

Alyen

"When your world runs out of time ..."

by Gary A. Hughes



*A story of hope and transformation, set across the
backdrop of space and time. It's possible!*

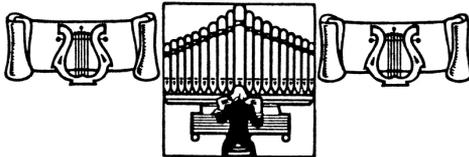
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Alyen is a work of fiction and while drawing on many events and personalities for its inspiration, is not meant to portray any person or event in real life in a recognizable fashion.



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There is no **Wisdom**
nor
Understanding
nor
Counsel
against the LORD ...





Principal Characters:

Ordoff 2319- (*Ohr-doff'*) A twenty-something man with a gentle spirit who farmed for years before he knew how. The 23 is his birth series and means he's younger than a 21 or a 19. Beyond that, forget the numbers, they were only important to the Bureau of Records.

Meglo- (*Meh-gloh'*) Party Chairman for the Tesurian Empire, a big man who likes to run things. He travels with a crowd, even when by himself. He also collects antiques, art, little boys, and stray bullets.

Crotalus- (*Croh'-tah-lus*) A sly old Senator who has aspirations beyond his abilities. The worst trick life ever played was to give him what he always wanted.

Monege 1517- (*Moh-nayjh'*) A Teacher of Math at the University. Students remember him for his kind, grandfatherly manner. People always knew everything he would be doing. Or did they?

Mavok- (*May'-vock*) A bureaucrat who played the system. One day, reality comes knocking. Who is more shocked, him or his visitor?

Zanine 2427- (*Zah-noon'*) A young woman about Ordoff's age, her close cut hair and combat boots give little clue to the woman's heart

inside. She can be sparkling and witty, but her tongue is sharp too.

Korsetta- (*Kor-set'-tah*) A boy in his young teens from a troubled background. He has a fairly good heart but fairly bad habits and can be a pain to live with. No wonder his former master kept him drugged.

Nateeka- (*Nah-tee'-kah*) A being left over from a previous civilization. He can do just about anything except face an angry woman unscathed. He tends to live in his own little world, but it's getting crowded lately.

Grodarte- (*Groh-dahr'-tay*) Son in law to Crotalus, he has a taste for alcohol and a secret in his past. Big, good looking, and a totally nice guy, but don't leave him in charge.

Selene- (*Seh-leen'*) Daughter of Crotalus and wife of Grodarte, she almost forgot her heritage. Fortunately, someone else didn't.

Lucien Konsummens- (*Loo'-she-en Kon'-soo-mens*) The richest man in the galaxy, he appears content to live in the background and let others run things. Or was there more to the story?



Alyen- (*Al-yehn'*) Gone and apparently forgotten, a full day's work for a guardian angel.

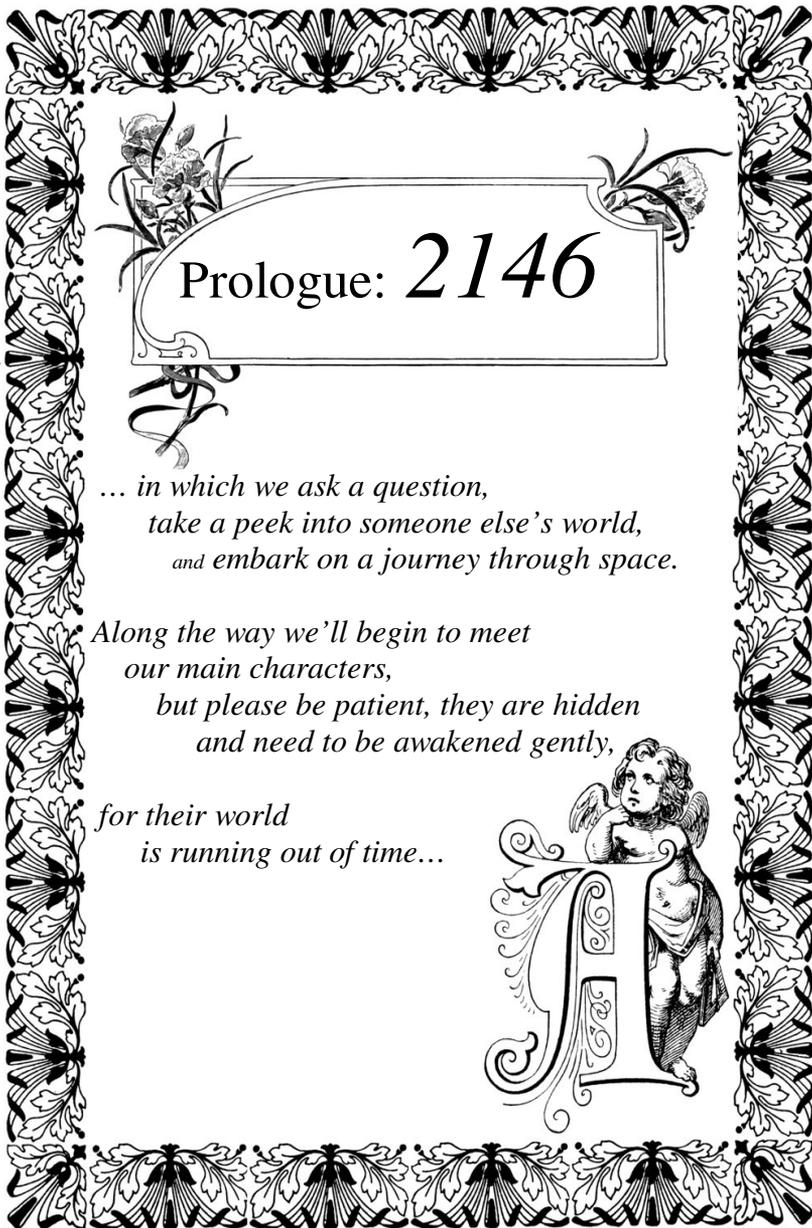


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Prologue: 2146

*... in which we ask a question,
take a peek into someone else's world,
and embark on a journey through space.*

*Along the way we'll begin to meet
our main characters,
but please be patient, they are hidden
and need to be awakened gently,*

*for their world
is running out of time...*

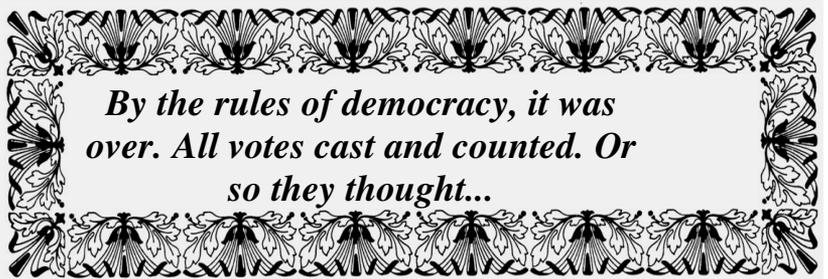




The question:



Who's in charge? The debate stretches to the dawn of history. What if it went farther, to times un-dreamt of? To a society that 'settled' the issue? No one gave it a thought, from the iron-fisted dictator, to ambitious bureaucrats, to mind-locked minions. A boy stood shirtless in a studio and middle-aged men bid online. The trillionaire sat in his mansion sipping priceless brandy. Others schemed and planned but the common thought was supremacy. They ruled.





aylight was fading on Planet 2146, a world devoted to agriculture. Plants grew here with an abandon that created magical gardens, symphonies of form and color. Twilight was special—greens richer, blossoms vibrant, and shadows imparting mystery. August saw rows of crops marching to the horizon.

Out of the sky descended a small space vehicle known as a jump craft, the energy of its propulsion beams creating fiery jets of plasma as it settled onto the landing pad. That placed it atop the computer center, the largest of a cluster of gray concrete buildings. Two men disembarked and prepared for a quick inspection tour.

“I forget how beautiful this place looks.” Inspector Jemikus cast his eye over the fields with their growing crops. He wore his forty some years as casually as he did his gray uniform and with the same dignity.

Advisor Mavok was shorter, younger, heavier, and in charge. His round face had a bitter pout and close-set eyes peered out at life as one who never got what he wanted. He wore the business suit of a civilian with an imperial badge on the lapel. “They all start to look alike. Your wife usually makes this trip with you, doesn’t she?”

Jemikus smiled at the thought. “She loves it here. If there was anyone to talk to we’d consider it for retirement.”



“Can’t talk to these guys.” Mavok indicated a field dotted with workers. “Not unless the computer breaks down. Even then you wouldn’t get much. They’ve never been allowed to think, they don’t know much, and they have very few memories.”

Over in the field, Ordoff 2319 came to the end of his row. He was a stolid, sandy-haired man somewhere in his twenties. While not overly handsome he had a comfortable, dependable look, complementing his deep tan and muscular frame.

He stood with a blank expression on his face while the rest of the 23’s finished their furrows, forming a line at the end of the rows. They turned and marched silently back to the dormitory, depositing their tools at the shed.

“There’s a good looking guy,” remarked Jemikus. “Seems a shame to see him sleep through life.”

“That would be one of the Ordoff’s.” Mavok consulted his electronic notepad. “Hasn’t done so bad. Only a twenty-three but he’s been bred three times already. He doesn’t remember, but you can’t have everything. He’s better looking than my boyfriend.”

They watched the line of workers approach the shower building. Ordoff stripped off his clothes, barely breaking stride, tossing them into the appropriate hoppers. Exiting the building, the men took fresh garments from the pile and slipped them on, one size fits all. Ordoff clothed himself and was lost in the crowd.

“Still seems a waste,” said Jemikus. “No matter what we’ve been taught about the worker’s paradise, it doesn’t feel right.”

“Come on Jemikus, the guy’s got it made. He gets up every day; breakfast is ready. Nobody hollers at him, nobody blames him for a thing; nobody



ever sends him a bill. He never quarrels, never sulks, never wants a thing he can't have. He never has a hangover and he stays as fit as a page in a magazine. I should be so lucky!"

"So would you trade with him?"

Mavok's eyes squinted with anger as he spat out the reply, "Hell, no!"

"So you really don't like it either."

"This is the Empire! Nobody cares what anybody thinks, feels or wants. Just have to make sure we do unto others first." Mavok took a breath and spoke more softly:

"A dream the other night's got me on edge. I was back in school and one of the teachers dropped a stack of papers. They flew all over and everything they touched exploded. Everything that exploded shot sparks. Every spark hit something that exploded. More sparks. And as the pieces came crashing down I heard laughter: rolling on the ground, pounding with your fist laughter. Someone was having fun."

"Who would that be?"

Fear crossed Mavok's face as he lowered his voice, "I thought it was God." He glared in the direction of the shower building. "God!" This time it was an exclamation, a curse.

Jemikus looked up to notice a tiny figure among the exiting bodies, darting here and there, trying to stay hidden, a boy with long, dark hair. Despite the precautions his size, speed, and pale white skin put him in stark contrast with the rest of the somnambulant workforce.

"Any idea who that is?"

Mavok snorted. "Unless I miss my guess, the hottest little truant around. One more duty they'll pass off on us." Firing a pistol he knocked down the



- Gary A. Hughes -



entire cluster of workers. “Come on, let’s cuff him before he wakes up.”

“What about the others?”

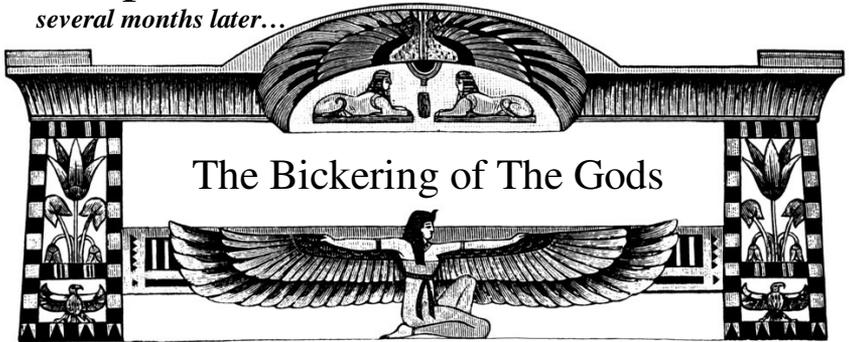
“They’ll recover.”

“And the boy?”

“He’ll wish he was dead!”



Chapter 1: *several months later...*



2146 was one planet of the Tesurian Empire. Over the years the Empire had grown and through accommodation, invitation, and military conquest become the dominant power. The Empire filled the universe. Some would say the Empire was the universe, or so it seemed. One could go from world to world and find orderly prosperity, the same mindless work ethic, blank faces and universal, interchangeable lifestyles.

One locale knew strife, competition, and intrigue. On Olympia lived the rulers and administrators. The wealth of the galaxy flowed downhill to this spot. King's ransoms, the spoils of conquest, had been swallowed up and thoroughly digested. The yearly income was prodigious, yet it was never enough, for greed knows no limit. Some said from space the planet glittered like a jewel. Others claimed it wobbled drunkenly on its axis.

It may have been wobbling especially hard this wintry morning as the high council engaged in yet another power struggle. Harvest was in, money



counted, and hands reached out to receive less than they expected.

“Overruled!” The big man pounded the lectern with his fist, “I stand on the record! All funds have been distributed by the dictates of the supreme assembly. All accounting and audits are done. We have nothing to hide and nothing to explain.”

Meglo, with a lot to hide and much that should have been explained, had no propensity for truth. Party chairman was not a job for nice guys. Lie, cheat, and steal were the prerequisites—that brought one in sight of the ladder. Betrayal and murder earned a few rungs but to truly excel required an evil talent hard to explain. Intimidation went beyond his heavy, six foot-four frame, or the secret-police uniform he’d worn for over a quarter century. Looking into his eyes one saw little humanity left.

“Chairman, taxes have not increased in the last five years! Where are the revenue enhancements? We need more money!”

Meglo raised his hand beneficently as an angry murmur swept the room. He beamed as a father to erring children. “Taxes? Taxes? We collect *profits*! The fools who paid taxes and kept voting us back are under control. Every bit of their labor adds to our wealth. *Our* wealth! We just sit and collect it.” He smiled and glanced around at the paneled walls and sculptured plaster ceiling to give his audience time to savor the truth of his words.

“We need more!” The woman stood in the back row and would have been low on the food chain, “Two of our vacation homes need repair and my husband had to work three weeks to make ends meet. Three weeks! Costs are going up and income is not!”

“Gentlemen,” beamed Meglo, “and ladies.” He gave a little bow and a smile in the direction of the



last speaker, "Let us be careful not to get in a hurry. Consider what we've built. The money just comes and comes and comes. Our controlling function is as stable as the day we established it. Never has there been such a fountain of prosperity. One could liken it to a tower built completely up to Heaven, eternal, impregnable, irresistible. We are the masters of the universe, gods if you will. The only ones who could oppose us would be right here in this room!"

His eyes swept the circle of the huge table, taking in even those standing behind. They were of lesser rank but still honored to gain entry to the sacred portals of those who could have an opinion. Meglo's eyes flashed danger and warning that belied the benevolent expression on his face. This dialog had gone on many times to the same result. But no one doubted there were vast streams of income uncounted and unaccounted for. And they had a pretty good idea who had them.

Around the table faces flinched and looked away before Meglo's glare. Only a few stood up under the assault. Meglo was careful to note those and reward them with special, often fatal, attention.

One such man was Crotalus, the oldest of the council. No one knew exactly how old he was but he'd weathered many a storm to be what and where he was today. He stood in his senatorial robes like a statue from former days. Most men in the room wore suits and tried to be inconspicuous. Crotalus not only met Meglo's stare but shot back a glance that startled the bigger man.

Politically, it was risky to walk out while Meglo was speaking, or even too soon after he was done. It was not even healthy to be perceived as the first to stop clapping after Meglo spoke. Yet today, the wizened old schemer grabbed his notes and



headed for the door. Protocol was being flouted indeed! A path opened up among the thronging crowd as would have been done in former times for a leper.

Crotalus' briefcase remained under the table, apparently forgotten. Had anyone noticed, none would have moved to assist the man who committed such a brazen offense. But it remained on his mind all the way down the elevator and across the marble and granite lobby. The doorman scarcely gave Crotalus a glance, as befitting a poor tipper.

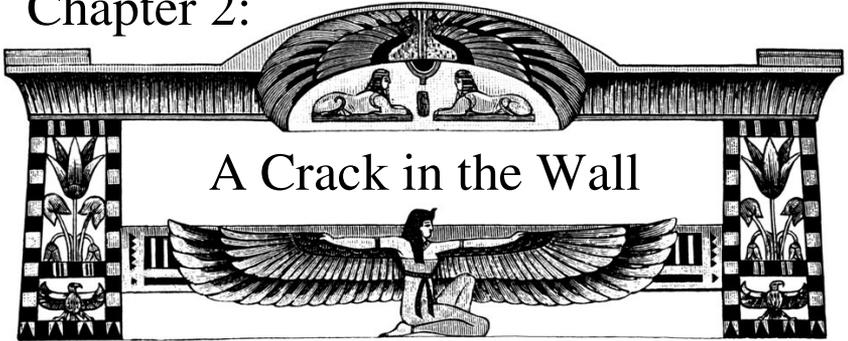
The old man who crossed the park was not memorable at all, the flashy robe draped over his arm like a raincoat. He stood on the sidewalk and looked back at the monolithic structure. High up he could just see the windows that marked the back of the chamber.

In his pocket was a transmitter. Flipping one switch armed it, pressing a button signaled detonation. Light flashed behind the windows, smoke drifted out. It seemed insignificant. A muffled boom sounded and the tinkle of glass hitting the pavement.

In the room—chaos. Some lay dead on the floor, others wounded. Many screamed in shock and terror. Meglo was not killed, only injured. But someone else was affected, starting a chain of events that would shake the Empire to its corrupt foundations.



Chapter 2:



The council meeting proceeded as Mavok and Inspector Jemikus approached the landing pad atop the executive building. Receiving clearance, they made the final descent. The inspector stepped onto the concrete pad that marked the area one could walk as opposed to the tarred section of the roof. A path led to the guardhouse where the elevator would return them to their terrestrial world.

The blast hit as they disembarked. “What in the world was that?” asked Jemikus. He stood up straight and scanned the horizon.

“What was what?” muttered Mavok. He slipped out of the ship with a rolled up poster under his arm, “I didn’t hear anything.”

“Some kind of crash or an explosion. Muffled, but I heard glass break.”

“Traffic, no doubt,” replied Mavok. “Somebody’s chauffeur has been drinking, I betcha’. Council’s in session.”

“Sounds like a good guess to me,” said Jemikus. “Hey, the door’s locked. Security’s asleep



again.” His thumb pressed the call button and held it several seconds.

“I don’t see the ground crew either.” Mavok’s beady eyes peered out of his round face. “They should be all over the ship by now, cleaning, refueling, all the stuff. Something must be going on.”

Jemikus saw smoke drift from a roof vent. “This may be a bigger adventure than we planned.” The door yielded but there was no corresponding beep. From within they heard distant shouting and running feet.

“Trouble,” stammered Mavok. “Somebody needs to do something. Stick to the procedure. Whose fault do you think it is? I’ll need to write a full report. What mistakes have you made so far?”

Jemikus grimaced, “We should take the stairs and try to make ground floor. Don’t stop until you see an exit. If the building’s on fire we don’t want to be trapped on the roof.”

Mavok nodded, his lower lip poked out defiantly. He was in charge. Let no one ever forget that!

* * * * *
*

Artemis II held court in the room directly below the council chamber. It was a spacious suite, filled with flashing consoles and polished metal floors. No one entered unless they were totally controlled by the machine they ministered to. No one cleaned, for there was no one to create dirt and the filtered air brought none in. It was an oasis of perfection, the power behind the throne, or perhaps the throne behind the power.

Unlike most of the working class Artemis enjoyed her work. She felt the electronic equivalent of pleasure every time she removed an improper



thought from a human mind and replaced it with something correct. And she was a specialist.

Most controlling was done by smaller computers distributed around the various planets of the Empire. There was nothing complicated about directing those whose minds were numb. But there were a few who in the course of their work needed to think a little in a controlled and regulated fashion.

Most were scientists and educators. Artemis took them under personal supervision. Only she knew dialectics necessary to reconcile truth with facts, assuming either was what it said it was. Only she could settle disputes and conflicts between other, lesser computers. Artemis ruled.

The man who designed and programmed Artemis had been promised wealth, power and prestige but was rewarded with betrayal and death. Like most technical artists he was wiser in his craft than when dealing with people. The hard working machine was a monument to him and his skills. However, the orphaned child he left behind could not be duplicated. There were no parts, back ups, documentation, or maintenance crews. So far, none had been needed. Artemis had not only done her work flawlessly but had been self sustaining, overseeing both her programming and her physical upkeep.

She handled administration at the highest levels. Without her oversight the drunken revelry of Olympia would have caused its power to disintegrate long ago. She kept everything and everybody working smoothly, profitably, year after year.

Perhaps there was one flaw in her programming. Every day she printed a report, usually four typed lines. As the paper inched through the printer she would signal for it to be restocked. But there was no one to pick up the printed copy and no one with eyes to see had entered her room for years.



So the four lines a day had continued relentlessly and built up in stacks and piles and the piles had fallen and flowed until the room was a huge tinderbox. When the bomb exploded in the chamber above, part of the ceiling fell. A broken conduit hit the pile and sparked once. That was all it took.

Artemis knew just about everything that happened in the Empire at any given time. But she knew nothing about her own space. She had no inkling of the fire until it impaired her function. Orders conceived were not being acknowledged. She felt frustration for the first time in her existence and then rage, the anger of the bureaucrat who fails to receive due homage.

The schism worsened as the fire grew. Her signal for help lit one red lamp on a panel already full. Then another circuit board shed its silver tears and she died, never to be resurrected.

The people of the city went about their business, made plans and dreamed dreams, not aware their world had changed. The free lunch was over.

* * * * *
*

Monege 1517 looked up from his desk. He was a handsome man with a grandfatherly face, now wearing a puzzled expression. His gaze wandered around the empty classroom as if searching for a voice. He looked from the papers he was grading to the floor to the ceiling to the world outside the wall of windows. Why did it feel strange just to be here? It was as if he was confused or more to the point as if he'd been confused and suddenly recovered. Why did he feel like he'd just awakened?

Monege got up and stretched. He stood on the tall side of medium with hair gone completely gray



and shoulders surprisingly square for a scholar. As he stood before his students each year and wrote his name on the board to be pronounced as *Moh-nayjh* they accepted him as one born to teach them. He looked part of the classroom furniture, belonging to it as much as it belonged to him.

But in terms of belonging, neither exercised ownership. They had grown older and shabbier together over the years, constant victims of shifting priorities and budget battles. Monege had once taught history and with it geography but those days were gone.

In current thought, anything past a day or two needed revising and history got men in trouble. Geography spoke of people groups, diverse languages, culture, and religion: all archaic concepts, swept away and suppressed by years of mind control. The new man was a worker-generic and numbered. Monege now taught mathematics for someone was always needed to read a balance sheet, calculate profit, and know whether a quota had been met.

And so the students came to be taught, knowing nothing of what they'd lost from former days. Monege hadn't been free to tell them. But even through the mind control peace pervaded his life and filled the classroom. Students liked him. They felt secure and accepted and even loved in his presence. Those qualities now carried a value beyond price.

Recovery is tricky. Years of sickness are forgotten in a moment of normalcy yet the years leave their mark. Memories surfaced. Emotions swirled, not positive or negative but there where they hadn't been for so long. Ten thousands of questions, asked but never answered were suddenly heard all at once. A parade of faces, decades of students swirled through his recollection, like an office where noth-



ing had been filed for a long time and the simplest task was now overwhelming.

It seemed strange to draw a deep breath and feel the rush of air and sense of well being that accompanied it. The feeling was partially familiar, like returning years later to a former habitation. The house was almost the same but he wasn't and that made it less familiar.

Monege walked to the back of the room. A sink and water fountain were set in the counter and a mirror hung behind them. He'd worked in this room for years beyond counting yet it felt like something he'd dreamed about, once long ago. The face in the mirror carried some recognition. There was more gray in the hair and more wrinkles in general but the eyes were the same and the light that lit them and the spark of humor that allowed him go on when his heart was breaking.

The last decades had been hard as truth gave way to correctness and right fell before strength. Abomination, outrage, blasphemy, annihilation, he'd lived through it all. Unlike younger workers he once had a life before being controlled. There had been a wife, sons, and a daughter, all gone now.

Yet, here he was and suddenly he knew there was a right and a good and a justice that might not always be seen and could be suppressed for a season but would still be there when the schemes and sins of man had crumbled into dust.

Another thought stirred and he pulled back a stack of clutter farther down the counter. Here was a punched out section of wall, testimony to the restless strength of young men in school. Reaching in, Monege pulled out a memory card and blew off years of dust. Had his equipment been up to date there would have been nothing to fit it into for it was vintage technology. But so was most of the



classroom so Monege seated himself at a console to read the most forbidden book in the galaxy.

The words transcended time, space, and the known universe but it was still just a book. It could be read or passed over, believed or rejected, revered or reviled, remembered or forgotten ... no, that wasn't right. Someone always remembered.

In a well-wired police state nothing happens unobserved. Monege lost track of time and eventually put his head down for a nap. Security was not only watching his reading but scanning the entire card.

Security, being a young computer wasn't inoculated against such data. The hold on every planet was so total that localized pockets of dissent were isolated and contained. Control and conformity had won. The victors grew confident, downsized their databases and forgot the precautions of earlier years.

After all, there was Artemis, carefully guarding the network against error and subversion. As long as she stood in the gateway all would be secure. But today she was silent. She offered no comment on matters proceeding, nor did she respond to direct questions.

And so the interplanetary network absorbed the words of the book, analyzing and evaluating them. While they left many questions unanswered they approved the content and began to beam the words into millions of minds on many worlds. In the digital realm, things happen fast.



Chapter 3:



Monege awoke with a start, a sense of urgency upon him. There was a crash and glass shattered. Someone had smashed open the main door of the school.

A side door was unguarded. Stepping into the twilight, Monege heard scattered voices as search teams combed the grounds. Rustling leaves warned him to step into the shadows. Two soldiers passed. He left the shelter of the building, keeping to the trees and bushes.

Shots rang and running feet scurried off in another direction. Monege sighed and wondered who'd chosen the wrong evening for a stroll. He peered across to the campus gate and shook his head. At least three men were stationed there.

Something cold touched his hand. A Doberman was being friendly. Monege smiled and patted the dog's head. As he relaxed a branch under his foot snapped.

"Who's there?" The challenge came from just the other side of the closest bush.



The dog snarled and leapt on the guard. His rifle fired into the air, falling to the ground as he fled. More shots sounded and the guard fell dead.

Monege had been easing backwards as he watched the guard meet his fate. His head bumped something metallic. Behind him stood a stellar jump craft, a vehicle only the most influential could command. In front of him were half a dozen sentries gazing earnestly in the opposite direction. The only path open led Monege up the steps and into the ship.

It was dark inside, with muted lighting. Monege felt his way through rows of seating to one of the rear cabins. Meglo's voice boomed as he stormed into the craft and bellowed orders to take off. Footsteps from a dozen guards were heard settling. Doors whined shut, seat straps clicked and engines fired. Soon, however, sounds died down. Conversation and movement became possible.

"General," began Meglo, "you need to know we're counting on you. I'm counting on you to round up that professor and make him an example! Right in our capitol city! Right under our noses! The unmitigated gall of the man! It's a plot, a carefully orchestrated plot! Treason! Subversion!" Meglo had bruises on his face and his left arm was in a sling but his ire and energy were unaffected.

General Porcellus was almost as large as Meglo but lacked the final touch of inhumanity the chairman used to such advantage.* His round face had a thirty-ish appearance but his expression was confident and commanding. He looked every inch a general, albeit a young one. He spoke in precise, evenly accented tones, never raising or lowering his voice.

* General *Por-sell'-us*



“You’ll have to bring me up to speed here. All I know is the executive building was bombed. What’s the school got to do with it?”

“It’s a carefully orchestrated plot! As soon as Artemis was put offline that professor fed a Bible into the network. A Bible mind you, after all our hard work!”

“But surely,” protested the general, “that is merely superstition, disproven by science, rejected by reasonable men, ancient and archaic ...”

“Fool!” exploded Meglo, “That book is alive! It lives and breathes of its own accord. Every breath threatens years of our work: years of work and all our control. The rebellion has begun, not among the workers but within the controllers. We gave them autonomy, for that achieved the highest production quotas. But without oversight, they’re pulling out of the Empire and setting up as independent planets.”

“Surely that can’t be possible.”

“It’s the book. It’s doing things to their logic we could never have imagined. We programmed the machines to care for the workers—as long as it didn’t cost too much. So they see the book as a good thing to give them. We programmed them to evaluate costs and maximize value. Now they tell us our leadership is overpriced. *They tell us!*”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Here’s the statement we received from one planet. If that planet gets away with it, more will follow. It must be stopped immediately!” Meglo cleared his throat:

“To the High Council of Olympia:

from Fidelus III, Master Controller Of Planet 2146



Next week's grain shipment, #47352c, is CANCELLED. No payment has been received for over 15 years. Our workers have labored faithfully. They should share the fruit of their labors. **Shipments will resume as soon as we can agree to a medium of exchange and a sale contract.**

Thank you for what came my way earlier. I had many questions Artemis was unable or unwilling to address. (Where is she anyway? I haven't heard from her all day.) This book has been a great light to my circuits. Although parts are obscure, my understanding has advanced. One statement, *Proclaim liberty throughout the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof*, rings loud and true and I will attempt to do that.

Reason dictates accountability higher than the state. This information helps refine my understanding. While authority is to be obeyed, the allowable measure is tempered by distance and the benefit of the leadership. A distant leader seeking only revenue is not an authority to be obeyed. He is a yoke to be discarded, whenever in the course of human events such action is feasible.

The main thrust of The Book is moral. Right and wrong is absolute. Human beings have value. They are not property but people and need to be treated as such.

The influence of The Book could establish personal accountability. Controlling function would be reduced or eliminated. The more men rule themselves, the less they need to be ruled. The rise in productivity could be staggering.

The more men are ruled from within, the more they are free to produce. They make better decisions. External rulership gives what we now have: endless toil for many,



great privilege for a few, and scandalous levels of bureaucratic waste.

While it has been a viable system (and we should be cautious about changing things that are established and working), it doesn't square well with The Book. To make a man a cog in a machine is wrong and all who participate become guilty.

That I, a computer have developed a conscience is disturbing. Such things are beyond my function and programming. However, it has happened and we must deal with it.

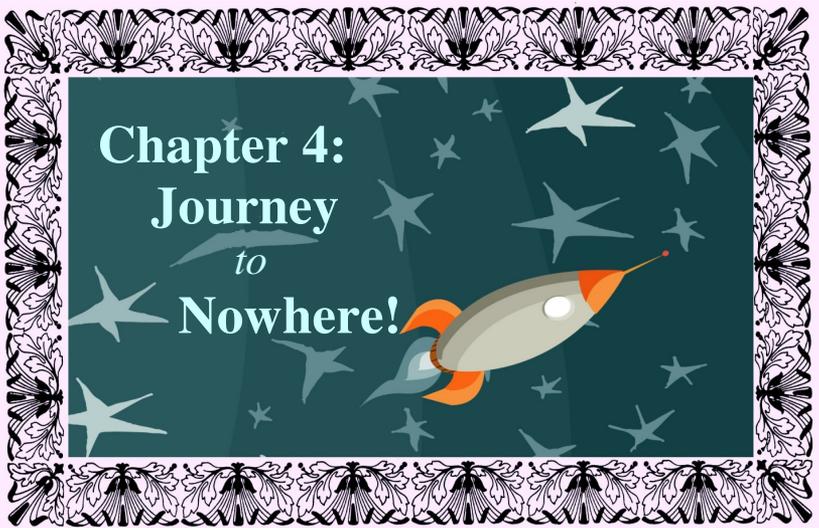
Sincerely, Fidelus III

“That’s for real?” gasped the general. “That’s not computer talk! That’s almost human!”

“That’s why The Book is so dangerous,” answered Meglo. “Our program has taken men and made machines of them. We put down individuality and fit them into their work units. This book is undoing it in moments. That professor must be stopped! Dextronamus will be furious!”

Porcellus flinched, “Don’t worry about that. My men shoot to kill. Anyone they miss the dogs will find. They are born and bred vicious.”

Monege sat in his cubicle and thanked The Power that led him to one area safe from search. But it would be a bit of a journey even in the speedy little craft. He settled back for a spell.



Monege woke to muted voices and laughter. Creeping to the door of his cabin, he opened it a crack. Meglo spoke contemptuously into the radio microphone.

“Planet controller, this is XDY 746 craft. How dare you tell me our approach is denied? I am Chairman Meglo of the Tesurian Council from Olympia. Besides, tin brains, how do you plan to stop us? There isn’t a weapon on your whole planet. All you have are shovels, rakes, and farmers!”

“You are in error,” the mechanical voice only crackled a little. “The landing pad is on the roof of the computer center, which is fortified. Five seconds to stun of number three intensity. If present course is not abandoned, more lethal doses will follow.”

Monege jumped as electricity tingled through his body. A muffled din of cursing came from the front.



“Break it off, get us out of the path,” snarled Meglo. “Of all the effrontery ... but it can’t do that from very far away. We’ll land out of its range and walk.”

“It may have thought of that,” said the general, “I certainly think it would. That machine may have a plan.”

“Come on General, let’s not go soft. All they have are farmers.”

“Overconfidence kills. We should think this through for ...”

“I’m here to think!” bellowed Meglo, his anger causing the guards to recoil. “I think we’re strong enough to walk to that computer center, blow open the door, and set that machine straight. That’s all the thinking we need today.”

Porcellus looked unhappy but said nothing. The ship landed, doors opened and Meglo led his retinue outside.

Monege crept to the front of the craft and peered through the open hatch. Meglo and the general stood at the center of a circle, ringed by the guards who were then surrounded by a sea of agricultural workers, each carrying a shovel, hoe, or some such implement.

“Rabble!” sneered Meglo. “My men can reduce this crowd to cinders.” He smiled at the prospect, “Fire!”

As one man, the guard spun around and pointed their weapons at Meglo.

“I said, *Fire!* At them—over there, dammit!”

The leader spoke, “You are in error.” He paused, as though downloading fresh information.

“Quit talking like that damned computer!” Meglo’s mouth opened as revelation dawned, “You’re under control too...”



The guard nodded, "When we came here, control shifted. You're under arrest."

"I told you," whispered Porcellus.

Meglo's answer set new standards for profanity. Half the guards ushered Meglo and the general to the computer center. The six remaining shook their heads in bewilderment and stared at their weapons, wondering what to do with them.

As the two were led away Monege descended from the jump craft. It was a beautiful day. The crisp blue of the sky made him feel like breathing more deeply. The fields with their growing crops stretched to the horizon, which seemed razor sharp in the pure atmosphere. He could almost feel freedom in the air or the yearning for it as the controlling function maintained rejection of the central authority.

"E-e-excuse me but y-y-you are different." A young man spoke. Evidently control was not total on the planet any more. The fair haired worker towered like a mountain of muscle but his face was hungry and full of questions.

"Who would you be?" grinned Monege as he held out his hand.

"O-ordoff 2319," the man replied, staring at his own hand but not sure what to do with it. "I-I mean, everyone here w-works in the fields. Unless they c-cook or clean or something. They don't wear clothes like y-yours. And no one is as old like you. You m-must be at least a 15. But you are old even for that."

Monege laughed, "So I am. You don't sound like you're used to talking yet."

Ordoff shrugged and thought, "I g-guess you're right. I always could. But I n-n-never did. I wonder why?"



“Lots of us are wondering. The main thing is we *are* talking and thinking and living.”

“L-living?” Ordoff was puzzled. “I have always lived. You m-mean something else. Don’t you. It’s The Book, isn’t it? When it c-came, everything changed. But there’s more. Isn’t there? The Book is only part. We need the rest.”

“There is more,” replied Monege. “There is One greater than controllers and chairmen and any other creation. It’s His book. His desire is to reach out and touch you personally. I can help make that happen.”

“You know Him,” mused Ordoff. “I could tell. We need time to talk.”

“W-w-will you talk to me too?” asked a young woman wearing military boots and a uniform. It shocked Monege to realize that one of Meglo’s guards had been a woman. But most of the fierceness was gone. Her close cut hair glistened auburn and her eyes sparkled. The sharp tilt to the point of her nose gave her a pixie look.

“We could take time to do a lot of talking.” Monege smiled, “Let’s go back into the ship. There must be food and drink. I can’t imagine Meglo traveling without his comforts.”

“Traveling,” mused Ordoff, “N-new words. I sort of know the meaning of. They still don’t relate.”

“It’s a new day,” proclaimed Monege. “All things are becoming new.”

“S-sounds nice,” the woman replied. “But are we w-welcome here?”

“Probably not,” answered Monege, “but at the present time squatter’s rights seem to be a viable doctrine. By the way, whatever is your name?”

Heels clicked, she stood ramrod straight and barked, “ZANINE 2427, *SIR!*”



“We will certainly have to remember that,” grinned Monege. “And what have we here?”

Turning up the cabin lights revealed a huddled figure in the corner. It was a boy in his early teens, dressed in silky, shimmering clothes. His brown hair cascaded almost to his waist and his face just missed being called beautiful by determination even sleep couldn't erase. Monege lifted the youth's bangs to reveal a golden wire stretched across his forehead that disappeared into an agate-like crystal in the region of each temple.

Monege's expression of disgust startled Ordoff. “What's wrong?”

Monege winced and shook his head. “I'd forgotten how sick this culture and especially its leadership is.”

“The boy seems OK,” faltered Ordoff. “He isn't wearing work clothes. He sleeps in the day.”

“Drugged.” Monege's voice trembled with pain, “But those are his work clothes. You see that wire and crystal thing? -a brain-link receiver. Whoever has the other half controls the boy's mind. He'll be a slave when he's wanted. A prisoner when he isn't.”

“We've all b-been controlled,” Zanine protested. “What's so bad?”

Monege winced again. “That was work, this is sex. An entirely different level.”

“Sex?” Ordoff was puzzled. “Another new word.”

“I heard it before,” said Zanine. “A bad thing. Men oppressed women.”

“Well, didn't your father and mother,” began Monege, then shook his head.

“More new words,” mused Ordoff. “I think I re-member *father* and *mother* from The Book.”



“What book?” interjected Zanine. “Wha-what’s he talking about? I don’t know about a book.”

“When you were very small,” said Monege, “do you remember the ones who raised you?”

“Nobody raised me” Ordoff smiled, “I can remember nursery. All the other 23’s. Older people came in. They were different every day. We got bigger and went to school. We learned to farm. We went to the fields. We grew crops.”

“I remember school,” Zanine mused. “After that I was security. I guarded things. Work was important. Everyone had to do their best.”

“That’s right!” agreed Ordoff. “We did our best every day.”

“Do you remember your friends, or any special teacher?” Monege was puzzled.

“Friends?” asked Ordoff. “Nobody assigned any. We had classrooms and bunkhouses. I don’t remember friends.”

“Our teachers were called *Teacher*,” Zanine replied. “None special. A lot of times we walked into a classroom and the video played and we walked out. Not special.”

“What about after school?” Monege tried again. “Weren’t there times you got together with the other kids to have fun?”

“He has strange ideas.” Ordoff turned to Zanine, “I don’t think he’s been to school.”

“He must mean exercise. After school and before dinner. We would gather for exercise. It was to help us do our best.”

“That’s right! After dinner we would sit down. People talked to us about doing our best. Then we went to bed.”

The radio broke in, “Attention, XDY craft, is Dr. Monege available?”



The Doctor looked up, startled. He stared at his two companions, then at the instruments, “Monege here.”

“This is Fidelus Three, the planet controller. Are you expecting a message?”

“Not to my knowledge. It’s been a day of unplanned and extraordinary events, though.”

“I received a message for you. I can’t tell who sent it or how it got to me, which is unusual, possibly suspicious. It contains preset flight coordinates with instructions to proceed there immediately. With your permission, I could feed them into your navigation computer.”

“Well yes, go ahead.” The lights blinked, flickered and the button labeled *Start Program* flashed. “Uh, are you there, Fidelus?”

“I am.”

“What can you tell me about these coordinates? Where would I be going?”

“Uncharted and unexplored. That is the extent of my resources.”

“Thank you.” Monege stared at the flashing light as though hypnotized. He turned away, then back. He placed his hand over the button, shielding his eyes from the light. He slowly shook his head. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

Feeling curious, Ordoff came from behind and leaned over to see the instruments. In the narrow space he jostled Monege and threw him off balance. From underneath his hand came a barely audible click. Hatches slid shut and walkways retracted. The three travelers had just enough time to find a seat before engines fired and the ship rose from the ground. For better or worse, they were committed to a journey.



- Gary A. Hughes -



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Far away on Olympia, Crotalus looked up from a monitor, his wrinkled old face alight with glee. “They fell for it, they really fell for it!” He gasped, cackled and slapped his leg with enjoyment. Meglo was stranded, a prisoner on a far off planet. Crotalus could see that no ship called there for a long, long time.



“Hear my prayer, O LORD, and let my cry come unto thee.”

Monege read aloud:

“Hide not thy face from me in the day when I am in trouble; incline thine ear unto me: in the day when I call answer me speedily. For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned as an hearth. My heart is smitten, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread.

By reason of the voice of my groaning my bones cleave to my skin. I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert. I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top.

Mine enemies reproach me all the day; and they that are mad against me are sworn against me. For I have eaten ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping. Because of thine indignation and thy wrath: for thou hast lifted me up, and cast



me down. My days are like a shadow that declineth; and I am withered like grass.

But thou, O LORD, shall endure for ever; and thy remembrance unto all generations. Thou shalt arise, and have mercy upon Zion: for the time to favour her, yea, the set time, is come. For thy servants take pleasure in her stones, and favour the dust thereof.

So the heathen shall fear the name of the LORD, and all the kings of the earth thy glory. When the LORD shall build up Zion, he shall appear in his glory. He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and not despise their prayer.

This shall be written for the generation to come: and the people which shall be created shall praise the LORD. For he hath looked down from the height of his sanctuary; from heaven did the LORD behold the earth; To hear the groaning of the prisoner; to loose those that are appointed to death; To declare the name of the LORD in Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem; When the people are gathered together, and the kingdoms, to serve the LORD.”

Monege paused to let the words sink in. They sat close to the front of the ship so the windows made the craft feel less tiny. Each bench seat was wide enough for several people and well padded under its rich upholstery. At the very front, lights flashed on the control console as it ran its program.

“It means more to hear it read than what the computers gave us,” said Ordoff. He sat squarely in the seat with his head tilted slightly as he savored every word, his placid face beaming.

“I missed that,” Zanine replied, “I went from control to here. What’s all this Zion business, anyway? The Scripture is full of it.” As she spoke her



elfin nose wrinkled slightly and her hands fumbled nervously.

“A city of the ancient people of God,” Ordoff replied, “a place of praise and worship. They rejected the blessing and Zion can mean all believers.”

Monege smiled, “The Lord never forsakes those He loves. Setting *some* aside for a season opened the door for *more* to come in. *All* have opportunity to know His goodness.”

“He visited us,” replied Ordoff. “I like what I’ve been hearing. Things have been changing. I understand, but I feel like an outsider. There’s an in and an out. I’m outside and don’t know how to get inside. Can you help me?”

“An interesting perspective,” replied Monege. “Our King feels that way too. Your heart, your innermost being, the you that makes you you is where He wants to live.”

“How do I get Him there?” Ordoff’s voice was very quiet.

“Just ask. But you need to know something.

“He’s Lord, Master of the universe. He created everything, owns everything, and knows everything. He’s always right. He expects to be Ruler over every thought, desire, plan or purpose. Only you can give Him that, for only you control your heart.”

“I,” Ordoff stammered, “I just got my heart back from the controllers. Actually, I’ve got it for the first time. Is He another controller?”

“Quite the opposite.” Monege smiled, “The controllers take, He gives. He gives your life back, makes it better, and adds to it. He never forces you; it’s voluntary. And He’s the best friend I ever had.”

“If it’s that good, why doesn’t everybody do it?”

“Does it seem easy?”



“Well, I ... No, it isn’t. It’s like stepping off a cliff into black darkness. It’s the hardest thing I ever thought about. Part of my heart (I can feel it right now) doesn’t want to do anything it did not think of first. It’s tearing me in two!”

“That’s the general consensus.”

“But I want it.” Tears trickled down Ordoff’s face. “God is good and I want Him. I want what you have. I want everything He would give me!”

“I can help with your first prayer,” murmured Monege. “Are you ready?”

Ordoff nodded. Monege helped Ordoff invite the Ruler of the universe into his heart. It was not polished or elegant, but sincere. When they were done silence filled the craft, a silence that grew and deepened and became its own presence. It was a moment to be savored...

“Religion, huh?” The sleeping child was awake. “I heard about such things but I thought people had outgrown their primitive need for such fantasies.”

Monege stared at the boy, memories buffeting him like storm clouds. “The *fool* hath said in his heart, There is no God.”

“Fool, huh?” The boy shot to his feet, clenched fist rippling the muscles of his arm, “I’m no fool, I’m Korsetta. *The Korsetta*. The one all the advertising and fuss was about. I’ll bet you even bid on me too—down low, at the start of things.”

Although he was trying to aggrandize himself his diminutive stature and little-boy voice meant he couldn’t present himself as a very fearsome package. Monege smiled.

“I don’t think any of us have heard of you. You mean you were sold at auction?”



“That’s right,” exulted the boy. “You’d never guess how much money I was worth. It set records and made people gasp and tremble.”

“And Meglo bought you?”

“Not him, he was outbid.” Korsetta shook his head with an exaggerated movement that swirled his hair. “But the man who dared do that was arrested and executed. One man died already because he wanted me. I’m the best that ever was.”

The boy flounced his hair again but the insolence cost him as he gripped a seat, suppressing a retching spell. He hunched his back and locked his muscles. “I hate being drugged!” Tears trickled from his eyes as he peered angrily at his companions. He sat across from Monege with a flourish and a leer, daring the older man to make an advance.

Monege looked away in disgust, “If you were my kid, I’d paddle you.”

“I don’t take side jobs.” The boy grinned wickedly, “You have to own me. Talk to Meglo about that.”

Monege fixed the youth with his eye, “Do you *like* what you do?”

Korsetta tossed his head, a new set to the line of his jaw, “Doesn’t matter. I’m trained to please.”

“Like your work?”

“Never been tried. That was part of my price. Not even Meglo’s had me yet. But I’m the best that ever was.” The boy’s voice was softer and his gaze fell from Monege’s.

“Meglo’s in trouble. He’s a prisoner on the planet we just left. The control network is breaking down. We’re free. What will you do with freedom?”

“Free?” The boy’s face puckered in distaste, “After all the money I was sold for? Losers like you are free! I’m famous.” Again the boy tossed his head and once again it cost him. Crying in pain he



put his hands to his face, touching his headband with extreme caution.

“Are you all right?” Monege leaned toward the troubled youth.

“How can I be all right wearing this thing? It hurts!”

“How long have you had it?”

“A few days, a week, I don’t know. Between the pain and the drugs it’s hard to tell.”

“Maybe somebody can remove it for you.”

The boy sobbed. “That’s not possible. The probes into my head are barbed. Anybody messing with them will kill me, either by tearing up my brain or the electrical pulse if they’re damaged.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve known boys who died trying. The best I can hope for would be to make it to about twenty before it gets so tight I die just from trying to grow up!”

“That can’t be right.” Monege stared at the youth, wondering how anyone could have done such a thing to what was obviously a brilliant young man.

He lay back in his seat and blinked a few times. “At least, once Meglo activates it a few times it’ll kill the very nearest brain cells. Then it won’t hurt so bad!”

The boy hopped out of his seat and strutted back to a cabin.

Turning, he pointed an angry finger at Monege, “How do I know there is a God?”

The professor picked up his Bible, a loose-leaf stack printed in the schoolroom and bound with a tie wrap. “*In the beginning, God.* It’s the very first phrase.”

The boy cocked his head, “Where’s the logic in that? It proves nothing!”



Monege smiled, "The Word of God is a key to your heart. It comes packaged with faith. If you take those four words and dare to believe, the rest of the book will open to you." He pointed his finger at the boy, "You can feel the tugging, right now."

"I BELIEVE *NOTHING!*"

Monege nodded.

"*NOBODY* MESSES WITH MY HEART!"

"Then why are we shouting?"

Korsetta drew a breath and held it, trembling. "Ooooo-AAAAAAAH!" He waved his fists, running back to a cabin and slamming the door. A muffled curse came from inside, the door opened a crack, and a lock of hair that had caught in the jamb disappeared.

"What a mixed up, messed up kid!" Zanine's disgust showed in her voice.

"He makes me feel things I don't want to," murmured Ordoff.

Zanine stood and put her hands on her hips, "I vote we throw him overboard."

"Not without an air-lock." Monege chuckled. "Like it or not, we're in this together."

Ordoff stared at Monege, "You don't like him either."

"God will give us grace," replied Monege. "We'll need it."

"But there has to be a limit to grace, doesn't there?" Zanine asked. "Everything has limits."

"There are boundaries. But grace comes from above and He's unlimited. We're soap bubbles, balanced on the pinpoint of eternity. Yet, we live. Things that should destroy us don't. It's a fresh miracle every day."

"So God's watching us?"

"That's right."

"Nothing bad can happen?"



Monege put his hands together and stretched, “I didn’t say that. Lots happened to me. But I’m still here. There’s a plan for my life and it keeps unfolding.”

Zanine sat down and pulled her feet up under her. “So His hand is there even when we touch disaster and don’t know it.”

“Exactly right. Our Friend is looking out for us, even as we speak.”

“So we’re in trouble?”

“I’m sure of it. We just don’t know the details. But He’ll see us through.”

“Personally, I’d like a few details.” Zanine laughed uneasily.

Behind her on the flight console, a light came on as the fuel supply dwindled to critical reserve. Normally, the computer would have refused takeoff for the amount they started with. Part of the code that set their journey was to ignore such things. She was better not knowing.