

Second Birth, J.F. Althouse

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CHAPTER ONE

SARAH

I followed the path through tangled orchids and stepped onto the lava sand beach, my carry-on bag still slung over my shoulder. A weathered boulder twice the height of a man stood at the waves' edge in the shade of a mango tree. Shamel believed my husband would re-appear near that rock. How he knew didn't matter to me. The stone anchored me, an irrational hope in the face of so much uncertainty.

I surveyed the edge of the world. Waves rolled past volcanic cliffs. Silvered deadwood littered the shoreline. I felt like them, washed up on this beach, an unworthy survivor of the storm of storms, the end of the Second Age. Jordan had been the reason why I stood on this spot, still taking breaths after billions of people had perished.

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I tried to tear my eyes from the turbulent horizon but couldn't. I should return to Shamel's mansion soon. Supper was at 1800 hours. He had adopted the Swiss custom of punctuality. A minute late and he would dispatch half his staff to find me. He worried so easily.

The latest refugees from the Second Age had fallen out of the sky and landed in the ocean, instead of on the beach. Some had drowned before we could reach them. Shamel had speculated that it had something to do with a stretching of the celestial chord between the ages. The sun and its dark twin were pulling apart. I feared I'd miss Jordan's flailing arms even though the sky hole hadn't appeared.

I brushed the tangled hair from my face and inhaled the salt spray as the surf pounded curling breakers across the brown sand. I dropped my backpack beside the boulder while a white-face monkey chattered from a nearby branch. The afternoon sun blinked through swiftly moving clouds, drifting toward its plunge behind the Pacific.

The ten-day trip to Paracas, Peru had been my chance to get away and recharge. It had been nice to visit Laura's home, meet her extensive family, and see the enigmatic El Candelabra for myself. But I felt far from recharged. My singular thought was to remain on this beach, keep vigil, and pull Jordan from the sea the second he hit the water. *Oh God, make him appear!*

Shamel had warned me it wouldn't happen quickly. Unlike the rest of us who'd torn the time fabric to flee to this age, Jordan had to retrace his cosmic trespass, mending his way home. Such a crossing could only happen with precision. He had to remain in the Second Age at least the same amount of time he'd been with me, from the moment he'd crawled out of the Embassy pond to the moment he'd sent me here.

That was the reality we understood from the Nephillim. But what if the Nephillim were wrong? They'd been wrong about other things. If it hadn't been for Jordan, none of us would be

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here, including most of the human race of the Fourth Age. Their ancestors wouldn't have survived if Jordan hadn't delivered the warning on top of the Sacred Mountain.

Would deliver. It was hard to remember time wasn't linear. It was square. All four ages happened at the same time, a cosmic swirl of interrelated events: past changing present, future changing past, present reeling through both. It only felt sequential, just as the dreamer of a thousand adventures discovers upon waking that he's slept only a moment.

Refugees of the Second Age were still arriving, with no rhyme or reason to their order. Shamel said it was because the journey was through a nexus, a bottleneck, a bead on a *migramah*. Pushing through that barrier required the force of will and the pull of others. When, where, and how we landed on this side was dictated by math nobody remembered. So far, seven civilians who'd jumped were unaccounted for, including Jordan and little Liv-ya. They could have appeared in remote places and not survived long enough for us to know. Or they could still be crossing.

I kicked off my travel sneakers, gathered my dress about my knees, and walked down the beach. The surf swept past my ankles and surged up my shins. I washed grime from my face, remembering the last time I'd been with my beloved.

I closed my eyes to see his face: Jordan carrying me to the Abyss, hurling me with the strength of desperation into the yawning mouth of the shaft, shouting as a tidal wave cleaved the clouds, "*I love you.*" The next moment, I lay in an English field, surrounded by sheep.

I wiped the surf from my face, smoothed my hair back, and stood up. Rhythmic splashes sounded behind me. Guess Laura had found me.

Relishing her concern, I forced a smile and turned. "Missed me already?"

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A thin man in a rumpled business suit stared back at me. His trousers were soaked to the knees.

“Good evening, Your Highness,” he said, his eyes sweeping hungrily over my body.

I backpedaled deeper into the surf. “You’re the diplomat from the party.”

He sneered. “You think you can escape us just by changing ages?”

A large wave smacked me across the back, hurling me toward him. He raised clawed fingers as if to impale me. I fought the tidal surge and tried to scream, but nothing came out. He lashed at my face.

“Stop,” Laura yelled.

His fingers froze inches from my eyes, as if Laura had somehow thrown a rope around his wrist. His face was contorted in fear. He fought against the invisible restraint, cursing me while the undertow pulled me away. I sidestroked across the current and gave him wide berth, then struggled ashore as waves pounded the beach. He kept his eyes on me as I choked up seawater and staggered to my feet.

“Turn around,” Laura commanded.

The man obeyed, cursing and spitting, still staring at me.

“Come to me,” she said.

“No,” he growled.

“You have no choice.”

He lurched through the foam like a marionette with its head twisted sideways, until he stood obediently before her. She touched his forehead. “Be still.”

He collapsed on the sand. Laura knelt beside him and spoke quietly. I stumbled to her side, heaving from the hard swim. Looking at him made me dizzy.

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“Keep back, Sarah. I have to concentrate.”

My legs buckled. I collapsed and knocked her over.

The young man sprang to his feet. Laura untangled herself and held up a hand. He froze at the sight of her spread digits, then turned and fled down the jungle path. His soaked pants flapped as he darted around a boulder.

“We have to catch him,” Laura cried and took off after him.

I staggered behind her. “He’s too fast.”

I rounded a rock formation in time to see the man plow straight into Krax. Krax wrapped his arms around the man’s waist and toppled him. In one swift motion, he grabbed the diplomat’s collar with one hand and his pants with the other, and slammed him against the side of the rock. Krax placed his knee under the man’s rear, lifted him, and leaned hard against him. He grinned as we caught up. “Hey, guys!”

The diplomat bucked. Krax pushed the man’s face against the granite, his mouth contorted into a pucker. Krax panted back at us. “Good thing I followed you, huh?”

“Nice moves,” Laura said.

“I never told you I worked in a psyche ward, did I?” He indicated his back pocket. “Babe, fish out my cell phone and call Shamel’s security.”

Laura motioned for me to keep back and approached the man. “That won’t do any good.”

The diplomat’s eyes grew wide with fear. He struggled against Krax’s hold.

Laura touched his forehead. “Be still.”

His body went limp. Krax shifted his foot to keep him upright. “How’d you do that?”

“Let go of him, honey.”

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Krax let go and the man fell. Laura followed him down, never pulling her hand off his temple. “What is your name?”

The diplomat’s lips moved like a landed fish. “I am the assistant to the ambassador of Spain.”

“I’m not talking about the person you’ve infected. What is *your* name?”

The chatter of the jungle went silent. The waves stilled. An unearthly chorus reverberated from his lips as if echoing out of a distant canyon. It clarified into words. “We are three.”

“Names, *por favor*. Now!”

The man’s lips spat out three horrible names I will never repeat. Even Krax, who couldn’t possibly recognize these ancient terrors from Anakim legend, shuddered. Laura crossed herself and took a breath.

Three voices hissed from the unconscious man: one male, two female. “What are you going to do to us?”

“Send you where the Law requires.”

The surf surged.

“No, let us go somewhere else!”

“There is nowhere else,” Laura said sadly. The large breakers crashed on the rocks.

“Let us go into that iguana.”

“It’s time,” she said.

“Nooooo!”

Their cry was swallowed in whistling winds bending palms. Laura shifted her touch to the man’s forehead and spoke too softly for me to hear. Pressure pushed me to the ground as if

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the world was retreating from these unseen creatures. I cringed at their collective violence, their rage. My heart felt like a stone. I collapsed in the sand.

The man thrashed. Laura kept her hand pressed against his head while he kicked and shook. Krax grabbed his legs.

“No, Krax!” Laura cried.

Krax gasped and went limp. The diplomat’s eyes flew open. He ripped Laura’s hand from his face and kicked Krax into the boulder. Laura grabbed one of the man’s legs and held on as he dragged her across the ground, toward me. Her eyes were closed and her lips moved silently.

I tried to get up but my body wouldn’t obey. The terror I hadn’t felt since that last night in the Second Age flooded me now.

No, please, I prayed, not now.

“Praying ... will ... do ... nothing,” the voices hissed at me. “We will have you.”

He desperately clawed across the sand. Laura held on like a stubborn anchor. He weakened and his fingers bled. A sick smile twisted across his face. “Jordan never crossed. Babla stopped him. We saw. We were there.”

“No,” I cried.

“Don’t listen to them,” Laura snapped. “They feed on lies.”

The man seemed to gain strength from my despair. He lurched closer. Blood dripped from his eyes and ears. His grimace stretched into a triumphant smile. “The wave swept him away. He died in a sea of mud.”

He lunged for my foot. Laura shouted something in a primordial language and he shuddered in agony, clutching his hand to his chest. “Others will find you.” His eyes closed. “We are Legion. We ... are ... many.”

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He writhed in agony, then lay still, his fingers a hair's breadth from my foot. Krax moaned and rolled onto his back, holding his arm. "Oh crap, I think he broke my wrist!"

Laura crawled to my side. She pulled me away from the prostrate man. "Are you all right?"

I clung to her and nodded, staring at the diplomat from the safety of her arms. He breathed slowly. "How did you know to do that?"

"She's Catholic," Krax said, nursing his wrist.

"He's okay now; they're gone," Laura said. "He was infected with three Spirits of the Dead. He'll wake up and remember nothing."

"What he said about Jordan ..."

"Were all lies, *kani*," she insisted. "Spirits of the Dead say whatever they want to fool others into becoming like them."

"What if they were right?"

"Jordan is not dead," she stated. "How could they have seen what they claim and survived to tell it?"

"Because it hasn't happened yet," I said. A sudden breeze through my wet clothes made me shiver. "I'm so cold."

Laura laid me down. The palms shifted overhead. Sunlight and shadow danced before the sky. The palm fronds tinkled like glass chimes. A shadow drew near. It pulled me in.

"I can't move my wrists," I said.

"Sarah, hold still," Laura said from far away. Fluids began to drip on my chest. They started to burn.

"Jordan, wake up," I cried.

CHAPTER TWO

LEVI

We followed the medical convoy south over the final ridge between Tevleh and Javan. The healing encampment stretched the length of a busy airfield. Retrievers carrying wounded from multiple fronts hover-taxied to their assigned landing zones. Leg extensions pushed out from their hulls and dust billowed against the perimeter shields as the ship's landing gear pressed into the rippling grass. I looked back from my seat at the long train of incoming Retrievers. Their approach lights flared above the Tevleh Mountains, grim evidence of the desperate battle being waged on our border.

We landed in a priority zone next to a Critical Needs tent. Aizah, Diago, Aaron, and I escorted Jordan's battered body across the field, into it. We kept our weapons at the ready. This forward base was close enough to the fighting to feel the ground concussions through my armored boots. A healer I didn't recognize and his techs waited where the *Olympus*' Critical Care Team should have been standing. The techs swarmed to Jordan's side and transferred him to a waiting table, while the healer approached me and nodded.

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“Where is the team from *Olympus*?” I asked.

“Aerial bombardment has delayed their flight. I will oversee the patient’s treatment.”

Healing equipment crawled overhead into position and dropped feeder tubes into his waiting palm. He slapped transfer clay onto Jordan’s feet. Orange fluid coursed down from the equipment into the sticky mound. So far, he seemed confident in his work as he directed the fusing of bones and the regeneration of lost skin.

Aaron groused over what had happened at the rally point with the ambassador and the Mestran Guardians. “I can’t believe you let Numu take Suri.”

“I had no choice,” I said. “She revived at the jump point with no residual injuries.”

“What were Numu and Amon doing in a battle support zone anyway?” Aizah asked.

“Same thing we were,” I said. “Rescuing civilians who didn’t belong there.”

“Amon couldn’t rescue his finger from a shut door,” Diago quipped.

I turned and faced them. “Agreed, but what choice did I have? She’s Mestran. She’s in Numu’s charge. End of options.”

Jordan groaned. The healer bent over his face and ran a fast scan.

“How is he?” Aizah asked.

“Not sure,” the healer said, motioning to the techs. Privacy screens were moved into position. He pointed to a glowing boundary line around the warming table. “He’s not responding to the feeders. I need you all to stay back, please, so we can work.”

Aaron took Aizah’s hand and drew her away. She bit her lip as Jordan’s face turned ashen. “Why isn’t he responding to the fluids?”

The healer looked at a floating display of Jordan’s organs. “Does he have any residual wounds?”

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“None, sir,” a tech said. “All major organs are completely regenerated, but for some reason they’re losing vitality.”

“What would cause that?” another tech asked.

“Sit him up,” the healer said.

They pulled Jordan into a sitting position, with his legs dangling over the floating table. His torso convulsed as he retched on the ground. Aizah and Aaron rushed to his side and held him steady.

“What’s happening to him?” one of the techs asked.

“It’s called vomiting,” I said as they struggled to keep Jordan vertical. “It happens to primitives living on the ice.”

“Why does it happen?”

“He’s sick,” Aaron said.

“What do you mean sick?” the healer inquired.

Aaron and I tried to explain Jordan’s condition, how his body was under relentless attack by microbes mistaking him for a fresh corpse in need of decomposition.

The healer was unimpressed. “I read opinion papers concerning the premature aging of northern primitives. But I disagree with the conclusion. Microbes don’t attack living tissue. He must have some other internal injury or having an adverse reaction to the fluids. We have to run tests.”

“There’s no time,” I said. “If you can’t treat him, I request you transport him to a facility that can.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

I took a step closer, “Make it possible.”

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He tilted his nose at me. “I am in charge of this base and I have perfectly fine equipment and staff. The primitive shall stay. I’ll figure out the appropriate treatment in due course. Now, kindly leave me to my work.”

Aizah grabbed his smock and pulled his head down to her level. “He’s not injured; he’s *sick*. New medical term; learn it.”

He struggled to free himself from her armored grip and she let him go at precisely the right moment. He toppled into a tray, scattering utensils with a crash.

“Oops,” she said.

Diago’s eyes were as wide as his grin. Aizah stood over the healer with a fist on her hip. She offered a hand to help him up, with the weapon attached to her wrist pointed directly at his nose. He hesitated to take her offer.

“Transport him now, or do I tell Athena why a very important citizen died because a ground-sucking healer refused a transport request?”

“You are being most unreasonable.”

She tapped her open helmet and a com window came up. “Tell you what; why don’t you complain to her directly and save time?”

His face paled as he waved her off. She took one step back, enough for the techs to rush in and help the healer to his feet. He straightened his smock. “Just what does her Excellency suggest I do?”

“Prep Jordan for transport to *Olympus*,” I said. “Now.”

“Use my only suspension chamber on this primitive?” he said.

“Where are you from, Healer?” Aaron asked. “Payahdon?”

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He was shocked at the reference to the enemy's capital. "Certainly not. I am Senior Healer to the Phut High Council. I am on loan during this time of deep distress."

"That explains it." Aaron griped. "Primitives aren't welcome in your country."

"Who are you people?" he demanded.

"You follow current events?" Aaron inquired. "Embassies getting overrun? Royals rescued? Enemy capitals blowing up?"

The healer looked at me for the first time and did a double-take. "You're the Guardian who rescued the Princess and—" He looked at Jordan with dawning recognition, mouthing the Phutian equivalent of Anak. "He's the primitive who fell from the sky?"

"Correct," I said.

"The one everyone thinks might be from the future?"

"You're catching up," Diago said.

"Athena is counting on his knowledge of the future to turn this war around." I pressed my armored finger against the man's collarbone. "Now, are you going to prep Jordan for suspension or would you rather spend the rest of your life recharging heal sticks?"

"In a swamp," Aizah added.

"By hand," Aaron said.

"You heard them," the healer blustered. "Get this civilian prepped for suspension."

The techs scrambled. The screens slid aside and the transfer chamber walked through the gap.

"What's it doing on legs?" Aaron asked.

A tech grunted as they jostled it into position next to Jordan's bed. "Too heavy for just the floaters."

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Jordan woke up and noticed the chamber as it lowered down even with his bed. He seemed to swallow back fear. Aizah wiped his face with a cloth and said something to him in Engel. I still struggled with the ancient dialect.

I motioned the rest of my team back so Jordan only had one person in view. Aizah talked to him compassionately as the techs went about their work.

“What is she saying?” I asked.

“She’s explaining the suspension process,” Aaron said. “I think.”

“He doesn’t seem too excited about it,” Diago remarked.

“Would you be?” I asked.

“Have you been through it?”

“Once,” I replied. “Not something I’d care to repeat.”

Jordan became agitated, while Aizah soothed him. He reached for the open edges of the chamber and she snapped at him. He quieted and obediently kept his hands inside.

“Woman’s touch,” Aaron smiled. “Ten men couldn’t have done that.”

“I wish that healer had tried,” Diago said. “Jordan’s got excellent aim.”

Jordan said something that included Suri’s name. Aizah took his hand and spoke rapidly.

“He’s asking about Suri now,” Aaron said to me.

“I gathered that much.”

“Suspension fluids are starting,” Diago said. “This is where it gets cold, right?”

Jordan gripped her hand and whispered desperately. Aizah bent down to hear him better. She nodded and answered him.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “What’s he want?”

Aaron looked back and forth between Jordan and us. “No clue, Chief.”

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Aizah nodded solemnly and said something with finality, which Jordan seemed to accept. He let her hand go and lay still. She gently pressed his arm down and fussed with the sheet while she talked. Jordan had trouble responding. His body turned blue.

“I just remembered something,” I said.

“What’s that, Chief?”

“Diago, do you still have Jordan’s backpack?”

“Yeah.” He pulled it out from his weather cape.

I took it and approached the suspension chamber. The healer knew better than to warn me back. I unzipped the backpack and showed Jordan its contents. Then I put the backpack in the personal effects locker on the outside of the chamber. I pulled the drawing Jordan had done of his wife and daughter and placed it next to his head. He struggled to turn so he could see it. His neck cricked. I cringed, remembering how much it had hurt when I’d done it.

He strained to speak, his breath puffing onto the crystal side of the chamber. “Thank you,” he croaked in my language.

“You’re welcome,” I said in Engel and touched his shoulder. He probably couldn’t feel it but I felt compelled to try. He had a long path ahead of him. I prayed Athena would know what to do to save him.

Aizah gave him a Trahl kiss on the forehead, whispering something in his ear. The techs closed the lid. We stood vigil as the suspension process pulled him down into successive levels of near death. When the suspension process was complete, his body would contain less vitality than an acorn.

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A commotion erupted on the far end of the tent. I spotted a flash of blonde hair race inside, followed by two civilians and an entourage of Mestean Guardians in full battle armor trying to keep up without knocking stuff over.

“Stop giving me orders, Amon,” Suri said. She skidded into the middle aisle, looking desperate. She swerved around one healing station and past the next, searching the faces of the wounded, cringing at those who didn’t have faces.

Diago shouted and waved. Suri locked on him and bolted down the aisle, her hair sailing behind her sweating face. Healers and techs backed out of her way. Amon stumbled in her wake, babbling the whole time. Numu panted as he tried to keep up. To my amazement, the Mestean Guardians trotted obediently in formation behind him, as if they were his private army. A new insignia was on their shoulder plates: a lion on a black background.

I flashed Ground Com about the situation. They advised caution. Things had changed in Mestean during my absence. The relations between the two ancient allies had become strained, partly due to the pair of royals racing toward me.

Suri spotted the suspension chamber and Jordan inside it. The healer extended his arm in greeting. “Your Highness, we are honored—”

She pushed him aside and pressed her face against the armored crystal. “Jordan! Jordan, can you hear me?”

“He can hear you,” Aizah assured.

“He blinked his eyes,” Suri said.

Numu and Amon approached. The Mestean Guardians fanned out behind them, weapons charged. Aaron and Diago looked at me. I sent a message to their visors to stay calm but to keep their weapons ready.

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“Good to see you’re alive, Levi,” Numu said with no trace of sincerity.

“You too, Ambassador.”

He looked around the tent and then at the chamber. “What is that thing?”

“Suspension chamber,” the healer said.

Numu took a step toward it and I politely blocked his path. “Keep away from the patient, sir”

Numu looked at the chamber, then assessed my glowing weapons. He held his ground, although sweat beaded his receding hairline. “Why is the chamber armored?”

“The suspension process reduces the inside temperature to near absolute cold,” a tech explained. “It has to be armored to withstand the thermal stress.”

Numu seemed nervous about something. “You Highness, we must go now.”

“But Jordan—”

“He’s perfectly fine. You must leave this good healer to his work.”

“We have to get back to Mestre,” Amon said. “The Ra is expecting us at court.”

“So, go already,” Suri said. “I’m staying.”

“No, you’re not.”

That’s sensitive, Aaron sent to my visor.

Amon grabbed Suri’s arm and tried to pull her away. She resisted. Numu took her other arm. Aaron knew better than to interfere but Diago didn’t. He rushed in and rounded on Amon with his fist. I grabbed him by the cape just before he connected with the back of the royal’s head. I sent an alert to the other Guardians waiting by the Retriever. Aaron relieved Diago of his weapons and put him in a controlled hold with one arm around his chest.

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The Mestran Guardians swarmed to get between Amon and us. Javan Guardians materialized around the Mestrans. Weapons came loose from leg holders.

“Stand down, sir,” I said to my Mestran counterpart.

“You are threatening His Highness,” he said. “We will fire unless you lower your weapons.”

“This is Javan territory,” I said, fighting the adrenaline to stay focused. “We’re in charge of their security.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Lower your weapons!”

“We’ll not yield!”

“What are you idiots doing?” Aizah yelled. She pointed at the readout panel on the suspension chamber. “Jordan is trying to wake up. You’re killing him.”

Suri shook Amon and Numu off.

“Brother,” I said, “Last chance.”

“Everybody, just stop!” Suri yelled. “And stop aiming those things at me.”

The Mestran Guardians obeyed instantly. I nodded at the Javan Guardians. We lowered our weapons.

“They weren’t aiming at you,” Diago grunted through Aaron’s glove.

“Quiet, Diago,” she said. To Amon’s delight, she took his hand and faced us. “I thank you, Guardians of Javan, for saving my life. I and my Guardians will now withdraw. Numu, order them to sheath their weapons.”

“Order your Guardians?” Aaron whispered.

“Quiet,” I said.

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Suri cast a final look at Jordan. She touched her hand to her chin in farewell and walked away.

“Not a moment too soon,” Numu said, looking pointedly at me. “May our paths never cross again.”

“Don’t count on it,” I said.

Numu barked at the Guardians. They jumped like kept dogs and hustled out of the tent. The Mestran shuttle lifted off while the hatches were still closing.

“Suri’s in danger,” I said.

“Jordan made me promise to guard her,” Aizah said.

“Do it.”

“Can I go, too?” Diago asked.

I looked at Aizah and she shrugged. Diago grinned and she smacked his shoulder armor. “Do exactly what I say.”

“No hitting the prince,” I said.

“Unless it’s absolutely necessary,” Aaron said.

Aizah and Diago cloaked. Diago’s face was still visible when he turned and ran down the aisle. His head bobbed like a floating specter.

“Diago!” Aizah’s disembodied voice shouted. “Helmet!”

“Sorry,” he said and his head vanished.

The healer finished checking Jordan’s suspension chamber and confirmed that he was okay. I looked around the tent. The other healers went back to work on their wounded patients. Retrievers continued to land and off-load more.

“Something’s wrong,” I said.

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“Numu was in a hurry to get out of here,” Aaron said.

“You scanned him for covert transmissions?”

“A dozen times while we stood here.” He pointed to the scanner hanging above my head disguised as a vitality booster. “Not a peep.”

“He didn’t like that Jordan was in an armored chamber.”

“Anak, we’re about to be attacked.”

I brought Ground Com up on my visor. *Attack imminent. Divert remaining inbound Retriever flights to other healing encampments.*

We see no sign of enemy—

The link went dead.

CHAPTER THREE

JORDAN

A long pool stretched to the foot of a man-made mountain, while a river thundered down its stepped flanks, plunging through wisps of cloud. I was carried to the summit by a giant child into a blurry garden. She danced across wet stone. Blonde hair, deer eyes, glittering silks, and smudged feet. With a skip and a twirl, her enormous cupid face orbited mine. A large red jewel shimmered between her eyes, hanging too low from a headband that was too large. She pushed the fiery jewel back above her soft eyebrows.

She took me deep into the garden. Her laughter echoed off a stone roof shading the summit. A square spring frothed at the peak's heart. I was flung high above cellophane-leaf trees. As I fell, another voice whispered, "Tell them to drink and live."

I landed in the giant girl's palm. She cradled me and placed me in a hole, then took off her jewel and laid it beside me. A stone slid across the hole, hiding her face, while her voice echoed, "Jordan, wake up!"

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I tried to push the stone off but my wrists were restrained by thick straps. It took a moment for the remnants of the dream to fade. There was no stone, just impenetrable darkness. I lay on cold metal. My eyes strained to see something. My lungs sucked in air as if they hadn't inflated in ages. Why did it hurt so much to breathe?

I fought back panic. The scent of verdant mold hung heavy in the damp air; that and the smell of someone in need of a bath.

A harsh *clack* and a bank of lights came on, blinking rapidly on a vertical wall beyond my feet. My toes were silhouetted against the rippling lights. A hot mound of clay clung to my bare chest with tubes protruding from it.

A gust of warm air whistled past my face, splashing droplets that stung my eyes. The rhythmic lights glowed through my hands and outlined the restraints on my wrists. Where could I possibly be?

A sliver of light split the wall to the left. A tall door opened slowly, as if caught in a breeze, revealing a brilliantly lit space beyond and casting new details on where I was. Bottles and strange devices clinked like wind chimes. Flexible tubes attached to the clay on my chest swayed above my head, where burning fluids entered my body. The straps kept me from grabbing the tubes and ripping them off. Thrashing about did nothing to dislodge them. It only made the liquid drip faster and my chest burn hotter.

The door bumped against something with a reverberant boom. It sounded like I was in a chamber the size of a gymnasium. I forced myself to calm down. Whoever had opened the door hadn't shown themselves. Maybe nobody had opened it.

Right, keep dreaming.

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I practiced my slow breathing, straining to get a bead on the intruder, and tried to remember where I'd been before here. My memory streamed back in chunks: a hibernation chamber, Suri crying, a picture of Lisa and Sophie leaning beside my face, and Diago trying to take Amon's face apart.

Before this place, I'd been in a field hospital. Levi, Aaron, and Aizah had been there, and Suri, too. She and I had almost froze to death on a primeval Alpine glacier. That's where I'd become gravely ill. Aizah had told the doctors to freeze me to slow down the progress of an unknown disease. Then they'd shipped me to Javan, Levi's home country, for treatment. Aizah had assured me I was in good hands, among friends. Looks like I'd been mailed to the wrong address.

Maybe the enemy had overrun the field hospital after I'd zonked out. They could have hauled me off as a hostage. That would explain the restraints and the lack of a friendly reception party.

I tried the restraints again and they slid a bit. The straps were anchored in slots that ran the length of my body. I could bring my wrists almost even with my waist.

A faint shadow wiggled somewhere off to my right. It looked like a man strapped to another table. He met my stare and said something weary and plaintive, a cry for help, perhaps.

The door slammed shut, sinking the room back into darkness. My table vibrated in time to heavy footfalls and labored breathing, followed by a cough high above my feet, hard and violent.

The blinking lights fluttered as the individual approached me, revealing a humanoid shape of enormous proportions. It wavered and then let out a huge sneeze. A slimy mass sprayed my legs. The creature sniffed back leftovers and thudded sideways to my neighbor's table.

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A narrow cone of light beamed down on the man's body, while I was left in the selfish relief of its shadow. At the edge of the light, two long arms swayed above much longer legs.

The man gaped up at our visitor, then pulled feebly at his restraints. His skin was cracked and covered with sores. A jellyfish cluster of tubes dangled above him, dripping similar fluids into a similar mound of clay stuck to his chest. He choked and coughed. A long rod with a wet cloth tied to the tip swung down like a crane and swabbed his face with one gruff stroke. I marveled at the enormous hand gripping it, the palm as wide as my chest. This was no Ephraim. This was a much larger being. Was this one of the Nephillim I'd heard so much about?

The titan kept to the shadows and circled to the far side of my companion's table, moving with surprising agility and speed. A disheveled mane hung about his ears. It gave him the appearance of a super-sized Einstein. When I craned my neck to follow his course, a three-foot face swiveled in my direction. Luminous eyes focused on me for one intense moment. Then he returned his attention to my companion.

Huge hands grasped the end of the table and the man struggled against his straps, crying words I couldn't understand. The table tipped with one swift movement and touched the floor with a splash.

What I'd thought was a floor was actually the surface of a small pool just larger than our beds. The giant submerged the table to the point where the man's face was above the water. He thrashed against his restraints with the panic of the condemned. The tubes filled with deep red fluid and spilled out over the clay on his chest, which melted and covered him like a coating of syrup. He screamed until the coating poured into his mouth. Bubbles ballooned slowly as his back convulsively arched. Then, to my amazement, his body began to shrink. Like a camera

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zooming out, he diminished into the center of the table. The restraints slid along the slots and followed his limbs as they thinned and shortened

The giant pushed the man completely underwater. Violent splashes and bubbles churned. Then the water quieted. One final gurgle and the giant lifted the table back to its original height. Where a man had once been, a dripping baby now lay. The giant undid the restraints and manhandled the infant in one hand. It cried pitifully. He tucked it under his arm like a miniature football and walked off.

The spotlight abruptly winked out. The door opened and then closed. I waited ten long seconds in the darkness before I struggled wildly against my restraints. The more I struggled, the tighter they became. My foot knocked something over at the end of my table. Things went crashing across the room.

The sliver of light at the doorway reappeared. Heavy footsteps hurried toward me. I thrashed to free myself, but to no avail. The same giant approached the end of my table. Its eyes glistened in the darkness. Large hands grasped the end of my table.

“Please, no,” I begged.

Then the table dropped.

CHAPTER FIVE

JORDAN

The table dropped with a sickening lurch and jolted to a stop. Water splashed over the sides and under my bare back. A hand as large as my face, with slender fingers the length of my forearm, gripped the strap holding my left foot. The hand ripped the strap free like it was made of paper, and then my right foot was similarly released.

Coughing echoed from the other side of the door as the giant glided around the table to work the restraint that held my left wrist, taking care not to injure me. The binding flopped free. The other restraint seemed to prove more troublesome for my benefactor. It twisted on itself and tightened. The large fingers worked frantically but got nowhere with the knot.

The huge door opened again, bathing the floor in harsh light. My rescuer retreated into the shadows while I strained to get my hand loose. There was a low grunt before heavy footsteps rumbled across the floor.

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Blood dripped into my palm, lubricating the binding. I tugged until my wrist cracked, ignoring the pain. Then a light blazed down on my table. A giant's enormous face glared at me. His gruff voice growled, "What in Anak?"

He grabbed the edge of the table. Water splashed over the sides.

My hand slipped free. I ripped the tubes off my body and flipped backwards off the table, beyond the lip of the pool, counting on finding the floor. It was there all right, but a lot farther down than I anticipated. I hit hard and slammed into some kind of cart. Metal and glass crashed.

The giant lunged at me but I ducked. His huge hand swooped by me like the boom of a sailboat. I staggered to my feet, my joints arthritic and my muscles burning. Yet I pushed past the pain and willed myself to run.

"How did this human get loose?" he demanded.

"I leave him alone for twenty minutes and you pull this stunt," a woman's voice bellowed from another part of the room.

"He's sick. He must be treated."

"Not this way," she said. They both spoke English.

"It's the only way to cure him."

"He's my human, not yours."

While I appreciated her concern, I wasn't in the mood to take sides. I was nobody's science experiment, thank you very much.

The open door beckoned. I stumbled toward it like a moth to a flame, with thumping and jostling behind me.

"You're letting him escape!" he shouted.

"You bet I am," she said.

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A young giant leaned through the doorway. “Hey, everything okay in here?”

I darted through his legs, across plush carpeting and out onto a sidewalk.

“Stop that human!”

I staggered into a supersized urban jungle. Lots of giants standing next to the door at a counter twice as high as my head. They held plates of food the size of beach umbrellas. A few looked down at me with consternation. A female giant screamed. Food rained down on the sidewalk in large gloppy piles. A plate shattered. I leaped as a four-foot-long shard skidded under my feet. Oversized hands reached for me. I dove between legs and fled across a street into the bustle of a more oblivious crowd.

The light illuminating this weird scene was a horizontal sliver of daylight at the end of a very long boulevard. My eyes adjusted to it as I ran. I was in a cavern sheltering a city. The road was dimly lit. Judging by the length of the side streets, the city sprawled for miles. Air cars the size of blimps silently glided over my head. Square courts with high walls sat in the center of each intersection. They came to the waists of giants walking on the sidewalks. Shafts of bright sunshine, diced into patterns by grills, beamed upward as spotlights. Acres of lush vegetation hung in cradles, basking in the illumination.

Giants hurried past me in every direction, most too busy to get to wherever they had to go to notice me. I dodged them and crossed the brightly lit square. Those closest to me looked down and gasped as I darted past. Being the only human on the street probably had something to do with their reaction. That and that I was as naked as Adam.

Heavy boots slammed the ground in a rapid cadence, coming in my direction. There was no time to ponder embarrassment; I fled from the stomping.

“Stop him!” voices yelled. “Stop the human!”

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The mouth of the cave was as wide as the horizon and seemed just as far away. Those chasing me took one step for every three of mine, gaining on me with each jaw-jarring stride. I was a block from the exit. There was a sunny meadow out there and a forest beyond. Something told me that if I got outside, I'd be safe. I ran until my lungs ached.

A big hand swooshed across my back. I dove headfirst into the sunlight. My pursuers stopped cold.

“Anak, now what do we do?” one of them moaned.

I rolled to my feet and tore across the meadow. I skirted ponds and dashed into a grove of saplings a bit taller than my head. The sun was low in the sky. I considered it relative to the horizon. It was rising. Ten o'clock, maybe, although its light was intense. That or my eyes were messed up from having been frozen.

I darted from cover and put more distance between me and the cave's exit. When I reached a thicket of substantial pines, I stopped and caught my breath, chancing another look back, squinting hard against the morning glare. Nobody followed me.

I ran to the end of the meadow and up a hill into heavy woods, where I took time to look over my shoulder. I'd just emerged from a huge mountain. Its flank was covered with crumbling temples and thick forests. A waterfall cascaded down overgrown terraces and ended in a final ribbon of silver that splashed near the cavern's exit.

There was movement at the cave's entrance. A cloaked figure emerged into the bright sunshine and carefully surveyed the meadow. I flattened myself behind a dense thicket and willed my body to be invisible. Not even a Ranger could spot me in this cover.

The figure locked onto my position as if I was painted orange and walked straight toward me. A burst of fog billowed over my pursuer like a canopy and a breeze shifted its cloak to

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reveal a long flowing gown beneath. It was a woman, but was she giant or human? With only a flat meadow for contrast, I had nothing to judge her height; at least until she reached the saplings. They came to her knees.

I retreated up the hill, slipping on wet moss and leaves. The woods thickened as I climbed. Closely spaced trees, steep slopes, and maybe a river in the next valley if I was lucky would slow the behemoth down. This was going to be easy.

Despite her size, which I estimated to be about eighteen feet, her steps were silent and graceful. As I ran for the ridge, she quickened her gait. Then her voice echoed across the meadow. “Wait, Jordan, I’m not going to hurt you.”

Her voice was musical, her words kind, and I recognized her by it. It was the same voice that had laid claim to me in the laboratory.

I crested the ridge and pushed through a tangle of bushes. Beyond was blue sky and—
“Jordan, no!”

The ground suddenly gave way. I grabbed an overhanging branch and arrested my fall. Rocks and chunks of dirt tumbled down the face of an enormous cliff. Clouds obscured the view below me.

I hauled myself back up onto the ridge. The giant lady was already at the foot of the slope. I wasn’t trapped yet. I studied the cliff and considered the available handholds. Maybe I could free-climb down its face.

Then I saw something that defied explanation. The clouds parted. The cliff clearly ended a mile down but there was no valley floor to meet it. Instead, more distant clouds issued out from under its base like an ocean of fog. The rocks I’d dislodged plunged through them like specks of pepper. The clouds thinned and parted, revealing forests, cities, and a harbor far below, complete

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with ships the size of rice. I had done a lot of high altitude jumps. That harbor was two miles down. The surreal landscape I stood on scrolled beneath my feet like a miniature tableau. This mountain was airborne.

CHAPTER SIX

SARAH

The wind hissed, skimming our Land Rover with a stream of sand. The parked vehicle was canted beside a sandblasted garage on a shadowed dune, buried up to the hubcaps. Beyond the battered vinyl siding spread a vanishing suburbia. Only wind-torn roofs and skeletal bedrooms remained visible above the advancing dunes. The home of this detached garage clung to life forty feet away. The façade had been wind-worn down to the bare wood. Tattered shingles clung to twin gables as stubborn oak leaves would to bark-less branches. Rusted gutters banged against long-shattered windows. Beyond the stark trapezoids of shade caused by the garage and the home, the sun vitrified all.

A gust of wind howled viciously through a hole in the garage's roof. Two small children huddled beside me, their tiny heads wrapped against the storm. Only clear blue eyes peeked out from scratched goggles. They cried and grabbed my legs, and my arms instinctively encircled both of them. My mind burst with an epiphany: *These are my children*. An impossible reality I embraced with abandon.

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They were frightened for good reason. We were taking a great risk by lingering so long here. I looked anxiously at the house. A man's form glided past a window frame, outlined by copper sunlight. My heart caught in my throat at the sight of him.

This had been his hometown. A town on the outskirts of a dying metropolis called Philadelphia. The dunes were much higher here. Only the skyscrapers were still visible, those that hadn't fallen over in the initial blast.

How did I know this?

Tree limbs, their bark long since stripped and their trunks half buried in sand, clawed skyward. They marked where the old roads lay hidden. In a few more years, the trees and roofs would be hidden. Then this town would sleep beneath an ever-deepening, ever-hardening wasteland, crushed and forgotten by the few who ultimately survived the catalyst of this global siege, a celestial legion the ancients had called the Stream of Heaven and its poisonous centurion, Wormwood.

Jordan crawled out of the upstairs window as a squadron of lumbering transports rumbled overhead. The enormous aircraft descended in a single line, their engines briefly drowning out the storm. The Mexican insignia of the eagle clutching a snake blazed from its wings. Wheels swung down and landing lights flared. I remembered a metal landing strip set up on the edge of a detention camp a few miles east of here. We'd skirted the perimeter of the camp to arrive here undetected. All able-bodied adults had been conscripted into expeditionary forces. Their children were being held in safety centers where the Western Confederacy of the Americas sustained them, provided their parents fought bravely in the East.

My skin crawled at the thought of being captured and our children indoctrinated by those self-righteous bureaucrats. My husband was still considered a citizen of this country-turned-

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empire, despite my Swiss status. He watched the planes land, rippling cross-shaped shadows across the sand. To their right, a dust plume billowed. Vehicles were coming from the airbase.

I shouted a warning. Jordan pulled his head scarf into place and pushed through the wind to reach me. The plume grew larger. They were coming fast. Had we been spotted?

Jordan scrambled around the garage and stared at me as if he saw me for the first time. Looking into his eyes calmed my nerves and steeled my resolve to survive. I hugged him fiercely and heard the words come out of my mouth, “We’d better leave. Another patrol is coming.”

He looked at me as if he was confused. His mouth opened and said words, but I heard no sound. The lead vehicle burst over the nearest dune. Soldiers leapt from the sides as I tried to scream.

I abruptly sat up. Like lights coming on in a theatre, my bedroom materialized and replaced the desert. Jungle noises silenced the shouts of soldiers. Rain dripping off the tile roof replaced the gunfire. I was back in humid Costa Rica, in my mountain villa overlooking the Pacific coast and the sleepy town of Quepos.

I shut my eyes and struggled to remember what I’d seen. It couldn’t have been a dream. I could still feel the sand in my boots and smell the fumes of the transports. My eyes were still adjusting from the blinding sun. I’d traveled the *Migramah* and gone to a place and time as real as this. A time in the future where I was with Jordan. He was my husband. We had two children, a three-year-old son and a two-year-old daughter.

“We named them Diago and Athena,” I whispered.

Doubt wormed through me. I hugged my knees, letting my sweat soak the sheets. I whispered the words of the Berbai. “Faith knows what is not yet made, illuminates what is not yet seen.”

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“Jordan comes back to me,” I whispered. “He comes back.” I squeezed my eyes as if to push back my fears. “We have children.”

I suddenly felt someone in my head, reminding me of the terrible reality of time and place when ages climax. When the two suns neared, all things happened at the same time and all times happened in the same place. What was, is, and would be became one tangled reality. Jordan’s peril, my prayer, and our future hung in a wild balance: solid, shattered, victorious, and overwhelmed. A single thought could tip the balance into chaos or stay the celestial landslide. A feeling became a thought and acquired a voice.

Protect him now.

“How can I protect him?” I cried, wondering who or what I was arguing with.

Guide him there. Here we’ll bear. Ignore the call, he will fall.

A downpour drowned the night. I shut the terrace doors to muffle the pounding of the rain. Dropping to the floor, I counted how many days it had been since Jordan had vanished down the shaft in Giza. Then I recalled the number of days he’d been with me in the Second Age. I subtracted the difference. Where was he now and what was he doing? My hand went to my heart. Mestre!

I sank to my knees so my head rested on the glass coffee table. I remembered to relax and let the author of the strange message guide me. My thoughts and dreams fell into a current. A vast river, full of lizards. I spotted him, lost and frustrated. Shadows crisscrossing over him.

“Jordan, follow me,” I whispered.

This was crazy. I was praying about a past event I’d only heard about as if its outcome could be affected. A pain welled up in my heart. I gasped at the urgency. This was not insane; ignoring my heart would be.

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I plunged into Jordan's reality. The scene sharpened in complete detail. I found him, where he was supposed to go.

"Honey, come east."

Jordan hesitated. He looked in the direction I wanted him to.

"Go," I moaned.

He took a step.

"Hurry. I'm waiting for you."