the water's edge. Ina ambled along behind him. He set the boat down on damp sand, took Ina's hand, and helped her climb into the narrow craft. Rosik pushed the kayak into the waves and jumped into the cockpit. Ina didn't lift a finger to help.

"I guess it's you and me, Tarma," Garrett told her.

Tarma felt envy's stinging needles. She mustn't let it show. "They look so silly."

"No kidding," Garrett said. "Come on, let's get going."

Tarma lifted one end of the red kayak and Garrett the other. They carried it to the beach, stepped inside, and shoved off. As Ruzhman Delik had said, the seas were calm despite a steady breeze blowing from the southwest. Garrett rowed far out into the cove. Rosik and Ina followed.

Garrett wanted to tour the Letonic Islands, but he didn't say why. The tiny spits of land were legendary for their beauty. In

ages long past, queens would visit. The Islands had witnessed many marriage proposals as men sought brides. Perhaps no other lands had shared so much knowledge with great writers, painters, and musicians. Garrett, however, didn't strike her as an artist or historian. He was a soldier.

Much time had gone by since Tarma had been this far from the shore. Such a view! Like diamond-encircled emeralds set in sapphire the Letonic Islands looked. Beyond the strips of land rose the black cliffs and steep, green hills of the mainland.

Garrett stopped paddling, his gaze fixed inland. "Tarma, that wall up there, on top of the mainland cliff, what is it?"

"The remains of Fort Letonstenya. We still use it as an observation post sometimes."

"That big island in front of us, what's there?"

"It's Boomerang Island," Tarma said. "It's long and skinny. On the leeward side, the waters are shallow. When the tide goes out, you can walk a good distance without getting wet. In the center of the island, there's a rocky outcropping. We call it the highlands. The view is good from up there."

Garrett pulled their kayak alongside Rosik's. "Want to take a look around this island?" Garrett asked.

"Sure," Rosik said, "it's worth a look."

Tarma helped Garrett guide the kayak to a gentle spot on the western tip of Boomerang Island. They jumped out. Warm seawater lapped around her ankles as she and Garrett pulled the kayak ashore. She pushed a lock of auburn-tinted hair away from her face and watched Rosik and Ina. "You've got to be kidding! Garrett, look at them now."

Rosik dragged the kayak onto the soft, white sand. Ina reached up both arms as might a child who wants to be held. Rosik swooped her out and carried her beyond the damp ground. He kissed her forehead before setting her down on her feet.

"How ridiculous!" Tarma said. But her heart ached. No one had ever babied her. "Ina, since when did you need help getting out of a kayak?"

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Red flushed Ina's cheeks. "I didn't want to get wet."

"Come on, let's take a look at the highlands," Garrett said.

Tarma pouted as they walked across sparkling sand. The shoreline transitioned into rolling dunes as they headed inland. Hardy beach grass clung to shifting earth. From behind, Tarma heard Ina's voice. "Watch out for bird eggs! Don't step on any." Despite jealousy, Tarma loved Ina. Ina was a good person: loyal, giving, and affectionate.

As they pressed deeper into the interior, grasses covered ever more of the sandy mounds. The blades grew taller and the stocks wider. Tarma realized she was like the grass. She was strong. She could do things herself. People knew it. She didn't need to be carried.

The ground beneath her feet hardened. Up ahead, she saw Garrett sitting on a fallen pole. He pulled off his water shoes and put on his hiking boots. Tarma did the same. Rosik shook sand from Ina's slippers before changing his own shoes. Garrett then led the way across the grassy landscape.

The ruins of Dset showed themselves. Garrett stopped walking. "This place was blown up," he said. "This was an act of war."

"There used to be a little fishing village called Dset here," Tarma told him. "The Izvyon blew it up." Not much was left. Weathered wooden beams teetered precariously over swaying meadow plants. A cluster of deep gouges pocked the earth. Strewn around the bowl-shaped depressions lay wooden blocks and rusted metal objects. The remains of two fishing boats rotted in the elements. Gaping wounds punctured the sides of both vessels. Once proud masts lay broken on the ground.

"Such beautiful land!" Rosik said. "It's criminal someone would blast it. *Tarnish not what is graceful and beautiful. For God had wrought it with his own hands.*"

"Who said that?" Ina asked.

"Thomas Fillimore."

"Who's he?"

VOLUME 2: LIARS AND DEFILERS

“A great Cadonan playwright and freedom fighter from long ago, from the Awakening Epoch. He used this particular quote to protest companies dumping waste into rivers and lakes. Fillimore referred to polluting as industrial warfare.”

“We can use Ruzhman Fillimore today,” Ina said, “even though he was Cadonan.”

Tarma touched a rusted chain that was hanging from a slanted beam. Soon the beam would tumble down and the chain would disappear beneath the earth. Was the Bakhadaree nation doomed to this same fate?

Garrett’s voice was somber. “Let’s keep going.”

Although Tarma had walked across Boomerang Island many times, the place still charmed—and haunted—her. With Garrett walking ahead and Rosik and Ina trailing behind, Tarma’s soul met the spirit of this land. Thick, soft, impossibly green grass cushioned her feet. Wildflowers, in a cascade of colors, bopped their heads in the green carpet. Birds and butterflies fluttered about seeking nourishment and shelter. She understood why, in ages long ago, queens, lovers, and artists wanted to come. Mostly locals visited now. Mostly soldiers. Mostly Bakhadaree national defenders.

Tarma watched Garrett wade through the lush grass. His path took him toward rolling, shrub-covered hills. The mounds of earth undulated ever higher until they reached the highlands, a land composed of dark stone and clusters of tall evergreen.

Garrett and Rosik were searching for something. What was it? Whatever their purpose, here they were, more soldiers tromping across land formed by God’s tears.

She trotted to catch up with Garrett. “When I was fourteen, I fought on this Island,” she told him. “It was five years ago, during the last Izvyonsk attack. The one that ended with the current ceasefire, and the blockade that’s strangling us.”

“You were a soldier at fourteen?” Garrett asked.

“I was a soldier, a revolutionary according to the World

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Assembly, at twelve," Tarma said. "So was Ina."

"Ina? Ina was a national defender?"

"Was and is. She's a reservist, like me."

"She doesn't seem like she was ever a child soldier," Garrett said. "You, I can understand. But Ina?"

Tarma understood Garrett's surprise. How unlike a soldier Ina seemed as she held Rosik's hand and skipped through the grass and flowers in her pretty, blue dress. "Don't misjudge her, Garrett. She's not as physical as I am, but she's clever. And, like most of us here, she has a reason to fight."

"Tarma, could you show me your most successful firing and observation positions?" Garrett asked. "Do you remember?"

"I remember. We train here sometimes. And I visit once in a while to honor those who died here." Tarma studied the familiar shapes of the rolling hills in front of them. "More than a few of my comrades' ashes rest in those hills. Ina and I saw many defenders die before our eyes. If ever we have the power to do so, I would love to be the one to strangle every Izvyon who wastes our good air."

"There is a rising movement in Izvyona that wants peace," Garrett said. "Hopefully the day will soon come when their voices will rule their land."

"You know, Garrett, I'm not convinced the Izvyon are capable of following the path of peace. I doubt peace is in their genetic makeup." Tarma knew Garrett felt sorry for her. She suffered through a childhood filled with violence and death.

"More and more people in Izvyona are tiring of war," he said. "Unfortunately, those who want to perpetuate conflict still rule. As long as they rule, they will keep attacking you."

She clenched her teeth. "They will have to kill every breathing one of us."

"Given the way the Izvyonsk government operates today," Garrett said, "killing every one of you is exactly what they want to do. They now realize that enslaving Bakhadaland will never work."

VOLUME 2: LIARS AND DEFILERS

Tarma's lips twisted into a snarl. "Never!" She walked along in silence. Rage filled her, but a memory intruded. Tarma was a child, maybe nine or ten years old. She recalled her history teacher's face. The teacher's name, however, Tarma did not remember. This teacher told them of an event that happened centuries ago, during a particularly frigid winter. The Izvyon and Bakhads had been fighting one of their many brutish wars along the border. In this particular battle, however, something different happened. A group of Izvyon wanted to end the bloodshed. To show they came in peace, the Izvyon cut branches from the mountain rovetisson plant. The shrubs bore bright yellow berries. The Izvyon waved the limbs above their heads. With luck, their enemy would see that they were carrying branches, not weapons. The Bakhadaree soldiers were not faring much better. They, too, were starving, cold, and without adequate medicine and blankets. When they saw the advancing Izvyon, the Bakhads cut branches from a different type of rovetisson plant. This variety grew in the lowlands and bore red berries. The Izvyon and Bakhads laid down their weapons and exchanged branches in the Tratrebulin Valley. The peace did not last, but for a brief moment in time, the Izvyon and Bakhads lived together, ate together, and danced together. They worshipped in the same Lotish temples. A few days after the lesson, the teacher was found beaten to death, slain at the hands of older students. They had nailed her to the basement wall of Tarma's school. Tarma witnessed it—a broken body hanging from gray concrete. Blood dripped from many wounds and pooled on the hard, cold floor. The teacher died for telling her students a true story from Bakhadaree history.

Tarma pushed the image, and the story, away.



After exploring the highlands on Boomerang Island, Lieutenant Rosik Venkin helped Ina climb into the kayak. He and

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Ina paddled behind Garrett and Tarma as they circumnavigated a round islet named *Mermaid Island*.

Rosik peered into the dense vegetation. Plant life pushed to the very edge of the sea. Unlike Boomerang Island, Mermaid Island had little in the way of a beach. "Ina, why do they call this Mermaid Island? Doesn't look like a mermaid to me."

"Legends say mermaids hide here," Ina told him. "It's also said they come here to die. Secret herbs grow that ease the soul as it leaves the body. If a girl wants a boy to fall hopelessly in love with her, she tricks him into coming here. It's nearly impossible to counter the spell of a mermaid's spirit."

"That I can believe," Rosik said.

They landed on a narrow, pebble-covered beach. Tarma and Garrett were already on the shore.

"Be careful where you step," Tarma said, "some places get pretty boggy."

After fighting through a tangle of brush, ferns, and moss-covered branches, they reached a spot filled with short but stout trees. Knobby roots pushed up through dark, damp soil. Pools of murky water pocked open spaces.

"Look at the size of this trunk!" Rosik said. The shaggy, lichen-covered bark felt cool against his palm. Everywhere, fallen trees and limbs, some nearly sawdust and others crooked and firm, lay strewn on the forest floor. Yet, despite the dark, damp, and clutter, a profusion of ferns and blossoms grew. Rosik bent down to inspect plants sprouting in the soggy duff. "Look at this weird flower! Even the stem and leaves are white. And this one! You can almost see through it." He fingered a towering fern. The fuzzy frond felt as soft as Ina's skin.

Garrett rubbed his belly. "I'm getting hungry."

"I know a good place to sit," Tarma said. "The tide is going out, so it should be dry."

They shoved their way through entwined greenery to a sliver of a beach littered with pale rocks. After the darkness of the forest, sunlight burned their eyes.

"It was like nighttime in there," Garrett said.

Ina tapped her hand on a prostrate tree. "Rosik, let's sit here."

Waves of salt water had long ago scrubbed away the trunk's bark. The relentless sun had bleached its wood pure white. He took a seat on the smooth surface.

Garrett and Tarma sat on large, boxy rocks. Rosik imagined both stones having been carved into mighty chairs, as if designed for a giant's children. A land of magic and fables was Mermaid Island.

As Rosik nibbled on an energy bar, he reminded himself that this serenity was an illusion. The world stood on the edge of war. He and Garrett might find themselves in combat at any moment. A hard thing to believe when the world around him glistened with beauty and life. Ina was leaning against him, her eyes closed. Garrett and Tarma were chatting. The sun's heat magnified the fragrances of chlorophyll, evergreen, the sea, and the rich soil of Mermaid Island. Elusive, spicy scents wafted out from the magical forest. If there ever existed a way to lock himself into a single moment in time, Rosik would choose this one. With Ina by his side and the gifts of the islands enchanting him, Rosik decided he had finally found a place more exquisite than his Vadsech hometown in the Domataree Land of Many Rivers. Long had he wondered if the universe bore a place more beautiful than his home. At last he had his answer.

"Rosik," Ina said, "what are you thinking?" Her voice was as soft as the breezes escaping the thickets.

"As a child," Rosik said, "I heard stories of sea maidens. Like your mermaids, they have the power to capture and break the heart of every man. But, you, Ina, are more lovely than all of these maidens combined. You do not only break hearts, you grind them to dust, a dust so fine the earth cannot keep it. For all eternity, the tiny bits and pieces wander the heavens, never to land." He gazed up at the blue sky. As intriguing as the color was, the heavens' blue hues lacked the vibrancy of Ina's

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eyes. Rosik's spine tingled as she stared at him. Her delicate hands touched his face. The kiss that followed was soft and long. Just how long, he wasn't sure.

A shout from Garrett ended it. "Hey, Rosik! It's time to go." Garrett and Tarma were already paddling toward the mainland shore.

"I don't want to leave this island," Rosik told Ina. "I wish I could stay here with you until the day I die."

Rosik pushed the kayak into the waves. He and Ina floated away.

CHAPTER 20

FORT LETONSTENYA

"We flee. Enemy ships follow. Merciless are the blows that strike us. Our sails are in tatters. Blood floods the deck. A fire breaks out. Death claims two ruzhmen who try to douse the flames. But not all are taken on this day. Projectiles fill the smoky skies. We limp away as our pursuers become the pursued. The great Fort of Letonstenya has let loose its rage upon our foe."



*The Ode of Pengril Mavrem, verse 76
Year 13,898 of the Grand Epoch*

Lestnya, Bakhadaland
Sunday, April 9, Year 1007 EE
4:00 p.m.

Heaving currents threatened to push the kayaks away from the rocky mainland coast. Lieutenant Rosik Venkin paddled against the waves. He followed Garrett and Tarma to a narrow slip of level ground in the otherwise rugged terrain. They pulled the kayaks ashore.

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Tarma led them down a footpath that ran along the base of the sea cliff. To their right, a stony face rose up like the dark wall of a giant's fortress. To their left, the surf crashed against the shoreline. They scrambled over tumbles of boulders and driftwood as they made their way down the trail.

"We're almost to Vodana Falls," Ina said.

The waterfall's roar transformed from a hum to a bellow. Another corner, and there it was—the white, foaming base of a massive column of water. The falls' source at the lip of the cliff lay hidden behind an overhang of glistening, wet rock. Rosik took a few more steps. A chill filled the air. Spray dampened his skin. Tiny droplets cooled his face.

Ina said, "It feels good, doesn't it?"

"It does. It reminds me of home."

"Are there lots of waterfalls in the Land of Many Rivers?"

"A few, but not like this place."

The falls seemed to swallow the path. Tarma and Garrett disappeared behind a rocky column.

"It's really awesome back here," Ina said. She also vanished.

Rosik followed her. The trail led behind the falls. He was standing in a cave. From inside the rocky hollow, the tumbling water glistened like a shining curtain. Here and there, among the bubbling foam, flowed ribbons of pale blue and violet. Graceful, yet proud and thunderous, the twisting, tangling braids plummeted into stacks of wet stone. Rosik shouted over the roar. "So powerful the falls! Yet despite such might, it is lost in the briny sea. And calm the ocean is today! A latent power, the sea hides its true might. Strong enough it is to consume even this giant waterfall."

"Rosik," Garrett said, "I worry about you, buddy. You sound like a poet again."

Ina took Rosik's hands in hers. "Don't listen to him, Rosik. What you said, it's beautiful."

"Beautiful like you."

"We're gagging over here!" Tarma said. "Come on, let's get going. It's a long hike to Fort Letonstenya."

The path switchbacked its way up a fold in the steep mountainside. It was quite a climb, but at last they reached the place where rigid, black rock met sandy, white stone. The slope eased.

"Wow! The view is amazing from up here," Rosik said.

Garrett tapped him on the shoulder. "No more poetry, please!" White seabirds swooped overhead. "See, even the birds agree."

More birds glided by. Rosik watched them perch on narrow benches sticking out from the cliff. Many grooves and dents in the rock were not natural. "The Izvyonsk Navy fired on this cliff," Rosik said. "War is written in the stone."

"Until now the Izvyon didn't have accurate weapons," Tarma told him. "They'd end up shooting things of no military value, like bird nests."

"But the birds came back," Ina said.

Ina was upset. Rosik searched for something hopeful to say. "Life is resilient." No other words of comfort came to him.

"The birds, the trees, the sea," Ina said, "I wonder how much more of people they can take?"

Rosik took Ina's hand. They walked on in silence. War was brutal to everyone. Not just humans.

The trail ended at the rim of the cliff. From there, flat bedrock extended all the way to the battered—but still proud—walls of Fort Letonstenya. Though age and war had toppled many of the massive blocks, the fort was still an impressive structure. In its prime, it must have been quite a sight. Rosik imagined sailing on a vessel much like the Goodwill Ship in an age when such craft were the height of technology. On a sunny day such as this, the seamen would know the enemy spied on them from behind these watchful walls. On a clear night, flickers of firelight would send chills through the advancing sailors. When fog shrouded the mountains, the seamen would rely on tales about the great Fort of Letonstenya.

Ina placed a hand on one of two pillars of stacked stones. "This used to be the entrance for the soldiers," she said.

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They wandered out onto the broad floor of the crumbling fort.

Despite the structure's age, the rectangular stones beneath Rosik's feet lay flat and smooth. Only an occasional weed or tuft of lichen spread anchors into the large blocks.

Something out of place caught his eye: a square-shaped piece of modern building material. Several other such patches dotted the otherwise age-old surface. "Ina, these squares, what are they?"

"Tunnel covers," she said.

"Are there tunnels under the fort?"

"Yeah, we keep them sealed so no one falls in. I saw a deer that had fallen in when the old wooden cover broke. It was awful."

"What were the tunnels for?"

"Lots of stuff, like bunkers and storage rooms. Some of the tunnels lead out to the cliff. But those openings are blocked, too."

"Why were there tunnels leading to the cliff?"

"To shoot from. There once were four tiers of firing positions: from holes in the cliff, from ground level, from the catwalk, and from giant wooden towers that people could move around. The catwalk is mostly gone now." Ina pointed to the right. "You can still see part of it over there." Then she bent her head back and stared at the sky as if she saw something he did not. "The towers were huge, but you can only see them in museums now."

"Ina, the cliff openings, how big are they?"

"Big enough for cannons. The soldiers used huge cranes to lower the guns. The cannons were mounted on frames with wheels, so gunner crews could roll their weapons through the tunnels to the openings in the cliff."

Stories of long-ago battles rose from the stone. Rosik almost heard the sounds. Almost saw the men. A soldier peering through a primitive scope would spot sails. He'd strain to see, for fog would obscure the view. Soon, he'd have no doubt;

enemy ships were approaching. The soldier would sound the alarm. He'd shout. Perhaps strike a gong or ring a bell. Maybe blow a horn. Uniformed men would scurry. Officers would call out orders. Cannonballs would fly.

Rosik climbed a set of ancient stairs. The fear, anger, and dedication to duty that the long-ago warriors carried in their hearts still lingered in this hallowed place. He wondered how many had fought here. Died here.

Then, above a crumbled section of wall, Rosik saw Izvyonsk warships. Not ancient vessels, but modern and Cadonan made. Far better these weapons were than anything Bakhadaland possessed. The Izvyon, however, were not the only invaders to attack these shores. In days gone by, enemies sailed from the ancient Tacatate of Sur. Some even came from as far away as the old Sohnanowaha Kingdom, from Fewwok, and the long-ago Antropkan states. In the fading pages of history, raiders also came from the lands of Fletchia. Grand, old epics described a group of beastly invaders who may have come from distant Togna. Most disturbing, in ancient times, even Domats came to fight the resilient Bakhads.

Like countless warriors before him, Rosik stepped down the rock stairs. He pulled Ina close. "If only I could stop war so you'd never see another," he said. "I wonder why God doesn't stop war, hate, and destruction."

"God doesn't start wars, Rosik, people do. So people need to stop them."

He heard Garrett's voice. "Rosik, come here. We need to talk." Garrett was standing alone on a pile of collapsed blocks at the rear of the fort.

"Excuse me, Ina." Rosik ripped his body away from hers. The separation pained him. Ina waited like a lonely tree weeping in a destroyed land that had once been a mighty forest. How hard it must be for her! Pain, then joy, then pain again. Now Garrett wanted to talk to him. Had their orders changed? Would his time with Ina be shortened? He climbed the fallen stones. "Captain, what is it, sir?"

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"You haven't told Ina about our mission, have you?"

"No, but I'm sure she suspects. So does Tarma."

"Be careful, my friend," Garrett said. "Our mission can change. The situation is volatile. Our Goodwill Ship being here ... the world is buzzing about it. Cadona is telling the World Assembly that Domataland wants to make Bakhadaland a vassal state against the will of the majority of the Bakhadaree people." Garrett squinted against the sun as he studied the landscape. "Anything else you want to look at while we're up here?"

"Did Tarma tell you about the tunnels beneath the fort?"

"She did," Garrett said. "Might be a good place for suicide bunkers."

"My thoughts exactly. Ina said the cliff openings are blocked. I'd like to see what it would take to clear a passage. We wouldn't need much of a gap."

"Nope, just a pinhole. Let's check it out. Then we can explore farther inland. Did Ina tell you about Commander Samar?"

"Yeah, she said Tarma will introduce us to him at an outdoor opera Tuesday night."

Garrett again scanned the surrounding terrain. "Tarma and Ina have been partisan fighters since childhood. I think we can trust them. They're patriots."

"I agree. Ina's whole family is tied to the National Defenders. Her brother, Solomor, is a commander in the Western District."

"I remember. Do any of her relatives live around here?"

"No, they live in the interior. In the Central District."

"What part of the Central District?"

"Her family home is near Fingaktik."

"Fingaktik," Garrett said. "Major rail and roads run through there. What do you know about her family?"

"Ina's parents live on a farm just outside of Fingaktik. A pretty good sized piece of land from the sound of it. Her father spent years as a national defender, but he was wounded in

combat. In the leg. He's a member of the Civil Defense now, and he trains national defenders. Her mother works on the farm, but she's also a Civil Defense fighter. Ina has an older sister and younger brother. The sister is married to a reservist. She has three kids and works for a bank that Izvyona considers illegal. Ina's little brother, Zerin, is a student—math and science brain from what I understand. He wants to be a veterinarian. He's also a musician and a national defender in the Youth Corps."

"A family of rural patriots," Garrett said, "the toughest kind. They may have good contacts and certainly good local knowledge. Do you think Ina would be willing to introduce us to her family?"

"I'll definitely ask her right away."

Garrett burst out in laughter. "I get it!"

"Get what?"

"Why you'd be so excited to meet them. You want to see what her mother looks like. To see what you'd look at every morning after a decade or so."

"Nah," Rosik said, "I really don't care what Ina looks like. I'd rather our spirits leave our bodies and fly away together."

"If war comes, you may get the chance. When this thing heats up, it's going to get ugly."

A somber thought.

"Make the arrangements with Ina," Garrett said. "I'll report in with the ship and see what Izvyona and Cadona are up to."

War still loomed, but at least Rosik would have more time with Ina. Maybe even meet her family. He headed back to her. She was still standing on the ancient stones with crumbling walls and worn steps encircling her. This moment, like the one on Mermaid Island, was not a brief point in time, but an event as ancient and enduring as the very rock itself. Eternities unto themselves were these blessed minutes with Ina Tovaleta.

CHAPTER 21

GERM WARFARE

Cadona City, Cadona
Monday, April 10, Year 1007 EE
8:00 a.m.

Cadonan National Health Director Vartu Sinje rolled down the driver side window a little farther. Nice time for the air conditioner to go out! The navy-blue suit and snug tie he wore didn't help matters. The broadcaster's voice coming from the sound array told Vartu what he had already guessed: yesterday was the hottest April ninth on record. Today was also on track to shatter all previous highs.

Traffic ground to a halt. The reflection of a smoking car ballooned in Vartu's rearview mirror. The vehicle was getting close. Too close. He saw the youthful driver's blank expression. Vartu struck the horn. Tires squealed. The young fellow barely stopped his jalopy in time. Vartu rolled down the window even farther. He wished he had taken a muscle-car taxi with air to his meeting. He checked his personal device for the time. Why did everyone pick now to hit the road?

The man on the sound array was still speaking.

"It's not only the weather that's heating up. The fragile ceasefire between Izvyona and Bakhadaree separatists shows more cracks—"

Vartu turned off the news. He had his own problems to deal with. In the road ahead, he saw nothing but one motionless car after another. The last thing he needed was to be late. President Louis Meyfeld had summoned him. The timing could

not have been better. Vartu wanted to get the attention of national leaders. The once benign J2 virus was mutating into deadly forms. Perhaps his warning had reached the very top: the president of Cadona.

Finally! The traffic was moving.

Vartu pulled into the Capital Plaza parking garage. Apparently, the ventilation system had failed because the air was heavy with exhaust fumes. Polluted vapors stung his eyes, nose, and throat. Again he checked the time. He was cutting it close. A guard sitting inside a see-through booth glared at him. A wobbly fan was twirling an arm's length from the man's sweaty face. Another guard, a tall man with a protruding belly, stepped in front of Vartu's vehicle and held up a big, wide hand. Perspiration covered the guard's forehead and wet rings stained the armpits of his pale blue shirt. Vartu brought the car to a stop. The tall guard guided a black wand over and under Vartu's vehicle. "You may continue, Doctor Sinje," the guard said.

Vartu parked and jumped out of the car. He rushed to the underground passageway that led to President Meyfeld's office. A string of national policemen, backed by at least twenty Home Guard soldiers, stood watch in the stark bunker at the mouth of the tunnel. The security detail had grown since Vartu's last visit three months ago.

Cool, fresh air greeted him when he at last made it to the Executive Office Building. Again, he checked the time. He was just going to make it. Vartu straightened his tie and wiped sweat from his face and neck before opening the door to President Meyfeld's office. Leslie Holm, the president's personal secretary, was expecting him. "Good morning, Doctor Sinje. Would you like something to drink?"

"No, thank you, Ms. Holm. I'm fine." Vartu took a seat.

He realized another visitor was in the room. Defense Secretary Richard Karther was sitting nearby. The poor guy looked exhausted. Once a cheerful, fit man, Richard now carried

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many extra pounds and rarely flashed his famous smile. His graying hairline had receded over the last year.

Richard noticed him. "Doctor Sinje, good morning. I was not the only one summoned, I see."

"Good morning, Mr. Secretary. I'm glad to have company."

"Gentlemen," Leslie said, "the president will see you now."

President Louis Meyfeld stood as Vartu and Richard walked in. "Good morning, gentlemen. I apologize for interfering with your busy schedules. Please, have a seat."

Vartu sat down. He watched as the defense secretary plopped into another chair. It seemed Richard's legs lacked the strength to ease him into a sitting position.

President Meyfeld settled in behind his opulent desk. "Let's get right to business, gentlemen. The intelligence director tells me the J2 virus is the product of biological warfare. Most likely created in Domataland or Sohn-Sur as part of their germ warfare efforts. I—"

"What!" Vartu said. He realized he had just interrupted the president of Cadona. "I'm, I'm very sorry, Mr. President."

"Please continue, Doctor Sinje."

"Mr. President, there is absolutely no evidence to support biological warfare efforts by Domataland, Sohn-Sur, or any other party. Sir, this virus has been around for centuries. Over the last few years, it has been mutating, becoming more infectious and severe. It's also moving beyond its usual range in the northeast. But, Mr. President, we've traced it through several stages. We have absolutely no reason to suspect manual tampering."

"Mr. Karther," President Meyfeld said, "does the Defense Department have any reason to suspect human tampering with this virus?"

Richard adjusted his position in the high-backed chair but didn't say anything.

"Mr. Karther?"

"Well, sir, some in the department claim this is a case of germ warfare, but these individuals have not yet produced

evidence to support their position.”

“Who in the Defense Department is making these claims?”

“General Douglass Willirman is the senior-ranking official involved, sir.”

President Meyfeld rubbed his chin. “General Willirman, huh? Commander of the Combined Armed Forces. That’s pretty senior. He’s provided no evidence to support his claim?”

“Well, sir,” Richard said, “he’s saying the Domataree Health Ministry has been making inquiries into the virus.”

“Doctor Sinje, your opinion?” President Meyfeld asked.

“Mr. President, the Domataree Health Ministry *has* been making inquiries into the virus: how it spreads, mutation rate, progress on a vaccine. But this is normal for any health agency. Many other countries have also inquired. In fact, we share information with other nations to coordinate the fight against such outbreaks. This is completely normal activity, sir. Domataland has not been making any unusual requests. Neither has Sohn-Sur nor anyone else.”

“Mr. Karther,” President Meyfeld said, “I need you to get a full report from General Willirman. These are serious accusations. We need proof.”

Richard twisted his wide body in his seat. “Yes, sir.”

President Meyfeld rested his chin on his folded hands. “Is there something else you wish to report, Mr. Karther?”

Richard took a moment before answering. “No, sir.”

“Doctor,” President Meyfeld said, “how are we doing on a J2 vaccine?”

“Working on it, Mr. President, but we’re simply not funded and staffed to deal with something like this. Fortunately, there are two bright spots. People recently exposed to a moderately bad version of the virus may have at least partial immunity to the most dangerous strains.” Vartu leaned forward in his seat. “Mr. President, there’s still time to contain the deadliest strains that are turning up in the Helmsey District, but we need to act quickly.”

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"I see," the president said. "Gentlemen, please let me know immediately if there's a sign this is a case of biological warfare."

Why was Meyfeld so fixated on this germ warfare thing? And why would General Willirman and the intelligence director make such claims about J2? "I will keep you informed, of course, Mr. President," Vartu said, "but what if there *is* no sign of biological warfare?"

President Meyfeld raised his eyebrows. "Then we have a lie. Doctor Sinje, Mr. Karther, thank you for your time."

Vartu jumped to his feet. "Mr. President, Mr. Karther." He hurried out of the president's office. Vartu was stunned. Cadona could be witnessing the birth of a deadly epidemic and the politicians, even the military, were playing stupid political games. This was an issue for science, not for haggling bureaucrats, soldiers, and spies.



Defense Secretary Richard Karther stayed in his seat. Maybe the time had come to tell the president what he had learned. President Meyfeld's questions about the J2 virus were a perfect segue. Richard cleared his throat, but the president's eyes remained locked on an autopad. Richard leaned forward and tapped his hands on the armrests. President Meyfeld did not look up.

Should he tell the president now or wait? This was serious. It was bad enough that the Defense Department was sidestepping both him and President Meyfeld, but now it seemed the situation was even more grave. The intelligence director was spreading the same lies about J2, so whatever General Willirman was up to, it seemed he had the Intelligence Directorate on his side. Richard scooted to the end of his chair. It creaked.

President Meyfeld glanced over the top of the autopad. "Something on your mind, Mr. Karther?"

"Sorry, Mr. President. I was thinking something through.

No, sir, I have nothing else at the moment."

"Very well." President Meyfeld focused on a piece of paper.

Richard pushed against the arms of the chair to lift himself to his feet. He slipped out of the president's office. Richard had made his choice; he'd keep silent for now. Was it a calculated maneuver or the coward's decision?

He hoped Vartu Sinje was still in the building. Friendly conversation would calm his nerves, but Vartu was nowhere to be seen.

As Richard walked down the bright hallway, he did see another familiar face: Senator Bradley Seldortin. Running into him was a mixed blessing. Richard respected Bradley, always had, even back in their college days. Richard suspected the feeling wasn't mutual. Now was not a good time to deal with such pressures. There was no running away, however. Soon they would pass each other in the corridor.

Bradley slowed his stride. "Rich, good to see you. Did you visit the president?"

"Hello, Brad. Yeah, I just left his office."

"What kind of mood is the old man in?"

"He has a great deal on his mind, but, overall, he seems well. I take it you're on your way to see him?"

"I am." Bradley gave nothing away in the expression on his long, slender face.

"Brad, is something wrong?"

"Let's hope not, Rich." Without another word, the gray-haired senator continued on, carrying his tall, lanky body down the hall. Bradley's knobby knees and big feet pivoted. He disappeared around a corner.

The encounter over, Richard headed out. With each step, his dread of facing General Douglass Willirman grew. Richard always hated the old bastard. What an obnoxious coot! Perhaps he could enlist Bradley's help in dealing with him. Bradley was always badgering Senator John Rineburg, another unpleasant fellow. Bradley may be a skinny skeleton, but he was fearless.

TOXIC SPHERE



President Louis Meyfeld saw his office door open. "Mr. President," Leslie Holm said, "Senator Bradley Seldortin is here."

Louis stood up. "Show him in, Lez."

The crown of Bradley's head almost touched the top of the doorframe as he walked in.

"Senator Seldortin," Louis said, "thank you for coming. Please, have a seat."

Bradley sat in the same chair that Defense Secretary Richard Karther had been sitting in just minutes earlier.

The tough times facing the world took their toll on people. Poor, old Richard was looking worse than Louis felt. Dr. Sinje was on the edge of a panic attack over the J2 thing. Senator Seldortin, though, seemed okay. The senator's demeanor had remained the same over his long years in the political arena: serious, but otherwise at ease. Bradley possessed a rare kind of confidence, the kind that ran deep. Bradley admitted mistakes. He was a realist. He understood there were things others knew that he would never comprehend. In his long life, Bradley lost his share of battles. Somehow, all of that was separate from his ego. The man knew who he was, what he believed, and what was worth fighting for. Perhaps these attributes gave him his steadfast strength. "You're looking well," Louis told him.

Bradley crossed one long, thin leg over the other. "Thank you, sir. Fortunately, I am doing quite well at the moment. What can I do for you, Mr. President?"

"Senator, I'm going to be frank with you. There's no way I can win re-election in October. The economy is killing us. Even if it does change direction, it would take a major miracle for it to improve enough to make a difference in the October election. And even minor miracles are in short supply these days."

"Unfortunately, I agree with you, Mr. President."

Louis' last hope faded. If anyone saw a way out of this

crisis, it would have been Bradley Seldortin. "Senator, if our party is going to have any hope at all, I can't run for re-election. You are the only one in our party who has a prayer of winning. You've stood against the rest of us on several issues. In the eyes of the public, you're not as tainted."

"I may not be *as* tainted," Bradley said, "but I am tainted nonetheless. As things now stand, anyone tied to the Allegiance Party looks dirty."

"Still, you're the best shot we have, Brad. We can push a campaign point: Senator Bradley Seldortin, Allegiance Party critic and outsider."

"Mr. President, you do realize my chances of winning are not good either. Senator Mitch Fischer is the political darling. They put on quite a show at the Back-to-Basics meeting when Senator Rineburg announced Fischer's candidacy. Quite a show, indeed. Almost looks like Fischer already won."

"We have six months for the Fischer glamour to subside," Louis said, "and six months to make your star shine. If we don't do this, Brad, the Freedom Party will drive this country into the ground."

"They may drive us into the ground anyway," Bradley told him. "Heck, they have so many allies in the media, the courts, the military, intelligence, big business, you name it, that they create havoc even when we control the presidency and the legislature."

"Think of how much worse it could be, Brad. Come July, they will hold the legislature. Come October, they will hold the presidency. I'm pretty sure they hold the true power in the Intelligence Directorate and the military. Defense Secretary Karther was just here. He didn't come right out and say it, but I think he was about to; we've lost control of the defense establishment, Brad. They've gone rogue. Doug Willirman is the supreme power in the military now. And the general is a Fischer crony. These guys have battle plans, Senator. They've already begun. Look at what's happening in Izvyona. They're encouraging the Izvyonsk government to take a hard line

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against the Bakhads. The Freedom Party will lead this nation to war.”

“Just as we’re putting Toxic Sphere into production,” Bradley said. “Toxic Sphere in Freedom Party hands. Not a pretty thought.”

“They’re fanatics, Brad. Even if we win the Freedom Party’s war, which we very well may with Toxic Sphere, it will be a brief victory. Eventually, the sky will fall on us.”

“If anyone is left alive for the sky to fall on,” Bradley said.

“Senator, even if we lose the election, if you stay visible on the national scene, the people who oppose the Freedom Party will have a rallying point. I cannot be that person, Senator. Too many people who oppose the Freedom Party also oppose me. The only way we can keep up the pressure is to give Freedom Party opponents a leader. I can’t think of a better person than you, Brad.”

“I need to think about it,” Bradley said. “I’ll talk to the wife. This will be rough on my family. These are difficult times.”

“I understand,” Louis said, “and they are about to get even more difficult. It’s going to be a long, hard road for many years.”

Bradley smacked his lips. “That it is. That it is. I’ll talk with the wife. Maybe bring it up tonight at dinner.” Bradley leaned his long back into the chair. “Louis, if I may say so, what has happened to you is unjust. You inherited this whole mess from the very people who now accuse you of starting it. They lie and scheme and put the blame on you.”

Louis appreciated the kind words. “It’s the risk of participating in the political process, Brad.”

“No, Louis. Our political process has failed us. It has allowed liars and defilers to rise to the top. This time around, Louis, the Freedom Party is crazier than ever. They have Pastor Leon Walls and the True Followers of God Church behind them. Who could’ve guessed it would come to this?”

“Fear and anger are big motivators,” Louis said, “and we don’t have anything to counter it with—except for you and

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people like Bob Fullerby and his Andecco News Service.”

“I *will* think about it, sir. I know I must give you an answer quickly. We are just too darned close to the election. I hope your confidence in me is not misdirected.”

Louis stood up. “Thank you, Brad.”

Bradley also rose. He held out a large, long-fingered hand. Louis shook it.

“So much for a quiet retirement in the mountains,” Bradley said. “The wife isn’t going to like this.”

CHAPTER 22

STRATTEN PARK

“Because you have the power to destroy does not mean you have the right to destroy. God does not will you to desecrate this land and the life-forms in it.”



*Thomas Fillimore
“On the Arrogance of Man,” verse 61
Year 7997 of the Awakening Epoch*

***Cadona City, Cadona
Monday, April 10, Year 1007 EE
11:00 a.m.***

The white paint of the little bridge had faded away. Nothing remained of the dainty canopy. The post wiggled as Bob Fullerby leaned forward and rested his elbows on the railing. Everything was falling apart. Bob recalled Stratten Park in better days. Long ago, the railings didn't shake or send splinters into your hands. A stream once flowed beneath the bridge.

Flowers grew along the banks. Ducks and geese waddled in thick grass. No longer. Nothing remained of those days except for rotting boards and a dusty, trash-filled ditch.

Bob stood upright and checked the time. Defense Secretary Richard Karther was late. Richard had ignored him for weeks. Why meet now? And why in this disgusting place? Bob scanned the devastated landscape surrounding him. How could anyone still call this a park? No living tree grew. Only a handful of mangled trunks, some supporting a few stubby branches, wasted away in the elements. Human feet and marauding tires trampled the sod. Only the hardiest weeds endured, and even they were losing the battle for survival. Squatter cities had sprung up like the shantytowns of the Shadow Years.

The day had warmed quickly, forcing unshowered people from their soiled cloth tents and lopsided, corrugated caves. Bob watched a young woman, her blond hair tangled beyond salvation, rip pieces from a wrinkled sausage. She handed the chunks to a gaggle of children. They reached for the shriveled meat with unwashed hands.

A squeak and thump rang out behind him. A young man had emerged from a portable bathroom. The man zipped his grubby pants as he walked away. The line of plastic toilet booths had grown since Bob last visited the park. The stalls farthest to the left had stood there the longest. Broken doors hung from a few of them. Others were missing doors altogether. Some doors could no longer shut, for people took to relieving themselves at the entrances when the interiors had flooded over.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bob noticed someone approaching. At last! Defense Secretary Karther had arrived. He was walking quickly, too fast for his health. Even from a distance, Bob saw sweat pouring from Richard's flushed face. The bridge creaked as Richard stepped on it. His puffy cheeks fluttered as he gasped for air. Red splotches dotted his pale skin. "Mr. Fullerby, sorry ... sorry I'm late. Bad traffic."

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"Are you all right, Mr. Karther?"

"Yes, fine." A wheeze squealed in Richard's chest as he inhaled.

Bob leaned on the railing again. So did Richard.

Richard caught his breath. "Sorry for not contacting you sooner. I had to be careful. I wanted to collect enough information to make it worth the risk."

"Risk? Mr. Karther, what risk?"

Richard stared straight ahead as he spoke. "Things are getting bad, Bob. Dangerous."

"In the Defense Department?"

"Yeah." Richard wiped his nose with a tissue. "Good old General Douglass Willirman, he runs Defense now. A good portion of the senior officers answer to him, not to me, not to President Meyfeld."

"What makes you say this?"

"Bob, it's hard to know where to begin. For one, we've had a spike in resignations in the officers corps. Those loyal to the civilian government leave, and those who stand with Willirman stay. I've also noticed a trend. Good leaders with stellar reputations suddenly develop a range of problems: addiction, child abuse, spousal abuse, suicidal tendencies, public brawling, you name it. Funny thing is, the ones who develop these issues are Willirman critics."

"Who's General Willirman loyal to?" Bob asked.

Richard did not hesitate. "The Freedom Party."

"Do you have proof of this?"

"Some." Richard slid a hand-sized object along the railing. It was a thin stack of papers folded over in quarters.

Bob picked up the bundle and slipped it into his worn, brown briefcase.

"Pardon the handwriting," Richard said. "I feared creating an electronic file. They're watching me. Another reason I was late. I wanted to make sure I wasn't tracked or followed. The two men who escorted me, I trust. Not many others." A wet gurgle rattled as Richard cleared his throat. "You'll love this

one, Bob. Admiral Annie-Marie Renshaw paid me a visit. She reported illegal use of Specter Node. Someone in the Izvyonsk security apparatus has been making unauthorized contacts with unknown persons on our side. The messages have all vanished. Bob, the messages can only be deleted if someone manually breaks into the system and erases them."

More than a week ago, Annie-Marie told Bob about a Specter breach. Apparently, the mystery hadn't been solved. "Who can authorize use of Specter?" Bob asked.

"Admiral Renshaw, three of her direct reports in Undersea Command, me, and President Meyfeld. In the event we are dead or otherwise unable to perform our duties, we have five backup personnel spread around the country. There's another tier of ten rotating officers in the event those five are also dead or incapacitated."

"Any clues on who authorized the Izvyon to use the node?" Bob asked.

"No, and if Renshaw's people couldn't figure it out, I can't imagine how I would, although I did try."

"How many times have the Izvyon used Specter?"

"Four incidents that I'm aware of," Richard said.

"Officer resignations and discharges, illegal use of our most protected communication node ... any other good news for me, Mr. Secretary?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Willirman and his people are fabricating stories. Big ones. The latest one is about J2. Willirman says Domataland, maybe Sohn-Sur, unleashed it."

"J2? You mean the virus?"

"Yep."

"Mr. Karther, why would Domataland or Sohn-Sur be interested in the J2 virus?"

"Biological warfare, Willirman claims."

"Biological warfare? With J2? J2 isn't a dangerous germ."

"It would seem it's becoming one," Richard said.

"How did you learn this?"

"Earlier today, I got a summons from President Meyfeld

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himself. So did Doctor Vartu Sinje. Vartu told the President that J2 is turning deadly and is spreading beyond its usual range in the northeast. Sounds like a nasty strain is showing up in the Helmsey District right here in Cadona City. Vartu said the National Health Directorate has been keeping a close eye on the virus. They have no reason whatsoever to think this is a case of germ warfare. It seems Willirman is lying. And he's not alone. President Meyfeld said the intelligence director is reporting the same lies about J2."

"You're full of good news," Bob said. "What else you got?"

"You're going to love this one even more; our military is clandestinely shipping weapons to freedom fighters in Estdeventia. Most of the time, our operatives use Izvyonsk special forces to slip the weapons over the Domataree border. Funny thing is, our own military wants to hide it from President Meyfeld and me, but not, apparently, from Domataree intelligence. Bottom line, General Willirman wants the Domats to know we are sending weapons to anti-government groups in Domataland, but they don't want the lawful Cadonan authorities to know."

Bob hoped Richard was exaggerating. "Any other news, Mr. Karther?"

"Some other stuff I'm still tracking down. It's all in the papers I gave you. I do, however, have some news I think you'll like. I saw Brad Seldortin this morning. He was on his way to see President Meyfeld as I was heading out. Brad was lost in thought. Almost walked right by me. Brad didn't say as much, but my guess is that Meyfeld is going to pull out of the race and open the way for Brad to run. Just a hunch."

The first bit of good news that Bob had heard in a long time! "I hope your hunch is right, Mr. Karther. Senator Seldortin is the only Allegiance Party member who has a chance of defeating Mitch Fischer. Last time I talked to Brad, though, he told me about his cabin in the mountains and his plans to retire with his wife."

Richard tried to speak. Instead, a deep whine rumbled

from his lungs.

"That cough doesn't sound good," Bob said. "You'd better get some rest. You're looking tired."

"You sound like my ex-wife, but you're right. I am tired. It's a difficult job when you have a quarter, at best, of your department behind you. If the elections were further out, they would probably make sure I got fired. But since we have only months to go, they probably think it's easier to bide their time."

"So, Mr. Karther, what's your next move?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, but I'll forward you more information when I can. I've got to be careful. I can't let them know I'm snooping. They'll start feeding false data ... or worse. One of my best sources, an officer with ten years of experience, was dragged off to a court-martial. Got five years in the brig. Three days after he was locked away, he turned up dead. Suffocated with a pillow. The details are also in the papers."

"You're implying assassination," Bob said.

"Quite frankly, it's mutiny. Not only against me, but against the president."

"Mr. Karther, if what you say is true, this is mutiny against Cadona, against the Cadonan Constitution."

The railing wobbled as Richard pushed himself upright. "These people are stealing our country from us, Bob. Well, I suppose I'd better get back to the office ... and figure out how in the heck I'm going to deal with Willirman. I'll be in touch when I can."

"Thank you for the information, Mr. Karther. Take care of yourself."

"I will." Richard walked away, the burden of his job stacked upon his shoulders.

CHAPTER 23

DROP CASE

INFORMANT

Cadona City, Cadona
Monday, April 10, Year 1007 EE
2:30 p.m.

A greasy lunch churned in Bob Fullerby's stomach as he drove to his temporary office in the old print shop building. He was late. His team members would be worried. Bob decided not to call, though. He wasn't *that* late, and the fewer personal device signals floating in the airwaves the better. No use giving his adversaries information about his movements if he could avoid it.

Nothing looked suspicious at the print shop as he passed by. Bob steered his vehicle down an alley. The bumpy passage led to a parking lot behind Ben's and Bertha's shops. Ben's neat, green car and Bertha's messy, blue one were the only automobiles parked there.

After Bob stepped out of his car, he spotted Old Lady Bertha in the hardware store. She waved at him from behind a streaked window. Bob made a point of looking friendly and unharried as he waved back. He didn't see Ben, but a lacy curtain fluttered from behind a window on the second floor where the party favors store was located. The windows on the third level were dark as usual.

The old folks made good neighbors. They kept an eye on things but didn't snoop. Nor did they ever complain when he

left his car in their lot. They hadn't, however, bothered to fix the fence that enclosed the parking area. The vertical wooden planks leaned in various directions like crooked teeth. In one spot, ankle-high, jagged stubs were all that remained of three tall boards. Bob's belly brushed against a full-sized plank as he squeezed through the gap.

As he expected, his team members were already at the print shop. Rona Betler's tiny car, painted in pastel lavender, was near the rear print shop door. A shiny chain fastened Kever Carsen's tall bicycle to a rusted post. Angela Thirgal's gray, dented pickup was parked alongside the sagging fence.

Bob opened the vault-like back door to the print shop.

"Mr. Fullerby! You're late!" Angela said. She and Rona were sitting at the old wooden table. Kever was leaning against the counter and munching on a carrot.

"I know," Bob told them. "Sorry I didn't call. After meeting with Richard Karther, I thought I'd better be careful. He gave me his info in longhand. He was afraid to use electronic medium."

"Uh-oh," Kever said, "that must mean Karther had interesting news."

"He did, and the news isn't good." Bob took a seat. He set Richard's notes on the nicked tabletop. "Basically, Richard thinks the Freedom Party is in control of the defense establishment, including intelligence."

Angela thumbed through Richard's papers. "What's this about J2?"

"It appears we may have a health crisis on our hands," Bob told her.

"Health crisis?" Kever asked.

"According to Doctor Sinje, the J2 virus is turning lethal," Bob said. "And it's spreading. Both General Willirman and the intelligence director are saying J2 is a germ warfare agent created by Domataland or Sohn-Sur. But Doctor Sinje thinks the virus is mutating on its own."

"What does Richard Karther think?" Kever asked.

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"Right now, he believes Doctor Sinje."

"Mr. Fullerby," Angela said, "how serious is this J2 thing?"

"Well, Doctor Sinje is quite concerned, so I can only assume we are heading for trouble. I have some good news, though. Rumors are stirring. Senator Bradley Seldortin may cancel his retirement plans and run for president on the Allegiance Party ticket."

Angela raised a fist over her head. "Yes!"

"Don't get too excited just yet," Bob said. "It's still a rumor."

Keever pulled a stuffed flatbread from the refrigerator. "Row has some updates, too, Mr. Fullerby."

"Let's hear it, Row," Bob said.

"Reltch and Rundell have been spending lots of money for Cadona City cops working reduced hours."

"What are they spending money on?"

Angela answered before Rona could speak. "Reltch recently bought a car no one in this room could afford. Rundell moved his family into an expensive apartment in the Sunset District. Their wives don't work, and we found nothing to suggest they've inherited money."

"Any evidence they're on the Back-to-Basics Club payroll?" Bob asked.

"Not that we can tell," Rona said.

Keever poured coffee into a mug. "Of course we can't tell. The Club's going to pay them under the table."

"Whoever's paying them," Angela said, "it's pretty clear Reltch and Rundell are tied to the Guiding Light document. We already know they're the guys who planted the bug-eye on the fire escape by Hatchets Bar. And they tailed Annetta Longstreet after the mystery woman ran off with the document. Now this. The logical explanation is they are getting money from the True Followers or the Back-to-Basics Club."

"Speaking of Ms. Longstreet," Bob said, "have we learned anything about her?"

"Not much that's interesting," Angela told him. "She studies finance and theology at the True Followers University

in New Cadona. It does appear she's a social butterfly and a True Followers activist, but, from what we can find, she's never been in trouble."

Keever chugged down coffee. "We also looked into Sam Crispe, Longstreet's boyfriend. He's a law student at the same school and holds down two part-time jobs. He's an aide to Governor Addison and works at a campus sports facility. He's also on the tennis and debate teams. Like Longstreet, he follows the Back-to-Basics and True Followers philosophy. No criminal record."

Angela said, "Row also identified two of the three women who were involved with dropping the document into the mystery woman's car: Pam Urzin and Mirgit Vespez. Nothing exciting there either. Both housewives in their forties. Both families belong to the True Followers, are Back-to-Basics Club members, and are registered with the Freedom Party."

"Row, how did you identify them?" Bob asked.

"You know how they like to film the audience during Pastor Walls' sermons?" Rona said. "Well, I compared our pics to pics of the crowd. It took a while but we finally got matches. I still have scans running to identify the third woman."

"Whoever they are," Angela said, "it makes no sense why they would've been wandering around with bags of groceries in the Hatchets Bar neighborhood on a Sunday morning. Nothing was open for several blocks. No markets, no bakeries, restaurants, or grocery stores. Not even a convenience store."

Bob rubbed his temples to ward off a creeping headache. "This whole thing makes no sense. There's a document called the Guiding Light. It's printed on paper. A mystery woman steals it. Some of Cadona's most powerful men are worried sick about it, yet the cast of characters surrounding its vanishing act are from all appearances ordinary people." An ache pinched Bob's neck as he leaned back in the old wooden chair. "Our mystery woman is the key. Any progress on identifying her?"

"Nope," Angela said, "she's still the mystery woman. Row

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has all kinds of scans running. Still no hits on the woman or her brown Monarch."

"Ang, Kever-o," Bob said, "while Row's searching for her, you two can get started on the Defense Department and J2 virus topics."

"Sure thing, Mr. Fullerby," Kever told him. "You heading out again?"

"Yep, I need to check in with the boss."

Bob was almost to the door when he heard Angela trotting up behind him. "Mr. Fullerby!" She peered up at him. Bob knew the look. Angela figured something out, something he wished she hadn't. "Mr. Fullerby," she said, "your Drop Case informant, it's Pastor Mark Walzelesskii, isn't it?"

Bob tried to hide his surprise. "Why do you say that?"

"Just makes sense," Angela said.

No point hiding it from Angela. She wouldn't believe a lie anyway. "You guessed right, Ang. Do not tell anyone. Absolutely no one. You must believe me when I say the Drop Case may be the most dangerous assignment you've ever had. It's certainly the most dangerous Kever-o and Row ever had."

"Mr. Fullerby, I know. That's why I'm afraid for you. You're a big, giant target."

"Don't worry about me. I'm well aware of the danger." But Rona and Kever, although brilliant, were inexperienced. "Ang, keep a close eye on Kever-o and Row. Don't let them do anything stupid. They're ambitious. This time, too much ambition could be deadly."

"Deadly for you, too, Mr. Fullerby," Angela said. "We're a team."

"I know, and I want to keep my team alive. Promise me, tell no one about Pastor Mark Walzelesskii. And keep an eye on Kever-o and Row. No heroics."

"I promise."

Bob reached for the doorknob, but something else came to mind. "Ang, we need to find this mystery woman. If Willirman, Walls, Rineburg, and Fischer get to her first, she's going

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to be in for one hell of a ride. No telling what they'll do to her, but it's not going to be good."

CHAPTER 24

SPOILED, BEAUTIFUL, BRUISED

Cadona City, Cadona
Monday, April 10, Year 1007 EE
3:30 p.m.

Leeha Ritsagin folded the freshly washed sheet around the edge of her thin, sagging mattress. “There! All clean,” she told herself. The sick-house feeling was gone. The air smelled of lemon and pine. She sat down on her newly made bed. Luck was with her. So far, no police were asking about the warning notes that she sent to ninety-nine women. Leeha turned on Andecco News. She found no reports of women receiving frightening messages. Maybe it was okay now. Yet worry haunted her. The police might be investigating. They might pull the strings right back to the computer that she used at Hughes Medical Center. She had worn gloves in case the touchpad was recording fingerprints or DNA, but maybe the authorities were tracking personal device locations while she was there. Perhaps security cameras were monitoring people using the computer links.

Leeha pushed herself up from the droopy bed and dragged her slipper-covered feet to the kitchen. After plopping a mound of ginger ice cream into a bowl, she put a teakettle on the hotplate. As Leeha stood by the cabinets and waited for the water to heat, it beckoned her—the weird document. She reached deep into the darkness behind the loose floor-

board. Her fingertips found the paper bundle. She pulled the bag from its hiding place and set the document on the kitchen table.

Then her personal device buzzed. The caller's identity was blocked. What if the police found her? Her heart raced. She had to be careful. She mustn't sound nervous. "H-hello?"

"Is this Leeha?"

The woman's words were slurred, slow, and careful. The voice sounded familiar. Leeha's hands shook. "Yes, may I help you?"

"I don't know if you remember me. I'm Cookie Davis. We both interviewed at Altage Enterprises."

Cookie Davis! Not the police. Thank goodness! "Oh, yes, I remember you, of course." Leeha pictured her—a beautiful, young, classy woman with salon-perfect hair, expensive clothing, and a Taysar wristwatch.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Leeha. I didn't know what else to do."

Wails poured through the personal device. What was wrong with this ditsy woman?

The sobbing eased. "I'm so sorry, Leeha."

"Cookie, are, um, you, okay?"

"My boyfriend, he went completely crazy. He hit me over and over."

So why was Cookie calling her? Police! Leeha was just thinking about them. "Cookie, um, did you call the cops?"

"Yes, I filed a report, but they said they didn't have an officer available. They told me to find somewhere else to stay because he might hit me again." More sobs. "I know he'll hit me again. He's hit me lots of times. Each time it gets worse. He's threatened my friends, too. If they help me, he says he'll kill them. He means it, Leeha. I know he does."

"Um, you could stay at a hotel," Leeha said.

"I, I don't have enough money."

A wave of panic struck. Leeha guessed the reason for the call; Cookie wanted to stay with her. Leeha should tell her

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she had been sick. Tell her she was still sick. Sick, sick. Really bad sick. It was true. She really was ... still was ... sick. While Leeha's mind raced, words spilled from her mouth. "Do you want to stay with me, at least for a night or two, until you find something more permanent?"

"Thank you, Leeha, so much." Cookie cried again. "I'm really sorry to trouble you, but I, I couldn't think of anyone else to call. You are the only person I could think of to ask whom he doesn't know. My boyfriend and I, we've been together for a long time. Just about everyone I know, he knows. He'll find me. He'll hurt anyone who helps me."

Leeha's heart pounded. What had she done? She invited a stranger into her house. Too late to take it back. "Cookie, so you know, I was really sick all week."

"I was really sick, too," Cookie said. "I just got better a few days ago. There's something going around."

Illness didn't deter her. "I, um, don't have much furniture and no guest room. I really don't have anything for you to sleep on."

"I have extra blankets and an inflatable mattress," Cookie said. "How do I get to your house?"

"Are you driving?"

"Our car's broken down. Is there a train or bus stop near you?"

"There's a commuter train stop a few blocks away," Leeha said. She gave Cookie the platform number. "Call me when you get there. I'll pick you up."

"Thank you so much, Leeha. I was so scared! I feel much better now. I've got to get my things before my boyfriend gets back, so I'd better get going." Cookie ended the call.

Leeha's body went numb. Her hands, her legs, no part felt like it belonged to her. "You idiot! Idiot! Absolute idiot! What's the matter with you?" Leeha told herself. This woman could be anyone. She could be a thief. An axe killer. Anybody! And what if she wanted to talk and talk and talk.

And Cookie was all pretty and cutesy. Miss perfect would

make Leeha feel awful about herself. Leeha needed that like a hole in the head.

Simmering water gurgled. Leeha turned off the hotplate and set the teakettle aside. So much for reading more of the mysterious document. Who knew when she'd get another chance. Leeha slid the pages into the paper bag and sealed the package inside a plastic sack. Once again, she hid the document behind the loose floorboard. Leeha pushed hard on the nail so the panel would stay in place.

Her whole afternoon was ruined. If it wasn't the police, it was Cookie Davis. Maybe she should turn herself in and go to jail instead. Not a good idea. More people in jail. Only one Cookie.

Cookie stepped off the train. Her dark hair fell in thick, loose waves around a bruised face. A puffy, black ring circled her left eye. Purple lines streaked a swollen nose. The left side of her mouth bulged.

The bundle Cookie carried slipped. Cloth tumbled from her arms. Leeha lunged forward and caught a stack of blankets, clothes, and towels. As Leeha stood up, she saw blue-green marks on Cookie's neck. The pattern of the bruises took the shape of fingers, as if a strong hand had clenched her throat. "Boy, he really did beat you good," Leeha said.

Cookie burst into tears.

Leeha felt awful. What a dumb thing to say! "It's over now. Come on, let's get you settled. My car's over here. It's not fancy or anything."

Cookie dried her eyes with a towel. "Your car runs. That's what counts."

Leeha opened the rear passenger side door and helped Cookie set her things on the seat. Cookie then stood as still as a statue and stared at the pile.

"Don't worry," Leeha said, "the seat's clean. The car just came back from the shop. They cleaned it up really well."

"Oh, Leeha, I wasn't thinking your car was dirty." Cookie

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again studied the pile. "I was thinking" She wiped her eyes. "I was thinking those things are all I have. My whole life. That's it."

The stack of clothing, towels, and blankets rested in the same place the weird document did when Leeha found it. An older memory returned. Leeha recalled packing after graduating from college. Her list of possessions had not grown much since then. "Everything I own fits in the car, too," Leeha said.

Cookie was in a talkative mood on the ride home. "My boyfriend and I, we once had so much, a big apartment full of nice furniture. And the view! We looked down upon the city lights. It was so pretty at night, looking out the windows. We were just about ready to buy a condo, when" A new round of sobs drowned her words.

E-gads! Cookie was so emotional! If only Leeha had more money. She'd put her up in a hotel. But Leeha might be out of work any day herself. She needed to save every coin. Because of her big mouth, Leeha was stuck sharing her apartment with this crying, spoiled, beautiful, bruised woman.

Leeha pulled into her assigned parking slot.

"Is that your apartment building?" Cookie asked.

"Yep." Leeha wondered what was worse, the wailing or the jabbering.

Cookie tried to smile. The bruised side of her lips didn't turn well. "It's a cute old building."

It wasn't *that* old. "I like it," Leeha said. "It's home."

Cookie followed Leeha inside and down the empty hallway. "Do many people live here?" Cookie asked.

"Yep, most of the units are taken. Those of us who live here, we're pretty quiet. Lots of old people." Leeha stopped in front of her door. "This one's mine. Four thirteen."

They walked inside. Luckily, the air still smelled of lemon and pine.

Leeha set a stack of Cookie's belongings on the couch. "Not much to show you," Leeha said. "This is the living room. The kitchen is there. The washer and dryer are behind those

bi-fold doors. There's the bathroom. And that's my bedroom. The couch isn't long enough to sleep on, so all I can offer is the floor."

Cookie smiled as best she could with swollen lips. "That's fine!"

Leeha had no warning. Cookie's arms swung around her. The breath squeezed from Leeha's lungs.

"Thank you so much, Leeha, for helping me." More sobs.

Leeha had no idea what to do. Where should her hands go? How long would the embrace last? "No problem. Um, do you want some food or something to drink?"

Cookie released Leeha from her grip.

"Would you mind if I took a shower?" Cookie asked. "With these bruises, I feel dirty. I'm not, but I feel like it."

Leeha hoped another hug wasn't on the way. "Sure, go ahead. I feel that way when my skin gets really oily. Sometimes I just finish washing, and boom! It's oily again."

Cookie pulled a towel from her stack of belongings and headed to the bathroom. She shut the door behind her.

Thank goodness! A chance to relax. Leeha poured herself a glass of milk and leaned against the kitchen counter. Panic struck. What if she had to go to the bathroom while Cookie was in there? What if Cookie was in there forever? Leeha put the glass of milk in the refrigerator. What a mess. She hoped Cookie found somewhere to go soon. This was driving Leeha crazy already.

In minutes, the bathroom door opened. No clothes! Cookie walked out with only a too-small towel wrapped around her. Images of the school locker room after gym class flashed by. What awful memories!

Cookie removed the towel and fished through her clothing. Leeha spotted ugly red and navy bruises on Cookie's right side. A big splotch marred her right shoulder and the side of her breast. Another patch stained her rib cage. Others dotted her hip and knee.

Leeha fumbled through the refrigerator for something to

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do while Cookie dressed. He had really beaten the shit out of her. That boy needed to be strung up and whipped. See how he'd like it.

"Hey, Leeha, any particular place you want me to set up my mattress?"

"No, just pick a spot."

"I hope I didn't mess up your plans for the evening," Cookie said.

A thought raced through Leeha's mind; Cookie wrecked her whole evening. And who knew how many more she was going to wreck. "No, you didn't," Leeha said. "Only thing I was planning to do was some studying. I'm taking a class through WorldLink."

"I'll be quiet so you can study, Leeha."

Yet again, Leeha surprised herself. "Do you want to watch a movie later?"

"Sure, sounds good."

"Oh, um, Cookie, you might want to look in the frig and see if I have anything in there you like. As you can tell, I'm not very fancy."

"You have a roof over your head, running water, food in the frig, a car that runs, and a part-time job that actually pays the bills. You have a whole lot more than many of us." Cookie put the mattress pad on the living room floor and set a Kettish prayer medallion on the pillow.

CHAPTER 25

YOU'RE MY ANGEL

Cadona City, Cadona

Wednesday, April 12, Year 1007 EE

7:00 p.m.

Leeha walked down the quiet hallway to unit 413. She was tired after the long workday, but at least the police hadn't arrested her for sending those warning messages to the women on the justice execution list. When she reached her door, she heard it: music. Leeha's body slumped. She remembered the peaceful times when no one would be inside when she got home from work, the way it used to be before Cookie Davis entered her life. When Leeha walked into her apartment, she heard another sound. Something sizzled—and smelled delicious. Maybe it wasn't all bad having her here.

Cookie stood by the stove. She swayed to the music and hummed as she stirred something in Leeha's old frying pan. Leeha watched her. It wasn't fair. Even old, baggy jeans and a floppy cotton shirt didn't hide Cookie's perfect figure. Nor did hair stacked carelessly on top of her head conceal the tresses' raven luster. Leeha considered one advantage she had over Cookie: someone who was supposed to love her didn't put bruises all over her body. Her next thought wasn't as comforting. Leeha had no boyfriend at all, not even a remote prospect except deep in the abyss of her imagination.

"Hey, Leeha! I didn't hear you come in." Cookie turned off the music. "I thought I'd make some dinner. Hope you don't mind."

"Actually, I'm starved. What are you making?"

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Cookie sprinkled some kind of seasoning over the sizzling food. "Just a simple stir fry. Mostly vegetables and mushrooms. And olive oil. It should be healthy."

"It smells good," Leeha said.

"I made berry pie, too," Cookie told her. "They had cheap fruit at the little market on the corner, so I picked some up."

"You seem happy today," Leeha said. "Did anything happen?" Maybe luck struck and Cookie found another place to stay.

"Nothing in particular. I had a long talk with the Toprit at the Kettish Church where I work. I realized I still care about my ex-boyfriend, but he doesn't know where I am, so I feel safe." Cookie had an odd expression on her face. "I'm safe thanks to you."

Oh, no! Was another hug on the way? "Cookie, you're exaggerating."

"No, I'm not. Toprit Lohsar said God sometimes sends angels to help us." Tears misted Cookie's huge, dark eyes. "You're my angel, Leeha."

What! Not more weird talk! "Glad I could help, but I'm no angel."

"Yes, Leeha, you are."

Leeha tapped her fingers on the table. What should one say at a moment like this? "Well, I'm going to do some studying."

"Okay, I'll let you know when dinner's ready." Cookie tossed something into the pan.

Leeha tiptoed into her bedroom. The last thing she needed was to catch Cookie's attention again. Leeha shut the bedroom door. Peace at last! She plopped down in the chair by her desk. Leeha checked the news. She found no reports of women receiving weird messages. Now she'd focus on her studies.

Another lesson finished! Leeha was pleased with her work. Then she heard a tap on the bedroom door. "Yeah?"

Cookie opened the door just a crack. "Dinner's ready."

Leeha walked into the kitchen. She saw a sight that she hadn't seen in a long time. Dishes and cups sat on the table. Silverware topped age-old napkins that Leeha had never bothered to use. She wondered where Cookie found the pot-holders that were resting beneath the platter holding the food.

"Is something wrong, Leeha?"

"No, I, um, it's been a long time since I've seen my table set. It looks nice. And the food smells delicious."

Cookie had even found a serving spoon that Leeha had acquired in college and had forgotten about. Cookie used the oversized utensil to scoop food onto Leeha's plate.

"Do you mind if we watch the news while we eat?" Leeha asked.

"Sure, okay with me."

Leeha pulled the viewing monitor away from the wall. The broken wheel squeaked as she pushed the stand to the center of the room. Why must it make that embarrassing noise when she had company?

Andecco News popped on.

"You like Andecco?" Cookie asked.

"Um, would you rather watch something else?"

"No way! Andecco's the only news with substance to it. I just love that reporter, Bob Fullerby. He's not afraid of anyone."

"That's why he has enemies," Leeha said. The authors of her weird document had written about Bob Fullerby. They wrote that he must be silenced. Then, like whispers from a dungeon, the document begged, *Show me to your friend*. Cookie might know what the document was. Maybe it was just silly ramblings, and Leeha was worrying for nothing. What if it was unimportant and she sent messages to those poor women for no reason? If it was dangerous, maybe Cookie would know what to do with it. Leeha's heart raced. She'd tell her about the document. The words were about to spill from Leeha's lips.

Cookie spoke first. "Itena Tarish sure is pretty."

"What?" Leeha asked.

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"President Tarish's wife, Itena," Cookie said. "She sure is pretty. Don't you think? Look at her outfit. It's gorgeous."

Leeha recognized the dapper man on the viewplane: Demnar Tarish, the new president of Domataland. His pretty, thin wife was walking by his side. They were touring a factory. It produced some new and versatile building material that was good for the environment. Leeha found the factory more interesting than Itena's outfit. "She is pretty," Leeha said, "pretty and skinny, like you."

"Oh, Leeha, Itena is much prettier than I am."

"Actually, Cookie, I think you're prettier."

"No, I'm not."

"I think you are. I'm really jealous of you. I hate being all fat and pimply."

"Do you want me to show you some exercises? I used to work out a lot. Not so much these days, but I need to get back into it."

"Seriously, you'll teach me?"

"Sure, it'll be fun."

"Okay, thanks," Leeha said. "I'm tired of looking like this."

Leeha felt Cookie's eyes surveying her. "You know, Leeha, it wouldn't take much for you to be a total knockout."

"Ha! Just like a whole new head and body."

"No, really, Leeha, I'm serious. If you want to, you could be drop-dead gorgeous. You have good features and a great body shape."

Typical words spoken to ugly girls by someone pretty who was trying to be nice. "I think you're crazy," Leeha said, "but I would like to learn some exercises."

"You're on! First session will be tonight after our dinner settles."

A flash shot out from the viewing monitor.

"Uh-oh, a news alert," Cookie said. "There's Angela Thirgal. Wonder what happened."

"This just in. It's official. Senator Bradley Seldortin has

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announced his candidacy for Cadonan president. He is the only Allegiance Party member so far to challenge the re-election bid of President Louis Meyfeld."

"I'm glad he changed his mind about retiring," Cookie said. "I like President Meyfeld, but there's no way he'll be re-elected. That creep, Mitch Fischer, has become too popular. For the life of me, I can't understand why."

"No kidding! Mitch Fischer and that John Rineburg, they're cuckoo." Once again, Leeha thought about the strange document. She didn't know why, but now a different voice whispered to her. The document would remain her secret.

CHAPTER 26

NUISANCE PEOPLE

Cadona City, Cadona
Thursday, April 13, Year 1007 EE
7:30 a.m.

Pastor Mark Walzelesskii wiped his sweaty palms on his pant legs and opened the door to the True Followers of God Church headquarters lounge. He was spying on his own father. He had no choice. In order to help him, Mark had to learn what was going on. Two young women were also in trouble. One he cared about: Annetta Longstreet. The other was the unidentified woman standing by an old, brown car in a fuzzy photo. Bob Fullerby had told him she was in grave danger.

“Son! Glad you came,” Pastor Leon Walls said. “Come on in and have a seat. We’re waiting for Dougy. He’s running late.”

Mark walked into the room. Tropical wood paneled the walls. Crystal goblets filled sparkling shelves.

Black leather moaned as Mark settled into the soft cushion of a lush chair.

Senator Mitch Fischer’s coffee cup clinked when he set it on a white saucer. His voice was pleasant and calm. “Pastor Walzelesskii, good morning.”

“Good morning, sir.” Mark reminded himself who Mitch Fischer was—a dangerous man who had acquired new powers.

Senator John Rineburg’s body was slumping into his seat. Mark didn’t know why John called the meeting. It was hastily

scheduled, so something serious must have happened.

John checked the time. "Did Dougy say when he's going to get here?"

"He said he's minutes away, John," Leon told him.

Through large, tinted windows, Mark glimpsed someone walking. A man was hurrying down a tree-lined pathway that led to the building. The man disappeared behind a hedge in full spring blossom, but when the fellow passed by a manicured tree, Mark got a good view of him through leafy branches. "Here's General Willirman now," Mark said.

John squirmed in his chair. "It's about time."

Doug walked in. Sweat glistened on his flushed face. "Sorry I'm late, gentlemen. Good-old-boy Karther has been hot on my heels about this J2 thing."

"What does he want now?" Leon asked.

"Proof Domataland or Sohn-Sur is behind the mutation in the J2 virus. He's driving me nuts."

"Hang in there, Dougy," Leon said. "Come October, Defense Secretary Karther will be history."

John swung his right leg over the left. "Let's hope so. That's why I called this meeting. We can't let Seldortin replace Meyfeld as president."

"It'll be interesting to see what happens in the polls," Mitch said. "The Seldortin candidacy is creating quite a stir."

John uncrossed his legs and rubbed the soles of his shoes on the carpet. "We can't sit back and watch for too long. The defectors are in the streets celebrating. Those liars and defilers of our nation! Meyfeld's no threat. He's a laughing stock. Seldortin, however, he's a problem. The reaction to his candidacy proves it."

"Pastor Walzelesskii," Mitch said, "what's your opinion? Do you think Senator Seldortin is a danger to us?"

His opinion? Senator Bradley Seldortin would make an excellent president. Mark dared not say such words in this company. Nor did he want to lie. Mark knew his father was worried. Mitch Fischer, perhaps the most powerful man in the

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world, had challenged Leon's lost son, a son Leon hoped was finally interested in taking up his rightful place as a leader of men. Mark struggled to find the right answer, one he could live with. Finally, he found the words. "Senator Seldortin is very popular with certain segments of the population, especially among those who advocate strict separation of church and state. He also has a big following among the poor. They see Seldortin as someone who is concerned about making their lives better, giving them more opportunity, better living conditions, better education for their kids. Obviously, there are a lot of poor people, so, I would say Senator Seldortin could influence the outcome of the elections."

Mark's response did not move Mitch. He glared at Mark with the same critical eyes. John and Doug, however, seemed surprised. Mark didn't crumble beneath Senator Fischer's strike.

Leon beamed. "Well said, Son."

Mark figured his father was thinking hope still existed for his wayward boy.

"I say we can't let Seldortin become president no matter what," Doug said.

John fidgeted in his chair. "I agree with Dougy. We need to take all steps necessary to see that it doesn't happen."

"I agree as well," Mitch said. "If Seldortin looks too strong in the polls, we'll need to take appropriate action."

Appropriate action? What did that mean? Mark wasn't sure. How far would these men go? The answer that came to Mark frightened him.

"What's the status of our Guiding Light document?" Mitch asked.

John and Doug shared a glance. John then said, "Dougy's people intercepted transmissions. Someone sent a message to each woman on our justice execution list—less Mary Kro-nvelt—warning them someone may be coming to murder them."

A rare flash of unpremeditated anger streaked across

Mitch's face. "When did this happen?"

"Saturday," Doug said.

Mitch regained his composure and allowed a look of displeasure to show. "Saturday? It's Thursday. Why am I only hearing about this now?"

"My people just pieced it together," Doug said. "At first, nothing looked unusual. Whoever sent the messages knew how to cover his tracks."

"Whoever sent them?" Mitch asked. "You don't know who sent them?"

Doug rolled his fat thumbs over one another. "Not yet. All we know is they were sent from Hughes Medical Center."

Leon dabbed sweat from his forehead. "It doesn't necessarily mean the information came from the Guiding Light, does it? The original list came from Hughes. We inserted the women's names into the Guiding Light, remember?"

Mitch leaned back in his seat. "It's possible, but the timing concerns me. The document vanishes, and these messages go out. Dougy, you haven't intercepted any other parts of the Guiding Light?"

Doug was quick to answer. "No, and we've expanded surveillance on all communication media and reviewed historical records. We didn't find anything else."

"The transmissions went to the women themselves, no one else?" Mitch asked.

"That is correct," Doug said. "Also, whoever sent the messages sent them over PD channels only. A good third of the women on the list don't even have PDs, so the messages will never get to them."

Mitch released a growling, long breath. "Has anyone notified Doctor Millerman? He may have a leak at Hughes."

"We have," John said. "Doctor Millerman told me he'd get on it right away."

Mitch massaged the handle of his coffee cup. "Do you think someone at Hughes might be behind the Guiding Light's disappearance?"

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"It's possible," John said. "Staff in the Women's Health Center screamed and hollered when our people took medical records. And Detective Brunish is poking around at Hughes again. His excuse this time is the Mary Kronvelt murder. He suspects a connection between her and the Agel Yungst shootings." John leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "Brunish is my pain-in-the-ass as Richard Karther is Dougy's."

Leon took a sip of ice water, but Mark still saw sweat on his father's face. Leon said, "I wonder if Detective Brunish has something to do with the Guiding Light disappearing? Maybe he's in league with Senator Sandra Pettock. She fumed when she saw the Guiding Light. She condemned Agel's attack at Hughes. Now Brunish is crawling around the place. Maybe the two are working together, along with staff at Hughes."

"Leon makes an interesting point," Doug said.

Mitch tapped his fingers on the armrests. "Why would someone alert the women? The document contains critical information. Why risk showing their hand over a trivial point like the justice execution list?"

"Maybe they want us to worry," John said. "Maybe for blackmail. The more frightened we are, the more we'll pay."

Mitch caressed his coffee cup. "Perhaps, but something doesn't feel right. How about the woman who grabbed the document? Have we identified her? Or her car?"

"No, sir," John said, "but maybe she works at Hughes. If Leon's theory is right, Pettock or Brunish may have recruited her."

Mitch poured more coffee into his cup. "We can't delay any longer. We need to figure out who she is. She's the last person who we know with certainty had the Guiding Light. We need to find her."

"Use military assets?" John asked.

Mitch said, "Gentlemen, I think it's time. Dougy, your opinion?"

"I don't like it, but I agree. It's time to use military assets to

find our thief.”

The glass quivered in Leon’s shaking hand as he took another drink of water. “Seldortin, Pettock, Brunish, Karther, the bitch in the brown Monarch. Our enemies are circling.”

John pulled his long body upright in his chair. “Maybe it’s time to clear the field. Get rid of nuisance people.”

“We may be getting to that point,” Mitch said, “but natural attrition is better. Fewer threads leading back to us. Also, don’t forget, not all of our nuisance people are in Cadona. We need to stoke up pressure on Domataland. We need to do more to provoke President Tarish. He’s proving more difficult to rattle than I expected.”

Leon said, “If Tarish is the *Last Ruler* from prophecy, he’s going to follow Bezgog’s plan, not his own.”

A snarl rose from Doug’s throat. “You give Tarish too much credit, Leon. He’s a madman and a former specialty soldier. A trained killer. Don’t forget, he’s a Domat. Like all Domats, all he knows how to do is kill. The man is no brilliant strategist.”

John twisted in his seat as if he were fighting a bad itch. “Be careful not to underestimate Tarish, Dougy. I had to deal with him when he was Finance Minister. I’m telling you, there’s something wrong with that man. He’s like a shell with nothing human inside. He gives me the creeps.”

“I have an idea of how to provoke him,” Mitch said, “a way not described in the Guiding Light, so we don’t have to worry about our enemies linking the event back to us. Tarish’s wife is an ethnic Estdevent. We’re making headway reestablishing ties to Estdevent rebel elements in Domataland—” Mitch stopped talking. “Excuse me a moment.” He read his personal device. “Gentlemen, I’ve just been informed; President Meyfeld is withdrawing from the race. He will not seek re-election. For personal reasons, he says.”

“This is not good,” John said. “The Allegiance Party bastards will unite behind Seldortin. Now he’s more dangerous than ever.”

Mark’s personal device buzzed. An alarm, not a call. Mitch,

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John, Doug, and Leon all stared at him. Since he answered Mitch's earlier question, everyone seemed to forget he was there. "Excuse me," Mark said, "I'm very sorry, I need to leave. I have a mission at the homeless shelter in Westville."

Mark knew Leon was proud of him. "Of course, Son. Thank you for joining us."

Guilt flooded Mark's soul. He felt like a traitor, but what choice did he have? Mark walked away and made a point of shutting the lounge door behind him.

Mark hopped on his bicycle and pedaled toward Westville. He committed many things to memory: the Guiding Light is still missing; use military assets to find the woman who stole it; nuisance people include Senator Bradley Seldortin, Detective Carl Brunish, Defense Secretary Richard Karther, Senator Sandra Pettock, and President Demnar Tarish; use Tarish's wife and Estdevent rebels to make Tarish mad; messages were sent from Hughes Medical Center; justice execution list is in Guiding Light; Mary somebody was murdered.

Mark took a detour along the way. He stopped at the interstate railroad station to use a public comm-node.

"Fullerby here."

"Mr. Fullerby, I have information for you." Mark kept the call short and then continued on his way to Westville to minister to the poor.

CHAPTER 27

THIS IS A FIGHT

Cadona City, Cadona
Thursday, April 13, Year 1007 EE
11:00 a.m.

Bob Fullerby checked off the topics that he had already discussed in his live interview with Senator Bradley Seldortin: the economy, environmental degradation, cost of living, and education. Transportation was the last item. “Mr. Seldortin, as president, what steps would you take to improve our roads, our rail system, our—”

“Mr. Fullerby, if I may, we have time for only one more issue. While transportation improvements are critical to our recovery, there is a pressing topic I would like to share with the citizens of Cadona.”

Uh-oh, Bradley Seldortin was playing offense. “What topic is that, Senator?” Bob asked.

“Public health, in particular, the J2 epidemic.”

“Epidemic, Senator?”

Bradley faced the camera. “Something is happening that the government isn’t telling you about. We are in the beginning stages of an epidemic. The J2 virus has mutated. It once caused minor illness. No more. Dangerous forms of the virus are spreading through our poorest regions. For those of you living in affluent areas, don’t think you’re safe. You are not. J2 will continue to spread if we don’t take immediate action to contain it.” He leaned forward in his seat. “J2 doesn’t discriminate. Rich, poor, young, old, we are all at risk. Currently,

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there is no cure and no vaccine. We are heading for a major health crisis, but both the Freedom Party and the Allegiance Party want to keep the public in the dark. The Allegiance Party doesn't want to create a stir so close to the elections. Our Allegiance Party leadership is willing to risk public health in order to hide the dangers of J2 from the people. The Freedom Party, on the other hand, has plans to turn J2 into a political weapon."

Bradley was going for the jugular.

"A political weapon?" Bob said. "Senator, could you please elaborate?"

"Gladly. The Freedom Party is waiting for the disease to spread. Then they can blame the Allegiance Party for not taking action." His expression grew more stern. "The Freedom Party is also fabricating a lie. They plan to release a statement claiming the mutated J2 virus is a biological weapon created by a foreign power. This is hogwash. There is no evidence whatsoever that J2 has been manually manipulated. Our dominant political parties have betrayed the people of this great land. The leaders of both parties are endangering the lives and health of our citizens."

"Senator Seldortin, these are very serious accusations. Are you not concerned about political fallout?"

"Mr. Fullerby, the truth stands on its own. It cannot be destroyed. Truth lasts forever. The people of Cadona deserve the truth."

A film crewman gave the signal; the end of the show was near.

"Senator Seldortin," Bob said, "thank you for taking time to talk to us on such short notice."

"My pleasure, Mr. Fullerby."

Only seconds remained. "This is Bob Fullerby, reporting from the residence of Senator Bradley Seldortin in Cadona City."

Filming stopped. Bob spoke with Bradley in another room while the crew packed equipment.

"Mr. Seldortin, pardon me for saying so," Bob said, "but you're taking quite a political risk on J2. You'll lose support of some Allegiance Party members. And the Freedom Party will retaliate."

"Mr. Fullerby, if a man can't tell the truth, tell it like he sees it, then what kind of man is he? We need to take action on J2. If my announcement makes that happen, then I've done my job as a public servant."

"Sir, Freedom Party retribution will be clandestine."

"Yes, it has to be. They build on sand."

Bob had to admit, few people had Seldortin's courage. "Senator, I have something of a personal nature I would like to discuss with you."

"Surely." Bradley put a long, bony arm around Bob's shoulders.

"I've received information from a reliable source; the Freedom Party leadership has stated that you must not, under any circumstances, be allowed to become president. Senator, I believe they will use any means necessary to keep you from taking office."

Bradley unwrapped his arm from Bob's shoulders. "Mr. Fullerby, don't worry, I know what these people are like. That's why I decided to run against them. If I thought they were a mildly bad bunch, I'd be heading for the mountains right now, not the campaign trail."

Bob's concern grew. Bradley was taking the threat too lightly. "But, sir, I really do believe they will use *any means* to get you out of the way."

The tall, lanky, big-footed senator tapped a large hand on Bob's back. "Bob, if God wants me to be president, I will be president. If God wants my reputation to be discredited, it will be discredited. If God wants me to die in this fight, I will die."

"Let's hope only the first is God's will. But please, sir, keep your security tight. It'll be tough to find honest bodyguards. The Freedom Party has its fingers deep into police depart-

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ments, the military, and intelligence agencies. Make sure those close to you can be trusted.”

“Mr. Fullerby, I never risk the safety of my family, and there’s too much at stake. Those of us who oppose the Freedom Party must stay alive so we can keep up the fight. This is a fight, by the way, not simply politics as usual. I promise you, Mr. Fullerby, I will be very serious about my security.”

Bradley was vulnerable, and he didn’t seem to grasp the gravity of the Freedom Party threat. Bob said, “Senator, I’ve also received news concerning the Defense Department. If my sources are correct, top Defense brass take orders from General Douglass Willirman alone, ignoring Defense Secretary Karther and President Meyfeld. General Willirman is loyal to Mitch Fischer and John Rineburg.”

“I’ve been hearing the same thing. Very troubling.”

“Sir, there’s something else. Have you heard of a document called the *Guiding Light*?”

“Guiding Light? No, no, I don’t believe I have. What is it?”

“It’s still a mystery,” Bob said, “but we’ve learned it contains Back-to-Basics Club goals. Only select Club members know about the document, and my source tells me it contains some very odd information. The Soldiers of God Justice Group is mentioned in it. It also contains a *justice execution list*. We believe one woman from the list has already been murdered. From what we’ve learned, it appears these items are the tip of the iceberg. Leon Walls, Mitch Fischer, John Rineburg, and Douglass Willirman consider this execution list a trivial point. They feel the document contains much more damning info. Here’s the other twist—someone stole the *Guiding Light*.”

“What?” Events rarely surprised Bradley. He was surprised now. “Who stole it?”

“Good question. A young woman in a brown Monarch sedan acquired it. We don’t know who she is or whom she works for. According to my source, the police failed to find her. Now the military is leading the hunt.”

“Hmm, if the military and police agencies are involved,

there must be some kind of financial trail. Funds have to be diverted from somewhere, even if the Rineburg family is sneaking money into the system to pay for it. I'll see what I can dig up."

"I've learned one more thing I think you should know," Bob said, "of an international nature."

"What would that be?"

"We've learned that the Freedom Party wants to push President Demnar Tarish's buttons. We believe the goal is to find an excuse to strike out militarily against Domataland."

"That's old news," Bradley said. "The Freedom Party has been busy in that arena for some time now. They are already stirring up the conflict between Izvyona and Bakhadaree separatists. It's quite a plan they have. They'll push Tarish into a corner. They'll leave him no choice. Military intervention in Bakhadaland will be Tarish's only option."

"It's more than that, Senator. They want to use President Tarish's wife, Itena," Bob said. "They want to use the fact that she's an ethnic Estdevent. They intend to involve the Estdevent rebels in this plan of theirs."

A flash of anger streaked across Bradley's face. "Use Tarish's wife! That's a low blow even for the Freedom Party."

"Like I said, Senator, these people truly will use *any means* to achieve their goals."

Bradley tapped Bob on the shoulder. "Thank you for the information. I hope your sources keep producing."

"So do I," Bob said. "My sources are taking great risks."

"I don't doubt that, Mr. Fullerby. I don't doubt it at all." Bradley checked the time. "Speaking of Bakhadaland and Izvyona, I have a briefing on that subject in a few minutes, so I must get going. I do appreciate the information you've given me. If you receive other news, please, keep me informed."

"I will," Bob said. He shook Bradley's long-fingered hand. "Good luck, and good running, Senator."

CHAPTER 28

DIRTIEST MEMORIES

Lestnya, Bakhadaland
Thursday, April 13, Year 1007 EE
5:45 a.m.

Ina Tovaleta pulled her fluffy, pastel pink sweater close to her body. The sun had not yet risen over the village of Lestnya. Sea fog dimmed the pale first glow of dawn. Amber-tinted lamps set atop tall poles cast both illumination and shadow across the concrete and rails of the train platform. Wisps of mist swirled in the man-made light.

Lieutenant Rosik Venkin swung an arm around her shoulders. "Are you cold?"

"A little." She leaned into his muscular body.

Something besides the damp morning air caused her shivers. A haunting chill taunted her every time she visited her hometown of Fingaktik. Soon, a train would arrive to carry her, Rosik, Tarma, and Garrett deep into Bakhadaland's interior. Despite the joy of seeing her family, painful childhood memories embraced her there. Although many things, both joyous and terrible, had happened since Izvyonsk soldiers marched in thirteen years ago, memories of the Great Invasion still scarred Ina's thoughts. Images from the past flashed in her mind: her family's farmhouse, a sunlit attic, a steep staircase, tongues of red flame, and black smoke.

She heard Tarma and Garrett share a laugh. Even Tarma didn't know everything Ina went through when she was six years old. There were details Ina never told anyone, not even her best friend. All who knew those details were dead, all

but Ina.

A rumble shook the ground. The train was coming.

"Ina, what is it?" Rosik asked.

"Nothing."

"Ina?"

"Old ghosts from the past."

"If you don't want to go, we can stay here," Rosik said.

"Garrett and Tarma can go without us. You said your family loves Tarma like a daughter."

"They do, but I need to go. My family runs a farm. This time of year, they'll be too busy to visit me, and I haven't seen them in months. Besides, I know it's important for you and Garrett to go to Fingaktik. I don't know why, but I know it is."

"Ina—"

She placed a finger on his lips. "Rosik, it's okay. I'm going."

The train pulled up alongside the platform.

"Hey, Ina," Tarma said, "we're in luck! It's Old Razmor."

A handful of passengers were already on board. Some of them watched as Ina, Rosik, Tarma, and Garrett walked down the aisle. No one said a word. Ina and Rosik followed Tarma and Garrett into a compartment containing four seats, two seats facing the others. Old Razmor the train car fell as silent as a windless, subfreezing winter night, so Tarma and Garrett conversed in whispers. Ina, however, stared out the window. She felt Rosik's eyes on her. She wished he'd join in Tarma's conversation with Garrett and let her be. All Ina wanted was to be by Rosik's side. She didn't want more questions or more prying. He didn't need to know her darkest fears and dirtiest memories.

"Ina, what ghosts visit you at home?"

She had to say something. Anything. Anything he'd believe. Then he'd leave her alone. "I was six years old when the Great Invasion reached Fingaktik. From the day we're born, we Bakhads are trained for war. The actual thing was not what my child's mind expected. It was not like the songs and legends filled with valor, honor, and bravery. It was filled with

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fear and hate and destruction.”

Rosik pulled her close. His body felt warm. “Ina, tell me what happened.”

“Maybe later.”

“Why not now? We’ve nothing to do but sit here.”

“Please, Rosik, I don’t feel like it.”

“But sometime you will tell me?”

“Yes, sometime.” She had no intention of doing so. Some memories belonged to her alone.

Tarma came to the rescue. “Hey, Ina, what types of crops do they grow around Fingaktik?”

Ina and Rosik joined the conversation.

CHAPTER 29

POWER BILL

“The Central Communication Authority (CCA) has once again expanded postal facilities to handle an increase in the volume of physical mail. The move comes at a time when a growing number of Cadonans are unable to afford personal device service. CCA head Brent Teller has requested funding for three thousand new postal service jobs. CCA offices have been flooded with inquiries about the new positions.”



*Bob Fullerby, Investigative Journalist
Andecco News Service
Year 1006 of the Enlightened Epoch*

***Cadona City, Cadona
Thursday, April 13, Year 1007 EE
7:30 p.m.***

Bob Fullerby entered the dimly lit lobby of his apartment building. Rod, a security guard, was sitting on a tall stool

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behind the front desk. News about the tense standoff in Bakhadaland played on a viewplane. "Good evening, Mr. Fullerby," Rod said.

"Good evening, Rod, anything exciting today?"

"Nope, quiet as usual. Nothing like the mess over there in Bakhadaland."

"Thank goodness for that," Bob said.

Rod's attention returned to the news.

Bob wandered around the corner. All four elevators were busy, so he leaned against the wall and tried to relax. Random thoughts and worries, however, caught up with him like clouds of mosquitoes swarming around a weary hiker. He scanned the familiar surroundings in search of something to occupy his mind. His gaze settled on the bronze-colored mailboxes covering the wall across from him. The number of boxes with red dots had been growing over the last few years—a sign of changing times. Bob stood upright and squinted. Was a red dot on the outside of *his* mailbox? Odd, he wasn't expecting printed mail. He walked over to get a better look. Sure enough, the dot was on his slot. The nodes in his left arm opened the little hatch of his mailbox. Bob pulled a large envelope from the bread-loaf-sized space. The power company? Again? He thought he had gotten his bill straightened out. Apparently not. How annoying!

An elevator arrived. It carried him to the eighty-sixth floor.

Bob didn't spend enough time at home. His apartment was a mess, but it didn't matter. The place was his only refuge. Bob walked inside his cramped quarters and flung his piece of mail onto the cluttered card table. He put leftovers in the warmer before settling his tired body into the plastic-covered cushion of a chair. Bob glared at the long, thin envelope before grabbing it and ripping it open. He didn't have time for this nonsense. The first page contained the words, *Keep your power on. Select a payment plan to suit your budget.* He slumped into the seat. "I pay my bills," he said aloud. "Why are you bothering me with this?" He tossed the first page aside.

The next page showed something strange: an aerial photograph of a brown car. The vehicle sure looked like a Monarch. He found another picture. And still another. Six grainy images in all. How did these get mixed in with his bill? Nothing else inside the packet seemed odd. He found no sign that someone tampered with the envelope. Bob checked the postmark. It came from the Central Postal Facility. What on earth was going on?

Bob stuffed the contents into the package, switched off the warmer, and rushed downstairs.

Rod was about to take a bite of an oily corndog. "Heading out already, Mr. Fullerby?" Another guard, Jamie, was behind the front desk as well.

"No," Bob said, "I was hoping you could do me a favor."

Rod set his corndog on a greasy plate. "Sure, Mr. Fullerby, glad to. What's up?"

"I've received a suspicious piece of mail ... perhaps I should call it *unexpected*."

"We could check the security video, if that would help," Rod said.

"Would you mind?"

"Not at all, sir." Rod positioned a viewplane so Bob could see it. An image of the mailbox-covered wall appeared. Rod circled Bob's mailbox in the picture. "Two hits," Rod told him. "Here's the first one."

They watched video of the mailman. He shoved a big envelope into Bob's slot. The mailman then closed the box and walked away.

Jamie studied the images. "Looks like the regular mail guy I see when I work days."

"Yep," Rod said, "that's the same guy. Here's the second hit." They watched video of a different man. "That's you, Mr. Fullerby, picking up your mail. No one else messed with it."

"Thanks for checking, guys."

Jamie asked, "Mr. Fullerby, is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm probably just being paranoid. Comes with the

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job.”

“Ours, too,” Rod said. “We’ll keep an extra eye out. After all, you are our most famous tenant.”

Jamie picked up a cup filled with coffee that had the consistency of cold maple syrup. “Our *only* famous tenant.”

“Thanks, fellows.” Bob headed toward the exit. These strange pictures were important. He had to get to the print shop.

He heard Rod’s voice. “Mr. Fullerby, I thought you weren’t leaving.”

“I just remembered something I have to do,” Bob told them.

Bob opened the back door of the old print shop building. Angela Thirgal, Kever Carsen, and Rona Betler stopped what they were doing.

“Mr. Fullerby,” Angela said, “we thought you were going home to rest.”

Kever was holding a cup of coffee. He set it on the counter. “Uh-oh, Mr. Fullerby, what happened?”

Bob tossed the envelope onto the wooden table. “This happened.”

Angela picked up the packet. “The power company? Mr. Fullerby, I don’t get it.”

“Look inside.”

She pulled out the contents. “Oh, my! Where did you get these photos?”

“Right where you found them, inside the power bill.”

Angela shook her head. “Why would someone put these pictures in with your bill?”

“Because they want Mr. Fullerby to see them,” Kever said.

Angela’s nose crinkled. “Brilliant deduction, Kever-o.”

Kever ignored her comment and examined one of the photographs. “This car looks like a Monarch, and it’s brown. Does it belong to our mystery woman?”

“I’m not sure,” Bob said. “None of the photos give a good view of the driver, and the image quality is too grainy to tell

if the car is *our* Monarch. Row, I was hoping you could clean the pics up. I worked on them on the way here. I didn't have much luck."

Rona studied one of the pictures. "I'm not sure I can. It looks sort of ... funny. I'll try." Soon, an image of a brown car appeared on the wall monitor. Rona squinted at her computer viewplane. "There's a lot of weird noise in this pic." The image grew a little sharper.

"All right!" Kever said. "We might be able to pull a license plate number."

"Maybe," Rona told him, "but it can't be the mystery woman's car. The car in our Hatchets Bar video had a scrunched license plate, remember? And a broken taillight. This plate isn't bent, and the taillight doesn't look smashed."

Kever leaned forward and stared at the wall monitor. "Hey, Row, could you please zoom in on the back seat?"

A fuzzy image of part of the back seat grew large. "A bunch of bags!" Rona said. "Just like the back of the mystery woman's car when it was parked by Hatchets."

Kever picked up a printed photograph and angled it so light shone directly on it. "Row, could you pan to the lower left corner, please?" When the image expanded, whitish streaks stood out against a dark background. Kever asked, "Is that a date timestamp?"

"It is text," Rona said, "but it's weird. It was added to the parent photo. It's not as noisy."

Bob watched as the writing cleared.

"It is a timestamp," Angela said, "and get a load of the date: March twenty-six, the day of the document drop at Hatchets Bar. Row, could you please display all the pictures and show them in time sequence?"

"Sure." In minutes, Rona had the six images displayed on the wall monitor.

Angela said, "All of these were taken before the mystery woman parked in front of Hatchets Bar. Maybe the damage to the car happened between the time these shots were taken

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and when she arrived at Hatchets.”

“Seems possible,” Kever said.

Bob felt a chill. “It does seem possible, but this whole thing makes no sense. Someone slips pictures of a brown Monarch, perhaps *the* brown Monarch, into my electric bill. Besides those of us in this room, only three other people know we are searching for a car like this: my informant on the Drop Case, Bill Marantees, and Senator Bradley Seldortin. Any of those three could’ve just handed the photos to me.”

“Well, whoever did it has access to police traffic cams,” Angela said.

“Ang, these pics don’t look like they came from traffic cams,” Bob told her.

“Police moths, then?”

Bob’s chill deepened. “Maybe, but why would a police moth have been flying over a nearly deserted street? And why focus on this particular car?”

“Mr. Fullerby,” Kever said, “do you know anyone who works at the post office or power company?”

“Not that I can think of.” A shadow of trepidation hovered over Bob. Something was not right. “It seems we have someone else out there who wants us to find the mystery woman before the Back-to-Basics Club gets to her.”

“Who could that be?” Rona asked.

Bob shook his head. “No idea.” He then noticed that Kever was again scrutinizing the photographs. “Kever-o, do you see something else?”

“Yeah, check out the lighting. This car is heading east. And something is alongside the road in the second pic. Some kind of sign, perhaps?”

Bob studied the image. “I see it, too. Row, could you please take a closer look at the right side of the second pic?”

“Enhancing now.”

An image of a traffic sign loomed large on the viewplane. The image was splotchy, but it was clear enough to read what was written on the sign: *Exit 62*.

"Kever-o is on to something," Angela said. "It looks like there may be another sign on the last pic."

Rona expanded the image. "Yep, got it. It says *Exit sixty-six A.*"

Angela got up and walked to the wall monitor. "You know, it looks like the car is taking that exit. Row, could you bring up a map of the Hatchets Bar area?"

A map appeared.

"Pull back, please."

A broader section of Cadona City displayed.

Angela pointed at the map. "Hatchets Bar is here. The driver is heading east. Assuming the driver is the mystery woman, she arrived at Hatchets around eight a.m." Angela drew a red arc on the viewplane. "So she must have been somewhere around here when the photos were taken."

Kever's fingers raced over his computer touchpad. "I think I got it! Interstate Eleven is in that area, and it has both an exit sixty-two and an exit sixty-six A. And the time it took her to drive the distance makes sense. She was driving slowly for that road, but still at a reasonable speed. I bet she was on Interstate Eleven."

Angela said, "Our mystery woman is smart if she took exit sixty-six A to get to Hatchets Bar. It would take her through some bad neighborhoods where it would be easy to lose a tail. There'd be huge crowds, huge buildings, few police, and not a lot of security cams. Maybe she knew someone was watching her."

"Our mystery woman is clever," Bob said.

Kever leaned back in his chair. "Not clever enough. Someone banged up her car somewhere between exit sixty-six A and Hatchets Bar. From the dings, it didn't look like your typical traffic accident."

"Maybe she banged up the car herself to make it look different," Angela said, "like a thief who changes his jacket after a crime spree."

"But think about our bug-eye video," Kever told her. "The

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mystery woman looked scared when she was parked in front of Hatchets."

Bob's personal device buzzed. "Excuse me, folks, it's the boss. There's a fistfight in the streets of D'nevtnya. Bill wants me to check into it."

"Who's fighting?" Kever asked.

"Izvyonsk supporters and Bakhadaree separatists. They're brawling because of the Goodwill Ship." Bob rubbed his face and said, "Row, see if you can learn anything else from these photos."

"I'm on it."

"Ang, Kever-o, keep working on your other assignments unless Row turns up something new. Or unless some other little surprise shows up in my mailbox."

CHAPTER 30

LITTLE FINGAKTIK

TRAIN STATION

"I have a vision. Beyond fields filled with the waste that we have sown, a gem gleams on the horizon. A world awakens from a polluted nightmare. A renewed land rises from the filth. A land where trees and grass grow tall, and animals roam in abundance. When the human mind learns respect and the human heart revels in love for God's precious creation, this vision will become reality."



Thomas Fillimore
"On the Arrogance of Man," verse 1
Year 7997 of the Awakening Epoch

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The Bakhadaree Interior

Thursday, April 13, Year 1007 EE

8:30 a.m.

Ina Tovaleta felt the train slow down as it navigated a sharp corner.

"This is some different country," Garrett said. "It looks so dry."

"We're in the rain shadow of the Coast Range," Tarma told him.

The mist had long vanished, and a blazing sun's clear, bright face shone in the eastern sky. Brush, trees, and tussock grasses pushed up through stony ground. To the west, a green band formed against the horizon. "Belzedko Forest is coming up soon," Ina said.

The locomotive picked up speed as the terrain flattened. The landscape transitioned from tan to green, and trees in ever-increasing numbers reached for the heavens.

Rosik leaned close to the window. "Look at this forest! It's beautiful."

Young leaves glowed like a multitude of lights against dark conifers. "It's pretty this time of year," Ina said. "So much life."

Rosik smiled as he gazed at the view. "I bet it's pretty in autumn, too."

Ina imagined it. "Oh, it is. The leaves turn yellow and orange."

Tarma pointed toward the window. "Look! Deer!"

Ina watched a tail and a pair of hind legs disappear into a patch of tall, spindly brush. "Lots of things live here," Ina said, "bunnies, foxes, wildcats, little bears, bats, all kinds of birds and squirrels."

The forest thinned. Vast stretches of tall grasses and rotund shrubs now dominated the view.

"There's Wildman Peak!" Tarma said. "We're almost to Fingaktik."

Ina's eyes followed the contours of the gently rolling land.

In the distance, hills collided with folds of rugged, purple mountains. Snow frosted the faraway peaks. She knew this place well. She *was* close to her hometown. “Hi, Momma! We’ll be there soon. We’re almost to Kastedmo Springs.” Ina longed to see her mother’s eyes and sister’s smile. She anticipated the strong embrace of her father’s arms. Most of all, Ina wanted to give advice to her kid brother, Zerín. He was quickly approaching manhood, and she knew how tough it was to come of age in Bakhadaland. On the other hand, Ina dreaded reliving the horrible events from thirteen years ago, events that nearly claimed her young life and did claim the lives of so many she loved.

A twinge gripped her stomach as the train snaked around the last set of low, undulating hills. Like a snapshot from an old photo album it sat there—the little Fingaktik train station. Everything about this place welcomed her with both joyful comfort and terrible angst. Ina felt Rosik’s hand squeeze hers. He was worried about her. She had to say something before he interrogated her again. Ina gestured out the window. “See that little stone building? That’s where you buy tickets. And those other little buildings sell snacks and such.” The happy spirit of the old days had never returned, however. Long ago, the train station had a party feel. When the weather was fair, they’d sell ice cream, cotton candy, and fun little toys. Children would play games to win prizes. All that ended after the Izvyonsk Great Invasion thirteen years ago. The station more resembled a memorial now.

As they stepped off the train, the nostalgic scent of Fingaktik spring found Ina’s nose. Life, both natural and man-grown, burst forth from immense tracts of land that unfolded in all directions. Many shades of green, accentuated by dots of color in hues beyond count, extended before them like waves on the sea.

“This is incredible,” Garrett said. “It’s obvious why this place is called a breadbasket.”

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Rosik scanned the landscape. "We live in an overpopulated, hungry world. No wonder so many long to possess this country."

"Hey, guys," Tarma said, "there's a map over here. Want to take a look?"

Ina waited on the platform while Tarma, Garrett, and Rosik studied the map. As Ina stood there, a young, dark-haired woman and a little girl strolled her way. So content the two seemed! Ina took a step back to give them plenty of room to pass. A gust of warm air rushed by. Like an unseen hand of a mysterious spirit, the burst of wind pulled back a curtain separating the present from times gone by. Ina saw herself as a little six-year-old girl on that bloody day of war thirteen years ago. She pictured herself walking by this very spot. The ruffles of her lacy, pink-and-white dress fluttered with each step. She held hands with Solomor's fiancée, Vinsa. Ina recalled gazing up at her as they walked along. Vinsa's thick, long, dark brown hair and white lace veil tossed in a summer breeze.

Even today, thirteen years later, Ina remembered Vinsa's face: clear, olive skin; enormous, amber eyes; full lips; and a stately, long, wide-bridged nose. Such a beauty!

Time had not eroded Ina's memories of events from that day either. It was a pleasant summer Sunday. She had attended a Lotish service with Solomor and Vinsa. Afterward, Solomor headed straight home, but she and Vinsa stopped by the train station to buy cotton candy. She stood next to Vinsa as they pondered what color and flavor to buy. So many choices! She had chosen cherry flavor and Vinsa grape. When it came time to pay, Vinsa set her shiny, black purse down on a ledge sticking out from the side of the booth. Ina remembered how Vinsa's kind smile beamed as Vinsa handed a few coins to the old, jolly, cotton-candy man.

As if it had happened yesterday, Ina recalled seeing her own six-year-old face reflected in the glistening surface of the purse. Long, thin, sparkly ribbons hung in her hair, and a delicate lace scarf sat upon her head.

The wedding was just a few weeks away. Ina was almost as excited as Vinsa. Soon, they'd be sisters-in-law. Ina's family home was large, so Vinsa and Solomor planned to live there until their own house was built. She loved Vinsa, so she longed for the day Vinsa would move in.

Rosik tapped Ina on the shoulder. His touch transformed her into a young woman. The little girl in the fancy dress faded. "Ina, there's a truck coming. Tarma says it's your little brother, Zerin."

A cloud of dust surrounded a green vehicle that was zooming down a country road. "Yep, Tarma's right. That's my kid brother."

The old, green truck came to a stop. Zerin stepped out. What a joy to see him! He must've been working outside. Dust covered his work pants and broken-in, brown boots. Wind had mussed his yellowish-blond hair.

Ina ran to him. When he hugged her, she noticed he had grown taller since her last visit. As she pulled away from his embrace, Ina realized his shoulders had broadened. Chest and arm muscles bulged beneath the well-worn, button-up shirt that he was wearing. Like she often did in years past, Ina rubbed the top of his head.

"Something in my hair?" he asked.

Had he forgotten how she used to tease him? "Just some straw," Ina said.

Zerin's voice sounded strangely deep. "Tarma, it's good to see you."

Tarma was clenching her hands together. Something about her smile seemed—almost nervous. Zerin's face flushed. Tarma pushed hair away from her face before falling into his open arms.

"Come on, Zerin," Ina said before his embrace with Tarma ended, "there are a couple of guys you need to meet." Ina pulled him by the hand. "Zerin, this is my friend, Garrett Dartuk."

Garrett and Zerin shared bows.

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Ina noticed the expression on Zerín's face. She had told her family that Rosik and Garrett were friends from the Northern Mountains, not Domataree sailors from the Goodwill Ship. She knew Zerín already had doubts about the story.

Ina again took Zerín by the hand. She failed to stop a blush from invading her cheeks. What would Zerín think about her blossoming romance? Would her thumping heart betray her? "Zerín, this is Rosik Venkin."

"Ruzhman Venkin." Zerín bowed. So did Rosik.

Uh-oh, Rosik was giving her *that* look. Best to put distance between them. Too late. Rosik grasped her hand. Busted! Zerín's eyes widened. Ina had no idea what to say. Boyfriend? Just friends? Perhaps she should make a joke. Nothing came to mind.

Zerín said, "Everyone's gathering at the house. I apologize for bringing the truck. There's only room for three in the front, so two people will need to ride in the back. Fortunately, it's a beautiful day."

"Rosik and I will ride in the back," Garrett said. "Let the ladies sit inside."

Ina yanked her hand free from Rosik's grip. "Zerín, where's the car?" she asked.

"Poppa and Temlin have it."

"Where did they go?"

"They didn't say," Zerín told her.

Something was wrong. Her brother was evading her questions. Perhaps her father and brother-in-law were on military business, not farming business. "When will they be back?"

"Don't worry, Ina, they'll be back soon. They know you and Tarma are on the way." Zerín threw a cold glance at Rosik and said, "Along with friends."

The old vehicle creaked and bounced when Garrett and Rosik climbed into the truck bed. Ina was about to step into the dusty cab, but Tarma zipped past her and slid to the middle of the seat. Tarma swung a leg over to the driver side of the

gearshift. Why was she so excited about getting to the house? Tarma tossed back her thick, auburn hair as Zerín climbed into the driver seat. He started the engine. Times sure had changed. Zerín had ridden in this truck as a preschooler. Now he was driving it. Ina blinked away a film of tears.

The truck swung from side to side on a bumpy stretch of road. That's when Ina saw it. Tarma's leg was pressing against Zerín's. He didn't seem to mind. What did Tarma think she was doing? Zerín was only sixteen. She was almost three years older! However, Zerín's seventeenth birthday was not far away, and then he'd be an adult under Bakhadaree law. Ina leaned forward and studied her baby brother as he steered the vehicle down the dirt road. His boyish look was fast fading. He was nearly a man. Soon he'd be old enough to become a full-fledged national defender—old enough to fight in the front lines. Zerín was only four years old and safe in Domataland when the Great Invasion of thirteen years ago struck, and the attack of five years ago never reached the interior, so he didn't know war the way Ina did. She didn't want him to learn. Fresh tears dampened her eyes. When war returned, she hoped he'd get refugee status in Domataland and finish veterinary school there. He could also continue his study of music. Domataland had many good schools. Someone had to survive the wars. Someone had to stay alive and rebuild the country. What better person than a lover of animals and music?

"Look how big that tree got!" Tarma said.

"Which one?" Zerín asked.

Tarma pointed. "The one by the corner. The last time I was here, I climbed it because that big bull was chasing me. Remember?"

Zerín laughed, not the laugh of a child. "I almost forgot about that. I was helping birth a calf, and I heard screams. When I looked up, there you were, running across the field. Old Snorter was chasing you."

"The tree was skinnier then. It barely held me."

TOXIC SPHERE

"But, boy, Tarma, did you ever climb fast!"

"Old Snorter hates me. I don't know why."

"Maybe he doesn't hate you. Maybe he was chasing you because he thinks you're pretty." When they drove by the tree, Zerin said, "Yep, it is bigger now. Those kind grow quickly."

"It grew fast, like you did." Tarma's voice had changed. She sounded like ... well ... a woman!

Ina peeked at Zerin. A grin crossed his lips. Zerin and Tarma fell silent, but their bodies pressed ever closer together. Zerin and Tarma? Were they kidding?

Ina stared out the window. Stands of forests, wild fields, cultivated land, and orchards zoomed by.

"I remember this turn," Tarma said.

Through trees, Ina spotted the family home. Large, but understated, the building blended in with the surrounding land. The house sat on top of a gentle rise. Trees, grass, shrubs, and flowerbeds in spring blossom ringed the home as a moat circles a fairy-tale castle. Zerin parked near the side entrance.

Tarma's voice turned girlish again. "I don't remember that trellis."

Neither did Ina. Lattices—overwhelmed by vines, leaves, and flowers—arched over a narrow path leading to a small, covered porch.

"Momma built it," Zerin said, "mostly by herself. Culasa and I helped some."

Ina leaned forward to get a full view through the windshield. "It's pretty."

Zerin and Tarma both stared at her as if they had forgotten she was there.

The truck bounced. In the mirror, Ina saw Garrett and Rosik. They were standing in the truck bed. The two men then leapt out as easily as most people step off a curb.

Zerin noticed as well. "Wow! Your friends are athletic," he said.

Ina climbed out of the cab. She expected Tarma to be behind her, but Tarma slid across the seat and followed Zerin out the

driver side. So many things were changing! The world felt out of control, like a wild wind had picked her up and flung her away from comfort and innocence.

The door at the back of the porch swung open.

"Momma!" Ina dashed down the walkway. Her mother's arms rescued her from the raging winds. Ina was home. She pulled away from her mother's embrace. Like light from heaven her mother seemed with her blond hair, pale yellow dress, and flowery apron.

Tears moistened her mother's blue eyes. "My Inalenta! I've missed you."

Ina took hold of her mother's arm. "Come on, Momma, there are people you need to meet." She clung to her mother's side as they strolled in the dappled shadow of the trellis.

They reached the end of the path. Her mother's smile disappeared as quickly as the shade. "So these are the ruzhmen you spoke of? The lumbermen from the north?"

"Yes, Momma." Ina's cheeks flushed. Her mother had this ... instinct. "Guys, this is my mother, Tinsa Ruzh-Tovaleta." Ina placed a hand on Garrett's shoulder. "Momma, this is Garrett Dartuk."

Garrett bowed deeply, as would a Domat, not a Bakhad. "Lady Ruzh-Tovaleta."

"And this is Rosik Venkin, Momma." Ina's hands trembled. She hoped her mother wouldn't notice.

Rosik bent forward into a formal bow. "At your service, Lady Tinsa Ruzh-Tovaleta."

"Ruzhman ... was it *Venkin*?" Tinsa said.

"Yes, Lady."

The smile returned to Tinsa's face. "Tarmalenta, my dear! I'm so glad you were able to join Ina on this trip. It's been too long."

Tarma's eyes sparkled. "It has. Much too long, Lady Ruzh-Tovaleta. It's wonderful to be back."

Tinsa gave Tarma a long hug. Then she touched Tarma's chin. "My, haven't you grown lovely. You glow like the sun."

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Tarma's cheeks reddened. "Thank you, Lady."

Ina wondered if her mother suspected that Zerín was the cause of Tarma's *glow*.

"Please, everyone, let's go inside," Tinsa said.

Ina held her mother's arm as they headed toward the house. How should she break the news about her relationship with Lieutenant Rosik Venkin?

The daytime dining room was brighter than Ina recalled. "It looks different in here."

"We painted it," Tinsa told her. "With all the troubles in the world, this lighter color gives it more cheer. Do you like it?"

"I do. It's very nice, Momma."

"Look at the table!" Tarma said. "Lady, you sure went through a lot of trouble for us."

Light spilled through huge alcove windows. Dishes, silverware, and cups twinkled upon a white tablecloth.

Worry muted the joy in Tinsa's smile. "There's so much uncertainty, so much bad news. Who knows when we'll meet again like this? It's wonderful to share time with family and friends." Tinsa gestured toward the table. "Please, sit! Sit!"

Ina took a seat. Rosik plopped down in the chair to her right. She made a point of ignoring him, but she felt his eyes on her. What if he did something ... stupid? Ina scooted her chair a little farther away. "Momma, is Culasa here?" she asked.

"Yes, she's in the kitchen."

Ina jumped to her feet. "I'll go help her."

"No need, dear," Tinsa said, "everything's ready."

Ina sat down. Rosik was still watching her. "So, Momma, where are the kids?"

"Vosmor and Zolena are in school. Ketsar is at playtime at the Defenders Lodge."

Rosik spoke up. "Defenders Lodge?"

"Yes, Ruzhman Venkin," Tinsa said, "a *National Defenders* lodge."

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"Yes ... yes, of course." Rosik stumbled over his words. "Ina ... she told me her nephew, Ketsar, is just three years old."

"They have a playground there," Zerin said, "so the kids can play and learn at the same time. And be with other National Defenders' children."

"A playground." Rosik cleared his throat. "Well, that's nice. A nice feature."

The kitchen door swung open. Culasa walked into the dining room. Her pale skin glowed like white quartz. She carried a large pot.

Garrett stood up. "Please, Lady, allow me."

"Thank you, Ruzhman, but I can handle it." Culasa set the pot down on the table.

"Garrett, Rosik," Ina said, "this is Culasa, my big sister."

"Lady, I'm Garrett Dartuk, at your service." He bowed.

"Culasa Ruzh-Loigta. It's a pleasure to meet you, Ruzhman Dartuk. And Tarma, it's good to see you again. How pretty you look!" Culasa pulled Tarma close.

Ina heard Rosik's chair squeak as he pushed it away from the table. A fork clinked against his plate as he rose. Luck was with him. Nothing broke. Nothing tumbled to the floor. "Lady Culasa Ruzh-Loigta, Rosik Venkin, at your service."

"Ruzhman Venkin."

From the corner of her eye, Ina saw Rosik sit down. He scooted the chair closer to the table. More movement. Then it happened. Rosik took hold of her right hand. The room fell silent.

Culasa's blue eyes—as pale as a winter sky filled with ice crystals, and now every bit as cold—flashed at Ina. "Ina, who is this man?"

Ina's heart pounded. No hiding it now. She stood up. Still holding his hand, Ina said, "Momma, Culasa, Zerin ... Rosik is my boyfriend."

Everyone stared at her except Garrett. He preoccupied himself by arranging a stack of apple slices on his plate.

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"Boyfriend!" Culasa said. "When did this happen? You didn't say anything about a boyfriend. You said you were bringing friends from the Northern Mountains."

Ina's voice shook. "It happened just recently." Then the breath of her spirit home fell upon her. She sat down. Rosik was next to her as he should be. "It just happened, but in some ways, it happened many long ages ago."

"Well then," Tinsa said, "let's eat while the food is fresh and hot."

No one disobeyed, not even Culasa.



Tarma Nedola felt Garrett's shoulder touch hers. "Um, Tarma, what just happened?"

"Rosik grabbed Ina's hand."

"So?"

"In Bakhadaland, especially in the interior, people don't show signs of affection until a relationship is ... announced."

"Oh." Garrett scooped up more food. "Good thing Ina's relatives don't stay mad long."

"Indeed a good thing," Tarma said. These were good people. Smiles, laughs, and the clanking of silverware stirred in the room as a rose's scent wafts through a garden. Tarma breathed in the warmth, comfort, and camaraderie of family and friends. She loved being here. Tarma recalled her own family. Most who survived left for Domataland or Fletchia. Tarma couldn't bring herself to leave, not without first fighting for her homeland. Then there was Zerin, always a cute kid, and now a handsome man. So gifted, kind, and smart! Tarma had been staring in his direction too long. His eyes locked on hers. Her body felt exposed, like it was dangling from the face of a cliff.

A question from Culasa broke the spell. "Zerin, when do your classes end tomorrow?"

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In another room, a door slammed. Footsteps thumped against the floor. "Uh-oh," Tarma said to Garrett, "Ina's poppa is home."

The dining room door opened. In walked Maktar Tovalet and Culasa's husband, Temlin Loigt. Their faces and hands were clean, but wind had tousled their blond hair. Sun had reddened their skin.

Garrett and Rosik sprang to their feet.

"Poppa!" Like a child, Ina ran to her father. She fell into his arms.

"Inalenta, my baby!" Maktar said. "I am so thankful you have come. And Tarmalenta, you brighten any room. I'm so glad you were able to join Ina on this trip."

"Thank you, Ruzhman."

Maktar was a good-looking man. Zerin resembled him in many ways.

Ina said, "Poppa, this is Garrett Dartuk and that's ... Rosik Venkin. Guys, this is my father, Maktar Tovalet." Ina took hold of Temlin's arm. "And this is Culasa's husband, Temlin Loigt."

After greeting bows, Maktar took a seat at the table. Tarma felt a tap against her left ankle.

"My apologies, Tarmalenta. I didn't mean to kick you. My banged up knee still doesn't bend so well."

Tarma knew Maktar was embarrassed about his war injury. His knee would likely never bend beyond a few degrees. Unless, perhaps, he found a way to have surgery in Domataland. "Is that why, Ruzhman? I was hoping you were flirting with me."

"Ah, my dear, I don't think my wife would let me get away with it. I'd be sleeping in the barn for a week."

"A week?" Tinsa said. "You'd be out there until next spring."

Everyone laughed, and, this time, Tarma caught Zerin looking at *her*. She pretended not to notice.

Maktar scanned the table. "You ladies prepared quite a feast."

"Four hungry men," Culasa said. "Lots of mouths to feed."

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Maktar corrected her. "Five hungry men. Zerin's seventeenth birthday is coming up soon. He'll be of age."

Tinsa refilled a serving bowl that Zerin had emptied. "He already eats more than the rest of us put together."

Food stuffed Zerin's cheeks. "Zerin, you look like a squirrel!" Tarma said.



Lieutenant Rosik Venkin knew something was amiss. Ina had scooted her chair so far away that another person would fit between them. Maktar and Temlin didn't try to conceal the frequent glances they threw his way, and Ina's mother and sister kept glaring. Rosik wasn't sure if Zerin held a good impression of him either.

"Everyone ready for dessert?" Tinsa asked.

No one objected.

Ina and Tarma helped Tinsa and Culasa clear the table. Ina seemed relieved by the chance to escape. With dishes, cups, and silverware in hand, the women disappeared into the kitchen. To Rosik's relief, he noticed that Maktar was keeping an eye on Garrett as well. Temlin, too, was leaning back in his chair and studying both him and Garrett.

When at last Maktar spoke, his voice was low. "Pardon me for saying so, but you two ruzhmen don't look like woodsmen from the Northern Mountains. How did you arrive? By water? Land? Parachute?"

Caution filled Garrett's words. "By water, Ruzhman."

"By ship?"

Garrett nodded.

"What is it you need?" Maktar asked.

"A good feel for the terrain, an understanding of local infrastructure, knowledge of places the Izvyon used in the past for drop zones and supply lines. Ruzhman Tovalet, you can say, Rosik and I are interested in history."

"History of warfare, I assume?"

"Yes, Ruzhman," Garrett said.

Maktar gestured toward Temlin and Zerin. "I think the three of us can help you with that. We are also deeply interested in ... local military history."

Rosik again felt Maktar's gaze. Rosik reminded himself who this man was: Ina's poppa.

"Son, where are you from?" Maktar asked.

Rosik swallowed hard. What or how much should he say? Garrett wasn't coming to the rescue. "My, my hometown is Vadsech, Ruzhman Tovalet."

Maktar took a long drink of tea. "Vadsech, eh? So there is one thing my daughter told us that is true; you are from the north, just farther north than we expected."

The door to the kitchen swung open. The women were laughing and carrying more food.

"Look at all this yummy stuff," Tarma said. She placed a tray of desserts in front of Zerin. "For our hungry squirrel." She gave him a wink.

Tinsa put new place settings down on the table. Still more food and drink appeared.

Ina laughed and smiled as she plopped down in her seat. She slid her chair closer to Rosik's. "So, Rosik, what do you think? Does this stuff look scrumptious or what?"

"Delicious! Thank you, ladies." Rosik wasn't sure what happened, but Ina was happy now. Maybe girl talk in the kitchen. He had heard of such mysterious things.

Ina scooped up a spoonful of cobbler and dropped it on her plate. She then rested her head on his shoulder. Thank goodness she had forgiven him for whatever it was he had done. He swung an arm around her shoulders.

A thump rattled the table. Garrett grabbed a cup as coffee threatened to spill. Dishes quivered. Silverware clanged. Temlin's eyes widened—an expression Rosik would've expected if an Izvyonsk soldier entered the room. Culasa seemed frightened. Tarma cringed.

Once again, the dinnerware vibrated. This time Rosik

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understood why; Maktar's big right fist slammed into the tabletop. His glare could've burned a hole through steel. Without averting his eyes, Maktar reached for his liquor glass. He was not pleased to find it empty. Tarma hurried to fill it with the nearest alcoholic beverage. Maktar finished his drink in one gulp. The table quaked again when he set the glass down.

Ina snuggled closer. Her hair smelled of strawberries.

Maktar's words sounded more like thunder than human speech. "Ina Tovaleta, explain the meaning of this."

"We're in love, Poppa."

"In love? How can you be in love? Your behavior is disgraceful."

"Being in love is no disgrace, Poppa. It's the most wonderful and most painful thing in the world."

A snarl twisted Maktar's lips. "He's a foreigner. Did you know that? He's a military man. He has a mission to perform. He will leave you. He will likely die in combat. Then what will you have? Nothing! And what do you know about him, about his family? How do you know if he's compatible with you, with us?"

"It's true he's a warrior, and he will need to leave me, at least for a while," Ina said. "Because he must leave makes it all the more imperative that we skip the formalities so we can be together as much as possible. If he dies in combat, that makes it all the more imperative. Besides, I, too, am a warrior. I, too, can die when war starts again, just as surely as he can. And are you not a warrior, Poppa? And Temlin? Yet you have your wives. And I do know Rosik. He is kind and educated and fun. I know his heart. I've felt his spirit. That's how I know we are compatible. That's how I know I love him."

Tears streamed from Ina's eyes. Her words stabbed Rosik's heart. This beautiful woman loved him. She challenged an angry father to say so. Rosik dabbed away Ina's tears with a napkin.

"So, young Rosik," Maktar said, "tell me, what do you want with my daughter?"

"I want to be with her, Ruzhman. From the moment we first met, I knew I have loved her all of my life. It's a feeling I cannot describe. Our love is something rediscovered rather than something new. I feel as if our souls have always been united, but physical bodies separate us until at last we meet again. I love her more than I love my own life—far more. I would die for her in an instant."

"What kind of crazy talk is this?" Maktar said. "*Souls always been united*. What the heck does that mean? What are you? Some kind of nutball philosopher or starving poet? What will you do? Read verses to the Izvyon when they pour across the western border?"

"I am neither a philosopher nor a poet," Rosik said, "but I do want to be with your daughter for whatever time we have in this life, be it one hour or a hundred years. And when this life is over, I want to be with her for eternity."

"You are a soldier of Domataland," Maktar said. "Why are you here?"

The worst part was over. Rosik felt courage now. "We volunteered. We cannot disclose details, but we come by choice. I visited Bakhadaland in the past and fell in love with this place. I saw what the Izvyon have done ... are still doing. Bakhadaland is our ally. We have few friends in this world, as is the case for you. Our fates, our security, are intertwined. I cannot speak for all Domats, but I can speak for myself. That is why I volunteered." He touched Ina's tear-stained face. The love he felt was strong and caressing, like floating in a warm sea. "Now I have another reason to be here. My eternal love is here. Laugh if you wish, but it is what I feel for Ina."

"And what I feel for him," Ina said.

Maktar shook his head. "You do understand, the two of you are heading for heartbreak."

"Poppa, it's too late for me. I was lost the moment I met him."

"Tarmalenta," Maktar said, "do you mind filling my glass with that orange foo-foo drink over there?"

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Tarma filled it.

Maktar held up the glass. "Then let us drink ... to love!"

Everyone held up a glass. "To love!"



Alone in the kitchen, Tinsa Ruzh-Tovaleta dried the last dish. It had been a great time with family and friends. Hope had been renewed as well. Domataland had troops—volunteers—on the ground in Bakhadaland. A less pleasant thought dampened the joy. The very fact that Domataree troops had arrived must mean one thing; the Domataree government believed fresh war with Izvyona was on the way. Right now, however, her loved ones were here. Nothing else mattered.

The kitchen clean, she headed toward the staircase. The upstairs bedrooms were not yet ready for her guests. As she passed by hallway windows, she saw Zerín and Tarma in the front yard. Squealing and laughing like children half their ages, they were dashing about the trees and shrubs. Yet another reason to be grateful. No matter what happened in the future and no matter how desperate the past, those two young people were happy. Tinsa had climbed only a few steps when she heard music. It had to be Zerín. He had played well since childhood, yet this melody had a depth of emotion to it far beyond what she would expect from a sixteen-year-old. She walked down the stairs and peered outside. Tarma and Zerín were sitting beneath trees. He played a flute. Tarma swayed to the music.

Tinsa was listening to the song when she spotted Maktar. He was gazing out the living room windows. Maktar was not prone to staring off into space. Something must be wrong. Tinsa walked up to him. Through the windows, she saw Ina and Rosik. They were sitting on a bench in the flower garden.

"Our daughter is heading for heartache," Maktar said. "This will be a difficult, and I fear short, romance. That young man knows how he feels now, but I wonder how he'll feel

when he returns to his Domataree military base, wherever that is."

"It will be difficult," Tinsa said, "but it's good to know that our daughter is capable of falling in love. I've often wondered if these horrible wars would've made it impossible for her. Look at our poor Solomor. He can hardly bear coming home after what happened to Vinsa. Thirteen years, and he still can't accept her death."

"You know, Tinsa, if Inalenta's romance is serious, we may lose our daughter to Domataland. She may join him there. Perhaps it would be a good thing. The young man says he's from Vadsech. Domataland's major cities and military installations will be enemy targets, but places like Vadsech may be safe havens for a while. Our Inalenta may be safe there."

Doubt haunted Tinsa like a marauding illness. "The area around Vadsech is filled with water. Fresh water's a hot commodity these days."

"Before an enemy can take water," Maktar told her, "they have to subdue the countryside. They must be careful, or they'll destroy the very resource they want to steal. Vadsech might hold out longer than many places."

Zerin's music slowed to a haunting, sad tune. Yet there was something else about it; a glimmer of hope trickled through the melody.

"Zerin's skill has grown," Maktar said. "Our youngest is almost a man."

Tinsa watched Ina and Rosik snuggle while Zerin's music floated by, sweet on the air. "Maybe if Inalenta goes to Vadsech, she can take Zerin, the grandkids, and Tarmalenta with her. Or maybe we should send them all to Togna, instead. It would be a rough life: hot, impoverished, desolate. But there's nothing in that forsaken place people want except sunshine and elbow room. Togna may be the last safe place on this suffering planet of ours."

"Elbow room is a hot commodity for countries like Sohn-Sur," Maktar said, "and the Tognalese have little means

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to defend themselves. They've lost their warlike spirit. As they've done for centuries, they'll wait for their remoteness, brutal weather, and harsh land to take their toll on invaders."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right," Tinsa said. "Even Togna is no longer safe."

Maktar's grim expression deepened. "This time the war is going to be worse. Cadona is arming Izvyona with fancy, new weapons that are more powerful than we've ever faced. It will be the toughest fight of our lives."

Tinsa again observed Ina, as beautiful as a rainbow, and the handsome Domataree man by her daughter's side. "Then it's the right thing, not to hinder Inalenta's love for this fellow. Our daughter may be wiser than we are. She understands there is precious little time." Tinsa took Maktar's hand. "I just remembered the funniest thing," she said.

"What's that?"

"A crazy thing I did when I was first falling head over heels for you."

"Tinsa, what did you do?"

"Every day when I walked home from class, I'd see you running on the school track. On one scorching day, you were the only one out there. My, were you sweating! And your face was so red! Oh, my goodness, it was red. Just as I was walking by, you finished your run. You took off your shirt and sat down on a bench by the sidewalk. You swung a towel around your neck and took a big drink of water. When you looked up at me, oh, my! I thought my heart would stop right then and there. Then you looked away like you weren't interested in the least."

Tinsa felt Maktar's arm slip around her waist.

"You walked that route every day at the same time," he said, "so that's when I'd run. I was too scared to talk to you."

"You picked that time to run so you could see me walk by?"

"I did. Every day. Even when it was so hot I thought I'd melt."

"Oh, my," Tinsa said, "I went several blocks out of my way

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to walk by the track, just to see you.”

Maktar pulled her close. “You never told me that.”

“Well, my dear, you never told me either.”

Maktar touched her cheek. “I could run fast back then,” he said, “before I messed up my knee.”

“War messed up your knee. You were injured fighting for our country.”

“You still love me?”

“Now more than ever, my soldier.”

CHAPTER 31

BOUNTY HUNTERS

Cadona City, Cadona
Friday, April 14, Year 1007 EE
3:30 a.m.

Leeha Ritsagin sat upright in bed. What made that noise? Maybe Cookie Davis dropped something in the living room.

More thumps rattled the nighttime stillness. Someone was pounding on the apartment door. Leeha checked the time. Who would show up at this hour? What if the police were coming for her?

Cookie darted into the bedroom. "Leeha, someone's out there!"

More knocks. The blows rang with urgency.

"Leeha, what if it's my ex? He'll kill both of us! The cops would never get here in time."

Leeha worried it *was* the cops. She swung off her covers and grabbed a table lamp.

"What are you doing with the lamp?" Cookie asked.

"Weapon," Leeha said.

Leeha crept up to the apartment door. She heard Cookie tiptoeing behind her. Leeha clenched the neck of the lamp. Her right eye neared the peephole.

A tiny, white-haired woman stood in the hallway. Mrs. Furley? Leeha set the lamp on the floor. "Cookie, it's one of my neighbors. There's a big, hairy guy with her. I doubt he's your ex." He didn't look like a policeman either.

Cookie peeked out. "No, it's not my ex. Thank goodness!"

Leeha opened the door. "Mrs. Furley, what's wrong?"

“Sorry to wake you. I know it’s early. This is Toofy, my grandson. I stayed at the casino a little too long, so Toofy came to get me. I didn’t want to go. I was on a winning streak and—”

“Grandma!” Toofy said. His voice was as gruff as his appearance.

“Oh, sorry, dear. Anyways, when we got here, we saw a man hanging around your Monarch. He was looking in the windows and trying the doors. I says to Toofy, ‘I know the young lady who owns that car.’ I knew right away something wasn’t right, so we checked it out. Didn’t we, Toofy? Toofy chased him off, but the guy was really nosing around.”

“He sure was,” Toofy said.

Mrs. Furley jabbed Toofy with an elbow. “Show them the picture you took.”

Toofy held up his personal device.

“Do you girls know this fellow?” Mrs. Furley asked.

Leeha examined the photo of a scruffy man. The first thought that came to mind was *a little worm*. “He doesn’t look familiar to me.”

Cookie leaned forward and squinted at the image. “No, I don’t recognize him.”

“Well, neither do I,” Mrs. Furley said. Her voice turned into a raspy whisper. “I don’t like the looks of him.”

Leeha didn’t either. She also noticed Toofy eyeing Cookie. Lots of guys eyed her, so no surprise there. But Toofy did look a bit strange himself. Certainly his name didn’t match his burly body. Curls of chest hair rolled out around the collar of his grimy, too-small, too-old T-shirt.

“Anyways, my grandson has a theory. Tell her, Toofy. He’s such a smart boy. Knows all about cars. What are you waiting for? Come on, tell her!”

“I would if you’d stop talking, Grandma.” Toofy cleared his throat. “As you ladies may know, they quit making Monarchs years ago. Spare parts can be hard to find. It’s lots cheaper to buy parts than buy a new car, and Monarchs, as reliable as they are, are popular in this bad economy.”

TOXIC SPHERE

"You think this guy wants to steal my car?" Leeha found it hard to believe.

Toofy stared at Cookie as he spoke. "I sure do. These crime rings hire private eyes and even bounty hunters. This guy could be a scout out looking for targets. If he saw what the ring wants, they'll be back with a tow truck. Do you want the pic of this guy?"

"Yes, please," Leeha said. "Thanks for letting us know."

Mrs. Furley gave Leeha a big, yellow-toothed smile. "You're welcome, dear. I'll keep an eye out, but you may want to invest in a security system for your car. Toofy can help you. He knows lots about cars."

"I'll give it some thought," Leeha told her. "Thanks again."

"Ladies." Toofy grinned—at Cookie, of course.

Leeha shut the door even though Toofy still stood in the hallway with a silly look on his face.

"Wow! That's creepy," Cookie said, "some guy snooping around your car. Maybe since Toofy scared him off, he won't come back."

Leeha felt a chill. Was the wormy guy searching for the weird document? Maybe he expected to find it in her vehicle. Maybe, somehow, he knew. "Cookie, what if he wasn't out to steal my car?"

"Why else would he be snooping around in the middle of the night?"

Leeha hadn't told Cookie about the document hidden beneath the kitchen cabinets. "I ... I don't know. It's just so weird. Of all the cars out there, this wormy guy picks mine."

"It'll be daylight soon," Cookie said. "Then we can look into security options."

"Good idea. Good night, Cookie."

"Night, Leeha. Don't worry, Toofy's still here, and somehow I have a feeling Mrs. Furley will be up for a while. She's pretty wired."

Leeha picked up the lamp and went to her bedroom. She paced the floor. Bounty hunters out searching for Monarchs

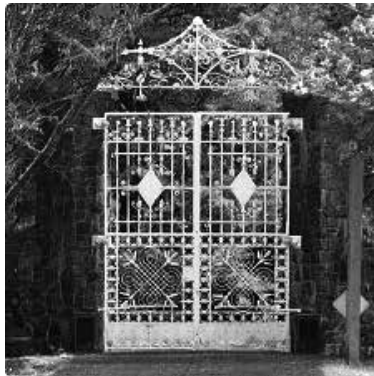
to steal? Leeha sat down at her desk and turned on the computer. She sent the picture of the wormy guy to her viewplane. The man's image grew large. Greasy hair dripped down to his shoulders. A bushy, sandy blond mustache drooped over his pronounced upper lip. The scruffy afternoon shadow was twice as thick beneath his chin than on his cheeks. The shirt he wore needed to be ironed, and the colors in the fabric's plaid pattern seriously did not match the color of his baggy pants. Could this guy be a bounty hunter? A private investigator?

She must think about something else. A beautiful image popped up on her computer viewplane. Leeha admired blue skies, sandy beaches, green hills, and sheer cliffs. It was still Thursday afternoon over there in Bakhadaland. Such a pretty spot! Too bad things were so messed up in that part of the world. Heck, even the people who wrote the weird document wanted to blow up the place. She scanned through images of a beautiful forest and then went back to bed.

CHAPTER 32

CONFESSIONS

“Warning! Pro-Izvoyonsk paramilitary cells and Izvoyonsk special forces are attacking convoys of civilian refugees and wounded defenders who are en route to Fingaktik. Do not travel above ground. Make for underground tunnels leading to the Motek Tovalet Estate Command Center”



*Great Invasion National Defender Alert
Sent to Civil Defense Leaders
Year 994 of the Enlightened Epoch*

***Fingaktik, Bakhadaland
Thursday, April 13, Year 1007 EE
3:00 p.m.***

Ina Tovaleta sat in her mother’s flower-filled garden. A warm breeze caressed her face. Rosik sat by her side. Perhaps the time had come to share the truth of her corrupt childhood.

"Rosik, do you want to see where our old house used to be?"

"Sure, I'd love to see it."

Ina took Rosik's hand and led him along a road that she often had followed as a child.

Such a perfect spring day! She and Rosik strolled by groves of leafy trees, reedy meadows, and wild grasslands. A gentle breeze blew through her pale hair. She heard only sounds of nature: the rustling of leaves, rattling of grasses, chirping or squawking of birds, and buzzing of insects.

"Ina, what happened to these buildings? So many have burn marks."

Memories rose to the surface. Ina saw what once was—a smooth street, gardens circling painted farmhouses, chickens pecking at the ground, and goats wiggling their tails as they munched on grass.

"Ina, what's wrong?"

"When I was a kid, this was a busy road. Several families lived here. After the Great Invasion, nothing was left standing."

"Why haven't people rebuilt?"

"We can't return yet. Too many bad things happened. Nature is still cleansing the land, turning evil into goodness." She stopped walking. Tall spring grasses tossed about in the breeze. The supple, green blades formed a dense carpet that ran from the edge of the road and over the remains of a farmhouse. A section of a rock chimney and a grass-covered foundation pushed up from the lush earth.

"Was this your home, Ina?"

"No, the Deksov family lived here. The Izvyon blew their house up in the Great Invasion. Emyla Deksova, my best friend, was six years old at the time, like I was. They found her body in the basement. Her grandfather saved my life that day, but he didn't live to see the sun set." Ina placed a hand on her chest. Through the cloth of the dress, she felt the edges of her Holy Triad pendant. She whispered a Lotish prayer for the Deksov family and then headed down the street.

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Her sorrow grew. Soon they reached the remains of her old home. She pointed across a sea of shiny grasses. "Our old house was there. It's hard to see. Not much is left."

Rosik's voice was soft and kind. "So this is where you lived when the Izvyon invaded?"

"It is. It was a big farmhouse. Even bigger than the one we have now. The house wasn't destroyed during the invasion itself. The Izvyon used it as a regional headquarters. It was destroyed later, near the end of the rebellion. The Izvyon laid waste to everything when they realized we had won the war. Do you remember me telling you about Vinsa?"

"Solomor's fiancée?"

"Yeah. She died in this house. And so did Emyla's grandpa, just after he saved my life." Ina walked toward the ruins. Soft grass tickled her ankles. "I can't believe the fence is still standing. We always kept it painted green. It used to run all the way around the house. We had a big yard and gardens, just like we do at our new place."

Ina guided Rosik down a hard-packed strip of ground that extended from the road to the tumbled foundation. She pictured a warm spring day from years long gone by. She was wearing a bright yellow dress and had a bow in her hair. She was running down the driveway toward the big porch that once stood there. It seemed another lifetime—a life stolen from her. Ina sat down on a large block. What part of the house it once was, she didn't know.

Rosik took a seat next to her. He said, "It's hard to believe so many bad things have happened here. Except for the look on your face and the sorrow in your voice, all I feel here is life. It's hard to imagine war machines, soldiers, gunfire, and death."

"You know war, don't you?" Ina asked.

"Unfortunately, I do. Garrett and I both fought terrorists in Estdeventia. The Estdevent Mountains are very different from this place, though. They're dry and almost barren. I was about to say violence and fighting don't seem as foreign in such lands, but that assessment is unfair. Growing up in Vadsech,

in the Land of Many Rivers, I'm used to green, so I don't easily see beauty in arid places. But it's there. I remember sitting outside one quiet evening. I saw birds, soft gray in color. They have these beautiful faces and huge, dark eyes. And their voices! As amazing as Zerín's music. They raise their young in prickly, scraggly bushes. These bushes, they look dead even when they're alive. But when the sun goes down after a hot day, the scent of the shrubs fills the mountains."

"You're a good person," Ina said.

"I try to be."

She squeezed his hand. "Rosik, I think I can tell you now ... what happened here. If you still want to know."

"Of course I do."

"I'm ashamed because I'm such a weak person. Others had worse things happen to them, but they're able to let go. Yet here I am, unable to forget." Ina closed her eyes. "I have no strength of character. I'm a coward."

"Tell me, Ina. Then I'll let you know if I think you're a coward."

"Okay, and if you think less of me, I'll understand."

"All right."

How easily that terrible day from thirteen years ago came to life.

"We didn't think the Izvyon would attack Fingaktik. We all thought they'd focus on capturing Satur. We thought we were still safe.

"The capital, though, was under siege, so the plan was to regroup forces in the east and launch a big assault against the Izvyon in the west, but Fingaktik was in chaos. Lots of people fled the war and came here. We ran out of room to house everyone, so we had to put up tents. A saying back then was, *Fingaktik had more refugees than residents*. The military brought wounded national defenders here, too. The hospitals were crammed full.

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“Sometimes, important meetings were held in our house. Our National Defenders and Civil Defense leaders would get together and discuss strategy. They were worried about morale, so they decided to put on a High Summer Festival. Our leaders thought a traditional celebration would cheer people up. They thought it would show people we were not going to let the Izvyon roll over us.

“Poppa, Momma, and Culasa went to the Northern Mountains to pick berries and mushrooms for the festival. Zerin was only four at the time, so Momma took him along, too.

“Solomor, Vinsa, and I stayed behind. On the day of the attack, we went to a Lotish service. We got all dressed up, like we do on holy days. Vinsa thought it would show others we were not afraid, that we were not broken. We were Bakhad and proud and strong. I wore my favorite pink-and-white dress. It was really frilly and had little hearts embroidered on it. Vinsa tied shiny ribbons in my hair.

“After the service, Solomor went straight home, but Vinsa and I went to the train station to buy cotton candy. It was a beautiful day, so Vinsa and I were looking forward to a stroll in the sunshine.”

The memories grew even more vivid. Ina recalled the sweet, cherry taste of red cotton candy. She remembered how her shiny, pink shoes glistened with every step.

“Vinsa and I were walking home. From behind us, we heard a horn honking. We couldn’t imagine what was wrong. We recognized the vehicle. It belonged to the Yazdek family. The eldest son was driving. He slammed on the brakes and shouted at us. The whole family was piled in the car. They all looked scared to death. They told us Izvyonsk soldiers and equipment had been airlifted in. Enemy troops would arrive in Fingaktik within an hour. The Yazdek’s didn’t have room for us in the car, so Vinsa and I ran home as fast as we could.”

Like yesterday, it seemed.

"When we got home, we saw Solomor by our truck. He had just received word and was coming to get Vinsa and me. He was all excited and shouting at us. He told us to go into the house, hide in the attic, and wait for him.

"Vinsa grabbed my arm and pulled me inside. She dragged me to the attic and told me to keep an eye out for the Izvyon.

"The attic had a big window on one end, so I sat on the floor and watched what was happening outside.

"Everything looked like it always did. It was summer, so I saw crop fields, farmhouses, pastures, and trees.

"The first thing that happened was a siren. We had warning stations around Fingaktik. They'd test the equipment sometimes, so I knew what the sirens sounded like, but this time it wasn't a test. It was for real. We heard a popping sound; the siren stopped."

Ina brushed tears from her cheeks. For thirteen years, these memories had been locked away. Now the prison that sequestered these dark thoughts was weakening.

"A little later, I saw a convoy of five military vehicles. Solomor saw them, too. He ran into the house. He was carrying weapons. Vinsa was upset. She told him that those weapons wouldn't work against the body armor that Izvyonsk soldiers wore. Solomor told her they were the only weapons that we had.

"Solomor and Vinsa argued. I think Vinsa wanted to leave the house, but Solomor told her there wasn't time.

"He gave me a camo poncho and a holster with a pistol in it. He told me if I had to shoot an Izvyonsk soldier, I must aim for the face, neck, groin, knees, and feet. Those were the most vulnerable points in the armor.

"We heard noises outside. I knew what it was. Vehicles came to the house. It was the Izvyon. Solomor told me to hide

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behind the chimney and to be very quiet. He said the soldiers might come up the stairs. He said if that happens, I should crawl out the little window and hide on the roof until the soldiers went away.

"I hid behind the chimney and looked out the little window. I felt safe peeking out because, on that side, trees and vines grew near the house.

"I saw soldiers walking around in the yard. I'd never seen a face-shield before. I freaked out. Instead of faces, the Izvyon had green, oval-shaped holes. I was watching the soldiers, when, out of nowhere, the floorboards shook. It was so weird! After a few seconds, there was no sound or shaking at all, like how I imagine space would be. Then there was this blinding flash and huge explosion. The whole house felt like it moved.

"I peeked around the chimney and looked out the big window. Where ... where Emyla Deksova's house used to be, all I saw was smoke.

"It was then someone knocked on our front door. Vinsa wanted to go down and answer it. She said the soldiers would be less likely to kill a woman. Solomor told her not to go. He said if someone went down, it would be him.

"Vinsa didn't listen. When Solomor wasn't looking, she went downstairs. She called out, *I am unarmed*. I heard a bunch of noises; things were breaking. Vinsa screamed and screamed.

"I still remember Solomor's eyes. I'd never seen his face like that before, like he was terrified. He was always so brave! But when he looked at me, his face was totally white, like a bleached sheet. He yelled at me. He told me to leave, to crawl out the little window and hide on the roof. I was too scared to move.

"Solomor pointed his rifle down the stairs and started shooting. There was so much noise! I crouched down behind the chimney. I put my hands over my ears and prayed the racket would stop. I just cowered in the corner. I didn't do a single thing to help.

"Solomor cried out. I think he was in pain. I heard a noise, like something fell. I didn't hear his rifle anymore.

"Everything got quiet. The only sounds were footsteps on the stairs. I knew where the creaks were, so I knew someone was near the top of the staircase.

"I peeked around the chimney again. Five soldiers were standing in the attic.

"Solomor was lying on his left side. I saw his back. His camo poncho was pushed up on his body. His shirt was soaked in blood. He wasn't moving. Three of the soldiers went back downstairs. The two remaining men hovered over Solomor's body.

"The soldier closest to me pointed his weapon at Solomor.

"I remembered my pistol. My hand didn't shake. Not at all. Not even a little. I shot the soldier. It was easy to shoot him, but the bullets, they just bounced off his armor.

"In this evil, sarcastic voice, the soldier said, *Look at this pretty, little girl.* The other soldier left. The one who stayed walked toward me. I shot and shot and shot until I ran out of bullets. All the bullets bounced off him. I tried to reload. He took the pistol from me and threw it aside.

"The creep pushed me to the floor. He kept making these awful grunting noises. He peeled the green shield from his face. He looked better with the shield. His face was ugly and pale, like a dead thing whose flesh lacked color.

"Then he hurt me. He held my nose shut. I couldn't breathe. He stuck his tongue in my mouth.

"When he got up on his knees, I tried to crawl away, but he pulled me back. He tore off my underwear. He pinched and bit me. I hit him and hit him, but he didn't stop.

"When he raised his head, I saw blood. It ringed his mouth.

"He ripped away panels from his armor. He grabbed my hips and dragged my body toward him. Then ... then he pushed into me. It hurt, but I didn't understand what he was doing.

"When it was over, his body collapsed on top of me. After he

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caught his breath, he squeezed my throat. I couldn't breathe. He wasn't wearing his gloves, so I scratched at his hands and fingers, but he didn't stop. He kept choking me.

"That's when I heard a familiar voice. It was Emyla Deksova's grandpa. He held a knife. Ruzhman Deksov had big, strong hands. I heard him say, *How dare you touch that little girl!* He stabbed the soldier in the neck. I saw the knife go in and blood squirt out.

"There was a whining sound. Ruzhman Deksov looked surprised. His body slumped forward onto the floor. His head was next to my left ear. He just lay there, facedown, totally still.

"The whole house grew quiet. I pulled myself from underneath the soldier. My legs were numb. It took a while before I was able to stand.

"I tried to wake Ruzhman Deksov. He didn't move. His back was covered with blood.

"I checked on Solomor. I thought he was dead, too, until I saw his eyelids twitch. He was breathing ... his breath was shallow, but he was breathing. He had a big wound on the back, on the right side. There was lots of blood. Momma had taught me how to stop bleeding. I knew where Momma stored stuff in the attic, so I put place mats over his wound, pushed the wound together, and taped it closed.

"I ... found Vinsa. She was lying downstairs near the front door. Her clothes were torn. Her neck was broken. I remember touching her cheek. Her skin felt funny and cold, like a doll that had been left outside on a cold night.

"I was so scared! I was all alone. I didn't know what to do. I knew Solomor would die if I didn't get help. I had no idea when my parents would get home. Then I remembered Uncle Motek and Aunt Tisha. They lived away from town and across the river. Their house was in a forest. It seemed a good place to go.

"It took a long time for me to get there. The Izvyon used suction bombs against us. At the time, I didn't know what

would cause the ground to move or force air from my lungs. Crops and trees were going up in flames all around me. I wondered if a devil had come.

"Flocks of birds were trying to escape. Shock waves from the bombs dragged the birds up and down, forward and backward, left and right. The poor things were flapping and squawking. It was horrible!

"It was such a relief to reach Uncle Motek's property! The big gate was still nice and shiny. The house looked like it always did: neat and clean. No sign of the Izvyon, but neither Aunt Tisha nor Uncle Motek were home.

"After I had something to eat and drink, I desperately wanted to take a nap; Aunt Tisha's couch was soft and comfy. Then I heard noises. I got scared. I thought the Izvyon had arrived, so I hid in Uncle Motek's closet. The closet was really big and deep and dark, with stuff stacked all over. I thought I'd be safe in there.

"I went all the way to the back wall and sat down in a corner. It didn't take long for me to fall asleep.

"When I woke up, I heard noises. Someone was walking around in the house. At first, all I heard were footsteps, but then I heard voices. I recognized Aunt Tisha's voice. She said, *Someone's in here, I tell you! I washed that glass early this morning. It should've been dry by now.* Uncle Motek was talking, too.

"All I thought about was how I was no longer alone. I wanted to see my aunt and uncle, but I was crying too hard to call to them. I tripped over things trying to get out of the closet. I think Uncle Motek almost shot me. He would've had no idea it was me until I stumbled out the door.

"I told Uncle Motek and Aunt Tisha what had happened to Solomor, Vinsa, and Ruzhman Deksov. Uncle Motek went to help them. Aunt Tisha was worried. She didn't want Uncle Motek to go, but he left anyway.

"After he'd gone, Aunt Tisha gave me a bath. I was dirty and covered in blood. As she was washing me, she recoiled like I had the plague. Then she wailed and hugged me. She

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kept saying, *My poor baby! My poor baby!*"

Even nightmares must end. Happy crows flew overhead and lit in nearby brush. Their squawking transformed Ina from a six-year-old girl into a nineteen-year-old woman. Ina could not bring herself to look at Rosik. What did he think? What *could* he think? She was damaged goods. "I didn't understand until years later why my aunt reacted the way she did. For a long time, I thought it was because I was dirty, and she didn't like dirt."

Rosik put an arm around her shoulders. Ina cringed. She wasn't worthy to have a man like him. She feared what he might say, what she'd read in his eyes. She must say something before he spoke. "When, when I told you I've never been with a man," she said, "it wasn't exactly true."

"Ina, you were a six-year-old girl raped by a grown man. I hardly think it counts."

She stared at her shoes.

Rosik asked, "So Motek found Solomor?"

"Yes, they took Solomor to a field hospital. The doctors said it was a miracle he survived."

"He survived because of you," Rosik said.

"I don't know if that's true."

"Sure it is. You had enough wits about you, despite all that happened, to dress his wounds, and you risked your life to seek help."

Rosik was being kind because he pitied her. That had to be it. "Rosik, I sought safety for myself as much as I sought help for Solomor."

"Ina, look at me."

"I can't."

Rosik cradled her face in his hands. "You were a brave little girl. And you're a courageous woman. I love you. I love you even more now. You are a survivor. A Bakhadaree warrior."

Tears fell from her eyes. Like melting snow, she slumped against him. He held her close.

"Ina, what happened to your aunt and uncle?"

"Uncle Motek went out on a raid one day and never came back. None of his squad did. Aunt Tisha died a couple of weeks later. Her resistance cell was guarding a munitions supply. She was killed with the rest of her unit in a battle with the Izvyon."

"Where were you all this time?"

"Aunt Tisha took me to be with Solomor in a hideout while he recovered. Uncle Motek and Aunt Tisha visited us when they could. Until"

"When did your parents get back?"

"Poppa found Solomor and me a few months later. My uncle and aunt were already dead. Right after Izvyonsk troops landed in Fingaktik, Poppa sent Momma, Culasa, and Zerine to a refugee camp across the border in Domataland. He arranged for me to go to Domataland, too. I was lucky. The people running the camp managed to unite me with my family almost immediately after I crossed the Domataree border. Solomor stayed here with Poppa to fight in the resistance."

Now what would happen? Someone else still breathing knew her story. "Rosik, no one alive but me knows everything that happened that day. Not Tarma, Solomor, Momma, Culasa. No one."

"I understand," Rosik said. "You don't need to be concerned. I won't tell anyone. It would serve no purpose. The man who raped you got his justice: a knife blade to the neck."

"But many were punished who didn't deserve it," Ina said, "who did nothing wrong. Like my friend, Emyla. Like the animals. The trees."

"It's war, Ina," Rosik said. "War, greed, hate. So many of us look for any excuse to kill. To hurt innocents. Sometimes it seems we can't help ourselves. Like it's in our blood."

Ina's strength returned. She sat upright. "Maybe someday we'll change. Maybe someday people won't be like this any longer."

"You know, the way things are going, we'll have to change,

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or there won't be anything left. There are a lot of us on this planet, and our weapons are getting more powerful. Ina, I'm sorry. My thoughts ... they're so negative. So full of hopelessness."

Ina scanned the overgrown ruins of her childhood home. The terror of long ago lay buried beneath a healing land. "Oh, Rosik, my thoughts are dark, too. I have good memories, but they're overrun by the bad. By the deaths of Emyla, Vinsa, Ruzhman Deksov, Aunt Tisha, and Uncle Motek. It doesn't honor their memories by the revulsion I feel for this place. Those I love also laughed and enjoyed life in this house, on this land. Look around, Rosik. So much beauty surrounds us! God is still here. God's creation is still here." She almost heard Emyla's laughter ringing from what had once been the back yard. Emyla was okay now, and happy. She wanted Ina to be happy. "Rosik, my first experience with a man was here. I would like my next experience with a man to be here. A happy experience. One of love. Will you love me here?"

"Of course I will."

She stood and took his hand. "This way." Her cheeks burned. She led him to a patch of bushes. Long branches draped over soft grass. She removed her Holy Triad. Rosik did the same. They hung the shining, silver pendants on a tree branch.

CHAPTER 33

THE FOLLOWER

Cadona City, Cadona
Wednesday, April 19, Year 1007 EE
10:45 p.m.

Leeha Ritsagin had one more set of data to validate. Then she'd go home.

"The prophecy is being fulfilled!" Jilly said. "The Last War is coming! President Demnar Tarish is the *Last Ruler* of Domataland. He has to be. All the signs fit."

What was wrong with her crazy coworker? How could Jilly believe such goofy stuff?

"Leeha, you'll never guess what's happening. Bezgog's hordes are massing on the Izvyonsk border."

Leeha focused on the bucket of data floating in front of her. Jilly said, "Hey, Leeha, you've got to come read this."

"I'm right in the middle of something, Jilly."

"But Leeha, Domataland is going to invade Izvyona and Bakhadaland, just like the prophecy says."

The data aligned in the bucket. At last! All done. "The data is clean, Jilly. Enjoy the rest of your night."

"It's just as God foretold," Jilly said. "God will smite the hand of Bezgog and his minions!"

Leeha had to get out of there. "I'm going to smite my own hand if it tries to reach into my refrigerator for a snack when I get home."

"Leeha, this is serious! The End of Time is upon us."

"People have been claiming such things for thousands of years. Time is still here."

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"Leeha, those before us didn't follow God's word. *We* are the True Followers of God. Oh, did I tell you? Pastor Townly is going to speak at our church again on Friday night."

Leeha grabbed her purse. She had to get away fast. "Hope you enjoy it. Good night." She rushed down the quiet halls toward the exit.

"Going home, Ms. Ritsagin?" Rodger said.

"Yep, finally." Leeha noticed dripped grease on Rodger's security guard shirt. He seriously needed to wash his hair. Stiff, gray strands drooped over his forehead.

"I'll keep an eye on you as usual," he told her.

"Thank you, Rodger." He was a nice man, but she doubted he'd be able to run out and help her if someone attacked her in the dark parking lot. Perhaps he was a good shot, though. Anyway, knowing he was watching did make her feel safer when walking to her car.

Leeha hopped into her Monarch. She headed for home.

As usual, the first two streets she took were busy, even late at night. The rest of the streets were typically quiet, with only a few autos on the narrow roads.

Headlights glared in her rearview mirror. When she turned a corner, the lights were still behind her. Another turn, and again the lights followed. She had driven this route many times at this hour. It was rare for one car to stay behind her like this. She veered from her path. "Don't get yourself lost," she told herself.

Leeha drove into an office complex. It was a place she knew. Her personal device provider had a service center there. The whole site was inky dark. Most businesses were closed for the day. Some buildings sat empty.

She must have been imagining things. No one was following her. Then she saw lights shine on the side of a building. Leeha switched off her headlights and crept into a dark corner. A small, white car came into view. It pulled to a stop in the middle of the deserted street in front of her. Leeha's heart pounded. What should she do? She took a few pictures of the

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vehicle. If things got dangerous, she would send the photos to Cookie. The glare of another set of headlights crept along the wall of another building. The white car pursued the other auto.

Leeha waited in the darkness. Nothing else happened. She drove away, but she didn't turn on her headlights until she reached a wide road with traffic.

She tiptoed into her apartment, but Cookie sat up on the air mattress. "Leeha, you're late. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, but something kind of weird happened. I'll tell you about it tomorrow."

"Please, tell me now," Cookie said. "I'm worried. You sound scared."

CHAPTER 34

THORN IN OUR PAW

"The tiniest bird flutters in the branches. The mightiest king sits upon his throne. Both bird and sovereign are equal and one in God. God is the river who binds all things into one body and one spirit."



Lotish Psalm 20
"Reflections on the Holy Triad"
Year Unknown

Ver-Nuvelin, Domataland
Friday, April 21, Year 1007 EE
7:45 a.m.

President Demnar Tarish trotted toward an armored car. Lieutenant Seltuk from the President's Guard opened a door. "Honorable President," the young man said, "I trust you enjoyed your run."

Another guardsman dried raindrops from Demnar's shoul-

ders and back before Demnar climbed into the automobile. The cushioned seat felt good after Demnar's hard workout. He needed the exercise, however. It helped relieve the stress of his responsibilities.

Presidential Spokesman Aldon Turnik was already in the vehicle. From the looks of things, Aldon had just finished a rigorous round of tennis. "Good morning, Honorable President."

"Good morning, Ruzhman Turnik."

The chauffeur said, "Honorable President, is the temperature comfortable?"

Demnar didn't like the attention. Somehow, it made him feel like a child or perhaps an ailing, old man. But they were just doing their jobs. "Yes, thank you. The temperature is fine."

The car took off. Windshield wipers swept away the occasional raindrop.

"Aldon, how are things on the ground in Bakhadaland?" Demnar asked.

"Our scouts tell us the Bakhadaree population is expecting a fight. Psychologically, they're ready. The Bakhads don't have any tricks up their sleeves, though. If the Izvyon attack, the Bakhads will be defeated."

"When, Aldon. When the Izvyon attack," Demnar said.

"Honorable President, the Izvyon may simply be growling. They may not launch an assault. Please, Honorable President, let's not give up on human wisdom so quickly."

Demnar gazed out the window. Fat raindrops had transformed into giant snowflakes. He recalled the news that Intelligence Chief Rozula Kolensha delivered a few days ago: Back-to-Basics Club leaders threatened Itena. "*Human wisdom,*" Demnar said. "Let's hope such a thing exists."

"Honorable President, I believe it does."

Aldon had hope. He believed in the inherent goodness of humanity. His positive attitude showed through in his public statements. That was why Demnar chose him to be his presidential spokesman.

The armored car came to a stop. "Talk to you soon, Honor-

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able President." Aldon pulled his long body out of the vehicle and trotted away.

The snowfall had dwindled. Blue sky poked through churning, pale gray clouds.

"Shall we get your bike for you, Honorable President?" Lieutenant Seltuk asked.

"No, I think I'll go for a walk instead."

"Where, Honorable President?"

"Reunification Park."

"We'll get a security detail set up right away."

Reunification Park was not far. Despite its location in the heart of Ver-Nuvelin, thick forests pushed right up to the roadside. They pulled into an empty parking lot. Demnar stepped out of the car. The sun shone on his face. Glistening water drops quivered on evergreen twigs.

A cold wind then blew, pushing storm clouds over the sun. Demnar shivered in the chill. Shadows shrouded the forest. Trees hummed a baritone chant as they tossed and swayed. Along the dimly lit path in front of him, he saw nothing but dark evergreens and gray, white, brown, yellow, orange, and red bark of leafless trees.

"It's stormy and wet, Honorable President," Lieutenant Seltuk said. "Perhaps a session in the gym would be better?"

An image of the weight room flashed in Demnar's mind. Bright. Mechanical. "No, a walk is what I need, Lieutenant."

"As you wish, Honorable President."

Demnar leaned toward the guardsman and said, "Just don't tell my wife."

The young man's eyes grew wide. "Never! No! Of course not, Honorable President."

"Thank you, Lieutenant, for your discretion."

"Of, of, course, Honorable President. Always, of course!"

Demnar headed up the quiet path. He chuckled. Teasing the young guardsmen once in a while was fun. They took life seriously. Their jobs demanded it; they would die for Domata-land's leaders. But these young men took *everything* seriously.

The older guardsmen were different. They laughed and joked with the best.

The hum of the armored car and rhythmic human speech faded as Demnar walked down the deserted trail. Soon, the only sounds he heard were the moans of trees and the clicks of soggy snowflakes striking his jacket. Nature enveloped him, but still Demnar's mind turned to work. Mighty Cadona was again beating the drums of war, but, for a brief time, the unimaginable almost happened. Louis Meyfeld was elected President of Cadona. Lasting peace, mutual respect, and camaraderie between Cadona and Domataland glowed like a diamond on a reachable horizon. The diamond proved a frail mist. How quickly the dream dissipated! Cadona's largest religious organization, the True Followers of God Church, had gone as far as saying the people of Domataland were Bezgog's children on earth. Now Pastor Leon Walls was proposing to his flock that Demnar himself may be Domataland's *Last Ruler* from the church's end of civilization prophecy.

The Cadonans were fighting with actions as well as words. Rozula and Defense Minister Rivar Henik delivered frightening news: Cadonan operatives were conducting new and bold operations in Estdeventia aimed at stirring up the terrorists, including Salumet's sons.

Then the worst news of all—Toxic Sphere. Work on Cadona's new superweapon was continuing. If rumors of Toxic Sphere's power proved true, nothing could stop Cadona from becoming the universal master. Just how powerful was this weapon? How did it work? How was it launched? Could Domataland's security net detect it? For all their fanaticism and ludicrous propaganda, Cadona had managed to protect its greatest military asset.

Toxic Sphere, however, was only a danger to Domataland if someone chose to use it. If Mitch Fischer, the Freedom Party, and the Back-to-Basics Club came to power in Cadona, would Cadona restrict Toxic Sphere's use to defense of their homeland? Or would they use it for a first strike?

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A cold wind slapped Demnar's face. Somewhere along the way, he had stopped walking. Demnar shook the unpleasant thoughts from his mind and headed up a little-used side trail. The skinny path plunged into the midst of tall trees and bushy understory plants. The wholesome smell of thawing earth and decaying wood drew his attention away from conflict. Patches of old snow, littered with evergreen needles and last year's leaves, cast a silvery glow through the dark forest.

Movement caught his eye. He pushed aside a floppy branch. Spring really had come despite the bulky snowflakes that slipped away from heaven's hands. Tiny birds had made the journey north. Their round, fluffy bodies danced among thick, sheltered twigs. Demnar watched the little ones hop about and flex their wings. He then cautiously released the bough. No need to disturb the little birds. They'd be hungry and tired after their long journey, and they had much to do. They had nests to build and young to raise. With the condition of the world, Demnar wondered how ones so fragile managed to survive.

He walked away and focused on the breeze. It smelled of snow and cooled his face. Yet Cadona's new weapon kept trespassing into his thoughts. Would the Freedom Party really use Toxic Sphere against Domataland? His heart filled with grief. Yes, he believed they would. He really did believe it. A truly horrific conclusion.

Up ahead, the path rose. Jagged rocks, tangles of roots, and sprawling branches formed slippery steps. Demnar pushed his way forward. Twigs and needles slapped his face and arms. The trail then dropped into a gulch. Mud and slushy snow huddled on the banks of an icy stream. Cold and wet seeped into Demnar's footwear. He heard a squishing sound as he pulled his feet free from dark, gooey mud. Demnar pictured Itena's face. She'd pretend to be angry. Even though they had housekeepers on call, Itena would complain about him walking on her clean floor with his dirty shoes. So how would she see him this time? A little boy playing in mud puddles?

Her brave and hardy outdoorsman battling the elements? Or perhaps a clumsy, middle-aged man forgetting his place?

After fighting more branches and slippery mud, he finally stumbled onto a wide, paved trail. Demnar examined the mess sticking to his clothing. Dirt covered not only his shoes but also his pants from the knees down. Itena would love this. His smile slid away. Once again, he considered the threat Cadonans made against her. Demnar brought Itena to this world. She faced this danger because of him.

Now on smooth ground, Demnar broke into a jog. As he turned a bend in the path, he saw a man sitting on a bench. The big fellow was not someone he expected to see: former President Elann Vispar. Elann was supposed to be in the Northern Forest visiting his daughter.

Demnar noticed that Elann needed to push against the bench to stand, but Elann's sullen expression brightened. "Demnar, how good to see you!"

"Elann, my friend!" Such a comfort it was to hug him, like embracing a father or a wise man in a time of great need. "What are you doing here, Elann? I thought you and Betsa would be in Pendsech by now."

"We're leaving today." Elann checked the time. "Soon, actually. It took a while for Betsa to make the rounds, to say her goodbyes."

Demnar wondered if Elann told the whole story. Perhaps the delay had more to do with Elann than Betsa.

Elann eased himself back onto the bench. Demnar sat next to him.

"How are things going?" Elann asked. "No doubt the troubles you inherited from me are keeping you busy."

"Yes, very." Demnar gave him a smile. He desired to hide his burden.

"You can share your thoughts with me," Elann said. "I still have my security clearance. Since many of your problems were once mine, I may be able to help."

"I'm sure you could, Elann. But you should be enjoying

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life, relaxing, traveling with Betsa. You no longer need to deal with these troubles."

"To be honest," Elann told him, "I rather miss the job, even though my old ticker doesn't. Do you have a moment to sit and chat, Honorable President?"

The recent transition was difficult for Elann. One day he was the leader of one of the world's mightiest nations, and the next day, he was retired. A *citizen*. "Of course I have time, Elann. For you, always." Demnar didn't need to pretend. He appreciated sage advice.

"Good. What's on your mind?" Elann asked.

Demnar's jaw tensed. "The Back-to-Basics leaders threatened Itena."

"You're joking! What kind of threat?"

"Rozula didn't have details. They want to involve the Estdevent terrorists."

"Discrediting Itena won't work," Elann said. "The whole world knows she carries Estdevent blood."

"Elann, I don't think the intent of the threat is to discredit her."

"Maybe the Cadonans want to rattle you," Elann said, "but don't take any chances. Keep security tight around her and your children. Limit their travel. But think before you act. Don't let the Cadonans get under your skin. That's what they want."

The Cadonans *were* getting to him, and Elann knew it. "Rozula learned something else," Demnar told him. "The Back-to-Basics Club misplaced a document of great importance to them. They call it the *Guiding Light*."

A twinkle filled Elann's eyes. "How did they manage to misplace it?"

"A young woman stole it. The Cadonans are trying to find her and her old, brown car."

"For whom did she steal it?"

"No one seems to know, including the Back-to-Basics Club."

“Why is this document so important?”

“We only know bits and pieces,” Demnar said. “Rozula’s agents in Cadona City tell us it contains Back-to-Basics Club goals. Our sources say it describes a band of mercenaries called the *Soldiers of God Justice Group* that works for the Club. This group has a hit list of one hundred women who are marked for *justice executions*. We don’t know why these women have been targeted, but we’re pretty sure the motivation is political. A woman from the list has already been tortured and murdered. Apparently, the Back-to-Basics leaders consider this Justice Group a trivial point. The Guiding Light contains much more damning information.”

“Executions trivial? Fischer and Rineburg are fine examples of enlightened leadership. Are you hoping to find this missing document and use it against our Freedom Party friends?”

“I am,” Demnar said.

“Good. Any other surprises since I left the job?”

“Have you heard Cadona’s accusations about the J2 virus?”

“Sure did,” Elann said. “Cadona is accusing us of turning the virus into a biological weapon. Next we’ll be accused of trying to extinguish the sun. Surprised I haven’t heard that one yet. But, yeah, I heard Bradley Seldortin talk about J2. Glad to hear Seldortin had the balls to call the accusations *hogwash*.”

Elann grinned. Given the topic of discussion, it wasn’t a reaction Demnar expected. “Elann, what’s so funny?”

“The Cadonan language has some interesting expressions. *Hogwash*. I really like that one.”

“So what do you think about Senator Seldortin’s candidacy?” Demnar asked.

“Good man. Little chance of beating Mitch Fischer, but it’s a good thing he’ll stay in the public eye. That old fellow very well may be the only one who can keep a lid on the Freedom Party.” Elann’s voice changed, as if his words were coming from far away. “That’s if Seldortin survives long enough.”

“Survive? Elann, do you mean actual life and death? Or do you mean survival in the political sense?”

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Elann pushed out his lower lip as he did when in deep thought. "Either, actually."

"Is he ill?" Demnar asked.

"Not that I know of, but Seldortin has powerful enemies."

A sense of disquiet filled Demnar to the core. "You mean senators Mitch Fischer and John Rineburg?"

Demnar knew that Elann was studying him. Elann said, "The thought bothers you, doesn't it? That the Freedom Party leadership could possibly consider *removing* their enemies?"

Again, Elann read Demnar's mind and saw his darkest fears. "Yes, it troubles me," Demnar said.

"You've known terrible men before, Demnar—the Estdevent terrorist from your younger days, the bandit kingpin."

"You mean Salumet."

"Yes, I mean Salumet."

"What does Salumet have to do with Rineburg and Fischer?" Demnar asked.

"You understood the evil intent of that bandit," Elann told him, "so why do you struggle with the fact that Mitch Fischer and John Rineburg are capable of equally unspeakable atrocities?"

"Elann, I was young when I dealt with Salumet. Brutish even. Perhaps I've softened with age instead of having grown wiser. I'm a husband and father; it changed me. But more than that, Salumet and the bandits were wild men, uneducated, and undisciplined."

Elann raised his eyebrows but didn't say anything.

"Well," Demnar said, "I guess that's not entirely true. Salumet seemed wild because he lived off the land. He didn't have the luxury of real political or financial power. Hmm, I've changed my mind. He had to be profoundly disciplined, albeit crazy, to cause as much damage as he did. Always, he was at a place of comparative weakness. We persistently hunted him. The whole of the Domataree military and Federal Police were after him. Any authority he had was completely earned. People followed him because they chose to, not because they *had*

to based on some military, political, or legal code. And while he may have been uneducated in the classic sense, he certainly had his talents. With a handful of bandits, he took out much larger, more powerfully armed Domataree units."

"So, Demnar, you're saying Salumet was disciplined, educated, and a leader of men. Yet he was also a butcher and a fanatic."

"Not unlike Senator Mitch Fischer and Senator John Rineburg," Demnar said. "I guess living in a fancy house and having a degree from a prestigious university doesn't preclude an individual from being a fanatic butcher."

"Even worse," Elann told him, "such people have vast wealth and powerful institutions at their beck and call. Ruzhmen Fischer and Rineburg are vastly more dangerous than wild men living in hideouts." As if to hide his lips from spying eyes, Elann leaned forward and rested his head in his hands. "Toxic Sphere ... anything new?" He pulled his hands away from his face.

"Sadly, no. Rozula and Rivar have their people working around the clock. The Cadonans aren't making mistakes. It's like the lowest abyss; information is not leaking out."

Elann's hands once more shielded his mouth. "I know I've told you this before, but I'm saying it again; if the Freedom Party takes power in Cadona, they *will* use Toxic Sphere against us if they think they can kill us before we can retaliate."

"Most of my staff have come to the same conclusion," Demnar said.

"And you?" Elann asked. "Have you come to the same conclusion?"

"I have ... regrettably."

"Do you have staff members who disagree?"

Demnar recalled Presidential Spokesman Aldon Turnik's position. "A few."

"Why do you tolerate it?"

"I like balance. I want someone to try to prove me wrong. You get better decisions that way."

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"You don't trust your gut instinct?"

"There's a Cadonan saying I like as well," Demnar said. "*Turn over every stone.*"

Elann's expression betrayed worry. "Be careful, Son. You're the president now, not finance minister. The goal isn't to get the amounts right on the bottom of the page. You must be a leader and act decisively. In economic matters, people expect a level head and thorough research. But as president, especially in matters of national security, people expect strength and courage. You mustn't show vulnerability to our citizens or our enemies."

"You don't think I'm decisive enough for military matters?" Demnar asked.

"I have no doubt of your grasp of military matters. But always remember, everyone on your staff needs to perform with enthusiasm and intensity, or you will lose. We have dedicated adversaries: Cadona, Visstel, and Sohn-Sur. Even Izvyona. That little country is a big thorn in this lion's paw. You need people you can trust to act with full spirit. Our Domataland is a lucrative target. We have what others want. Security, I'm afraid, will be your biggest challenge."

Demnar grew concerned. Did Elann regret supporting him for president? "So why did you pick me, and not a mean, loud person?"

"Loud, mean people are good at starting wars," Elann told him, "not winning them, and certainly not good at preventing them in the first place. Being belligerent is far from the same thing as being decisive and confident."

"War," Demnar said, "so many things are sliding in that direction. War between Izvyona and Bakhadaland is coming. The hope for peace dims by the day."

"Are Cadonan operatives still in Izvyona?" Elann asked.

"They are, and they are more active than ever. The Freedom Party is shipping weapons to that *thorn in our paw*, and President Meyfeld and Defense Secretary Karther can't stop them. Some of those weapons are finding their way to our

own Estdevent bandits. The thorn is pushing deeply into our leg now.”

“Izvyona transferring Cadonan weapons to Estdevent terrorists. Sounds familiar. That’s the very same supply pipeline you helped shut down all those long years ago when you were Major Tarish, the war hero. Now Salumet’s sons have grown up to take his place as Estdevent bandit leaders.”

“It does feel like history repeating itself,” Demnar said.

“Well, my boy,” Elann told him, “you’ll need to shut down that supply line again. You were instrumental in bringing down Salumet. Now you will have to bring down his sons.”

“I would rather his sons decide not to follow in their father’s footsteps,” Demnar said. “I would rather they find more productive ways to help their people.”

“That’s not the path they’ve chosen, Demnar. You can’t change that fact no matter how hard you wish it. But at least *you* have chosen another path.”

“How’s that?” Demnar asked.

“Izvyonsk soldiers killed your father,” Elann said, “but you still desire peace with Izvyona. You do not seek revenge the way Salumet’s sons do.”

“It was war that claimed my father’s life,” Demnar said. “In the course of battle, my father may have killed the parent of an Izvyonsk child. In my own battles in the south, I no doubt took the life of a parent of an Estdevent child. People, both good and bad, die in war. Heck, even other forms of life who are blameless die in it. It’s the way it works.”

Pride showed on Elann’s face. “Like I said, you’ve chosen a path that is different from the one Salumet’s sons are following.”

Demnar appreciated the kind words, but kind words would not protect Domataland or Bakhadaland. Only concrete actions would. “Speaking of Izvyona, Rozula says the Peace Now movement is growing stronger. I wish we could find a way to help them. I’m afraid if I meet with them openly, I’d hurt their cause rather than help it, so I have people work-

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ing on alternatives.”

“Be careful, Demnar. Many in the Peace Now movement do not support independence for Bakhadaland.”

“True, but they’re willing to talk,” Demnar said. “If they are willing to talk, perhaps we can achieve what seems a distant dream: Izvyona lets Bakhadaland go. The two nations become strategic allies. They strengthen bilateral ties. They link their transportation systems. They freely cross each other’s borders. They live and work in each other’s countries. If they can get to that point, whether there is one nation or two doesn’t matter. It’s worked before. It worked for us—the SoDimit and Nuvelin. So many of our citizens are mixed blood that the distinction of the two peoples is irrelevant today. If it worked for us, why wouldn’t it work for Izvyona and Bakhadaland?”

“That’s what I like about you,” Elann said, “one of many things. Despite all that’s happened, despite the weight of the job you’ve accepted, you have dreams. You have vision. These are as important for a leader as decisiveness.” Elann checked his personal device. “It’s Betsa. Time to go. Well, Demnar, I’m glad we had this chance to talk before the wife and I head out of town. I long to see my spirit home again. The great northern woods! Betsa’s spirit home is the windy plains, but she hasn’t felt the desire for her plains as I desire my forest. So she’s glad to come along and linger among the trees.”

Elann pushed himself up from the bench. Demnar also stood. Elann said, “Do not be afraid, my dear friend. You will not fail our country. Your road will be hard, but you will find a way to overcome all obstacles.”

“What if I can’t?” Demnar asked.

Certainty filled Elann’s voice. “You have many good people on your team. You *will* need them, just as I needed mine. In my heart, I believe many terrible things are about to happen. It’s almost as if I can feel the world cry in pain. It’s as if the trees, the ground, and the rocks are groaning because they, too, sense the growing terror. All will suffer, not just mankind. Trust your team, but remember, you are their president. Your

vision *must* be theirs. Now I have a favor to ask of you."

"Anything, of course," Demnar said.

"Take care of Chief Kolensha."

"Rozula?"

"Yes, she's a good egg, that one. Talented. She's amazing at her job. The best I've ever seen. But a soul needs more than that, especially a gentle soul like hers. I doubt she's been involved with anyone since her husband died. A desperate loneliness fills her. Look after her for me. See that she gets out once in a while and has a good time. If her heart does not find love again, I fear she will not be long in this world."

"I will look after her," Demnar said. "Itena is finding herself bored since she resigned from the Science Council when I became president, so maybe Itena and Rozula can find things to do together."

"Good, good." Tears tumbled from Elann's eyes. "I don't know when we will see each other again." His voice sounded weak and distant, almost like an echo.

"Your birthday party is coming up," Demnar said. "You haven't forgotten about that, have you?"

"No, I haven't forgotten. How could I? Betsa would never let me. That woman of mine never forgets anything. I think her memory gets better with age." Elann's lips quivered. "Goodbye, my son." He then stood up straight. The tears disappeared from his eyes. "Goodbye, Honorable President." Elann bowed and then walked to a waiting car. Before climbing in, he said, "Don't forget, look after Rozula."

"I won't forget, Elann. May your spirit find peace and your body health in the Northern Forest. Say hello to Betsa for me. And also your daughter and her family."

"I will, Honorable President."

The armored car left. Soon, an aircraft would transport Elann Vispar, former president of Domataland, away from Ver-Nuvelin, capital city of Domataland.

CHAPTER 35

BULLET IN HIS BRAIN

Cadona City, Cadona
Friday, April 21, Year 1007 EE
6:15 p.m.

Leeha Ritsagin's heart pounded. Sweat burned her eyes. She wiped her brow, but still perspiration rolled down her face. She would never make it up this confounded hill. The sidewalk stung the bottoms of her feet. Up ahead, she saw Cookie Davis. Cookie was running in place at the top of the rise. "I hate her," Leeha said to herself.

A big smile crossed Cookie's face. "Come on, Leeha, you can do it. You're almost to the top." Cookie burst into a round of jumping jacks.

Leeha gasped for air. She really, really, really hated Cookie. Finally! The last step. Leeha reached the top of the hill.

"Good job, Leeha! You did great!"

Leeha wanted to complain, but she lacked the breath to speak.

Cookie headed down the other side of the hill. "Come on, keep moving. You'll recover faster."

Leeha struggled to suck air into her lungs. "I can't."

"We'll just walk now," Cookie said, "all downhill. Come on."

Leeha followed. Her legs wobbled. She noticed a spring in Cookie's step. How did Cookie do it? After a few blocks, however, Leeha did feel better. She no longer hated Cookie. The sweat dried.

"Come on, I have a surprise for you," Cookie said.

"Surprise? What, more pushups?"

"No, protein! You need protein after a hard workout." Cookie led her to a small shop. Leeha had driven by it many times but had never gone inside.

"Cookie, we're all stinky. We can't go in there."

"Sure we can. We can sit outside after we order."

"Order what?"

"A high-protein yogurt drink. Really healthy."

She followed Cookie into the market. Four men were seated at a table. The guys' eyes never left Cookie as she pranced to the counter. Leeha mirrored Cookie's way of walking and holding her head. It didn't work. The men paid Leeha no attention.

"May I help you?" the woman behind the register asked.

Cookie ordered. The woman slid two glasses down the counter.

"Come on, Leeha," Cookie said, "let's go sit outside."

What a pretty patio! A graying plank fence, dotted with swirls of knots, sealed off the yard from the outside world. Planter boxes held tangles of fragrant shrubs and blossoms. Leeha and Cookie took seats at a round table made of iron bars twisted into a rose-and-leaf pattern.

"Here, try it," Cookie said. She handed Leeha a glass.

Leeha took a sip. "Oh, my! It's awesome!"

"I knew you'd like it. It's cheap. And really good for you." Cookie took a long drink and then said, "It was really nice of Toofy to put a security system in your car for free."

"Cookie, Toofy put it in for *you*, not me."

"No, he didn't," Cookie said. "He put it in because his grandma made him."

Leeha had to laugh. "Yeah, Mrs. Furley sure is bossy."

A couple sat down at another table. News began to play on the wall of the building.

"Hey, it's Andecco," Cookie said. "There's Bob Fullerby!"

Bob was standing by a video of an airfield topped by stormy skies.

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"It's the end of an era. Domataland's former President, Elann Vispar, and his wife, Betsa, are about to board a plane. After nine years in office, Mr. Vispar is leaving Ver-Nuvelin to begin his retirement. He's returning to his hometown of Pendsech in the region Domats call the Northern Forest."

"Wow! Vispar's actually going to let the new guy run things," Leeha said. Elann Vispar had been a fixture in the news for a long time. Many Cadonans viewed him as the world's ultimate villain. Now he was retiring. Elann and his tall, chubby wife waved at a crowd of cheering Domats as the couple headed to a waiting plane.

"Mr. Vispar leaves Domataland's new president, Demnar Tarish, with a brewing crisis. The tense standoff in Izvoyona's breakaway region of Bakhadaland continues. The Domataree Goodwill Ship remains docked in the Bakhadaree port of D'nevtnya."

Not again! The danged document! She almost saw text that was written on one of those crazy pages: *Our spark is to persuade Izvoyona to lash out against the Bakhadaree separatists.*

"Leeha, is something—"

Shouts drowned Cookie's words. Six rowdy men stomped across the patio and sat at a nearby table. "What's the crap that's playing?" a man said.

"That damned stinkin' Andecco News," said another. "I hate that scrum, Fullerby. I can't believe anyone listens to that fricken scrum. Someone should've put a bullet in his brain long ago."

The video flickered off. The couple who earlier had turned it on grabbed their plates and went back into the building. The noisy group laughed and cursed. One of the men gawked at Cookie.

"Come on, Leeha," Cookie said, "let's go inside."

Leeha stood and picked up her glass. "Gladly."

After Leeha and Cookie finished their drinks, they headed home. Leeha followed Cookie down a narrow, quiet street. Just as Leeha stepped off a curb, a chill came over her. An inexplicable feeling it was, like walking in a flower-filled, sun-dappled forest. She saw nothing dangerous. She heard no threatening noises. Yet a sense of dread encircled her. Were the creepy guys from the market stalking them? Leeha searched for the men's reflections in the streaked window of an old building. Something much worse than rowdy males reflected in the glass; a white car was driving down the street. The shape! The angles! This auto sure resembled the one that followed her the other day. She glanced at another window for a clearer image.

It was the same car!

Then she spotted the driver.

Leeha dashed around the corner. She grabbed Cookie's arm. "Cookie! Hide!" She pulled Cookie into an alley. They crouched down behind garbage bins.

"Leeha, what's wrong?"

"It's him!"

"Who?"

"The wormy guy! He's in the white car."

"You mean the guy who was snooping around your Monarch?"

"Yeah! Toofy's bounty hunter."

Cookie stood up.

"Cookie, be careful. He'll see you!"

"He won't," Cookie said. She peeked over discarded sheets of cardboard.

"What do you see?"

"A light blue car," Cookie told her. "An old man is driving it. He's alone."

"The car I saw was white," Leeha said.

Cookie squatted down. "Leeha, are you sure you saw the wormy guy?"

"Yes! Positive! You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

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"No, I think you're scared. I know scared. I think I see my ex all over the place."

"Cookie, did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Crunchy footsteps."

"No, I didn't hear anything."

Leeha crept to the back of the building. A weedy path littered with pieces of trash and crumbling chunks of concrete ran between the rear wall and a warped vinyl fence.

She heard another noise. Leeha peeked around the corner. Someone was there! A slender figure rushed around the other side of the building.

More sounds. It was Cookie. She was standing next to her.

"Leeha?"

"A guy was back there! I saw him. I did! I'm not crazy."

"Was it the wormy guy?"

"I don't know," Leeha said. "I didn't get a good look."

"Did you get a picture of him?"

"No."

"You know, Leeha, anyone could be back there. Even a kid playing."

"This person was too tall."

Cookie peered around the back of the building. "No one's back there now. Maybe you scared him as much as he scared you. Come on, let's go home."

While they waited to cross the street in front of her apartment building, Leeha saw a man. He was standing far away, so she wasn't sure, but he did resemble the wormy guy. Leeha blinked. The man was gone. This time, she didn't tell Cookie what she had seen.

CHAPTER 36

BIRTHDAY GIRL

Cadona City, Cadona
Saturday, April 22, Year 1007 EE
6:00 p.m.

Leeha Ritsagin opened the door of her brown Monarch. Hot, sticky air belched out. While she waited for the worst of the heat to escape, she scanned for danger. No suspicious men or vehicles were in sight.

Her personal device buzzed.

Jeremy was calling. "Hey, sis! Happy birthday."

"You remembered!"

"Yeah, I'm trying to get better at these kinds of things. I hear noises. Where are you?"

"In the parking lot at work. I'm just heading home."

"You had to work on a Saturday?"

"Yeah, but just for a couple of hours."

"Hey, sis, you need to get married. Then you can hang up the spurs."

Odd thing for Jeremy to say "I kind of like the type of work I do," Leeha said. "I'd just like to do less of it. Or get paid a whole lot more."

"Did you go back to full time?"

"No, not pay-wise anyway. They get lots of free hours out of me."

"I'm part time now, too," Jeremy said, "but they barely have enough work to keep me busy."

"You don't sound too worried."

"I'm not. God will look after us. Anyway, I'm thankful to

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have more time with the family.”

“How are Sonna and Skyla feeling?”

“Both are good. We found a new doctor. Sonna’s really happy with him. You have a nephew on the way, Leeha.”

“It’s a boy?”

“Yep!”

“Awesome!”

“Well, sis, I’d better go. We’re doing some volunteer work and then going to a church service. Sonna’s feeling well enough to get out and about now.”

“That’s great!”

“Hey, Leeha, go have some birthday fun, but stay out of trouble.”

“I’ll try.” Trouble had a nasty habit of finding her: the weird document; the stalking, white car; the wormy bounty-hunter guy.

Leeha drove home. Nothing unusual happened along the way. The lobby of her apartment building felt nice and cool. The stairwell and hallway were quiet, and the lighting was comfortably soft. She opened the door to unit 413.

“Happy Birthday!”

Cookie, Toofy, and Mrs. Furley were waiting for her. Cookie was wearing a pretty summer dress. Mrs. Furley had on a flowery blouse and a brightly colored skirt. It was the first time Leeha had seen Toofy in an actual button-up shirt.

Mrs. Furley pulled a chair away from the table. “Have a seat, birthday girl. Here, try this wine. It’s the good Antropkan stuff.”

Leeha sat down. She took a sip of the pink beverage. Delicious!

Cookie set a pot containing whole-grain noodles on the table. The tomato sauce smelled yummy.

“Wait until you see the cake Cookie and I baked,” Mrs. Furley said. “I ate half the batter. Don’t worry, though. I didn’t lick the spoon and stick it back in the bowl.”

“Oh, Leeha,” Cookie said, “this card came from your mom.”

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Toofy lit tall, slender candles.

Mrs. Furley said, "After we eat, we'll watch the news. Cookie told us you like Andecco. So do I. Did you know Bob Fullerby is single? He's one sexy man. I'd sure love to get my hands on him!"

CHAPTER 37

OPERATION MARINER

“When a rich man looks out his window, he admires the luxuries that wealth has bestowed upon him. If a poor man is lucky enough to have a window, he sees grimy walls, dirty streets, and all manner of disease and decay. Most of all, the poor man is denied the privilege of seeing hope.”



*Thomas Fillimore
“Treacherous Chronicles,” verse 52
Year 7999 of the Awakening Epoch*

*Cadona City, Cadona
Sunday, April 23, Year 1007 EE
7:30 p.m.*

Clamps grabbed the tires of Bob Fullerby’s car. He turned off the engine. Soon his vehicle slid into the dark car wash. Bob hadn’t bothered cleaning the exterior of his automobile for quite some time. His vehicle was old. Anyway, it would be filthy in minutes after a washing. Gritty streets spit up debris, and contaminated rains left discolored splotches. Now, however, the J2 virus was on the prowl, and he had just returned

from an area of the city where J2 victims had been found. This car wash had added a potent disinfectant to its cleaning solution. If ever a reason existed to wash his car, this was it.

A giant, ratty clump of cloth slammed against the windshield. The swab gyrated and swirled before swinging like a big, severed head onto the roof.

The darkness around him thickened as his automobile moved deeper into the tunnel. Unseen things slapped and whipped the vehicle. The setting seemed more a haunted house than a car wash. Bob braced for a big rush of water, but no deluge came. Whatever liquid was used didn't smell too good. Finally, the racket ended. The car sat in a pitch-black chamber. All fell silent. Only faintly did he see large objects moving about. Then came screaming blasts of air. A rectangular object, similar to the business end of a giant vacuum cleaner, glided over the windshield. All fell silent again. The car jerked. It moved toward a growing light. "A whole generation of kids will be scarred for life by this place," Bob said to himself. He emerged into the gray light of cloudy dusk.

Bob pulled into a littered parking slot and called the secure comm-node in the print shop building.

He heard Rona Betler's voice. "Hi, Mr. Fullerby."

"Hey, Row, did you get the files I sent?"

"The ones about Domataree reinforcements moving closer to the Izvyonsk border?"

"Yeah, those."

"Yep, got them fine."

"Could you put Ang on, please?" Bob said.

"She's not here. She left with Kever-o."

"Where did they go?"

"We got an old dog-ee. Ang and Kever-o are going to send it into that riot zone just west of the Helmsey District."

What were those two doing? They knew better than to go into those neighborhoods, especially at night. "Row, do you have their exact location?"

"Yeah, I'm sending it now."

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"Got it, Row."

"Mr. Fullerby, I hear noises. I thought you were at home. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, fine. I'm at the car wash. I'll be heading home soon."

"Okay, see you tomorrow, Mr. Fullerby. I'll make sure Ang gets the files when she gets back."

Bob headed out to find Angela Thirgal and Kever Carsen.

He spotted them. They were standing on a street corner. Both Angela and Kever were fixated on Angela's personal device. "Pay attention to your surroundings, kids," Bob said to himself. He parked along the sidewalk and climbed out of the vehicle.

"Mr. Fullerby," Kever said, "what are you doing here?"

"That's what I was going to ask you."

"Mr. Fullerby," Angela said, "check this out! We got a dog-ee in the riot zone. You're not going to believe these pics." Angela projected images onto the crumbling wall of a building.

Dog-ee was indeed sending some amazing video of the riot zone. Giant piles of trash blocked the streets. Flames shot high into the evening sky. The mounds reminded Bob of the Lautupa Volcano. "Is Row capturing this?" he asked.

"Yeah, she said she's recording," Angela told him.

Dog-ee's camera scanned the heap. The images left no doubt; human corpses were burning along with mattresses, pillows, tires, and a multitude of other items.

Bob studied the gruesome scene. "Any idea how many bodies are in there?"

"No, but at least a dozen," Angela said. "People are getting really pissed because no one is hauling off the dead."

A close-up of a man wearing a tattered knit hat filled the video display. Angry eyes glared from above the dirty bandana that was tied around his face.

"Uh-oh, he spotted dog-ee," Kever said.

A silhouette of a boot appeared. The camera sent a spinning barrage of images. Dog-ee came to rest at an angle. The device

showed both sky and street. Many irate faces peered into the lens. The heel of a boot loomed large. Filming stopped.

"Whose dog-ee was that?" Bob asked.

"It belonged to Row's friends," Angela told him. "We bought it for cheap."

"You got some good pics, Ang," Bob said. "They certainly give a different feel than aerial shots of the scene, but why didn't you tell me what you were planning?"

"Sorry, Mr. Fullerby. We heard that the riot got more intense. I didn't want to wait. I was afraid we'd miss the worst of it."

"If our leaders don't address this epidemic quickly, the rioting we're seeing now will be small potatoes," Bob told her. He then noticed a spray bottle in Angela's hand. "What's that?"

"Disinfectant, for when dog-ee came back."

"We didn't need it after all," Kever said. "Dog-ee is dog-gone."

Angela shook her head. "I should disinfect your brain, Kever-o."

"Ang," Bob said, "I sent Row some files. I need you to take a look at them. Domataland is deploying troops and equipment near Izvyona and Bakhadaland."

"Okay, I'll give them a look as soon as I get back to the print shop."

Bob fought to suppress a yawn. "I'll see you kids tomorrow. No more heroics tonight, understand?"

Angela gave him a scowl. "That goes for you, too, Mr. Fullerby."

"I'm heading straight home, Ang."

Bob parked in the garage by his apartment building. His personal device buzzed as soon as he stepped out of the car. What! Pastor Mark Walzelesskii was looking for him? What a stupid move! Didn't anyone appreciate how dangerous this city had become? Bob trotted down three flights of concrete

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steps. A few big raindrops splattered on his head and shoulders as he darted across the street.

A handful of people were waiting for a bus at the corner transit stop. Mark's tall, slender frame stood out like a red flag despite the bland-colored, hooded sweater that he was wearing.

A bus arrived. Passengers stepped out and others boarded. Soon Bob and Mark were alone on the sidewalk.

"Pastor Walzelesskii, what are you doing? Coming here was not a smart move."

"Sorry, Mr. Fullerby, but I didn't know what else to do. I didn't think it was safe to use comm-nodes."

"What happened?"

"Have you heard of *Operation Poker Hand* or *Operation Mariner*?" Mark asked.

"Not sounding familiar."

"It's bad, Mr. Fullerby. Senator Rineburg said we're conducting military exercises along the Izvyonsk border with Domataland. The goal is to push Domataland to respond with force. We are going to keep our activities secret, but we will release Domataree activity to the press. Senator Rineburg wants to make Domataland look like the aggressor."

"I take it that's Poker Hand," Bob said. "What's Mariner?"

"Izvyona is going to attack Bakhadaland again," Mark told him. "General Willirman said we've learned something new about Domataland's weapons, and now Domataland won't be able to stop the Izvyon like they did the last time. Izvyona is going to use Sea Ghosts in the attack."

"Do you know the schedule?"

"Poker Hand has already begun," Mark said. "Senator Rineburg was laughing. He said President Tarish was falling for the trap. Mariner is supposed to go down within twenty-four hours."

"Did Rineburg or Willirman say anything about the Goodwill Ship?"

"Yeah, it's the excuse for Operation Mariner."

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“Thank you, Pastor, but please, in the future, be more careful about where we meet. If these guys are willing to start a war, one can only imagine what they’d do to you if they knew you’ve been talking to me.”

“I’ll be more careful, Mr. Fullerby.”

Bob watched as Mark wandered off into the night.

CHAPTER 38

BON VOYAGE THE GOODWILL SHIP

“The Goodwill Ship was not always a symbol of hope to the down-trodden and a sign of amity to the war-weary. Once, in ages long past, she was an instrument of destruction called Red on the Sea. She had been reborn. It has been said that as long as she sails, peace is possible”



*Domataree Children’s History Book
Year 998 of the Enlightened Epoch*

***D’nevtnya, Bakhadaland
Sunday, April 23, Year 1007 EE
6:45 a.m.***

Ina Tovaleta awoke with a jolt. Lieutenant Rosik Venkin lay by her side in the bed Pada Rammak had set up for them

in a back room of Pada's Shinchik restaurant. Even though Rosik hugged her, sorrow's long, cold fingers held Ina in their grasp. The dreaded day had arrived. Soon, Rosik and Garrett would board the Goodwill Ship and sail away. The faintest hint of morning light crept through the room's one small window. She wished for the day never to dawn, for the world to be stuck in this time forever, for Rosik's arms to be eternally wrapped around her. But no matter how hard she wished or how fervently she prayed, the sun was rising. It was close now. Rosik would wake up, get dressed, and leave.

Rosik stirred. His left hand touched her soggy pillow. "Ina, you're still crying! We talked about this. We'll be together again. I don't know exactly when, but we will, so please don't cry."

"I don't want you to go."

"Ina, I'll either come back or I'll send for you. We've already decided, haven't we?"

She swung her arms around his neck. "Rosik, I'm so scared. We don't know what's going to happen. I wish I were the one leaving. Being the one left behind in the same old place doing the same old things is worse than being the one departing."

Rosik rocked her in his arms. "I can't say I agree with you. I'm the one leaving, and I can tell you, it feels darn shitty."

"It wouldn't be so bad if I knew when we'd be together again. At least I could count the days."

A sudden burst of daylight bled through the window. A wail fled from Ina's throat. Tears formed in Rosik's eyes. She caused his sorrow. The sting of goodbye was bad enough. Her weakness, her inability to conceal her emotions, added to his pain. She wasn't strong enough to spare him this burden.

"Ina, will you marry me?"

Did she hear him right? "What?"

"Will you marry me? This morning, if we can."

"Really? You'll marry me? Right now?"

"Yes, right now. Will you?"

"Yes! Yes, Rosik! I will marry you. Right now!"

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"It's Sunday," Rosik said, "maybe someone will be at Temple Ubstenver who could marry us."

"Let's try!" Ina reached for her personal device. No one answered at Temple Ubstenver, but it was early. Then she made another call. "Tarma! Rosik and I, we want to get married. This morning. At the temple."

Rosik and Ina were ready in minutes. Ina heard a knock on the door. It was Tarma. "You're getting married!" Tarma gave her a hug. "Ina, we've got to go. We don't have much time."

"I know," Ina said, "we're all packed."

Rosik, Ina, and Tarma met Garrett in the hallway.

Garrett carried his gear. "If we're going to do this, we'd better get going."

A door opened. Pada Rammak peeked in.

"Sorry if we woke you, Lady Rammak," Rosik said.

"You didn't, I was making breakfast and heard noises. Why are you up so early? Did something happen? More trouble with the Izvyon?"

"Not this time," Rosik told her. "We're getting married. We're going up to Temple Ubstenver. We hope someone will be there to perform the service."

Pada clapped her hands. "Married! How wonderful." Pada touched the charcoal-colored sleeve of Ina's sweater. "You're marrying in black and gray?"

"I didn't bring anything else," Ina said. "Rosik is leaving. I brought sorrow clothes."

Pada tapped a finger against her round chin. "Hmm, I may have a robe that will fit you. My daughter is a tall girl. Her father's family hails from the Momidan foothills. People there are bigger than those from the Shinchik flatlands." In short, quick steps, Pada scurried away. She returned in seconds. In her arms she cradled a silk robe. The shimmering fabric was pink in color and embroidered with gentle, swirling patterns of leaves and flowers. "I know Lotish brides wear green, but pink is better than black and gray." She handed the folded

clothing to Ina.

The cloth glistened even in the low light. "It's beautiful!" Ina said. She stroked the soft material. "Thank you, Pada."

"No problem at all. Do you have a vehicle? It's a long walk, and the buses aren't running to the temple yet."

"We don't have transportation, Lady Rammak," Rosik told her.

"Well! We can't have the bride and ruzhman walking up to the temple on their wedding day! May I give you a ride?"

"Lady Rammak," Rosik said, "thank you so much for helping us."

"Young man, it's my pleasure. You look so handsome in your uniform. And the lovely bride will wear a robe I weaved with my own hands. What could be better?"

They left the building through a back door. Like a damp blanket, fog hung low to the ground. Moist air felt cold against Ina's face. Pada, Tarma, and Ina climbed into the car as Garrett and Rosik stuffed their gear into the trunk. Ina heard the hatch clink shut. She then heard Garrett's voice. "Rosik, are you sure you know what you're doing? You did just meet her."

Rosik didn't hesitate. "Yes, I'm sure. If the world were kind, I would like my family to meet her before our marriage. I would like her to first see Domataland and Vadsech. But the world is not kind."

"Then let's do this, buddy," Garrett said.

As Pada drove up the winding, steep road, Ina thanked God for the fog. The moist shroud blocked the view of the harbor and the sailing ship that would soon carry Rosik away.

The drive to Temple Ubstenver did not take long. Pada parked near the entrance. Tarma jumped out and ran up the temple steps. Ina watched as the thick door opened. A good sign! Someone must be inside. She followed Tarma into the dimly lit foyer. Rosik, Garrett, and Pada trailed behind her.

A babbagurdy was busy dusting furniture in the worship chamber. Tarma said, "Excuse me, Lady, do you know if there is anyone here who could perform a wedding?"

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"A wedding?" The woman's smile seemed angelic despite several missing teeth. "Entire Salna is praying in the reflection room. I'll let her know you're here." Rocking from side to side with each step, the old lady limped through a doorway near the altar.

Within seconds, the babbagurdy returned. "This is Entire Salna," she said.

A beautiful woman wearing spring green raiment and a white veil appeared. Ina recognized the young entire. She was the one who sprinkled water on her and Rosik during the Celebration of Awakening service.

"Are you the couple who wishes to marry?" Entire Salna's voice sounded like a misty spring rain.

"We are," Rosik told her.

Entire Salna studied them. "I believe I've seen you before."

"You have an extraordinary memory," Rosik said. "We attended the Celebration of Awakening service. The worship chamber was packed."

"But only a few wore the uniform of Domataland," she told him. "The ship sails away today, does it not?"

Grief stole Ina's breath. Such terrible words! So final they sounded.

Entire Salna touched Ina's shoulder. Her palm felt warm, even through clothing. "Don't cry," the entire said. "It will be an honor to marry you to this man. Are you a Lotish believer and a Bakhadaree citizen?"

"Yes." Ina's hands were trembling.

"Here, let me help you," Tarma said. Tarma held Ina's arm steady. The entire scanned Ina's Bakhadaree citizenship stamp.

"Very good," Entire Salna said. She then read Rosik's name tag. "Ruzhman Venkin, are you a member of the Lotish faith?"

"I am."

"I need identification. Birth or military will do."

Rosik gave it to her.

Entire Salna's fingertips came to rest on the folded robe

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that Ina clutched in her shaking arms. "This is lovely cloth. Is this what you will wear?"

Ina's words stuck in her throat.

Tarma said, "It is."

Pada and Tarma helped Ina wrap the silken fabric over her dark clothing.

"Do you have a veil?" Entire Salna asked.

Ina lost what little control she had left. Tears burst from her eyes.

"She doesn't," Tarma said. "We didn't have time."

Ina felt Entire Salna's warm hand on her arm.

"Please wait for a moment," the entire said. She walked away, but soon returned with a lace veil. It was the type ordained female entires wore for very special holy days. She draped the lace over Ina's head.

Ina's tears stopped flowing. She was a bride!



Lieutenant Rosik Venkin gazed at Ina. She was more beautiful than any woman who spent a fortune on a wedding gown.

Entire Salna's words reminded him his time with his bride was short. "Please, Ruzhman, we should begin. Your ship sails soon." To the old cleaning lady, the entire said, "Lady Kasola, will you assist me?"

The ceremony was quick. When it ended, Entire Salna's body swayed, as if the floor had moved beneath her feet.

Garrett reached to steady her. "Entire Salna, are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you, Ruzhman Dartuk. My spirit home visited. I felt the warm sea flow through me. Peaceful and alive, but gray and powerful. Ruzhman Venkin, the warm sea is your spirit home as well, is it not?"

Rosik wondered how she knew. "Yes, Entire Salna, the

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warm sea is my spirit home.”

Garrett bowed before the Lady of the Temple. He then said, “Rosik, we must go.”

The lace covering Ina’s head tickled Rosik’s lips when he whispered into her ear. “Come, my love.” He headed toward the doors. “Wait! The veil! We must return it.”

“There’s no need,” Entire Salna said. “We have others. Keep it.”

The young entire was beautiful almost beyond belief. Light streaming in from the golden dome and stained glass windows drenched her in splashes of color reminiscent of reflections on a placid lake. An image of Lake Serendipity appeared to Rosik. It was a parting gift—a glimpse of his Land of Many Rivers home. “Entire Salna, Lady Kasola, thank you,” he said.

Outside, fog hung like a pearl glaze in the cool air. Rosik helped Ina climb into the back seat of Pada’s car. No one spoke as they rode down the hill. Ina buried her face in her hands and wept. Tarma gazed out the window. Garrett stared into space. Pada concentrated on the road as she drove, but Rosik saw the tremble in her fingers. Rosik felt he should say something, but a tangle of sorrow and joy stole his voice.

They arrived at the harbor. Countless people were gathered to bon voyage the Goodwill Ship. Pada pulled to a stop along a curb. “The crowd is huge. This is as close as we can get, I’m afraid.” She turned off the engine. “I’m sorry I can’t accompany you to the ship. I must return to my restaurant. They’ll need me to help with breakfast.”

“Lady Rammak,” Rosik told her, “there is no need for apologies. We are ... thank you, for all you’ve done for us.”

Everyone climbed out of the car.

“Ina,” Pada said, “keep the robe. My wedding present to you. I can make another robe for my daughter.”

Rosik saw tears well up in Pada’s dark eyes.

She bowed to him and Garrett. “Brave soldiers, I wish you safety and peace. If you should return to our city by the sea,

please stop by. If need of shelter were to again arise, you know where to find me. You will always be welcome."

"Thank you, Lady Rammak," Garrett said.

Pada wiped away tears and climbed into her car. She drove away. Garrett then walked toward the docks. Tarma followed.

"Ina," Rosik said, "we need to head to the ship now."

"No!" Her body crumpled. He caught her. "Rosik, you can't go!"

"Ina, you're my wife. We have legal standing to be together. I have family here, and you have family in Domataland. I want so badly for you to see my home in Vadsech."

If a blossom possessed human speech, the flower's words would flow as softly as Ina's. "The Land of Many Rivers." Her body straightened. "I'm a wife," she said, as if the reality of it had just dawned on her. "I'm Ina Ruzh-Venkina now."

"Yes, you are Ina Ruzh-Venkina, my wife, and a citizen of Domataland."



Ina Ruzh-Venkina wondered what lay beyond the fog. Was it a green field or a great chasm that dropped into a pit of fire? Despite the crowd, the world had fallen silent, as if sorrow had frozen sound. Rosik's arm wrapped around her shoulders. His touch fought the chill. Together they walked, as husband and wife, to his waiting vessel.

A puff of mist floated away. Then she saw it: the Goodwill Ship. Ghostly gray it appeared through the thinning vapors. Its enormous masts reached into a white sky. On the docks, sailors mingled with citizens, police, and national defenders. In contrast to the joyous mood when the ship arrived, the people now clustered together in silence and tears. A gaggle of pro-Izvyonsk protesters huddled nearby. The signs they carried read, *Never Come Back*, and, *Domats Not Welcome in Izvyona*. Less an occasional scowl, few Bakhadaree patriots acknowledged the protesters' presence.

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The fog soon fled, unveiling a pale blue sky. Desperation enveloped Ina. It would not be long now; she would no longer see Rosik's face. He'd sail far away.

A horn shrieked. Ina knew why. It was the signal for all hands to board. This old tradition sometimes meant joy, for it also sounded when a ship came into harbor. But this was not the call of joy. It was the cry of despair. The sailors lined up on the gangplank. Tall and stern the men held themselves. Many Bakhads wept. Ina watched as the sailors filed onto the ship. The end neared. Her husband must soon join the line.

"Ina Ruzh-Venkina," Garrett said, "don't worry about your husband. I'll look after him."

She touched Garrett's cheek. "Thank you, Captain Dartuk. God bless you."

Garrett gave Tarma a hug and kissed her forehead. He then climbed aboard the ship.

Rosik's turn came. "I must go now, Ina."

She clutched his hands. She squeezed hard, lest she forget how it felt to touch him. As she and Rosik had done the last time they parted, she held on as long as distance allowed. He took another step up. His hands slipped from hers. Ina reached up and touched one of his pant legs and then a shoe. She tried to speak, but sobs stole her voice.

Before boarding, Rosik said, "My Ina, I love you. I will forever. Look at you! You are the world's most beautiful bride. I can't believe you're my wife. It's so wonderful! It's hard to believe it's real."

"I love you!" She wanted to shout the words, but she managed only a whimper.

"I love you, too."

Two sailors saluted as Rosik stepped onto the deck. Rosik, tall and proud in his uniform, peered over the side. He bowed to Tarma and blew Ina a kiss. Then he disappeared from view. Breath would not fill Ina's lungs. "He's re ... he's really ... gone."

"Ina," Tarma said, "you're his wife. He'll be coming back

for you. Or he'll send for you."

"I don't want him to go!"

"I know, Ina."

On board the vessel, sailors called to one another. Those standing on the dock heard the Domataree voices. In moments, the tall sailing ship pulled away. A babbagurdy in the crowd said, "Once again we are alone. Forgotten."

Alone. Forgotten. Ina feared those words. Would the impromptu wedding mean anything to Rosik when he returned to his world? Or would he forget his wife in far-off, troubled Bakhadaland? Would there be another, better woman waiting for him in his Domataree port? Or in Vadsech? An old flame rekindled, perhaps? Surely there was some lady out there who had led a better, cleaner life. Someone who didn't cease to be a virgin at the age of six. Someone who was not battle hardened before adulthood. Someone who had not killed in defense of her home.

"Hurry! Ina, look up!" Tarma said.

Ina saw the ship. Two figures stood along its railing. Rosik and Garrett! Both men waved. Ina and Tarma waved back. The ship shrank. Tinier and tinier it grew. One last time, Rosik swung both arms above his head. He and Garrett then vanished.

"Rosik!" Ina tried to call out, but tears choked her words. "Come back!"

The tall ship, its sails puffed open in the wind, silently slipped ever farther away.

"Do you want to go home now?" Tarma asked.

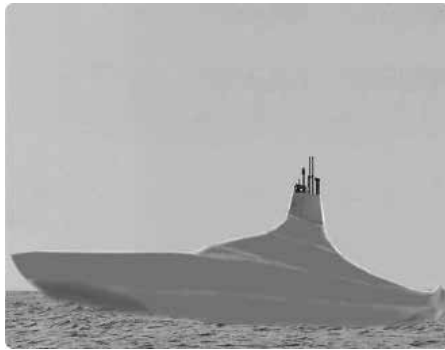
"No!"

Many felt as Ina did, for the crowd on the docks thinned, but only a little. The back of the vessel now faced the shore. A gust expanded the Domataree flag to full length. Its green, gold, and white bars flapped in the wind. A cheer rose from the Bakhadaree crowd. A young man said, "Domataland will not abandon us!"

CHAPTER 39

RIBBONS OF BLOOD

“The Sea Ghost marks a turning point in tactical surface warfare technology. Scarcely a blip on radar, all but undetectable to sound tracking, and nearly invisible to the naked eye, the Sea Ghost can operate as both a surface vessel and a shallow-water submersible. Its ability to fold down the upper decks into the lowest level makes the ship a smaller target and maximizes its speed”



*Senator John Rineburg
Chairman, Defense Intelligence Committee
Legislative Defense Funding Request
Year 1003 of the Enlightened Epoch*

***D'nevtnya, Bakhadaland
Sunday, April 23, Year 1007 EE
9:50 a.m.***

Music spread through the crowd. Tarma Nedola recognized the melody. “Do you hear it, Ina? They’re singing the Domata-ree national anthem.” Tarma hummed along. It made her feel

better, but Ina refused to sing.

The voices faded before the song ended. Tarma stopped humming. A stir spread through the crowd like a fire's breath gusting through dry grass. People pointed out to sea. Tarma saw a sight that had become too familiar: Izvyonsk warships. Cheers rose from the ranks of the pro-Izvyonsk protesters. Tarma saw a group of patriotic Bakhadaree men shake their fists. On this dock, the protesters were outnumbered. The protesters' voices faded.

A patriotic woman shielded her eyes from the sun. "Where's the Domataree Air Force? Are they out there? They're so hard to see."

Those with binoculars scanned the scene. "I see ten Izvyonsk ships out there," a man said, "Cadonan-made Sea Ghosts, but no sign of Domataree aircraft."

The Goodwill Ship was heading eastward. The Sea Ghosts pursued.

"They're going for the Goodwill Ship!" the man said.

Ina squeezed Tarma's arm. Tarma winced against the pain.

The distance narrowed between the ten modern war vessels and the Domataree flagship. A woman said, "The Izvyon could've fired long ago. Why are they getting so close?"

An elderly man stared through binoculars. He wore a veteran's vest and scarf. "The Goodwill Ship is in international waters. If the Izvyon take action now, they'll break maritime law."

Brilliant rays ejected from a Sea Ghost. Streaks of light dashed across the sky. The weapons made no sound. Blinding flashes erupted by the Goodwill Ship. Then came an audible explosion. The blast formed a wake. Short but violent waves raced toward the shore. In an instant, it was over. So fast it all happened! The crowd on the dock fell silent. A burst of red flame flared up from the ocean surface. Black smoke soiled the soft blue of the spring sky.

Ina's legs folded. Tarma caught her. Even so, Ina's body slumped down onto the wooden dock. Tarma's arms felt as

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weak as jelly.

"Rosik! No! Rosik! It can't be!" Ina clutched the Holy Triad pendant that was hidden beneath her wedding attire.

Tarma knelt down beside her and watched the patch of fire on the sea. The flames died. Only a thick column of black smoke remained.

"What can you see?" a woman said to a man. "Is anything left of the Goodwill Ship?"

He said, "Nothing's left! It's destroyed. Totally destroyed." Binoculars tumbled from his hands.

The woman plucked the binoculars from the ground. "Oh, my God! Oh, my God! It's gone. Completely gone." Now the binoculars rolled out of her hands. She fell to her knees. "All those young men! All those young men! Dead! The Izvyon did this! Monsters! Izvyonsk monsters!"

Ina moaned. Tarma saw a puddle of teardrops on the wooden plank below Ina's face. Tarma pulled her close. "Ina, my baby! My poor baby!"

Tarma heard the erratic stomping of many feet. Cries of fear mingled with shouts of rage. A mob of patriots encircled a cluster of pro-Izvyonsk protesters. Soon, punches were flying. Many protesters fell, writhing in pain. Bakhadaree policemen watched the melee. One officer scratched his head and adjusted his cap as a female protester begged her attacker for mercy. "Please! Please, Ruzhman, don't hurt me. I have children. Three children." She didn't get mercy. A young, angry man flogged the protester with her own sign. A male protester tried to make a run for it. Two patriots grabbed him. They threw him against a post. One patriot struck him with bare fists. The other man pummeled him with a chunk of jagged wood.

The struggle did not last long. The patriots rolled over the protesters like hungry Tognalese jungle ants. Bloodied bodies lay in twisted mounds. Pools of blood stained the dock. Tarma saw a man floating facedown in the water. A haze of red surrounded him. Through spaces between the boards of

the dock, she saw ribbons of blood churning in the salt water.

Women with knives appeared. They glared at the protesters' bodies. Even grandmothers had their duties in Bakhadaree warrior legends. A girl helped a babbagurdy kneel down alongside a prostrate protester. The old lady handed the girl a cane. The girl then gave the lady a curved knife. The babbagurdy raised the shiny blade. An ancient battle cry rang out: "*Enemies of Bakhadaland, beware!*" The knife fell. Soon the babbagurdy lifted her hands above her head. In one hand she held the knife. In the other, she held the man's scalp. The severed flesh dripped blood. "*I seal your fate, mine enemy!*"

More red twisted and turned in the sea.

"Tarma! Tarma! My Rosik is dead. The Izvyon killed him!" Ina's words rang with the despair of every tear of sorrow ever wept.

"I will kill every stinking Izvyon that lives," Tarma said. "Every single one. The sympathizers, they deserve worse than death. No fate is too harsh for them."

CHAPTER 40

WITNESS ONE

SUNRISE

“Before the era of airpower, the golden-headed hawk symbolized eyes-on-the-enemy surveillance. Today, along with the thunderbolt and historic jet engine, the sharp-eyed bird of prey is the emblem of the Domataree Air Force—the shield of Domataland.”



*History of Warfare Textbook
Domataree Air Force Academy*

Ver-Nuvelin, Domataland
Sunday, April 23, Year 1007 EE
2:00 p.m.

Key staff surrounded President Demnar Tarish. They watched on live video as his nation’s Goodwill Ship burned on the seas off the Bakhadaree coast. Demnar’s heart bled. So many lives had been cut short, the lives of good, patriotic men who loved Domataland. Yet here he sat, safe in a conference room in

Ver-Nuvelin, far away from Cadonan-made Sea Ghosts. "Any sign of Cadonan activity?" Demnar asked.

Defense Minister Rivar Henik waved his hand over the situation globe. "Nothing that we didn't already know about, Honorable President."

What terrible power brought the world to this point? Domataland was vulnerable and its enemies relentless. Demnar's options were few. Perhaps the legends of unalterable fate were true. "Destroy the Izvyonsk vessel that fired on the Goodwill Ship," he said.

A grin flashed across Rivar's face. "Yes, Honorable President." He paused and then asked, "Just the one warship?"

"Just the one that fired, Minister Henik."



D'nevtnya, Bakhadaland
Sunday, April 23, Year 1007 EE
10:00 a.m.

Tarma Nedola watched as the Izvyonsk warships changed course. They were heading straight for the harbor at D'nevtnya.

"They're coming for us!" a woman said.

Some onlookers ran. Most remained, including Tarma. She cradled Ina in her arms. Tarma hoped the Izvyon would come ashore—an opportunity to kill an Izvyon with her bare hands. No thought pleased her more.

"Hey, what's that?" A young man pointed overhead.

A string of quivering disturbances shimmered against the clear sky: Silver Star. The Domataree Air Force had come. In a blink, the ethereal aircraft changed positions. A line of light bolted out from one of the globes. In less than a heartbeat, an Izvyonsk warship was gone. No explosion. No fire. Simply gone.

TOXIC SPHERE

A man lowered his binoculars and shook his head.

"What did you see?" a woman asked.

"The damnedest thing," he said. "The Izvyonsk warship vanished. Some steam. Some silt on the water. That's it."

The crowd on the dock cheered. So did Tarma. "Ina, they got 'em! The Domats pulverized the ship that killed Rosik and Garrett. They should sink all the Sea Ghosts."

Ina cried all the harder. "It's too late. He's gone. My husband is dead."

The flying objects dropped. Some hovered close to the sea's surface. Some dashed about. Others appeared, disappeared, and reappeared like flashing lights. A string of them buzzed the nine remaining Izvyonsk vessels. The Sea Ghosts fired. Their weapons proved useless. The ships turned around. The crowd cheered again.

Tarma didn't cheer this time. After having been married little more than an hour, her best friend was a widow. What could she possibly say to Ina now? Rosik wasn't coming back for her. Ina would not receive a call instructing her to join him in Domataland. They would never present their first child to Ina's family. There would be no birth-blessing in the temple. No first wedding anniversary. They would not even witness one sunrise as husband and wife. Tarma herself would miss Rosik and Garrett. They were good men. They didn't deserve to die. Not now. Not so young. Not like this. Tarma was ready for war. She wished for it to begin here and now. But it wasn't meant to be. Revenge would have to wait a little longer.

The translucent, quivering balls transformed into hard-sided, sickle-shaped aircraft. They flew in formation. Their engines roared. The docks shuddered. Billions of trembling waves covered the sea. The warplanes circled above the spot where the Goodwill Ship met its end.

"Ina, look! The airplanes are paying tribute to those who died on the Goodwill Ship."



Ina Ruzh-Venkina watched the Silver Star aircraft. They were honoring her husband, Lieutenant Rosik Venkin, Soldier of Domataland. Although a new round of tears gushed from her eyes, she felt pride.

A blast of wind grabbed her lace veil. She saw the cloth twist and fold above her head. Tarma reached for the delicate fabric, but it hurried beyond her grasp. It rode the swirling current of air far out over the ocean.

CHAPTER 41

MOST OF THE CREW

"... You have lost a loved one and Domataland has lost a patriot and a guardian. Our brave soldier of Domataland has died to defend us all. A grateful nation mourns with you in this, your hour of sorrow"



*Next of Kin Notification
Domataree Defense Ministry*

***Ver-Nuvelin, Domataland
Sunday, April 23, Year 1007 EE
2:30 p.m.***

President Demnar Tarish's temples ached. He rubbed his eyes. "Minister Henik, your evaluation of the Silver Star strike?"

Defense Minister Rivar Henik rested his elbows on the conference room table. "Cadona was watching, Honorable President. We gave them what they already knew: a standard strike. However, there is something the enemy has figured out."

"And that is?"

"The Izvyon knew exactly how close they needed to get to the Goodwill Ship before firing. Any farther away, Silver Star could've intercepted the barrage. The exact moment they came in range, they fired. No hesitation. Chief Kolensha, do you agree with my assessment?"

Tears rattled Intelligence Chief Rozula Kolensha's words. "I do, Minister Henik. Either Cadona or Izvyona figured it out. There are only so many ways they could've learned about this particular capability. What surprises me is that they showed their hand. They showed us what they know about our weapons. It's possible the Izvyon were so bent on destroying our ship that they didn't care about intelligence consequences."

"Whatever the reason," Rivar said, "Rozula and I have a hole to plug in our security."

Demnar asked, "Minister Henik, did the Goodwill Ship complete its final mission before it was lost?"

"Yes, Honorable President," Rivar told him, "we have received confirmation. Mission complete."

Demnar stared at the viewplane and watched the Domataree aircraft circle above the destroyed sailing ship. The grand vessel had served as the flagship of Domataland's foreign policy for many long years. Now the ship was no more. "Minister Henik, I want the names of all those who died on our ship. I will notify next of kin myself."

"Yes, Honorable President."

Despite the silence of the staff, Demnar sensed unease, sadness, and anger. "Comments? Observations?"

Rivar wasted no time responding. "Honorable President, will we be taking out more of those Izvyonsk ships?"

"No, not unless they prepare to take other hostile action."

Presidential Spokesman Aldon Turnik said, "Honorable President, killing the Izvyonsk ship ... two wrongs don't make a right. Sinking their vessel won't bring back our men, but it will harm our image as a peaceful country. We've worked hard to improve our image in the eyes of the world."

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Madrik Meppatch, chief of the Science Council, squirmed in his seat. "What! Honorable President, we should sink all of their ships. Cadona and her allies insult and belittle us at every opportunity no matter what we do."

Several others murmured their support.

"Revenge will not bring back the lives of our men either," Demnar said, "but it will harm our image as a peaceful nation."

Madrik wasn't finished. "Half measures! Honorable President, that's what we gave them. Half measures! We should destroy the other nine ships. Blow them up when they return to Sulturil. Hell, we should crush the whole town of Sulturil. If it weren't for Silver Star, Izvyona would've obliterated D'nevtnya."

"Chief Meppatch," Demnar said, "we are a civilized nation. We need to act like one. Yet doing nothing makes us look like we are unwilling to defend ourselves. Izvyona must know they cannot strike out against our interests without penalty."

"Honorable President," Aldon said, "fighting violence with violence only creates more violence. We risk escalation."

Demnar again watched the death scene displayed in front of them. "Sometimes fighting violence with violence keeps a lid on more violence until true change is achieved in all warring parties. Peace cannot be one-sided."

Aldon said, "By sending the Goodwill Ship into Bakhadaland, we violated the ceasefire agreement that we signed with Izvyona."

"Izvyona violated the ceasefire first, and multiple times," Demnar told him.

Aldon shook his head. "So we react just as the Izvyon do? We are behaving just like them."

"Spokesman Turnik, the leadership in Izvyona will take full advantage of nonviolent action."

"If we respond in a peaceful way, Honorable President," Aldon said, "Izvyona will eventually see the advantages of responding in kind."

Rivar's face turned crimson. "Spokesman Turnik, Izvyona

will respond in a peaceful way when Bakhadaland ceases to exist, when full-scale Estdevent revolution returns to our southern mountains, and when our nation crawls on its knees to beg Cadona for scraps.”

Madrik raised a fist. “Hear, hear!”

“Our military response,” Aldon said, “will encourage Izvyona to request, and no doubt receive, more advanced Cadonan weapons. Cadona has started production of the next generation of aerial hunters, for example. If there is one thing we don’t need in that part of the world, it’s more and better weapons.”

“What you say is true, Spokesman Turnik,” Demnar said, “but to deal in peace, all parties involved must have an underlying desire for peace, and peace under acceptable conditions. Unfortunately, the current Izvyonsk leadership does not want peace, not unless it is one hundred percent on its terms.”

Rivar’s unruly, gray eyebrows scrunched low over his eyes. “And that is called *surrender*.”

“Minister Henik, Spokesman Turnik, Chief Meppatch,” Demnar said, “your positions and concerns have been recorded and noted. Thank you.”

It was time for the next topic.

“Minister Takee,” Demnar said, “lodge a complaint with the World Assembly—gross violation of maritime law, the attack and sinking of an unarmed, historic vessel in international waters.”

“Yes, Honorable President,” Foreign Minister Takee said, “but you know what the response will be. The World Assembly will chastise us for sending the Goodwill Ship to Bakhadaland. The World Assembly will do what it always does. The majority of the delegates will blame us for everything.”

“Of course they will,” Demnar told him, “and when they do, we will inform them that Izvyona had repeatedly violated the ceasefire before our ship entered Bakhadaland. We will also remind the World Assembly that it failed to take action when we lodged those earlier complaints. We will also reit-

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erate the fact that the Goodwill Ship was an ancient sailing vessel without weapons.”

Rage caused Minister Takee’s hands to shake. “Honorable President, providing history will do no good. Cadona and her allies have the World Assembly in their back pockets. Sohn-Sur, as usual, will abstain. Few will dare stand against Cadona and Visstel.”

“You are correct,” Demnar said. “The World Assembly will not support us. However, it is our duty as a member nation to ensure history is properly recorded. There is a chance, Minister Takee, that a day will come when Cadona will not hold the World Assembly, and history, hostage.”

“Understood, Honorable President.”

Demnar shared the frustration the Foreign Minister felt. Yet a shadow of hope flickered in the void. As long as historical records existed, one day the truth may be known.

The room fell silent. Demnar asked, “Anyone else?”

No one spoke.

“Minister Henik,” Demnar said, “inform me immediately if Izvyona or Cadona take other hostile action.”

“Will do, Honorable President.”

Demnar studied the face of each person seated around the conference room table. No one moved or talked. “Dismissed.”

As people stood to leave, Demnar said, “Chief Kolensha, please stay a moment.”

The room cleared.

Rozula sat still, her eyes red from tears.

“Rozula, you were quiet. Your assessment?”

She swallowed hard before speaking. “Honorable President, I would love to see all of those Sea Ghosts destroyed. But taking out the one ship that fired the killing shot was the proper action, the balanced response. You did the right thing.”

“There’s something else on your mind, Rozula. I know you too well. What is it?”

She sniffed and wiped tears from her cheeks. “My heart bleeds for the souls we lost.” She closed her pale blue eyes.

She then opened them and said, "I agree with your assessment of Izvyona. Their government doesn't want peace. They want total control of Bakhadaland, and they want to distract and weaken us by stirring up the Estdevent terrorists. As long as the same people rule Izvyona, we cannot expect peace. I carry this conclusion with a heavy heart."

"It is with a heavy heart I carry it as well, Rozula. Thank you. You are dismissed."

Rozula stood and bowed. "Honorable President." She left the room.

Demnar rose and placed a hand on the nearest wall. A window formed. A view of a beautiful spring garden appeared. Tiny birds danced about on twigs and then darted to another perch farther away. As Demnar focused on spring tree buds, his mind drifted weeks into the past to a time when he was Finance Minister and Elann Vispar was President. Snow still shrouded Ver-Nuvelin when he, Elann, Betsa, and Itena traveled south. In contrast to the wintry capital, spring was well under way in the port city of Naltuk. Leaves had already unfurled, and the fragrances of vegetation and thawed earth gave testimony to dawning life. The Goodwill Ship lay anchored in the harbor at Naltuk when he arrived. Demnar recalled seeing the grand, old vessel for the first time. He knew the specifications, but to see it in person was quite a sight. Dressed in all its finest décor, the vessel proudly waved its Domataree flag in the warm sea breeze. Domataland's official colors really meant something: green, for respect for life and the environment; gold, for equitable distribution of wealth; white, for justice and rule of law. The Goodwill Ship carried Domataland's flag, and its meaning, around the world. It was on this balmy, sunny day that the ship left Naltuk and sailed away for Bakhadaland. Elann, Betsa, Demnar, and Itena greeted each sailor before they cast off on what turned out to be the ship's final journey. Demnar recalled the salutes and bows as the men boarded. The seamen, volunteers all, understood the mission and the

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risk. They would not have the means to defend themselves. The enemy was angry, dangerous, relentless, and strong. The sailors knew war cries stained the winds and water in the dangerous place that was their destination. Yet there the men stood, proud to serve Domataland, proud to support their Bakhadaree brothers. The ship's very presence would express Domataland's political will more than any statement made by a politician in Ver-Nuvelin.

Demnar forced himself to recall as much as possible about the day the Goodwill Ship departed the port of Naltuk, for neither the ship nor most of the crew would ever be seen in Domataland again.

Birds with colorful feathers flew into the Ver-Nuvelin spring garden. Their fluttering drew Demnar away from the ethereal place where memories reside. He wiped tears from his eyes. He vowed never to forget his brave brothers. Many good men died to reveal Izvyona's true intent. Izvyona would use military force to dominate Bakhadaland even if it meant conflict with Domataland. It was also now clear that Izvyona felt confident of military support from Cadona. Izvyona would not have taken such bold, deadly action against Domataland unless it was sure of aid from the world's most powerful military. These answers were found at the cost of many lives.

What could he possibly say to the loved ones of those lost? Demnar sent an image of a decades-old letter to a viewplane. The correspondence was addressed to his mother. Demnar was a little boy when she received it. He recalled how her hands trembled. She sat down on a couch and moaned. The letter delivered grave news. Demnar's father had been killed in a skirmish on Domataland's border with Izvyona.

Years after his mother's letter was written, Rozula Kolensha received a similar one. Rozula's husband, Kesik, had died in combat.

How easy it was to send soldiers to war. How hard it was to watch them die. How much harder still it was to inform family and friends that their loved ones were never coming

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home. Today, that would be Demnar's job—to communicate directly with those who will mourn, with those who will forever carry a void that will never heal. Demnar bore an even greater burden. He feared the attack on the Goodwill Ship was the first volley in a much longer, bloodier conflict.

With memories of the Goodwill Ship fresh in his mind, Demnar went to his office and performed the most heart-breaking of tasks: notification of the next of kin.

CHAPTER 42

DEAD RAT

“Those beings we most abuse, despise, and revile in this life are the ones God holds in the highest esteem when they enter his kingdom of light and love.”



*Pastor Mark Walzelesskii
True Followers of God Church*

***Cadona City, Cadona
Sunday, April 23, Year 1007 EE
11:45 p.m.***

Bob Fullerby's three team members were waiting for him inside the windowless back room of the old print shop building.

“Mr. Fullerby,” Angela said, “you’re cutting it close!”

Bob flung his old briefcase down on the table. “I know, been busy today.” He struggled out of his sweater and tossed the worn garment over the back of a chair. “Row, did your professor have any ideas about the brown car photos in my

power bill?"

"Yep! Mr. Durban said it looks like the shots were taken from multiple source points."

"Give it to me in Cadonan, Row, not your tech-speak."

"Sorry, Mr. Fullerby. He said each image seems to be a composite of shots taken from at least three cameras looking at the same scene from different positions. He also thinks the cameras were on a highly mobile airborne platform, and, though each unit moved independently of the others, they could coordinate on the fly to take a single shot."

"Can police moths do that?" Bob asked.

"Nope, and it gets even weirder. Mr. Durban thinks the pics were intentionally dirtied to hide just how powerful the equipment really is. He suspects government sources, like spy equipment, but he wasn't able to nail down a tool."

"Row, are you telling me these are government spy-eye photographs?"

"Mr. Durban says it's the best explanation," Rona told him.

"So someone deep in the spy-eye business in our government knows we'd want photos of a brown Monarch taken on that particular morning." Bob didn't know of a source with that kind of access who wouldn't just hand him the images.

"Does it have to be *our* government?" Angela asked.

"Um, Mr. Fullerby, excuse me," Keever said, "could you get into position, please?"

Bob stood near a wall. Lights came on. He saw himself on a viewplane with a backdrop of Bakhadaland behind him. As Keever adjusted the equipment, Bob said, "Ang, anything else on the Monarch?"

"The computer found several possible Monarch matches around the western end of Interstate Eleven. The pics came from open-source traffic cams near entrance ramps. Now we have to manually sort through the images. The Warrenton District doesn't require front license plates, and the mystery woman's Monarch didn't have a front plate, so we're starting with the Warrenton area."

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“Excellent, good work,” Bob said.

On a wall monitor, Bob saw Andecco reporter Scott Walters. The young man was reporting the latest news on the sinking of the Domataree Goodwill Ship. Soon, Scott would turn the report over to Bob.

“You know,” Bob said, “the sinking of the Goodwill Ship is a dead rat in the mine.”

“What does that mean?” Rona asked.

“Long time ago, miners used to take rats into mines with them. If the miners weren’t sure if a passage was safe to enter, they’d put a rat in a cage and put it in the tunnel. When they’d pull the cage back, if the rat was sick or dead, the miners would know to stay out.”

Rona made a face. “How cruel! And what do rats have to do with the Goodwill Ship?”

“Izvyona sank the Goodwill Ship. Our president and defense secretary didn’t authorize them to use our weapons to do it. According to my sources, General Willirman, Mitch Fischer, John Rineburg, and even Pastor Leon Walls encouraged Izvyona to attack.”

Kever adjusted the lights shining on Bob. “This time the dead rat means a poisoned government, Row,” Kever said.

Angela asked, “Mr. Fullerby, what are you going to say about the ship?”

“The time has come. We need to ... we have a *duty* to say more. It’s too dangerous to release everything we’ve compiled, but we can let the world know we’ve uncovered a dead rat.”

Kever raised a hand. “Mr. Fullerby, you’re on in ten, nine, eight”

CHAPTER 43

NEW DAY

Cadona City, Cadona
Sunday, April 23, Year 1007 EE
11:50 p.m.

Leeha Ritsagin grabbed another handful of popcorn. The plain kind. No butter. No salt. No caramel. She especially missed the butter, but the treat was still good and crunchy. Leeha set the nearly empty bowl on the tray table in front of her couch.

Too Many Goodbyes was one of her favorite old shows. She knew several of the tear-jerking lines by heart.

Cookie Davis reached for another tissue. "This movie is so sad!"

The heroine struggled up a mountainside. Once at the top, the actress wept as she ran across a plateau covered in grass and wildflowers. She climbed the highest mound rising from the windswept landscape. The site seemed like the top of the world. Billowy, white clouds hung in a blue sky. Wind whipped the fabric of her pale, long skirt around her slender legs. The woman's flaxen hair tossed about. Sunlight drenched the flawless skin of her pretty face.

Leeha mouthed the words that the actress spoke. *Why God? Why? Do you intend to remove from the world everything that is good and true?*

The scene did not finish. An Andecco news alert interrupted the show.

"Oh, no!" Leeha said. "I wonder what happened?"

Bob Fullerby's face appeared on the viewplane. Behind him flashed images of the blue seas, green hills, and tall cliffs

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of Bakhadaland.

Cookie tossed a damp tissue into a garbage bag. "Uh-oh, Bob Fullerby looks worried."

"He sure does," Leeha said.

Bob also appeared tired, yet his voice rang with unusual power.

"The three-week-long standoff between Izvyona and the break-away region of Bakhadaland ended in a disaster destined to shake the fabric of the civilized world. At ten a.m., Warm Sea Time, Izvyona launched an attack from a Cadonan-made warship. The target was the Flagship of Domataland: the Goodwill Ship. Modern light-strikes sank the ancient Domataree vessel after it sailed away from the Bakhadaree port city of D'nevtnya. The government in Ver-Nuvelin responded by sinking one of the Izvyonsk vessels, a Cadonan-made Sea Ghost.

"President Meyfeld has officially protested the Izvyonsk assault. Under the agreement between Izvyona and Cadona, Izvyona was to use Cadonan weapons only upon the approval of Cadonan authorities.

"Senator Bradley Seldortin, the Allegiance Party candidate for President, also criticized the attack. Senator Seldortin said the presence of the Domataree Goodwill Ship in a Bakhadaree port was an issue for diplomats, not the military.

"Senator Mitch Fischer, the Freedom Party candidate for president, however, offered a different opinion. Senator Fischer said the presence of the Goodwill Ship in the port of D'nevtnya infringed upon the territorial integrity of Izvyona. According to Senator Fischer, Izvyona has the right to defend itself from what Fischer called a foreign invasion."

The camera showed faces of stunned people in the harbor town of D'nevtnya, Bakhadaland. Many of them wailed. Some, overcome with grief, lay prostrate on wooden docks.

Other bodies lay motionless, surrounded by pools of blood.

Bob Fullerby's face reappeared.

"Self-defense or not, two things are clear. First, tension in the area has reached a new level. Second, no authorized person in the Cadonan government gave Izvyona permission to use Cadonan-made naval assets in this attack.

"A single great question lies before us: what will humanity choose to do next? Is this tragedy the warning the world needs to step back from the brink? Or is it a symptom of a world irreversibly succumbing to a culture of hate and violence? As I look at the gruesome scene unfolding in D'nevtnya, I am reminded of words spoken long ago, spoken by Thomas Fillimore, the eminent Cadonan playwright: In war, the land dies. The air and water poison. Orphans' wails pierce the night, and widows cry a veil of tears.

"This is Bob Fullerby, reporting for Andecco News Service. A tragic day is drawing to a close in Cadona City. I wish my fellow Cadonans a good night and a peaceful new day."

Once again, the old movie played, but Leea didn't focus on the show. That *stupid* document! Many things written in it were happening. It had to be real.

She heard Cookie's voice. "Leea, is something wrong? Do you know someone over there in Bakhadaland?"

Telling Cookie about the document wasn't a good idea. Exactly why, Leea wasn't sure. "No, it's just that ... so many bad things are happening. Our economy is falling apart. Cuckoos are coming to power. Now it looks like a big war is going to start."

"Leea, there are good people, too. Not everyone is bad. Bob Fullerby said the sinking of the Goodwill Ship is a wake-up call."

"Do you really think there's a chance things might get better?"

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"As long as enough good people stand up for what's right," Cookie said, "I believe we do have a chance. A *good* chance."

"I hope so."

"Hey, Leeha, do you want some tea? I kind of have a taste for some."

"Yeah, thanks. Tea sounds good."

Leeha watched Cookie fill a teapot with water.

Cookie was right, of course. If good people took a stand, hope still lived. This document was important. It almost seemed like a plan, a blueprint for evil design. Of all the people on earth, why in the heck did it find her? Why didn't the document end up with someone famous and powerful? The world would listen to people like Bob Fullerby, Senator Bradley Seldortin, and Detective Carl Brunish. She was a nobody! If she tried to bring the document to someone's attention, everyone would think she was crazy. No one would take her seriously.

Cookie pulled two mugs from the cupboard and said, "Hey, Leeha, have you seen the wormy guy lately?"

The wormy guy! He might be the answer. If he had wanted to steal her Monarch, he would've done it by now. He must want the document. If she knew who the wormy guy was, she might be able to figure out who wrote it. If she had proof that the document was important, then people would have to listen to her.

"Leeha?"

"Um ... I haven't seen him in the last day or two."

Cookie set two cups of steaming tea on the tray table. "Leeha, what is it?"

"Cookie, would you help me search for the wormy guy? I have some ideas on how we can use his picture to identify him."

"Of course I'll help. Just let me know what you need me to do."

Leeha remembered something that Cookie had said to her a week or so ago: *You're my angel, Leeha*. Cookie got it back-

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ward. Cookie was Leeha's angel. The world would deliver many trials, but now Leeha had found someone who cared.

