



“From the Paper to the Stars”

WRIT 690: Thesis Defense

Spring D 2023

By

Morgan J. Smith

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## Artist Statement

### Foreword

The journey from course lectures to the final dissertation has been and continues to be about delivering a product I have dreamt of through a sea of time. A combination of two ingredients: the imagination, which can be the altar where the Lord offers visions to guide our path, and a determination to sit behind the dim glow of a laptop that makes the eyes sore while fingers work tirelessly transferring thought to visual. From there, with the help of an unusual sort of luck, those raw texts might zoom with electric speed to the warm paper emanating with the delicious smell of a freshly printed manuscript. Within those pages is the potential to take flight beyond the boundaries that the people of proud and authoritarian have deemed the limits of human possibility. Breaking beyond those limits is a goal of this thesis, a beginner's step in that direction via laying out a fantastic literary work supporting the claim that science fiction is a tool for Christian evangelists and should be used to communicate beautiful facts involving the Lord's handwork and the genuine, very present spiritual warfare encompassing every person.

The theme of this dissertation is an original work of fiction, but there pertains a necessity toward establishing a critical foundation through outlining the motivation endeavor; moreover, critically evaluating specific qualities by discussion to optimize the purpose of the topic, the labor, and necessity for a passage laid out in the Creative Manuscript. Thus, the usage, influence, or optimism of fiction (space fiction, fantasy, etc.), depending on the author's creed, acts as a window to salvation for some. Reading the breathtaking works by Christopher Paolini, J.K. Rowling, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien inspired such fascination for knowledge and hope for beauty in the world. I wanted to utilize that literature variety for the great commission.

When I hear of any talks concerning resolutions in our government, everyone I'm near will get serious about the national issues and what could come about. Still, it never seems to get intricate with the Holy Spirit, His handiwork in the scenario. That is another hope of this dissertation to illuminate the association of the Holy Spirit with literature construct mirroring the Lord's handwork and becoming a hope or awakening for others to see the beauty God continues to instill through life.

This masters program continues to be a form of training to become versed in the skills to successfully transcribe spontaneous whims into narratives that patrons willingly pull off shelves. This degree is about creating a product not to the specifications of any entitled customer nor commerce such traits to appease any persnickety critic (especially those consistently over your shoulder); but, whole heartily develops a parallel to our world with the beloved trademarks of heroism, romance, glory, and holiness. Honestly, I wish to offer a creation of my own volition where even one person would willingly read the work that would be enough for me.

### **A Continuous Journey**

I like to believe any author of passion had some beginning rooted early in their founding years. Something of profound significance that to other eyes might appear as nothing more than youthful fancy transforming the landscape to suit the comprehension of a child; all the while, in that young mind, is the genesis point of the talents and excitement to every story, novel, or folktale they will eventually share. I think that is how some of the greatest literary authors began amidst the turmoil that life generally hails upon everyone.

That is how I began the journey into and through this evolving program that spanned beyond merely written texts but into marketing, rhetoric, and contemporary literature courses. Before each of these courses, I had a general knowledge of writing literature, the primary setting of a very narrow world, and less than dynamic interaction between a few characters. Of course, even before this level of inscription, I trace my days of writing the first novels of this growing career to a few illuminated memories of when I was but a clumsy toddler in kindergarten.

It is comical to look so far back at a point when there was so much energy and zeal for a task I did not fully comprehend. Whenever I was not learning about the excessively drawn-out study plan of the alphabet or other craft materials, I would draw frame-by-frame picture books consisting of construction paper and crayons, sometimes even taking time out of recess and nap time to complete them. When I did accomplish a page, then came the necessary help I was not afraid in my youth to ask for, someone to write the dialogue of that scene (still just a tiny kindergartener). Immediately, I would go over to the teacher or, after school, my mother and ask them to write down what I wanted to say in the discourse. Thank goodness they had patience and a keen ear to understand what I was saying; otherwise, it would have been pure gibberish by my hand. Finally, after help from folks and educators, I slapped my booklet together, and I recall the

faintest distinction of pride for my work as if that moment, I believed to have created a literature masterpiece all my own doing.

Unfortunately, after kindergarten, my booklet venture dramatically died away. Maybe I became bored with it, or coming into the first grade meant buckling down for authentic learning credentials (beginnings of math, science, English), thereby less time to draw and write. So, I went from freely creating booklets to forcible reading genres I had little to no attention span. Thus I went silent from the project for a long time and focused on what I was told to study and learn to be a good schoolboy. So keeping my head down and out of trouble, I trudged through the public school grades with obnoxious classmates who talked nonstop with gaudy ear piercing and roving waves of female gossip barriers that blocked the hallways from everyone attempting to race to the classroom.

The spirit of writing and reading was in jeopardy of becoming wholly snuffed out in my line of interest; until a revival popped into my life via a classical novel with a dragon, wizard, and a little hole in the ground. I had completed the trials of middle school and found myself waiting out a summer vacation for the beginning of my freshman high school year. Suddenly, one day between a dull laboratory job and garbage chores, I found on the mesmerizing YouTube a prevue for *The Hobbit*. The only place I ever heard that term was from Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*, so I assumed it was a fan-made film. However, when my finger tabbed that trailer, I instantly became wide-eyed of fascination with the location's familiar rich emerald hills and enthralled by the baritone vocals of that dwarf cast. I had to see this movie, but I was even more taken aback by the realization that *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were novels long before any of the films. In response, I read the manuscript and fell in love with the

literature, from the language in the characters' actions, the aspects of each arc with beautiful scenery, and the twist of an outcome.

Further, I grew to greatly admire the author J.R.R. Tolkien for numerous such achievements with his manuscripts and talent for conveying the qualities of scripture. The man crafted a realm built on the very establishment of moral absolute that is the persona of the Holy Lord, even wrote his thorough genesis for middle earth in *The Silmarillion*, all the while not spouting a convoluted message. All credit for aiding my focus back to willful reading is due to the brilliance and passion of Tolkien, to which I attribute the most profound inspiration to the quality of elements within my work.

It wasn't until my high school senior year that the ember for writing wholly rekindled, subsequently discovering the class Creative Writing. After all those school years of grueling projects involving cardboard projects and historical papers that said a lot but covered only the tip of the iceberg, finally, I had an opportunity to write about a subject beyond the confines of those faculty walls. Walking into that classroom felt like a cold lightning bolt coursed through my mind. Immediately a sense of relief, nervousness, and excitement rolled over me at the thought of writing of my choosing and design (still under a specific prompt). At that time, I thought I found something I truly enjoyed over every class project, pep rally, or career aptitude exam.

Sitting in that classroom with brick walls at all four sides without a window to provide transit for ideas beyond the stale glow of fluorescent lights that seemed to border between awake and dream felt like a representation of a dam established around my mind. This class was a fissure freeing liquid thought onto the paper. I remembered the love for creating I felt in kindergarten, and this experience would help sustain that desire for another interval.

Behold, after high school, I began my first year in the Fall at Liberty University Residential. That was a strange sense of cold numbness being relocated from Tennessee to Virginia and dropped off with a campus of strangers buzzing about. An even stranger sensation of freedom that I came to love and need to acquire the worldview previously limited to my town's 500 square-mile area. Partaking in the lectures and work-study of all those courses from Evangelism, Philosophy, and Biology/Biosphere felt like I was finally waking up beyond the confines of pragmatism that had been instilled for twelve years. Such concepts as young earth and differing cultural and religious practices interested me to the degree that they would become foundational to writing novels in the MFA program.

At first, my chosen career path landed me in the cinematography program, but after a semester, I switched to BFA in studio/digital art. I prefer working with my hands in the spectrum of color and attempting to transport the vision of thought to paper or monitor.

Liberty University became my home, the friends I made – the kindest people I ever met – were my trusted family, and the geography of rolling mountains to the east and quiet town to the west was always within walking distance for enjoyment. So, when the reality of graduation finally approached, it was like an oncoming train, ready to burst this bubble of consolation. Even with this feeling of trepidation, I could not help but feel dignity and accomplishment when I grasped that diploma.

After school, there were several possibilities of what direction to take; eventually, I returned home with my folks and started an individual job to gain clarity. This venture led to taking a year off from school, the first time doing anything as radical as this, and gaining clarity as to what the Lord would guide my direction in a way I would not only understand after a period of first-time occupation in this year off was as a lawn and service laborer (driving to

outdoor jobs for weed-eating, mowing, landscaping, tree removal). During that period, I attempted to organize my studio portfolio for presentation in hopes of entering the MFA studio/digital art program, I was turned down, which sent me into a low, but I persevered by reawakening that drive for writing. During the intervals when my co-workers and I were driven between jobs and laboring outside in warm air among thick pines outlined a vision for forthcoming projects. After the main blunt of summer, I left that trade to work at a Picture Frame shop, hoping to immerse myself in other artistic pieces to improve my abilities. I continued with my writing, leading to three ample literary titles.

Unfortunately, shortly after the COVID scare, I was let go from the Frame shop, but not without completing an entire short story manuscript. After a month in a lull, I applied for the MFA Creative Writing program. Still nervous from my last flop entering a MFA program, I realized that events had to have been orchestrated by the Lord just for this application. As it turned out, the enrollment process required the submission of a story or literature piece for review before one could be enrolled. As it happened, I had a short work of fiction written and ready to be typed and submitted, thanks to the time on my hands. From there, it was a short heart-pounding interval between the submission and waiting for the answer from the review board. When I got the acceptance notification, it felt like the exact moment I first read my acceptance into Liberty University residential programs. I wanted to jump to the stars and believed I could achieve anything despite the obstacles.

At first, the daunting challenge mainly consisted of transferring from residential study to online study and being unable to meet face-to-face with peers for group discussions never entirely made sense to me (although those group discussions were still beneficial). Through every dissertation and lecture, I persevered. Although, looking back from kindergarten to the

MFA program does not feel like a linear path; rather, a lengthy inconsistency between reading and writing. Thankfully I like referring to a wise excerpt, “To a story–teller a journey is a marvelous device. It provides a strong thread on which a multitude of things that he has in mind may be strung to make a new thing, various, unpredictable, and yet coherent.” (Tolkien 239). No one knows all the ends of their journey, but every path has merits and purposes.

### **A Novel for a Thesis**

During my time as a residential student, there was always the query at the beginning of every semester concerning following our chosen vocation as the calling to glorify God as part of the great commission. That has been a strange mission for someone like myself who leans toward introversion and longs to design fictional worlds set apart from this one that the Lord has given us. However, that is not to excuse the commission but get creative with the methods.

While on campus at the University, not only were my eyes opened to history and facts previously obscured, I developed an interest in the world beyond the borders of where I resided. I had the opportunity to view various cultural backgrounds and seminars whose topics ranged from corruption to worldwide trafficking. I became aware of issues threatening the nation's integrity (mainly acceptance and tolerance of unscrupulous practices) and had a general desire to take action. Unfortunately, there lies the rub, being one person with very little influence or reach. Never been one to know what to say through social media, and while volunteering has merits, it doesn't seem to take a stand against evil seeping throughout the country in the forms of self-destructive cultures acting as tumors.

Extraordinary how some people who have been separated by different lifetimes can still help and encourage action against evil. When I consider what I could or should do, I think of one quote from a favorite author of mine whose words are part of the catalyst to this MFA program, "Since it is so likely that children will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage. Otherwise, you are making their destiny not brighter but darker." (Lewis 31).

That is how I view my role in the Lord's great commission, combating the lies and the agenda orchestrated through the Enemy. The art of storytelling is a device that should neither be misused nor underestimated.

This is what the hope of this thesis will be structured around, a narrative essay of my originality. This narration is something I have envisioned for a long time and one of the ones I began writing while working for the lawn and service company. The working title so far goes by *Auroran Templar* (this spelling is intentional). The initial genres lean toward adventure, action, and spiritual, but I have plans to fuse other categories: war, romance, thriller, mystery, and maybe a sip of horror. The premise centers around a young man's journey, Andrew Reagan, as he becomes instrumental in a skirmish amongst the ocean of stars. This boy Andrew considers himself a speck of grain in the sand, plagued with anxiety about uncertain pathways beyond his senior year. Well, he freshly graduates high school and immediately receives a commission when he is taken up and met by a divine being. Accepting, he receives clues to a heritage he never knew and a suit of magical armor. He is instructed to wait a year without speaking of this to anyone or going to college, against the pressure of his folks. Later travelers arrive in a space vessel and ferry Andrew off the earth, where betrayal strikes from one of the crew and crash lands. Andrew is stranded in a distant realm of metallic knolls. There he encounters a mysterious guardian who claims to have waited for Andrew's return. Those two embark on an odyssey across worlds of sea, glass, and darkness to bring him to one known only as the Gran-Arbitrator, who has the authority to reveal Andrew's past. Across his travels, Andrew learns of a galactic enemy bent on the domination and death of all free people; all the while, his fate is connected to the universal kingdom known as the Auroran Templar.

The hope and excitement are to present this developed plot in the form of a narrative essay as the grand finale to the program, symbolizing where I began with a thought for years jumbled within my head to written narration intended to embrace all the qualities of scripture in the characters and nature to share with an audience. In hindsight, it might only come down to a sample of the essay, but I would detail elements that structure the essence. Then, using this fiction to spotlight issues and warn all Christians need be aware.

One issue is reawaking the values of the spiritual nature warped or silenced in this society. The intention is to remind people that there are spiritual beings who are very real, or more real, and at work through our lives. As stated, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." (Ephesians 6:12, KJV). My ambition is to illustrate these principalities and powers. Rediscover their influence on people and why it seems so offbeat in this age through indication that these powers affect bygone cultures compared to their return to the modern age. Further, a remarkable accomplishment would be to attest that the Lord's presence is boundaryless.

Additionally, there are fundamentals to the literature that merits serious analysis for cohesion. Some are scientific fields meant to offer the structure for the fabric of the setting and even showcase the ordered creation of God's handiwork. Such features would cover interesting cosmological facts to make the sensation of travel or expanse more epic. While the whole comprehension of scientific facts is out of my expertise, an attempt to compare and contrast agnostic versus creationist viewpoints will be made. The foundation of physical laws this narrative is based on will follow the Creationist module, that earth and the universe were created strictly in six days. According to various scientists and professors, along with the theory of the

ether, the so-called vacuum of space is actually comprised of an invisible particle structuring what they have defined as the ether.

I suppose an essential point is any research covering modern culture's entertainment broadcasting traits of space as strictly secular landmarks as if that is their sovereignty to decide the limitations of God's wondrous work or directed creation. A critical issue to illuminate the creation is not a random event born from an unprecedented blast but called into origin through commands of the One with neither beginning nor end.

During critical analysis, an endeavor to argue the acceptable volition of science fiction, or space fiction, should formulate its appropriateness within Christian literature. While science fiction is a grand unveiling of ideas evoking possible futures of a unified civilization or global disaster, the genera highlight wondrous concepts of technology and physical adeptness that feels like it makes some cynics arrogant toward the Holy Spirit. Possibly increases or aides their slur about Christianity as a pagan religion and deeming new technology key to immortality. Nevertheless, vibrant theologians have used science fiction to promote the scripture via storytelling, and I want to follow that noble line of disciples.

### **Beyond Mundane, Back to The Lord**

Throughout this process of structuring and examination, a final ambition is to improve the skills I have learned to uplift the reader and help them see beyond their desk, cubical, or bedframe. Providing an escape, but not an escape from God but from anxieties and forces that can hinder a connection with God. When I take a moment to observe the world, from the streets to high-rises, I realize various types of escape are not in a paperback. Such methods might be considered recreational but ultimately are physically and spiritually toxic.

While we cannot solve every problem, I can strive to offer a product, maybe a reminder, that an escape can be a pure journey through printed texts that form a foundation for one's imagination to dream of natural magnificence among contrasting geographies or beauty of fellowship among comrades. I suppose it is all about helping them escape to the Lord, to Christ, through the cornerstone of his nature embedded in the textual setting so they can believe beyond all the boundaries of the practicality of the beauty and goodness in the Lord's creation. The utmost inspiration continues to come from a personal role model who makes sense of storytelling in the hands of a Christian with these wise words, "We have come from God, and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain errors, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God." (Carpenter 151).

## Critical Report

### A Literary Handiwork

Getting up to another day of frustration, compounded with an infuriating routine of daily struggles, can leave this sense of hollow completion. The workday for all individuals involves stress brought upon thru events caused unintentionally by our fellow peers or intentionally by those who find pleasure in others' misery and those influences calculatedly brought upon man and woman for their destruction by the unseen and malicious. As stated, our scrimmage is not against flesh but against the rulers of the darkness and spiritual wickedness in high places (Ephesians 6:12, KJV). These forms of attack can take numerous shapes varying in intensity. Nonetheless, the result is somehow leaving a person disconnected from God, perhaps like Peter stepping out of that boat and eventually sinking beneath the crashing waves of a massive fury tempest, with our eyes and minds more occupied with the limitations brought upon by the tides of anxiety rather than a keen spirit set on God. There must be a desire to seek after the Lord's wisdom that acts as a warm blanket relaxing the strained muscles in hours of calamity or turmoil.

The arsenal for proclaiming Christ's teachings has vast methods for each individual according to their bestowed talent and refined skill. There is a particular knack with an almost timeless charm and kin to Jesus's ministry, storytelling. During his time walking among his followers and those skeptical of his identity, Jesus would speak in parables, "usually short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle or something (such as a news story or a series of real events) likened to a parable in providing an instructive example or lesson" ("Parable"). The art of storytelling, folktales, and parables is a craft not cast away in a bygone era of cave paintings or scrolls of parchment. This art form is alive and thriving in the entertainment industry under constant production across television studios, films, theatres, and

even novels. However, with these brands' influence over the crowds, their agendas might not involve glorifying the Lord, possibly sometimes the exact opposite.

Fortunately, there are those whom I believe the Lord has placed a desire for the woven novelisation to combat the removal of the Lord from our daily life. Here I would utilize my contemporary novel to awaken the eyes glazed over by infuriating routines and lighten the hearts to the grandeur of coming to know the Lord. This personal novel (Auroran Templar) is structured upon the foundation of three enigmatic traits that require exploration for complete comprehension.

The first is the very genera for what is ultimately meant to be Christian literature, science fiction. A goal is to express that this grand category is not solely for agnostics but is utilized by Christian authors to captivate audiences. The second foundation is the setting, established according to Creation Theory. Utilizing the setting to preference and impart physic truths of the Lord's handwork. The crucial third trait revolves around spiritual entities, such as those mentioned in Ephesians 6:12. A chance to display those of darkness's influence through culture, illustrating awareness and promoting those of the light's positivity. All these traits represent a determination orbiting a literary endeavor to fulfill a commission of evangelicalism, fly a reader from the shadow of everyday toil, and manage to begin a journey toward Christ.

### Genre Instrument

The genera of space fiction or science fiction is a field of literate art dating back to the first recollections of what we call mythologies. The influence of such captivation has a magical ability to become timeless while inspiring fresh ideas from original recollections of how the world was perceived to operate. This statement by Sanjukta Chakraborty, whose scholarly article examines the mythological effects of old against modernized folklore, suggests a primary impression of this genre's fiction, "At its best, science fiction generally tries to free the imagination and also opens up new avenues of perception. Its validity lies in its efforts to convey an exhilarating and life-enhancing appreciation of the mystery of the universe, of existence." (Chakraborty 130). The field is exceptional in designing a frame of mind to move the audience beyond the seat of their chair to that other world within sight but out of reach. With the proper refinement, an author, novelist, or storyteller can manifest this embodiment of wonder to convey messages of truth, wisdom, or philosophical morals in such a way that it is not mere letters but willing the imagination a perfect visual.

Another examiner, Alan Gregory, and his research on fiction's elevated influence point out that the skill to be "'Sublime' refers to a certain range of imaginative and affective responses to the vastness and extreme power, to the fearful and threatening, the grand and imposing, the vertiginous and appalling, to that which strains imagination and stumps reason." (Gregory 12). So, this artistry appears to be a limitless form of explaining the possible with the impossible, with roots stretching to those of folklore known as mythology, whose titanic heroes and adventurers perform otherworldly deeds against a plethora of monstrous beasts. Such classic yarns influence recent creativity and apparatus influences. As Chakraborty formulates, "Mythology shapes the thought of science fiction. Ancient science fiction and technology

develop their thoughts from mythology and after that science fiction changes its forms and is gradually technologically developed.” (Chakraborty 131).

However, just as mythologies of old subvert chronicles of the Lord with a malicious mirroring that promoted pagan gods (possibly parallel to demons), current literary productions can seduce a population from the reverence of the Lord. Whether there is initial intention or byproduct due to fandom, such obsession with productions gives an unhealthy rise to modern unwholesome practices in replacing intimacy with the Lord. As well as fostering obsession toward pious practices with credibility because of their popularity and not crediting actual spiritual obedience, chiefly any toward the Holy Spirit. An excellent and unfortunate example provided by Altena Davidsen’s research concerning religion and fantasy is Star Wars, “popular fiction not only inspires belief but also prompts readers and viewers to engage in religious practices that incorporate the story-world into their own lives... example, members of Jediism, a new religious movement based on George Lucas’ Star Wars saga, aim to live spiritual and ethical lives according to the Jedi Code and perform rituals (mainly meditation, but sometimes also prayer) to communicate with the Force.” (Davidsen 490). While the Star Wars franchise has unprecedented admiration from a great fan populous, this fictional series can take part in unhealthy bolstering of substitution from the Lord in favor of another power or self-empowerment.

Indeed, literature can inspire the generations via imagination to view themselves as the heroes of old and heroes of new similar to those flying off the silver screen with such poise and freedom from common subjugation of daily responsibilities, like rent, cliental demands, or family drama. However, some could or would use such magnificent fantastic fabrication to input

their agenda or mutilate a holy aspect from reality to twist people to an ideology that places them as superlative correct against absolute pearls of wisdom, which Gregory states:

The discourse of popular sublimity... continues to serve as the literary and visual vocabulary for ecstasies (*delights*) of the overwhelming. The sublime God also still adds his weight, albeit recast as nature, technology, human desire, or the allure of a European car. Popular culture thus continues on the trajectory of the sublime, which remains a principal device in the imaginative repertoire for representing, invoking, and celebrating power. (Gregory 231)

About which the examiner McGrath points out, “From its inception, much of science fiction has been preoccupied, not simply with the idea that science provides a challenge to religion as a way of knowing, but with the concept that science, with its attendant technology, gives mortals real godlike power.” (McGrath 80).

While the literature should have, on some level, the capacity to uplift an audience beyond the cesspool of toil and apprehension they may or may not encounter through life, I do not argue for a standpoint that fiction or science of any brand ripens an individual to some form of divine authority. For example, transhumanism is a mounting fantasy inspiring a new-age philosophy, catalyzed in the mid-20th century and rampant in recent decades. Which is another wretched excuse for immortality via eliminating the need for involving Christ. The researcher Robert Geraci provides insight into fiction’s stimulus with this new-age immortality:

Science fiction provides a wonderfully religious perspective for many believers, one that can easily be adapted into explicit transhumanist faith. Hugo de Garis, who advocates the development of “godlike” machine intellects and asserts that we should be able to upload

our minds into computers in the future, has written that science fiction satisfies his biological need for religious meaning and awe. (Geraci 146)

The influence of science fiction through pleasant rhetoric and awe-inspiring dreams has the aptitude to instill worship toward pagan conviction as that of modern cultural agnosticism. There are possible intentions for such construction of ideology with fantastic texts and productions that challenge belief with what could be versus what is; however, science fiction is in no way abandoned only to the mythological secular.

While many have contrasting viewpoints concerning their reasonings for edifying a work of art, I remain on a laborious path to commit all generated literature as praise to the Lord, from whom all edification of and through such beautiful stories originate. A struggle from the inspirations that lean one away from applying the characteristics of God's character or his written Word into the interwoven plot of a story, and the daunting task of capturing that which is so consecrated without altering that could mistakenly cast a false impression. Nonetheless, science fiction (space fiction or fantasy) has been utilized before to promote the edification of scripture through some of the most beautiful depictions of strange foreign worlds still connected to the characteristic of the Lord. The best example on my mind is by renowned theologian C.S. Lewis and his science fiction series, *The Space Trilogy*, three separate books of the same continuum (*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*). To one scholar's scrutiny:

Reenactments of myth in science fiction take many forms. The best strives to deepen the emotional connotations of a story by distributing it with the reverberations of some great original, as C.S. Lewis will with success with the parable of the temptation of *Eve in Perelandra* and fewer with success with the Arthurian legend in *That Hideous Strength*., Lewis's friend Charles Williams reenacted Christian and pre-Christian myths in most of

his novels, sometimes incorporating the pagan components, so they emerged as substantiating for the Christian religion. (Chakraborty 132)

Throughout his work, C.S. Lewis demonstrates that the old figures from past fables have intrinsic value to current texts. More than that, he exhibits how what might be considered pagan characters can have a place in Christian literature by indicating Christ's values thoroughly about the creatures and nature of his world. A straightforward example is C.S. Lewis's utilization of the mythical god Bacchus, the Greek god of wine, primarily in *Prince Caspian*. In general reminiscence of mythological yarns, this Bacchus being attributed to wine is associated with debauchery; in Lewis's narrations, the figure is still a god of wine but expressed as a cordial youth of merriment. C.S. Lewis illustrates through that character's obedience toward Aslan, the analogous figure of Christ in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, that there is sincerity to mythical legends for Christian inspiration and even such ideas that might instinctively feel pagan could be applied to illuminate God's authority over all lore, maybe even signifying spiritual entities. A brief excerpt from *Prince Caspian* to model this concept, "I wouldn't have felt safe with Bacchus and all his wild girls if we'd met them without Aslan. – Susan Pevensie" (Lewis 169). Yet, most impressive is, as academic Higgins describes, "C. S. Lewis... suggests to a thoughtful reader that huge questions about the relationship of faith and science remain open. Lewis did not hesitate to engage with the scientific hypotheses, philosophical assumptions, and socio-political concerns of his time... neither should any thinking Christian." (Higgins 101). Through his inspiration and methods, I intend to continue with my novel. Never to limit to the ideological viewpoint I have defended, nor to be a leaf in a storm of contrasting philosophical perspectives.

The idea is to infuse the problems and issues people endure in reality into a cosmos of wonders with gliding oceans and striding mountains, illustrating heroes who can so simply yet

with extreme challenge combat the common difficulties some may feel too insufficient to tackle. But, as Higgins puts it, “Lewis listened to the ideas of his time, transformed them in his fiction, and has the potential to transform the ideas of our time. Such a revolution could help heal divisions within the church and wider Christian culture.” (Higgins 102).

### **A Universal Groundwork**

The design of any fictional world has a measure of success due to the input from reality. The realms in stories that glide off the page as a spectrum of liquid concepts that fabricate a universe require an anchor to be structurally sound, even in fantasy. For the more intuitive audience, there is that underlying need for logic, not so much a hungry aspiration for it, but the mental focus brought on when the reading is consistent with clear cause and effect. The inspiration for such an endeavor does not require looking far or wide. Instead, the mere environment provides a perfect example of a well-established system of physical interaction in the world that cooperates on a fundamental level.

The beauty of such order between the unquivering duties of the tiniest of insects to the established cosmos that provide the precise amount of rays ferrying heat and nutrition is a unique system that seems taken for granted in the daily struggle of working citizens and twisted to cut out the idea of God's artistic authority with something as mind-numbing vast as the universe. The education of doctrine relating to subjects like the Big Bang, "the universe originated billions of years ago in a rapid expansion from a single point of nearly infinite energy density" ("Big Bang Theory"), suggests all that there ever was or ever will be a result due to disarray of events that border between cosmos and microscopic with not the slightest influence, and argumentatively not slightest need, for a theological presence to conduct any amount of input into any segment to the universal conception.

Even with resultant conjectures advocating for theories or hypotheses, hard-pressed advocates toward a nonspiritual creation cannot deny correspondence with the mental image of a Big Bang and the scriptural visual to the beginning of all reality. An assessment by Doctor Ball implicates via his examination:

There are quite a number of popular books discussing the Big Bang theory of cosmology and implications for religious faith, some claiming support for the Bible, others by renowned scientists with varying personal philosophies of a non-Christian perspective. In one of the most well-known of the latter, Nobel Laureate Stephen Hawking conjectures an unknown physics phenomenon, admittedly in an attempt to remove the need for a Creator. Indeed, it remains difficult to avoid the implications of the Big Bang theory, namely that there was a beginning to this universe having a cause beyond the universe itself. (Ball 2)

Fortunately, many still argue for a hand in the exact placement and refining of everything that makes up what we know. In contrast, the Big Bang theory has ties toward a liberation, although more accurately condemnation, of the Holy Lord as Creator of the universe.

Nonetheless, it can still be deemed a simple framework for understanding the testimony of the heavens, seen in the expansion rate of the universe (Ball 24); therefore, an open topic for deliberation with scientists and even writers who see more of a steady hand in arranging the cosmos. Thus, there is a realization of a pearl of keen wisdom from creationists who still take up the challenge of lecturing the truth among those willing to comprehend the message. From my perspective, a specific professor I have encountered, although I like to believe I was meant to come across, is Dr. Russell Humphreys, who opened my eyes and mind to the wonders of the application that is not taught directly in the public system. According to his notes, there is a particular view along the lines of gravity based on scripture, a type of membrane the heavens (space) consist of, and even includes a tautness described in Isaiah 64:1 to rend (divide) the heavens, along with other scriptural passages. The notes Dr. Russell presents in his lecture indicate “the heavens (space) to be a real material such as in Psalm 102:26 – and all of them [the

heavens] will wear out like a garment” (Max Bauer). He dwells deeper into discussing the heavens to be or like an invisible fabric with the properties of a vacuum containing invisible bound charges, labeled as the ether.

Frankly, the ether is not unknown, merely referenced through its politically correct counterparts, including spacetime, continuum, manifold, quantum vacuum, plenum, and other terminology meant to not grant full credit to what the ether represents in the scheme of creation. The professor continues speaking of the ether paralleling a great canvas with that fabric tension, “God also stretched the material. *who stretches out the heavens like a curtain And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in – Isaiah 40:22*” (Max Bauer). So he claims the fabric of space is stretched or pulled taut with material that apparently would not stretch so effortlessly, creating redshifts and tension, such facts that completely went over my head but stuck in my heart, in my imagination.

The elements that structure the universe people see in the night sky, by the multitude of stars and constellations that glow in the images of titanic heroes, are a construct of the natural world that writers use for a genesis point in the writing of their outline. This narrative structuring method has valid upshots and is effectual in classical novels illuminating or emphasizing natural wonders. A prime classification examined by Yohn María, who researched Tolkien’s catholic upbringing, has identified it as, “the concept of sub-creation coined by Tolkien in his theory on Fantasy from the standpoint of the author’s understanding of literary action as a participation in divine creation.” (María 29).

With J.R.R. Tolkien’s philosophy, being recognized as one of the foremost distinguished literary creators of fantastic worlds (María 17), there is a basis for understanding a necessity toward reality’s setting as a source for plot and fundamental truth to its genesis. While writers

who deal with fictional genres don't make a carbon copy of the reality we live in without inserting tweaks or concepts that emphasize a type of sense of epic or vastness, such as in space fiction, any editing about alien worlds, traveling to stars the range of a galaxy, or colossus beings the size of a continent; yet, there is that familiarity of levelheaded elements that instill direction or order for the characters to operate on a fundamental physical equilibrium we understand. By including any such environmental elements, the author has the potential to emphasize the epicness correlating back to the Holy Creator, to indicate praise to His originality. As stated by a scholar for Tolkien's devotion, "For Tolkien, the literary sub-creator is, as we shall see, a reflection of God the Creator, who possesses the creative capacity because of being created and, more specifically, because of having been created in the image of the Creator." (María, Yohn 19). However, based on any authors' belief toward a particular theory, he or she has the capacity to utilize the principles associated with that theory or module to establish the groundwork of their universe, which, if the audience accepts the tale, could influence their perception toward the specific theory. A further example, "Tolkien's literary theory is built on the depth of his Catholic thought and actions, and so the theory of sub-creation manifests the truths of the Christian faith about creation. Thus, we can say that Tolkien's theory of sub-creation stems from the principle that we humans participate in God's ability to create because we are created in His image and likeness." (María 29).

In reality, the debates between theological creation and the world could be incomprehensible, especially for those without skill in such fields of science. From experience, it can come down to believing what we are told all our lives or what comes across as intelligently valid. However, the truth is always present, no matter how much the secular or agnostic attempts to conceal the facts. While such particulars might be out of reach of understanding (even for

literary authors), that is no reason to ignore a duty to expose fabrications and promote the Lord's authority. "All of this punching and counter-punching is revealing the hostility between those who hold to traditional Christian beliefs and those who believe that modern science has rendered the Christian faith merely empty mythology." (Ball 3). That is a particular reason I strive to conduct my epic under the regulatory principles stated by Doctor Russell and parallel to Tolkien's sub-creation theory, to promote an interest in the Lord's presence without limitation in all the heavens.

### **Mystical Hearts Unleashed**

Beyond the physical attributes of universal order and oversight, I believe a more profound element that has held sway since the foremost generation and is now recessed into modern ignorance needs to be enlightened. The notion I speak of is another characteristic of the Lord, The Holy Spirit, but more than just Him. I wish to utilize the range of the spiritual nature in my novels to promote much-needed awareness. This mindfulness is intended to give glory to the Lord's character and awareness to those of malevolent nature who seek through various formulas to entice, possess, or destroy us and our tether to God. The presence of such spirits is not to be mistaken for interaction, as humans generally converse over a cup of coffee, a quiet meal, or a session of therapy.

Instead, their presence is known through the actions of a person or people. The vile activities that seem normal while directly contrasting to the Lord's nature and command indicate their dark stimulus seeping through the open doors of both heart and mind. In some studies, these spirits had a direct connection to the ancient pagan gods of the old world or mythology. The ramifications are correlated with those many nations of those bygone eras who majorly and willfully practiced human sacrifices and soothsaying, all in homage upon the altar of a particular deity. Jonathan Cahn, the author of *The Return of the Gods*, whose research examines connotations between malicious spirits and association with malevolent effects on culture, poses a rhetorical question imbued with genuine concern, "Is it possible that the ancient entities known as the "gods" are more than fiction and possess an independent reality?" (Cahn 3). While these foul entities have a probability of being more than the bad guy off a page or the carving of an idol, these beings have an impact that flounders the contrasting viewpoints of people groups around the world.

When tragedies of a numerous nature are caused by intentionally inflicting harm upon another or the world disaster that strikes in a heartbeat, it is a natural response to either seek the why one has befallen such misfortunes or the who is to blame. To clarify this predicament, “As long as humans have existed, they have concerned with questions of good and evil. And as long as humans have been producing literature, the question of the nature of good and evil has been an important theme of that literature. It is a theme that has appeared in literature of all genres from all cultures, albeit in a variety of forms, as one would expect.” (McGrath 95). Although undoubtedly, the entities or foul spirits seek whatever means to mutilate the identities between good and evil characteristics.

While the literature has the transcendence above any border of tribe or continent, so do the dark forces warned by God, remember Ephesians 6:12, manage to weasel their way into the rhetoric and desires of cultures attempting to barricade people’s genuine desire to seek after the Lord. “That the gods could appear in every land, transcending the many differences, distinctions, and barriers of culture, to become a near universal part of human life is a strange and peculiar phenomenon. To modern sensibilities, his fears, desires, and fantasies. That is certainly part of the story.” (Cahn 11). To some of these timeless questions of good and evil, these wicked entities who took up the lying mantle of a culture’s gods could be the source of such inquires, even continuing to the modern age with different schemes to possess and violate the people, especially those whose faith rests in Christ.

Once again, as literature of old helps to exemplify the combativeness of evil via the forces of good, I intended to do likewise with clear indication to these spiritual foes. Although fiction or fantasy treads the marshes of fabrication, the groundwork serves as a platform promoting or manifesting the forces of such essences that are disregarded with trivial opinions in

the fast-paced society. An investigator whose work reflects associations between supernatural beings and the present day offers a simple while scrupulous assertion, “Works of fiction that include supernatural features within their story-worlds (= supernatural fiction) serve as sources of religious inspiration and plausibility in the contemporary religious field.” (Davidsen 489). The trick is to provide a crystal visualization to these unseen enemies, being as my work deals with space fiction, these beings would be given somewhat more physical shape for the audience’s benefit, equivalent to the titanic Balrogs of hulking fire and wicked apparitions in J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth.

However, most important is emphasizing that the Lord has equipped us with our defense against their onslaught and the gear necessary for an offense. Mainly, I speak of the armor of God:

Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God: Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching there unto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints. (Ephesians 6:13-18, KJV)

At a glance, this passage might be interpreted as guidelines for clean living that help avoid or resist temptation, which causes any person to submerge in immorality. I suppose following these instructions and actions is the correct manner of comprehending this passage, but I choose to see this passage with more zeal, more wonder as though each piece of the armor is so

genuine but merely set apart among that independent reality whence angelic bodies dwell. From there, the goal is to transcribe that armor as something so sacred to protect the human soul with a power that illustrates deep magic when one witnesses the dawning of such magnificent gear within their mind.

Everything from the spiritual essences to the mighty armor forged by God for each individual is an ambitious trait I desire to envisage so everyone can be enamored and have a budding desire or curiosity to know more of these crucial characteristics. Even what Jonathan states about wicked spirits, “In their days of glory, they had reigned over tribes and nations, kingdoms and empires. They had subjugated cultures and mastered civilizations, infusing them with their spirits, saturating them with their images, possessing them.” (Cahn 5), is a significant actuality that needs to reach the public’s ears. At the same time, releasing a flood of ideas in my head. Such facts create a vision of whole legions of paladins in the specifically designed armor bestowed by archangels to combat the present vile demons manifesting as goliaths who hold a tyrannical grip upon civilizations. Then there is a battle with pure magic from the one true loving Creator against the malicious sorcery of those self-proclaimed gods. An undertaking of this magnitude, which is considering the prudence necessary when writing of such spiritual creations (not to evoke praise or overly fascination mistakenly), is one I believe to be a necessary task.

Many disciples of Christ have unique talents for conveying the Word and multiple fields; thus, literature needs engagement to communicate truth over pleasing hypocrites via others.

I argue that an analytical distinction between religious and fictional narratives can and should be drawn, and that this distinction should be based on the author’s reference ambition. Religious narratives, according to this definition, are narratives whose authors

claim to tell about superhuman beings who really exist in the actual world and who intervene in this world for the benefit (or detriment) of humans. (Davidsen 491)

This claim to narratives illustrating superhuman beings (some of which I mentioned above) is a deep-hearted ambition. One is to stem the tide of these dark beings' encroaching influence on modern culture and society and extend an olive branch among readers and wanderers craving to know what is beyond into the unseen.

### **Continuing the Beginning of the Mission**

The task of this great commission, set forth by the Lord, is as intriguing as it is intricate. There are numerous factors to consider to ensure the plot has sound rationality. Although, it is amusing getting motivation from some of the most favorite epics to have a picture of how the hero will interact or think in comparison from old legends to modern reincarnations. “The link between mythology and science fiction is close and deep, but not always obvious.” (Chakraborty 130). Part of the dream for my work is to imbue characteristics of medieval chivalry among futuristic architecture and mechanisms set beyond a single congregation of stars. I am weaving that classical element of a valuer from traditional yarns, Arthurian and Beowulf, who physically fought foes but different from the established problems and unscrupulous practices endured in this modern age that embody various configurations.

Further, this vital workshop of mine would be the set tone for all to know or come to know the quality of the Lord, or at the very least, be some aid in warning them of demonic entities eager for their ignorance. Any adoration or praise is not wasted thoughts or breath, whatever the forms might take. As such, “Worship is connected to spirituality. Spirituality is connected to the Spirit or to spirits. And spirits, as revealed in the Bible, can be either of light or of darkness.” (Cahn 13). For any faithful Christian, they should be this intuitive obligation to help others differentiate between spirits of light and those of darkness. While some might choose the route of preachment, I will speak of such actions of these demons through my novels and literature. There should be parallels to their nature – unseen while influence manifests in the actions of their victims – and maybe even somewhat hyperbole to create a more crystal-mental image of their evil. However, that is not to credit them for impressibility or awe; instead, it indicates a more prominent target of what good will and has triumphed over:

And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down” (Revelation 12:7-10, KJV)

In that passage, I want, I intend to be a focal point with all these parallels to wicked spirits or vile gods, that they will be defeated. Perhaps I will use my imagination to depict the ‘how,’ but the promise is that good will overcome evil no matter the manifestation it might take, and the followers of darkness will face accountability.

Hopefully, through exquisite structuring, the flow of ideas will come across naturally, depicting a universe forged by a wise Creator, with visualization of what some might call unseen or invisible, showcasing an original clash of good versus evil. Across this process, a vision has endured of what, how, and why these ideas for literature matter, a conjunction between evangelizing the nature of God and hopefully providing some speck of a first step toward embracing Christ. The second is breaking that feeling of hollow completion by rekindling any reader’s love for the natural wonders of this world by providing grand imagery emphasized by the original environmental beauties. Whatsoever events may occur, nothing is not known to God nor out of his caring hands.

## Creative Manuscript

### Auroran Templar | Book 1: Omega Knight

#### Chapter 1: Where Dreams End, A Journey Begins

Epic was the accurate word to describe this battle. All across the eyes' vision two imposing armies wage bloody war, churning the landscape into black soot. On one side, legions of darkly clad troopers with maces of jagged diamond spikes and rifles spewing green ion bolts roared amidst the battlefield. They were a mixture of warped beasts who gritted fangs and hissed venom against a host of human crusaders attired in silver armor with double edge swords of neon and rifles that shot blue bolts of energy against their ravenous foes. Leading the army of darkness, a pennant with the image of a golden dragon intertwined on murky black, while the army of crusaders fought under a banner of a fiery lion shining like the sun. Both sides were a pure representation of good versus evil; while in the sky, massive ships in the configuration of giant swords and irregular stars groaned to each's battery onslaught. While nimble aircraft in the design of vultures blazed upon the army of light hailing bombs and missiles releasing an inferno flood melting the skin and shot razor soot into the eyes. Then the army of darkness surged forth with monstrous machines that walked like apes with static cannons mounted on the shoulders and mechanized tendrils whipping apart limbs. The battle would appear to be a tragic end for life and goodness. Yet, each man stood his ground unwavering, with sword high, united as brothers. They would not succumb to the immense surge of darkness.

*BOOM!*

A great flash whose pearl beams smote the enemy and dazzled the Crusaders burst above the magnificent host. The illuminance came off a warrior of glistening white and golden armor with wings made from the warmth and smell of sunlight. He was a knight who came to the aid of

his charge. Flying to the front of his army, he landed, sending a tremor across the fractured field. Standing before the enemies who halted, their eyes wide with fear. The knight clapped his hands with a force mistaken for a thunderbolt, and behold, a magnificent sword emerged with white and blue flame seething off the blade. With one swing slitting the air, he slashed all manner of dark machinery and weapons down to size. Then, with warm golden beams puncturing the grey horizon, he charged with his sword first and the invigorated crusaders behind him with a blasting cry. He was their leader, their hero, their champion. Andrew could only marvel at his appearance and actions, with a blink-less gaze of longing to be that figure.

“Andrew!” A thundering voice shattered the landscape.

Andrew’s head jerked back away from the direction of the window, nearly falling out of his desk. He looked all around with bewilderment as some of his classmates stared with the slightest sneers and giggles of amusement. The Calculus teacher, Ms. Green, with her hair bun stretched so tight it pulled the skin taut, tapped her foot while she pursed her swollen lips.

“Are you ready to rejoin the class? Perhaps sometime before the bell, and I have enough time to teach everyone about tonight’s assignment.” Ms. Green spoke with a tone, not ice cold but with a hint of exhaustion.

“Ah, yes. Sorry.” Andrew quickly replied at a pitch barely reaching Ms. Green’s ears. She nodded with a content smile and began her lecture of equations Andrew attempted to wrap his head around. Then, with his pencil tapping the desk at the clock’s rhythm, he took a final gaze out the window overlooking old yellow school buses and an overcast day. He let out a deep sigh and returned to his teacher’s lecture.

Andrew’s imagination once again whisked him away from the high school lectures. Nothing out of the ordinary, for Andrew always felt somewhat disconnected from people and

more relaxed in his own realm. It was there he felt without limitations or restrictions that life constantly placed on him. Although, that is not to imply he was a rebel. Andrew always lived by doing what everyone told him and keeping to himself to avoid trouble. Walking across the school hallways became no longer a conscious decision but a hypnotic motion. At least Andrew had his friends, though they each had a clear idea of what they would do or where they would go after graduation, increasing his worry and self-reflection of inferiority. Coming to his locker and grabbing his last book for the day, Andrew received a jolt when his friend Connor snuck up and surprised him with a slap on the shoulder.

“Hey dude how’s it hanging?” Connor asked with his usual wild hair and grin for dramatics. Although he was Andrew’s best friend, he seemed somewhat opposite to Andrew’s current persona, more energetic with bleached hair and wild-eyed with fashion for shorts. Andrew simply sighed and put on a smile for his friend.

“Nothing much man. How about you?” Andrew replied.

“Oh, a little bit of everything. I just found out I’m going to Stanton University.”

“Wow! Dude that’s great.” Andrew high-fived Connor. Both had a grin on their faces.

“So, you hear anything from your choices?”

“I-I gotta get to class.” Andrew slammed his locker shut and scurried away. Andrew bit his lower lip with a single question on his mind, *What am I gonna tell him?*

Dashing inside the nearest restroom, Andrew came to the sink counter with the question funneling inside his mind. Leaning against the counter, slowly panting to the prospect of life beyond the walls of his twelve-year public education, beyond the confines of his mediocre county to a world of infinite possibilities and causalities.

Looking into the mirror image of slack baggage straining the eyes reverberating parallel with his sunken reflection. Twitching violently, Andrew twirled around to a stranger who relaxingly leaned against a stall gazing at Andrew with a pale face. Obviously, he was a senior at the school from his height and build, too. With long messy hair as if today was his first attempt with hair gel, wearing tight black pants and a white hoodie over a black zebra pattern undershirt. Andrew was thankful he had no idea who he was or what social circle he ran with for fear of starting a conversation about topics Andrew was sure would be distasteful.

The fatigued fellow let out a simple sigh which could almost be confused as a snore. He then held out a long cylindrical carton clear as a perfume bottle with a golden amber liquid in the center and a bowed, thick crazy straw at the top with faint white mist disappearing into the air.

“You looks like you could use a quick blow?” He spoke as if Andrew was merely another familiar friend. For a moment, the smell was an intoxicating sweetness that relieved Andrew of his burden; yet, Andrew’s mind felt drawn back to earth as his eyes narrowed on that dark fluid imprisoned within the tube. Perhaps it was simply every health lesson he remembered about such a situation or a genuine disdain for the practice. Nonetheless, Andrew could only offer a momentary glance at the smooth tip and then, meeting this acquaintance’s eyes, replied, “No... thanks.”

The boy merely shrugged his shoulders, no more concerned about Andrew’s response than he was about the school’s education. Andrew attempting not to appear hurrying out of fright or guilt, grabbed his material, skidded across the floor, and made for his next class without looking back.

The remainder of school mainly involved strength keeping his eyes open and trying to jot down every word the teacher would say about a topic. Thankfully Andrew had decent

calligraphy to read his own notes but would end up filling pages with gaps from whence he just couldn't keep up with the teachers' instructions. Finally, the bell (really an alarm) rang, and Andrew was one of those who nearly flipped his desk rushing out the door to his truck.

The drive home didn't help take Andrew's mind off the dilemma posed by Conner's question. Andrew rubbed his brow from every creak and groan that old Ford made whenever he tapped the brakes. Coming home became the last place he wanted to be while his mother, Evelyn, was away looking after her sickly mother. Although his folks lived among a hillside not far from the neighbors, Andrew had grown weary of how such scraggly pine trees imprisoned the house. Such congestion obscuring the sunset made Andrew feel nauseous and depressed, especially with the premonition of the howling storm.

Like rounding the final base to a mundane baseball field, Andrew stepped over the threshold, tossed his backpack by the kitchen table, and proceeded to feed their rowdy mutt. Then, dragging his bag to his room, Andrew stretched on top of his bed, looking over the assignments with half-glazed eyes. But Andrew couldn't stop returning his gaze to the window, trying to catch a glimpse of the warm sunlight behind enclosed trees and return to that realm beyond his room.

After two hours of the homework charade, Andrew thumped back to the kitchen to prepare supper. His father, Donald, arrived home with the same mood Andrew suspected, long strides to his walk, slamming the front door wearing his usual plaid collar shirt. He had a scowl over his stubble face that meant another agonizing day.

"What's for dinner?" Donald asked with a deep exhausted tone.

"We're hav'en beef and vegetable soup," Andrew attempted to reply without any hint of annoyance.

Donald rolled his eyes, tired at another canned meal. Since Evelyn was away, it had come down to Andrew preparing meals for his father, which consisted of tv dinners and canned goods. Andrew would have been happy to prepare a home-cooked meal from smoked sausages, meatloaf, or other culinary treats. Unfortunately, the time frame required for such an elaborate supper did not coincide with Donald's patience.

After setting a bowl of soup before Donald and himself, they held a moment of silence and then flicked on the television while listening only to their chewing and Family Feud. Andrew's eyes darted between the screen and Donald's face hoping he would be too enamored to notice Andrew. A hope that quickly vanished into strife.

"So, did you hear back from any your applications?" Donald spoke after swallowing a mouthful of beefy broth.

"No-o, not yet," sputtered Andrew.

"Have you emailed or called any of them back?"

"Not yet."

Donald's utensil hit the table with a cling. He took a long deep breath before exploding, "Why the hell are you putting this off?"

"I'm not. It's just been difficult to find spare time between everything."

"Between what? WHAT? You're just being lazy as always."

Andrew slammed his fist to the table.

"I have not been lazy!" Andrew fired back, eyes wide.

"So what are you gon'a to do after school? Just lay around while you drain me and your mother dry?"

Only the television broke the tension that left Andrew's mouth gaping at such an accusation.

"I asked you a question!" Donald spoke behind clenched teeth. "Are you just waiting for something to fall into your lap because that's *just* how life works." Donald said with a sarcastic scowl.

"Why can't you just have faith in me?" Andrew bellowed.

At that, Donald, shaking his head, pushed away from the table, his boots echoed as he walked to his bedroom, leaving Andrew to ponder if there were truth to his words.

## Chapter 2: Graduation and a Commission

Andrew smiled at his reflection, whether how silly or amazed he looked. His amber eyes inspected his combed, thick chestnut hair and any fabric wrinkle. He was relieved to wear jeans and a t-shirt under the robe, but after placing the cap on, he looked like a blue apparition with a platter on his head.

“Andrew come on out. Let me get a look at you.”

“Alright mom,” said Andrew trying to keep a straight face.

Evelyn stood in the hallway wearing her black and white dress with tears sparkling from her eyes. She had to place her hand over her mouth to keep from blubbering. She motioned for Andrew to come to her for a hug. Andrew gave his mother a big embrace, smiling sincerely at the day’s milestone.

“I’m just gonna use the bathroom one last time. You and your father get ready to go.”

“Alright, oh, remember I’m riding separate.”

“Yes, yes, I remember,” Evelyn replied as her heels clattered with every step to the bathroom.

Andrew walked outside, breathing in the golden afternoon air, and noticed Donald on the phone, who had not yet seen Andrew in his graduation gown.

Waving over to him, “Hey dad, check it out.”

Several creases forming across his face in response to a deep scowl, Donald waved off Andrew violently, his age-old signal to shut up. Andrew’s smile faded, receiving confirmation of what he had felt all along. This was just another ordinary day.

So, with eyes downcast he merely hopped into his Ford and rode away, kicking up dust as good riddance. Andrew’s thoughts bounced between the harsh words spoken by Donald and this

supposed accomplishment. He began to consider that this whole day was a big sham. That he was not worthy of graduation. He was still a stupid kid when he first began school and forever more.

An ocean of blue gowns greeted Andrew at the high school. After finding a parking spot, Andrew forced a smile and met Conner with a high-five.

“Conner! Great news man. I got accepted into Harrison Forge Academia.”

“W-what, seriously! Bro, that’s amazing.” Conner gave Andrew one arm embrace.

“Yeah. I mean, wow, I can’t believe it.” Andrew stood still, holding up his head but his eyes downcast. He had begged for this news since Donald’s outburst a week ago, yet he still felt apprehensive.

“Hey, Andrew.” Conner placed his hand on Andrew’s shoulder, “You made it. Don’t forget you’re an A-average student. You got an amazing life ahead.” Andrew nodded still forcing a smile. Suddenly, a whistle was blown, signaling the graduation march had commenced.

The whole event was a blur. Andrew recalled the pounding echo of students marching in unison. Then they entered the football field, assembling according to their designated chair. Followed by the disharmony of the alma mater, possibly because they had never sung it before. Andrew managed to spot his parents among the assemblage. Evelyn waved hysterically while Donald gave him a nonchalant wave. As the list of names drew closer to Andrew’s last name, Reagan, he could feel the sweat trickling down his brow or moisture from the drizzle. Finally, his name reverberated across the field. Fighting back the numbness, Andrew managed to proceed across the podium, receive his diploma, and shake the principal’s hand. After that, he recalled a shower of flying caps with a cheer roaring into the plum twilight.

Later, after Andrew and Conner got out of their gowns, they met up with their folks at a local pizza parlor for a celebration. The parents recounted their graduation stories and spoke of the excitement waiting at college.

“Well, are you gonna tell the great news?” Conner spoke out, seeing Andrew quiver at the talk of college.

“What great news?” Evelyn asked.

Andrew shot Conner a warning glare, “Well, uh, I very recently found out... I got accepted to Harrison Forge Academia.”

Instantly, everyone’s mouths dropped, even Donald’s pizza fell out. Everybody congratulated Andrew by clapping and cheering. Donald even walked over, placing his hand on Andrew’s shoulder, “I’m very proud, kid.”

Andrew smiled with his eyes glazing over. Keeping his composure, he scrunched his face and gave everyone a nod. After that, everyone ate their fill of pizza, and Andrew made up an excuse to leave.

“I’m just, gonna, get some, fresh air. Uh... later.” Andrew turned for the door and headed out to his truck.

Andrew drove into the night without a destination in mind, all the while wishing Conner hadn’t mentioned anything because he didn’t tell Conner everything. When Andrew received his email confirmation, he immediately felt tension. All the various programs at a beautiful location had made Andrew bounce at the thought of telling Donald. Yet, Andrew felt something else. A sensation like an underlying tug at his heart and mind, as though going to college was the wrong decision.

Andrew kept musing over these thoughts until he realized the truck was in the parking lot of Creekwood State Park. Soon, Andrew found himself lying in the lush meadow observing the night sky's brilliance, where he could still recall the warmth of the campfire as he and his father sat roasting marshmallows. Where in a winding river he had caught his first fish and Donald helped reel it in. Where Donald had given him a piggyback ride along a natural trail within those very woods, and Andrew nearly hit his head along a low hanging branch. Here Andrew's mind felt relief from the pressure and noise of life. Perhaps, this underlying tug was a calling Andrew had put off too long to find his birth parents.

Of course, Donald and Evelyn never said a word, but Andrew could tell from the lack of facial features he shared, plus there were never any newborn photos of him in an album. Just thinking about it put his stomach in a knot.

Staring up at the stars always helped Andrew take his mind off worldly troubles. His head would race with fantastic ideas of surfing the spectrum of nebulas or battling monsters from the void. He was amazed how there could be so much to behold beyond this sphere while there continued to be turmoil to occupy a lifetime.

At that moment, with the fresh pollen, slow hoot, and crystal glow from the stars, Andrew was beginning to relax under the infinite wonders. In fact, a particular star outshined the multitude; actually, anywhere his eyes drifted, that one star would match his gaze. Andrew sat up, rubbed his eyes, and squinted into the sky. The star now shined bright enough to obscure the stellar cluster. Getting a warm feeling and tugging sensation again, Andrew stood up but almost believed he could see a hand reaching out from its brilliance.

Suddenly, the world fell absolutely silent, not a hoot, chirp, or croak. Then a tremendous flash drowned everything in white brightness. The next millisecond, Andrew bent over with his

hand against his chest as he heaved. Looking around, the groves of trees were replaced by vast horizon to the celestial brilliance. Ahead of him stood a mysterious figure garbed in a white tunic.

Around Andrew, a mist hung low, obscuring any trace of the grass or soil; although, after two steps, he noticed it didn't feel like the meadow, every step seemed to cause a ripple across this mystifying surface like a raindrop on a lake. Andrew edged closer to the mysterious stranger, who appeared in his early thirties with intensely bright auburn hair. His face was clean-shaven, with eyes that twinkled. Andrew stopped five feet from the stranger, who continued smiling peacefully.

"Welcome," the stranger finally broke the silence with a bow, "Andraus Reugel." He spoke with such fluent harmony it nearly sounded like music.

"Whoa, what'd you just call me?" Andrew's eyes widened.

"I called you by your birth name."

"What?" Andrew rubbed his eyes as though it would wipe away this experience. "Who are you? What is this place? Is this real?"

"More real than anything you have experienced thus far. As for what or where," the stranger looked down, and Andrew followed his gaze. The sight nearly made Andrew lose his balance and left his legs trembling. The dew parted, revealing earth in the finest brilliance of detail. Andrew could see churning waves in the Atlantic, beacons of golden lights web across the East Coast, and marble clouds expanding beyond the curvature.

"You are upon the Firmament, a place truly set apart from all shadows among the realms. As for who am I, you may call me Gabriel."

Andrew held his hands out to steady himself as he returned his gaze to Gabriel. “Okay... why am I here?”

“That is the right question,” Gabriel replied with a slight chuckle, “You are here to continue your lineage. To arise to your appointed position.”

“Wha-a,” Andrew stammered, “I’m sorry but you got the wrong person. My name is Andrew Reagan. My parents... my parents... wait, what do you mean, *lineage*?”

Gabriel sighed, “I understand you’re unaware of your heritage, but what I mean can only be revealed by your next decision.”

“And what decision is that?”

“Take hold of this new life that is being offered to you. Cast aside all comforts and undertake this quest before you.”

Andrew could only gape. “Okay, just stop. This is all insane. Just please send me back to the park.”

Gabriel’s eyes became downcast, “I can send you back.”

“Thank you.” Andrew sighed deeply.

“But, Andrew, now I persist please do not leave. Do not fear the majesty around you. Take up this commission set forth by the King Forever Himself. By His hands it is truly a new life,” Gabriel pleaded with an expression of concern.

Andrew shrugged his shoulders. “Who says I want one.” Looking down at the earth, Andrew could only think of his hardships, his faults. How he felt so minuscule. “It’s not me. I’m nothing... nothing but worthless.”

“Do not dare speak those lies here!” Gabriel’s eyes now held a tempest. “Not here. Do not believe those lies for they shall consume you.” Andrew had to take a step back from the intensity

in his voice. Gabriel's expression softened again, looking deep into Andrew's eyes, "Don't turn away from all you can gain. You will not be alone on this quest. You have never been alone on your quest."

Turning away to view the luminous galaxies, Andrew pondered Gabriel's words. Looking around at everything that should be impossible, a deep longing grew to jump into those celestial lights and fly alongside them. He even began to smell a smell not foul nor exactly sweet but just cold and warm, fueling his awe for these surroundings even more. He could still sense deep doubt and pain, but longing to be part of this had become so powerful it brought to his heart the one thing he had longed for that whole day, joy. Andrew replied with a hushed tone, "Okay, I accept."

Gabriel sighed in relief, and his smile returned, "You are taking your first step on a glorious path. Now to bestow the gifts." Stepping aside, there was an elegant golden wooden table with pieces of gleaming bronze and sapphire armor neatly arranged on top. Andrew tilted his head, certain it had not been there a second ago.

"Come," Gabriel motioned to Andrew, who was drawn to the collection like a moth to a candle. Stepping forward, Gabriel reached for two metal boots with fluorescent silver markings.

"Wherever you tread, bring peace," Gabriel motioned for Andrew to lift his feet one at a time. They seemed to slip over his shoes, yet he felt they fit snugly with a weight to his steps. Then spectacularly, the light around the boots became armor across Andrew's ankles up to his knees.

Next, Gabriel lifted a gold belt with a neon stripe. "May truth gird your body and deception not overtake you." Fastening it around Andrew's waist, the light again formed snug

chain mail and armor around his thighs and an indigo woven tunic with a scarlet outline and golden tassels at the angles around his waist.

Then raising Andrew's arms, Gabriel fitted a bronze, sapphire breastplate featuring a strange cross inset engraved with a skyward arrow emblem within.

"No matter the terms of the battlefield, be virtuous."

Once fastened, starlight once more materialized as chain mail and armor across his stomach and down his arms. Even the shoulder plaiting was designed as a face and mane of a lion.

Finally, Gabriel carefully lifted the helmet, featuring a mouth plate with auburn markings and wingtips coated in magnificent arctic-silver.

"Wherever you go, be mindful of the salvation upon you."

Andrew inclined his head as Gabriel gently placed the helmet on. While it fit snugly, looking through the visor Andrew felt as though he had viewed the world through a crack in a door, but now the door was open, revealing even more spectrum of detail.

Now with a wave of his left hand, a shield appeared in Gabriel's hand. It was the length and width of Andrew's torso in the form of a circular top portion with a triangular base, like a frisbee on top of an arrowhead. On the front featured embedded sheets of bright red and blue wings lining the edge with the silhouette of a roaring crimson lion at the center.

"By this shield have your faith in the King Forever unyielding, so no weapon of the enemy shall pierce you."

Taking the shield by the copper-tinted straps, it near-instantly felt an extension of Andrew's left arm. Then with a wave of Gabriel's right hand, a sword brimming with a spectrum of ivory hues materialized. The tip appeared as a leaf with three four-point star-like emblems in

the center blade. The hilt seemed a mixture of bronze-gold with a chiseled image of a fiery nova in the pommel.

“This is Excelsior, sword of sovereignty, blade of a thousand supernovas, steel made manifest via the Helper.”

With the blade carefully across Gabriel’s arms, Andrew grasped the handle and raised it to his eye level. At the base, the saber extended from the molded design of a lion’s mouth, while the steel had a diamond reflection. Gradually after Andrew grabbed it, ivory embers flickered spontaneously off the blade till it became a golden white flame shimmering in the air.

“Now for the last and greatest gift,” Gabriel nodded.

As Gabriel reached behind his back, Andrew squinted and was almost sure he could see great beautiful wings at a slight angle of the light, or part of the light. Andrew heard a silent pluck, then Gabriel’s hands returned, holding two plumes that shimmered like liquid sunlight without losing their form. He whispered something to each then, with a toss, the threads mystically flew to Andrew’s back. Suddenly, Andrew felt an unexpected weight that made him stagger. Trying to turn his head in circles, Andrew managed to get a reflection in the sword that took his breath away, wings. Not mechanical neon wings nor giant animal extensions, but massive wings made of sunlight.

“These are gifts bestowed by the ArkenOrder from the command of Elōhîm.” Gabriel’s voice deepened. “Be very cautious for these are tools, not toys.”

Andrew nodded with his wide-eyed amazement hidden under the helmet. Then he began examining himself. The armor felt increasingly heavy, yet an energy coursing through his veins made him want to run and jump like a child in a new costume.

Trying to keep his composure Andrew turned back to Gabriel. “This is... I mean this is...”

“Awesome.” Gabriel finished with a grin. “Yes. It is awesome, as is the One who forged such marvels. But, be warned, this is no mere armament. As these are crafted beyond all realms of physicality, they are connected to your essence consequently subject to weaknesses of the fall.”

“What does a season of the year have to do with this?”

“No, that means you will still feel pain when dealt a formidable blow, and there will be chinks from your hindrances,” Gabriel sighed, “but you stand firm against all assault of the enemy. Remember it is not by the wings nor armor you have power, but by the King Forever, you defend and lead your charge. Always be aware of that.”

“I shall.”

“Very good, now...” With a wave from Gabriel, the armor seemed to evaporate into light and fold into the wings before they, too, disappeared.

“You are to prove your devotion to this quest.”

“Wait wha? Why’d you give me all this if you were just goanna take it away?”

“To show a mere glimpse of what awaits, and it was not taken away but merely stored. Further, this was decided that another who is devoted to the Patriarch shall reveal more when the time is right. As for what I shall deliver, it’s a final instruction: Do not go to college. Wait a year readying yourself, then return to the exact location within the park. During this time, do not call upon the wings or armor. The time to be known is not yet at hand. Should you fulfill your devotion you shall receive the oath of the Auroran Templar.”

“Wait, so what am I supposed to do or say?”

“Go about your days and trust in the occupations that’ll come about, but do not mention what has transpired here. I am not advocating for you to lie, but some will not fully comprehend, or some might attempt to sway you from this commission. This experience was for you and your story alone.”

“Oh, alright. It’s just there are more questions, I…” Andrew trailed off.

“Which shall be revealed at Elōhîm’s perfect timing. Until then, farewell o’mighty prince.” With a blink of Gabriel’s eyes, Andrew found himself inexplicably standing in the park meadow.

### Chapter 3: An Interval and the Sendoff

Sweat streaking across his brow to his chin, Andrew sighed with relief that it was finally the end of the day. Looking west the sun pelted the horizon casting an auburn silhouette against sharp roofs and hills. Shaking off loose grass from his yellow polyester shirt Andrew quickly jumped behind the steering wheel, eager to leave.

“Hey, Andrew wait up.” Don, a coworker, came running and huffing over. “Is’t true you won’t be comin tomorrow?”

“Um, yeah. This was always temporary. Plus, I got something coming up I’ve been waiting on.”

“Oh, gotcha. Uh, the guys going for drinks want join for proper sendoff?”

“Thanks, Don. But I got an appointment I can’t miss.”

“Ah well good having ya!”

“Thanks.” Andrew shook his hand through the truck window and proceeded to drive out of that Lawn Service Company.

Andrew felt bad for turning down Don’s invite, but he refused to miss his appointment with Lance, Andrew’s youth leader during high school, one of the few people he had left to socialize with. Driving to his office, Andrew considered all he could discuss over the past year. The events after the encounter with Gabriel resonated in Andrew’s mind, coming home and walking tediously into his parents’ living room. Timidly telling his folks how he couldn’t go to college. He would have preferred the awkward silence all night with the two of them slack-jawed, but Donald had to inquire more, and rightly so, “What do you mean *can’t*?”

Andrew could recall his eyes twitching, trying to decide how to answer that, “I just think I need to wait for something more incredible.”

Donald then shook his head, his face contorting into a scowl. “You little puss—”

“Donald!” Evelyn interjected.

“Oh, right because that’s just how the world works. Just sit around for everything to fall willy-nilly into your lap.”

“That’s not why I’m doing this.” Andrew shot back.

“Then what is the reason?”

“I’m... I just need to do this. I’m choosing to wait a year.”

Donald’s mouth gaping, his eyes narrowed, and his hands behind his head; Evelyn stepped in and instructed Andrew to go to bed. Andrew could still recall the heated temper between the two that night.

Andrew shook his head out of the daze, realizing he had reached Lance’s office, an outlet at a shopping precinct. Parking his truck, Andrew shook the collar of his shirt, wishing he’d had time for a shower.

Stepping through the doors labeled Community Outreach, Andrew walked to the back of the lease. He admired the open ceiling showcasing the girders and tin roof. He’d once overheard others gossip about how such a building made the leadership crude and nonprofessional; in contrast, he felt it was unique and liberating along with the vinyl chestnut flooring. Andrew slightly bit his lower lip, wondering how this might proceed. Coming to the back, he found the main office door half-opened, with Lance sitting behind a desk, his eyes darting back and forth between a monitor and binder. Lance was a modest gentleman with hair whitening early for his age before any wrinkles began to show. He wore a short-sleeve plaid shirt with kayak pants.

Quietly pushing the door open, Andrew spoke in a hushed tone. “Hey, Lance.”

“Hey there Andrew,” Lance replied with a smile, “glad you could make it.” Lance shook Andrew’s hand, then motioned for him to sit down.

“This is really the highlight of my day.”

“Happy to hear it, so how you been?”

A brief pause as Andrew stared at the floor. “It’s been tough. After the incident of telling my dad not going to college... well, you know I had to leave. Then Conner was able to take me in until he left for college. And you already know I’m trying the whole living on own thing. It’s a challenge.”

Lance nodded his head. “I understand, at some point, we all face that challenge. Personally, I...” Andrew listened intently to Lance’s story. Andrew felt that Lance was a man Andrew could have a conversation with.

“You understand where I’m coming from here?”

“Oh, sorta, I guess this all just new territory for me.” Andrew shrugged.

“I’ll say, you had quite a few careers this last year. That’s impressive.”

“Some might say that’s unable to hold a job.”

“Well don’t listen to those people, you pick up skills at each one and nothing you learn will go to waste.”

“Thanks, but I don’t know how warehouse worker, camp counselor, lawn labor, or the others all fit together.”

“Well, I’m not sure either,” Lance replied. “But didn’t you take flying lessons? That’s impressive.”

“Yeah, but I could never get the mechanics down. Plus, I only went up twice, didn’t finish the whole forty hours.”

“You still flew, something I can’t say.”

Andrew smiled for a second, but slowly his eyes returned to the ground.

“Maybe less about the careers and family. Is there something else on your mind?”

Andrew interlocked his fingers. “I keep having these eerie dreams. They’re inconsistent yet... somehow, all the same. I’m standing in a burning field, in front of me is a black and gold-dressed figure with a jagged crown. Other times it’s a meadow with a fog around me but I can still see a dark hooded figure, and I know it’s the same being. I wonder is there any meaning to them?”

Lance gave a long gaze as if Andrew were a riddle he needed to concentrate on solving.

“I think the field and meadow are points in your life when you are stressed or relaxed and this figure is a representation of your current challenges.”

“You think? I mean I feel like I should know that figure.”

“Well, it’s my best guess. I’m no Joseph, but you’re probably right. Maybe it’s a type of premonition, maybe it isn’t. But if these are very vivid and strong for you, I’d say don’t take it lightly and don’t worry about it. If something is about to come about trust in the timing that it was set.”

“You think?” Andrew asked, leaning forward.

“Don’t stress about tomorrow’s problems, but don’t be ignorant of them either. Trust in the strength you’re given for your current trials, and then you’ll be prepared for what is to come.”

Andrew smiled, meeting Lance’s gaze. “Thank you.” Andrew wiped the sweat from his forehead, relieved to finally tell someone of these dreams and immediately remembering he didn’t shower.

“Hey, uh, sorry for the stench, I just got off work and your schedule, I didn’t want wait so…”

“It’s okay, don’t worry about it. Honestly, a strong odor is the mark of a man’s hard-earned work.” Lance took a long dramatic inhale. “Oh yeah, now that’s some fine American labor right there.” Lance and Andrew broke out laughing.

After a second, Andrew regained his composure and wanted to end on a good note, looking Lance in the eye, “I need to tell you one last thing. I’m going away, and I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

Lance raised his eyebrows. “Ah, my I ask where?”

“I’m sorry but I rather you didn’t.”

“Ooh, mysterious, kind of Mission Impossible spy stuff.” Lance chuckled. “Well, I hope the very best for you, thank you for coming to see me before leaving.”

“Thank you for seeing me and I hope your new ministry goes great.”

“Yeah, you and me both. Now get outa here and go have an awesome adventure. Be sure get some pictures.”

“Alright, thanks Lance.”

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Andrew lay under a familiar cluster of stars with a different attitude than last time. His feet kept twitching along with his fingers tapping. He was glad he stopped by the apartment to shower and change clothes before coming here. Taking his phone out to check the time, he groaned, realizing only a minute had passed since his impatience last forced him to check. His breathing became heavy.

Andrew thought, *This is insane. I threw away my life for a hallucination. I should just go.* Yet, he felt something deep in his heart, beyond his thoughts, that he should stay. He had survived the bitter departure from his father's house to the mind-numbing tasks he picked up for a paycheck. Come this far, he wanted to see this through. Observing the stars opened the window of wonder within Andrew's heart. He slowly forgot his woes and relaxed to the serenity around him and the memory of the Firmament.

After a while, he turned over and noticed a glowing in his right pocket. But his phone was on the left. Jumping up, Andrew carefully pulled out a large flat coin. One side had a spectacular chiseled insignia interwoven with the purest strands of gemstones from ruby, emerald, sapphire, silver, and gold, forming an image as best as Andrew could make of it was a silver star in the center with a golden crown to the right, and a fiery shrub to the left with a diamond arc around all three and two fiery citrine wings along either side. The other side, from where the eerie golden-white glow originated, featured such skillful chiseled artistry of a lion interlaid with gold with rough grain to convey ridges of his cheeks and the teeniest of diamond specs for the eyes, with an arty quality of intense ginger for his mane that had the appearance and feel of the flames from the sun. Suddenly, above the lion, writing shimmered around the rim.

Reading it aloud, "With humility, wisdom, and courage inscribed on my heart I swear to keep the Eternal Mandate sacred, as faithful servant under the Patriarch, the Mediator, the Helper, Elōhîm."

Suddenly, a great beam of light shot into the night sky. His eyes taking a moment to readjust, Andrew looked up, and within seconds a minuscule star seemed to break free of the constellations. Then, the star blasted towards Andrew with a tremendous boom, knocking him off his feet. Hovering several feet over the ground was none other than a spaceship. Andrew's

eyes wide and mouth gaping, he marveled at the mere design of this fantastic encounter. The ship was oval-shaped with round fins up top and retractable wings on either side.

Then just as quickly as it arrived, vertical planks retracted, releasing a dim snowy glow from within alongside a ramp extending four feet from the ground. In a slick suit of white and blue with a tinted helmet, a figure walked out on the ramp steadying itself against the motions of the hovering ship.

“Are you the new knight?” The being spoke like an officer with a bullhorn. “Did you receive the medallion?”

In a daze, Andrew instinctively raised his hand, showing the coin, or medallion.

“We need to go now before this realm’s defense force gets a lock on us.”

“I-I don’t unders-understand.” Andrew had trouble speaking through his shock and the pulsating engines.

“We picked up on the beacon your medallion sent out. If you’re the knight we’re here to retrieve, then we must leave now.” The stranger extended his hand, with five fingers, out toward Andrew. An overwhelming urge to run away was taking over, but a faint flashback to when Andrew stood with Gabriel made time almost standstill. *This is it*, Andrew realized. *This is all happening. The oath, the quest. Its time.*

As though an invisible nudge had helped give him a much-needed jolt, Andrew found himself grasping the being’s hand and coming aboard the spaceship. Andrew would later describe this mysterious nudge as beyond all sound reasoning and physical exertion, but stepping across that threshold to be the first man of earth gazing within the interior of a vehicle beyond this globe was a rush of cold-water coursing throughout his veins.

Coming round a corridor, he emerged into a semi-circular shaft with multiple corridors to different sections of the ship; although, his sense of measurement felt somewhat irregular at this point. Andrew nearly jumped at the being's presence when it directed Andrew to a curvature couch hanging perpendicular to the wall. It was the same hue as the floor and ceiling. The only immediate visual distinction was the texture with a strange crisscross pattern similar to quilts. The ship jerked, and Andrew crashed into the couch and frantically grasped anything that would balance him. To his surprise, the cushion was not a rough grain he had suspected but a firmer yet sponge-like quality that molded to his specific body weight.

"Wait here." The stranger repeated before hurrying off down a different corridor than the one they had come. Andrew nearly rolled off the couch from the sensational jerks made undoubtedly by the craft's inconsistent motion; however, Andrew hadn't the slightest clue what direction that was or where the ship was precisely. Until he looked outside.

Rather, he nearly fell back into the night air. At least that was the illusionary trick that played on his mind when suddenly a section of the wall around him, even behind his back, became visible. Similar to the vertical shutters transition on PowerPoint, the curved wall became an observation window to the thrilling experience Andrew had willingly become a part of. It was bizarre to interpret the world sinking into the dusk but more so that it all appeared at a sharp incline while he somehow remained horizontal.

Instantly, Andrew gasped, understanding this to be part of the illusion or in the sense of one first traveling to space on a ship with functioning gravity. He was nearly heading straight up strands of grey isles parting into the starry exterior that was becoming not darker as the receding landscape but amazingly brighter. Andrew had a kid's smile one receives at any first-time miraculous roller coaster experience. The thrilling sensation felt reminiscent of commercial

planes sprinting down the runway, soaring higher and higher into the expanse of freedom. Only this was so much more extreme.

Suddenly, a jerk by the ship nearly threw Andrew out of his seat when his knees were on top of the cushion with his hands and face against the window. He had caught just a glimpse of the cause of such violent maneuvers as they soared across the ship's ascent. While it was a guess by models he had taken an interest to online, Andrew was positive those were F-22 or F-35 aircraft with red tracers propelling them like attack dogs arcing back toward the spacecraft. If not for the confident guess those fighter jets intended to knock down the vessel Andrew found himself in, he would have been very delighted to see those spectacular feats of engineering in action.

Instantly, Andrew could see a pop of light like an instant sparkler lit from those hunting jetfighters, which he could only surmise with quick-witted panic were missiles. In response to Andrew's alarm, the ship made what his stomach assumed to be a barrel roll that blurred his vision with a whirlpool between the expanding grid of nightlights, with his head no more stable than a bobble head he gave a bile burp to this ricketiness momentum. Andrew turned away from the window to take his attention and worry off the exterior conditions. Realizing he was alone during a pivotal life or death scenario, he dared to hurry down the corridor the person entered just for the comfort of company, even with whatever the being might be.

Not nearly as long as he suspected, the passage had a slight rising slope that led to a cockpit. Andrew would consider this area bizarre only in the sense that he was within a non-terrestrial cockpit. Otherwise, it was a strange concoction of what appeared to be screens made of light that had a solid composure, similar to a robust touch screen. While the other portion was dials and switches that seemed just as important. Those neon constructs Andrew would learn

acted as a quick array for buttons, but mainly as a display monitor to outside conditions, notably the current moment with the hounding aircraft and the encroaching missiles.

Andrew's breath dropped at the site of the missile highlighted by the monitor. Instantly, a flash from the rear of the ship obscured the entire monitor, followed by a mild tremor. Then one of the pilots yanked hard on a lever which caused a jolt for Andrew with momentary vertigo, as though his mind and stomach couldn't decide whether up was down or if the floor had just been yanked out under his feet.

Just as quickly as that horrid sensation overtook him, it was replaced by a surprisingly comfortable stillness. Andrew looked onward into a night sky that seemed to be recapturing his memory of observing the stars from the Firmament. Looking over at the monitor, Andrew's worries began dropping to the dwindling landscapes of the earth. He could barely make out his home state, which soon became surrounding states, dwindling into one large mass of a continent. It appeared the further they flew, the faster the planet shrank.

Now, with his eyes trailing back from the monitor where he had always been to the stars ahead, Andrew let loose a wide grin. It all felt like waking to a dream every little boy imagines when viewing the constellations or imagining himself aboard shuttles from a famous exploration. The actual chance to travel beyond the set limitations that man was born into and roam the beyond with possibilities as infinite as the eyes could behold.

Suddenly, Andrew became aware that all eyes from this alien crew now focused on him. Since the excitement was over, his attention could finally observe his surprising captors. There were three of them, similar in Andrew's opinion to a commercial plane with a pilot and copilot in a navy type of uniform featuring green sashes, and one, the pilot Andrew assumed,

wore a cocked hat that resembled a folded triangle with a short, rounded top. However, the most extraordinary feature was what Andrew did not expect from these beings.

From his plethora of enthusiasm for films devolving into various alien features ranging from animal traits to mind-bending mutilations, Andrew had envisioned some form of tentacles, lidless eyes, or some appearance of those traits onto these, except they appeared just as men. Both gave a very recognizable human observation of skepticism with squinted eyes, tilt, and nod with the head when they examined Andrew, along with all the same facial features an average man would have, including the average five fingers on only two hands. He did see that there seemed a bit more color or highlight of a certain hue in their face as the pilot featured a bit greener around the cheeks and chin, while the co-pilot had a somewhat yellowish forehead that appeared natural to his health. Even the one who welcomed Andrew aboard finally removed his helmet, revealing an average man with a slight bluish indication around the ridges of his eyes. However, Andrew expected him to have hat hair, on the assumption that he grew hair; instead, he had short silvery blonde hair perfectly combed as though the helmet neatly cushioned his head.

Following this silent exchange of observation in which a minute felt like an hour, the man with the helmet slowly stuck out his hand with a device resting gently on his palm. He motioned for Andrew to take it, which he did, if not slowly and suspiciously. Holding it felt tough while having a flimsy quality, like it was made from rubber bands. The man gestured for Andrew to place it along the back ridge of his ear. Andrew was hesitant, if not confused. Remembering the very old childhood warning about taking candy from strangers, which is a hilarious concept to remember at this point since he was in the simplest of the expression already in their van traveling far from home.

Doing as he was shown, realizing how well the device molded to his ear, he experienced a slight shock that tickled the whole ear and made him almost swat the device onto the ground.

“Are you well?”

“Yeah.” Andrew replied. “Just a little shock no big – wait! I can understand you?”

The man nodded, satisfied with the newfound and final clear exchange. “Yes, that is correct. You now have the full interpretation of vocals known by Concordians.”

Andrew looked at him in a new light, similar to when a child has that first sense of speaking fluent sentences but doesn’t comprehend the magnitude behind such a feat.

“Concordians? Is that who or what you all are?”

The stranger seemed amused, with a nod of his chin, “Well, yes, we are all the people of Concordian. I am Ofer. This is our pilot, Itamar,” Motioning with the palm of his hand to the man with the hat, who tilted it up briefly, revealing a strand of braided hair going down the center of his scalp, “and here is our beta-pilot Zev.” The other stared hard at Andrew and gave a nod lifting the thick hair bun on the back of his head.

“Hi, everyone.” Andrew made a feeble attempt at a wave. “I’m Andrew... Reagan. Andrew Reagan. Soooo... why am I here?”

At that, everyone looked at each other with an expression and sense of confusion; although, Zev just rolled his eyes, seemingly annoyed by the question.

“Do you not have your cosmopolitan identification?” Replied Ofer with his eyebrows raised.

“You mean like a driver’s license?” Andrew replied, trying to make sense of this newfound strange conundrum.

“This is a waste of time. He’s not the-” Zev began, whose voice was a deeper tone than Ofer’s but light with his pronunciation.

“Please, Zev, this is very bewildering for all of us,” interrupted Itamar, who seemed to speak fluent English yet had an accent equal to someone from across the equator, “Andrew, Ofer meant have you received the medallion composed by the ArkenOrder?”

Andrew could only eye him for a moment, realizing that he had not heard the name or phrase ArkenOrder in over a year. Steadily, Andrew pulled out the medallion, which still glowed whitish blue. It came across as a priceless ancient relic made from stern material and smooth edges that acted as a night light. Yet, looking up, he was amazed that everyone’s expression was of all awe more than Andrew’s, if possible. Ofer gathering his composure met Andrew’s eyes and made a strange gesture with his primary fingers with his left hand over his heart, then holding his arm up at an angle position. To Andrew’s correct interpretation, the gesture was meant as a salute and, in his case, a high welcome.

“Welcome aboard sir Amnon. It is a relief to have you back into the fold.”

Now Andrew narrowed his eyes at Ofer’s attitude change and puzzling statement. Before he could press the matter, Ofer interjected, noticing his perplexed expression, “If you would follow I shall further validate you and answer any further questions you have.”

Not wanting to continue this with all eyes on him, even these three had begun to feel like a packed auditorium, Andrew followed behind Ofer. Now at a more leisurely pace, Andrew began to fully interpret the ship that carried him. The path to the bridge was a smooth incline, with the primary light source around the vessel originating from curved columns lining the ship and bathing the air in a warm light that leaned on no specific spectrum.

Following after Ofer, Andrew returned to the corridor where he had previously sat, and the windows still presently displaying the exterior of various strands of light and orbs that reminded him of a school of fish blazing all around them. He almost became entranced by this phenomenon when suddenly, a simple jerk in the ship, and in response all the light outside became thinner like strands of neon that had no end, with crowns exploding from these strands then instantly withdrawing back into a different strand, comparatively to a kaleidoscope.

“Ah, we entered the current. The first sight of it is always classic memory.”

Andrew turned, facing Ofer, who smiled at Andrew’s amazement at the fantastic show dancing all-round the ship.

Continuing after Ofer down another corridor, they entered a room not so much bigger than the corridor but completely round that Andrew at first perceived it to be a sphere but soon judged the curve of the walls and floor to be more of an elliptical. The only thing not a part of this singular area was a panel off at an angle from the entrance. Ofer stood there pressing a button, then a portion of the wall slowly jutted out and took the form of a dentist chair, from Andrew’s interpretation.

“If you would please.” Ofer motioned Andrew to take a seat, which Andrew timidly approached to sit on, although he had never been wholly afraid of dental examinations until now.

“Are you going to probe?” Andrew said with a low hard chuckle, though Ofer only stared at him with a furrowed brow.

“Of course not, nothing that invasive for the time being.” Ofer replied clearly, not comprehending Andrew’s attempt at light humor, or nervous demeanor. Ofer pulled out, to Andrew’s interpretation, an old flip phone, except the top portion was more of a prism. Ofer

noticed Andrew's apprehension from his hard gulp and moist brow and reassured him, "This is just a common physical examiner, or P.E. Certainly you have had a therapeuton before now?"

"Not like this." Andrew forced the reply out. Instantly multiple beams shot from the device, moving radically over every fragment of Andrew's body. Andrew could barely feel a tingle as the beams moved in an almost random direction but felt somewhat exposed. As instantly as the lasers began, they formed one singular ray and retracted back into the device. A low beeping flashed on a console next to Ofer as he began observing analyses on a monitor.

"Now I should be able to comprehend a general condition of your current health." Looking over the monitor, he merely sighed and aahed, almost similar to any other practitioner from earth, which made Andrew chuckle at the strange parallels.

Ofer began rubbing his cheek, then facing Andrew with a perplexed look, he squinted hard at Andrew as if to identify some aspect the examiner contraption was unable to detect.

"Well, despite your extensive time upon that realm you are a young healthy Concordian."

"Concordian? You mean human, right?"

"No my statement remains as Concordian. How long have you been marooned upon that realm, Amnon?"

"What, no – I mean I was born on earth. Just please tell me why am I here? What do you want from me? And why do you call me Amnon?" The questions flowed from Andrew's mouth, almost becoming a singular tone.

Ofer cocked his head, scratching his chin, studying the bewilderment and fear written on Andrew's face, and matching it with the confusion across his. Pressing down on a lever, a portion of the room rotated toward Ofer with a bench jutting out. Sitting down with a hard sigh,

Ofer looked at Andrew from the corner of his eye which made him appear as a mysterious bard, and Andrew the mystery to his riddle.

“To be honest with you lad, we don’t know much ourselves. We were charged by the Esteem Luminanem himself for this task. To seek out the newly anointed Knight, or the Omega Knight, upon a very recently transferable realm. The crew were skeptical at first, and I no less than the others, for a pristine knight has not been chosen in endless revolutions. Despite all doubt here you are, and such an honor it is.”

“The Omega Knight, you mean a knight of the aura templar?”

“The Auroran Templar, correct. They are, or more were, the mightiest guardians across all realms secondly only to the ArkenOrder.” Ofer spoke, looking directly at Andrew, yet his eyes were not in the present but drifted with the majesty of his own mention of such things as knights.

“You know of the- wait, what do you mean were?”

Ofer reestablished his focus on Andrew with a quick readjustment in his seat and averting his gaze to collect his thoughts.

“Well... to be blunt, many are either dead, in hiding, or retired from the corps. At a time when even I was in my twilight as a lad, there was massive conflict with the infernos of war melting across the stellar marine. The Knights, along with rangers and crusaders under their charge, did honorable battle but the king...” Ofer trailed off, averting his gaze further from Andrew’s sight.

The mention of this king evoked raw grief and sneer Andrew could feel radiating from Ofer. “The king had lost his way, he had been aloof for too long, and the results of so many massacre was the result of his cessation from the mandate.” Ofer shook his head but, with effort,

met Andrew's eyesight. "However, it was the final campaign against those blasted foes that decided the current state of affairs. One final act of, well... some might claim bravada, I like to think it was courage, but he faced those foul forces as a true knight. Perhaps even that moment was a small act too late in events, for he was slaughtered beyond recovery, along with those knights who fell in battle or retired from heartbreak." Ofar's head slowly dropped below Andrew's gaze, as one at a funeral.

"You were one of those knights." Andrew spoke softly, meaning to keep it to himself.

Ofar belched a hard chuckle that sounded more of sandpaper against his throat.

"No, no, like I said I was but in the waning years of a lad, one who had such imaginings to walk side by side with those mighty figures. Alas, it would seem a hidden boon I was not among them at the time, considering the fallout." Ofar continued to keep his gaze averted while stroking his chin.

"If you don't mind me asking," Andrew began, attempting to be cautious. "Who won that war?"

Ofar snorted, more as though the question amused him rather than troubled. "Won? Ha, I don't believe there were any true victors." Ofar straightened himself in his seat with his eyes narrowed on Andrew. "The conflict has frozen into a jagged standoff between the Templar and that vicious coven of Obsidians. The open fire between battery and bruise has been quenched, but so much was lost to those foul parishioners. Entire realms were seized and remain under the tip of their spear. While a creeping decay is very much present within." Ofar slowly nods his head, having to accept the truth of what he spoke. "Although, recently, there has been much strife. The fires of war are being stoked once again, which makes all the more curious about

you.” Ofer returned his eyes directly onto Andrew with an intensity that hinted at traces of curiosity and ferocity.

Andrew gulped, his eyes twitching but attempting to remain fully focused on Ofer’s eyes. “Me, I’m the one with all questions.”

“I’m afraid not,” Ofer replied, “you see although we did receive this order from the Esteem Luminanem, I nor Itamar or Zev actually met with him. This undertaking was to be utmost secretive. Only half quantities of facts with specified waypoints and interchangeable routes. That is why I inquire who you are and how you received that medallion?”

Andrew was nearly about to stutter, quickly eyes drifting around the room and returning to Ofer’s gaze. The message from Gabriel had instructed him not to speak about the events still echoed in his head, but he considered it had been a complete year, not to mention considering the circumstances he found himself within and all Ofer had spoken thus far. Andrew consented that withholding what he knew would only be senseless.

“Alright. Here’s what I know...”

So Andrew began his recollection of events from a year ago. Andrew decided it wouldn’t be necessary to include his high school graduation, so he opened with his story at the moment in the grassy field, to instantly whisked away to the Firmament. As Andrew went over what happened, he found himself using his hands and arms to emphasize the grandeur and awesome experience. Even Ofer leaned in with awe at the recapture of the memory. His eyes wide with mouth slightly gaping, Ofer would even instantaneously stop Andrew to inquire more detail about the particulars of the experience rather than the sequence of events themselves.

With such random questions ranging from, “Was there a type of smell to this pool you stood upon?” or “This Gabriel spoke to you as a man?” Ofer’s tone resembled a curious child

who'd heard a great yarn and wanted so desperately to know details as if to implement themselves into the very story. When Andrew made it to the end, where he found the medallion and the spaceship arrived, he looked at Ofer, waiting for a response or next question, but only saw the wide-eyed face of a man who seemed younger by the splendor of such a recollection.

“That settles it, you must be him.”

Andrew turned to see Itamar standing by the entrance with Zev close behind him.

Andrew assumed they must have arrived sometime during the recollection of his experience at the Firmament and became as entranced as Ofer.

Itamar's eyes were wide with the same glow of delight beaming off Ofer. Yet, Zev's eyebrows were furrowed, and he merely nodded, “Yes. Indeed.”

“Who am I?” Andrew asked tentatively.

Ofer raised his hand, halting any further transaction of answers and narration.

“Itamar please, this is still such a load to bear in one day. Just keep our course steady kind sir.”

With a shrug of his shoulders and a deep sigh, Itamar replied, “Oh, very well. I came here to tell our arrival should be five-xnus, perhaps there's a margin to reduce that span. Come Zev.”

Itamar turned and proceeded back through the corridor. Zev quickly narrowed his eyes on Andrew before turning and chasing after Itamar.

“Who am I? Wait, does this have anything to do with you all calling me Amnon?”

Andrew asked, but Ofer only waved away the question.

“Just one more examination, also not invasive.”

Before Andrew could answer, Ofer clicked another button, and from the top portion of the ceiling, a long spindly arm unfolded out toward Andrew with some type of cubical camera on

end. Andrew leaned back from it, nervous once again, while the arm made quick movements positioning itself from Andrew's cheek. Then the piecing of the camera extended, or floated, outward and suddenly made a humming as it moved from cheek to cheek, then quickly retracting back into the ceiling.

“What was that about? Did you just x-ray my teeth?” Andrew looked over Ofer, whose full attention was upon the results on the panel. His face narrowed, and his mouth muttering. All Andrew could hear was, “the seal. If not him than who...”

Ofer straightened himself and cocking his head with a grin at Andrew. “Well, seeing as this is obviously your first time aboard such an astral vessel I do believe a tour is in order. Do follow me.”

#### Chapter 4: Crash Course Twice Over

Andrew's eyes were wide bright from the illuminating spectrum of watercolor droplets. His mouth in full smile at the fantastic engineering while Ofer attempted to explain the function and operation to him. They stood in a passage overlooking a different chamber further from the medical room; unlike it, this had narrower walls with a higher ceiling. Still round but comprised of much piping and many tubes that integrated into several pillars that jutted out from the sides of the walls aimed at the epicenter of the room. While the chamber itself was a dark grey, the pillars seemed to generate or, more accurately, vibrate a spectrum of light that flowed like water droplets down the pillars, sometimes radically changing the slightest hue at the slightest differential beat in the rhythmic harmony. Once at the center, the light would form a silvery ring before instantly traveling across another pillar.

“So, this is how you travel through space?”

“This is a component in that process. The Cauldron Reactor synthesizes plasmatic fuel into thrust, thereby to, uh, ‘kick start’ voltaic circuitry, provide source of propulsion to the Thrust Regulators, and other plasm elements into necessary resources,” Ofer replied with a tone of gratification, as one remembering the impressiveness of an achievement.

“This is incredible. On earth we dream of flying across the stars in spaceships, even make movies that seem so realistic, but this... never expect experience this.” Andrew felt he was standing on set to a movie with every texture of walls and dazzling light, a prop that might reveal itself back to a dull reality on earth.

“Well, I imagine they shall make their achievements at the right time. Hopefully, in their own style as well,” Ofer replied.

Walking to a window that peered into an abyss that was neither a dark void nor solid illumination. Andrew leaned against the ledge with a grin as he shook his head at his surroundings.

“Honestly,” he began. “This is just unbelievable. I mean on earth the best agencies are still working around budgets for voyages into space, much less reaching the moon or the nearest planet in the solar system. Here, I mean the mere thought of the grandeur is unbelievable. How is this possible, or even travel like this?”

Stepping up to the window, Ofer, with a smile to the lad’s curiosity, “Well, I think it really comes down to the Core Converter and Celestial Wayfinder.” Ofer walked along a different passage leading to a narrower area meant for one person that contained what Andrew could only describe as a gyroscope roughly half his size with several rings of looped lightning silently flipping and revolving. At the center, to Andrew’s amusement, was a large soap bubble with glimmering light range shifting inexplicably across its surface.

“The Core Converter,” Ofer’s voice resonated deeply within that passage, “is the primary or genesis for ship accessing and voyaging within a celestial current.”

“Celestial current?”

“Think of the current as a focalized momentum of the ether’s particles’ stream. Similar to an intense pressurized faucet. Components are construct from refined galvanized crystal which is able to conduct, balance, and generate an energy frequency. The Core Converter acting in unison with the vessel’s paneling, translucent-paneling, along the hull, especially along the wings conducts the energetic frequency that captures the pressurized flux thus allowing the vessel to sail across the infinitive ocean.”

“Wow,” Andrew whispered, though it resonated as a droning drumbeat. “Didn’t you mention there was something else that made this possible? I mean it sounded like celestial wayfer.”

“Ah yes, the Celestial Wayfinder. You see these celestial currents themselves keep one on a guided path across the infinitive fluxes to any telluric locality. That said it is vital to have even basic stellar cartography, as to have utmost precision identifying regions that are a hole on the map and currents that provide swiftest traveling against solar rotation. However, finding new paths to various regions or original realms requires an ancient apparatus known as a Celestial Wayfinder.”

“So it’s a compass?” Andrew replied.

“Well, these celestial currents are a mystery of themselves with many a theory, but the Celestial Wayfinder is an ancient instrument able to locate fresh currents and jumpdoors with uncanny accuracy to determine previously uncharted realms and stellar isles.” Ofer explained, rubbing his chin.

Andrew grinned as he leaned against the corridor, his eyes mirroring the looped power bolts. “Wow. So, is that where this mysterious benefactor is that you’re taking me to, an uncharted realm?”

Ofer let out a hard laugh, which sounded like a backed-up exhaust pipe. “No, that was where we were. With all the gracious luck in the verse, we are following a pre-cautious route plan that will get us to a meeting with the Esteem Luminanem.”

“So, I have to meet, in person, with this lum-anen person to find out all the answers? Like, what’s going on or why I’m here?” Andrew questioned with a ragged tone.

“Luminanem. That is correct, but that medallion is evidence enough as to why you are here.” Ofer nodded at the pocket with Andrew’s glowing medallion.

Andrew wanted to press further concerning his bizarre importance but held back with a sense that Ofer truly was at a total loss as he was. He gave a nod in acceptance to the answers. Before turning to leave he noticed a strip of optical wires emerging at the lower edge of the cylindrical chamber bowing in and out of floor until it was out of sight under the converter.

“I guess those distribute the frequency to the outside paneling?” He inquired pointing at the cables.

“Hmmm, oh careful not too close,” Ofer squeezed by gently pulling Andrew’s arm back, “and no, the frequency is funneled within the compartment itself. Those lines are part of the harmonic equilibrium, the synthetic graviton that allows us to pace throughout the interior and protects us from fatal momentum.”

“Wow, so wait, back when we were spiraling off earth, trying to outrun those jets, this equilibrium is what kept us from being thrown all around the place? It’s what produces the artificial gravity?”

“Well... yes. In co-tandem with the cauldron and converter, the harmonic equilibrium is a thick liquescent with some type of magno-charge spanning the cross section that offsets exterior graviton forces. Of course, those forces can be extremely abrupt, so the equilibrium has momentary lag, but still manages to counteract the full brunt of the attack.”

“Cool.” Andrew whispered. At best he could interpret it worked something like an old map table that remained level against teetering sailing ships, he recalled Evelyn having something similar in storage.

From there, Ofer continued the tour of the ship. From Andrew's point of view felt like a mere hour of enjoying the rich experience, but in truth, he wasn't sure how much time had passed.

In actuality, although the ship seemed vast to one with no prior familiarity, Andrew later realized how basic the ship was regarding rooms and size. The light source to each room seemed to activate from their presence in the vicinity, and all the corridors were the same shape and size with a type of gray and white grain in the coating.

Finishing the tour, Ofer stopped at a door that seemed a rippled tin, explaining this was Andrew's quarters for the remainder of their voyage. The doors folded back unto themselves, revealing what Andrew considered a modest room from a neoteric Hotel 8. The floor was still the same color as the whole ship, yet had the distinct impression of being marble. There was a bed with blue and green sheets that arched out of the back wall with a compartment for holding a minimal amount of clothes, like a sleek stone wardrobe. Even a walk-in compartment with a door rotating into the wall revealing a space that Andrew found out acted as a shower and latrine. The glow from the ceiling was a yellow-orange that felt like warm sunset upon the skin.

"So I suppose I'll just chill in here till we get there?" Andrew joked with agitation.

"I suppose, although you can adjust the heat if need be. Most likely we'll need to make cessation at the realm Riph-Rram for provisions." Ofer replied without a thought to Andrew's joke.

"So, we'll have some layover at an alien planet. Cool. I hope we have time to check it out."

“Possibly, maybe enough allotted time take in a local market. Which reminds me, here.”

Ofer reached for a side pocket on his pants, pulled out a small leather sack, and handed it to Andrew.

Narrowing his eyes from the sack to Ofer, Andrew replied. “What’s this?”

“Just simple mintage.”

Andrew looked inside and found five, six, maybe ten pieces of thin rectangular cuboids with gold, bronze, and scarlet tint to individual pieces. Andrew looked up into Ofer’s eyes, trying to muster an appropriate response, but found himself stuttering before softly getting out, “Thank you, but... why?”

Ofer gave a slight chuckle and nodded his head before answering. “Well, every fresh adventurer needs just a little aid, especially when jumping into an unfamiliar market. Although, I doubt it will be such an extended period at Riph-Rram for you to observe anything but perhaps-”

*ZAP!*

Ofer was cut off by the discharge of a strange firearm. To Andrew’s surprise, he found himself racing behind Ofer to the cockpit, only to discover a horrifying sight. Itamar was slumped over in the co-pilot chair with a smoking hole in his shoulder. To his left, Zev sat in the helm’s chair with a contorted scowl and sunken brow while holding a strange pistol made of dark stone with blazing jade along the barrel. He trained the weapon on both Ofer and Andrew with an expression that revealed such heat of anger that Andrew felt as though a hot breeze had passed over him.

“Zev what are you doing?” Ofer inquired, keeping Zev in front of him to maintain some concept of cooperation and level head.

“Fulfilling the commands by the Imperium Kami.” Zev’s voice was so calm that he didn’t slip with a single syllable. Yet, his words had a chilling effect that made Andrew numb hearing each pronunciation.

Without taking his eyes off either of them, he hit a button on the console that produced a slightly pitched whistle before another voice could be heard. Andrew immediately guessed Zev to be contacting his employer, this Imperium.

“Operative, identify designation and province of rendezvous.”

The voice was strange dialect to Andrew’s ears, a male voice from the sheer gruffness but very fluent with speech like a Harvard professor.

Zev repeated several numericals Andrew couldn’t follow along with and even clicks with his tongue and upper jaw. Not breaking his rhythmic speech by the end of the code, Zev continued, “By order of the dominant Obsidian Utopian I have ascertained fugitive of high priority, and arriving into Riph-Rram synchronization.”

A momentary pause marked by a low humming made Andrew feel as though a catalytic explosion was about to take them all from this instantaneous nightmare in which Andrew would awake back in that soggy grass park.

Suddenly to Andrew’s ensuing dread, the speaker resumed, “Acknowledge, proceed to designated realm. A detachment will arrive momentarily for extraction.”

“Hail Dominion Kronus, dynasty eternal.” Zev hit the button again, and the humming and speaker ceased. Andrew noticed the edge of Zev’s lips twitch as if trying to fight back a smirk.

“What are doing?” Ofer spoke with such control, not hinting at the fear or intimidation that Andrew was feeling. “Conspiring with those monsters of dreadful deed. Do you truly realize who this lad is? What we been waiting for?”

“Oh, I well know who this young louse is and the proclaimed words from that decrepit old man. Do you honestly believe that just because this boy carries some talisman with a ragged seal has any meaning for the coming age? The dynasty eternal is upon us all, a reign upon generation upon generation, and those of obedient heart will achieve harmony unlike ever before.” Zev spoke with a cold tone but something more to his voice; something almost overlapped with his tone.

“Are you mad? The Obsidians produce only tyranny with the stain of death across every society via persecution and debauchery.” Ofer’s tone rising higher to overcome Zev’s chilling message.

“Oh, there is already plenty of that already,” nodding in Andrew’s direction, “but soon there will be silence of nirvana.”

Suddenly, various lights began flashing across the console, which startled Andrew, causing an involuntary jerk. Keeping the ray gun on the two of them, Zev slightly turned his head, his eyes dashing back and forth like a ping-pong match between his captives and the console. Pulling down on a lever and adjusting a knob, Andrew noticed the string of lights outside the vessel gradually reform into the multitude of stars spread thick and thin in a night sky. The sensation in Andrew’s mind was near motionless. Looking ahead, he noticed one star did not seem to retreat back into the black canvas as all the rest but continuously enlarge. Stranger, yet this star even had its own peculiar twin star rising at an angle from it. Then Andrew gasped as he realized what he still felt so unsure of, what some must see to fully believe. Another planet with its own moon orbiting the circumference of this alien globe.

Andrew wanted to grin so badly, if not for the very present threat still aiming a barrel at him. This was a strange circumstance of irony for Andrew, to be the first person from earth to

visit an actual planet beyond the solar system, and now he was truly abducted by some madman for reason of an alien empire. As they approached closer to the planet, Andrew thought the sphere was slipping on its axis rotation. Then he realized it was him becoming woozy from the deep breathing due to panic of being a hostage and the foul smell. He had not fully realized that the burning hole in Itamar had left in the enclosed air. Acknowledging the smell, how frighteningly close it was to an intense barbecue, had slowly made Andrew nauseous and induced a tremble in his knees and heavy head.

Trying to focus on something less intimidating than the present capture or enlarging planet quickly approaching, Andrew looked down at his pocket. He noticed a warmth with a blueish-white glow faintly pulsing. Keeping his brow slightly tilted, Andrew rolled his eyes up toward Ofer, who had been keeping an eye on Andrew's condition and noticed the faint glow as well. Suddenly, as if electricity had energized the room, Ofer raised his eyebrows and began darting his eyes from the pulsing glow of Andrew's medallion to Zev, who was now focusing more on the ensuing rendezvous. Andrew couldn't be certain if he was meant to bargain their lives with it or attempt to clobber the coin over Zev's head. Then the high-pitched whistle sounded again, and Zev's concentration was further directed at the planet and communication with his Obsidian contact. Andrew trying to stand firm against the odor of death and a worsening situation, looked back over to Ofer, who mouthed the words *Now hurry*. Instantly Andrew got an idea he couldn't explain but considered better than his other options. He twitched his fingers, trying to loosen them for his surely idiotic course of action.

With one last deep breath, Andrew reached into his pocket and would have screamed *thank you* for the medallion easily slipping out. Then rushing forward to Zev, he thrust the medallion in his face. Instantly and brilliantly, a beam of light like the first brilliance back at

the park shot directly into Zev's eyes. The sheer power of the glowing particle stream nearly drowned out the screaming agony burning through Zev's cornea. In the great spectacle, a terrifying sight was unmasked by the light, revealing what one would consider to be Zev's shadow become like an oil texture with a hideous humanoid form similar to Zev but definitely not a physical creature.

As quickly as the beam burst forth, it was gone leaving the figure of Zev in a state with snow-glassed eyes and a pale, wrinkled complexion, making him appear 50 years older. With Zev slumped over the chair drooling, Ofer rushed to the controls while Andrew stood wobbling from the incredible rush of excitement. It took Andrew a moment to realize Ofer had repeated a question towards him.

“You well lad?”

“Oh, uh, yeah. Just fine, how bout you?” Andrew leaned against the co-pilot seat for balance before shoving off at the realization Itamar's body still lying there.

“Oh so sound, but such emergency flying is not my strongest suit. Fret not, I should be able to get us to a surface port with no-”

“Ahhhhh!”

A blood curdling shriek made Andrew and Ofer jolt as Zev jumped from the seat onto Ofer punching him savagely. By comparison, Ofer had more height and reach over Zev, but now Zev attacked without any regard for pain and even seemed unnaturally strong for his stature. Rapidly, blood was drawn. Whether the majority came from the brutality on Ofer or Zev's own inflicted wounds was uncertain, but his savage attack was not only aimed toward Ofer but the control console for the ship. In the thick of the sudden chaos, the ship lurched forward and began increasing tremendous speed toward the planet.

In the midst of the shudder and violent vibrations of the struggling ship, Andrew heard a clink and realized he'd dropped his medallion. Scrambling to pick it up, he could hear what was like a slow crunch of an aluminum can, but all around him. Looking up, he could now see a thick layer of bluish violet surrounding the planet that nearly encompassed the entire window.

“Your-r majesty,” Ofer spoke while trying to resist a chokehold from suicidal Zev. “Don your armor.”

Andrew felt as though the vibrations were moving across the ship and up into his brain, like a colony of fire ants crawling across his body, that he would be torn apart before suffering a massive impact. Suddenly the medallion glowed bright and strange markings formed across the rim, instantaneously becoming legible English. The lettering was an ivory glow behind the inscription that felt such a peculiar power.

Andrew was momentarily captivated long enough to read the transcription, “By the Will of Elōhîm, upon me my armor.”

Suddenly, a flash embraced Andrew with a strange warmth that reminded him of comfort lying by a burning hearth. Andrew looked over his shoulder to see what he had not seen for a full year, the wings of sunlight emanating with power that warmed the bones and stopped the trembling. Elegant threads of light shimmered down from the wings and materialized in the formation of bronze and sapphire cladding as the armor with a distant familiar weight and strength to it. The sensation – of what Andrew could only ever equate to as magic – nearly made him completely oblivious to the oncoming threat now completely covering the entire exterior cockpit.

Rushing over to Zev with a speed that made him crash into the wild body, he tossed the raving carcass of what he now considered some wild being rather than a man down the corridor. He heard a hard thump and saw Zev's body slump across the floor but still twitching.

“How did I-”

“Andrew!” Ofer scrambled at the controls, which many sparked, and some were dented from the intense struggle.

“What should I do?”

“Hold fast sir. Our steep decent through the atmosphere damaged thruster and framework. I'm try level for a hull landing, but-”

Boom! The world around Andrew became a magnificent vortex of sound and light, collapsing into a single void of darkness, followed by utter silence.

## Chapter 5: A Farewell before the First Step

Andrew felt so relaxed being in bed this morning. Every dresser and piece of clothing lying just where he left it had an overwhelming feeling of safety and security. He could even smell his mother's cooking of crispy bacon drifting down the hallway, only making him more relaxed in his soft sheets that seemed almost too neat, without a single wrinkle, along with the sunlight filtering from the window that had an eerie hum to it and consistently shining bright then dim like an emergency light bulb.

Andrew's body was incredibly stiff as if the covers constricted his every movement. Trying to move his hand to his head to rub his eyes sent an unbearable numbness across his arm and chest. Wincing at the sensation, Andrew's vision of his room shifted from the comfort of his bed to murky darkness. Slowly his vision shifted into a blurry setting of desolation and isolation. Scanning his surrounding with only his eyes, Andrew remembered the hijacking of a spaceship by a person, or humanoid, called Zev and Ofer's attempt to save their lives.

Andrew let out a deep groan from the pain of such a frightful realization and multiple sores caused by a battering around from the impact and structure that collapsed on top of him. Fighting through the searing heat of agony, Andrew slowly pushed himself up with the wall paneling clanking as it slid off him, causing a symphony of echoes. Reeling he realized he still had his armor on, Andrew began feeling his way as best he could to some other point of this broken vessel, hoping to stumble upon an exit.

Immediately, his hands felt something soft like a boxing bag, except there seemed to be brokenness and protruding solid element from it. As Andrew's eyes began to adjust fully to the dimness, he realized it was the body of Zev. The realization was like cold electricity shooting up Andrew's spine, giving him the energy to jump away from the corpse. Andrew could only stare

at the body rubbing his hands as if to wash clean and muttering under his breath, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Andrew was not admitting guilt for Zev’s final state but apologizing for what he considered disturbing his body. For a brief moment, Andrew saw Zev not as the traitor who killed Itamar and abducted him but as another person, another human, who met a harsh consequence from a foolish decision.

Hearing a clang from another portion of the wreckage, Andrew forced himself to move onward to a portion that seemed to filter golden rays into this tomb. Andrew had to almost crouch as most of the structure had collapsed, but still, the ceiling appeared to be impressively intact. Suddenly, even against his armor, Andrew could feel a breeze that offered cool air that broke the stale ambiance. Following the current, he came to what he supposed was once a portion of the cockpit with shards of the observation glass crackling under Andrew’s boot.

Through a new opening in the ship, there was a jagged outlet between the vessel and natural sediment, with great beams of warm golden light pouring from above. Andrew could hear another noise from the outside that frightened him to the thought of monstrous beasts sniffing the wreckage or savage scavengers inspecting for survivors. Until he heard the noise again as an almost unmistakable groan from Ofer. Quickly Andrew began crawling through a somewhat angled passage leading out to a warm embrace of comfortable sunlight and a friendly gust of cool wind.

Standing tall and his eyes readjusting to the endless brilliance, Andrew gasped at the embracing realization he was fully upon an extraterrestrial world. Looking around, he guessed that the vessel had crashed into a dune that somewhat cushioned and swallowed the vessel. The ground appeared to be a layer of smooth sand that seemed to be solid, with a metallic rainbow that shimmered across the grains from the breeze of the wind.

“An-Andr-ew.” Ofer wheezed out as he lay sprawled out on the ground. Andrew rushed over and knelt next to him. Andrew almost placed his hands to help Ofer but held back timidly, unsure if he might inflict more agony onto him.

“What do I do?” Andrew spoke to himself, wanting to curse deeply for his incompetence during this dire predicament.

“You-must,” Ofer replied, believing Andrew had directed the question to him, “get us... away from here. Obsidians will be-e tracking... crash. Distance... must get distance.”

To Andrew’s surprise, he, as gently as could be done, lifted Ofer with ease and began sprinting in a direction with the most foliage with an instinctive action. Even with the armor on, Andrew did not feel burdened by its weight but rather energized with its protection all about him. As he sprinted, he took note that the vegetation, for the most part, resembled mature pines one might expect to find in Yellowstone, except these had red and orange thistles that were dark tone in the sunlight. Nothing seemed to have a foul smell but a sweet richness any new adventurer experiences when introduced to a wilderness diverse from what he had come to know all his life.

Andrew kept sprinting, all while going over the events in his mind, how the man who first offered his hand out welcoming him on this journey was now dying in his arms. At that moment, all Andrew really wanted was to be back on earth with access to an emergency room for Ofer. He would hope that Ofer would pass enough as a human for the doctors and surgeons while not being too inquisitive. Although he was not sure how he would explain this to authorities, one phone call was his one deep wish at the moment, to see his parents and give them a great embrace that conveyed all the security and love one needs in a crisis.

Soon Ofer began wheezing harder, which acted on an anxiety Andrew had been trying to fight back since awakening in the wreckage. Slowly, his legs began to burn from the extent of his

sprinting; more than that, the armor had begun adding an additional burden to his strained muscles. With the taxing weight in his arms and on his body, Andrew had to halt to catch his breath when he realized he had stumbled into some form of oasis. The trees had become thicker and surrounded a pool of crystal water like natural sentries. Slowly, Andrew rested Ofer next to the water as he crouched on his knees and leaned over to view the depth of the mysterious pool. The liquid was visible straight to the bottom, which seemed lined with natural stones that appeared smooth and dazzling. Suddenly, the armor disappeared, and Andrew felt around his pockets. He discovered he still had his phone, the sack of mintage, and the medallion emanating a faint glow.

Quickly Andrew scrambled back over to Ofer, who coughed blood over his chest. Andrew gently lifted his head while Ofer motioned for Andrew to lean closer to hear his strained words.

“Don’t worry, I-I’ll get you some help-and water. Here’s some water.” Andrew blurted out.

Ofer merely shook his head very weakly and slowly spoke through hard breathing. “The water. Place m-me in it.”

Andrew didn’t question his request assuming the pool truly had some mystical properties to heal Ofer. Gently hauling him into the water, Andrew stepped back, expecting something miraculous to occur that would be thunderous and explosive. Andrew tensed, waiting for whatever to happen to be inexplicably sudden. Time slowly passed with nothing happening, not even Ofer’s minor scrapes healing over. Andrew inched closer back to Ofer, who merely floated on the water with no change to his condition.

“When will this water heal you?” Andrew asked, with a tremble as to what the answer would be.

“No. A-a good place... to rest.” Ofer answered with a smile and eyelids barely open.

“W-what.” Andrew choked out.

“The medallion... guide you... it will. Trust... in Elōhîm.”

“I don’t understand. I have to get you help.”

“Waited for you. Our beacon... restore what is t-tarnished.” Ofer’s breathing slowed.

“Thank you... O’mighty king. Mine eyes have seen... restoration.” His eyes sealed close with a relaxed smile. Slowly, his body began to float away as if carried off to the center of the crystal lagoon. He simply floated among a mirror of trees and golden beams as if only to rest his eyes and sleep away his wounds. Gradually Ofer sank beneath that enveloping, serene liquid blanket.

Andrew could hear something like rain droplets and realized it was his own tears against the water. Wiping away his tears, Andrew stood up with the harrowing realization that he was now alone in an environment utterly foreign to any measure of help or rescue he could think of. In a daze, Andrew began walking away from the pool that now had become a watery crypt and back into the full sunlit sky. Forcing himself not to look back, Andrew noticed a trail of footprints leading to the grove of the oasis. For a split second, Andrew was in terror a mysterious creature had arrived who might not show kindness to Andrew’s predicament, but he realized those to be his footprints coming to this location.

To his amazement, there was no sign or indication of the wreckage among the rolling landscape. Andrew was amazed he had traveled so far carrying a grown man without stumbling or being overcome by weariness. Then it occurred to Andrew that he had not the slightest clue where to go from here. He desperately wanted to return home at this moment but had not the

slightest idea if there was any civilization or even society that would accommodate his present situation.

Stroking his forehead, Andrew almost cursed the horrific events that led him to his situation when a spark lit his memory concerning Ofer's last words about the medallion. Removing it from his pocket, Andrew had half a mind to toss the enchanted object far into the distance in rage at his friend's death.

Looking down at it, the lion on the front of the medallion glowed brighter with the top portion of its mane shimmering in the form of an arrow. Suddenly, the emblem began to pivot like the needle on a compass, then swiftly made a 360° degree spin before focusing on a particular direction. The bearing was not a marked path nor the same course back to the ship but merely leading beyond this grove to whatever unknown.

Taking a deep breath, muttering to himself, "Okay, I trust you." Andrew began walking in the direction his medallion was pointing.

## Chapter 6: The First Forge and Quick Trust

Andrew still felt in a bit of a daze, mostly from his constant stumbling or dragging with his foot. He guessed the overwhelming event of losing a new friend and being marooned on a strange planet was the primary cause but suspected that a difference in gravity could be the reason. He would have laughed at the outrageous realization of living out a ridiculous fantasy.

Attempting to take his mind off current dilemmas and sorrows, Andrew focused more on the spectacular surroundings he was among. The landscape was still a swaying dune with metallic sand casting the brightest hues of green, yellow, indigo, and more across his eyesight like an anodized titanium knife, but there were massive natural structures that illustrated the definition of such wonder. In the distance rose colossal arches that would have been mistaken for hollow mountains.

The cerise trunk pine trees with dark orange thistles still grew throughout the land, some as great barking behemoths that stood alone in the metallic sea, others in clusters with a similar height to pines of earth, among these trees or in isolated patches that appeared as clusters of grass from a distance were reeds that seemed to grow stout and proud against the land. Andrew began to realize despite the cloudless sky, the temperature was merely warm, without the slightest discomfort brought about by humidity or extreme heat. As though the world was stuck in the ideal perfect temperature for the summer season, with the rays from this world's sun comfortably absorbed without fear of boils or sunburn.

### *Squeak*

Andrew nearly tripped over his feet when an unmistakable living sound broke the comfortable silence. Turning in circles to identify the culprit of such a seemly innocent noise, *squeak* he heard it again coming from a nearby tree. A curious, disturbing concept occurred to

Andrew that the trees were more than trees but conscious beings who had the capabilities to incapacitate Andrew, who was very much a foreign creature in their domain. Just as quickly as Andrew considered such a notion, the true culprit revealed itself climbing from behind the trunk.

Instantly, with no regard for his safety, Andrew broke out in a hysterical laugh at the realization of his fear, which was a cerulean rodent with green spots slightly larger than a mouse but with the limbs and body of a koala. The tiny animal made another squeak which only made Andrew laugh more at the utter adorableness of this creature. The animal stared long at Andrew as if just as amused by Andrew as Andrew was of it. With a slight tilt of the head, the koala-mouse gave another squeak before scurrying up the tree with the speed and ease of a squirrel. Andrew finally managed to stop laughing to just grin at the satisfaction that other living creatures were surviving this environment and that it was such a harmless critter.

Suddenly, Andrew heard multiple squeaks as he looked around the other side of the tree to see a whole group of the koala-mouses scurrying up the tree. Andrew's grin faded away at the realization that there could be an animal food chain with a predator that survived from these blemished rodents. With no interest in encountering this possible beast, Andrew quickly continued in the direction of his medallion, but with a new hope that there could be a civilization here that was very sustainable from the land.

So, Andrew's perpetual trek across this world seemed to become an endless bound of mountainous arches with magnificent pines providing apparel to a waterless sea of growing despair. Andrew's mind began to sway between the strange environment with colorful pines and alien animals that amused his sense of imagination and the death of Ofer mixed with the realization that he may never speak with Conner, Lance, Evelin, or even Donald; without, the

slightest chance to explain his choices concerning the last year or apologize to Donald for how he left their relationship.

After what Andrew could only guess as hours, his legs felt as though the feet had become dumbbells, leaving him enough strength to balance his body and drag his feet. Over time he'd even begun wetting his lips as the sun's continuous gleam had now become a relentless accumulation of molten rays that released sweaty trickles streaming down his forehead to his chin. At his last ounce of determination to keep going toward an unknown destination, Andrew realized the sun had finally reached the western portion of the sky (assuming this sun set in the west), nearing the now purplish green horizon, which revealed an elliptical basin with a truly wonderful sight he doubted to behold, civilization. Without any regard to hostility or differentiation with this alien settlement, Andrew found himself sprinting with only the thought of cold water on his lips and a hot meal from BBQ brisket to BLT sandwiches. Coming up to the border, Andrew slid to a halt at what his eyes beheld. It was indeed an alien settlement but in the sense of a look back in time of another nationality.

The layout of this town was similar to an old west settlement, only twice as congested with structures. Cautiously, walking around what he guessed was the back to some of these buildings, Andrew noticed that most construction came down to half being from the natural lumber of this world, seeing how the wood had a similar crimson stain the pines Andrew had walked among. While the other half resembled pueblo architecture, with the stone resembling the anodized metallic sand, only now it had a darker tie-dye shade to the buildings.

Andrew stroked his forehead layered with perspiration. He wasn't sure what to expect if he went further. Still, his need for food and water had become a strong enough motivator to keep going into whatever populace this town housed. With a deep breath, Andrew continued into the

town, coming onto a paved road consisting of grit-like river stone and smooth compacted mulch. Taking the road that had the basic similarities of a main street, Andrew turned a corner that led to a general direction of the epicenter of the settlement and skitted to a halt at his first glance of the alien public.

It was spectacular to realize just how human they appeared. Similar to the crew from the spaceship, everyone had humanoid physicality but with the slightest tint of lime-green, burgundy, orchid shade within their skin. Many wore clothing that seemed to follow the ideal conditions for such an arid region, a distinction in textile resembling khakis with strapped boots or even sandals. Along with long sleeve shirts, some had a bright reflection, while others even wore ponchos or shawls with an elegant pattern design of beasts, vegetation, or deep heritagical meaning that escaped Andrew's quick contemplation. Very few were dressed in grey linen skirts and kilts, while those few who were men walked around bare-chested, mostly clean-shaven. For the most part, many didn't seem to wear hats or any headwear, which made his next discovery with ease.

While so many had the impression of general human traits from five fingers, two arms and legs, two eyes, and hair with a general monochromatic skin tone, Andrew did notice some, few as they were, had differing appendages for hair, even the slightest strands fur or scales, and some with distinctive bright multicolored striped skin. It was as though he had stepped onto the set of a scientific production with so many devoted cast members, several even with sidelong keen pointed ears.

Andrew almost had the urge to ask someone for the director but hesitated when he realized a few gave him a peculiar glance and then hurried away. Andrew realized that he stood out with his wardrobe, not only most distinct from these townspeople but also most tattered. In a

vain thought to stay undetectable, Andrew averted his gaze from everyone and continued following his medallion, walking along what he assumed was a dusty sidewalk as everyone else seemed to be traveling along.

As Andrew continued, he realized there were some who used the main centra of the road riding on beasts with incredible resemblance to a Clydesdale, only with a polish of fiery ginger coat and feathery auburn mane. Andrew assumed these were close enough to be associated as stallions, as they let out a *neigh* so strong it almost had a similarity to distant thunder.

Additionally, others rode through on motorbikes resembling crotch rockets but with only a front treaded wheel and a back end that hovered. These machines made only a humming sound with an occasional slight burst of backfire that startled an already anxious Andrew. Even with the obvious creases of tarnish and rust, Andrew still couldn't help but think to himself, *Oh I want one of those.*

Taking his eyes off the massive steeds and space bikes, Andrew made his way past shops. As he could best guess each sold or marketed a different singular necessity for such an environment. The signs or plaques that advertised these shops were transcribed in a dialect that most closely resembled hieroglyphics and Latin calligraphy.

Suddenly, two space bikes thundered through the avenue with sleek bloodshot markings on an inky overcoat. Rumbling past everyone with little regard for their safety, the bikes stopped at the far end, where the bikers dismounted, then grasping for a type of rifle stored along their bike with the resemblance of a submachine gun with a bayonet. They appeared in armor with a similar paint style as their bikes, but not a smooth shell. Rather it came across as geometric, with sharp edges and numerous points where pieces intersected. Although, the most foreboding was

the helmet, which was a slick ovate orb with a scarlet glyph where the face should be. Andrew had a churning feeling in his stomach at their sight that sent a chill down his spine.

Suddenly, when one seemed to be staring at Andrew, he became very nervous, not wanting an encounter with whoever these armed troopers were. Andrew quickly ducked into a nearby establishment. Instantly, a wave of various voices crashed over him as he realized he walked into some type of pub. The interior seemed a mix of varnished wooden sheets with stone countertops and flooring. There were even monitors hanging from the ceiling with newscast headlines or athletics broadcasts, neither of which Andrew could discern at the moment. The place felt like an awkward hybrid of an old saloon and Wild Wings. The occupants were too enamored with their conversations or broadcast to care for Andrew's presence.

Andrew quickly checked his medallion and found it to be pulsating intensely. Looking toward the direction the arrow directed him, Andrew noticed in a back corner a lone figure sitting at a booth wearing a fedora with a unique trench coat that seemed to be made from maroon wool with navy blue leather, and a white outline running along the edges, along with plating in the shoulders. The rim of his hat shadowed his face, but Andrew was certain he seemed to be wearing a mask (or have a metal head).

Andrew felt far too intimidated to approach this mysterious stranger and begin asking for his help on matters he didn't fully understand. Looking back at the medallion, he found it stopped pulsating or even acting as a compass, then glancing back toward the stranger got the uncomfortable feeling he was being examined. Attempting to avoid this awkward state, Andrew tried to merely stroll over to the counter as a casual customer. The bartender, who had a smooth forehead, walked over to Andrew with a protruding chin and folded lip. He looked Andrew up and down before speaking, "You no from around this corner are yea." Hearing his bizarre

grammatics, Andrew remembered the translator by his ear and started patting it to feel if it was broken.

“Uh, is it really that obvious?” Andrew replied, detecting no problem as far as he could guess with his ear device.

“Notta seen wear such that. No pleasant for long welcome.”

Andrew couldn't help but look himself over, then around at others' clothing.

“Yeah, well, I'm new to all this.” Andrew replied

“I'll say. So, what'll have?”

“I'll have a lemonade.”

“A wha?”

“Nothing, sorry.” Andrew cursed himself under his breath, “I meant water, just water.”

The bartender grunted as he proceeded to grab a mug of water for Andrew. Soon as the mug hit the table, Andrew poured the semi-cool liquid down his throat, using what little drops left to wipe his forehead. Setting the empty cup down, catching his breath, he noticed the bartender staring at him. Andrew assumed he wanted payment and remembered the mintage from Ofer. Rummaging through his pockets, Andrew placed the medallion on the counter as he reached for the leather sack when suddenly the bartender let out a loud heavy grunt at the sight of the medallion.

“Yo-re a Knight of Auroran Templar!”

Now all music and noise stopped as all eyes focused on Andrew. Feeling the intensity of their gaze made Andrew nervous, and he attempted to relieve the tensions with a timid wave to his already alien surroundings.

“You’re the reason those blasted Obsidians are treading here.” The bartender spoke, grasping the counter so hard his knuckles cracked and leaning close as if preparing for a tussle.

*BLAST!*

An utter blur of motion as a flash of smoke choked out the whole room. A mysterious hand with lightning strength dragged Andrew through a bewildered saloon to a door leading to an alley. Before Andrew could blink the smoke out of his eyes, he was being pulled by a silhouette through streets and alleys. Finally, they stopped between a tight space of a rigid wooden structure and a stone house.

The stranger pushed Andrew up against the wall and spoke with a hushed, deep resonating melody, “How did you come by that Medallion?”

Andrew coughing as he tried to get his words out, “It *cough* it just appeared to me. *cough* A year after I got some magical armor.” Andrew finished with a wheeze. For a moment, the stranger was as still as a statue. Then he released Andrew, who fell to his knees, and shoved the medallion into his hands, which to Andrew’s guess, the stranger managed to grab in the confusion.

“Did that Medallion point you here?” He asked with a hint of astonishment.

Andrew looked up, his eyes clearing, and could see it was the same stranger from the pub, with the trench coat, hat, and he was wearing a mask that appeared bronze with silver. There was dark bronze plating along his boots and his knees, he even seemed to wear a burnt indigo breastplate with rifts and curves to appear as a rugged flexible vest.

“Actually, yeah. I think it was leading me to you. I mean if you can believe a medallion can guide a stranger to another stranger.”

The stranger tilted his head until the rim dipped below his chin, “Not the medallion itself,” he spoke as though he was in a deep struggle about the next move. Then raising his head and looking both ways down the alley, he said, “Alright. Keep that hidden until we get several leagues from here. You have strength for full revolutions trek?”

“I guess, well I mean, no. I don’t have any food or water.”

“Wait here. Don’t be noticed, not yet.” The man spoke with not a hint or break of sureness. Andrew merely watched in awe as he hurried away without making a ruckus. Andrew slowly picked himself up and paced from that spot he was left, relieved to have found some form of help and worried about what further mess he had become entangled in.

Leaning up against a wall, Andrew yawned at the wait, remembering it was still evening the moment he had left earth. He had been awake the entire endeavor, not counting his knock-out from the crash. He looked up at the sky, now entering a ginger-lavender sheet. Perhaps the rotations on this world were longer than that of a typical day on earth. At least, that’s how it felt. Of course, it was possible for the days to be shorter than earth’s. The debate in his head enticed Andrew to slump down and fall into a deep sleep.

Suddenly, something like a low broadcast through a garbled police scanner snapped at Andrew’s attention and need to stay awake. Peeking around the corner, he could see four of the darkly clad soldiers from earlier. One with a slightly larger insignia across its mask was pointing at various locations, clearly giving some form of instruction to the others. Then each began heading in a different direction as the one who gave instruction headed Andrew’s way. A tap on the shoulder nearly made Andrew jump into plain view of the dark soldier before a stern hand pulled him back into the alley. The stranger had returned with a satchel and a type of canvas leather backpack.

“Follow me, stay close.” The stranger spoke with such conviction and deep tone it was a wonder if that was his real voice or a transmitter in his mask.

Andrew and the stranger wasted no time weaving through alleyways and streets. Andrew would have enjoyed taking in more of the architecture of this town that seemed versatile with the land, but the stranger was incredibly fast and abrupt to halt and quickly peer across every corner before sprinting further through each section of the town. Finally, they reached what Andrew assumed to be another segment to the edge of the town, where several buildings or huts rested in a row before a sea of metallic dunes.

Suddenly the stranger held his fist, forcing Andrew to stop before running face-first into a punch. Crouching low next to him behind the corner of stone shop, which seemed presently closed, Andrew very carefully peeked around the corner to find two of the massive alien Clydesdales, with blueish green feathers for a mane and tail, even some plumes above their hooves. The beasts merely stood tall and stout, flicking their feathery tails and shaking their heads that had reins from mouth to neck and dark mustard saddle about their back.

“Thank Alpha Ternion I was kind enough to acquire two Skynards. See here, we’ll make a run to a cavity on other side of the horizon. From there we should have enough cover for the night. You can ride can’t you?” The stranger inquired without a hint of concern for whatever Andrew’s answer might be. Andrew’s mind flashed to memory when he and his folks went horseback riding in the Virginia mountains over a decade ago.

Before Andrew could begin a syllable, a faint squeak Andrew would have dismissed if not for the incarnate lightning twist such grace and instant thunder echoing in his ears. The stranger had pulled and fired his pistol on a darkly clad soldier now sprawled motionless across

board and dirt. A steaming hole sizzling out of his forehead, with a gun and mace in either of his hands. No time to even be dazed, the stranger dragged Andrew by the shoulder to the Skynards.

Andrew watched as the stranger, in one smooth bound, was up top his steed with reins pulled back and galloping in the far-off golden twilight. Andrew thankfully remembered to place one foot in a stirrup and lift himself quickly into the saddle. From there, all he recalled was gripping with his knees and a strong kick with his heel. Fortunately, that did the trick as the beast reared so far on its back legs Andrew nearly fell off if he hadn't gripped hold its neck in time. Then still vertical on its back legs, the creature managed to jump, Andrew guessed five feet, landing in full gallop after the stranger. Andrew didn't dare look back, mostly because he didn't want to lose his grip on this four-legged nascar.

The Skynard continued to gallop, or rather switch between galloping strides and far-flung leaps that felt as though they were gliding. Andrew tried to sit upright as he remembered from horse-backing with his folks but only managed to nearly slide off when the creature made another breathtaking leap. Barely holding the reins, he thought he was directing the Skynard as best he could tell in the direction of the stranger, but truthfully the Skynard was very well tame and wise, as beasts are, and was following after its companion the stranger rode.

The sun sinking behind the horizon cast long violet shadows among the dunes. Andrew tried to focus on the sunset wishing it wouldn't disappear so fast, as the darkness was slowly making him very anxious. Suddenly, Andrew noticed something spring up across the scarlet thread of light. It appeared fixed, swaying like a flag but having a strange shape of a flimsy column. This made Andrew's mind jump to the imagination of phantoms and ghouls, wishing even more that the sun would recall back across the horizon.

Now, another one of these strange occurrences appeared, then another, and another after that. Andrew gulped at what he was diving towards when without warning, he felt the coolest mist splash across his face. He tried to wipe it off and discovered it was a mix of vapor and sand. Looking around, he realized the Skynard had nearly dashed through one of these strange phenomena. Only after seeing it from a different angle and feeling its composition he realized they're a type of dust devil funneling the sand from the landscape with an equal amount of water droplets. Andrew smiled at his misconception of these whirlwinds but quickly sulked when he realized the sunlight was nearly gone over the enveloping horizon, and these dust devils were picking up strength that whipped the grit like sandpaper in his skin.

Andrew could barely keep his eyes open, which made little difference as the last stroke of light slowly shaded from scarlet to darkest indigo. Even stronger was the fact that the weight of wandering all day and intense escape had left him exhausted, with just enough strength to balance himself on top of the Skynard. These dust devils still spraying across his skin felt as though he was being cocooned by layers of marsh. Strangely he felt almost warm, like being back in bed with bedsheets and losing more strength to blink his eyes back open. Finally, Andrew giving into the comfort of deep sleep, slowly held his eyes open one last time, glimpsing, as he presumed prelude of a dream, an outstretched hand with gnarled fingers and a great bracelet. Andrew dozed off, chuckling at the thought of a giant hand folding over him into a warm tight clutch.

## Chapter 7: A Wanderer's Warm Supper

*Sniff, sniff.*

The smell of exotic BBQ wafted over Andrew like a warm shower. As if his eyes were clasped shut, Andrew struggled to open them, and even when he did, his vision received the bulk of darkness. The first thing he could comprehend was stars shooting upward into and disappearing among the darkness. Next was a crackling that brought back the comforting feeling of a stove furnace during a brisk autumn night.

Finally, the smell compelled Andrew to push himself upright in order to locate the delicious scent and be amazed not for the last time. The shooting stars were embers from a fire where the mysterious being knelt while turning a rotisserie device with what Andrew couldn't distinguish if it was chicken thigh or a slab of beef. The stranger had his back against a wall, which seemed a combination of smooth sediment and an intertwined root system that formed a dome cave. At another end of the fire, the Skynards stood with their gaze bobbing from the ground to the opening of the hollow.

Andrew's stomach made a loud growl. He was sure the stranger would take notice and begin a relentless inquisition. Instead, he continued to rotate the sizzling meat.

"When your done staring the mutton is ripe." He spoke with a deep flowing tone, not a hint of worry or irritation.

Andrew slowly crept closer to the fire and sat on the other side of the flicking flames, keeping his eyes on the being he unwittingly followed, who even killed for him. Now, he merely turned the mutton, but Andrew was tense as spring-loaded pistol that he'd become hostile against Andrew. Suddenly, jabbing a thin rod into the mutton tore a chunk off, making Andrew flinch but clearly offering the piece to him. Andrew slowly crawled over to the kabob, his stomach making

more reasons against caution. Gradually taking the offering, Andrew quickly bit into that mutton, nearly bringing tears to his eyes. The seasoning tasted so ripe with an exotic amount of sour and sweetness. Further, after nearly dying in a spaceship crash, stumbling across an alien desert, and being shot at, Andrew almost accepted the notion of not getting a last meal.

Andrew continued biting into the chewy mutton with such vigor, almost par to a starving wolf. The stranger helped Andrew pace his eating by holding out a type of green waterskin after choking once on a swallow. Following a long drink and wiping his mouth, Andrew finally focused on the mystery man, who in turn set his attention on Andrew. After a moment that seemed to stretch into an hour of uncomfortable silence save the crackling fire, Andrew sputtered out the only thing he could think of and did have great importance.

“Who are you?” Andrew asked with a deep breath.

“One of few who still hold true to the Mandate eternal.”

Then, with a slow unwavering motion, he brought his hands up, showing Andrew he was unarmed. Finally, the mystery man removed his helmet, which the hat seemed attached. What Andrew saw managed to calm him further, for just as the crew who picked him up from earth, Andrew once again faced not an alien but a man. He had bristly stubble across his cheeks and chin, with short curly hair that was a mixture of deep red with bright blonde highlights in the firelight. His face had creases across his forehead and cheeks, yet not caused by old age but by one who had seen and done great feats of strength, like a man of stern character who experienced the most dire combat. Yet in that gristly face, there was a twinkle in his eyes Andrew recognized from some of his most patient of teachers, coaches, and fathers of friends who displayed kindness and understanding.

“I am Zecheriah, Auroran Ranger.”

“Oh-okay.” Andrew muttered with the feeling that Zecheriah expected him to know what an Auroran Ranger was. A sense of unease settled over as Andrew’s eyes darted away from Zecheriah’s stern blinkless gaze studying him. So, Andrew merely bit into his mutton slowly. Wanting to break the silence, which in Andrew’s opinion, had become very awkward, he mentioned the one thing they might both be comfortable with.

“This is very delicious.”

“Well, my gratitude.” he replied with a nod, “When one knows the herbs and juices of spanning realms there’s bound to be a culinary treat. A trick of the trade is knowing the proper flavor for a day’s mood, a sweetness to alleviate a sour hour or zest to commemorate bold action. Many would be imbecilic to the ignorance of time and fire for substituting oven and timer. The result of open flame and patience appears to be a satisfied appetite.”

Andrew gave a bit of a weary smile. He felt more at ease hearing Zecheriah speak with ease and without the helmet. Then Zecheriah shifted his position as if he had something uncomfortable before him.

“Alas, there are more pressing matters that must take priority over a hearty meal. Am I right to conclude that you know not of an Auroran Ranger, or for that matter the Auroran Templar?”

“*Cough.* Well, um, I have heard of both... very recently. Actually, only too recent cause I still don’t know what either are.” Andrew felt embarrassed for his ignorance.

Being on a remote planet, he’d figure he ought to have basic knowledge of the why he was out here, yet no one had ever fully described so. Zecheriah gave a nod with his head, poked the fire once more, then readjusted himself so his left elbow rested on his knee in a comfortable position.

“I do believe this is where I fully come into your story. I’ll have to explain one and all as best I can. Some I shall reveal tonight, others as we come to better know one another, while there will ultimately be details meant for others to reveal at proper time.” This man spoke with such confidence Andrew couldn’t bring himself to ask a question until he finished. “To commence let’s begin with that medallion on your person.”

Zechariah reached under his coat’s lapel along the left side of his breastplate and *click* removed an object in the shape of a disc the size of his palm. On one side in the middle was a chiseled sun with ivory rays horizontal and vertical. It looked something like a compass with a large flaming focal and four arrows for north, west, east, and south; although, the northern ray had an extra indented arrow. Directly in the center of the sun, Andrew almost had to squint, was a diamond white bird with wings spread in midflight.

On the other side an insignia with the purest gemstones forming a silver star in the center with a golden crown to the right, and a fiery shrub to the left with a diamond arc around all three and two citrine wings along either side, the exact same design Andrew had only seen on one other object. With his chin becoming slack, Andrew realized it was indeed another medallion like his own, except far less illumination.

“Ar-are you a knight too?” Andrew found himself asking in a hushed tone.

Zechariah gave a hard chuckle and shook his head. “Nah lad, for I already told you I am a Ranger, not Knight, although still among the assembly of the Auroran Templar. This medallion I carry was bestowed upon my person from the Prime Tetrarch amid the Halo Congregation. You have received yours from the very Arnûrm.” When Zechariah spoke that last word, Arnûrm, sent a warm calm over his nerves. As though that term had significant meaning and wonder beyond mere definition. That didn’t stop Andrew from asking, “The who?”

“The first children of the Sovereign Patriarch. These medallions, specifically those of a knight, act as an identification to service across all the realms. A cosmopolitan identification some would simply put it.”

“Service. Wait, is that why everyone is after me and trying to kill me?”

“That is certainly the opening salvo of this riddle you have found yourself trudging through. Now, before I go further I require answers to continue explanations, namely how did you arrive upon this realm and all that’s transpired to point we met.”

Andrew’s gaze dropped to the floor. He assumed the topic involving Ofer would have to eventually be explained. So, with a deep sigh, Andrew began with his adventure, although he had come to nearly hate it, back to when the ship arrived with Ofer, Itmar, and Zev. Andrew felt rather nervous. He always loved hearing stories but was never much of a storyteller himself. A couple of times, he would get stuck trying to explain his understanding of new mechanics he had been introduced to. Zechariah kindly encouraged Andrew that such material was unnecessary, as he already had a sound knowledge of such technical matters and didn’t fully relate to the story’s primary purpose. So, Andrew continued when Zev betrayed the crew, and in the struggle, everyone crashed on this world Riph-Rram.

Then, with another deep breath, Andrew re-layed how he carried Ofer’s broken body in his hands and sprinted across the metallic wilderness to a sheltered oasis. Choking back a sob, Andrew described placing Ofer’s body in the water and his last words to Andrew “mighty king” and “restoration” which he had to think hard for a second to be sure if those were correct. Andrew didn’t understand why Ofer said those last words then and felt somewhat ashamed he didn’t know now, as though he should. In a way, despite the pain of recounting the death of a

friend, he found himself relieved to share that memory. As though perhaps the memory of Ofer's aid wouldn't be caged to Andrew but just might spread so all would know of the great man.

After a moment of a deep breath, Andrew wiped away a tear and continued what remainder of his story from the lonesome crossing to the point of entering the town and walking into that pub Zecheriah just happened to be at. Now a silent pause ensued, and when he looked up at Zecheriah, he was surprised to see that the man seemed to be as grieved as Andrew, sunken eyebrows and right fingers tapping the left knuckle.

“All I can offer is my condolences, and my strength, my resolve, and my knowledge upon this journey Prime Tetrarch.”

“Thank you.” Andrew replied, forcing a smile, “Prime Tetrarch?”

“Yes, that seal on your medallion is specific to the lineage of the king, the Prime Tetrarch to the Auroran Templar.”

At that, Andrew dropped his food and mouth.

## Chapter 8: Instruction begins among the Dunes

The next day involved a long ride across a landscape of layering sandy sherbet, with more arches rising from the sand like the spray from a whale's breach frozen in time. Andrew already felt numb from the continuous riding on top of the Skynard, which had lasted from the shadows of dawn to what he believed to be midday. His mind was only partially aware of the pain and more revolving around what Zecheriah had revealed last night. Andrew was a king.

After that revelation, he found himself too dumbstruck to know what question to ask next. So, Zecheriah merely said, "That will do for tonight. Yes, there is more to be said but let that be in the warmth of sunlight on our backs and after a renewal of sleep. Tis no good increases any concerns that might impede a rest for a march before us. I have spoken."

At that, they both took to a spot in the cave and laid down to sleep. For the longest time, Andrew thought how unreal everything had become. From traveling in a spacecraft to walking on an alien planet to the realization, he was some type of king. A part of him wanted to laugh with excitement, it seemed reminiscent of every little boy's dream of becoming a shining hero in armor, and somehow that dream was transforming into reality. The other part of him shivered at the mere thought of unbelievability. It felt as if a millstone was forming in his stomach to the responsibility, a sickening feeling reminiscent of when Donald and Evelyn would quarrel. Andrew could only reflect on his shortcomings, being a quiet introvert, unable to speak up, who was in no way a genius with any matters concerning political systems.

Finally, Andrew managed to drift off to sleep. In a dream, there was a meadow with the sweetest scent of budding blossoms that warmed his nose. A massive fog hung all around Andrew that blotted out the sky and cast a thick dew on all the flowers and grass. Surprisingly Andrew was certain he could taste the moisture which had a cold sweet flavor. Hearing a splash

of a foot against the water, Andrew turned to find the mist almost parting to a figure in a dark garment, the same figure from previous dreams he had spoken of with Lance. Andrew quickly gasped at the face that was now uncovered and appeared almost a mirror image of himself, only older, with beaded hair. The figure stood stone still with arms behind his back and the slightest tilts of his head studying Andrew. Suddenly, he flashed a grin revealing perfectly white teeth and spoke one word, "Brother."

Instantly a great earthquake shook the dream into a blur, and Andrew's eyes shot wide open to see Zechariah give him a hard, but not painful, kick in the heel. He then tossed Andrew a small bar of meat that tasted like smoked jerky. From there, they made their way from the cave, which turned out to be a crevice in an arch with some trees growing among it, and began riding their Skynards across the rolling landscape. A silence had ensued between them. At first, Andrew didn't mind, but now it had grown to be uncomfortable.

Finally, unable to take the sound of hoofs (if Skynards have hoofs) against sand, Andrew plucked up the courage to break the silence and ask, "So, um... where are we going exactly?"

"We are headed for the sky docks. I have a vessel in storage that will sail us to the Crusader Corps, and from them we shall reach Tokhath, the Esteem Luminanem. With some guidance by The Helper and small amount of cunning we should reach the docks with no misfortune." Zechariah replied, wearing his hat and mask again.

"Why are you helping me?" Andrew meant no disrespect in the question, which seemed reasonable considering how out of place he was as a complete stranger. Zechariah didn't take offense to it in the least.

"Well lad, every fresh adventurer needs just a little aid."

Andrew nearly teared at that remark, remembering Ofer had said the exact words to him and what had become of his fate. With a slight cough to keep his emotion in check, Andrew decided to change his drifting thoughts with a different question.

“So, who or what are or is the Auroran Templar?” Andrew asked.

“Now, I will give you a basic preamble of the Templar, but the full history of such foundation I believe resides in the more capable wise hands of Tokhath. Straightway the Templar was formed at the dawn of the first appointed king and those of his chosen knights who later became the original head tetrarchs. With the general militia, the birth of the Crusader Corp, the Templar was given the Mandate, the book of covenant, for healthy living, opposition of evil, and defending the pilgrims amongst the ether. Now we are in an age of strife where in the absence of the Prime Tetrarch the legislators within the Gran-Council have further digressed from the Mandate. Tolerance for evil rises as a tidal wave in parallel to our adversary the Obsidian Coven, whose strength grows with territory and credence.” Zecheriah paused, shaking his head, then with a nod, continued, “No matter. I am still Ranger and partisan to the Mandate. However, from plush cushions of snoopng eyes in the Gran-Council, I became disfavorable with them. Refusing any type of unauthoritative disarmament I took a leave of absence deep into the frontier, revisiting realms of amity. Finally, I arrived here upon Riph-Rram. Then a year ago I had a dream, actually a vision, of a young lad descending by wings of massive eagles with the Great Lion going out before him. Then I heard the most powerful, most deep, most sweet words spoken to me *Be prepared. You shall be service to the king once more. With hope and responsibility on your shoulders tutor him in ways of heritage to the Mandate. You shall be mason and he shall be your cornerstone.* So I waited here, with such a prophecy I certainly became nervous anytime I moved from a particular settlement or abided in the wilderness, but I

trusted Elōhîm would inform if I ventured wrongly. Finally, here you are the lad from the vision with the seal of the king no less.”

Andrew nodded. Coming to terms with these amazing circumstances was still difficult. “O-kay. I’m sorry, just still feeling overwhelmed by all this revelation. Even more so now than last night.”

“Well, honestly, I would be taken aback if you weren’t.” Zechariah replied with a chuckle that sounded more like a muffled cough under his helmet. “This appears to be an excellent a spot as any.”

Andrew looked all around him and only saw the metallic banks in every direction, with a grove of trees dotting here and there with those reeds popping out of the ground. “Good spot for what?”

In one motion Zechariah jumped off his mount, “To see what you are made of.”

Zechariah threw his trench coat over his Skynard revealing a messy white shirt, cuffed before the elbows, under his breastplate, or vest-plate. To Andrew’s fascination the Ranger’s medallion was fastened upon his armor about at the same spot as the heart (Andrew assumed their anatomy was the same). Along with a thick dark crimson belt with two silver guns, revolvers from second glance, and different compartments like an iconic superhero’s utility belt.

He proceeded to remove a knife from his belt. The handle was longer than his knuckles, with a tint of copper running along the spine. Then, with a hard flick, *snap*, it morphed like stretchy playdough to become a sword nearly the length from his chin to his waist with a single-edge, wideset between the tip to the middle like a *S* contour. The composition appeared akin to the diamond intensity as Excelsior except without any shimmering flame about it but a dark sapphire with a silvery white edge.

“Now, call upon your sword.”

Nervous, Andrew leaned backward, unintentionally pulling the reins back which made the Skynard jump suddenly, which made Andrew fall on his back. Quickly jumping up to avoid looking silly for too long, his eyes locked on the Ranger’s sword. Andrew hastily patted himself down searching for the Medallion, which was still in his pocket with a warm glow. Pulling it out, Andrew looked at the rim expecting to see the words he spoke back on the ship, only now they appeared a different set of symbols across the rim. Andrew shook it, comparing it too much to a magic eight ball, and of course, nothing happened.

“What is it?” Zechariah asked, having removed his helmet and seeing Andrew’s confusion.

Andrew looked back and forth between Zechariah and the Medallion, “There was writing around the rim last time the armor appeared on me. Now it’s something else, do I just speak the same thing as last time?”

“Yes, and no,” Zechariah replied, “certainly the last time was the first time you dawned your armor, which the Medallion illuminated the vow to unlock thy gift. In a manner that medallion is the lock, so to speak, and the vow is the key. Now you know the key but pronto you must do more than merely speak by words, you must command by will of conviction.”

“What?”

“Simple lad, quite simple. Believe. Believe in He who forged those tools you were so gifted. Visualize that what you require, such as the sword. Reach out and feel the warmth running down the blade into the hilt and command it be unsheathed from the wings etherarûm.”

“Etherar- wha, wait, wait... are you saying it’s alive?”

“Absolutely not, but it is infused with power beyond the mere physicality, to the source of the Forger. Now, actually stretch out hand, make the full action of conviction, and call upon your sword only.”

Andrew shook his head and stretched out his hand, half expecting nothing to happen. Nonetheless, he tried so hard to push those thoughts aside and imagine the shape of the blade. He only held it twice but couldn't forget that diamond blade with three four-point star design in the center. Nor those cross-guards featuring embedded gems and chiseled wings that radiated a white flame that seemed a compaction of thousands of white stars bursting from the hilt of the lion's mouth flowing along the mesmerizing vane. Even the handle, being leather-wrapped, felt comfortable and stable in his grasp.

Suddenly, with a phrase popping into his head, Andrew felt the need to whisper, “To me Excelsior.”

In the blink of an eye strands of sunlight wove together, as various spectrums of threads weave to form a sturdy textile, composing Andrew's sword, which felt so heavy he nearly dropped it. The white flame didn't radiate nearly as strong as when he first held it, but that sword felt just as full of power and splendor at that moment. Andrew had to grasp it with both hands for steady and turned to Zechariah, who nodded in satisfaction while he stroked his chin.

“Remember Omega, trust in your conviction and more so the Forger, who is your Captain and Captain to the Arnûrm. Who just so happens to be the son to the Sovereign Patriarch.”

Zechariah spoke as he made a wide arc around Andrew.

“Okay. Wait, Omega? That's what Ofer said back on the ship, what's that supposed to mean?”

“You lad. You are the Omega Knight, last knight inducted into the Templar and one molding into that set of armor. Thus, time to see what you are made of. Breath and take a soft swing.” Zecheriah said, raising his sword parallel to Andrew’s shoulders.

Andrew raised his sword just in time as both blades clashed, sending a soft echo across the silent hills. With another swing of his sword and Andrew managed to deflect with Excelsior.

“Not bad. You seem to have nurturing talent.” Zecheriah replied with a stout posture as he continued to walk in an arc about Andrew. “Keep that blade up and ready always!”

Swiftly Zecheriah lunged with incredible speed. Andrew barely managed to dodge, but not without losing his balance and falling on his side. With Excelsior still in hand, Andrew picked himself back up, keeping his eyes and sword trained on Zecheriah.

“Here raise your sword above the head with both arms like so,” Zecheriah grasped the hilt of his sword with both arms and raised it above his head without the slightest indication of difficulty. Andrew did likewise, trying to keep his arms steady while the bulky blade was above his head. “This is known as the swift eagle,” Zecheriah made a chopping motion going to the ribs and the legs. “Now you. And remember, swift and control.”

Andrew did as he was shown, although he had to do it more slowly with a tremble through his arms and legs. “Modify your stance, get your leading leg forward, bent. Keep those shoulders equilibrium. There, there you, well done. Now swift strike!”

Andrew brought the sword down shakier than how he had been shown, but Zecheriah nodded, satisfied with his attempt. “Good. Now let’s try that with opponent.”

“What!” Andrew blurted quickly, looking at Zecheriah raise his sword toward Andrew.

“Keep a steadfast mind in the battle, always.” Zecheriah replied with eyes stone solid on Andrew. Raising his sword, he cried, “Yee-haw!” and both blades met with a swift clang.

Andrew tried the swift eagle as quickly as his arms would allow. Brief second, Andrew almost thought he would land a strike, then swifter than his eyes could move, Zechariah sidestepped, spun, and nearly punctured the neck with the blunt of his sword. Andrew, too stunned to move, had to catch his breath.

“Remember, do not be limited to the blade alone.” Zechariah said in a calm voice.

Zechariah stepped back, giving Andrew space, which he bent over, holding himself up at the knees.

“That was way too close.” Andrew said between deep pants.

“No that was control. You shall discover in an array of a fight must not lose yourself to blinding chaos. This is more than smelting your skill, its forging keen instincts rooted in wisdom and not analogous to beasts. The ability to flow with your strikes, trusting the movements from every step to every breath.”

Andrew could feel the resonating conviction in Zechariah’s voice, but he could mainly only ponder what he had gotten himself into. So, that Sherbert arena was filled with echoing clangs and groans. Although Andrew grew very weary in his arms and legs (basically everywhere), he felt an itch of joy and excitement.

After an hour or more of learning his first basics in a duel, they continued their journey. The cool breeze that often brushed against his face with the slightest tickle of sand felt as though brushing away his previous anxiety. Andrew would speak about home to avoid the awkward silence, which Zechariah was rather curious about, even asking about its geography and governments. They would have intervals of stopping for the slightest sip of water and continuing this training with swordsmanship. Zechariah even began to teach Andrew further survival tips.

“Now you will want the right gear for any and all realms.” Zecheriah reached into his satchel and pulled out a pocket-size thermos, a black poncho, and a thumb size orb, “The basics come down to water purification, thermal canvas, gravi-scope, to name a very few. These will mean all the difference should you stand on razor between life and death on any gem or sovereign realm.”

“What do you mean gem or sovereign realm?”

“The realm you mentioned while riding, earth, where you had lodged, had different climates and ecosystems yes?”

“Well, yes, basically.”

“That is a sovereign realm. Said to be crafted by the hands of Elōhîm himself. Those realms are the genesis of distinct tribes of the Adamahzm, the second children.”

Andrew nodded his head, half understanding what Zecheriah said. “Okay. So, are we on a sovereign realm? I mean is that what, uh... Riph-Rram is, a sovereign realm?”

“Oh, not at all. This realm is gem.”

“So, are these gem planets, er realms like rare?”

“Actually no. Gem realms such as this telluric under our feet were once forged by the Arnîurm under Elōhîm’s guidance. In fact, it is the sovereign realms that are rare, and without simplicity to come by. Gem realms are far more dispersed across the stellar isles among the infinitive sea. Usually, such gems only pertain one or two major climates, a sole ecosystem, several moons to name a few unique oddities. Although, there is the standard threefold classification to the habitation for settlements upon such telluric orbs. The first category is barely suitable for wayfarers, has surface and water although too chemically unbalanced with atmosphere conditions impossible for agriculture. There are possibilities for dome assemblage or

severe terraformation, but that is ill-practiced and economically defective. The second category is more suitable as would require astral suit for only short periods and some the environment could be edible. The third category is an almost near quality to sovereign realm. Water is perfectly balanced with atmospheric condition suitable for respiration.”

“Cool!” Andrew couldn’t help but blurt out.

“Aye, perhaps,” Zecheriah gave a light nod then a sake, “but truly there is nothing compares to the wonder of sovereign realms. Despite whatever plunder undertaken by its tribe, there is an everlasting beauty. Surely it would take a lifetime to discover all such marvels to such a bequeath estate.”

Andrew thought to himself how he couldn’t fully agree with Zecheriah. Sure, earth had some of the most beautiful national parks and oceanic views he had always wanted to see, but Zecheriah’s description of the many gem planets and strange features awakened a desire in Andrew to explore them all. Surely, he thought nothing on that scale could compete with a few ol’ sceneries from earth.

### Chapter 9: From Anodized Dunes to Aerodromes

The following day was a continuation of their pace across the multitone dunes. Andrew continued his practice of dueling, in which Zechereiah had begun a habit of bruising Andrew. He further taught him navigation via wind, the sun, and even tracks of wildlife. Andrew was amused to learn that the reeds he had seen first stumbling alone through the dunes were, as Zechereiah demonstrated, hollow tubes reaching down to a cool spring of water. Andrew couldn't help but laugh at himself for the thought that he could have passed out from dehydration among numerous water sources. Even encountered his first predatory wildlife.

When getting a drink of water, Andrew noticed a vortex at the surface of the sand. There was not the slightest breeze, and any dust devils occurred at twilight, apparently. Andrew edged closer till he was only a foot from the edge of the twirling sand.

“GET BACK!” Zecheriah shouted just before the vortex burst, and out rose a screeching creature. Andrew fell down and crawled fast away from the horrid, winged beast that had definitely taken notice of Andrew. The creature was twice the size of an eagle with featherless wings and a long neck with a crooked ebony beak. Its talons were black that appeared more jagged scalpels. It made a shrieking squawk, then dived toward Andrew.

*BANG!*

The creature blew over to Andrew's side with its head missing. Andrew scrambled to his feet and realized Zecheriah standing in a fixed position with the slightest trail of smoke emanating from the barrel of his gun. He holstered his weapon, walked over to Andrew, and stared at the creature.

“Tis a primal predator of this realm, usually feeding on the rodents among the grains to the climbers of trees but will furiously attack if intruded upon. A good lesson to always be

mindful of your surroundings.” At that, Zecheriah carried the carcass over to their supplies. Andrew looked over the sand and spotted the head of the beast, which sent two realizations through his mind: Zecheriah was a deadly dead shot with multiple weapons, and that was what hunted the koala-mice he first saw.

That night Zecheriah cleaned and cooked the winged beast (which had the faintest taste to chicken) and regaled Andrew with folktales of celestial bodies taking physical form to defend mystical lands with striding mountains and flying oceans against beings of an abyss manifest. Andrew smiled and would lean closer to the fire listening intently, almost certain the flames would briefly take the shape of the figures in Zecheriah’s tale. Andrew was thrilled by Zecheriah’s stories but could see in his long pauses a tired expression as though, for a glimpse, he was in the midst of such conflict.

“I tell you these things not to love the sword, but what it defends. To hear of heroic deeds and exemplars.”

After Zecheriah’s regale and supper, both leaned against their Skynards. In the distance, the dust devils began to disperse into a single soothing gale. As Andrew drifted off to sleep, he could hear Zecheriah humming a tune. He could only catch a few verses, but it was such a deep-throated melody. Each resonation held such a power within the syllable Andrew believed it would be enough to captivate the most solemn heart’s desire to get up from whatever armrest or cubical, run to the door, and partake in the most daring of adventures. As best as Andrew could piece together, the song went something like this:

*Forward unto Dawn.  
We march afar, across star and dark.  
From shores of yore, through oceans’ deep;  
We stand in light against darkness’ deed.*

*Desert the land of birth and life,*

*In reckless chase for vengeance ease,  
Beyond the border between home and dream,  
Bar from home at dawn's first light.*

*Through sorrow tears and plea for hire,  
In covenant forged by grace of Father.  
He hammered and shaped the stars to armor,  
And charged in vow to safeguard all wayfarer.*

*The kings of ol' wrought mighty deeds,  
With swords of fire and shields of faith.  
They fashioned and forged great ships of yore,  
To sail among all jewels and golden orbs.*

*The shadows tread spread far and wide.  
By host of ore and blood they hide,  
By idol vice in shackles they ploy, with honey lies;  
To steal and kill the children of light.*

*A tempest sung in void full night,  
Inferno flares and bites in clash of life.  
The cries of bold echo from on high,  
To honor thy Father, and foe they defy.*

*Forward unto Dawn.  
In judgement age to bring them home,  
And return to bliss at evil's perish.  
By dawn's author the old restore.*

Andrew felt rather ashamed for his crude interpretation of the captivating melody; however, one particular phrase stuck in Andrew's head as the light of the flickering embers vanished. *Forward unto Dawn*, sounded like a cool simple motto for encouragement in the last stretch of a 100-yard dash.

Actually, that is what Andrew dreamt, reliving his 4th grade fifty-yard dash. Everything was the same from the track field behind the school, with weeds springing out of the cracks in the asphalt. The only difference was a much older kid running side by side with him. He wore general school shorts with a black cut undershirt, but his face was the same as that figure in dark

garments from his past dream, with the same older reflection and beaded hair. Andrew knew he wasn't there then, but he felt so familiar. He seemed so friendly with his grin between panting and finally spoke such warmth in his voice and fluency with each letter, "Keep running. I'm right here beside you. Always."

The dream began to shift. All the colors of the setting could not keep up with his pace. Suddenly, he was no longer running but soaring across literal roving hills and oceans whose waves would cast sprays of water up into the sky and never return to the sea. Then, a red flash and all was in crimson, black flame. Andrew could feel the vibrations of massive guns blasting in the distance turning the landscape into molten craters. He could not see any war machines, only feel the violent vibrations of giant shells zooming by and blasting cavities. Despite the destruction, the landscape never became wholly barren. As if fighting the inflicting ravage, the terrain continued to heal back over with an emerald valley, like a scar.

The third day the sun was casting a warm glow across the landscape that gave a hint of golden tint with long shadows opposite the rising hills. Riding to a ridge that overlooked the smoothest portion of landscape Andrew had yet seen in this world. In the distance, there looked to be something of a scar across the plain with gnats hovering around it.

"Tis Beta-Launch Port. Our transportation beyond this orb lies in storage. Given that the minuscule Obsidian patrol was present in the village, is well enough assumption there are swarms as such among the port. Discretion is of the utmost importance." Zechariah said while studying the landmark through his visor.

"Alright. I mean I'm not the one with armor on." Andrew replied more as a joke but sounded to his ear slightly sarcastic. Zechariah merely snorted and proceeded down into the widening magenta-gold expanse.

Soon Andrew noticed a portion of the ground that seemed to sink into the surface like a dried-out riverbed. Andrew even began to take notice of stones lining the edge of the break in the ground level, each a deep lime green too smooth to be algae but in contrast to the multi-shade of the landscape. Suddenly, Andrew heard something between a *baa*– and an *oink* come from up ahead. A caravan was approaching from the direction of the port with large wooden wagons of auburn and navy lumber pulled by massive creatures that, at Andrew’s first interpretation, looked something like a large pig with stocky legs and massive wide horns plucked off a water buffalo. Andrew and Zechariah had to take a wide arc around them to avoid the horns. Passing the wagons, Andrew noticed several of the traveling individuals to be men with ponchos and women with vests, some on top or in the wagons and others guiding the great beasts and leading another drove of what appeared to be exactly like goats and lambs. The only difference was that these had brighter coats of ginger and dark crimson. They let loose many *baas*, which made the dufugo (that’s what Zechariah informed were the larger horned creatures) snort a deep *oinkath*. After the caravan was a yard behind them, Andrew noticed another group of similar animals with different wagons coming up along the path.

Then he noticed the sound of humming and sputtering. Andrew looked to see a long dust trail kicked up by hoverbikes. Some headed in the direction of the port, others away, but Andrew was certain that he was getting among crowds of severely different strangers, which made him nervous and missing the last two days alone with the Ranger.

Andrew was so occupied with turning his head around to see different travelers coming and going that he neglected to notice the path began to sink further into the planet. Soon a wall had steadily risen on either side. Once the natural walls became high enough to obscure sunlight on the path, Andrew thought he could hear the distant rumbling noise of machinery over the

chaotic animals and people chattering. The path was now zigzagging into the descension of this canyon, which had to have been what the scar in the flatland was. The sound of machinery became a chorus of multiple mechanical buzzing and revving shaking pebbles among a symphony of voices from a crowd. Andrew kept side by side with Zecheriah.

Coming around a sharp corner, the path gave way to the massive interior of a great chasm. Andrew looked in awe at the collaboration between the natural structure and construction of its environment. Above, the sun was high enough to flood the entire interior with golden light. Waterfalls gushing forth from halfway up the walls, and at the bottom were strange granite water wheels that generated the electricity. All along the walls between the waterfalls, like honeycombs, were platforms and pocket holes for various spaceships lying dormant and taking off. At the bottom level where Andrew and Zecheriah stood, there were alleys of open tents and shacks that made Andrew reminisce about a beach snack bar. Even mounds of clay formed into stone domes and buildings scattered among the haven.

“Stop gawking.” Zecheriah leaned close to Andrew, “Try and act as if you seen this sort many a time. You must remain hard to discern among this lot.”

The two slid off their Skynards and walked between two alleys of tents as two Obsidians came around a corner of pavilions.

“We shall have to bid farewell to our Skynards, may their next master grant them care and mastery.” Zecheriah looked long into his steed’s eyes as he stroked the neck, “from there with caution proceed to the dock master to procure my vessel.”

With the rim of his hat obscuring his helmet and Andrew keeping his head down, the two led their Skynards among a bustling crowd of marketers and rushing travelers. A slight breeze

would occasionally bring the scent of misty falls among the crowd before being swallowed by the stench of musty sweat and feet.

Zecheriah came to a particular vendor with several stock animals in makeshift pens of thin wire and wide flagging ribbon. Coming close so only he and Zecheriah could hear one another over the crowd, Zecheriah motioned to the Skynards, and the vendor stroked his thin hairy chin and rubbed his smooth head. The man gestured between the Skynards and his livestock. Andrew could only guess he was haggling with the Ranger, although this would be the first time Andrew ever saw such bargaining. Quickly the vender and Zecheriah grasped each other by the wrist, and something of a tug of war, but they were actually, in Andrew's vernacular, shaking hands on a deal. The vender reached behind him to a pocket on his belt and produced a small sack that jingled. Zecheriah took the sack and handed his Skynard to the vender, Andrew did likewise.

Then swift as a fox on the scent, Zecheriah began hurrying along alleys of tents and buildings, with Andrew trying to keep up. After much sprinting between pavilions and squeezing between iridescent studios, avoiding patrols of Obsidians, Zecheriah arrived at a tower at the center of the chasm. The structure was less natural brick than the surrounding construction and more a rig three stories high with metal piping outlining a hexagon spire.

"I shall do all the talking. Speak nothing toward him, he can be... *cough* let's just be on with it." Zecheriah proceeded up the staircase that winded around the building.

Opening a door not so dissimilar to an office trailer door, he and Andrew quickly stepped inside a room too similar to a workplace. The same humming glow from the lights cast a bluish tint to the air, with mounds of envelopes and file cabinets lining the walls, with drafting tables with holographic images illuminating three dimension spaceships hovering above the surface in

amber glow. Across from one particular table was a pudgy man with a bald head and thick sideburns that came so far down it formed a beard. He wore a vest over a vest that, to Andrew's relief, covered his upper torso and a long dark toga. If he seemed annoyed by the intrusion of strangers, it was but for a moment as he became wide-eyed at the sight of the Ranger.

"Ranger!" He exclaimed, grasping his chest with both hands, "Yeesh, a heart attack you nearly gave me. Unless your goal that was." All his attention was focused on Zechariah, which was fine with Andrew, who giggled at his speech.

"Hello Puckle." Zechariah replied, his voice sounding deeper than before, "I have returned for my vessel. Do kindly restore it to me, I will make with the storage fees, and be off discreetly."

"Your ship, oh yes. Such an enigmatic can, with the wings' flexation, compartmental rotation, payment vended, ordnance defensive—"

"Payment vended?!"

"Uh, yes, about that, another arrived who bore credentials for half majority of lease, made full on payment, and, uh, the vessel which no longer required my complete studios observation—"

Zechariah jumped over the table, grabbed Puckle by the collar, and gave him quick thrash.

"You sold MY ship!"

"Payments... missing... gone you were... communication unable... other with legitimate credentials."

"Ah, very well. This procurer where do I find this figure?"

"Here still. Yond rotary nine the hanger is. A lass sizzling figure she is."

At that, Zechariah leaned away from Puckle, "This lass have a name?"

“Yes. For you she explicitly left identification. Recall it was I think, Xosha... Xachti... Xochtel.”

“Xochitl?”

“Yes the one that is, Xochitl. Interest in the vessel and you she was.”

Zecheriah let go of Puckle, who staggered back, nearly falling over a stack of folders. Zecheriah paused, but Andrew could hear deep breaths like he had been sucker punched. Regaining himself, Zecheriah tossed the pouch of money to Puckle, “Payment in full of storage and silence. Speak nothing of this or our departure. Remember who I am and whom I serve.”

Keeping his eyes on Zecheriah, Puckle knelt and cautiously picked up the pouch, “Of course, course... Auroran Ranger.”

Zecheriah motioned for Andrew to leave. Before stepping out, Zecheriah spoke, “May the wind be at your back, and the sun always shine upon your face, dock master.”

## Chapter 10: A Warm Welcome, A Cold Snare

At the bottom of the stairs, Zecheriah was again moving swiftly between markets of travelers, with an occasional patrol of Obsidians, which everyone just lowered their head and turned their backs to them, not wanting trouble. Coming to a waterfall whose cool mist sprayed against Andrew's face in blue and indigo droplets. The rushing water and creaking machinery made Andrew nearly yell to Zecheriah, "SO, WHO'S XOCHITL?"

Even over the tearing noise, Andrew could hear a deep sigh from Zecheriah. Leaning against the side of the wall to the waterfall's catch basin, Zecheriah adjusted his hat or fiddled with it before replying, "YOU'LL FIND OUT SOON ENOUGH! Or too soon."

Andrew could barely make out that last part before Zecheriah was off again, with Andrew trailing behind him. Soon they came to a portion of the chasm wider from top to bottom, where it smelled of grease over the sweaty crowd. Zecheriah stopped just in front of a massive inlet cut deep inside the wall with cranes hanging from the ceiling and several floodlights along the roof and the top four corners.

In the center of this hangar was a spectacular spaceship Andrew could only compare an eccentric imagination. At first impression, the ship or astral vessel looked like an enormous bronze doughnut with a sharp scarlet outer edge. Andrew noticed a cab or compartment with half the exterior facing the ship made of glass, presumably the cockpit, and the other half geometrically smooth with sapphire striping along the edges. Finally noticing a shadow over the portion, Andrew realized it had wings, with one suspended by wires hanging from a crane, while other wings appeared to float near the vessel.

Pop-pop! Sizzle! Pop-pop! Andrew looked up to the flashing lights of welding by an actual robot, although it looked too familiar to an MIT robot with a hand, arm, and base, which left Andrew feeling unimpressed.

“NX get that patch sealed. I’m not having leakage force me to louse depot for vackle fluid. Honestly, how can one so sheer take such horrendous condition his...”

Andrew thought it was the robot, but a slender figure instantly stood up and peered at Andrew and Zecheriah. Whoever it was quickly dropped whatever tools, slid down the vessel’s side, and came face to helmet with Zecheriah. Andrew’s mouth began to droop at the sight of the woman. She was a woman but not anything like Andrew had yet seen. She had ruby skin that captured and provided a shine. Her hair was a wild sway, for it actually looked as if some fibers were in sway from a breeze even though there was no wind at that moment in the chasm, with a rich lavender hue with silver strands like rivers among a moonlit night. There was a single braid by her left ear, and her eyes were a bright lime green with glossy rosy lips, and what made her seem really alien, in Andrew’s opinion, was a strange single blonde stripe going across her face from her right eye across her nose down to her left cheek. The clothes had spots of grease, but she mainly wore a tight dijon tank top with grey, blue pants with big pockets near the waist but got tighter further down her legs while wearing long cuffed cavalier boots.

She looked Andrew up and down, sizing him up, before turning her full attention towards Zecheriah. She gave a sly smile, then strutted over to Zecheriah, coming less than a foot away. For some reason, Andrew felt uncomfortable standing near them.

“Hello Xochitl.”

“Ah hello Zechia.” She replied, instantly striking Zechariah in the head with the blunt portion of her fist. Zechariah didn’t exactly stagger, but he had to adjust his helmet. Xochitl merely caressed her fist but showed no sign of physical pain.

“I suppose, by some degree, I deserved that.”

“After so long and what we shared yes you did deserve that and so much more.” Xochitl remarked.

“I am deeply sorry but I must have this spat with you later.”

“Why? Is it about him,” Xochitl nodded in Andrew’s direction, “is he yours?”

“Wow, WHAT?” Andrew felt very red in the face and extremely awkward.

“That was meant as a complement darling.” She gave Andrew a wink.

“Enough! He is my ward and in my charge. I must get him to the Crusader Corp immediately. Now I shall be taking my ship—”

“Aha, my ship as the majority credentials are in my title, along with payment and maintenance.” She replied with a sly smile again.

“Xochitl we don’t have time for this.” Zechariah’s voice grew deeper with frustration.

“Then let me finish the sealing these breaches, otherwise there is the transport via public network.”

“Lady please,” Andrew blurted out, growing anxious by the direction this was going, “I don’t know what your history with Zechariah or Zechia or whatever, but this my first time in space, and so far, people have tried to kill me, I’ve had to watch a friend die, and I’m stranded in this rainbow wasteland. All I am asking for is a little help to get to one person who can explain why this is all happening. Please, please help us.”

Xochitl folded her arms and looked down at her feet, pondering his words. Finally, “Well, I still have to finish sealing breach; otherwise, we won’t be able to breach the atmo. I just need a moment alright darling.”

“Thank you.” Andrew said through a deep breath.

“What could help is if you two went and procured an extra carbadunion rod.”

“The Obsidian patrols most likely will be on watch for anyone with my uniform.”

Zecheriah tapped his chest plate.

“Well then, fire-pistol, you better be extra careful.” Xochitl smiled then, spun around on her heels, and hurried back over to the vessel.

“Fire-pistol?”

“Don’t, just don’t.” Zecheriah rubbed his visor like he seemed tired from a full day’s work. “Alright, I shall acquire this item. You stay here.”

“I can help. I’ve managed to stay by your side without drawing attention.”

Zecheriah squared his shoulders and looked into Andrew’s eyes, “I will not risk any more than need be. Besides you know not what a carbadunion rod is. I will return quickly and momentarily.”

So Zecheriah sprinted off, disappearing behind stacks of crates and black marquees. Andrew paced there at the threshold of the hangar, wondering if he should ask Xochitl if she needed help, but felt uncomfortable being near her alone.

Suddenly he felt a tingle by his ear like a gnat buzzing. Andrew tried to flick it away, but it became less of an irritation and more of the softest whisper or melody that might be carried across the wind. He couldn’t explain it, but the whisper seemed so entrancing Andrew was confident he could hear the direction in which it originated.

As in a daze, he was following the tune that continued with the same sweet pitch, but deep down, Andrew felt it had an underlying sinister tone. Yet, curiosity and the allure had gotten the better of him, so he traveled further into the recess of the cavern, where fewer open tents stood, and more pavilions were sprawled out in random patterns. Finally, he came to an entrance of a deep violet cone tent. Andrew chuckled nervously, for a thought popped into his mind that it looked like an enormous witch's hat.

For a moment, Andrew had the sense to hurry back to the hangar, but he thought *after all the danger I had endured thus far: a mad gunman, an alien wasteland, escaping a barroom brawl, and surviving a winged predator, now I would let something minutely new as a tent scare me off?* The flaps were open, clearly welcoming anyone inside. With a deep breath, Andrew stepped inside, proud of his commitment. There were several candles as the only source of light. Even the light from the entrance didn't seem to offer much illumination. Around him were tapestries on altars and pennants that seemed suspended from wires. The embroidery looked something reminiscent of Greek mythology with strange humanoid beasts with snakes for appendages and hooved limbs, along with titanic forms in the clouds and rising from the crevasse in the ground.

"Please join." A sweet voice broke the silence.

Andrew stepped further inside, coming to a veil with crimson beads and olive emblems. Pushing the veil aside, there was a round marble table that looked as if it had caught a lightning storm in its minerals. On top of the table rested a glowing jade sphere. Andrew felt very uncomfortable in this room, chilly actually, even had the strangest notion that the sides of the tent almost appeared to be heaving in and out to a steady heartbeat rhythm.

“Come. Do not be so easily turned away.” The voice emanated from the opposite end of the table. Andrew’s eyes finally adjusted to see a woman wearing a very dark green and violet crimson garment. “You seek the aid of Jēzēbul?”

“I – I just heard a tune, or something, and followed it here.”

“So you do seek Jēzēbul’s aid. Then allow Jēzēbul to elucidate you by freeing your wishes, your needs, your heart’s desires.”

Andrew was hesitant, especially after hearing this woman refer to herself in the third person. However, the chill now made his legs quiver and felt like cold fingers moving across his shoulder, pushing him into the chair at the table.

“All is revealed to Jēzēbul and thus unto you. Demonstration,” she laid the tips of her fingers on the sphere. It began to make a soft unearthly ringing like a moist finger rubbing a glass rim within Andrew’s head, “you are from another realm but knows nothing of this realm. You bear a heavy burden unlike any man. Unable to bring any might to the task at hand. Thus, seek the essence of the one who died by your hand.”

Suddenly, her eyes rolled back, and her mouth opened wider as a grotesque black hole. “Why,” Jēzēbul’s voice was no longer her own, but the sound of Ofar, “did you let me die, why are you intent to bring anguish to us all?”

Andrew wanted to scream in terror, he wanted to jump up and run away, but he felt frozen in place with him, gasping for breath as if he was treading water. The ringing had amplified in pitch, now it felt as if a drill was against his forehead, yet all he could do was sputter, “stop.”

“Why?” her voice echoing the resonance of Ofar, “Allow us to guide you. To comfort you. Open the door.” Now it sounded as if multiple people were speaking in unison.

Suddenly, a thought pierced Andrew's memory. Although he had known Ofer only a short time, he recalled Ofer's tone at the spring, the peace he was at, and the kind melody in his words. The more Andrew recalled that memory, the more he contrasted it with this voice Jēzēbul spoke as if it was nothing more than a thief over a phone committing identity theft. Instantly, a fiery anger seeped all across Andrew's veins until he jumped up, feeling like breaking free of an iceberg, and shouted, "STOP THIS NOW!"

Instantaneously, the sphere began to smolder, and Jēzēbul clutched her head writhing in pain. With a mixture of multiple tones, her voice cried, "The Helper is about him. Aha! Send him away. Send him away! He burns us!"

Andrew couldn't understand, but the longer he remained in that room, the warmer it became and brighter, revealing the wrinkled fabric to the canvas. Actually, whatever strange force was the cause frightened Andrew even more so than the paralyzing chill he had only experienced a second ago.

*BOOM!*

The crystal ball exploded in a cloud of lime dust and melting glass. Andrew sprinted back out the way he came with his hand over his heart, making sure it was still beating. Suddenly he heard a pistol being shot from the direction where the vessel was docked. Still feeling that fire coursing through him, Andrew hurried over to the skirmish.

## Chapter 11: Halo Fury's Getaway

Dashing around a stack of crates, Andrew found himself staring at a miniature war with blue and green lightning bolts hurtling around Ranger and a group of darkly clad warriors. In the open, Ranger grasped a maroon shaft with his left hand and shot with his right hand with such steady accuracy while numerous Obsidians in their dark armor and helmets with scarlet glyphs shot back while attempting to encircle the hanger door. Several Obsidians lay dead across the paved stone chasm.

Still, none of the comrades took any notice, they only kept attempting to shoot the Ranger, but Zecheriah gracefully dodged the rounds. If the Obsidians even hit him, his armor repelled the impact. Quickly two to three troopers produced a briefcase object that instantly expanded into a mauve size door that deflected Ranger's energy shots. Spinning his pistol like a gunslinger, Andrew could see some type of clicking that changed the configuration of the Ranger's sleek revolver to fire kinetic shots, which had more effect against the Obsidians' shields.

All were far too preoccupied to even notice Andrew running unto the scene, but Andrew noticed a particular Obsidian who somehow managed to come up from behind. With his rifle shouldered, he drew out a baton that sprouted diamond spikes on end. The thought of Ofer still on his mind, swirling with boiling rage, Andrew let loose a great war cry and charged forward.

Whether intentionally or not, his armor had formed around him with his wings of light and Excelsior blazing bright. The Obsidians near him who managed to turn in time were blinded by the sword's radiance and instantly struck down with a great swing that cut through them. Quickly with one leap, Andrew glided across the firefight, nearly hitting his head against the ship, and landed by the Obsidian with the jagged diamond mace. Bringing his sword down, the

Obsidian managed to catch it with the teeth of his mace. That surprised Andrew long enough for the enemy to knock the sword out of the lock and bring his weapon down on Andrew.

Thankfully, Andrew had the swifter weapon and managed to swing all the way around, slashing his opponent across the chest.

The Obsidian staggered back, but the gash made by the sword grew brighter and brighter until a miniature ball of bluish-white infernal consumed the chest. Then, *swish*, the fire was gone leaving two halves of the foe cauterized and nearly his entire middle portion in ash. Andrew never realized that was the full effect of his sword and looked back at the others Obsidians he cut to see the same result of cauterization and ash.

“Let’s go!” Zecheriah grabbed Andrew by the shoulder armor and almost had to drag Andrew toward the ship. Both sprinted toward the vessel as the Obsidians began shooting again, no longer in shock from Andrew’s stunt.

“I told you to stay with the vessel!” Zecheriah barked to Andrew.

“Can we talk about this (gasp) later?” Andrew cried back, the armor now feeling heavier and heavier. *Whizz!* An emerald bolt of energy zoomed past Andrew’s head, giving him renewal of strength in his legs. Finally, they reached a spiral staircase at the base underneath the cockpit. Racing up the steps, Andrew got a glimpse back, realizing with alarm twice as many Obsidians converging on their location. Once both were inside, Zecheriah hit a switch that retracted the stairs and raised up a corridor.

“Xochitl get us out of here now!” Zecheriah yelled down the passage as he ran, with Andrew not far behind, his armor still weighing him down and making echoing clinking with each step. Coming up a ramp, Andrew found himself in the cockpit so much larger than the previous ship. Nearly the entire portion was made of sturdy glass, even part of the floor, with

panels of buttons and touch screens. Two chairs with an armrest that had holographic images along the armrest swiveled around the floor in a wide arc, with a third chair extended further out in the center of the glass with instruments similar to throttle and joystick hovering over a panel was where Xochitl sat furiously flipping switches and tapping icons.

“Well, you still know how to introduce a good time to a girl. And welcome aboard the Halo Fury.” She replied over her shoulder when she twisted the throttle that, sent a *RRUEEEVVVVVV* reverberating throughout the ship. Suddenly, the ground began tilting quickly all around Andrew, almost losing his balance. Steadying himself against a chair, he looked out to see a crowd in noir armor surrounding the ship aiming at the vessel, and one in particular shoulder something like a RPG.

“Go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go!” Andrew shouted.

Instantly, with a hard jerk to the left, the vessel was outside the hangar, within the open chasm, propelling away stacked crates, blowing down pavilions, and knocking down the Obsidian death squad.

“Lets blast.” Xochitl yelled back, then a sudden jerk, the vessel was vertical with the top of the gorge, and *SWOOSH* they were flying faster and faster until *BOOM* they escaped beyond the crevice of the canyon. Andrew recalled the strange experience last time of two forces acting against one another, the feeling of gravity from the realm wanting to yank him back down to the surface and the artificial gravity from the vessel that created the impression the ship’s floor was a level surface all on its own. It caused a stomach cramp both times.

In seconds they breached the atmosphere and were welcomed by a multitude of crystal stars, and a colossal skull.

“You must be deep on the Obsidian’s scope for them to take this much interest you. Hang tight we’re gonna have to thread the needle on this one.”

“You! Against those batteries?” Zechariah said, grasping tight to Xochitl’s headrest.

“It’ll be just like Arsion-Crec.”

Next second, Xochitl pulled back on the levers, and the ship zoomed toward the menacing sight right as soon as a rainstorm of ivory firepower pelted all around the vessel. Andrew had the vaguest recollection of a BBC showtime physics episode and believed for sure if not for the artificial gravity, he would’ve died from all the intense maneuvering. Able to observe more than 180° degrees out the windows, Andrew realized the wings didn’t just hang by the sideline. They could move about with the faintest use of electrostatic coming off the base as they did so. This gave the ship odd configurations at times and placed a pocket of thrust, allowing them to skirt and slide in the most astonishing and, in Andrew’s opinion, impossible movements.

Xochitl primarily flew straight at the massive vessel, which, coming into focus, could see the uniform design of exterior strata and sharp fins. The body of the titanic vehicle having a more bulky vertical design was the deepest purple Andrew had ever seen, nearly blended with the black abyss, if not for massive scarlet and gilded striping all throughout the hull with glyphs in seemingly random order. The cannons were a spectacle of violent fireworks producing a stream of ivory explosions all around Andrew’s field of vision, with even one or two emerald beams instantly rocketing toward their minuscule ship. To Andrew’s astonishment, Xochitl really did fly nearly parallel along the surface of the massive vessel, which aided their escape as the cannons could not apparently angle far enough to accurately shoot them.

Finally, coming along the edge of the ship, they flew near a great glowing portion of the Obsidian’s vessel that sent a violent vibration throughout their ship’s structure.

“Just blew past a primary thruster. That never gets old.” Xochitl commented with a grin.

“Well isn’t this donut fast enough to outrun them?” Andrew still trembling after the intense storm of shelling and near incineration.

“Watch your mouth and your eyes. Get ready to take in the meaning of speed.” At that, she flipped a red switch, and just like he remembered, all the light outside became thinner or collapsed into a single endless strand of a spectrum; instantly, they were among such silent sleek lights like in-between the threads of a tapestry. Andrew let out a deep sigh of relief and sat down in the chair. Only then realizing he was no longer in his armor.

“So, I can only get navigation for a short stretch into this stellar current. Still need a destination.”

“We must go to Unnahr.” Zecheriah said with ease of tension in his voice, “From there we should get Andrew an escort to the Esteem Luminanem.”

“Unnahr, the major Crusader garrison closest out here on the frontier? Seriously who is this kid?” Xochitl turned to Andrew with a twisted face.

“Show her the medallion.” Zecheriah motioned with his head.

Andrew pulled out the medallion that still always turned up in his pocket and continued to softly glow. He showed one side with the star and three rings, then flipped it revealing the lion with the fiery mane. Xochitl instantly gaped at the image and shook her head.

“I- I- I don’t understand.” She turned to Zecheriah, “Is he Amnon?”

“It’s Andrew actually.” Andrew spoke under his breath, not wanting to be heard but saying it more for his comfort. Still had no idea why people immediately assumed his name was Amnon. Maybe a close translation or even pronunciation between Andrew and Amnon.

“I must make a communicato to a friend of mine. He held the rank of Captain, and last I was aware, he was set to be stationed among the frontier. Hopefully, he will be with acceptable distance and vouch for us.” Zecheriah turned around to the consult and began flicking switches and constructs made of amber light took shape, which he began typing like a keypad.

Xochitl turned back to Andrew and, regaining her composure, smiled very sweetly, “So, you really are this Prime Tetrarch? The oh-so-long-awaited king?”

Andrew looked left and right, trying to find the words or an explanation. All he could reply, a phrase which he hated to use, was, “I don’t know.” Andrew looked down at his feet, shaking his head. “Honestly, this all just so beyond belief that I’m not sure anything. But, I want to believe in whatever this is, whatever is happening. I really want to.” Andrew looked back to Xochitl, who still smiled, although she seemed more sympathetic and caring.

“I guess that’s all any of us can strive for.”

Andrew nodded and turned his head to the light show outside. He now thought it looked something of countless strands of lightning bouncing all across the field of view but never able to strike the ship or simply chose not to strike.

Xochitl, still observing Andrew, could see his fascination in his relaxed eyes and calm smile. “First time voyage across celestial current?”

“No... second. The first time ended with a vessel crash.”

“Don’t worry promise won’t end like that on this vessel, not with this pilot.” She gave Andrew a wink, which he tried to chuckle away but could feel his face getting slightly red. “You do any flying back wherever come from?”

“Sort of, flew a little biplane, but never anything this sophisticated.”

“Oh don’t stow your saddle just yet. May get a chance very soon.”

“Perhaps,” Zecheriah finally turned around as all the lights and constructs he was working with disappeared, “I managed to get through to him. The garrison shall be expecting arrival. Now that is done away with, I will be in my chambers.”

“You mean my chambers. My vessel after all.”

Zecheriah only retorted with a long deep grunt as he walked out of sight.

“Hey can I ask you something?”

“Seems like you can.”

“Even out here everyone’s still uptight about that. No, I meant, uh... is there any history between you and Zecheriah, that might get us into trouble?”

Xochitl’s hands paused, and she closed her eyes, nodding to herself. She slowly got out of her seat, looked Andrew in the eye, and proceeded to a different monitor.

With a deep sigh, “Oh, well, we were close, very close. Even from across the gulf, we seemed intertwined. But then he... maybe I... listen for right now he is someone of utmost special to me. And I do hope in some even small manner I am to him. Besides, you and I only just met, though I admire your boldness.” She looked over her shoulder with an eyebrow raised.

“No, no, I–I didn’t to imply–” Andrew quickly tried explaining just as Xochitl began laughing.

“Oh you truly are adorable, don’t worry that’s a good quality to have. And I dare say dashing. I do believe you will fill the role of knight quite well.”

Now Andrew felt completely red in the face and tried to avert his gaze from her attempting to hide a shy smile. He tried not to admit to himself how striking she continued to appear, mostly because that seemed inappropriate or other reason he could neither decide nor

understand. All he wanted to do at that exact moment was not be in the same room with Xochitl for a while.

## Chapter 12: The Realm Beyond Realms

Later Andrew had the chance to explore the interior of the Halo Fury and once again found himself thinking he had stepped onto a Hollywood set. The ship consisted of two central portions (as Xochitl labeled them) the disc and the head. The head comprised the cockpit and several chambers, including the master quarters, cauldron reactor, primary thrust distributor, core converter, and other main mechanical junctions.

The rest of the ship, that is the disc, had an appeal like an open space apartment. The room would be a nearly singular large open corridor with couches, tables, even a bar. In some places, the translucent paneling made a segment appear as though one was standing in the heart of space while the vibrant threads of light silently soared across space. Andrew even discovered a room or two designed as some type of pantry and dorm with enough room for a single bed and a rotating azure tube that acted as a shower and restroom as on the first ship. All the passages, no matter what portion, were an octagon structure, but with the diagonal sides bowed inward, appearing more of a cross tunnel.

At first, he noticed a soft ghostly glow emanating from the verticals of the passage, but Andrew realized the main light source came from minuscule floating orbs the size of a grass seed. These orbs mainly floated near the ceiling or walls, whereas those hung in the path would be repulsed if a person got a foot within reach. Each had a different tone you could only notice if you looked directly at it, but from a distance, it all blended to form a transparent radiance that brought out the clarity in all objects and surfaces. It was only when Andrew was shown his chambers, or bedroom, that he realized the lights worked on a type of dimmer for each room, and it was the dimming of the ghostly light emanating from the vertical walls that controlled the illumination from the orbs.

Even after learning of such an amazing design of this ship and the excitement of escaping custody of sorts, Andrew was extremely tired. He desperately wanted to go to sleep, and the deepest part of him hoped he would awaken back on earth with the most spectacular dream to tell. As it happened, he would have a spectacular dream to tell, just not back on earth.

Slowly drifting from that grey-blue chamber, Andrew felt he was sinking further into that soft mattress. As the world became darker, he drifted further down until he felt he had come up like a sprouted plant back into the misty plain he had arrived many times before from previous dreams. Andrew looked all around, expecting to find the stranger with the dark robe who bore an uncanny resemblance. Instead, he was shocked to see a different figure.

A clean-shaven man with intensely bright auburn hair, with actual twinkling eyes wearing the same white tunic he had worn a little over a year ago.

“Gabriel?”

The figure nodded, pleased not that Andrew remembered his name but just to see him again.

“It is wonderful that you accepted the commission.”

“Yeah, and I thought meeting you was a surprise. Wait,” Andrew looked around the mist wildly, “are we back on the firmament? Is this where I’ve been returning to, in my dreams?”

“Yes this is where you have come to, but no dear boy, it is not the firmament. This is I suppose what you might consider, on the other side of the firmament.”

“Huh?”

Then Gabriel spun in a slow circle, softly blowing in every direction. Instantly as if struck by a massive gust from a hurricane, the mist receded back, rolling over itself like wrapping paper

being re-rolled. Finally, the landscape could be seen for what it really was, and Andrew could only describe it as the purest definition to breathtaking.

He could see that it was a prairie with the richest of grass that didn't have the faintest sign of a weed or bare patch. The field seemed a unanimous height, but he had the impression it never had been cut. The grass seemed to grow at the perfect length. Beyond the grass, depending on the direction, Andrew could see groves of trees forming the frontline to a forest with the brightest leaves in an autumn gallery, and beyond that, mountains that rose so sharp and high the pinnacles looked more of a creamy dagger. In different directions, there was a distant natural wonder that didn't seem natural, at least not in Andrew's lifetime.

Yet the most awestruck was the sky. Everything looked as though it was basking under an unobscured warm sun, but there was no sun. In fact, there was no blue sky, only space. Andrew could see such stars and nebulas with such clarity he had not seen since and only once before at the firmament. Andrew had to look away, for the longer he stared directly up, the more numerous the stars became. The more celestial radiance came into focus, that void almost seemed as though it would be filled.

"This is... This is a dream isn't it? It has to be, or... it can't be?"

"Here is where one can arrive via dream, or meditation for meeting of communion."

"Like a higher-level plain of existence."

"Yes, but absolutely not as you imply it. Here is where messages of many sorts are delivered, searched, and must be patient before such news. Where the wanderer who is lost among your realm is found, and the so haughty highbrows lieges are cast down by infinite wonder. Whence all luminanem, prophets, and seers are bestowed intervention from the Sovereign Patriarch, and those of the saying of sooth along with incarnations of mediums and

other such alchemic channeling intercept tainted truths by His recalcitrant children. It is but the path they walk that they so choose whom such reports will be imparted from. That is why I am here, to deliver the Patriarch's message."

"Alright. So, I will speak with you from now on, when there's a message?"

"Oh no. Although distance and travel are not that of your march, my charge is your birth realm. I am pleased that I was given the opportunity to see you once more and await with excitement for your journey beyond. From here forward requires eyes open and ears attune to His voice. I will confirm that a Knight of the Auroran Templar must be instructed by his fellow brethren, one who walks with the Mandate engraved upon his heart. You have discovered him, the Auroran Ranger. He is your Chief Principal as you are a novice under his mold. The Esteem Luminanem does have revelation and teachings between you and him alone, but I am certain the Ranger is your foremost Chief. Now for the latter message."

Gabriel looked straight into the vast expanse of dazzling constellations, and Andrew followed his gaze. Suddenly, as if by the stroke of a brush, all the stars, nebulas, clouds, and other celestial bodies rearranged to form a crystal image of a herd of bronze stallions grazing leisurely in a field above them where the sun should have been an object as close as the moon but looking something comparable to an hourglass. Then rising from the dirt, a group of spinally thorned serpents attacked, biting at the stallions. Many instantly went limp, thundering into the ground, while some bucked and kicked, trying to stomp the thorny snakes while others galloped away. Suddenly one serpent larger and more razor than the rest came into focus. Wherever it slithered, a stallion would keel over dead without a chance to defend itself. Then like a firecracker, a younger stallion, not as tall as the others but adorned in shimmering sapphire mane and bronze coat, jumped into the fray and attacked the larger serpent and others, allowing more

stallions to escape. Instantly, the scene was gone. All the stars were back as they had been, as though never moving out of place.

Andrew looked around, taking in his breath, not realizing he had nearly held it with ecstasy. After controlling his breathing, Andrew looked back to Gabriel, “What was that?” He came off louder than he meant, but Gabriel didn’t seem to take offense.

“A premonition I’m sure.”

“What? You don’t know? What does it mean? Is someone going to die? Or people? Does this have to do with reaching that Esteem Lumina- person? What about—”

“Son please,” Gabriel stopped Andrew and placed his hand on top of his shoulder, “As a saying you may have heard, ‘I am only a messenger,’ and honestly I do not know what to make of it or to what ends it shall lead. Those things are of the Sovereign Patriarch and Him alone, we do not know, nor shall I lie about the unfolding of your story or that of others. All I can and will say is don’t take such lightly nor allow it to spoil other wonderous bounties.” Gabriel patted Andrew on the back. Andrew felt somewhat at ease, especially when a warm breeze swept over his shoulders and tickled his ears. Then it occurred to Andrew that other than when Gabriel blew the mist away, there hadn’t been the slightest gust of wind in this place. Looking at Gabriel, who appeared looking off the distance with a deep smile that seemed sad and overjoyed.

“The Captain of the Arnûrm calls me back to my post.”

“The Captain?”

“Yes, He is the Captain and just as such the Mediator for all Adamahzm. As you bear the wings of the Arnûrm, He is very much your Captain too. Please, always hold to that, for He is the one who shalt never fail. Farewell, Andraus.” Gabriel hugged Andrew before he could ask any more questions. Then he began walking away toward a portion of the meadow that stretched

on without the slightest sight of forest or mountains. For a moment, Andrew thought he could see the speck of a figure at the very edge of his vision Gabriel was walking toward. Then in a blink of an eye, Gabriel was gone, and Andrew was left alone in that rich silent expanse.

### **Annotated Biography**

Ball, Steven. "A Christian Physicist Examines the Big Bang Theory." *A Christian Physicist*

*Examines the Big Bang Theory - Letourneau University*, Sept. 2003,

<https://www.letu.edu/academics/arts-and-sciences/files/big-bang.pdf>.

In *A Christian Physicist Examines the Big Bang Theory*, the author provides systematic research contrasting the theory of the Big Bang to the Creation theory. There is evidence that agnostic scientists agree to a perpetual start to the universe. Along with evidence disproving the Big Bang and facts verifying the legitimacy of scripture's resourcefulness to the origin of the universe.

"Big Bang Theory." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster,

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/big%20bang%20theory>.

A simple straightforward definition of the astronomical theory its placement in time and its briefest description of how the universe came to be.

Cahn, Jonathan. *The Return of the Gods*. Frontline, 2022.

The book is very introspective to the nature of demonic spirits including specific manifestations and effects on cultures. The author has a narrow focus on three in particular, Baal, Ishtar, and Molech who are referenced as the dark trinity. The outline references Israel's rebellion against the Lord thru homage to the dark trinity, with an examination into customs and downfall as the ultimate consequence. Even examines America's sway by these demonic entities via new practices.

Carpenter, Humphrey. *JRR Tolkien: A Biography*. London : Allen and Unwin, 1977, p. 151.

A bookish database providing a scholarly list of Tolkien's famous and profound speech marks across his career. Several that concern with is devotion toward any of his writing focusses and his personal walk with God.

Chakraborty, Sanjukta. "Imagination is the Power of Myth, the Rest is Painted with a Touch of Science Fiction: A Study of Mythology and Science Fiction." *Comparative Literature : East & West*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2022, pp. 130-138. *ProQuest*, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/liberty.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/imagination-is-power-myth-rest-painted-with-touch/docview/2761800476/se-2,doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2022.2106663>.

The article *Imagination is the Power of Myth, the Rest is Painted with a Touch of Science Fiction: A Study of Mythology and Science Fiction* draws a linear comparison between science fiction in recent years to that of ancient mythology. An agreement is that the genera of old and present convey perception toward exhilarating concepts of existence. The author includes other novelists as examples who utilized mythology, or specific features, in their scripts to further a deep message or formulate a fun analogy.

Davidson, Markus Altena. "Fiction and Religion: How Narratives about the Supernatural Inspire Religious Belief – Introducing the Thematic Issue." *Religion*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2016, pp. 489–499., <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721x.2016.1226756>.

The article argues for the benefit of embracing supernatural qualities in the plot of modern novels to support religion. Examples range from books to television that incorporated spiritual practices into the series which some intense fans practiced in reality. Any such validation comes about when the novelist constructs their supernatural

venue via anchored to reality can any truth to divine intervention come across as wholesome.

Geraci, Robert M. "There and Back Again: Transhumanist Evangelism in Science Fiction and Popular Science." *Implicit Religion*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1558/imre.v14i2.141>.

The article *There and Back Again: Transhumanist Evangelism in Science Fiction and Popular Science* has little to no analogy with *The Hobbit* and all more with transhumanism, technology being path to immortality. The author stipulates that any religion is an aid to understanding humanity but ultimately science fiction has become a type of religion for promoting this laic movement. The article outlines a continuation of how science fiction first promoted the concept of transhumanist and recent fictional authors progressed similar ideology.

Gregory, Alan P. R.. *Science Fiction Theology: Beauty and the Transformation of the Sublime*, Baylor University Press, 2015. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=2075481>.

The book *Science Fiction Theology: Beauty and the Transformation of the Sublime* is straightforward with its purpose and subject, sublime. The text offers crystal explanation to a assortment of creative and sentimental outcomes to the immensity potential, horrendous, daunting, even dizzying, to that which tensions imagination and bewilders reason. With further discourse into cultures' effect and influence concerning sublimity and its connotation with materialistic products.

Higgins, Sørina. "C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier: Science and the Supernatural in the Space Trilogy." *Sehnsucht: The C.S. Lewis Journal*, vol. 3, 2009, pp. 101-110.

This journal entry is a review essay over the narration *C.S. Lewis on the Final Frontier*. The composition covers critical analysis imparted from professors and such who review modules that parallel and contrast with Lewis's process for utilizing scientific hypotheses. The basis for much referral is Lewis's own Space Trilogy and his ideas cohesion between Christian culture and political matters during his time.

Lewis, Clive Staples. *Prince Caspian*. Simon & Schuster Books For Young Readers, 1951.

The fourth book in the "Chronicles of Narnia" series by novelist and evangelist C.S. Lewis. The plot focuses on the Pevensies siblings' sudden return to the land of Narnia to discover the heir, prince Caspian, attempting to restore the wonderful and magical native Narnians oppressed by Caspian's uncle Miraz. The Pevensies must navigate a land they once ruled long ago to aid the Prince. All the while, Aslan helps in mysterious ways.

Lewis, C. S., and Walter Hooper. *On Stories, and Other Essays on Literature*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1982.

A collection by C.S. Lewis of nine stories as well as eleven scripts previously unpublished. Within these essays he examines several works by his closest peers, a famous example J.R.R. Tolkien, critiques such pieces in parallel with his philosophical interpretation concerning fiction. Along with providing discussion regarding the mastery and application fiction contributes in the development of youth.

María Del Rincón Yohn. "J.R.R. Tolkien's Sub-Creation Theory: Literary Creativity as Participation in the Divine Creation." *Church, Communication and Culture*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2021, pp. 17-33.

This article delves into the theory of Sub-Creation devised by J.R.R. Tolkien. Reviewing his Catholic upbringing that had residual effects on his development, and defining

Tolkien's theory along the lines of a principle to create based on people's kinship to God's image. Even using references from his essay 'On Fairy-Stories', and the book of Paul II to illustrate this concept.

Max Bauer, director. *Creation Theory of Gravity Eliminates the Need for Dark Matter*.

YouTube, 21 Nov. 2014,

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qa0dq4rMM18&list=PLHMBBJYwJQfyS8XG-LLZdKBu2s2luUX\\_w&index=12](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qa0dq4rMM18&list=PLHMBBJYwJQfyS8XG-LLZdKBu2s2luUX_w&index=12).

A video lecture presentation with the speaker Russell Humphreys, a scientist from Chattanooga Tennessee who earned his doctorate from Louisiana State University and is a foremost advocate of the Creationist Theory. In his seminar, he covers astronomical fields that contain subject areas such as the Ether and the cosmological constant.

McGrath, James F. *Religion and Science Fiction*. Edited by James F. McGrath. Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, U.K, 2012.

The book *Religion and Science Fiction* covers an observation between ages past worldview of morality and modern concepts of utopianism through technology. The text does not hesitate to formulate analogies from diverse cultures' folklore and well known fictional characters and series like Superman and Star Trek.

"Parable." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/parable>.

A forthright connoting to the term *Parable* with traces of etymology to Latin and examples of its usage in sentences.

The Holy Bible: *New King James Version*. Thomas Nelson, 2010.

The collection of thirty-nine books comprising the Old Testament and twenty-seven books comprising the New Testament.

Tolkien, J. R. R., Humphrey Carpenter, and Christopher Tolkien. *The Letters of J.R.R.*

*Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1981.

A volume of 354 letters from J.R.R. Tolkien consisting of responses and objects during his time as an undergraduate at University of Oxford and the days before his death. The collection of correspondences and scripts provide insight into the development and clarity behind the creativity for Tolkien's world, Middle-earth.