



Light and Glory

Part One of Eight
of

Närdamähr

by
Justin M. Sellers

Teaser

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Training Begins...

The sun rises on a grey, dismal November morning. And even as Lewis Pratt prepares breakfast for his children, degenerate renegades from another world launch a terrible assault upon Earth. But the disaster is abruptly stopped, and fantastically powered men and women appear and begin rescuing and healing the traumatized Earthmen, who find themselves presented with an unbelievable reality:

A man known as Sěřěhahn the Anhar, who rules and covertly puppeteers the distant, magnificent world Nrathěrmě, had enlisted the renegades behind the disaster and will inevitably assault Earth again, he desiring our world and its people in his intent to harness a forgotten force that has forged our past and yet commands our future...

So begins the first of the eight portions of the epic Nārdamāhr, the heroic history of the triumph of courage and hope as brought about by unassuming, simple people like the Pratts.

Reviews for *Light and Glory*

"For months, my friends were pressuring me into reading this book. For months, I resisted, saying I didn't have time.

"One night, during a break from school, I was really bored. So, I decided to start reading *Light and Glory*. That particular night, it was a Tuesday, I only had enough time to read a few chapters. I went to bed late, after having read for a couple of hours. I did not want to put the book down. I went to work the next morning, thinking only of being able to get home and continue reading. When I got home from work, I ate something, and began reading. I went to bed 7 hours later. I did the same thing the next day, waiting only to be able to finish the book that night.

"Mr. Sellers's book was amazing. I finished it in about 11 hours of reading. I could hardly put it down, only doing so for sleep and work. If you only read one book this year, I would recommend *Light and Glory* by Justin M. Sellers. I am grateful that my friends introduced me to this book."

-Joseph Ransom, Oregon USA

"A friend of mine suggested the book *Light and Glory* by Justin M. Sellers to me. I was a little skeptical at first, but as soon as I began reading, the book became alive. I could not put the book down! This book was full of excitement, laughter, sadness, and joy. I fell in love with the characters and felt a personal bond with them. I definitely recommend this book to anyone who is looking for a great read. Pick one up today!"

-Brittany Lees, California USA

"I started reading the book *Light and Glory* by Justin M. Sellers just to say that I read it. However, after the first couple of chapters I realized that I could not put it down. I found myself becoming attached to the characters that were no longer just characters, but people that came to life! I have to admit that this book even brought me to tears a time or two. This book is very well written and you can tell that the author is extremely intelligent. I would definitely recommend this book to everyone!"

-Lindsay Lees, California USA

"Sellers's *Light and Glory* isn't your typical science fiction novel though a brief synopsis may lead you to believe so. *Light and Glory* is a story of the recovery and repercussions of a traumatized Earth aided by the fantastic powers and technology of its otherworldly rescuers. However the story is not simply about epic space battles waged over the dominion of an ambiguously crucial planet and its people but delves into the human character and explores the depth of emotion, courage, nobility, ignorance, and bigotry that is mankind. Surprisingly insightful, Sellers has certainly embarked on an epic tale that I for one hope to see through to the end."

-Adam Clark, California USA

"I first read this book a few weeks ago after a friend suggested it to me. At first I was skeptical because I had never read anything by this author. However, soon after I had started, I found myself getting involved in the lives of the characters of the book.

"*Light and Glory* is an exciting story that targets the reader's mind forcing him or her to think deeper than they may have ever thought before. In this struggle between good and evil, one begins to appreciate the light and glory of the universe.

"I would recommend this book to anyone looking for a good read, it was entertaining, intense and interesting, every chapter kept me eager for more. *Light and Glory* is definitely worth your time."

-Dallin Hendrickson, Oregon USA

"I've read a lot of fantasy and sci-fi, but I've never read anything as ingeniously abstract. Sellers invented a world that goes far beyond any sci-fi I've ever heard of, though the human touch is as natural and normal as real life. I agree, it's the story of the year! Also, few books have a message that can compare with the powerful hope and energy that I felt as I read. Read *Light and Glory*."

-Eric Crowther, Oregon USA

"*Light and Glory* is an amazingly inspirational novel. It captures a reality that each of its readers can bring to life. With language that attracts true emotion, every reader will feel as if they are embarking on their own unique journey. Its themes are powerful and moving. It is a novel that will take a place in each of its readers' hearts.

"I highly recommend this to all readers. After reading this I found myself truly inspired. I was able to relate to the characters and felt a closeness to them. It was a definite positive and enjoyable experience reading this novel. I hope all who read this will take the time to read this exceptional story."

-Matt Baldwin, Virginia USA

Pronunciation Guide

This book contains words that originate from fictional languages. I've transcribed the words into Roman letters that approximate their proper pronunciation, and modified them to make them appear less intimidating to pronounce.

The Roman vowels used in these words are pronounced in the following way:

A - like "a" in "sat"

Ä - like "a" in "father"

Ē - like "ea" in "eat"

Ĕ - like "e" in "egg"

Ō - like "o" in "nose"

Ū - like "oo" in "boot"

Ŭ - like "u" in "up"

Consonants in these words are each pronounced individually. For example, the word "Pp'm'tärnhär" is a five-syllable word: p-p-m-tärn-här.

When conjugations make words hard to read, I have placed apostrophes between the conjugations and the words. For example, the "n" conjugation of "Närdamähr" is written "N'närdamähr."

Justin M. Sellers

Chapter 1

Horrors and Hopes

From "About Forms" by Thomas Pratt:

...those kinds of obstacles were needed. We missed each other, definitely. Of course we did!

Let me stop here. I have been writing so much about Antär; I should put it all in better perspective.

So I think I ought to record for your reading a full version of the war between Antär and Sërëhahn. I'll do it chronologically this time. Events like these deserve to be seen in their proper light.

Events like these! What amazing, wondrous, archetypal events! What awesome adventures, shadowing the Great Adventure, I have been allowed to enjoy! Really, life in Ömähäär-hood is a life unlike and greater than all others, life as life has always, ever, been meant to be life!

I say that these events shadow Eternity, but give me any event, and give me time, and I can show how that event reflects totally the whole of Ä'ähänärdanär. But I have experienced these events. I've been able to ponder and muse about them. So I'll use the story of these events to demonstrate the perfect interweavingness of Är's Full Story, as much as I can in the time that I have to give to this.

This conflict of light against false light, reality against error, intelligence against destructiveness, these wars as I still call them, of Ömähäär against Sërëhahn, are excellent fountains of so many themes of the Eternal Epic. The natures of good and evil, and their infinitely varying hues, and the ways in which they're recognized and the ways in which they are mistaken for each other, were shown profoundly and so thoroughly through these events, these endeavors and glorious endurings.

And how much the character of Infinity was displayed throughout that terrible but glorious adventure! How much the dangers of self-inflicted ignorance, of masochistic rejection of ubiquitous opportunities for growth and betterment, of self-inflicted naïveté, of stubborn cowardice of life and love and everything that's worth living and being for, how much the dangers of prideful mulishness were displayed! And how much the glory of bravery and of progression was shown too! The awesomeness of moving forward, of being! And the confident mistakes of even the wisest of people, and the simple success of the unpretentious!

And these events are a better sermon than any that I can design, on the need for

dedicated Ōmäthäär in Ä'ähänärdanär!

And that's motivation enough for me to record the whole epic in chronological order. Instead of trying to explain what I want to explain, the character of Är and the perfection of Ärthähr, directly, I will let you live the events that explained those things to me in ways that few words could ever have done. Archetypal principle can be better apprehended if it's seen in the context of the events all around it.

I am not going to analyze principles here, unless it is absolutely necessary and flows with the telling. Analyses of the applicability of most of these events can be found in my other writings, and especially in the writings of people like Räröähr and Ūnrë. And Mär.

I want this account to provide a profitable overview of these wars. Conclusions can be found in other sources, and earlier in this book of course, and I hope you'll draw new conclusions as you live these things, as you're personally inspired to. What will strike me, or has struck Mär, or whomever, as profound will not necessarily strike you in the same way; what people harvest is relative to what they need, and to what they already have. It's a waste of time to try to explain didactically every single principle. This account, I hope, will provide a springing-off point for you to glean everything that's applicable to you, just by living these events yourself....

...and that was right about the time that Ōhäthäär and Thahn met one another. Think what you will, but I do not believe it was a coincidence. The West called that year 1942.

The Nazis were less careless than Razar and her minions. I think they resemble M'razar more than they resemble R'bathërü. But Ōhäthäär was tremendously more subtle than Adolf was. Adolf was more like Razar, I think.

Now, Razar had the M'tärnhär, the Ranrëälërë as they dared to call themselves, and even the bitterest of Adolf's allies were not anywhere near as darkly potent as the M'tärnhär were. But I think the profundity of the Axis-Allies War lies more deeply. Adolf did not wield M'tärnhär the way Razar did. Adolf's campaign against the Jacobites was less terrible, and less comprehensive, than was Razar's campaign against the Nöhönüäär. Nevertheless, his campaign was more potent in that it struck at the heart. Razar was more terrible, but Adolf was positioned at the core.

Ōhönüäär's history was more profound than was Närdamähr's. It is a perfect archetype that the diminutive Earth should be so overshadowed by Nrathërmë's grandiosity, while she, all along, held power over that great, mighty one!

But I, for one, owe an infinite debt to Närdamähr. It was Mär's Ōmäthäär, who are from Närdamähr, who made my life worthwhile! Who made me more than a grey shadow of unrealized possibilities! Who gave me life, and light, and the keys to everything I can want!

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Consider what you know of my life before I met Mär's Òmäthäär: I had been, for the most part, content in my meaningless mundanity. I had had plans for what I thought was all the education I really needed; I had had plans for what I thought was a worthy career. I planned to entangle myself in the sophistries of that society's temporal governing. I planned to achieve what I believed to be success. I had sated the expectations of my blind educators to a point of special distinction. I had good friends, I knew many who would help me achieve my small-sighted goals, I had a fine family, I enjoyed the company of a wonderful woman.

Brittney.

A wonderful woman. I believed I had a bright future.

But my life was cold. It was dark. It was blind!

Imagine the horror of living a life with no final goal, no victory at its end, chasing after fickle pleasures and evading chilling woes! The only thing that kept me sane, aside from my family and Brittney, was forcing the reality of my life's ultimate pointlessness continually out of my thoughts!

Compare that to Òmäthäär-hood! Compare that to Är! To Ä'ähänärdanär! To everything the Ärthähr is and everything it can make anybody! To Ä'ähänärdanär and joy!

How much I know now that I didn't know then! O, how much I am now, that I could never have imagined being then! What awesome things I have been able to do! What I have seen! What wonderful things, that I could never have imagined before!

I was shallow and small. I was merely a bystander, an oblivious extra, in the Grand Epic of Är. I knew nothing of the glories that were happening even as I lived my pointless existence.

So glory for gallant Òmäthäär!

Glory to Mär.

Still, while Mär attempted to show me how to let myself be a hero instead of an extra, how to allow myself to take part in and revel in the awesomeness of the Great Perfect Plot, while I had been as unknowing of that Plot as extras are wont to be, his explanation was not sufficient, not for my blind self. Not until I lived both horror and hope would I apprehend what he wanted me to understand.

That's why it'll be better for me to go on with the chronological recounting; this way you can live what I and others have lived. This way you can learn more easily, and I won't use my time attempting to convey everything that I want to convey in these uncommunicatively straightforward words.

That Axis-Allies War then led the faction called the Union of...

...by that time, I was nearing my twenty-first birthday. I had no way of knowing that I would not finish that year before everything I knew, and everything on which I had so

stupidly placed value, would be flipped upside down.

November twenty-first was when it started for me. The sun was rising over Austin when the pirates struck. I love the sunrise of that day; I love looking back at it; it signifies to me the rising of real light, finally, into my life.

Isn't it right that pirates served as my preliminary introduction into the world of Nārdamāhr, and, consequently, of Ä'ähänārdanār? Rārōähr contends that it was Är's idea of a practical joke. I think, this time, he's right about Är.

The N'nüährnär acted quickly. Äthähäth had been waiting for a plain sign that the pirates were working with the Ämāthōär. Many of the pirates struck at Earth together. The N'nüährnär's hold on the planet saved it from breaking apart, but the pirates were soon aware of them. Now that the pirates knew that they were not alone, a quick active scan revealed all of Äthähäth's vessels to their sight.

The stealthy division that had slid in to stabilize the planet split apart. The pirates pursued many of them, but the tactic bought the N'nüährnär the crucial time that they needed.

Äthähäth's main force, waiting just outside the range at which the pirates might have spotted them, bore down quickly upon the pirates. The pirates realized their mistake in time, and gave up pursuing the smaller, stealthy ships.

Many of those stealthy ships had been destroyed, but their splitting apart and scattering ensured that, while the pirates engaged some of them, the others were yet free to continue to keep a stabilizing hold on Earth in case the pirates should strike at the planet again.

Äthähäth's fleet was nearly one-and-a-half times the size of the pirate fleet. Sērēhahn had not compensated the pirates yet; he did not want unusual technology to insinuate a possible connection between the pirates and Nrathěrmě. Thus Äthähäth's fleets were almost as able as the pirates' were. Being outnumbered by such a significant margin against equally well equipped foes, the pirates' odds of defeating the N'nüährnär and completing their job were manifestly slim.

Sērēhahn had intentionally selected a particularly degenerate, cowardly clan of pirates to annihilate Ōhōnūäär for him. Such an act of senseless barbarism could easily have been put to the charge of the pirates alone. Who would suspect that the pirates had acted under employment of someone from Nrathěrmě itself?

According to N'zärnär, these pirates feared death supremely. In their minds, no reward that they believed Sērēhahn could offer them for the completion of the job was worth the risk of death with no hope of revival.

As soon as the pirates were aware of the strength of the N'nüährnär forces, they attempted to flee. Äthähäth had prepared for this. His ships were positioned in a wide sphere around the pirates, just outside the pirates' range of passive visibility. Äthähäth, wisely, was terrified of letting escape anyone in league with the Ämāthōär.

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Many of the pirates were cornered by the N'nüährnär's swiftly closing encirclement. The majority of the pirates, however, flocked together in a tight pod and charged through a more sparse area in the collapsing sphere.

The N'nüährnär nearest the escaping pirates broke away in pursuit. The pirates were faster, and they spared no energy from accelerating to the retreat. The N'nüährnär did not pursue the pirates far, lest they reveal themselves to any of the other nations near that area.

Meanwhile, Äthähäth insisted that some few of the pirates be left alive, in order to be questioned. Sërehahn had covered his tracks well; the pirates knew little that the Ömähäär were able to find significant.

Nevertheless, Äthähäth, not yet knowing the extent of the pirates' knowledge, commanded the pirates to surrender. The N'nüährnär corralled the survivors together, who, knowing they were outdone and seeing their enemies' desire to preserve them alive, promptly obeyed the command....

Tom placed the last of the four mismatched plates at the head of the small, scratched kitchen table. Straightening up, he surveyed the orderliness of the sparse tableware for his family's daily breakfast.

"Tom!" Lewis Pratt barked impatiently at his son.

Tom looked up at his disheveled father as Lewis flipped another darkly browned pancake onto a plate beside the stove.

Lewis cursed under his breath, then turned to Tom, taking the smoking pan from the heat. "Go see what's taking—" he began, then stopped himself, moderating his tone. "Please, tell Andrew and Terry that breakfast is waiting."

Tom barely had time to step around the small table before his brother Andrew emerged from the hallway into the kitchen, having obviously heard Lewis from his bedroom. Beginning to smile to himself at Andrew's promptness, Tom quickly suppressed the impulse, seeing Andrew's even more sullen than usual demeanor that morning.

Andrew sighed wearily as he flopped into a chair beside the table, dropping his backpack beside him. He was already wearing his coat, ready to escape the house and his father's compulsory breakfast gathering as quickly as possible.

"Juice," Tom muttered, realizing the missing piece of his table setting and turning toward the fridge.

Terry then emerged from the hallway, brushing briskly at her back-length red-brown hair. She took her seat beside Andrew as their father brought the steaming plate of pancakes to the table. Tom followed close behind Lewis

with a jug of store-bought orange juice.

Lewis set the plate on the table, and Andrew reached for a small pile of pancakes as Lewis sat himself down at the table's head. Both Andrew and Terry, who chose only a single cake, deliberately avoided the more burnt ones, though every one of the pancakes had been browned or blackened to varying degrees.

As Tom reached the table with the orange juice, he noticed the time on the clock above Andrew's head. It was already almost seven-thirty. He hesitated, realizing he had to leave at that moment if he was going to make the bus to the city. But then he moved forward again and set the juice on the table, pretending not to have seen the time.

Lewis instinctively glanced at the clock as Tom paused to check it, however. "Tom!" he said. "Get going! You're going to be late again!"

"It's alright," Tom said dismissively as he sat himself down across from Andrew.

"Tom, this job is important," Lewis said intently.

"I know," Tom said, still attempting to sound unworried. "I can catch the next bus."

"You need a better work ethic," Lewis chided him.

That struck Tom in a soft spot. Tom had only wanted to stay at home as long as he had so that he could serve as something of a moral support to his despairing father. He loved his new internship, but he found himself wanting more to be there for his father. He opened his mouth to respond, but then just assumed an attempted casual smile and a shrug. Then he snatched up a few more severely burnt pancakes, carefully avoided by Andrew and Terry, as if to seal his determination to stay.

Lewis stared at Tom for a moment, then shook his head helplessly. He grumbled some more about Tom's lack of responsibility as he took a couple pancakes for himself. Inwardly, however, Lewis Pratt was thankful to be able to have breakfast together with his children.

Andrew shook his head again as he bolted down his pancakes, wishing Lewis would tell him to "get going," rather than insisting on these morningly rituals together. The sooner Brent got there, the better, he thought to himself.

Terry, finishing her pancake, swiftly disappeared back down the hallway to her bedroom.

After an uncomfortable silence, Lewis, swallowing his last bite, joked shakily, "Andrew, be careful, you'll choke!"

Andrew continued shoveling down his breakfast, as if his hurry would cause his ride to arrive sooner.

But hurry or no, hardly two seconds had passed before a loud horn honked from the street outside.

Andrew sprang up, knocking his chair back and shouldering his bag in one quick motion. "See ya," he said, swallowing his mouthful as he waved bye to Tom.

Tom waved back, his mouth too full to return Andrew's farewell.

Andrew halfheartedly extended his goodbye wave to his father, but didn't look at him as he maneuvered his way around the table toward the front door. Terry then came striding out of the hallway in a bright sweater, her books in her arms and a distinctly cheerful expression suddenly pasted onto her face.

"Bye, Dad! Bye, Tom!" she said, following Andrew to the door.

"Bye, have a good day!" Lewis called after them. He wanted to add, "I love you!" but restrained himself, knowing that they would find it awkward.

Tom waved again after Terry, and then went back to his breakfast as she closed the door behind her.

Lewis stared silently at the closed front door for a few moments. Then he sighed, and looked back at the clock. "Now, Tom," he began, hoping Tom could now be persuaded to leave too, though Lewis did enjoy his company.

But Tom suddenly sprang up. Nearly tripping over his own chair, he twisted around toward the front door. Spewing orange juice out of his mouth, he bellowed, "Stop!"

Before Tom could understand what had so suddenly come over him, and before Lewis could register surprise at his son's senseless outburst, a glaring white burst of light blinded them both. Tom felt a tremendous weight crash into him, bowling him over. Lewis felt a sudden crushing force thrust him into the back of his chair and smash him into the wall behind him, just as his ears seemed to explode and his entire body burn with a sudden concussion of air and heat.

And everything fell immediately to blackness.

...but, whatever the case would have been, there would have of necessity been survivors. Äthähäth and his company were the right people in the right place at the right time; Är always knows what he's doing.

It was a miracle that the planet was not destroyed. The N'nüährnär's stabilization of the planet's core saved it, but the Nöhönüäär on the surface suffered

awfully.

The strain caused on Earth's interior ripped the surface crust layers. Magma burst through the surface in scattered fissures all over the Earth. Many lofty cities of the fragmented Earthmen were toppled and burned. Millions of people died within the first few minutes as a result of the seismic and volcanic reactions of the assaulted planet.

The pirates had also fired a few bolts of rantha at Earth. I see no reason why they should have; their tearing of the planet's interior would have destroyed it immediately, had not the N'nüährnär intervened to stabilize it. N'zärnär has speculated that the rantha was nothing strategic, but was just twisted, malicious overkill. These cowardly, small-hearted pirates wanted to take as much pleasure as they could afford to take in their annihilation of the helpless civilizations of Earth.

The rantha was significantly slowed by the N'nüährnär's protective field in and around Earth. But though the planet was not shattered by the volleys, the rantha was still moving at such speeds as to demolish what remained of the Earthmen's pretentious empires.

Upon contacting Earth's atmosphere, the rantha instantaneously heated the gases around it. Though it had been slowed by the N'nüährnär's field around Earth, much of it was still moving quickly enough to shatter atoms in the air and especially on the surface. Energy released from the broken atoms tore across the land, wiping away the Earthmen's cities like dust in a sudden gale.

The vast majority of the Nöhönüäär were annihilated by the rantha, and then most of the survivors later perished in the earthquakes and volcanic inferno. Only those who were sufficiently distant from rantha impacts and volcanic rips had any small chance of surviving, but many of those were killed in the quakes.

I was just on the outside edge of the burst of a rantha impact. I lost consciousness as a result of the blast and the heat, and managed to remain unconscious through the rampaging earthquake that convulsed my home, which ironically remained standing.

All, all this destruction, by the command of Sërëhahn.

Quantitatively speaking, the destruction caused in this instance by Sërëhahn's mercenary pirates was insignificant. Mere billions were killed, and most of them were later revived. The eradication of the Earthmen's civilizations could have been deftly repaired by the N'nüährnär.

But still, this attack inaugurated the destruction of so much! So many lives, so many dreams, so much happiness that might have been, had it not been for the nefarious, twisted evil of Sërëhahn and his associates!

And Earth was its own world! A whole world with its own history, and all the wonderful things that good men and women have done there! The Josephs, the Moseses,

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the Muhammads, Buddhas, saviors of men! The thousands upon thousands of heroes! The magnificent blood of nobility that again and again, progressively, lifted Earth from the ashes of evil men!

Evil men like Sěřhahn.

He cared no more for life, except for his own. Every living act he did, everything that outwardly made life, was bent by his poisoned, deeper desires. The destruction that day at Earth was minimal quantitatively, but, having sought, and temporarily achieved, the destruction of so many real people in his effort to exalt himself, Sěřhahn sealed his downfall. No one can destroy life and glory without reaping his own destruction.

Sěřhahn's illusionary day of power was already beginning to set...

The first thing Tom realized he was aware of was a horrible searing feeling all over his body. It felt like the worst sunburn, yet burning everywhere at once. Only after a few seconds of dim awareness of the biting pain did he notice that he was lying on his face on the floor.

He tried to open his eyes, but then immediately shut them; they burned with a worse pain than the rest of his body as soon as they began to open. Lifting himself up painfully on his hands, he realized that something wet and warm covered the floor underneath him.

"Dad?" he croaked, his throat stinging.

He heard no answer other than a shrill ringing in his ears.

"Dad!" he said more desperately, rising gingerly to his knees and feeling around frantically with his right hand. It grazed something sharp, sending a spasm of pain up his arm as he felt his palm split open. He jerked his arm back, but in doing so lost his balance, and fell back onto his front. He heard the tinkle of glass and felt another piece of it cut his right cheek as his face hit the floor.

"Dad! Lewis!" he screamed, beginning to cry with fear and pain. "Lewis Pratt!"

Lewis returned to consciousness hearing his son's screams but not registering what he was hearing. All he was aware of was the searing burn all over his body and a throbbing pain in his head. Then he began to feel an intense pain in his stomach. And finally, he realized that Tom was sobbing his name right there beside him.

He tried to open his eyes, but they stung, and he shut them again. "Tom!" he said.

"Dad!" he heard Tom's shaking voice in the stinging darkness.

"I'm here," Lewis said. "I'm right here."

Lifting himself onto his hands again, feeling even more stinging pain now in his right hand, Tom reached wildly toward Lewis's voice with his left hand. After a couple seconds, it landed upon something soft, and warm and wet, Tom guessed despite himself, with his father's blood.

Lewis felt Tom's hand grope about his calf. He tried to lean forward to touch his son's hand with his own, but a sudden shock of pain pierced his right side as soon as he made to move.

"That's my leg," Lewis said as Tom called out to him again. "But I can't move, son."

Tom quickly wiped blood and tears away from his eyes with his left hand, and tried to open them again. The pain was almost unbearable, but through the searing sting and through blotchy, blurred vision, he saw a flickering image of his father crumpled unnaturally against the wall. Lewis's chair was broken underneath him, and the table looked as if it had been hurled into Lewis's abdomen. Even through the blur, Tom could see that his father's face was red and raw, and his clothes were becoming increasingly soaked with blood.

Tom closed his eyes again, more out of horror than out of pain. "What's happened?" he moaned.

The only response he heard from his unmoving father was a low groan, followed by what sounded like a tearful whimper. He forced his eyes open again.

He found it a little easier to keep his eyes open this time. The rising sun was shining through the empty frames of the shattered kitchen window across from where he now lay. He could see that many of the thinner branches of the trees outside had kindled; almost all their leaves were gone. The chairs, dishes, and table inside had all been apparently hurled in Lewis's direction.

Turning himself painfully to look behind him, he saw that the rest of the kitchen looked the same: pans and dishes thrown to the floor, all gathered toward the northern side of the house. The closet door by the entryway was swinging open, its hinges visibly contorted. And as the door swung slowly back again in the wind that was whistling steadily through the house, Tom saw that the front door had also been wrenched open, and was drifting slowly back and forth in the breeze.

He remembered Andrew and Terry. Whatever had just happened, he realized, Andrew and Terry had been outside for it.

He began to lift himself to his knees, wanting to find his siblings, though

he had no thought as to what he might be able to do for them. But he was knocked down again onto his face as the ground shivered violently underneath him. Crashes sounded from other rooms, and the house creaked dangerously around them.

“What was that?” he said, growing more terrified now.

Lewis gave a choking whimper, and Tom saw his eyes flicker slightly open, only to instantly shut again.

“What is going on?” Tom coughed, feeling panicked tears dribble down his face. He pushed himself up onto his knees again. His skin felt like it was ripping with every movement.

He heard his father mumble something about Andrew and Terry, then saw him slump forward limply.

“Don’t worry,” Tom said to him, trying to keep himself calm. “I’ll go get help.” He turned and stumbled across the broken floor toward the swinging front door. The yellow sun cast shadows behind the scattered dishes and utensils and into the dents all over the wall, and reflected off of the ubiquitous shards of broken glass, making the mess seem more chaotic and jagged to Tom. He realized he was shaking before he managed to reach the front door.

Some part of Tom had hoped that whatever had happened had affected only his house. But as his stinging eyes adjusted to the light shining in through the doorway, he felt his chest seize up with despair.

The street outside was cracked in several places. Every house he could now see looked plainly as damaged as his own. Roof tiles had been ripped off, every window he could see was shattered, and many of the taller houses seemed to be leaning noticeably to his right. Water was gurgling up from a fire hydrant across the street. A few of the houses and many of the cars were smoking. He could see flames beginning to lick up from the side of one house.

He fell to his knees in the doorway, the pain of his burned knees striking the ground only a dull shock to him now. He slid over sideways, resting his head against the doorframe, staring unacceptingly at the destruction all around him.

The car in the driveway across the street was smoking. Tom almost wanted to turn back into his house. He didn’t want to see any more. He didn’t want to find out that his neighbors were dead.

But he lifted himself up again, ignoring the continual pain all over his body. He began to stomp forward, his knees aching with every step. As he made his way past the garage, he saw that a large portion of the horizon to the

south was a towering pillar of black smoke. He choked on an emerging sob. It seemed clear to him now what had happened: Austin had been struck with a nuclear bomb.

The cloud of smoke towered indefinitely away into the sky, rising from some place far over the horizon. And then Tom saw Brent's car.

His brother and sister's ride was lying on its side in the middle of the street just before the stop sign at the corner. He could see from where he stood that its windows were all broken. Smoke rose from its front.

He stumbled toward it, crying more fully now. He wanted desperately to get to that car, to find his brother and sister alive, to take care of them, to make sure they were okay. But he was terrified that they would not be. Even as he jerkily approached the dented rear of the car, he realized that no one was moving inside.

Tom's right leg suddenly seized up with the pain of walking so quickly, and he fell to his face again. Forcing himself back up, he shouted, "Terry! Andrew!"

No sound more than a dull hissing came from the battered car. Tom continued staggering toward it, but his hope was already gone.

"Terry! Andrew!" he shouted again.

He fell to his hands and knees. The pain of walking was unbearable. His eyes were starting to sting more severely again. He pulled himself forward for a couple meters more, then looked up toward the car. He could now see two unrecognizably burnt and battered forms slumped in the back seat of the car through the broken rear window.

"NO!" he screamed.

He crawled forward more quickly, his right palm piercing him with pain every time it touched the cracked pavement. Upon reaching the car, he reached his left hand in through the shattered window and began violently prodding the burnt, bloodied bodies.

"Terry!" he shrieked madly. "Terry! Andrew! It's okay! Wake up! It's okay!" He began screaming more and more loudly, as if his unrecognizable brother and sister would revive if he screamed louder. "Wake up! It's Tom! Wake up!"

Tom lost track of how long he remained there, shaking the lifeless bodies and shouting their names. But all of a sudden, a very firm hand came from behind him and pulled him back.

Tom shouted out in surprise, then saw a tall man crouching in front of

him. He swung his right arm wildly at the man, who calmly ducked out of the way and pulled Tom down into a sitting position on the broken street.

"Tom," the man said familiarly, "Leave Terry and Andrew alone."

"Who are you?" Tom demanded fiercely.

"I am a friend."

"How do you know us?" Tom shouted, not caring to hear the man. "*Did you do this?*"

"No." The man's voice shook with a strange passion. "I can help you, Tom, and Andrew and Terry, too."

Then the man reached forward again toward Tom. Tom shouted and kicked out at him, but the man's hand managed to touch Tom's head.

The first thing that struck Tom as strange then was the lack of the intense pain he had come to expect as a result of moving his leg like that. He felt his foot connect with the man's left side, but the man didn't seem to notice it.

And then he realized that the pain in his skin was gone. His joints didn't burn anymore. And his head was clear, and his eyes were clear and painless, too.

The man stood and moved to the roof of the sideways car. Tom didn't see if the man touched the car or not, but the next thing he knew, the roof was disconnected from the rest of the car, and the man was setting it gently down onto the ground. Tom watched dumbly as the strange man stepped onto the roof of the car, reached in, and then lifted a blinking and perfectly whole Terry Pratt out of the car.

"Terry!" Tom screamed in elated disbelief. He leaped to his feet with agility that would have surprised him had he not been overcome with the sight of his once mangled sister now standing in perfect health. He leapt forward and scooped Terry up in his arms, now truly sobbing.

"You're okay! You're okay! You're okay!" Tom babbled, squeezing a totally disoriented Terry in what was becoming a painfully tight grip.

She managed to extricate herself enough to say, "What's going on?" before Tom shrieked again with delight as he saw the man lift an unscathed Andrew out of the car.

Tom dodged around Terry to go embrace Andrew, but then stopped dead, looking with fearful suspicion at the man who was now bending into the front seats of the car.

"Who are you?" he asked the man again.

The man stood and surveyed Tom, but before he could answer, Brent

Young, whom he had just lifted from the car, began shouting.

“What ha – Stacey!”

Brent lunged down toward his girlfriend’s body, but the man caught him with a surprisingly firm arm across his chest, holding him back.

“Brent,” the man said, “Wait. Watch.”

Brent struggled against the man’s unmoving arm as the man reached down and touched Stacey’s head.

The blood and burns faded off of Stacey Brown instantaneously. She looked up, confused and obviously alarmed to find herself in the crumpled wreckage of the car and to see Brent screaming hysterically above her.

The man released Brent, who swooped down on Stacey, kissing her and asking her if she was alright.

“What happened?” Stacey asked, more worried now, but glad to have survived their apparent crash.

Brent bent down to help Stacey out of the car, but found that her legs were pinned down.

“It’s okay,” the man said from behind him. And just then, Brent saw the twisted metal retreat away from Stacey’s legs, as if of its own accord.

Brent jumped in surprise, and Stacey looked to where he was staring just in time to see the bleeding cuts in her legs close up, as did the tears in her jeans.

Brent let go of Stacey and stepped back, looking uncertainly at her.

“Don’t worry,” the man smiled, placing a hand on Brent’s shoulder.

Brent backed away from the man as well. The man reached toward Stacey, and she floated out of the car without him touching her.

“Don’t worry,” the man said again as Stacey screamed in surprise before touching down on the cracked pavement. She ran immediately to Brent, looking nervously at this strange man.

“There is a lot to explain,” the man said quietly.

“Yeah,” Tom said impatiently. “*Who are you?*”

“Tom! Andrew! Terry!”

The three Pratts spun around to see Lewis sprinting toward them. No longer bloodied, no longer injured at all now, they could see that he was crying with apparent joy to see them all safe and alive.

“Dad!” Tom shouted euphorically, running toward his father. “You’re okay too!”

Lewis embraced Tom, then let go of him to see if Andrew and Terry were alright.

The two younger children had only then become aware of the desolation surrounding them. Both of them stood rooted in horror as Lewis embraced them, weeping.

“What’s happened to our house?” Terry gasped as Lewis embraced her.

“What happened to everything?” Andrew said.

Lewis looked past them to where the man was talking to Brent and Stacey. A young woman was now standing between them and the man, as if she had appeared out of thin air.

“I’ll take you to your families,” the man was saying to Brent and Stacey. Then, without another word, the man scooped Brent off his feet with one arm and Stacey with the other, and glided gracefully into the air.

“What the —” Andrew shouted as Terry screamed. They watched as the man picked up speed and disappeared with a screaming Brent and Stacey over the rooftops.

“It’s alright,” the woman in front of them said, grinning slightly. “I’ll explain everything.”

“Who the hell are you people?” Lewis said to her.

“I am here to help,” she said. “That’s all.” Like the man, she looked very young. She was dressed very plainly, in what looked to the Pratts like some sort of robe. But her grey, shimmering clothing had no discernible edge; it just seemed to fade right into the air a few inches from her body.

“Why don’t we go inside?” she said, addressing Lewis.

Lewis put his arms around Andrew and Terry. “I am not letting you inside my house,” he said. “Not until you explain to me what is going on here.”

The woman sighed and sat herself comfortably on the pavement. Lewis remained standing, as did his children around him.

“I think you’ll want to be sitting down for what I have to say to you,” the woman said.

Finding that easy to believe, Lewis guardedly sat down on the curb, keeping what he thought was a safe distance between this person and his family.

“Call me Liz,” the woman said as the Pratt children sat down on the curb as well.

“Liz,” Lewis said untrustingly.

Liz looked at Lewis as if considering him. Then she said, “We, that man and I, represent a group of people called Nüährnär.”

“Did you do all this?” Lewis demanded. “Who are you people?”

Liz’s voice was soft but forbiddingly firm as she said, “We did not! I didn’t, neither did any of my friends in Nüährnär! This was a despicable, cowardly, evil thing that Sëřehahn did to your world!”

“Sarah who?” Lewis said.

Liz’s abrupt anger softened as quickly as it came, and an understanding smile smoothed her already smooth, young face. “All this, that’s happened to your world, this was all the result of an unprovoked attack instigated by a man who calls himself Sëřehahn.”

She sighed again, then looked seriously at them all. “We, Nüährnär, we’re not from Earth,” she said simply.

Lewis began to laugh dismissively and derisively at such an idea, but something about Liz’s easy expression made the laughter swiftly die in his throat.

“You don’t believe me?” Liz asked conversationally, looking at them all. “I can change that. Look down.”

They had been sitting right on the curb when she said that, but then, as soon as they did glance at the ground, they saw that it was more than a hundred meters below them. The cold November wind whistled around them as they found themselves suspended high above their house in thin air.

All four of them screamed, flailing around in the air. Liz, sitting comfortably cross-legged in the air in front of them, laughed at them all in what was clearly a good-natured way. Then Lewis felt the surge of adrenaline disappear that had filled him at the sight of the ground so far below, and he felt his shaking self suddenly calmed somehow.

Liz smiled amiably and extended a hand to Lewis, uncrossing her legs to float more relaxed in the air.

“Lewis,” she said, her unraised voice somehow perfectly audible over the whistling wind, “It’s alright.”

Lewis swung his arm desperately forward to take Liz’s outstretched hand, and stretched his other arm out for his children. Andrew and Terry grabbed onto it, but Tom, being closer to Liz, reached out for her other arm. Liz took Tom’s flailing hand as well, and then the Pratts found themselves plummeting with terrifying speed back to the ground.

They stopped just as their dangling feet touched the burnt grass in front of their house, then collapsed to the ground as Liz let go of Lewis and Tom. The trip downward took only a fraction of a second. Tom felt like he should

want to throw up, but, even after such a drop, his body didn't seem to have any need to.

The Pratts then all felt themselves lifted into sitting positions there on the grass by some invisible, but rather pleasant, force. Liz had sat down cross-legged again on the ground.

"Sorry to scare you," she said, understanding laughter still twitching at the corners of her mouth. "But do you believe me now, Lewis?"

Lewis rose to his feet. "Get away from my family."

The laughter faded from Liz's face, but her tone was still comfortable as she said, "I'll get away, and leave you forever, if that's what you want. But only if it's still what you want after hearing what I need to explain to you."

Lewis hesitated. Liz's flying prank had begun to convince him. At least he was certain now that Liz was no regular person. But it had also frightened him. He did not want this person to hurt his family.

Suddenly, Liz was standing. "Lewis Richard Pratt," she said levelly, "Neither I nor any of my friends of Nüährnär had anything to do with Sërëhahn's attack on your world." She sounded almost offended then; her voice shook with fury as she said Sërëhahn's name. "I don't want to hurt you. I won't hurt you! You cannot hurt me, and I'm not going to hurt you. But Sërëhahn *will hurt us all!*"

Lewis had no idea who this Sërëhahn person could be, but still he felt some unspecified dread creeping up his spine as Liz referred to him.

"If you don't want to be destroyed by Sërëhahn," Liz continued, now speaking more quietly, "Then my people of Nüährnär are the only ones who will protect you from him."

Lewis was surprised. He gazed speechlessly at Liz for a moment. He looked down at his children, still seated on the grass, only Tom's face not white with fear now, and, the thought of protecting them overpowering his apprehension about Liz, he nodded, not looking at her.

"Fine," he said, sitting back down. "Tell us what you have to say."

Chapter 2

Vanguard

...as ambassador of Reality. Sometimes, many small things lead to wondrous ones. But I wouldn't have thought at the time that the destruction of everything that I knew was a small thing!

Such disasters do help to awaken people to the things that really matter. The things that eradicate the petty distractions that stand in the way of lives remind us what life is for! That's the way it was with me. The destruction of everything that I thought I knew opened a window for me to learn everything that there really is to know! Disaster and horror drew me from the illusions of pretended, hollow "life" to what Life really has always been.

To Ä'ähänärdanär.

This was a tremendous, pivotal event in my life. Don't think that it wasn't. But it was also just the first, and one of the smallest, of the terrors and pains that I was about to endure. I had no idea who Sërëhahn was back then. I had heard of Pp'm'tärnhär, though I didn't realize it, and I didn't take seriously what I had heard, anyhow. I knew nothing of...

...and Ämäthöär. Lhëhrha's strain notwithstanding, few things reflect the epitome of evil, in its worst, most mixed, most potent manifestations, than they did. Evil, and destruction, and the terror of endless regression! Good is good, but so much of the good that they did served as mere host to their evil intentions!

But I ought to continue with the chronological version of the story, as well as I can give it here and now. This story! This microcosm of Ä'ähänärdanär! But that's what all stories are.

More than a billion N'nüährnär were now reviving and orienting the fallen Nöhönüäär. The proportion of dead who turned out to be revivable was remarkable; nearly two-thirds.

My dear counter-Antär was...

An unseasonably warm breeze swept through the circle of kneeling Trotters outside their house as Scott Trotter finished his prayer with a quiet, "Amen."

"Amen," his present family agreed around him.

Scott put his arm around his wife beside him.

"I hope they're okay," Rene Trotter wept as she leaned into Scott's embrace.

"Of course they are," Scott said comfortingly. "How big can an earthquake be?"

"I bet Aaron's watching this on the news right now," their son Joseph said, reclining, still shaking, on the lawn.

"I bet," Scott smiled. "He's probably wondering if we're all okay."

The slouching house creaked and snapped behind him.

"Dad, I'm freezing!" Kathy said, clutching her nightclothes closer to her. "Can't I just run in and get my coat? It's dark still!"

"No," Rene said sharply. "No one is going close to the house, at least until help comes."

The house abruptly stopped creaking altogether. "Good morning," a pleasant voice said from the broken sidewalk.

The Trotters looked up to see a smiling young woman walking toward them.

"Good morning," Rene said, quickly looking over the girl to make sure she was unhurt. "Are you okay? Do you need help?"

The stranger's smile deepened. But as she sat down near them she said very capably, "At the moment, I'm here to help you."

"Who are you?" Kathy asked. She was staring at the woman's glowing white gown, if it was a gown, which cast shadows behind them all in the grey predawn.

Just as she was speaking, a man descended swiftly from the sky, carrying a shaken Aaron Trotter in one arm.

"Who—" John Trotter shouted.

"What—" Joseph said at the same moment.

"Aaron!" Rene exclaimed, leaping to her feet and running toward him. "What's going on? Who is this?"

"Aaron, let go," the man was saying, gently prying Aaron's clutching arms from around his neck.

Aaron seemed to become aware that he was standing on solid earth again, and leapt away from the man, tripping and falling to the grass.

Rene scooped him up in her arms. "Are you okay?" she asked tearfully. "Why...who are—" she began, looking up at the strange man. But he was nowhere to be seen.

"Rene," the young woman said, standing again slowly.

But Rene's attention was drawn quickly away by Kathy's squeal: "Sarah!" just as John shouted, "Whoa, look!"

Another woman touched down on the grass, carrying Sarah Trotter in her arms.

"Mom! Dad!" Sarah cried, running and embracing Scott without a second glance at her rescuer. "Here too?" she said, horrified, catching sight of her family's leaning house.

"I'm afraid so," Scott began, confused but happy to see all his five children safely there with him.

"Aaron!" Sarah said, springing away from Scott and running toward her mother and still shaking brother. "How –"

Then, seeming to get a hold of herself, Sarah turned back to the woman who had brought her to her family. But she too was gone.

"She's gone to help other people," the glowing white woman said as Sarah looked around.

"Gone?" Sarah said blankly.

"What are you people?" Aaron choked from where he still crouched on the ground.

"It's alright," the woman said to Sarah, correctly reading her expression. "She knows you're grateful. I'm certain she'll be getting thanked by a lot of other people today. And," she said, grinning first at Aaron then directing her words to Scott, "I obviously have a lot to explain to all of you."

"You most certainly do," Scott said, with almost a trace of laughter in his voice.

The woman sat down once more. "Come here," she said to them all. She leaned back casually on her hands.

The Trotters, led by Scott, obligingly moved into a tight clump in front of the woman.

"Alright," the woman said, looking at each of them and then back at Scott. "The first thing you have to know is that I and those others are not from this Earth.

"Don't worry," she said quickly to Scott and Rene's flummoxed expressions, "This will all make sense to you soon."

She paused, but none of the Trotters challenged her. Every one of them was staring wide-eyed and uncomprehendingly at her, but they were still listening. After what they had all just seen, most of them felt ready to hear almost anything from this strange, glowing girl.

“The earthquake you’ve all just been through—and yes, it was here, too,” she said particularly to Aaron and Sarah, Aaron just now beginning to notice the contortions of the mountains around them and the ruin of his home neighborhood. “It affected everywhere on Earth. Sarah, you were just in Arizona?”

Sarah nodded, even more amazed now.

“Sarah was lucky to survive,” the woman said complimentarily to Scott and Rene. “The land there was affected far worse than your mountains here have been.”

“And fires,” Sarah breathed. “And lava...”

The woman looked sadly at her. “Yes.” She sighed, then said, “All these worldwide earthquakes were caused intentionally. Aaron,” she said, looking at him, “You saw things much worse than earthquakes over in Florida, didn’t you?”

Aaron looked fearfully at the woman. “How do you know that...you don’t know me...”

“I know what happened to Florida,” she said. “I saw it. And—”

“How?” Aaron demanded.

“I’ll explain,” the woman smiled. “But, for now, just know that my people stopped what was being done to Florida, and to everywhere here. This was not natural. This was done by people who wanted to destroy your world.”

“I can’t believe that,” Rene said breathlessly.

“I know your names,” the woman shrugged, “Because...well, we know about a lot of things about Earth. But I’ll explain all that soon.

“But Aaron,” she said kindly, “I saw what happened to Florida, because I helped stop the people who did it.”

“I think it was an atom bomb,” Aaron said darkly to his family. “Or some worse kind.”

“It wasn’t a bomb,” the woman answered him, “But it was a much worse kind. Like a lot of atom bombs, being set off from the sky to the ground.”

“In Florida?” Rene gasped, becoming very white now.

“And in a lot of places,” the woman said. “But it’s over now. For now.”

“For now?” John asked, going white too.

“We’re here to protect you, in case you get attacked again.”

“Attacked?” Scott said. “Who attacked us?”

The woman paused for a moment. “There really is so much to explain.”

“But who,” Joseph said. “And why?”

“And where are you all from?” Sarah asked.

“Bad people did it,” the woman said, “From our old world.”

“Why?” Joseph asked again.

““Old world?”” Kathy repeated.

The woman smiled in an almost overwhelmed way at Kathy, then looked wordlessly at Joseph for a moment. “To be honest,” she said then, “I don’t know why they did. But my parents, and others of our leaders, knew the attack would be coming before it came. So they must know something about why you got attacked.”

“Your leaders?” Scott said. “Are they here?”

“No,” the woman said a little sorrowfully. “But,” and she visibly brightened as she spoke, “I hope they will come here soon. You might get to see some of them.”

Kathy crept closer to her mother. She wasn’t sure if her family should be listening to this glowing person, and wasn’t sure if she wanted to see still more people like her.

“But, if you’re going to meet anybody,” the woman was continuing, “I need to explain a whole lot more to you first.”

Sarah noticed her father nod slightly, showing he was listening. She smiled unconsciously as she looked back toward the woman. Whoever this person was, whatever she was, Sarah wanted to hear whatever she had to give them.

...what a marvel she was even then!

That same general scene of introduction was happening all over the Earth, the noble vanguard of Nüährnär attending to every family or individual who would revive on Öhönüäär.

Some received them remarkably well. Like Scott and Rene Trotter. Some others took a great deal more convincing. Some, like dear Rod Hawke, made themselves pests to be reckoned with! But, sadly, many of those never were so wise as Rod eventually became. They left Nüährnär quickly, and the Ämäthöär made ghastly use of them.

Then there were Peter and Annie Garcia: heroes in beautiful archetype! And John and Kōrhas Fleming were, of course, intertwined in the Garcia legacy. John may have died thinking his efforts to save Nüährnär were a failure. He was no more of a failure than I was in that catastrophe. His efforts rescued and dignified so many who might, otherwise, have suffered the baseness of heart that is so much more incapacitating than mortal death! John, Peter, Rodney, all heroes to the uttermost extremity!

Rod's welcome to Nüährnär, as represented to him by Hōrdaädr, was characteristically far more violent than Peter and Annie's, much less to mention John's! Peter was suspicious, perhaps insensibly so. But when Rod...

"Where are they?" Peter Garcia muttered crossly, looking over his shoulder at the ruin around them.

"Who?" Annie choked between groans.

"Ambulances, Search and Rescue," Peter said, turning back to her. "Anyone."

"They're probably helping other people," Annie said, shifting her weight in the rubble.

"Don't move!" Peter said, and he tightened a filthy rag that he had tied around Annie's left arm.

"Peter," Annie said, then winced. After a breath, she continued, "You need to take care of yourself."

"I'm fine," Peter curtly lied.

Annie Baker was lying in the rubble of what had been their apartment complex. Peter had tied tourniquets on her left arm and leg, and bore one himself on his right leg. The moans of suffering neighbors filled the smoky air on every side.

"Adam! No! Adam!" a voice shrieked from beyond one of the heaps of twisted wreckage.

"Adam?" Annie said.

"Don't talk," Peter urged her quietly, dabbing her severe burns with a wet cloth. Water was everywhere, spewing from a ruptured pipe nearby.

"Not Adam Morris?" Annie said. "That's Katie Morris screaming!"

"Come back!" Katie's voice wailed in their ears over the groans of everyone around them. "Don't leave me here! Adam! Come back!"

Peter was becoming all too used to those kinds of cries now.

"He's..." Annie began, tears emerging and falling down her blistered cheeks.

We'll all be just like him, Peter thought hopelessly to himself, *If real help doesn't get here soon.* He wrung the wet cloth out into the broken metal and plaster underneath them.

"Here," he said, gently lifting Annie's head and placing the wrung-out rag underneath it. "I'm going to the...to where the office was. There may be something better than dirty towels in there."

"Peter," Annie said sharply. She forced herself to sit up, awkwardly

raising herself with her unbroken right arm. “You can’t go off digging through...through all this. You’re bleeding! You take care of yourself first!”

Peter didn’t respond, but just eased Annie back down onto her back in the wreckage of their shattered home. He wiped away blood that was falling down the side of her face.

Annie pushed his hand away, then snatched the cloth out of it.

“Hey –” Peter said, but Annie lifted his untucked shirt and pressed the cloth against his skin. Peter winced, but Annie pressed the cloth more firmly against him.

“Annie, I will be alright,” Peter said, gasping from the sudden renewed pain.

“No, you won’t,” Annie said firmly. “I will be alright now; you need to take care of yourself!” Peter’s entire body was red, his freshly ironed clothes now torn and splotted with blood and grime. Painful blisters covered the right side of his face and his right hand.

Annie’s night clothes were just as filthy as Peter’s clothes, though less bloody, as Peter had tended to her wounds promptly after the blast. Her blistered left side was less burnt than was Peter’s right side, though both looked the worse in the eyes of the other.

“I’ll be back,” Peter grunted, standing as pain pierced his right leg.

Annie’s hand with the towel slid out from underneath his shirt, and Annie yelped as she saw how quickly the towel had become soaked with blood.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, then winced again and fell back onto the rubble.

“Just...just stay here,” Peter said, ignoring the burning pain in every joint as he turned toward the center of the ruins.

The apartment office had been a good hundred feet from where Peter and Annie’s apartment had been. Less than half an hour ago, Peter thought shakily, he would have just walked down the stairs and over to the office within a matter of seconds. Now he faced a long and painful distance over a mire of jagged wreckage and between the bodies of slain and suffering neighbors and friends.

But Peter saw other people standing amidst his apartment’s desolation. They did not look injured. Peter wondered for a moment if they were some sort of rescue team. But their dress was unlike anything he had ever seen. They were scattered throughout the destruction, apparently talking to the suffering survivors. But they weren’t dressed like any rescue personnel of

which Peter was familiar: their clothes were long, flowing, and shimmery, almost luminescent.

“Peter,” a man’s voice said from behind him.

Painfully he turned on the spot, to see one of the oddly cloaked people standing right there near him and Annie. A similarly dressed woman was kneeling beside Annie behind the man.

“Who are you?” Peter demanded impulsively. “Are you medically certified?”

“Yeah,” the man smiled.

The man was dressed in what looked like an amazingly thin, light robe, but Peter could not tell where the man’s skin ended and the robe began. Nor could he even tell where the robe ended and the air began; the man’s clothes just seemed to shimmer like a defined cloud of flowing blues and whites. Then, as he watched, Peter realized that the blues and whites of the man’s robe were constantly drifting and changing through each other. Were these members of some kind of charity, Peter wondered? Where were their medical kits?

Then he saw that Annie was lifting herself up from the pile of debris. “Annie!” he shouted, alarmed. “What are you doing?”

But Annie didn’t seem to be in any pain at all as she stood.

Then Peter felt the man beside him lightly touch his arm. Peter jumped despite himself, and fell over backward in the sharp rubble. He felt his hands get cut on shards of bricks below him, but then the pain instantaneously vanished. And then Peter realized that he was no longer in any pain at all.

He looked at his hands. There was no trace of any cut or scratch on either of them. Then he registered that his burns were gone; the blisters on his right hand were gone, and the skin of both hands was as healthy and tan as it had been before. It was even healthier, cleaner somehow.

He looked up in wonder at the man in front of him, hardly even noticing as the bandage on his leg unraveled itself and fell limply to join the refuse around him. Annie was standing all the way up now behind the man, her tourniquets and wounds and burns gone too.

Peter scrambled to his feet. “Who are you?” he said again. He stumbled through the wreckage toward Annie, who was looking amazedly at her woundless left arm.

“That will take me some time to explain, Peter,” the man said casually.

“Who are you with?” Peter said, staring at the robed man and woman. “How do you know my name? Why are you here?”

“Sit down,” the man invited. “I’ll tell you everything.”

The pillar of smoke towering out of the Atlantic over the horizon had already conjured into Peter’s mind fears of international war. Were these members of some radical terrorist group? Had Washington been bombed as well? Peter glanced quickly to the southwest, but the dusty sky there was pillar-free.

“What is going on?” Peter demanded, turning to the strangely dressed people. “Was it a meteor?”

“I’ll take you home, Annie,” the woman said kindly.

Annie backed away from the woman, looking fearfully at her.

“This is her home!” Peter said with even more suspicion, and he put his arm around Annie. “And her parents live a thousand miles away; what are you trying to pull here?” He was becoming increasingly afraid of these people.

The man chuckled in what struck Peter as an out of place, but no less comforting, way. “A thousand miles isn’t far, Peter, as I want to demonstrate. But neither of you have to go anywhere if you don’t want to.” He turned to the woman. “I’ll help these two.”

“Okay,” the woman said conversationally. Her tone too seemed to Peter not to fit in the ruins of such a disaster. “Good-bye,” she waved to Peter and Annie with unfitting familiarity. “I hope to see you again soon.”

Peter was sure he caught a mischievous smile glint across the woman’s face, just as she launched herself straight into the air. She accelerated in the blink of an eye and vanished in a swirl of dust.

Annie screamed beside Peter, who stumbled backward in shock. He noticed a particularly sharp shred of twisted metal out of the corner of his eye. Stooping quickly down, he grabbed it up and pointed it threateningly at the man standing in front of them.

“Keep away!” he shouted as he put his arm around Annie again. “Whoever you are.”

“Peter Garcia,” the man said patiently, appearing totally unperturbed. “If you want to know what’s going on, then sit down and put that ridiculous thing down. I’m going to tell you everything.”

Peter stepped forward, brandishing the strip of metal more threateningly. “I think I can guess enough,” he retorted. “Get away from us!” He glanced around, afraid another terrorist might attack them from behind.

The man calmly put up his right hand, and, as he did, the piece of metal was yanked from Peter’s hand. It soared slowly up into the air and came back

down to land in the man's outstretched left hand. Then Peter felt his muscles seize up, and realized he was sitting down despite himself. Annie sat down beside him, terror on her face.

The man sat down in front of them, looking at Peter with an entertained, chastening expression. "I hope you'll listen," he said, holding the piece of metal in front of him, "Because what's just happened here," and the piece of metal began to droop in his hand, "Concerns both of you." The metal turned clear like glass, then fell from the man's hand, splashing into his lap, no more now than so many droplets of water.

"What I have to say is extremely important to you both."

Peter tried to open his mouth to resist, but found that it would not respond.

"Your whole world has just been attacked. This disaster was not caused by me, or my companions, or by anyone from your world. People acting under the direction of a man whom we call Anhar tried to destroy Earth. My countrymen and I thwarted them, but Anhar will try again. We, obviously, are not from your world, and neither is Anhar. He will try again. I and my countrymen are here to protect Earth from him."

Peter still found himself unable to speak, yet he realized that sneering in contempt at such a yarn was unhindered.

The man, still untroubled, looked down at the rubble in front of him. Peter instinctively looked down too. Tiny drops of water were racing up into the air from between broken bits of brick and plaster and wood, collecting in a quivering glob held somehow between two of the man's fingers. Peter watched astonishedly as more and more drops leapt from the rubble to attach themselves to the lengthening strip of water in midair, held up by only the man's fingers. Then before he knew it, the water had gone opaque, and the man was again holding the same twisted strip of metal that Peter had been pointing at him seconds ago, just as twisted and sharp and dirty as it had been before.

Peter was staring unblinkingly at the man, when the man spoke, snapping Peter out of his dumbfounded gaze.

"Peter," he said, "You're not too bright are you? You refuse to believe that I and my companions aren't from Earth, in the face of having been wholly healed, of having seen Mänrü fly, and still in the face of what you've seen I've been able to do with your powerful weapon."

Peter had been snarling venomously at the man for some seconds before

he recognized that his mouth was his own again: “Bright! You stupid, brash idiot! Do you have any idea what my IQ is? Here you are, destroying things and blowing up towns, and you’re here calling me stupid? I don’t care what gadgets you people have, it doesn’t give you the right to kill people, and to come here and keep Annie and me from talking, and I see no proof, I don’t see any reason why I should think that that means that you’re some kind of extraterrestrial! You could be anyone! *You’re* stupid if you think cheap tricks will fool—”

But the man’s hearty laughter overrode Peter’s furious outburst. “You see?” he was saying, laughing as if at a shared jest, “*You don’t know what’s going on.* I could be anybody. Why rule out the truth, if you don’t know what it is yet? But you do know that I’m not what you’re used to seeing as ordinary. And,” he said, adopting something of a mock-censuring tone, “Don’t you think you should be a lot more grateful to someone who has saved both your lives?”

“I cannot expect either of you to believe anything yet. But, after what you’ve both just been through, I’d expect that you’d be prepared for what’s unexpected!” The man paused, then said, almost as if to himself, “You’re going to have to be.” He sighed thoughtfully. Then he focused back on Peter and Annie, and said, “I’m going to give you both more proof than even you could ask for, Peter, of everything I’m going to tell you, and of what I’ve told you. But before I can, before I can *show* you what I need to, you both are going to have to take one thing on trust. You’re going to have to let me—”

“I don’t trust you,” Peter interrupted. He would not have been still listening to the man if he had had any control of his legs.

The man smiled understandingly. “I am sorry that we healed you without forewarning you,” he said. “I need to do something more for you, however.”

Peter felt his muscles return to his control. He stood, taking Annie’s hand. He nodded curtly to the man, then said, “We’re going.”

The man floated lightly into the air, crossing his legs under him. “Where?” he asked.

Peter didn’t answer. He put his arm around Annie and turned away from the man.

As soon as they turned, the man was floating in the air right in front of them.

“What are you?” Peter cried, his voice shaking suddenly.

“Let me tell you all about that,” the man begged sincerely. “Please, just

sit down. Hear me out.”

“Peter,” Annie said fearfully, but then trailed away.

Peter looked at her. She was white and clearly terrified. Looking up hatefully at the man blocking them, he said, “Do we have any choice?”

“Here’s your choice:” the man said, “Don’t talk to me, and remain in the dark while everyone else helps one another against Anhar’s next attacks, or just hear me out, and thereby know enough to help everyone. We need to work together here!”

Peter snorted. “You’ll really just let us leave?” he said doubtfully. “What do people as gifted as you need my help for, anyway?”

“Peter,” Annie said, staring at the man with apprehension. “Let’s just listen. We can at least listen.”

“Please, Peter, Annie,” the man said, still floating firmly in midair.

Peter looked untrustingly into the man’s light blue eyes, then sat down again in the ruins. “Alright then,” he said. “Talk. We’re listening.”

“Are you?” the man asked dubiously. But then he rose a couple of feet and soared gracefully around Peter and Annie, first on his front, then on his back. He smiled at them both, and asked, “How would you like to be able to do this?”

Peter stared stonily at the man as he came to hover in front of them. The man stared straight back at him. Finally, Peter said, “Sure. Of course I would. Annie?”

“Who wouldn’t?” Annie said timidly.

The man smiled a small smile. “I can give you what I have, what lets me do this.”

“What?” Peter queried.

“Your clothes,” the man said. “You’re dressed for work and you for bed, but you’re both wearing clothes.”

Peter stared uncomprehendingly at him.

“Manifestly, your clothes aren’t part of you, but they help you. They cover you, keep you warm, make you look sharp,” he said, nodding at Peter. “When they’re not torn, that is,” he smiled friendlily. Peter’s mouth did not so much as twitch back.

“They give you more than you are without them. They’re yours. They add to what you are yourselves, especially for warmth.

“Now, I’m not any different from either of you, physically,” the man began, but then Peter cut in.

“Hold it!” he said, pointing at the man. A triumphant grin creased his face. “I thought you said you weren’t from Earth!”

“I did,” the man began, raising his hand placatingly.

But Peter overrode him. “An extraterrestrial who just happens to be no different from ordinary people?” he sneered. “Who are you? What do you want?”

“Peter, I do not understand that,” the man said forcefully. “How it is that you are no different from us. But we are no different biologically from one another. I still have plenty of questions about that. But if you want to know more about what is going on, why we’re the same, then hear me out. Once you understand what I am trying to tell you, then you will get to talk to people who are a lot more knowledgeable about all this than I am.”

“Who?” Peter asked.

“My leaders,” the man replied simply. “The Ōmāthäär.”

“The who?” Peter said.

The man laughed a little, saying, “Listen to what I’m telling you now, and then you’ll be able to understand everything.

“But clothing. It can be a good addition to us that lets us do things that we can’t do without it. That’s what I’ve got. I have clothing inside my body as well as out, and that lets me fly, and do all sorts of things.”

“*Inside* your body?” Annie said apprehensively.

“Inside, through, interwoven with it, everywhere,” the man said comfortably. “You’ve both been immunized against many diseases. It’s somewhat like that. Nothing of my body has been harmed, or changed, or taken away. But there are other things within it that help it function better.

“I never need to eat, because I have better stores of energy within me that my body gets to use. Of course I love to eat! But I never *need* to. I never need to sleep. I cannot get naturally ill or aged. I am not anything near as frail as I would be without what I have within me. And I can fly. Much faster than you would believe,” he smiled. “And, I can do all sorts of things...”

The next thing Peter knew, the man had glided straight toward him, then passed, like a ghost, straight through Peter’s middle and out his other side.

Both Peter and Annie shouted with surprise, but the man started laughing again.

“What I want now is to give you both the same ‘clothes’ that I have, so you both will be able to participate in all that we all must do to thwart Anhar.”

Peter shook himself. “Thanks,” he said, “But we said that we’d *listen*.

Are you finished?"

The man looked wordlessly at Peter. Then, before Peter could register that anything had happened, the man had leaned forward and taken Peter's hand in his.

"Wha—!" Peter shouted, outraged, trying to wrench his hand away. But it was like trying to pull it out of a steel vice.

But then the man released him.

"Get away from—" Peter began, but then stopped dead.

He suddenly realized that he knew the man's name: Mäöhä. And he understood, as if it were English, that it meant, "One Who Lives for Truth."

As he looked around, he realized that he automatically knew the names of every stranger around him: Öhärthär, "Perceptive;" Räsad, "Sorrower;" Äpäöthärkahn, "Rock Heart;" Ūdtas, "Icy;" Tärnär, "Victory" ...

And he knew the full names of every neighbor there in the wreckage. He could see straight through the wreckage as if it were transparent. He could see through his neighbors.

He could see into himself.

And he could see all this, he realized within himself, he could see it all without having turned his head or even so much as moved his eyes. It was as if he suddenly possessed some kind of omnipresent sight, letting him see every side, and inside, of everything around him.

But he could not see through Mäöhä, nor through any of the strangers, whom he termed "N'nüährnär" without thinking why he did. And his skin was opaque, he realized, though his clothes surely were not anymore. But nonetheless he was *aware* of everything going on within his body.

He knew that a great system of infinitesimal weaves had sprouted on top of and underneath and all through his skin. He knew it as if he were seeing it through his impenetrable skin. Everything inside of him, he knew suddenly, had been changed.

Not changed, he understood, but added on to. Like clothes, he realized despite himself.

All this he realized within the tiniest fraction of a second. He looked at Mäöhä without moving at all. Then, without pausing to consider how, he unleashed a burst of raw momentum furiously at him.

All Annie saw was the man release Peter, then yelp as if in sudden pain, jolting violently in the air, which snapped loudly. A burst of wind instantly whipped her side, knocking her roughly to the ground.

Peter reached out to lift Annie with something other than his arms. It was gravity, he understood, or something like it. Inertia. And as Annie was righted by his invisible force, he realized that the energy, whatever it was, was being generated by every part of the adamantine weave running through him. Through his skin, but also through his bones, his capillaries, his brain, through every organ, through everything.

His brain, he saw, or all but saw, was fortified within a shell of greater density and strength than the weaves of the rest of his body, running through and around the bone of his skull. But his brain itself was totally interwoven with miniscule bridges and connections, the nerves coated with entire complexes of microscopic, even subatomic, subphotonic, mechanisms that he knew made his thoughts and his reflexes unfathomably fast. At least, he would have thought it all unfathomable before.

The mechanisms within his brain were moving more quickly than light, he realized utterly disbelievingly. Peter recognized that his long-believed Planck Distance clearly had nothing on the tininess of the myriads of objects now racing through every part of him.

And a great mesh of energy, or inertia, or momentum, Peter realized, was now coursing through every part of him. He knew that that made him practically indestructible, and also that he could send it out in order to move anything, or manipulate it in order to move himself.

He recognized then that Mäöhä had started laughing. The last second had felt like an hour to Peter's quickened thoughts.

"Well," Mäöhä was laughing jubilantly, "You're a regular N'närdamähr now, Peter!"

Annie was looking from the man to Peter, wondering what was going on.

Närdamähr, Peter knew instantly. That was Mäöhä's culture. So a N'närdamähr was someone from Närdamähr.

"How dare you!" Peter snarled, feeling more and more violated the more he comprehended how much Mäöhä had done to him. "You had no right to—"

"Peter," Mäöhä said lightly, "I am sorry that I helped you again without forewarning you. But don't you see how much there was for me to tell you? And don't you believe me now?"

Peter didn't want to believe this person, this thing. Yet he couldn't deny that he did know now so many things, as inherently as he knew his name or how to speak English. He knew that Mäöhä's people really had come to help them, that they really were not from Earth. He knew everything about their

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culture, their world of Nrathërmě, their history, everything. He had to believe Mäōhä, and his “countrymen” of Nüährnär. He did not want to believe, but now he found himself feeling that he had no choice.

...and by then they were all just trying to calm him down! And then Rod said, “Easy on, mates! Let’s not get argy bargy! If youse’ll get to the duck’s guts, she’ll be apples; I’ll be all ears flapping!”

And they believed him! Frail old Rod hoodwinked them! So then Ärōärōbät released him.

And as soon as he had control of his limbs again, Rod dove to the ground, threw himself forward, and then launched himself off the cliff!

He told me that he knew what he was doing. He said there was a very inconspicuous ledge a few meters down, with a small cleft in which he had hid countless times.

But Hördaädr saved him the trouble. He caught him in midair, then soared out to talk with him there, floating hundreds of meters from the valley below. Rod said that that was when he recognized himself temporarily beaten. Temporarily.

And others reacted still differently. Suliaman and Elaben Naidu at first...

...needless to say, Lydia too reacted far more cognizantly than I and my family did!

Consider my father’s reactions to Brä’äödädankat. He would not accept the simple truth until it was staring him in the face! When people let petty distractions alienate them from the juice of life, it becomes all too easy for simple realities to seem fantastic to them, and for untenable philosophies, usually fearful ones, to seem bluntly undeniable. But my dad caught on quickly enough, once he let himself wonder if the truth could be true. It’s unsettling how much fear can distort any evidence. It’s all too easy to believe something when I’m afraid of it being true. But understanding flushes fear away.

How fearful we all were back then! Brä’äödädankat never knew, I think, how great a service she did to my family. She led me to Ōmāthäär-hood and Ä’ähänärdanär! And, ultimately, to...

Chapter 3

Nrathěrmě and Nüährnär

Liz grinned at the Pratts seated in front of her. Lewis was examining the plate of food that Liz had just conjured for him, a further demonstration of the possibilities she was trying to impress them with.

"Is it...real?" Lewis asked, poking at the edge of the plate, which was sitting securely in midair in front of him.

"Taste it!" Liz invited enthusiastically.

Lewis eyed her with distrust.

Beside him, Tom picked up an elegant silver fork from where it sat in the air beside his own plate. Taking up the knife as well, he tentatively began to cut into the steaming filet mignon that Liz had made for him. Andrew, on Lewis's other side, had been given a pizza covered with pepperoni and bacon and sausage and any other meat that Liz suspected he would like. And Terry was gazing suspiciously but still hopefully at a tall chocolate parfait dangling in the air over her lap.

Lewis picked his plate up out of the air. Liz had given him rib-eye steak with potatoes and gravy, all the plates of deliciously smelling food having been generated out of thin air before the Pratts' eyes. Andrew passed his hand under his plate once, and then again. He bent to take a better look underneath it, checking to see if it really was levitating without any evident support. Terry had now taken her parfait in her hand. Glancing uncertainly at Liz, she placed the parfait back in the air, but in a different spot. It remained exactly where she left it.

Tom cut a piece from his filet mignon. It was a perfect red on the inside, not any redder than he would have wanted it to be, and it was surprisingly tender and easy to cut. He examined the piece of meat for a second, then put it in his mouth. The sudden flavor was overwhelmingly wonderful. None overpowering any of the others, the tastes of the beef and the bacon and the fantastic blend of spices intermingled in his mouth. It was tender, yet firm, more than any meat he had ever eaten. For a moment he was unaware of anything other than the pleasure of the incredible taste of it all.

"Tom!" Lewis exclaimed, noticing his son chewing, "Don't eat that!"

"Lewis," Liz said in a definitely friendly way, but with a hint of waning

patience, “Do you really think that I couldn’t have killed all of you already if that was what I wanted?”

Lewis instantly felt his muscles leave his control. He launched himself backward in a spectacular backflip right out of his sitting position, spun a somersault in the air, and landed gracefully on his feet two meters behind where he had been sitting. But then, eyes wide with shock, he hurled himself forward again, vaulted over on his hands, and landed, sitting again, exactly where he had begun. His hands shot down to brace his landing, stopping his seat just as it brushed the burnt tips of the front lawn. Then his miraculously strengthened arms lowered him softly to the ground.

Lewis’s heart was beating madly. He was not as afraid this time as he was when Liz had lifted them all into the air above the house, but he was still surprised.

Tom’s mouth was sagging open in wonder, a bit of mauled beef still in his mouth. Then both Andrew and Terry began laughing uncontrollably. Andrew doubled over howling, his pizza retreating out of his way, while Terry started wiping mirthful tears from her eyes as she looked from Lewis to Liz.

Liz giggled a little too, but then said, “Quite obviously, I could do whatever I wanted to do to you. So don’t bother with this skepticism.”

“What do you want, then?” Tom asked sincerely.

Lewis looked sharply at her, more of a challenge in his eye.

“I’ve come to explain to you what is going on here,” she said obviously. “And, I think, the leaders of Nüährnär want your help.”

“*Our* help?” Lewis asked.

“Everyone’s help from Earth,” Liz said. “I think. At any rate, I am here to explain to you what is happening. I think that we’ll all need each other’s help. So I need you to trust us all.”

“Tell us what’s going on, then,” Lewis commanded.

“I could spend days on end trying to explain everything to you!” Liz said. “And, even then, you probably wouldn’t understand so much of it!” She smiled a little. “You’d probably understand me less, and trust me less, the more I tried to explain to you!”

“But—” Lewis began, confused.

“I want to show you everything rather than waste time trying to tell it to you. Give me your hand,” she said to Lewis.

Lewis hesitated. Her point with the backflip had been well taken, even if it had been infuriating. And she did look trustworthy, really. He took Liz’s

decisively extended hand.

Liz released his hand almost as soon as she touched it. Then she sat back, a harmless look of satisfaction on her face. Before Lewis could be very confused, though he was getting more and more used to this person being confusing, Liz said, “Now, Lewis, you know that my usual name obviously is not Liz.”

As soon as she said that, Lewis realized that, somehow, he knew Liz’s real name. “Brä’äödädankat,” Lewis said, the six-syllable name rolling off his tongue as easily as if it were “Liz.”

His children stared at him. “How did I know that?” Lewis blurted.

“I told you it,” Liz said, “When I touched your hand.”

“‘Thunder Woman?’” Lewis translated the name.

Liz laughed hard. “Something like that. ‘Feminine Thunder’ is probably closer. That one touch was enough to tell your brain that one bit of information. That’s now in your mind, permanently. I want to explain everything to you that way; it’ll be a lot faster than talking. But you do need to trust me, Lewis, to let me.”

Lewis answered by emphatically extending his hand to her.

Liz smiled with clear surprise. “It is more complicated than just that, though,” she said as she pushed his hand gratefully back. “If I were to tell you everything now, it would be too much! Too much for you to digest yet. You could spend days thinking about it, and you still would have trouble making sense of everything. I can give you the information, but accessing it, really understanding it, your own brain has to make those connections. And it would take a long time for your brains to make sense of even a part of all this. I do not think that we have that kind of time.

“I want to tell you all a whole lot more than just my name! But, in order for you to be able to comprehend it all, I have to make some changes to your brains to prepare them to be able to handle it all.”

Lewis planted his hand quickly beside him again. “You don’t strike me as someone who asks permission of us,” he said with half a smile. Then he asked, “What are you talking about, changing our brains?”

Liz smiled understandingly, then reached forward to touch Lewis’s arm.

“Don’t!” Lewis shouted, recoiling, afraid she was about to change him right there.

But Liz’s fingers touched his hand as he jerked back. She sat back again. “Look at your arm.”

Lewis realized that his right arm was glowing, and changing colors like a rainbow. Frightened, he lifted the sleeve of his bed shirt. The changing colors faded to his regular skin below the elbow.

"Dad..." Terry gasped as Lewis's arm faded from red to blue, and then to purple, and then on to yellow.

"What," Lewis began, stammering. Then he looked at Liz less fearfully, and asked, "What have you done to my arm?"

"You don't like it?" Liz asked casually. "Then make the colors stop."

Lewis looked questioningly at her, but she just smiled confidently back. He looked at his hand, then, as soon as he willed it, the colors stopped shifting, stopping at a light green. He paused, thinking. Then at his thought his arm turned red. He raised his hand in front of his face. Blue, yellow, grey, black, white, he cycled through colors more and more quickly.

"What have you done to it?" he asked again, not afraid anymore, but wonderstruck.

"I've gotten your attention," Liz smiled. "Does it hurt?"

"Hurt?" Lewis asked, looking past his silvery hand at her.

"No," Liz smiled, answering her own question. "Because I didn't hurt it."

Lewis's children gasped as their father's arm disappeared. Lewis laughed. "Unbelievable!" Then his arm reappeared out of his sleeve, glowing white. It changed back to its normal skin color. Lewis looked thoughtfully at it, then turned it silver like chrome again.

"I didn't change it either," Liz said, watching him happily. "I added to it, but I didn't change what was already there. When I touched your hand, I sent a lot of tiny things into you. They built a whole new structure in your arm that lets it change colors like this."

"I didn't feel anything," Lewis said, flexing his metallic fingers.

"I mean *tiny* things," Liz grinned. "You believe in atoms?"

"Should I?" Lewis asked, grinning a little too.

"Basically," Liz answered. "But there are things much smaller than atoms. Smaller than most Earth thinkers seem to think is possible."

"Like what?" Tom asked, interested.

"There is a lot to explain," Liz said, "If you'll let me," she added to Lewis.

Lewis looked at his metallic hand. He turned it normal again. Part of him wanted to ask Liz to undo whatever she had done.

"I can undo it completely, if you want me to," Liz said as if she had read

his thoughts. “But I didn’t hurt you. I added to your arm; I didn’t hinder it or change what it already was.

Lewis looked at his hand, then chuckled as it and his arm faded into a vivid, glowing green.

Liz looked at him for a moment. Then, looking at all of them in turn, she raised her arms and said, “Shall we?”

Lewis’s attention was pulled from his glowing hand as he realized that he was rising swiftly into the air. His children were rising with him, as was Liz in front of them.

They stopped several meters above the rooftops below. Tom noticed a few of their neighbors looking up at them, while others robed like Liz pointed at them from the ground far below.

Liz smiled at them all as they looked expectantly at her, hardly struggling at all this time. She left them suspended where they were while she soared up higher into the sky. The Pratts watched as Liz rocketed higher and higher, then fell backwards, slowly turning feet over head as she plummeted downward.

Tom saw her put her arms out as she gained speed, and she began spinning playfully, spiraling down toward them. She dove a little lower than where they were floating, then pulled up to arrive dramatically in front of them.

“I can give all of you what I have,” she said, looking extremely comfortable as she relaxed in the windy air. “I can add to your bodies, so you’ll be able to fly like me, and do everything that my people can do.”

“Just let me fly like that!” Terry said.

“Me too,” Tom said. “That looked amazing!”

Lewis smiled at his children. But then he looked at Liz. “I would love that, Liz. I’ll let you give us all that. But I don’t want you to alter our minds one bit.”

Liz nodded, then swept suddenly toward Lewis. Lewis felt a thrill of fear, afraid Liz might change his brain anyway and horrified of what that could mean. But he didn’t feel like his mind changed as Liz clasped his hand.

She let go, then glided over to Tom to take his hand as well. Acting on terror, Lewis struggled toward her, not wanting her to harm his children.

The next thing he knew, he was charging through the air toward Liz, then abruptly stopped as Liz put up her hand.

“Don’t worry!” Liz laughed delightedly. “I’ve only done what you asked

me to, yet. I haven't changed your brains yet." She moved toward Andrew and Terry, Terry reaching her hand out eagerly.

Lewis moved again in the air, drifting slowly after Liz, just getting used to being able to fly so naturally and effortlessly.

No sooner did Liz touch Terry's hand than she zoomed off and up into the air, laughing excitedly. Tom whizzed past her, then banked around to fly back alongside her.

"This is great!" she squealed.

Tom laughed and flipped in a barrel roll. He saw Andrew climbing and diving a few hundred meters away. And then he saw his father streaking toward them.

"Can you believe this?" Tom laughed over the rushing air as Lewis came up level with them.

"Does that matter?" they heard Liz's unraised yet oddly audible voice from above them. They all three looked up, and saw Liz shooting down toward them from out of nowhere.

"Apparently not," Lewis yelled back. He let out his arms, loving the feeling of the wind racing past them.

Liz swept past again, then turned to them all and beckoned them toward her. "Andrew," she called. Her voice did not sound loud, but Andrew apparently heard it anyway, as he turned back toward them.

"Now, I've given you what I could," Liz said to them all as Andrew flew up to join them. "You can change colors now, if you want to," she grinned.

Andrew's skin instantly turned red. Terry gave herself her old summer tan. She rolled up her sweater sleeve to admire her perfect skin as Andrew went invisible beside her, only his clothes still visible. Tom changed his hands from blue to glowing white, then to silver like Lewis's arm had been. Andrew changed entirely silver as Tom admired the reflecting blues of the morning sky in his hands.

Lewis, his hands silver once more, smiled at his children, then took a double take at what he saw now.

Liz had vanished, and in her place Lewis saw himself!

"Hi, kids," the other Lewis said in Lewis's own voice, "I'm overbearing and paranoid."

Tom snorted with laughter, but Andrew and Terry didn't seem to know how to take that.

"Thanks, Liz," Lewis said sarcastically as the other Lewis morphed

instantly back into the young woman. “What on earth are you people?”

Liz drifted lazily back and forth. “Believe it or not, Lewis, we’re mostly the same as ‘you people’ are. As far as I know, we’re exactly the same.”

“But I can’t do that...”

“Be paranoid?”

“Nice,” Lewis said, in a “that’s enough” voice. “What you just did. I can change color, that’s fun, but –”

“There is still a lot to give you,” Liz said. “Brains like yours can only handle so much. You still can’t fly as quickly as we can. Your brains aren’t built to keep track of everything that goes on in our kinds of bodies.”

“But, you just said that we’re the same as you,” Tom said.

“Essentially, yes. And don’t ask me how. I have my suspicions, but you should talk to one of our leaders about that. But we all have more added within our bodies. We are just like you. But we have helped our bodies be able to do better what they already do.”

“Like fly?” Tom smirked.

“Like manipulate our surroundings,” Liz answered, waving her fingers. “Manipulating forces of energy lets us fly.

“And that’s all that I am proposing giving you all,” she said to Lewis. “I want to *add* to your brains. Then your brains will be capable of directing the tools I’ll give you, and you also will be able to assimilate everything that I still do need to tell you! There still is so much to tell you!

“Adding to your brains will not affect your personalities or your thoughts,” she assured Lewis.

“How?” Lewis asked doubtfully. “If you’re changing our brains...”

“I am only giving you more,” Liz explained. “Helping nerves conduct faster, repairing decay, and also modifying nerve connections when I give you all the information I need to give you.”

“I understand,” Lewis said reluctantly.

“I will not hurt you,” Liz insisted.

Lewis looked away, trying to think through his fear.

“Here,” Tom said, gliding forward and extending his hand to Liz. “Give me everything!”

Lewis shot between them. “No!” he said to Tom. He rotated toward Liz. “I go first.”

“I promise you,” Liz said, extending her hand to Lewis, “You have *no reason* to be worried!”

Lewis's silver hand reflected the blaze of the morning sun into his eyes as he began to extend it. And then he felt something very strange. He wondered if Liz had done it, but it seemed deeper than anything like that. All at once, he felt superbly confident and at peace, in a way he hadn't felt for more than three years. He took Liz's hand.

Liz smiled at him and squeezed his hand pleasedly. And then Lewis felt himself inundated. Lifetimes upon lifetimes of information flooded into his consciousness. He knew everything. Everything about Liz's people, Nüährnär, everything about the attack that had just happened, everything about Nüährnär's history and culture, everything.

But he had no idea what to make sense of first.

He found himself staring blankly ahead. Noticing Andrew and Terry's worried expressions beside him, he shook his head as if to clear it, then smiled reassuringly at them.

"Take a look at this," he smiled, looking back at his silver hands. Slowly, and fairly grotesquely, they were sucked backward into his arms.

His children gasped around him, staring at the stumps, but Lewis laughed loudly and his hands promptly returned to normal.

"This is unbelievable!" he cried, looking back at Liz. "I can do *anything*!"

"Well, not *anything*," Liz smiled, but Lewis wasn't listening to her. He had already enthusiastically clasped Tom's hand and now turned to dart over to Andrew and Terry. They had only just enough time to worry about their father's overflowing excitement before he took each of their hands. Instantaneously they were aware of the incalculable amounts of information, knowledge, know-how, and skill surging into them.

"Oh my gosh!" Terry said, her face shocked as if she had just tasted something very spicy.

Lewis let go their hands, smiling with wild enthusiasm at them both. "You were telling the truth," he said, almost incredulously, turning back to Liz. "Sěřěhahn, Nüährnär, all of it, it's all real!"

He noticed a cloudy silver robe appear around Tom behind Liz. Then he realized with horrible consciousness that he could see through everything except for the others and except for Liz and Tom's misty robes...

"We've been naked this whole time?" he said, outraged, to Liz as a silver covering radiated out from him as well.

"Don't worry," Liz laughed, "There are many worse things! But of course I was telling the truth!" Red and white robe-like layers appeared

respectively around Andrew and Terry at that moment. “Do you understand why it would have been impossible for you to understand everything before?”

“I know kung-fu,” Andrew said solemnly behind Lewis.

“It still is too much for me for keep track of,” Lewis said to Liz.

Tom glided toward Andrew, his silver robe suddenly changed to a totally opaque white martial arts uniform.

“You will have an infinitely easier time making sense of things now,” Liz was saying as they heard Tom laughing, “Who cares about kung-fu? Check this out!”

“I’ll help elucidate some of the basics to you,” Liz said to Lewis.

Terry was doubled up with laughter; Tom and Andrew’s arms and legs were no more than white and red blurs punching and kicking harmlessly at one another.

“You have learned well,” Tom was whispering dramatically, “Grasshopper!” Then, as Andrew flipped him in a whirr of color toward a shrieking Terry, everything went black all around them.

They stopped instantly, to see Lewis standing in front of them, facing Liz, who was smiling widely at them. They all looked around, all of their surroundings nothing more than empty blackness.

“Sorry,” Andrew said hastily to Liz, turning his attention to whatever she was showing them now.

“No reason,” Liz smiled. She gestured around them.

“That was awesome,” Tom whispered to Andrew.

“This isn’t real,” Liz was saying, gesturing at all the blackness. “We haven’t gone anywhere; I’m just going to show you some of what you need to understand.” As she said that, the blackness became a field of seemingly innumerable stars.

Just to make sure, Andrew attempted to see past Liz’s illusion. No sooner did he try than the stars disappeared, and he saw them all back suspended high above his house.

“You’ll want to watch this,” Liz said lightly to Andrew.

Andrew sheepishly returned to the illusion, somehow intuitively knowing how to tune back in to what Liz was showing them.

“Are we in space?” Lewis asked, gazing around at the deep sea of stars.

“I’m showing you space,” Liz said.

The Pratts gazed around at the stars. There was no sun or planet anywhere that they could see.

“Wow,” Terry gasped, pointing, “What’s that?”

A vast cube was in front of them. It reflected the stars perfectly; Terry wondered if she would have been able to spot it against the stars before Lewis had changed her.

“That’s Nrathěrmě,” Liz said. The cube was getting larger and larger as they realized they must be approaching it. It quickly filled their entire field of view.

“Nrathěrmě, that’s your world,” Lewis recognized.

Liz paused. “Yes. I like to say so,” she said then. “This is where my people came from. And Sěřěhahn lives here.”

“Sěřěhahn?” Tom said. “You said he tried to destroy the Earth?”

“Some minions of his,” Liz said spitefully.

They were racing along, far above the surface of the cube, but still it seemed to stretch away endlessly in every direction.

“It doesn’t look much like a planet,” Andrew commented, as Lewis wondered aloud, “How big is this place?” But as soon as he thought, he remembered, as if he had known for years, that the cube was more than a million miles across on every side.

Tom swore quietly as he apparently realized the same thing.

“Where are all the people?” Terry wondered, thinking Nrathěrmě, whatever its enormity, was very ugly.

“Inside,” Liz said.

The next thing they knew, their surroundings had changed totally. They knew they must be inside Nrathěrmě, but what the Pratts saw surprised every one of them.

This was no industrialized waste, no cloistered habitat. It was magnificent!

They found themselves soaring through the air of a brilliant blue sky, brighter and cleaner than any earthly sky, above a verdant, rolling landscape. They knew that they were within a closed area, but they could see no boundary other than the ground for hundreds of miles. Andrew was only slightly surprised to realize that he could see that far. But his far sight in no way lessened the glory of the shining blue sky.

Liz laughed, but her voice seemed to them to shake slightly, and she pitched downward toward the ground. The Pratts followed her; billowing, fluffy, shining white clouds rushed past them as the wind whistled freshly through their ears and hair.

Lewis zipped up and away from the others, sweeping over the surface of a bank of towering white clouds. Terry plummeted like a rock to the sprawling sea of trees below them. She dove underneath the canopy, then shot through the trees, zigzagging at breakneck speed, laughing with the exhilaration of it. The trees were enormous, and thick branches and drooping vines burst continually out in front of her, but she found her new reflexes to have no trouble dodging anything in her path. Faster and faster and faster she flew, screaming now at the excitement of banking back and forth so nimbly.

Andrew and Tom had gone on to a clear, grassy, hilly area. “Whoa,” Tom cried out, pointing at an approaching hillside.

Andrew followed Tom’s finger to see a sprawling herd of grey animals, which were marching carelessly through the grass. “What are those?” he asked, looking at the creatures’ sleek grey coats and lopsided front and back legs.

“Called Ě’anakěz, aren’t they?” Tom answered, both of them touching down some meters from a few of the animals. A couple of the Ě’anakěz looked curiously at them, but otherwise ignored them. They really were beautiful animals, Tom thought, taking in their chestnut eyes and stubby, hanging ears.

“Where are all the people?” they heard Terry’s voice ask. They looked around for her, then realized she was miles away in a nearby forest. Her voice sounded as if she were right beside them.

Tom realized, as if he were remembering, the answer to Terry’s question even as he heard Liz’s voice answering it. “Nrathěrmě is full of people,” Liz said, again sounding as if she weren’t also miles distant. “As recently as a few days ago, there were more than one hundred sextillion people living in and around there.”

“One hundred how many?” they heard Lewis’s staggered reply.

Tom realized that that meant one hundred billion trillion. He jerked his head toward where he knew Liz was, and Andrew followed him straight through the solid hills toward her.

Liz was chuckling. “About a hundred seventeen and a half sextillion, as of four days ago. That will have changed by now.”

Tom and Andrew joined Liz, just as Lewis swooped down from among the clouds. She was gliding lazily along above a winding, muddy river, one of her hands skimming along the surface of the shining water.

“But Nrathěrmě has more than enough space for them,” Liz continued, “And they’re always adding more to it. There are places that are full of people.”

But there are also wide open areas like this! Nrathërmě has wide oceans, and deep oceans too. There are majestic mountains there, wonderful ones, of all kinds of sizes and forms. Plains, rivers, rolling deserts, oceans of sand and stone, icy lakes, jungles just bursting with vitality...everything any of us could ever want!"

"And Sëřehahn lives *here*?" Lewis asked.

Liz paused. "You know that my people call themselves N'nüährnär," she said.

Now that Liz said the word again, Lewis realized that it didn't sound strange to him at all. He knew exactly what Nüährnär meant: "Refuge," which meant that N'nüährnär meant people from the Refuge. Then he noticed that none of them had been speaking in English at all since Liz had changed their brains, and that this new language felt more natural and comfortable to him now than English ever had.

"Nüährnär fled Nrathërmě more than a year ago. One of your years; we haven't used any measure longer than weeks in a very long time."

"Why?" Terry's voice asked.

"No need," Liz shrugged parenthetically.

"Seven-day weeks?" Lewis asked.

"Yeah," Liz smiled. "Strange, isn't it?"

"Nüährnär had to leave, though, more than a hundred of our weeks ago; about fifteen of your old months."

"You don't use anything longer than weeks?" Terry pressed.

"The planet Nrathërmě was taken apart to build this," Liz explained, "Along with thousands of other star systems, so we don't need to measure by seasons or days or nights anymore. And life moves so quickly, weeks are the biggest measure we need. We still use days, just to measure things by I suppose, and then weeks are seven of those; a little more than four and a half of Earth's days in all.

"Think about it like you measuring archaic things in thousands of years instead of in millennia; you rarely measure life in millennia; years, and maybe decades, are the largest measures you need."

"Life moves that fast in Nrathërmě?" Tom asked.

Liz smiled knowingly at him. "You've only been speaking N'närdamähr for ten minutes now. And an hour ago, you didn't suspect that I or any of this ever existed!"

"Yeah," Tom nodded, "That's right; it feels like it's been a lot longer than

that. A few days, maybe.”

“There is so much for you to get used to,” Liz smiled at them. But her smile faltered as she continued, “But my people don’t live at Nrathěrmě. I’ve never been there; I was born after they left, about sixty weeks ago. But I’ve been shown what happened enough to feel almost like I was there myself.”

“You – what?” Andrew stuttered. “You were born –”

“Sixty weeks ago, nine of your months,” Liz said simply.

“You look closer to Tom’s age,” Andrew said, trying to make sense of this. But then he realized that Liz’s age was nothing unusual at all.

“I taught you everything I know about all this in an instant, and you just need to put it all together,” Liz reminded Andrew, as his mind began to do just that. “I got all this taught into me when I was born; then I decided that I wanted to look the way I do. But,” she said, smiling reminiscently, “I think you will get used to things much more quickly than I did when I was first born.”

Tom stared at Liz, amazed to think that the capable, confident adult before him was no older than a tiny infant.

“Watch this,” Liz said, getting their attention.

The three of them looked at her, and then saw that their surroundings had changed again. There were people everywhere! And even they could hardly discern the furthest boundaries to this wide open area; Lewis could see that they were in a vast hallway, like a tube more than a thousand miles across, stretching away endlessly in either direction. The distant walls were covered in forests and oceans, and even a gigantic system of glaciers in one area.

Terry was standing beside them again in the air. She was looking around in awe at the sheer number of people around them. There were millions upon millions of people racing to and fro along the cavernous highway, shooting by at speeds that Terry knew her eyes would not have been able to see before. Still more people were drifting more lazily along, farther from the corridor’s heart, and others, millions of them everywhere, were grouped in crowds of all kinds of varying sizes, while others seemed to be playing on and around the land bordering the great hallway.

“This is a memory,” Liz was explaining. “My grandfather’s grandmother gave it to me.” She gestured to a young-looking blonde woman in the nearest group as she spoke, whom Terry inherently knew was Liz’s great-great-grandmother, a woman called M’ dĕřĕtěnhě.

“This happened a few days before Nüährnär fled Nrathěrmě,” Liz said. “About ninety-eight weeks ago now.”

“She’s so young—” Terry began, but Liz shook her head quickly, gesturing for them to watch M’đerětěnhě.

Nothing happened for a few long seconds. Lewis wondered for a moment why he could not hear any of the conversation that appeared to be going on in the group, but then realized that the people must have been communicating from mind to mind. That only struck him as strange for a fleeting instant, before he remembered that that was exactly how they had all been communicating together ever since they had been fully changed.

Tom glanced at Liz as the memory continued uneventfully. He was surprised to see the look on her face: there was anger, and sadness, mixed with what looked like apprehension of whatever was about to happen. And, Tom thought, there was a trace of a vague dignity about her as she watched.

Suddenly Liz started slightly, and Tom brought his attention back to the group in front of them. M’đerětěnhě and a young, extremely handsome man, who Tom knew was Liz’ great-great-grandfather Ů’ědnōděn, seemed to be starting to leave the group. Another woman glided sociably after them, putting her hands warmly on each of their shoulders.

Tom just had time to understand that this woman was known as Ůtōash before Ů’ědnōděn cried out in apparent rage. Tom watched, stunned, as Ů’ědnōděn and M’đerětěnhě dodged instantly out from under Ůtōash’s hands and turned to stand with unmistakable hostility before her. At that precise instant, Ůtōash screamed in apparent agony.

And then everything seemed to go dark. Tom could see that nothing visually had changed, but everything around them all seemed to have been filled with a frozen, weighty darkness, blacker than anything Tom had ever imagined. He felt seized with a paralyzing, undefinable but completely enveloping fear.

Ů’ědnōděn and M’đerětěnhě were screaming now as if in lethal pain. A blast of blazing white light, which was entirely overshadowed by the crushing fear of darkness, burst from Ů’ědnōděn’s left hand at Ůtōash.

The terror of the others in the group at the invisible darkness turned to shock that Ů’ědnōděn had just tried to murder Ůtōash. But Ůtōash stood unharmed. Tom realized that that was not right, that that light should have annihilated her, but then that thought was crushed out of him as the darkness grew still heavier.

Ůtōash was grinning a horrible, hating grin at Ů’ědnōděn. Tom felt sure that the darkness was actually radiating from out of her. A few of the others in

the group apparently recognized the same thing, as half a dozen more blasts of the deadly white light burst from them into Ūtōash. People were screaming everywhere, but their voices sounded muffled by the fear that Tom felt was freezing his mind.

Ūtōash ignored all the others, more of whom began pounding at her with the bolts of stifled light. Ū'ėdnōdėn, screaming with apparent pain and fury, dove toward Ūtōash. All Tom saw was a flashing movement of both Ū'ėdnōdėn's and Ūtōash's arms, and the next thing he knew, Ū'ėdnōdėn was drifting lifelessly past Ūtōash. Then Ūtōash cried out in sudden pain as M'dėrėtėnhė shouted as if in powerful exertion. In the same moment, three of the continuing bursts of light struck Ūtōash.

Instantly the darkness evaporated. A shadow of the fear still lingered, but Tom's senses no longer felt clouded, and his mind no longer seemed compressed. He could see no trace of Ūtōash, whom he assumed must have been destroyed. Why hadn't the previous bursts of light annihilated her, he wondered.

Lewis's mind was reeling, his heart pounding. He looked at Liz, overwhelmed and utterly confused by what he had just witnessed, but she didn't respond. Her face was grave as she continued to watch the memory.

He turned his attention back to see M'dėrėtėnhė slump into a sagging position in the air, her body curling limply. Several people rushed to her side, but she did not move. Others of the group had intercepted Ū'ėdnōdėn as he drifted inertly on past where Ūtōash had stood.

Lewis then heard the people speak, shouting, calling out to everyone around: "He's dead!" "Ū'ėdnōdėn is dead!" Then: "He's not coming back!"

"M'dėrėtėnhė is alive," he heard another man call. "But she isn't moving!" a woman cried out, clearly panicked.

"Ūtōash!" someone else was screaming.

"She tried to kill Ū'ėdnōdėn and M'dėrėtėnhė," another man said in obvious shock.

"What was that...that feeling?"

"Did you feel it?"

"Ū'ėdnōdėn tried to kill Ūtōash!"

"It came from Ūtōash!"

"No!"

"She was trying to kill Ū'ėdnōdėn and M'dėrėtėnhė!"

"Not Ūtōash!"

"I'm certain it was coming from Ūtōash!"

"She *did* kill Ū'ėdnōděn!"

"M'děrětěnhě's not moving!"

"What was it—"

The frantic group, which had now been being joined by other alarmed people from all around, disappeared. The Pratts found themselves above the muddy river again.

"What was that?" Lewis asked in horror.

Liz was openly weeping. After a few seconds, she said, "That thing that killed my grandfather, Ū'ėdnōděn...it was a minion of Sěrěhahn's."

"Like the people who tried to destroy the world?" Andrew asked, his eyes wide still from the indescribable terror of Ūtōash.

"Oh, no," Liz said. Her whole demeanor seemed saturated with grief and hatred. "No. Those could be called people. But this," her lip curled loathingly, "This was not a person! Not to me."

"What was she?" Tom asked. Though the memory had ended, the fear and the darkness still seemed to press in over him.

"Evil," Liz said simply. "And that same scene happened all over Nrathěrmě around that time. Nüährnär had to flee Nrathěrmě because Sěrěhahn was going to kill them all."

"Why?" Terry asked.

"Ū'ėdnōděn and M'děrětěnhě were Ōmāthäär," Liz said.

Tom tried to think what Ōmāthäär were.

"That means they knew something that Sěrěhahn didn't want them to know," Liz was continuing.

"What?" Tom asked.

Liz shrugged, dragging her hand through the water again. "All I know is that they called themselves Ōmāthäär, and they knew a lot about Sěrěhahn and his minions. But M'děrětěnhě has never told me about it. I don't ask."

Lewis stared at Liz. That was not the kind of answer he had expected.

"The Ōmāthäär who survived the first days of Sěrěhahn's attacks fled Nrathěrmě. Much of their family and friends joined them. We've called ourselves Nüährnär ever since. And Sěrěhahn and his minions still hunt us."

She looked at Lewis. "I believe my grandmother. The less I know, the happier I am. I have already seen too much..." her voice trailed away, and she started weeping again.

"I have lost twelve brothers and seventeen sisters to those things," she

sobbed then. “And—” she began, but then stopped, softly shaking with tears now.

She stopped above the river and looked levelly at them all. “You need to understand this. You must understand how bad things are. You have got to understand that the same Sěřehahn who led those...*beings* in killing the Ōmāthäär is the man who tried to destroy your world!”

Lewis’s augmented mind was spinning with all of this; being reminded of the destruction of everything he had thought he had known made it yet more jarring to him.

“Who exactly is he?” Lewis asked. “Sěřehahn?”

“He has killed hundreds of people that I love,” Liz answered, her voice rising slightly. “His followers killed them.” Her voice then rose in a fire of fury that startled Lewis. “Sěřehahn is terrible. His followers are terrible! Whenever I’ve met them, they have filled everything with darkness! I hate them!”

“All that I care about Sěřehahn is that he has murdered hundreds of the people that I cared for! He wants to murder everyone I know and care about—and he wants to destroy your world, too! for what reason other than soulless murder, who can tell?”

She breathed viciously for a couple of seconds. Then she seemed to gain a hold of herself. “He’s Anhar,” she said at last.

That statement supplied Lewis with the kind of answer he had been asking for. Only half an instant’s searching in his mind revealed to him who Anhar was.

“No!” Terry exclaimed, realizing who Anhar was at that same moment.

Anhar was the leader of all Nrathěrmě, Lewis knew. Every one of those hundred seventeen sextillion people honored Sěřehahn as their leader! And the more Lewis thought about Anhar, the more he understood what a wonderful leader he was. The people of Nrathěrmě, the N’nrathěrmě, loved their Anhar, and Lewis could see why they did. Everything good in Nrathěrmě seemed to come from Sěřehahn. He was the greatest kind of leader that anyone could ever want; he helped his people in any way he could, he loved them, he gave everything for them. He taught them, and governed them loosely yet competently. Everything he did bettered the lives of everyone he could influence. In less than a hundred years, Nrathěrmě had changed from a small, lonely planet bound by illness and mortality to the great unaging paradise that had spread to harvest so many thousands of worlds! And Anhar had been the prime mover all along. Anhar was not a dictator or a tyrant. He ruled

benignly, benevolently, and ingeniously, presiding for people who knew how to govern themselves. He was merely the keystone of Nrathěrmě's beautifully self-run society.

"How," Terry was asking Liz, "Can Anhar be Sěřěhahn? A murderer?"

Liz smiled subduedly at her. "It is incredible," she said. "But he is. I do not understand him. I know that he is Anhar. But I also know that he is repugnant, despicable."

"How could such a man lead Nrathěrmě?" Lewis asked. "Why doesn't anyone else know what he is?"

"You've got it," Liz smiled gravely at him. "Sěřěhahn heads Nrathěrmě because nobody knows what he is. They haven't seen what awful things he does to those he fears; they only know him as the Anhar who, really, is more responsible than anyone else, almost more responsible than everyone else combined, for making Nrathěrmě what it is."

She turned away and flew a short way up, taking in the panoramic beauty of the illusionary land all around.

"Nrathěrmě is more wonderful than anything I have ever seen in real life," she said quietly. "Even though we N'nüährnär try to mimic it." She turned to face them as they glided up after her. "But it's more than that. The N'nrathěrmě are genuinely happy. They're productive, informed, and progressive. Life is a continually deepening joy in Nrathěrmě; everyone is constantly learning and growing and just enjoying everything! They love each other. It is the greatest, best adventure anyone could wish for, being able to live and grow and love, every day deeper and faster and faster and deeper than the day before, always!"

Tom thought that that last sentence sounded recited.

"And Anhar, *Sěřěhahn*," Liz spat venomously, "Really is responsible for Nrathěrmě being such heaven." She looked past them at the rolling green land. Then she added, "People in Nüährnär are happy. But N'nrathěrmě don't have to fly from Sěřěhahn their whole lives."

"What if Sěřěhahn isn't evil?" Andrew suggested. "What if Nüährnär is wrong? I mean," he said, daunted by Liz's surprised, disbelieving look, "If Nrathěrmě is so great, maybe Sěřěhahn in fact isn't—"

"I used to be married," Liz said with forbidding flatness. "I am married! But Bäd'r'när is dead, and he will *never* come back, because of Sěřěhahn." Tears were rolling down her again enraged face. "His horrible followers killed him!"

Andrew wanted to apologize, but Liz continued, and he didn't dare say anything else.

"Andrew," she said, "You were dead less than an hour ago, but Năb'n revived you. These things, these minions of Sěřěhahn, are horrible. They can almost never be killed by normal means. Those whom they kill can almost never be revived. They are inhuman abominations." Her voice was steady now, but tears continued to wash down her face. "Băd'r'năr will never, ever, ever come back. All of my children but one are dead. And they will never, ever come back! My great-great-grandfather will never come back. Never!"

She seethed for a second, her features now taut with fury. "Sěřěhahn, Andrew, is a monster! A deceiving monster, but therefore a monster all the more!"

"Sorry," Andrew mumbled sincerely.

Terry hesitated for a moment, then glided toward Liz and put her arms around her. Liz smiled at her, then fell into silent tears. Lewis shot Andrew a chastening look as Liz put her arms around Terry, who tightened her grip.

"You were thinking the same thing," Andrew said impudently and privately from his mind to Lewis's. Lewis scowled and shook his head impatiently.

"Thank you," Liz said softly to Terry. She looked at the men, smiling an appreciative and also understanding smile, as if to say she understood how much they were trying to comprehend. "I'm sorry," she said, and her smile lingered toward Andrew.

"I know what I know," she said resignedly. "I know that Sěřěhahn is behind the disaster that your world has had to suffer. I would think that that would be enough for all of you." She looked amicably but pointedly at Lewis.

She shook her head, as if disappointed with her own emotion, and Nrathěrmě's magnificent halls disappeared around them. Tom felt a little disoriented to find that they were still floating above their ruined house, on Earth.

Liz drifted wearily down to the Pratts' front yard. Lewis and his children followed her, noticing that many of the neighbors were floating and soaring around above the houses.

Touching down on the scorched grass, Liz looked up at the battered house. The house lurched more upright as the Pratts landed behind her, its damaged and burnt areas healing before their eyes. The lawn turned vividly green under them. Liz walked along the ground toward the front door, which

opened by itself. The inside of the house, which they could view right through the walls, was perfectly whole and clean, as if no catastrophe had ever happened.

Liz looked around at the pristine house in front of them. Tom could detect something of nostalgia on her face, and she said, "I've never been to Nrathěrmě." She turned more fully toward them. "Everyone who I know that has gone back has ended up caught by Sěřěhahn." She sighed. "That's how Sěřěhahn has still been able to find us, and kill *so many* of us!" Liz's young face sagged with a weariness as of an old, war-worn veteran.

"I love my family," she said. "And I do trust them. And I love Nüährnär. And I know, as horrible as it really is that Anhar of Nrathěrmě could be what he is, I know that Nüährnär is right. We have no choice but to stick together. Anhar is to thank for that."

She smiled again at them. "Well," she said to Lewis, "I promised you that I would leave you forever if that was what you wanted after hearing what I needed to explain to you." She stepped aside from the front door, waving her hand up as if presenting the house to them. "Your house is yours. I envy you, that you have a home." She looked seriously and gratefully at Lewis. "I will leave you alone, forever, if you want that."

Lewis actually considered that. But as he looked at the old house standing in the morning sun, he saw how weak and pathetic it was. That shoddy pile of wood and glue would never protect them from what, he knew despite his hopes, was coming. From Sěřěhahn and calamity.

Knowing he could not yet grasp the magnitude of what he was doing, Lewis smiled back, terrified but confident. "No. We will go with you. I hope we can save one another from whatever may come."

A tear trickled down Liz's cheek again, and the door closed softly behind her.