

Jordan

We had been married six years and five months that Thanksgiving. I savored the crisp autumn morning from our big bed, enjoying the smells wafting up from the kitchen. Lisa sent our four-year-old up the stairs to wake me for breakfast. When I heard her little slippers scraping across the floorboards, I shut my eyes and pretended to be asleep.

“Daddy?” her sweet whisper called inches from my ear, “are you ‘wake?”

I pretended to snore. As expected, a wet finger went into my ear. I howled in mock shock. Sophie squealed and fled the bedroom. I caught her in the hallway, scooped her up, and threw her over my shoulder.

Downstairs, Lisa accepted my kiss as she peeled a mountain of carrots. I swung Sophie around to give her an upside-down peck.

“You got Daddy out of bed. Good job, sweetie.”

“I gave him a wet-willie again,” she giggled and scampered off to watch the Macy’s Day parade.

It was our first attempt at hosting the annual family Thanksgiving in our little Philadelphia suburban home. The event for our clan was a twenty-person affair with five veteran Thanksgiving meal preparers in attendance: two mothers, two grandmothers, and one great grandmother.

Lisa looked at me for a split-second between flying carrot wedges. “When you’re dressed, I need you to get me some Cool Whip.”

She projected a calm veneer, but the speed she was chopping things begged otherwise. A Navy Seal team seconds from the start of a mission couldn’t have been more pumped.

I ran back upstairs to change.

“And I’m out of cream cheese, too,” she called.

“How much do you need?” I yelled through the neck of my shirt.

“A large box. Get the Philadelphia brand. Your grandmother likes that.”

“Cool Whip and Philadelphia, got it.”

“And another thing of cider.”

“Cider, got it.” I bolted down the stairs two at a time.

“Not the store kind. Go to the cider place on Fagleysville Road.”

“Something about a road, got it.”

“And hurry back. I need help with the tables and chairs.”

“Can I come?”

I scooped Sophie up, relishing her little arms choking my neck. “Mommy might need your help here. You stay and watch the parade, okay?” A quick kiss and I was off.

The mini-mart had Cool Whip but was out of cream cheese. I drove to a grocery store across town. It was a mob scene inside. Twenty minutes later, I was out the door with my single purchase. It landed in the back seat beside the defrosting Cool Whip. On the way to the cider place, my cell phone buzzed.

“Sorry, the mini-mart didn’t have cream cheese, so I—”

“Daddy, the Snoopy balloon is flying away!”

It took me a minute to realize Sophie was talking about the Macy’s Parade. “Snoopy got away, huh?”

“You should see it. They let go of his strings and he flew way up. He’s bumping into everything.”

I drove to the cider place. It was an old-fashioned family-run business with a small alcove and a cash box instead of a register. Cider was dispensed from a giant storage tank through a simple

garden hose. The lady behind the counter chatted with the customer ahead of me and it was a while before she could fill my order. When she had, I strapped the cider in with the seat belt and pulled out of the parking lot.

My cell rang again. It was an all-too-familiar voice, but the words were desperate.

“Come home now,” Lisa ordered.

I was startled by her tone. And confused. What was she doing calling from a New York area code?

“Lisa? I’m on my way. The mini-mart was out of cr—”

The line went dead.

I sped up my already fast pace, then cringed as a police car flew up on my tail. At the last second, he swerved and zoomed past me. I sighed with relief. Probably chasing another speeder.

I called home. There was no answer.

I reduced the half-hour trip home to eighteen minutes, flying into our development and rushing past the tree-lined streets and 1940’s homes. As I turned onto my cul-de-sac, my heart froze. Reflecting off the windows of the corner house was the tell-tale flashing of red-and-blue emergency lights.

My heart hammered in my chest. Down the street, a half dozen police cars gathered in our front yard. Some had skidded up on the front lawn. An ambulance careened around the corner behind me and roared past, screeching to a halt in front of my driveway.

I left the engine running and ran past a cluster of neighbors. A cop stopped me cold at the edge of the drive. I tried to argue my way past. The EMTs from the ambulance pulled two stretchers out and ran up the walk. A man with a badge hanging from his neck intercepted them. A few sentences were exchanged. One of the EMTs glanced at me. His face looked grim. They stepped back, clearly not in a hurry anymore. I argued with the cop to let me through. My family was in there, for God’s sake.

The man with the badge came towards me. “Mr. Wright?”

That was when my world came to an end.

My wife and daughter were buried during a sleet storm one week before Christmas. I tried moving back into the house after the police had concluded their investigation and the insurance company had finished cleaning, but I didn't last long. I kept seeing my wife's face. My cousin found me weeping in the driveway and took me in for awhile. The hospital gave me new meds and my boss gave me more time off. Guess you don't know how many friends you have until things turn bad.

I discovered I had a lot, including an old buddy from the Navy. He called and invited me down to Costa Rica to clear my head. Actually, he called every week, asking if I'd made a decision and promising to send an extraction team if I kept saying no.

"I need you down here," he'd said.

"I'm an architect, not an archeologist." I'd countered.

"That's why I need you. We found something."

"What?"

"Can't tell you over the phone. Get your body down here and we'll show you."



It was a bumpy flight over the Gulf of Mexico. I spent a lot of time in the airplane restroom, clutching a picture of Lisa and Sophie, staring at their faces, trying to purge the memories of the trial.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, as you can see from the enlargement photos, the wife and daughter suffered multiple stab wounds to the ..."

The picture slipped from my fingers. I leaned over the little metal sink and silently sobbed my guts out.

Later, the jet taxied to its assigned gate and rolled to a stop. The buildings had been scarred by a recent hurricane. Metal siding had peeled away as if a god had tried to pry his way inside. The flight attendant announced that the jetway had been damaged by the storm and we would have to de-plane by the stairs.

I stepped out and felt the warm sun on my brow. Costa Rica was steaming hot, even in January.

If I could only be transported miraculously back in time. If

this was last summer, maybe I could have done things differently—somehow saved my family. Moved to a different house that wouldn't have been mistaken by a doped-up thief as being empty because the car wasn't in the driveway.

I pushed the reflection aside and followed the crowd down the first step, squeezing my eyes against the nightmare image disrupting my thoughts. I gripped the rail and sucked in warm tropics, anchoring myself with the scent of engine exhaust and moist air. That helped a little. It was a distinct change from frozen Philadelphia.

A long bank of windows stretched across the terminal, framing waiting families who waved to loved ones. White smiles on coffee-colored faces, their exuberance was infectious. This trip was an opportunity for me to get away from the firm, hang out with an old friend, slow down and try to rebuild.

I followed the chattering passengers to the ground. A flash of blonde hair in the windows made me freeze. The woman stood rock still behind the crowd, staring at me. My feet turned to lead.

“Lisa,” I croaked.

It wasn't the first time I'd seen her since her death. I'd seen her Christmas Eve hovering in the bathroom mirror.

I couldn't help myself. I kept staring from the last step.

The passengers pressed forward, and I stumbled to the tarmac. When I looked again, she was gone.

Coming here had been a mistake.

In a daze, I followed the passengers into the terminal. It swarmed with humanity. I'd avoided crowds for a long time. After the funeral, I'd spent Christmas holed up like a hermit in my ravaged home, eating macaroni from a pot and sleeping on the couch in front of a roaring fire, avoiding the upstairs bedroom.

Krax whistled when he spotted me going through Customs. I was loaded down with bags on both shoulders. He crossed the security boundary, ignored an irritated guard, and gave me a bear hug.

“Welcome to Costa Rica!”

I dropped my bags and returned his fierce hug. My best friend, who I hadn't seen since my wedding. Hair longer and beard stragglier, but with the same gleam in his deep-set eyes and the same pair

of tarnished John Lennon glasses he'd worn since college.

I owed him an apology. "Sorry I kept saying no to your invitation. I wasn't trying to blow you off."

He pshawed. "I was starting to wonder when you'd finally give in." His eyes filled with concern. "You look like you've been run over by a tank."

"Roger that."

"Still flashbacking?"

I nodded.

He squeezed my shoulder. "We'll get through this. You need time, friends, and the perfect change of scenery. We got all three in large quantities."

"You always could fly me out of a tight spot."

"Never lost a Seal yet," he grinned. He shouldered one of my bags. "The *salida's* this way. That's 'exit.' You'll want to brush up on your Spanish. You're staying longer than two weeks. Nope, don't start. I'm not taking no for an answer. We've been waiting a long time for you to come down here. Need your weird brain to figure out what we found. Hang onto your gear; this ain't Switzerland. Anything that isn't guarded disappears fast."

We wove through the crowd of eco tourists, business people, and returning nationals. Never call them locals, I learned.

Mounted on the ceiling, near the flights arriving and departing monitors, a flat screen displayed a well-dressed woman with a perfect smile and jet black hair. I strained to comprehend her Spanish over the din. Something about an emergency.

"What's she talking about?"

Krax focused on the monitor. The woman's face was replaced by a building collapsing into rubble. His brightened. "What to do if there's an earthquake."

"Which is?"

"Scream and run around."

We pushed through the exit, back into the blazing sunshine. I heard a loud whistle followed by someone calling Krax's name. A young man lounging beside a beat-up yellow Land Rover was the source. He had sandy blonde hair with a Dodgers cap riding high. The Rover was wedged up on the lawn between several other cars,

under the shade of a knurly tree with a trunk as wide as four men. Krax yelled back in Spanish and beckoned me to follow.

“Jordan, meet Greg. He’s here from San Luis Obispo under the guise of studying archeology, but we know he’s just here for the girls and surfing.”

Greg had the carefree smile of someone who lived in perfect weather. He shook my hand. “Krax told me what you two did overseas. Way cool.”

“Well, not everything,” Krax inserted. “I left out Paris.”

Greg’s smile faded. “Sorry about your loss, man. Can’t imagine what you’re going through.”

I liked him instantly. Then again, anyone who hung out with Krax had to be good. That, or eventually they’d get that way. Krax was infectious.

Greg tossed my gear into the back as I climbed in behind the driver’s seat. Krax rode shotgun. Greg brought the ancient truck to life with a deafening roar. He stomped on the gas and shot off the curb in reverse while I searched for a seat belt. There were none.

The narrow road swarmed with fast-moving cars and dust-covered trucks. They followed so close their bumpers practically touched. As we flew through the outskirts of San Jose, Krax turned and handed me a Dramamine.

“Take this,” he yelled.

“Why?”

“Main road to Quepos is blocked. A landslide from the hurricane.”

That didn’t explain the Dramamine, but I took it.

Krax carried on a loud conversation with us in Spanish. I followed for a while, glad for the practice. Then I fell behind when they picked up speed.

Dust blew in my face. My window was down because it no longer went up. I watched the scenery zip by as the sun washed over me, the humid air whistling past my face. Emerald green fields fenced in with a neat row of caramel-colored branches flashed by, interrupted by tangled remnants of jungle and secondary forest. The branches forming the fence had leaves all over them.

Greg pointed. “Cool, huh? When a farmer needs to fence some-

thing in, he just whacks branches off a tree and shoves them in the ground. They root on the spot, and instant fence.”

Concrete-block houses with corrugated metal doors were tucked between the fields, with heavy bars on the windows. Gas stations with open-air mini-marts were packed with people seated on shady ceramic tile patios. Young children ran through the yards, chasing chickens and skinny dogs. A roadside stand whipped past, the rough tables piled high with colorful fruit, only half I recognized. Cattle slept under a giant shade tree. A farmhouse was set far back in the middle of a field, surrounded on three sides by a deep porch. Its pink stucco walls were splashed with mud. In front, a man in a white shirt and trousers lounged in a plastic lawn chair, a toddler cradled in his arms.

I quickly looked out the other side of the Rover.

High in the hills were expensive white villas with red tile roofs. Thunderheads crested the ridge. The tallest peaks wore mantles of cottony clouds. The land was magnificent and different from home. Different was helpful. I wavered back to feeling hopeful.

Krax got a call on his cell. He talked rapidly, giving a thumbs-up, as if the person was seated next to him. He snapped the phone shut. “Good news. Laura made progress.”

“You mean she got the corner exposed?” Greg asked.

“Yep.” Krax looked back at me. “Change of plans. The Mayans are calling. We’re heading straight to the dig site.”

Greg shot a look at him. “Yeah, like it’s even Mayan.”

Krax nodded. “Exactly. To the dig.”

“You found something that isn’t Mayan?” Fatigue from traveling and not sleeping for a month sloughed off and I felt a spark of enthusiasm ignite.

We took a detour somewhere in the mountains. Only a few roads led to the coast and landslides clogged the main route. Most of the traffic opted for the same detour. Cars and trucks funneled onto the small road and pressed forward. Greg swerved to avoid debris in our lane. He jockeyed back just before an oncoming car took out our side mirror.

Everyone seemed to be moving at the fastest speed possible without causing death or dismemberment. A gleaming Mercedes

roared past and squeezed in front of us to miss an oncoming eighteen-wheeler. Greg stood on the brakes to avoid driving up the guy's trunk. He laid on the horn.

Krax chattered as if nothing had happened. We wound steadily through mountain passes flanked on both sides by fields of tattered coffee and banana trees. Jungle filled the gaps in between. The road deteriorated as we raced around hairpin turns and teeth-rattling stretches of potholed shoulders clinging to the sides of crumbling cliffs. I should have lost my lunch, but the Dramamine did its job and kept my stomach from offloading.

I dozed off for a minute. My eyelids felt like concrete, and it was almost impossible to force them open. But I needed to, because for some reason, I floated out of my seat.

Cripes, the car had gone airborne.

We landed hard. The Rover's frame groaned and the shocks bottomed out. Greg kept going straight as drivers honked in annoyance. Krax looked back and examined the road with a quizzical eye. Then his face brightened. "We didn't lose anything."

His round glasses were covered with a film of fine dust. He spun back in his seat and stabbed a finger at an intersection we were hurtling through. "Greg, turn! Turn!"

Greg stomped on the brakes and spun the wheel. "Sorry, man, I forgot we were going to the dig."

The tires squealed in protest. He overshot the intersection, fishtailed around a telephone pole, bounced over the corner of somebody's parking lot, and accelerated down a dirt road cut into thick jungle. Reddish brown dust billowed through the open windows.

Krax calmly cleaned his glasses with the front of his T-shirt. "Check this out, buddy. An old growth rainforest."

Sunlight flickered across my eyes, filtered by tall trees. We bounced along a dirt trail wide enough for only one vehicle. The lacy jungle canopy stretched above us.

I had trained in the wilderness years ago, but nothing like this. Moss and orchid-covered branches paraded by very high up. I wanted to take everything in, but as Krax had so aptly professed, I did feel like a tank had hit me.

The Dramamine pulled me back to sleep. As I drifted off, I worried about the nightmares coming back. I didn't want to scream in my sleep and freak anyone out. But all I dreamed about were strange fruit and children chasing chickens. What a relief.

"Jordan."

A hand gently shook my shoulder. The car was still. I heard birds clacking and whistling to each other deep in the jungle.

"Hey, Jordan, wake up, buddy. We're here."

I looked out the window and stared into a dense growth of glistening leaves and brown ropy vines. Splashes of red and orange flowers dangled like Chinese fireworks, their blooms serviced by wasps and hummingbirds. The air was hot, thick, and salty.

I followed them through the jungle. It may have been classified as old growth rainforest but I knew otherwise. This land had been many things in the last fifty thousand years: farmland, meadow, desert, ocean floor, searing lava. Only in the last few millennia had it been a jungle.

Krax carried a machete but only used it a couple of times to hack a stray branch. The trail was well worn. Scrapes on the trees and rocks told me heavy stuff had squeezed through here. Screeches sounded above us. Whatever they were, I couldn't spot them through the leaves. Then a troop of white-faced monkeys clambered out. They jumped up and down, shaking the thin branches and shrieking.

"What are they so mad about?"

Greg laughed. "Us. We're trespassing."

The males pulled leaves and twigs off the branches and hurled them at us. A litter of debris fell as we passed underneath. A green glob hit the dirt to my left.

"That's poop," Krax called over his shoulder. "Don't worry, they're lousy aims." He gave me an appraising look. "You'll need to buy a hat, though."

His cell phone rang. He talked in rapid Spanish and snapped it shut. "Laura went into town to get replacement parts for the drill."

"Kate went with?" Greg asked.

"Yeah, Romeo, she did."

I was about to ask who Kate was when an unexpected break in the jungle revealed a steep hillside with Brahman cattle grazing through tall grass. The large humps behind their shoulders swayed as they scrambled to give us a wide berth. Some trees had been knocked over. Those still standing dangled splintered branches with withered leaves.

“The storm was a category three,” Krax said. “By the time it got over the mountains, it had degraded to a category one: winds and rain. Lots of rain.” He pointed uphill with his machete. “Dig’s that way.”

We headed toward a tarp on tent poles stretched over a rectangular pit at the far end of a meadow. An electric fence was strung around on tree-branch fence posts to keep the cattle away. Carefully marked out lines and piles of sifted soil drew me like a kid at Christmas. Tell-tale signs of a small Mayan settlement protruded from the perfectly flat excavation pit.

I felt the timelessness of this place. I felt their presence, the people who’d called this mountain their home seventeen centuries earlier.

“Mayan village,” I said.

“Yep, Classic Period. That’s a hearth over there. Found some ceramic figurines and a stone compass bowl.”

“Any jade?”

“No such luck,” he laughed. “It wasn’t turning out to be all that rich of a site. Then the storm came and changed everything.”

“So, why are you questioning whether it’s Mayan?”

“Hold that thought.”

The study area stretched the length of a volleyball court. Farther back, I saw signs of heavy erosion. Broken tent poles and bits of old tarp lay in the weeds. We walked past an exploration trench and then descended a twelve-foot ladder. The damage from the storm was very evident. The deeper excavation must have acted like a retention basin, collecting the runoff and concentrating it at the bottom.

“How much rain did you get?”

“Greg, do you remember?”

“Twelve inches in three hours. Friggin’ Noah’s flood.”

The soft ground had eroded into an arroyo almost fifty feet deep. The sides were back-braced with a spider network of timbers. The bottom was a flat mud floor, piled with a jumble of heavy crates. Steps had been cut into the slope to allow access to the bottom.

“The crates washed down there?” I asked.

“Nope, we put them in afterwards to hide the entrance.”

Greg took a seat on a crate and pulled out his iPod. “I’ll stay up here and keep an eye out for the girls.”

Krax worked a key into a rusted padlock. “We have to keep things camouflaged from looters. Artifacts are a lucrative commodity.”

I thought of Lisa and Sophie. We had talked about going to a demonstration dig for kids in Williamsburg when Sophie got a little older.

Krax freed the padlock and tugged at the side of a crate. It was hinged like a door.

I shook the memories free and peered in. Four hardhats, climbing ropes, and various tools were stacked around the interior of the spacious crate. In the floor was an open hatch from which protruded the top of a metal ladder.

“When the storm flooded the dig, a sink hole opened.”

I stared down the ladder. Rungs disappeared into nothingness. Krax handed me a hardhat with a headlamp duct-taped to the front. It said ‘Kate’ on the rim.

“How deep is it?”

A sly smile spread across his face. “Deep enough.”

Levi

My story takes place twelve decades ago, before the cataclysm. Nothing else about me will be preserved in this vault. I refused the privilege. More important people deserved the tablet space.

My name is Levi. Before the cataclysm, I was a Guardian in the service of a nation called Javan. My job was to protect our citizens from hostile threats. There were many during those final decades. One such threat appeared during a routine search-and-destroy mission in space. It was at the conclusion of that mission that I met a remarkable man. To me, he became a brother. To my people, he became a prophet.

In those decades, the Earth was in constant danger of being hit by objects from space, both natural and artificial. My squadron's orders were to intercept a particularly large object on a collision course with Earth. It was a derelict of enormous size, possibly dating back to the early centuries of the First Age. Near Earth Objects Science had calculated the object would survive reentry and strike the Earth, causing cataclysmic damage. My orders were to intercept, salvage any useful technology, and disintegrate the rest.

My country was the most technologically advanced nation on Earth, thanks to the Nephillim. They gave us everything, from

advanced communications to improved medicine and cutting-edge military equipment. For this mission, we flew new single-seat Darts. They were small, fast, and equipped with light-, sound-, and gravity-bending technology. This rendered them invisible to our enemies, the Western Confederacy. We launched from a high altitude platform above the Javan capital, Deucalion. All indications were that we would have a routine mission. That prediction proved to be highly inaccurate.

Trying to describe space flight for a tablet etching is like trying to describe colors or music. And it's been many decades since I've flown. But at Athena's request, I'll do my best to render what it was like.

Our ships shot into the night, riding on four thin streaks of light. The weight of my armored flight suit pushed me deep into the seat. Plowing through the thick atmosphere was like being pulled up the side of a rocky mountain. My body shook and rattled until I thought my teeth would crack. The intense light from my ship's thrusters washed out my control displays. Then I exited the thick hydrosphere and emptied into the vacuum of space. The world outside the thin canopy was dead quiet, except for the ticks of micro-meteors striking the ship's shielding.

I scanned the stars for my three comrades. When a stealth squadron launches at five times the speed of sound, four small ships could scatter quickly.

I spotted Aaron, my second-in-command and best friend. He was one mile to my port side, aligned to my wingtip with a precision only he was capable of. It was a talent he never tired of describing to the female Guardians back at the Acropolis.

Aaron's wingman lagged far behind his tail. My wingman was slightly ahead. Not great flying for a rapid launch, but tolerable. Both wingmen were rookies. They'd checked out in the simulators, and this mission was their first taste of the real thing.

I rallied the squadron. They glided back into position beside Aaron and me. We were in a line formation, four hundred miles above Earth, spaced at one mile intervals, precise and primed.

Earth rolled slowly beneath me. She was beautiful in that time; a shimmering jewel of cloud-veiled oceans and green continents.

Not the shattered corpse of mud and desert we live on today.

I miss the old Earth. I never got tired of looking at her, and I weep when I contemplate what she's become. I wish I could relive those missions just so I could see her from space again. The flights were a welcome change from the more dangerous ground missions: mucking around in enemy countries, sabotaging one thing or another. Space-intercept missions were mundane by comparison. But once in a while, they delivered their share of excitement. This turned out to be one of those times.

NEOS didn't give me any details about our quarry other than its size. They weren't sure of much else. Something was blocking their ability to scan it. My ship's instruments acquired the incoming target and chirped data in my ear. A lot of the data was muddied, as if my ship had become myopic. The object had crossed the ten thousand mile no-fly boundary, making it fair game for salvage. It was coming straight toward Earth. No chance it would deflect off the hydrosphere.

I listened to the data stream and realized why NEOS had so much difficulty identifying the object. This was not a normal piece of space junk. Mostly, we just intercepted old satellites or launch cradles from Nephillim space missions. This monster spinning toward us was enormous. It was the size of a small city, bullet-shaped, and with the stern ripped open. It was larger than anything that had ever emerged out of the gloom of deep space. We'd heard legends about fantastic super ships built by the gods, drifting beyond the boundaries of our solar system. Hundreds of times larger than any derelict we'd salvaged to date. But that's all they'd been, legends.

I tuned the scanner to a higher magnification and gaped at the 3-D display. The thing rolled toward me with the sun casting a halo behind it. I needed no instruments to know what it was. They would have been useless anyway. The thing was practically invisible to my scanner even at close range.

It was the front section of an ancient spaceship, intact from nosecone to mid-ship. I did a visual estimate of the hull's thickness using an open portal for reference. The armored hull could have been a hundred inches thick. Unrecognizable equipment protruded from it, long antennae and mangled gantries. What looked like a

damaged gun turret hung from a smashed mounting a third of the way back from the nosecone. I could have stood up inside the barrel. The fact that this thing was trying to cloak itself meant advanced technology was still operating somewhere onboard.

My data library couldn't find any matches with previously encountered vessels. Material scanning of the hull yielded a date impossibly ancient. My equipment had to be malfunctioning. No ship could be that old. It would predate anything NEOS had listed—and their records went back twenty-six hundred decades.

I calculated time to atmospheric penetration, probable location of impact, and percentage of mass that would survive freefall. Not good. Eighty-two percent of that monster would survive the atmosphere and strike our world. At thirty thousand miles an hour, the impact would be strong enough to destroy a city.

My ship finished plotting an intercept course. Range and velocity displayed across my field of vision. We'd have precious little time to do our job before impact.

It would have been a lot easier if we could have made the intercept in deep space. Salvaging technology from it would have been a lot safer. But NEOS didn't allow us to travel into deep space. No one left the vicinity of Earth, period. It was a boundary created long ago by the Nephillim. A virtual shell between Earth and the rest of the universe. If left uncrossed, it kept our planet from being destroyed by the Creator, or so the ancient writings claimed. The warnings were so dire and clear even the Elder Nephillim, those rational old codgers who'd sooner believe in a fusion cannon than a Creator, had heeded the warnings.

I set course and left dayside with the others, crossing into night. The sun set behind us over the curve. The surface of Earth lit up with clusters of glittering lights. They were the cities of the enemy, the Western Confederacy, an empire spanning north and south across two continents and reaching across two more perpendicularly. In the center glowed the enormous capital city of Payahdon, a twelve-hundred-square-mile starburst of radial streets, crowded high rises, and bustling harbors.

Because space debris appeared with increasing frequency during those decades, religious zealots in my country worried that the

apocalyptic prophecies had come true. *The end of the Second Age drew near*, they shouted. But just because Nephillim space junk fell from the sky didn't mean we had to crawl into shelters. I kept my feelings behind my teeth and suppressed any notion that the nut jobs might be right. Still, the evidence mounted.

Forty decades ago, the first piece of Nephillim space junk had appeared in the night sky like a meteor and had crashed to Earth. It had narrowly missed a small village in the northern part of Maggog. Now, the debris came larger and more frequently, with the impacts more disastrous. We had to launch intercept missions on a routine basis. To the zealots, it was a warning. The Thief was coming. The five races were doomed.

Other signs gave weight to that fear. I was, and still am, a religious person, but I am not overwhelmed or easily swayed by signs and miracles. I've learned during my long life that those are tools used by both sides of the spiritual realm. I recognized the spiritual war intensifying and its poisoning influence on the corporal world of flesh and leaf. An evil had taken root in the West and now threatened to overrun the planet. The Western Confederacy spread its iron grip over vast numbers of helpless, peaceful nations. We Javans and the remaining free nations of the East were faced with a grim reality. It was the same realization the virtuous people of the First Age had faced: we had to either fight back or be exterminated. If we couldn't push the Western Confederacy back to its ancestral borders, the Creator would have to do it for us in order for some remnant of good to survive. Unfortunately, when the Creator of the Universe got involved, the power deployed at the final hour was, by necessity, devastating. Such was what the great Deuca had prophesied would happen at the end of the Second Age, whenever that was supposed to occur. No one knew, not even Deuca.

I studied the monstrous shape rolling toward my squadron. I wondered what the next mission would be. Probably to destroy the other half of this ship.

Like every Guardian, I went into missions with concentration and focus. When we said goodbye to our families and launched, we left all emotion behind. We stayed alive that way. This time, my emotions refused to obey. They chased me across the void.

A feeling of intense danger came over me. The feeling ate at my concentration.

Aaron's ship glowed in the moonlight. We had served together during many brush wars. I fought the desire to talk to him. I dared not, or the enemy might glean the signal and know we were here. Nor could I hand signal him because we were a mile apart. The distance prevented our shielding from bouncing ghost images off each other, another sure way to get a Western missile up our backside.

Anak, the feeling wouldn't quit. It clung to the back of my mind and bubbled into a thought: The most important event in my life was about to happen and I was missing it.

That made no sense. The two most important events I could think of were weddings and funerals, neither of which were scheduled in my foreseeable future. Panic gnawed at my soul.

Missing it, missing it.

Anak, what was happening to me?

I'd had a similar premonition during morning prayers. What was happening to me might be important. I knew what I had to do, despite the lack of time.

I sighed and prayed for clarity. As I relaxed and listened, my mind settled and focused. The feeling grew back into a thought. The thought grew into a certainty. The certainty solidified into words. The words moved across my mind in a rush. I was caught in its current, helpless to do anything but listen.

Behold, I send you a messenger, a man of sorrow and affliction, a fallen star to whom is given the keys to the shaft of the Abyss. He will carry My Word to My People. Guard him so my Remnant may be spared.

Like a taut rope cut, my mind released. My head banged into the panel. I gasped for breath. The vision, words, whatever they were, lingered in front of my eyes.

Nine minutes from target. I grabbed my controls. I had a job to do.

That was the moment my world began to end.

Jordan

Hardhat in place, I followed Krax down the hole. I'd seen my share of makeshift construction ladders, but this one was about as flimsy as a rainspout. It was metal, eight inches wide, with rungs as thin as my pinky. The arc of my lamp showed no bottom and I gave the descent my full attention.

Krax hummed an old church hymn. The ladder bounced in time as he led us into the abyss.

When Krax wasn't talking, he was usually humming or singing. The first time he'd stayed with us, my wife had said he reminded her of a morning disc jockey: lots of funny talk with a little bit of music played in between.

Krax got to the chorus and started singing. His deep baritone voice filled the narrow shaft. "*We're marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Ziion.* Hey, did I tell you I welded this myself?"

"No, you didn't."

"You should try it. It's easy to learn. *We're marching onward to Zion, Zion, the beautiful city on the hill.* I had no choice, though. I couldn't buy a ladder long enough. My old sponsor said we should use ropes. No way, I said. Too much moisture. They'd rot and break. Not good when you're climbing a thousand feet down. He said he was through and cut me off. We had to get part-time jobs in town just

to keep the dig going.”

A thousand feet! My boot slipped off a rung. My nose just missed getting sliced by a nasty shelf of limestone.

“Watch out for the rocks, by the way; they’re sharp. Yep, so I bought a bunch of scrap metal and had a welder in town show me the basics. You should try it, great stress release.”

“This is all one ladder?”

“Heck no. This is just the first section.”

He switched to “Yellow Submarine.” The old Beatles tune had the same rhythm as the hymn.

Krax descended with gusto, and the rungs banged against my face with renewed vigor. Then Krax’s voice changed. He sounded much farther away. I found out why a few steps later.

The narrow shaft opened into an enormous cavern. My headlamp couldn’t find the walls or floor.

“I feel like I’m falling out of the sky,” I called.

“Cool, huh?”

I came to the end of the ladder but no floor waited for me, just a slick stone ledge the size of a table. When I panned my light around the edges, I realized I was on top of a huge stalagmite. The next ladder waited for me a few feet away, just as narrow and shaky as the first.

“Did you find the next ladder, buddy?” His voice echoed off the unseen walls of the enormous cavern. —*adder buddy?* —*der buddy?* —*uddy?* —*dy?*

“Yep, I’m good.”

As I descended, my headlamp illuminated hundreds of towering stalagmites. Krax switched back to humming. I didn’t know how long I went down. I had no reference of progress other than smooth rock slipping past my face. Then the ladder stopped bouncing.

“We’re here,” he said.

I touched bottom a couple of minutes later and found my footing on the slick rock.

I smelled mud. Water dripped somewhere. Wind moaned through unseen tunnels. The cave felt alive, like we were standing in the belly of an enormous whale. The floor tilted at crazy angles, curving around the stalagmites in great rolls. I followed Krax over

an incredible landscape. There were chisel marks where they'd marked a trail, but a trail to what?

Krax crouched on a stone wave and switched off his lamp. His voice was pregnant with anticipation. "I wanted you to see it the way we did the first time. Shine your light over there."

I played my beam across the far wall of the cavern. "What did you guys find? Some kind of cave painting?" I joked.

Then I saw it. It was suddenly very hard to speak.

It towered five stories before me. Thick limestone deposits encased the edges, as if the cavern wall had molded itself into a frame. I stared at a structure made of boulders, each the size of an irregular billboard, like a massive jigsaw puzzle fitting perfectly together. The wall sloped away from me, tapering the higher it went. My mind struggled to accept what I saw and I stated the obvious. "Polygonal-shaped masonry."

"I believe the proper term is cyclopean."

"Is this what I think it is?"

"You tell me."

I approached it reverently. Surface carvings materialized on the face of the ancient stones as my light sharpened the sloping facade. I saw animals, anthropoids, phonetic lettering, and hash marks.

"They look Celtic," I gasped. "Almost Ogram." I stepped forward to touch them. "No, wait, they're Proto-Basque. But that's impossible."

Krax grabbed my shoulder and pulled me back. "Whoa, cowboy. Look before you leap."

He tilted his light down. I stood on the edge of a chasm hundreds of feet deep. I panned down the enormous stones as far as my lamp would reach and spotted scaffolding surrounding a perfect ninety-degree corner. Razor sharp and precise. The angle of the two walls appeared to be sloping at about fifty degrees. I wondered if they were in fact fifty-one degrees, fifty-one minutes and fourteen seconds. That would be too good to be true.

My words sounded calm but my heart was in my throat. "I'm looking at a pyramid, aren't I?"

He put his hands on his hips and stared proudly at his prize. "After our sponsor quit, we spent all we had on the excavation and

the ladders. For a while, all we could do was photograph the darn thing. Then Shamel showed up with his sizable Swiss bank account. Now we got penetration radar, heavy-duty drills.” He pointed at a tunnel carved along one side of the wall. “Last week, we reached the back side. Laura found another corner. Yes, you’re looking at a pyramid. The first one to be discovered in Costa Rica.”

“What’s it doing all the way down here?”

“We were hoping you’d know.”

“Obviously, it was buried somehow.”

He nodded and stroked his beard, as if this constituted a profound insight.

“The next question would be who built it,” I said. “It can’t be Mayan.”

He pointed at the stonework. “Right. They didn’t use polygonal stones. I was thinking Inca, but ...”

“The Inca didn’t build their cities. They said they only repaired them. The polygonal foundations predate their civilization. And there aren’t many examples of pyramids with polygonal stones.”

“Lake Titicaca has one.”

I pulled out my infrared digital camera and began filming the carvings. “I thought Greece had the only example.” I jotted down the date and time of the photos in case my computer messed up the time stamping. “It isn’t Toltec.”

“It isn’t Olmec, either. They built round pyramids.”

“And, of course, it’s not Aztec.”

He said it at the same time I did. “Because they were lousy masons.”

“It’s a shame the carvings are so worn.” I panned my lamp across a row. “I can’t make out what any of these animals represent. That might be an elephant.”

“Looks like a blob to me. Shamel ordered a stronger radar unit. It’ll arrive next month, provided it doesn’t get stolen in Customs.”

He led me down a ledge to the drilled tunnel. His eyes were wide with excitement. “I can’t wait to get inside this baby.”

“It’s hollow?”

“Laura just confirmed it today.”

I put my compass on the ground and lined it up with the face

of the wall. “I read about one in Mexico. Some Buddha statues were found inside.”

“Balanku,” Krax said. “Kate runs that site. I saw them; pretty freaky. If there is another pyramid hidden within this one, then its carvings might be better preserved. From them, we might be able to date the pyramid. That’s what I really want to know; how old this sucker is. I mean, buried this deep in the earth, it could be—”

My compass wavered and then froze precisely where I thought it would. “Twenty-six thousand years old,” I said.

His headlamp whipped around on me.

I shrugged in the glare. “Give or take a century.”

Levi

It was time. I broke communication silence and called out to my squadron. “Flight, Lead.”

Aaron’s voice was confident as usual. “Lead, Two.”

“Lead, Three. Lead, Four,” the rookies called. Excitement edged their voices.

“Roll out and follow me into the target’s wake. On my mark, we eject, dispose, and drop. Boots on metal in three minutes.”

“Understood,” they said.

They mirrored my track across the void. We peeled off in split-second intervals and pointed our noses into the ragged stern of the ancient starship.

Data flashed over my face gear, identifying probable locations of recoverable tech inside the hull. Other readouts tracked the relic’s increasing speed and decaying trajectory. It fell at an ever sharper angle as the Earth’s gravity reclaimed her prodigal child.

Millennia ago, this massive ship had launched into space, one of a thousand such ships—if one believed the legends—and hurled itself into a desperate war between gods. I shuddered to think of the weaponry used against this magnificent craft. How many souls had died when she’d been ripped in two? How many sailors still lay entombed in her carcass? I knew what race they’d been; and despite

that, I still felt sympathy for them. It wasn't the sailors I held responsible for the insanity of the First Age. It was their leaders.

The spinning hull knifed into the atmosphere and ignited. Thin trails of smoke streamed past us as we closed in on the wreck. Beyond the ragged circle of metal spread a panoramic view of the night side, a vast sweep of continents edged in lights, bounded by dark oceans. We were above the heart of the Western Confederacy of Ephraim Nations, directly over the capital. The vast megalopolis glowed through a swirl of clouds. Its streets fanned out in multiple starbursts across a wide plain. She was Payahdon, the Confederation's enormous capital, and this monster was aimed straight for her.

A searing flash lit up the rim of the hull. My optics went instantly black to protect my retinas.

One of the rookies whistled. "Anak! What was that?"

"Something exploded inside the hull," I said.

"Old munitions," Aaron added.

"The target has broken in half," I said. "Clean break, full separation. Two and Three: land on the closer section, designate Beta. Four, you're with me. We intercept Alpha."

"Understood," they replied.

We split into pairs. The hull had come apart along a rim seam, birthing two distinct shapes; one a bullet-like nosecone that could have covered a stadium, and the other a cylinder that could encompass ten city blocks. The outer curve glowed red as the streamers of smoke thickened spaceward. The two sections twisted and rotated about each other in a dizzying ballet of metallic splendor. If they hit Payahdon, they would impact with the weight of five million tons each.

NEOS contacted me. A rapid display of data streamed across my field of vision as the scientists analyzed what I'd broadcasted. We'd gotten close enough for our ground controllers to defeat whatever cloaking this relic had used to shield itself. I read the intelligence summary and informed my team.

"NEOS found a scroll that confirms the identification of the artifact. It's a First Age Ephraim Ship of the Line, or what's left of it. As you can see from the highlighters flashing on your screens,

it's got plenty of tech on it. Don't get greedy. Just grab what your sensors identify as the most important and shoot it up to the rally point. Set charges for full hull disintegration. Remote detonate only on my command. Are we clear?"

All three confirmed.

We jettisoned from our tiny crafts. They dissolved into dust. This prevented the recovery of any sensitive technology by the enemy in case something went wrong with our mission. The Confederacy had stolen enough of our military know-how already.

A Javan stealth retriever plane headed for our rally point. It would be on station at precisely the same time we would. That is, if all went according to plan.

We dropped into the hull sections in nothing but our armored flight suits. I fired my grapples into the inner curve of the nosecone and reeled myself in. I hit the bulkhead, stood up, and looked for my squad's ID signals on my readout. Aaron and Three were safely aboard the other fragment. Four was on the opposite side of the hull from me.

Running along the inside bulkhead, I ignored the dizzying way the earth and sun seemed to chase each other across the night. Four maintained pace. He hopped across ragged tears in the thick metal, which flashed shafts of light each time the sun traveled beneath us. Soon, he was out of sight as the mangled decks and half-charred walls filled the space between us.

I dodged twisted struts and girders and ducked into a wrecked cabin section, where I found a giant spacesuit wedged under a heavy beam. It bore the markings of an officer. The armored suit towered above me three times my height. A body was still in it. I climbed hand over hand up the tattered armor and searched the shattered helmet. A giant skull stared back. Pieces of burned, hardened flesh clung to white bone.

I felt inside the rim of the helmet for any technology. According to legend, First Age officer helmets held an array of mind-control gadgets. My bosses would definitely want to reverse engineer those toys.

The three-ring insignia on his chest indicated the ancient country of Raphaim, the sworn enemy of my ancestors. Nothing

remained of his country now except legend.

I slapped a detonation charge on his chest. In a few minutes, nothing would remain of him either. Payback for starting an insane war that had almost destroyed the Earth centuries before my birth.

Flames shot up through a hole near my boots. Time to leave.

Ahead was another cabin section. A strange shape shimmered in the flames. It looked like a huge insect leaping and twitching in the heat.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. My readout indicated it was the source of the jamming we'd detected during our approach.

"Lead, Four."

"Four, Lead," I said.

"I've recovered as much tech as I can. My charges are set."

"Understood. I have one more area to check."

"Do you need assistance?"

"No. Lift off and join the others at the rally point."

"Understood. Lifting off now."

Four detached and rocketed into the night sky. He would be too small a target for enemy tracking stations to distinguish from the enormous fireballs plunging straight at their city.

Aaron and Three checked in and then lifted off for the rally point. So far, the mission had gone smoothly.

Too bad it didn't stay that way.