

Worldwalker

The Worldwalker Saga Book Two

by

Andrew Christian



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For my girls and boys, all fourteen of you:

*Aleja, Alice, Brion, Cande,
Connor, Corbin, Jana, Jessie,
Karine, Katie, Maria, Mariana,
Markus, & Sofie*

Forward

It is not necessary to read *Magelord: Worldwalker Book One* to enjoy this story. Indeed, this completely self-contained tale takes place 80 years before the events of *Magelord*.

That said, there are breadcrumbs and clues regarding the coming conflict ahead in every volume, leading up to the grand finale in Book Five. Also, some questions from one book will only be answered in another, and not usually the way you would expect.

I hope you enjoy *Worldwalker* enough to go back and read *Magelord*, and to also read the next volume in the *Worldwalker* saga, *Derek the Destroyer*, scheduled for release in 2025.

Yours in Fantasy,
Andrew Christian, January 2024.

Worldwalker

Prologue

57年8月20日

Historical Entry by order of His Imperial Majesty the Great Kublai Khan, as compiled by Tonga the Scribe:

For the first time in centuries, a Stranger came to the glorious city of Shangdu.

No one was expecting him. Like a viper, he moved unseen among the domes, penetrating deep into the metropolis before being noticed. When the guards finally confronted him, the outsider began glowing and howling with the anger of a blue dragon, drawing forth a deadly blade of sky fire. One of the soldiers, Altan, fell to the Stranger's sword, but the skirmish took time—enough for the Royal Cavalry to reach and surround the interloper, bows drawn.

Thus, my Master, the Great Kublai Khan, may His Name be Praised for All Eternity, arrived upon the scene.

“Put away your weapon, that we may speak,” the Great Khan called. The Stranger's face lay buried in the shadowy folds of a radiant, writhing cloak that twisted across his body like a nest of serpents. The fabric shone with unearthly blue light as he gestured to the cavalry. “You first,” he said, the voice echoing with peculiar, alien

sounds, but the tone commanding and fearless. Despite the many grim warriors nearby, his attitude projected confidence.

The Great Kublai hesitated, unused to such treatment. To my surprise, he said, "Very well," signaling the soldiers. As one, they pointed their bows to the ground. The Stranger paused, then his hands moved, and the wondrous blade of lightning folded in upon itself, until all that remained was a golden hilt. Indicating the fallen soldier, he said, "Er—sorry about your man there; I was forced to defend myself."

"Worry not; he will be fine come the morrow," said the Great Kublai, shrugging. The hood had pulled back; we could now see the youthful face of the outsider, whose gaze lingered doubtfully on the body. Altan's flesh had been cleft nearly in twain, a mortal wound running from shoulder to chest. Bountiful puddles of blood lay all around the fallen warrior. Face skeptical, the Stranger said nothing.

"I am Kublai Khan; I lead these men," said my Master. "Come, let us retire to a more comfortable setting, and you can tell me why you have come to my city on this day."

"Kublai Khan?" the newcomer said, surprised, as if my Master was known to him. Then he frowned. "I have no time for respite; my business is pressing."

"Tell me of this business, and I will perhaps allow you to carry it out. Begin with your name. Or, if you prefer, you can fight through my men."

The outsider considered these words, glancing briefly at the soldiers, who now numbered forty and six. "It's a long story," he finally warned. "But I will give you my name; I am Alexander Mason."

"We have more time than you know, Alexander Mason," said Kublai Khan. "We shall hear your full account."

"I can't remember every little detail."

“We shall drink somna tea, brewed from our lovely orchids in the royal gardens. It will relax you, help you remember.”

Alexander Mason looked at the mounted warriors uncertainly. With a motion, the Khan sent the soldiers away, until only the three of us remained.

“While we talk,” said my Master, “You have my promise: you will be treated as a welcome guest.”

“Fine,” said the outsider, sighing. “Let us talk then.”

Chapter 1

Complacency comforts with familiar routine. But when external forces threaten, we erupt like wildfire, until smoldering ashes are all that remain of who we were.

—Alexander Mason, *The Evolution of a Man*

While perusing a textbook and sipping iced coffee, there at the diner, alone but for thoughts of imminent exams and papers due, a sudden commotion outside the window drew my attention. A homeless man had stopped nearby, cupping his hands against the glass with an incautious heavy thud, startling me from my studies. Breath fogging the pane, he loomed scant inches away, face contorted into a wrinkled scowl. As I squirmed under his penetrating gaze, the hobo considered me through the glass, tilting his head with uncertainty. Finally, he nodded, tapping the panel insistently with a gnarled finger. *So rude*, I thought, perturbed; how fish at the pet store must feel.

In weeks past, I had occasionally seen the old bum in the diner's vicinity; figured he hung around to collect scraps from the cooks—perhaps even the dumpsters out back during especially lean days. Though I had felt both sorrow and pity for his plight, such laments had not been sufficient to spur me into action. God only knew what unfortunate circumstances the fellow had endured; drug

addiction and mental illness were probable—perhaps even criminality, fostered by desperation. Best to avoid such miserable dilemmas, I had reasoned, though my Boy Scout training had protested. The Scout Oath insists upon aiding the downtrodden, yet I had my own worries; I could not be responsible for every lost soul that crossed my path.

Now, his contiguity and focus were such that feigning apathy was no longer an option. Nervously, I smiled, offering a small wave—hoping he would find solace in the acknowledgment and go away. Instead, he beamed—a delight without guile, approaching the joy displayed by children upon meeting Santa. Indeed, the fellow resembled that jolly old elf, with long, unkempt hair and a substantial beard flowing halfway down his chest—both a lavish, downy white. Though his upper lip was clean-shaven, his eyebrows were wild and bushy, the resultant amalgam evoking hints of the Amish farmers one periodically saw on television. The eyes of the hobo were a mirthful, piercing green, ancient and wise, as if he had seen portentous wonders that others could only imagine.

Erroneously taking my greeting as an invitation, he hurried to and through the diner door, coming toward my table. I sighed and shifted in my seat, pulling myself up straighter, poised for fight or flight as necessary. But he simply shambled into the opposing chair and bowed his head, then opened a nearby sugar packet, proceeding to eat it. Chuckling, I relaxed; he seemed simple and harmless, perhaps even retarded. Many others were present, dining and going about their morning routines; aid was plentiful if needed. So I nodded back cautiously and said, “Hello.”

The hobo’s face was hard to look at, the worn visage stenciled with cavernous lines and ancient wrinkles. They seemed to shift about untethered as he dined upon the sweetener, pouring the majority into his wide mouth, some crystalline remnants sprinkling onto the knotty beard. Regarding him made my eyes feel strange and watery,

forcing me to wipe at them. With his arrival, I had feared an accompanying noxious smell, yet only a loamy freshness drifted by in the wake of his passage. He wore a gray robe that had possibly once been white, but did not seem overly soiled. High-cut boots of an unusual gothic style protected his enormous feet, buckled with dark leather straps that protruded like tongues blackened with bismuth. His footgear seemed ancient and worn, covered with dust and grit from countless miles wandered in search of purpose, or perhaps a place to call home. The fellow was tall, even while seated—somewhat imposing—yet he stood out comically, his antique garb entirely inappropriate to the fashions of this modern college town. Still, no one paid us much attention except Janelle, the waitress, who hurried over professionally and inquired of my uninvited companion, “Coffee?”

The bum nodded and smiled as she flipped a cup over and poured. Meanwhile, he reached over to my plate and helped himself to one of my leftover hash browns. Chewing with satisfaction, he then opened five additional sugar packets, dumping them into the dark liquid once Janelle’s glass pot had completed its dispense. A nutty, pleasant aroma floated by, evoking early mornings around scouting campfires. I had little desire to stay there, but did not wish to seem unkind. Gently, I said, “I need to get going now, but let me pay for your drink and bid you good luck.”

He took a sip of his coffee and grimaced, adding several more sugars. As I gathered my things, the playful green eyes grew cold and transfixed me with a glower that was at once haunting and powerful. Gravely, he said, “Time keeps on slipping.”

For a moment, I pondered this utterance. The phrase *into the future* floated through my mind—some wayward song lyric evoked by the unusual declaration. Frowning, I shook my head in puzzled irritation. Clearly, my uninvited

breakfast buddy was wrestling with mental issues, perhaps elder dementia, even schizophrenia. Discomfort growing, I swept the textbooks and review notes into the cavernous maw of my Ovaltine backpack, which I had gotten free by collecting labels from the chocolaty drink.

“Oh, really?” I offered nervously as I rose, hoping that by humoring his delusion, he would not create a scene or become violent. Hurriedly, I fished out my wallet, plunking down enough to cover my breakfast and his coffee, plus a frugal tip appropriate to my economic status as a college student. As I turned to leave, the homeless man whispered a single word.

To my ears, it was a throaty, soulful sound, the syllables unfamiliar and nonsensical, possibly some foreign or primitive tongue. But to my body, it was an incontestable command; I turned back to the recently vacated chair and slid into it, sitting obediently before the hobo. Fear and confusion filled me; what sort of mentalism was this? Though I longed to get away, my limbs felt distant, disconnected. Unwillingly, I sat, hands folded, immobile; helplessly interned by an invisible force I did not understand, like a hapless skier in the clutches of an avalanche.

“You will listen,” he admonished, stern but not unfriendly. My will was irrelevant; his irresistible. I was mesmerized, powerless, a butterfly under pins. A spidery fear knot crawled into my throat as I nodded, giving the man my full consideration. At this, he grinned.

“Better,” he said. “Now, pay attention.”

Impossible to do otherwise. I waited, meeting his gaze warily.

“You are Alexander Mason,” said the hobo. How did he know my name? For a moment, I pondered subterfuge: *Oh, that guy? Sorry, just missed him, but I will let you know if I see him. Cheerio, must be on my way!*

However, I still could not move, and his statement had not been a question. As it was true, there seemed little point in denial.

“Yes,” I admitted. “And who are you?”

“A researcher and observer. I am known as Emilon.”

“Emilon,” I repeated. The odd name meant nothing to me. Attempting to project a genial air I did not currently feel, and perhaps to placate the stranger, I asked, “What do you research?”

“Everything.”

I let that percolate for a moment, concluding that he either did not wish to say, or maybe did not even know himself. “I have seen you around the diner a few times,” I said cautiously.

“Yes,” Emilon agreed. “I have been preparing the membrane for transport.” He said this as if it were an entirely reasonable endeavor, and not the ravings of a schizophrenic madman. My rational mind longed to dismiss him as such, and thus regain purchase on my sanity, which could still not quite grasp my inability to move from the chair, apparently because he had merely pronounced some mystical word.

“I am sorry, but I do not understand what you mean.”

“Of course you do not understand. Fear not; I will enlighten you. All you need do is accompany me and—” Whatever he had been going to say was lost as Emilon abruptly fell silent, gripping the table by its edges, so hard his knuckles became white, his fingertips growing purple with compressed blood. His face contorted into a mask of anguish as he turned his head sideways, as if suddenly under great strain. Gasping, he held this posture for many long seconds, head and arms trembling. I could only watch in dismay; the old loon was having some sort of fit, right here at the table. Part of me wanted to help him; another

more cynical voice urged me to run. Neither effort was possible due to the mysterious hypnosis locking me to the chair. Still, I had my voice; I opened my mouth to call out to Janelle, to implore her to dial the authorities, but before I could speak, his eyes fluttered, and he came back to his senses, panting heavily. Whereas before his expression had shown mirth, there was now only a deeply inscribed pain. My better angels urged empathy and patience as pity flowed through me.

“Are you all right?” I said. “Is there anybody I can call for you? A doctor, perhaps?”

“No,” he shook his head. “This is beyond anything a medical practitioner can repair. I told you, time keeps slipping, threatens to tear itself apart. I must continue to hold it together. Lately, the duty has become—most difficult.”

More crazy talk. I sighed, half-convinced this was some scam designed to relieve me of my wallet so Emilon could spend the weekend marinating in a bottle of whisky. He somehow knew my name, although it was not exactly a secret. I was on the enrollment lists at the University, was well respected on the SUNY Chess Team; he could have seen me there talking with acquaintances or playing, as matches were open to the public. He seemed to have some purpose in mind—I decided to ask.

“What do you want from me?”

His eyes lit up again; the delight had returned, the pain banished. “I have been waiting a long time for you, Alexander,” said Emilon. “At last, you are ready.”

“Ready? For what?” I demanded, exasperated.

“You will gather what is lost to fix that which is broken.”

I processed this, unsure what to make of these ramblings. Perhaps he was speaking in metaphors; I had learned in psychology class that many schizophrenics are prone to such. He had said something about accompanying

him somewhere, right before the seizure, or whatever it was. Preparing membranes, slipping and tearing, wanting me to fix things. Conceivably, he lived nearby in some old tent in severe disrepair, possibly ripped or torn, letting the rain in. Pure speculation, of course, but mostly a fit to his words; maybe I was supposed to find some duct tape and help him patch his shelter. My fear had greatly diminished; though Emilon seemed crazy and talked in circles, he did not appear threatening or hostile. As I reflected, I found I could freely move my arms again, though my legs still felt distant. Assisting the hobo was likely the fastest way to get rid of him.

“Can you show me?” I asked.

With a silly, sunny smile, as if he had taught his puppy a new trick, Emilon rose, stood by me, even patted me on the shoulder. “Come!” he commanded.

My legs suddenly felt fine; had my paralysis been my own doing, locked down by fear, cowed by his presence? It mattered not; it was a relief to be back in control. I stood and shouldered my pack, then hurried to follow him out the diner door.

A blanket of warmth unrolled over us: a bright, optimistic day filled with the bounty of Spring. The earthy scent of nature fluttered by, carried by the kindly breeze. Sunshine gently played upon my face like a ghostly musician, caressing my cheekbones with warm fingers of tingling radiation. Just two short months ago the town had slumbered under seventeen inches of heavy, wet snow. But today the air danced with butterflies, and birdsong symphonies flowed from happy hidden spaces among the trees.

Emilon led me down the alleyway next to the diner, then behind it. Rusted dumpsters and discarded boxes provided a seedy backdrop to patches of overgrown brush; no one else was present. I searched for a tent in vain, pulling back a step when no domicile was visible. Still, I

could detect no aggression from my cohort as he waved and beckoned me to follow him further down the path, finally stopping before a nondescript brick wall. Though ample trash and empty bottles languished in haphazard disarray, no lodging was present, not even a makeshift cardboard hovel. I became painfully aware, then, that we were very much alone.

“A necessary discomfort,” Emilon said, looking awkward. He breathed out a delicate—yet ugly—staccato sound, almost the yelp of an injured puppy. Abruptly, my nose began to bleed; a double-barreled blast of crimson that gushed without warning, filling my throat with unpleasant bitter coppers. With a whistling dissonance, a warm wind developed, and the bricks became blurry. A surge of panic and anxiety gripped me as cold sweat erupted from my armpits. Was this like the earlier immobility in the diner? Or worse, some supernatural torture ritual I had blundered into?

The rational part of my mind rejected such fantastical premises; perhaps I had suffered a stroke or embolism, was experiencing the typical auditory and olfactory hallucinations. Pinching my nose and holding my head back, struggling to remain calm, I noted Emilon was doing something near the wall, touching it, moving his hands around it, making circles with his arms.

A smoky swirl of churning mists materialized before us, a misplaced horizontal tornado of colorful haze, three yards in diameter and scant inches from my face. Had Emilon dropped a smoke grenade? Bewildered, I stared into the sky, half-expecting to see an incoming chopper. In the confusion, my bloody hands fell away from my nose, flapping uselessly, as if to ward off the vapors. A deafening explosion occurred nearby, a tortured thunderclap, as a surge of thick air barreled into me, forcing a step backward. Emilon was behind me now and caught me gently, steadying my likely fall. Then, without another word, he

shoved me forward. Helplessly, I stumbled into the spinning mists.

The world around me wavered, the scenery shifting and blurring. Quaking with terror, I spun within a vortex of chaos, powerless, a hummingbird in a sandstorm. Random nonsense met my eyes, flashes of conflicting color, bursts of blinding brilliance and solemn shadows, spiraling in wild patterns that hijacked the senses. Gurgling with fear, I rode the storm, a tiny bug adrift in an ocean of irrationality. Slipping and gliding, flashing lightning strikes, hurtling and spinning; a nightmare ride on a childhood corkscrew slide. For eternal moments, I endured this madness. Then the vapors broke apart, spilling me carelessly to the ground, where I lay—chest heaving, muscles trembling. Against a sudden, irresistible surge of lethargy, I struggled, yet the soothing fog clutched my eyelids with unrelenting black fingers, dragging me down into its welcoming embrace.

Chapter 2

The Five Known Worlds are threatened; only the boy and I stand in the way of their destruction. Though it is a crushing burden to thrust upon one so young, no one escapes the whirlpool of destiny. At least he will have my assistance, and this is no small thing. While the inviolable Laws of Causality constrain me, I have my tricks.

—Emilon's Lament, from the Forbidden Writings

I opened my eyes, sucking fragrant, dry air into my lungs, relishing the solidity of the ground beneath my hands and face. My nose had stopped bleeding, my head was clear; I felt almost normal. Relieved, I laughed; obviously a panicked overreaction to a simple bloody nose, so severe I had even fainted. The logical if unexpected result of stressors from my heavy class load, along with the peculiar demands of the homeless bum, Emilon. I flushed as I imagined Janelle stumbling over me on her way out with the trash. Sheepishly, I pulled myself to my knees and looked around, trying to get my bearings.

The budding cheer faded; something was very wrong. The diner alleyway, the dumpster and empty bottles, the brick wall; all were gone. The constant familiar drone of cars passing along Main Street was missing; the air hung silent and eerily still. My surroundings had radically changed from the Albany I knew.

A wave of hysteria threatened to overwhelm me; I spun around, bracing for danger. When minutes passed and nothing untoward happened, I began to feel foolish. Calming myself, I called upon my Boy Scout training; when lost, the first step is to stop and figure out where you are. To use your head, not your legs. So where was I?

Still outside, but a vastly different exterior than the alleyway. The sun overhead—and resultant shadows—indicated 10:40 am, the skill another gift from years of scouting. A couple of hours had passed since breakfast then; in that time I had been brought—where? A doorway of sorts stood nearby, a horseshoe trellis, its faded iron surface infested with prickly vines and nettles. The creepers seemed to seethe with malevolent intention, their sinuous tangles brimming with monstrous blackthorns; eyes narrowing, I kept my distance.

Leafy vines curved away from the trellis in a tangle of unbroken foliage, suffocating a series of surrounding stone walls. An overgrown mass of prickly vegetation prevented unhindered traversal through the archway. Beyond the thicket, I could make out a path leading from the opening; worn yet unkempt with brush, as if few ever traveled that way. The air was clean but overly warm; arid and dusty, reminiscent of a class trip to an Arizona desert.

The walls curved outward near me, then turned inward gradually, creating a round space within, entirely encircled by the impenetrable nettles and spiky shrubbery. Four other trellis openings were visible off in the distance, shrouded in shadow and hinting at unknown mysteries. In the center of the clearing, a magnificent stone table stood in stately repose, marbled with green and umber earth tones bound by veins of silvery white. Moving to it, I noted moderate depressions in the smooth stone, near to each vertex of its five even sides. I touched its surface; warm and surprisingly resilient, almost organic, like the shell of a turtle. The hollows appeared to be washbasins without

faucets or drains; presently, they held no water, only echoes of long-lost purpose. Perhaps it had once been an elaborate community birdbath.

What was this place? My heart pounded as I tried to consider my situation with something approaching rationality. I had fainted—or, if I took a more sinister view, perhaps was drugged. Either way, I had been abducted, brought to this locale for unknown reasons, probably by the homeless bum, Emilon. The air was dry, with a peculiar smell of citrus, like the tang of freshly squeezed lemons; overhead, the sky shimmered in cloudless curtains of vibrant blue, casting a brilliant, unyielding light. Neither of these features implied the typical trappings of Albany. I could not shake the conviction that I had traveled a great distance. Or was I perhaps creating conspiracies out of more straightforward explanations?

I walked around the massive birdbath to the next trellis; this one mostly free of brambles. The opening beckoned like a secret passage to an otherworldly realm. Briefly, my Ovaltine backpack caught as I squirmed through the spiky overgrowth; released with a simple tug. A narrow, beaten path led up the hill, only to vanish behind a knoll. As I moved along it, the ground crunched beneath my feet, sending up small puffs of dust. The way was peaceful, with many shade trees providing easy shadows that somewhat cooled the parched, stagnant air. After following the trail for a short time, I rounded a turn and saw Emilon.

He sat at a wooden picnic table, muttering to himself beneath the respite of a sprawling apple tree. Plump, crimson fruit filled its branches; the ground beneath peppered with over-ripened orphans. I resolved to proceed cautiously; Emilon was clearly my abductor and obviously insane; his actions would be unpredictable.

He was examining a wooden chest, about the size of a moving box. It sat before him on the table, encircled by

bands of dark metal, a golden padlock dangling from its face. His great, wrinkled hands fiddled with an ornate, metallic key. The sight of the container sent sweaty chills down my back, conjuring images of sordid torture tools within: knives, portable blowtorches, perhaps pliers for pulling fingernails. But Emilon did not seem interested in my presence, staring at the box and absently worrying at the key. He was ten paces away and seated; against threatening moves, there was ample opportunity to simply run away. Youthful and well-toned from physical education classes, I had little doubt I could quickly outdistance the old wino.

For a time, I wavered there, torn between demanding answers, or slinking away unobserved. But before I could decide, Emilon stirred, noticing me.

“Ah, there you are,” he said. His face was haggard, haunted; chiseled with an unyielding determination that was both commanding and terrifying. Beneath the bushy brows, the green eyes seethed with deep concentration; blazing emerald twins lost among infinite sunken shadows.

“Where are we?” I asked, my voice calm but strained, the muscles of my legs poised to fly at the first hint of trouble.

“You are at my domicile, in Lorne, on the landmass of Kral, the world of Anion,” he said casually. “Come sit with me, and I will tell you what must be done.”

The references to Lorne and Kral meant nothing to me. But my blood froze at the ‘world of Anion’ allusion. Did this madman genuinely believe we were on some other planet? *Absurd*, my mind insisted. I could not let his lunacy infect me by even considering such fancy. But my certainty faltered upon recalling the hellscape journey through the twisting vapors.

Stall for time, for whatever else you can glean from this kook that may help you escape, I thought. Aloud, I said, “I’ll stand, thanks.”

Emilon seemed weary, as well as disappointed that I did not take a seat at the table. Still, he said, “Very well, ask the questions that are bubbling up inside you, as I know you must.”

Such an odd way of speaking, I thought.

“Okay, then,” I said aloud. “First, how did you bring me here?”

“We walked, together,” he said. No further explanation was forthcoming. Frowning, I considered this; it seemed an utterly irrational suggestion.

“To another planet?” I finally said, my tone belligerent. The sarcasm was not appreciated; Emilon glowered.

“To another *world*, to be precise,” he admonished. “Same planet.”

Such a claim made as little sense as walking here, to this place; Anion, he had called it. Simply not possible. Was it? My heart began to pound.

“I don’t understand,” I said helplessly.

“It is not as difficult as it may seem,” Emilon said. “There are infinite possibilities in the ether, immeasurable star systems with countless planets. In our particular region of spacetime, five worlds have taken shape alongside one another, each a reflection of its mirror siblings, comparable in geography, with similar physical laws. Yet far more than likeness binds these worlds together. On each, life has advanced to where it can question its existence: human life. Earth is one such world. Anion is another. There are three more.”

Emilon sounded like Carl Sagan, the famous astronomer. When I was twelve, I had eagerly watched his Cosmos episodes on PBS. Sagan, too, had talked of infinite stars and worlds, in our galaxy alone. My brain was spinning, grasping at things that were perhaps not entirely relevant. Five worlds seemed far too meager to be of any import in the grand scheme of the universe.

“Only five in all the heavens?” I said, gesturing at the sky. My expression showed my great skepticism.

Emilon was unperturbed. “Only five that are known to me, that I must shepherd,” he said, as if this clarified matters. Suddenly, I felt overwhelmed.

“I need to get back to my classes,” I said, my voice soft and meek. Emilon looked at me, his eyes filled with sympathy and great tenderness.

“You may do so if you wish,” Emilon said kindly. Then firmly, “Once you have completed your task.”

“What task?”

“The one you are uniquely qualified for by your bloodline. Your wishes in the matter are inconsequential, as are my own. Time is slipping; I am close to losing the strands entirely. You must help me restore equilibrium. For now, you must put aside the life you knew.”

More loony talk about time. Yet I was beginning to accept that Emilon was more than he seemed, that he wielded an irresistible power I did not yet understand. His other comments were equally disturbing.

“What does my blood have to do with it?” I asked, alarmed, picturing demonic rituals, perhaps involving the stone table within the trellises. A dark vision came; I saw myself sacrificed upon the icy marble, eyes dead and staring, my lifeblood flowing into those mysterious catch basins.

“Fear not; your blood opens the way, but only a small amount is needed to attune the Veils of Chaos. It is how we came here, to Lorne.”

I recalled the nosebleed, the swirling colored vapors, being thrust forward by Emilon—then suddenly being here. Those events seemed unreal, better explained by a medical emergency than some ‘opening of the way’ mysticism. Yet it was difficult to doubt my own eyes. The homeless schizophrenic theory was fast becoming more of a desperate hope than a scenario fitting with circumstances.

At least Emilon did not seem to harbor sacrificial intentions.

“But why do you need me? I mean, *me* specifically. Surely, others would be more eager and qualified to assist you. After all, I’m just a college student—”

“Across the worlds, among the billions, only your blood contains the genetic key to unlock the Veils of Chaos.”

His second use of the unfamiliar term prompted me to ask, “And what exactly are the Veils of Chaos?”

“They are the glue that supports and binds the worlds; the connective tissue, the amorphous membranes that hold and mold; the keepers of balance, and the source of magic. I know your first encounter with the Veils was uncomfortable; they were resistant until they recognized you. From now on, their traversal will be without friction. In my domain, the Veils are yours to summon and command. Once you complete your task, you will freely move among the Five Known Worlds. Try it now. Call forth with your mind, with your will.”

Emilon was clearly serious. Maddening, this feeling that nothing was making sense, one confusing idea after another, with no time for reflection. My head was pounding. Half-heartedly, I looked around, not knowing what I was looking for. Suddenly Emilon was upon me, so fast I did not see him rise, nor make his way over to me. Shrinking back as he seized my shoulder, I felt my mind wrench uncomfortably, as if my skull were being forced open. Amid a pounding splinter of pain just behind my eyes, new knowledge flooded through me.

The colorful spinning smoke, first seen in the alleyway: the Veils of Chaos. Emilon seemed to believe I could control them, had shown me a glimmer of the way forward. With mind and will, I called for the Veils, reaching out my hand, almost as if beckoning to Janelle for a refill. They responded eagerly, swirling into being before

me, vaporous and predominantly gray, yet resplendent to behold, thrumming with energy, glittering with swatches of flashing rainbow hues.

The Veils of Chaos, I thought, marveling. *The glue that supports and binds the worlds*. They sparkled with otherworldly intensity, striking and vibrant. Crackling energy pulsed within the clouds as they spun, towering above us. Emilon had stepped back a few paces in anticipation of my action. A thunderclap occurred, loud and jarring. I let the Veils spin in their disordered splendor for a few moments, feeling wonder and awe. Then, reluctantly, I released them, watching as the billowy mists dissolved into ghostly tendrils of oblivion.

Emilon was beaming like a proud parent, unsurprised and smug, like, *see, I knew you could do it all along*. Both amazement and doubt engulfed me, along with a deep sense of dreamlike unreality; I was pleased at the accomplishment, but confounded by a sudden reappraisal of Emilon. His words were not the ravings of a lunatic, after all, but purposeful. Summoning the Veils made me feel powerful, more in control of my destiny. Even with Emilon's blatant coercion and my subsequent abduction, I found myself softening toward him. My cynical side immediately threw out a warning. *Caution: you have no idea what motivates this crazy old wizard. Perhaps he gifts you with this power to lull you into gratitude, to indoctrinate you into his diabolical schemes*. I thought about this for a minute, dumbstruck, while misgivings and worries assailed me.

Finally, shaken and defiant, I said, "I want no part of this."

Emilon looked surprised, like he had not considered my refusal. He said, "Before you decide, you must understand the stakes." Abruptly, he tossed me the key he had been fingering.

Instinctively, I caught it, bobbled it for a second, my balance slightly off by the counterweight of my backpack. Once the key was firmly in hand, though, my vision blackened, then exploded and went far away.

I saw an unfamiliar man shouting at the sky, his face haggard and tortured, tears streaming down his cheeks. His eyes were wild and frantic, afflicted with maniacal glimmers of insanity. A dead woman stood nearby, impaled by several wooden poles, haunting in her horrific mix of beauty and desecration. Her white gown was bloody and ragged. A group of people, many dressed in archaic military uniforms, watched the raving man from a distance, fear and disquiet etched upon their faces. His hands were outstretched, and overhead, a monolithic comet streaked across the sky, trailing black smoke, white steam, and orange death fire.

Somehow, the man was controlling the asteroid, pulling it from the heavens; in his grief and rage, intent on the obliteration of the world itself. Given the mind-boggling size of this great rock, he would likely succeed. As I watched, the colossal projectile split into five pieces, each the size of an enormous mountain. The figure sent these deadly monstrosities in different directions, apparently determined that no section of the world escape his wrath. At last, he collapsed, sweaty and exhausted.

My vision blurred, and Emilon came into view. He seemed agitated, almost panicked; he stood before the stone table in the trellised clearing. This time, the structure was not vacant; five spheres floated, one above each basin, the size of overlarge basketballs. They resembled globes of extraordinary detail, with entire continents, topographical mountains, and watery seas; even tiny clouds upon their shifting surfaces. Emilon stood before one of them, wildly typing on a handheld keypad.

The sphere suddenly took flight, leaping from the stone basin, carrying my vision along for the ride. Like a

missile, it raced toward the descending mountain fragments, targeting the nearest. The hurtling orb glowed with searing white fire, and I expected some kind of explosion as it intersected the giant, icy rock. Instead, the globe embedded itself deeply within the hurtling mass, like a hot coal falling in snow. The air flickered, then the entire colossal rock fragment vanished. Three additional globes were careering toward separate chunks of the asteroid, ultimately impregnating them in the same manner as the first. One by one, the trio of ponderous smoking stones glimmered and disappeared. A lonely gigantic chunk continued on, trailing smoke, until cresting the horizon. Ignoring this final asteroid chunk, Emilon sent the last globe speeding off in a different direction, headed to points unknown.

My sight shifted; I was now an astronaut, it seemed, looking down at the Earth from space. An easily recognizable North America swung into view, yet mostly covered in an unbroken sheet of white ice, as was Canada. A single terrible asteroid dragging fiery plasma lumbered in from the west; as it closed upon the ground, it broke apart into countless smaller pieces. Many of these were yet titanic, hulking and burning, unforgiving. They began to impact the planet like the merciless shotgun blast of a god. An unimaginable shock wave rolled over the landscape where the first hit, annihilating all in its path. The ice turned to steam as the pieces continued to rain down, each triggering new unstoppable groundswells of destruction. Carnage swept across the continent as I watched, west to east, with some remnants falling into the ocean and continuing beyond, out of my sight. The devastation was on a scale my mind could scarcely process.

“Anion could not handle all five fragments of the Great Rock; all life would have been destroyed,” Emilon said in my ear. “So I sent each one to a different world, where they would do the least damage, to a time they were

destined to fall. The one you see crashed upon Earth almost thirteen thousand years ago. It brought a new ice age; only about forty thousand humans survived the impact. Yet, with time, enough to repopulate and create the world you grew up in.”

The panoramic space view was fading; in a few moments, it had vanished. I was still by the picnic table, breathing heavily, holding the ornate key, with Emilon nearby. My head was spinning.

“Together, the spheres that you saw earlier stabilize the flow of time for each world,” he said. “These stabilizers work collectively, modulating as needed to synchronize the timestream. The falling of the Great Rock forced me to scatter them among Five Known Worlds; they have been lost for millennia. The fabric of spacetime is unraveling without them, dangerously so. I have done all I can; now, we are out of time. You must retrieve the stabilizers and bring them back to where they belong.”

“Oh, is that all?” I said with heavy mockery, shaking my head stubbornly. “Find somebody else, or do it yourself; I can’t be part of this—this folly.”

Emilon frowned, eyes dangerous. “So be it,” he said gravely. “Avoid your destiny, if you want; free will is the right of every living soul. Enjoy your college life, such as it is. It won’t be for long, though. As time continues to desynchronize, the worlds will shake themselves apart. The world of Xana’Dul is already nearly gone. There, a critical failure point is fast approaching; in less than two years, the mantle will collapse, the Timeslip backlashing upon the other worlds, destroying them all. Including Earth and everything you know. Observe.”

Head reeling from emotional overload, my sight was hijacked once again; how was he doing this? Some advanced projection system? I could still feel my body, but not see it. These thoughts were swept aside as my vision cleared; a great city lay ahead, nestled within a valley,

approaching quickly as my perspective flew toward it. I felt as if mounted upon a giant, invisible eagle.

As the metropolis neared, I beheld gigantic alabaster buildings, many shaped like domes, most in a state of crumbling decay. Roads had once crisscrossed the land but now lay crumbling and fissured with signs of prodigious upheaval. Bubbling magma angrily flowed from the upper part of the city, spilling in steamy rivulets onto the streets below. Periodically, the ground rumbled with menace, and the buildings shook, shedding detritus. Few domes were intact, most showing gaping holes and cracks reminiscent of shattered eggshells. Pasty black smoke filled the landscape, clinging to the structures like toxic webbing. The city was devoid of movement; nothing living stirred, or even whispered.

My vision pulled back, shifted. Everywhere I focused held only blackened devastation. The ground shuddered continuously, and the land lay rent in many areas, with deep chasms juxtaposed against sudden sheared cliffs at improbable angles. Swelling noxious gasses and raging fires peppered the ground like suppurating plague pocks. Lava and soot blanketed the widespread destruction. The scenery moved below me, miles passing, then leagues; more cities, villages, towns, all crumbling and burning; nothing had escaped the omnipresent corrosion. Tears welled in my eyes unbidden, for so much that once was, now lost. Abruptly, the scene ended.

Emilon stood beside me, his hand gently upon my shoulder. His eyes were earnest but compassionate. "This fate awaits Earth, and all worlds, if you do not help me."

Chapter 3

If the young only knew how often all endeavors fail, they would never attempt to achieve anything. It is their unique blend of ignorance and optimism that gives their ambitions wings and, occasionally, propels us all forward.

—Aberdeen the Alchemist, *Writings of Worth*

For several long minutes, I processed all that had just transpired. Emilon's revelations left me shaken and disturbed, especially as I imagined the devastation of Xana'Dul spreading to everything I knew and loved on Earth. Could I ignore such peril, especially if I might somehow stop it? Cynically, I wondered if Emilon had shown me the destruction in order to manipulate me. If so, his machinations were working; my resistance had diminished. Though I was not yet ready to commit, gathering additional information would do no harm.

“What do you expect of me?” I asked. My tone specified a practical inquiry, not some whine of protest. Emilon seemed to understand.

“You will proceed to each of the trellis doorways in turn, and summon the Veils of Chaos,” he said. “Unlocking the way with a small amount of blood. A portal will open, leading to a world containing one of the five time stabilizers; one is already here, on Anion.”

His tone was light as he preached of bouncing among worlds, as if casually suggesting a stroll through the saloons of a holiday bar crawl. Bemused, I found myself nodding along; the newest denizen of Loony Land.

“Then what?” I said gruffly, adding, “Not that I have yet decided.”

“I have provided various tools to assist your journey, and a briefing on their use.” He motioned to the chest. “They are inside, accessed by the key you hold. Using these implements, you will retrieve the stabilizers, then return here. That’s it.”

Emilon waited, as if seeking a decisive answer. It was not enough for him to threaten or cajole; he wanted a willing conspirator in this plot of madness. Why did he not simply retrieve the stabilizers himself? He had implied unimaginable power over many things, perhaps even time itself. Emilon looked like a man, but for all I knew, he wore such a guise as a costume, obscuring his true nature: an evolved time traveler with magical future tech, or perhaps an advanced alien. Maybe even some kind of living god. Why did he need me?

Then again, he had shown the comet colliding with Earth some thirteen thousand years ago, and had not recovered the stabilizer in all that time. The thought comforted me; even Emilon had limitations, it seemed. *Perhaps he speaks the truth, and I am the only available solution to him*, I mused; my ego trying to persuade me. Then my thoughts darkened; less than two years remaining. Earth and the other worlds—all would fall if I did nothing.

Memories of my time in scouting surfaced, somehow more relevant now than ever before. Under the strict instruction of Scoutmaster Hartman—himself a former Eagle Scout—I had learned many values that were now incorporated deeply into my being. Every week for a decade, I had promised upon my honor to do my best. To do my duty, to both God and country. I had sworn to

always help others; to keep myself physically strong and morally straight. Hartman, a veteran of the Korean War and Army Ranger, had been an exemplary pillar of these principles. Though I had graduated from scouting several years prior, I often thought of Hartman when facing hard decisions, considering what he would do.

As long as there was a chance that Emilon's assessment was accurate, I had a clear obligation and ethical responsibility to help. The stakes, as characterized, were quite simply too high. If I later discovered misrepresentations, I could always bow out.

Sighing with resignation, my resistance fell away. "I will try my best," I said to Emilon.

"You are stronger than you think," he said, patting me on the shoulder. He pointed to the chest, said, "You better be going. If you need me, I will be in the main building, up the path, steadying time." Abruptly, he flung out his hand as if pointing. A moment later, Emilon vanished, leaving me alone with the box on the picnic table.

I stumbled to the nearest bench, sat there, slumped; overcome by warring thoughts and emotions. Emilon was certainly no homeless bum, though God only knew *what* he was. At least he had proven no threat and left me to my designs. I sighed, lifted the key, and slid down the bench until I reached the chest. Now that Emilon had explained his expectations, much of my earlier turmoil had faded. Wonder and curiosity pushed at my mind, forcing it to a new level of consciousness, more receptive and less resistant. Suddenly eager to discover the contents of the box, I pressed the key into the lock and turned it.

With a nauseous lurch, I found myself in a familiar classroom, seated at my old school desk. Posters of Einstein, Newton, Bohr, and Feynman—among others—adorned the walls, each with their most crucial mathematical contribution scrawled across the bottom of their portraits. Professor Rivas was there, just as I

remembered him from last semester: suit and tie, his unkempt black hair streaked with encroaching gray and gathered into a righteous ponytail. Under his affable tutelage, I had pulled off a narrow A minus in his class, Physics 101. Like many others, the course was an unrelated filler requirement for my business major; to my mind, a shameless cash grab.

Though I understood this entire scene to be another of Emilon's projections, my mind had become warm and accepting; I flowed willingly along the pathway of the encounter, letting it lead where it would.

No other students were present, and the Professor regarded me with bright eyes, standing next to a film screen that unrolled across the front chalkboard. He held a remote control in his hand, with a long black wire running to a slide projector behind me, its fan loudly whirring. The lights dimmed, and the scent of burnt dust hung in the air, emanating from the heat of the projector's bulb.

"Let us begin, Mr. Mason," Rivas said, his English carrying the slight Spanish accent as usual. The Professor clicked his remote, and the first slide loaded with a clackety shuffling sound, replacing the glaring white box that had occupied the screen.

First up was a schematic of what appeared to be a cloak. A circle off to one side with a line leading to the garment implied a magnified view, perhaps through a microscope. Within the outline, there was a spherical lattice resembling a soccer ball. I had seen such a construct in *Scientific American*: a buckyball, named after Buckminster Fuller, the philosopher-inventor who claimed a spiritual epiphany on the shores of Lake Michigan. In the diagram, tiny lines of force connected it to what seemed minuscule futuristic crystals.

"Go ahead, Mr. Mason," the Professor directed. "Open the box." He gestured to a nearby table at the side of the room, over by his desk. Upon it was the chest from the

picnic table; no lock this time. From the context, I realized this classroom mockup was the briefing Emilon had mentioned. Standing, I shuffled over and popped open the lid. Some strange fabric covered the contents; I drew the material from the box, quickly realizing this cloth was more than just packing. Shaking it out revealed a shimmering cloak, finely wrought and striking to behold. Translucent at first glance, but a closer inspection exposed a dynamic iridescent surface, like dancing rainbows on the skin of a soap bubble.

The garment featured arm holes and a hood, almost like a poncho. It looked just like the image on the screen. With some hesitation, I pulled it on. It was baggy, covering my body from shoulder to calf. At first, I could not locate a fastener, but as I pushed the edges together across my neck, they stuck with a magnetic click. The material felt oddly textured beneath my fingers, a paradoxical blend of slippery silk and rough sharkskin.

“Muy bien,” said Rivas. I noted he was now holding an antique gun: an old musket, business end flared like a trumpet. He pointed it at me and said, “Are you ready?”

Ready for what? My brain was foggy, floating through a river of the fuzzy surreal. The professor was violating the first rule of gun safety by aiming it at me.

“Not really,” I told him. “Point that thing somewhere else.” The cloak elongated as I spoke, emitting a screechy whine, metallic and grating. Moving, flowing, the animate material slid over my body with intimate familiarity, seeking my head, covering it, lengthening to drape my legs. Along the fabric, hues of iridescence shifted to the cerulean plasma highlights of gas flames. The cloak pulsated with volition and rippled with intent, sealing itself over my chest, precisely where the Professor aimed. Smiling, he pulled the trigger.

A yellow flash occurred near the hammer; white smoke billowed from the barrel. The shot rang out,

impacted my chest. I felt a firm slap, but the blow merely stung a bit; the spent projectile fell to my feet, a leaden musket ball from days of yore, now mostly flattened.

“Defensive armaments,” the Professor explained. “It will also protect you from the weather and hostile magic, as well as help you communicate. Other functions will become clear as you wear it.”

“Clave,” I said. An Argentine expat, Rivas said this often: the Spanish equivalent of *cool*. “Muchas Gracias, Profesor.” Curiously, his hostile action did not trigger any anger or alarm within me, perhaps because my brain was sailing happily through a soothing fog; almost as if Cheech and Chong had wandered by, trailing a cloud of Maui Wau. Rivas frowned, perhaps not appreciating my drugged state or my gringo Spanish. He said, “Offense next. Keep going, Mr. Mason; back to the box.” He pressed the remote button.

A new schematic on the screen displayed the hilt of a sword. The slide depicted curious details and more crystal filaments, but I wanted to see it myself. Going to the chest, I fished out the device, a sturdy, two-handed affair. The handle was gold plated with a heft of heavy metal, grooved with black ribbed padding suitable for gripping. A narrow blue line encircled the handle in the middle. One side had a bulbous pommel, the other a small guard. No blade was evident, but a small slit was present where a shaft could be inserted. I trawled around in the box but didn’t see one. It wouldn’t be of much use as a weapon this way.

“Hold with both hands and twist,” Rivas suggested.

Gripping the shaft as instructed, I turned my wrists in opposite directions. There was some resistance, but when I could rotate no further, the blue circle slid out of view with a satisfying locking sound. A deadly shaft of glowing metal sprang from the opening near the guard, wounding my eyes with searing blue brilliance. Thin but solid, the glowing blade crackled as small arcs of energy meandered

along its surface, writhing and hissing like the offspring of Tesla coils. My arms noted a sudden gain in weight as the weapon activated, nicely balanced and not overly heavy. Within my hands, the sword had come eagerly to life.

“Be careful; the edge acts as a molecular repeller,” said Rivas. “It will cut through almost anything, with ease, including your flesh. Here, try it out on me.” He put up his hands like a boxer, dancing upon the balls of his feet, and approached.

“No way,” I protested, confused at such a proposal. “I will not attack *you*.” Though my muddled brain was not against the idea per se, something seemed inappropriate about his request. In defiance, I held the blade down and away. Rivas sashayed in close, punched me in the nose, hard.

“Ow,” I said, eyes going watery.

“Fight me, knave,” he cried, throwing an uppercut. The cloak sat inert, letting it happen; so much for defense. I tried to block a couple of his blows with my free hand, but finally brought the blade around in frustration, just to get him off me. My wrists moved, and his left arm severed with little resistance, skidding across the floor from the momentum of a swing that never landed. Horrified, I stared at him, mouth agape, “Oh my God! Professor, I am so sorry!”

“No trouble at all,” he said, face unconcerned, walking over and picking up the arm. His stump was not even bleeding. “Barely a flesh wound.”

For a moment, I felt like a character in a Monty Python skit. My head swayed as he fitted the detached limb to his stub; it seamlessly merged, with only a slight twisting motion. Of course, this was not actually Rivas or his classroom, just some chaotic funhouse briefing simulation, courtesy of Emilon. Feeling relieved at this thought, I swished the glowing edge back and forth, tracing random

lines in the still air. A sweeping crackle accompanied these motions.

“How do I turn off the blade? Twist the other way?”

“Claro,” Rivas said.

As told, I forcefully turned the hilt grips in the opposite direction. There was brief resistance; abruptly, it disengaged with a sharp metallic click. The blue circle reappeared as the metal shaft flowed in upon itself and quickly vanished. Easy enough.

“Remember,” said the Professor, “Never touch the blade.”

“Got it,” I said.

“Good. Next slide.” He fingered the remote, and two items appeared on the screen. The first resembled the metal clamps used in old movies to haul around ice blocks. They were of black metal and had large angled jaws on one end, with scissors-like finger bows on the other. The diagram showed a close-up cross-section of wound wires and minuscule, baffling electronics.

The other item was a simple metal circle, depicted before a twisting vortex; its purpose unfathomable from the diagram. As I studied the screen, the professor rummaged through the box. He located the two displayed objects within and went over to a spinning globe on an elaborate wooden stand in the corner—which had either gone unnoticed, or perhaps just appeared there. The sphere seemed to be a replica of the time stabilizers Emilon had shown me earlier. Holding up the clamps, Rivas said, “You use these to maneuver the stabilizers. They are far too heavy for you to handle unaided.” So saying, he extended the clamps, then locked them on the globe. A loud sound of heavy modulation occurred, similar to the *wah-wah* intro of Pink Floyd’s *Welcome to the Machine*.

“*Welcome, my son,*” I crooned, but the Professor glared impatiently, saying, “Let’s leave the childish antics for playtime, Mr. Mason.” Sheepishly, I trailed off.

Abandoning the tongs for the moment, Rivas took out the small metal circle and stretched it. Soon, it was the size of a hula hoop. He reached for the handle of the clamps, then moved the stabilizer through the center of the circle, where it gradually vanished as it passed the threshold of the ring.

“A storage area,” he explained, shaking the hoop. “Powered by a phased rotating singularity.” Releasing the clamps, he withdrew them, now empty, and put both articles on the table.

“Ah,” I said knowingly, as if I saw such wonders daily. My foggy brain had lost the capacity to be surprised; yet another marvel for later contemplation.

Rivas reached into the box, said, “The last major device.” In his hands was a wide leather belt, thick, almost the type worn by wrestling champions. Then, “Oops, almost forgot.” He walked to his desk and clicked the remote. The screen displayed the belt, along with close-up cutouts that showed a metallic mesh of wound wires and the ubiquitous crystals.

“This will lead you to the stabilizer on each world,” the Professor said, fastening the band around his waist by simply drawing the ends together, after the manner of the cloak. The globe had reappeared on its wooden stand; Rivas came over and stood by me, pointing to his midriff.

“All you need do is follow the light,” he said. “Easy peasy, lemon squeezy.” This silly rhyme had been the Professor’s catchphrase, usually dropped upon his unsuspecting class after some challenging mathematical revelation. It was obnoxious both then and now. I scowled; he was harshing my mellow.

A reddish light appeared where he was pointing, at his waist, aligned with the stabilizer. The Professor twisted his torso back and forth; the light moved across the surface of the belt, staying fixed toward the globe. He spun around in a circle; the light stayed put.

“Okay, I understand,” I said, tired of this charade. Sensing my impatience, Rivas said, “A few last items, not even worth a slide.”

“Fine,” I grunted.

Still wearing the belt, he headed back to the chest and produced a sharp medical scalpel, along with a vessel that resembled a chalice from church—a place I had attended frequently in my youth. Lately, I didn’t talk to God much; given recent events, perhaps a choice worthy of reconsideration.

“For extracting your blood, Mr. Mason,” he said. “A small amount will be sufficient.” He put them aside, drew out a leather bag, shook it. It rattled musically. “Batteries for the cloak and sword. Use them wisely.”

“I will try,” I said.

“One thing more; the misplaced time stabilizers interfere with the Veils of Chaos. You will not be able to leave the world you are on until you retrieve each one. Questions?”

My overworked, stoned brain could not think of any. “Not really,” I said.

“Then good luck, and may fortune be with you, Mr. Mason,” said Rivas. “End of briefing.”

The peaceful mental high faded, and I found myself alone, seated at the picnic table. The chest was open before me; one by one, I pulled out the devices Rivas had shown me. The clamps were cold and solid beneath my fingers; I played with them a little to get their feel, then stuffed them into my backpack. The bag of batteries and belt followed, along with the hilt; I did not need these things for now.

The small ring seemed easily lost, so I decided wearing it would be the best course. Upon pushing it onto the ring finger of my left hand, the digit seemed to vanish. Given the briefing, not entirely surprising. My finger was not invisible; I couldn’t even grasp it with my other hand. A horizontal view of the area showed a cross-section of

bone and arteries within the perimeter of the metal circle, yet there was no pain or blood. My fingertip had gone numb, devoid of sensation; not unpleasant, just extraordinarily odd.

My stomach growled, so I gathered several apples from the tree and bit into one. It was sweet and tangy, with cream-colored flesh, juicy and satisfying. While chewing, I pondered the unknown future. Would I be up to the task? Was I seriously supposed to go around with a sword like some medieval knight of yore? I was unlikely to last long in a sword fight. Emilon could have at least provided a gun—or even a bow—if he felt there would be danger. From my time in scouting, I was competent with both arms; unfortunately, there was no available merit badge for swordsmanship.

When Emilon had touched my shoulder, gifting me with the knowledge of the Veils, something more had been transferred. Bits of images and shadows, hints of hidden agendas, unspecified regrets, and profound sorrows. Most apparent was his unshakable belief that, of all the people scattered throughout the Five Known Worlds, only I could assist him. He had also said as much, but could I believe such words?

There had also been a sense that my scouting, chess, and school skills would be helpful if deployed cleverly. Emilon had been very confident that there was a path toward success, if only I could find it. I would have to learn as I go; improvisation would be critical. For challenges that arose, I would adapt and overcome, like a Marine Corps cadet.

Be prepared is the Boy Scout motto; I packed several apples in case food was scarce. After urinating on a nearby tree trunk, I felt ready to embark. But where to start? Briefly, I considered beginning my venture here, on Anion, but was still uncomfortable with Emilon's actions; getting away from him motivated me to try elsewhere first.

Earth was the next thought, but my eagerness gave me pause; if I returned to my home world immediately, I might lose my nerve, dismissing these events as a vivid dream, hoping Emilon would not seek me out. Meanwhile, time would keep slipping—until Earth, too, became desolate rubble.

Though undeniable fear at the unknown journey ahead tugged at me, an undercurrent of excitement, even eagerness, had surfaced. Scouting had taught me to triumph over the unexpected; I had tackled many challenges, all of which I had surpassed. Under the guidance of Scoutmaster Hartman, I learned to make a bow out of the bounty of the forest, using only a knife. I had created fire with nothing but knowledge and my bare hands. Foraging for food and water, building shelters, wayfinding, and independence were second nature.

Survival skills were just the beginning. Scouting was also deeply about character; God, country, and service to others underpinned all aspects of the program. To complete my Eagle Scouting certification, I was required to create and deliver a project to help my community. After rounding up the junior scouts through promises and cajoling, we had cleaned all the trash from a local park and dug the pits for a donated swing set and water fountain. Helping others had always made me feel good about myself, and I could not neglect this duty now. Recognizing that Emilon had likely appealed to this part of my character, I now felt obligated to at least try my best to assist, even if I did not yet understand precisely how.

Strapping on my backpack, I donned the cloak, sealing the fabric at my neck, liking the feel of the slippery coarseness against my skin. It was a short walk back to the circular space; at the stone table, I recalled the vision of the five time stabilizers floating above it. Without them, it now seemed lonely; dusty and empty. Gripping the chalice and scalpel, I proceeded to the next trellis, the one to my

immediate right. There was no way of knowing where it led. The thorns were thick here, making the doorway all but impassable. Not a problem; I swept aside the cloak and pulled the hilt from the pack. It felt good in my hands, weighty and eager. With a twist, the blade emerged, humming and hissing, sparking with electric authority. With masculine aggression, I swept the opening and watched the spiky vines fall away like shredded noodles. The way was now clear.

After stowing the sword, I distastefully ran the scalpel across my left thumb, wincing at the sharp pain. A fine slit appeared there, followed by a welling of crimson. Maneuvering the chalice into position, I vigorously pumped my fist and squeezed a bit into the cup. Droplets swirled within as I called for the Veils of Chaos, reaching out with mind and will. The shifting vapors came readily, spiraling and obscurant, filling the passageway. Shuffling forward, the hairs on my neck prickled as energy saturated the air. The Veils, as if sensing my forthcoming action, accelerated in a kaleidoscopic frenzy. A powerful, ozone-scented wind developed, whipping furiously at my hair and cloak. After inhaling—and holding—a deep breath of fortification, I spilled the blood into the haze. Deep baritone reverberations bubbled forth; with a violent thunderclap, the vapors parted, revealing a passage. As echoes chased one another along the circular stone walls, I stared in awe at the shadowy suggestions of what lay beyond.

Tantalizing hints of reddish orange dirt; an immeasurable flat expanse with occasional sickly brush; most critically, another world. A sense of wonder and anticipation rushed through me, along with cold, sodden fear. I exhaled the latter away, put the scalpel in the goblet, placing them on the ground for later. Pulse racing, nerves alive, I stepped into the unknown.