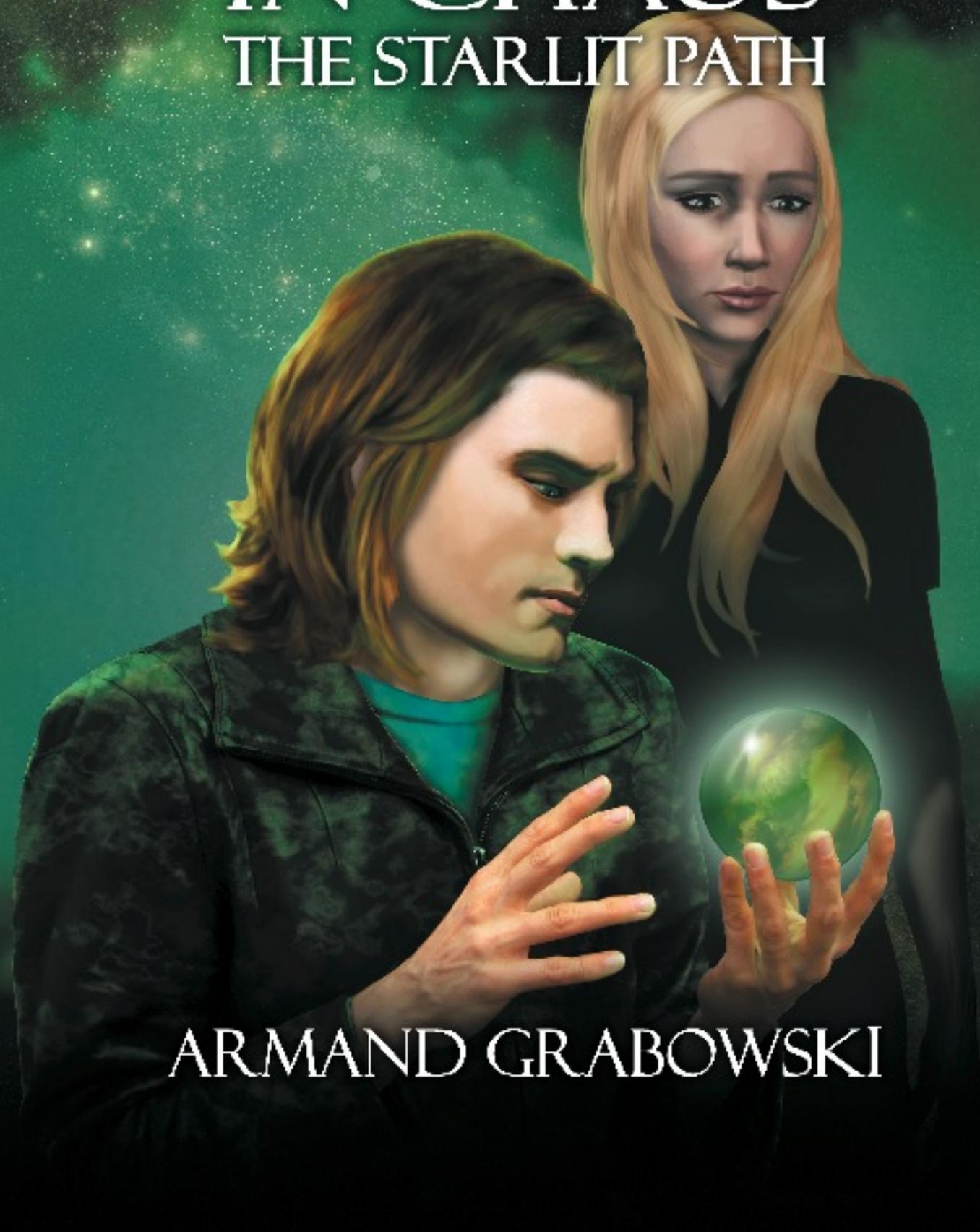
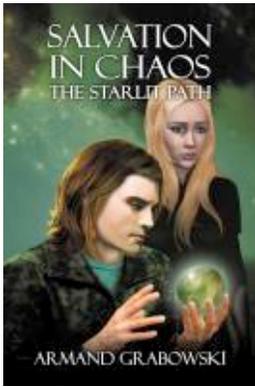


SALVATION IN CHAOS THE STARLIT PATH



ARMAND GRABOWSKI



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“The last thing I remember is the Captain’s giant gun blowing me away into nothingness. And then, I remember everything. I am not Adam Zefir; I was not born in Enicar; my parents, Richie, everything they told me...it’s all a lie. I feel my head begin to spin in the darkness, as my mind is assailed with memories; everything of the life I once lived, the world that they repressed, returns to me, all at once. They fall around me, so suddenly and so powerfully that I can barely piece them together or decipher them.

Astralis; H-District; Nova Force; Project Revelation; the starfall; *someday, we’ll be enemies; choose your destiny, Aeron!*; the path to freedom; the Liberators; Captain Underwood; the rebels of Astralis; Terra; Violet; peace; home. My true name.”

Answers

All around me buildings erupt in a sweltering blaze; the town is engulfed in flames of despair. The culprits - those soldiers, clad in impenetrable armor, images of impassable terror - cover the skies, encircling the bleak landscape in a loathsome fury. One of them swoops down at me and I leap for cover. Amidst the rain of deadly bullets I manage to conceal myself beneath a building. My momentary peace found, adrenaline and exhaustion take hold of me at once and I gasp for air; but I know this fight is not over. As I look carefully upon the landscape, my eyes catch a glimpse of a girl - a familiar girl - collapsing in the streets. Her short, dark hair, glistening with a purplish gleam, hangs heavy over her face which is round and smooth face and (once a beacon of innocence, no doubt) is fraught with fear and confusion. Without wasting a moment, I run to her, abandoning my security; as if by impulse, a name forms in my mind, and I call to her, "Violet!" I rush towards her and she raises her head, her eyes meeting mine for only an instant before a massive, bulky figure, his armor adorned with medals and fortified to the brim with weapons, swoops down upon us. I realize, too late, that my attempted rescue has been in vain. He lifts his arm, the gun firmly attached to his wrist. I open my mouth to scream, but the wave strikes my chest and a shock courses through my body. I feel great pain, then numbness - as if my mind is vanishing from my body - then nothing. My vision, my feeling, and my being, all give way to darkness...

I awaken in a cold sweat, panting so heavily I nearly choke. The dream is once again over; I'm back in Enicar, in my room, at the start of a new day. I gradually get dressed, going through the usual rounds of preparing for school and casually noting the absence of my family - again. My parents have already left for work. Richie is off on Nova Force business; he's likely to be halfway across the universe by now. As I help myself to a quick breakfast, I can't help but contemplate the surrealism of it all. I've lived with my parents in Enicar my entire life.

That dream that captivated me in sublime terror has been occurring repeatedly for about a sub-cycle - a rather insignificant time period for a man of 18 cycles. And yet, every night, I am fooled once again into thinking that the dream is real. And every day I can't help but wonder if the life I live while awake is the dream. Of these two existences, the dreams feel more like reality to me. Why is that? Is it that I refuse to accept my life as reality, or are my dreams not a subconscious existence but something greater? My thoughts are interrupted by a rather loud car horn. Checking my Wristwatch, I note the time: Norman is here.

“So, ready for another wonderful cycle of school?”

I breathe an irritated sigh at Norman's greeting.

He chuckles and replies, “My thoughts exactly.”

I climb into the car and look over to my friend. He adjusts his glasses and points his Wristwatch at the vehicle. It starts in response, and Norman verbally places the destination: “Elwand High School.” We begin to move - neither of us sure of what to say for some time. Finally, Norman begins.

“So, regarding our previous conversation...”

Not wishing to revisit this discussion, I make a rather strained sigh. He ignores me and continues: “What if Infinity is only the place where the people who have done wrong in life go? As in, only the people who are plagued by darkness?”

I raise an eyebrow. “And what about those who lived good, peaceful lives? Where do they go?”

“Well...” He tilts his head thoughtfully. “Okay, bear with me here.”

“I'm listening.”

“What if there's a third realm? As in, a place aside from Infinity where the dead who have been good in life are sent?”

“And who decides who goes to which place upon a person’s death?”

“Well... Viggoth, of course!”

I smile bitterly. It is a classic response, irrefutable, even with no available evidence. “And how does he decide? Where is the line between acts of good and acts of evil?”

Norman frowns. “How should I know? I’m no deity. I assume only Viggoth knows.”

I realize that Norman’s only baiting me into continuing the argument. He loves to debate; he thrives on disagreeing with people. I can’t live like that - I’d rather just go on in peace. “Well, I guess all we can say for certain is that Infinity is a place where a person goes when he or she dies.”

Norman finally detects my disinterest and surrenders the argument. “Ok, fair enough. But it’s just interesting to think about. I mean, what does it look like? How does it operate? Do we get to keep our bodies? Do we ever come back to the living realm?”

I’m tired of this argument - I know nothing of it. But there has to be a way to know for certain. I look at the sky in curiosity. “The answers must be out there - in the rest of the universe.” I pause for a second, gauging his eventual reaction to my next statement before continuing. “Norman... have you ever wanted to go out and find the answers?”

“What, like... on other planets?”

I nod.

He exhales grimly. “That’s a pretty dangerous notion, Adam.” A typical response. “It’s safe here, on Enicar. There may be answers on other planets, but there’s no telling what dangers are really out there.” His voice gets very deep, very fearful. “On other planets dwell monsters...”

“Oh, come now!”

“It’s true!” His tone is in no way uncertain - Norman is dead serious. “Ever heard of the Scarlet Phoenix, Adam?”

“Sometimes I worry about you, Norman...”

Norman continues unabashed. “They say the Scarlet Phoenix roams the universe, searching for victims...and when he finds one, he showers them in a searing flame and peels the skin off their bones!” His voice has risen to the point of hysteria.

“And then what? Does he grant three wishes to whoever can slay him?”

Norman groans at me.

“And, even if your stories are, by some miracle, true - if the answers are out there, isn’t it worth risking our lives?”

Norman looks away uncomfortably.

“Nothing ever happens on Enicar; no excitement, no knowledge, no contact with the outside world. Is that living? Or is it some sort of suspended animation?” I complete my message sadly, heavily: “Maybe... this is Infinity. Maybe... we’re already in it.”

The car fills with a very eerie silence. Norman is the one who breaks it, awkwardly: “Let’s just watch some TV.”

He points his Wristwatch at the front of the car, and the glass lights up with a holographic image. I barely tune myself in as a dark-haired reporter comments on the highlights from last night’s Borealan Mercenary Competition.

“Looks like Terra Lumere won another match!” Norman says excitedly. “I’m telling you, this guy is an inspiration! Losing just isn’t an option for him!”

Norman's adulations bore me, but the action on-screen is, admittedly, very entertaining; Terra Lumere, in his signature, golden Combat Suit armor, handily defeating his latest victim. As he fights, the gold highlights in Terra's suit light up, and his opponent is crushed by tons of earth. I continue to watch as if hypnotized. I feel a sense of familiarity, as though...it seems indescribable. Something about the situation seems familiar. Then, a striking pain seizes my mind, and I clutch my head as a wave of memories that aren't mine flow into me. They arrive too quickly for me to make sense of them; the only thing I can recall is a single phrase, from a voice I've never heard: "Someday we'll be enemies."

"Adam! Are you all right?"

I recover, shaking my head from side to side. "I'm fine."

The car slows to a stop, and I see that we've reached our destination - Elwand High School. Norman and I enter into the massive, empty building among a crowd of students. As we pass from classroom to classroom, I tune in to a conversation between two average-looking students. One of them says something along the lines of, "Last cycle, I received straight Cs; perfectly average! My parents were, like, so proud of me!" I try desperately to hide my exasperation; Norman senses this, and whispers, "Relax, Adam. They're just grades; nothing more." This is a lie - it's far more than grades. It's a mentality. Everyone in this school - on this planet - is content to do only what they have to do to get by. I've always believed in improving one's self, and testing one's limits. That makes me an outcast, an overachieving failure. Norman's like that as well, even if he would never admit it; he's the only real friend I've got.

Norman tries to take my mind off the subject: "Hey, I heard we have a new history teacher this cycle - Tonie Gradios!"

I look away half-heartedly. "And?"

“Well, apparently, he’s from Borealis - the capital of the universe! Sounds interesting, huh?”

“So far, none of the teachers at this school have had any of the answers to the questions I want to ask,” I tell him. “What makes him any different?”

I can see he wants to persuade me, but he keeps silent and the two of us continue to walk towards the classroom.

Norman and I take our seats at the front of the class (we do it mainly for the extra space since everyone else sits in the back) and await the new teacher. The bell finally rings and seconds later I see Tonie Gradios for the first time. He is nothing like what you would expect from an educated man; he is dressed casually, in torn, stained clothing. His long, gray beard extends down to his chest, and his wild, bushy hair gives him the appearance of a homeless vagabond. The feature that strikes me most, however, is his eyes: crystal-clear and impossibly deep, they are the sole aesthetic feature on this man. He walks, slowly, towards the front of the room and begins to speak, in a surprisingly powerful and charismatic voice.

“My name is Tonie Gradios; I am here to enlighten you.”

His commanding voice is met with a sleepy silence. He continues to speak, “Who among you can tell me how long humans have existed in this universe?”

One student, sitting in the back, raises his hand nonchalantly. “10,000 cycles.”

Gradios gazes at him deeply, as if capturing him in a stare-down. “What is your proof?” The student shifts uncomfortably into his seat. Gradios looks out into the classroom, which begins to give off a very different atmosphere. “Nobody has any proof?”

Another student nervously raises her hand. “W-well...that was when Viggoth created humans, according to *The Book of All Time*.”

“Hm...I see.” Gradios’ tone is skeptical. “And did anyone yet exist to witness this phenomenon?” He receives no response. “Are there any historical documents, or empirical evidence, which can lend aid to the verification of this account?”

I take a quick glance around the room and see a room full of shocked faces. Even Norman is in disbelief.

“If no proof or evidence exists of a matter, then it is a matter of faith,” Gradios explains. “And matters of faith should remain a responsibility to be dealt with outside of the classroom, where reasonable, objective learning takes place.”

“But everything is connected to Viggoth!” I hear a student shout. “Viggoth created humans; Viggoth created the technology humans used to colonize other planets after the original planet was rendered unlivable; it was his act of generosity! If it weren’t for Viggoth, objective learning would not exist!”

“Ah,” Gradios retorts, “but what if Viggoth does not exist?”

This statement is met with a gasp, then a massive silence. All around the room, students are whispering silently to each other, and I can be certain of what’s being said: “Blasphemy!” “How dare he!” “Who does he think he is!” But I remain silent, eager to hear his next statement.

“I find the claim to be worth reflecting upon,” Gradios continues, ignoring the reactions of his students. “Ponder this, if you will; no human has ever truly seen this Wyrms God, who supposedly gave birth to mankind. With no such evidence, the mechanics of this deity are purely a matter of belief, and the burden of choosing to believe, or to doubt, rests with the believer or the doubter. “

My eyes begin to widen. I begin to understand that this man, this Tonie Gradios, in a world of ignorance, is an enlightened man. I continue to listen with great enthusiasm.

“This school has encouraged you all to close your minds and your mouths; this world has motivated you only to settle into a life of mediocrity, and never to pursue your own dreams, or even to ponder what life means to you. Can such a thing be called life?” The students continue to listen in horror, as though Gradios were threatening their very lives. “Unfortunately, this appears to be a message adopted by the Borealan government itself...”

At this point, Gradios stops to acknowledge the criticism of his students. “Do you object?” The students make various affirmative gestures. “Then you defend an empire you do not truly understand. Who among you, I wonder, can tell me the name of Borealis’ Emperor?” The noise dies down, and the students begin to back down. Nobody knows; I profess that I don’t know either. “As I thought.” Gradios looks up once more, and begins to pace the room as he speaks; as his speech grows on, his passion becomes evident, as do the truth in his words.

“Children, you are the future of this world, of this universe; you are the forces of progress, of rebirth. This universe has taken a dangerous turn - it has abandoned these values. The universe has lost its way; it has lost the ability, the strength, to dream of a greater future; to gather the courage to act on that dream, and paint the picture of a destiny worth fighting to fulfill.” He stops pacing, his words building momentum as he continues. “What I will teach you in this class, you can choose to believe or to discredit; but whatever the case may be, you must understand what you believe in *for yourselves*. That is the most important thing.”

Just as Gradios finishes speaking the bell rings and the students file out in a hurry, desperate to escape this blasphemy and repress everything they’ve just heard. As if from a distance, I hear Norman whisper to me: “Can you believe that guy? What a ridiculous lecture!” But I refuse to listen - I’ve become lost in the man’s words. On this day, I’ve experienced something I’d never imagined before: a teacher who actually encourages open-mindedness. I resolve to see him

again, as soon as school gets out; I have many questions to ask this man.

<>

“I would love to answer your questions, child.” Gradios takes a quick sip of his drink, and slowly places it on the table. “However, certain questions require experience in life’s long passages to be truly answered.”

He looks back at me, as if expecting a response. “There is one question I know you can answer for me,” I tell him. “The capital planet of the universe, Borealis; what’s it like?”

Gradios sighs, takes another, longer sip, and then answers. “It is an empire of foolishness; a government that encourages ignorance and mediocrity. It began, I’m afraid, with the coronation of the new Emperor; it is as though all progress ceased simultaneously with his appointment.”

“So does that mean that everywhere else, things are the same as here?” Gradios looks at me, waiting for an elaboration. “All my life here on Enicar I’ve lived in a world where I was the only intelligent one; a world where intelligence was frowned upon. It’s been awful, but I’ve persisted in the belief that things are better on other planets; that there’s a place out there where knowledgeable people like me can be accepted. But...is it just the same way wherever I go? Does such a place exist, or...”

Gradios smiles warmly. “Never fool yourself into thinking that this universe is uniform, Adam. The secrets that this realm holds are abundant and awe-inspiring.” He folds his hands, and his voice grows softer. “It is true that many in this universe have succumbed to the same mentality that grips Enicar; however, in response to this new ideology, the universe has seen the rise of many resistance movements. There has even been talk of a revolution - a return to a thoughtful, reasonable universe that sees past the horizon. One such

movement intrigues me. Far away, on a distant planet, the Intellectual Liberation Coalition is gaining momentum. They fight Borealis with its greatest weakness - knowledge. It is their intent to reveal to the universe the fallacies of the Borealan government, and inspire the spirit of change in the people of the universe."

I can see the inspiration in Gradios' eyes; he, too, believes in the cause of this Coalition. "Why haven't you joined?" I ask.

"Were I considered worthy, I would without hesitation; however, nobody knows where the ILC is situated," he responds. "They find those with great open-mindedness and extend their invitation; in this sense, only the most enlightened are allowed to understand the truth regarding their existence." He gestures towards me. "Would you join, Adam, if you had the chance?"

This catches me off guard; I'm not sure how to respond. I take a moment to consider my answer, then reply, "I'm not sure if I'd want to be caught in some kind of revolution. But I would like to know what's out there in the universe, resting beyond Enicar."

"Do you believe it's a better place?"

I don't have an answer to this, but I respond, "I believe there are answers out there."

Gradios looks me straight in the eye and I can clearly see, from the intensity of his stare, the importance of what he will say. "If that is what you truly believe, then you must act on that belief." He continues, and I am once again left hanging on every word. "Whether you are prepared or not, Adam, the revolution will soon begin. When it does, there will be no place for those who stand back and watch the world change. If you believe that the outside world contains the answers you seek, then you must travel in the direction of that belief; for it matters not that you simply believe in something, but that you act to create that which you believe." Gradios glances at his Wristwatch. "Well, you had

best be heading home.” We both stand up to leave. “Have a nice night, Adam Zefir.”

I leave the classroom and turn back to give one final farewell. “See you tomorrow, Mr. Gradios!” I shout into the room, and he gives a brief wave of his hand in response. As I turn to walk away, I realize that Norman’s probably gone by now- I’ll have to walk home. I leave the school with one question answered. Someday I have to leave Enicar, and not return until I find the answers I seek.

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I awaken and rub my eyes as my vision gradually returns in the darkness. My coherence returns slowly, and I become aware that I’ve slept the entire night. This, in itself, I find to be a miracle; that nightmare that has plagued me has not returned, not tonight. Perhaps the knowledge of another intelligent being, besides me and Norman, has calmed my mind; perhaps the message the dreams convey has already passed. In any case, what’s certain is that, for the first time in over a sub-cycle, I have slept comfortably.

A Voice is Heard

As requested, we've arrived in the dead of night. Adam reaches for the handle and the door swings open. How has he unlocked the doors, I wonder; who are we dealing with? I'm moving tentatively, but Adam continues to move forward without hesitation. I call out to him, stopping him briefly in his tracks, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

He remains firmly in place, his back to me, and responds, "Don't you want to know what happened to him, Norman?"

"But is it worth all this? We barely knew Gradios!"

Adam begins to walk forward and I speed up to a trot to catch up to him. "The day after we met him, he disappeared, Norman. There one day, gone the next. And nobody seemed willing or able to explain why."

"Well, yeah, but... we're breaking the law here."

Adam keeps walking; he doesn't seem to care. "Listen, Adam. You've done all you can do. You've tried to make this issue public, and you failed. The North City Times rejected your article; even the school's newspaper turned you down. You have to stop, before you go too far."

Adam stops immediately and faces me. I can see the fire in his eyes; a passion I've never seen in him before. He looks like he's ready to fight me should the need arise. "But one person listened. One person heard my voice, Norman; and that's one person who's willing to help me find out what really happened that day."

"Right, your little 'contact,'" I retort. "Adam, some guy left a message on your Wristwatch, telling you to come meet him in the school's library at nightfall. He didn't leave his name; he didn't explain his motive; he didn't even bother telling us anything about him."

“I understand the situation, Norman.”

“And...you’re all right with all this.”

“If you don’t want to get involved...”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” As we approach the library, Adam begins to slow down. As he comes to rest, he takes a deep breath, and gives me a half-smile.

“Look, we’re friends, and as a friend I feel obligated to help you deal with your problems in life.” I draw close to him, and he turns his head to avoid looking me in the eye. “But I’m warning you, right now you shouldn’t get in too deep. We’re safe in Enicar; we live a peaceful life. If anything should arise to threaten that balance...well, I’m not going to follow you off the edge of the universe. Got it?”

Adam nods slightly. I’m not comfortable with that response - not in the slightest - but I’ll hold my tongue, for now. The library door is open and Adam walks in with me following close behind. And that’s where we meet this “listener” - without a doubt, the most bizarre-looking human being I have ever seen. He sits behind a single table, positioned in front of the rows of bookshelves; if I didn’t know better, I’d say his tufts of unmanaged, jet-black hair were threatening to devour his face. His facial hair, just as askew, gives him a strange sense of sophistication - but mostly, it gives the impression that this is a man who needs psychological help. His eyes, barely visible beneath his hair, are sharp, green, and squinted in a trivial glower. I detect some insanity behind them; but that just might be me. His dress is fairly formal, and I can tell he’s put some effort into looking presentable. He looks to Adam, then to me, and twists his lips in an unnerving frown. “Which one of you is Adam Zefir?” he asks, cordially, but with an air of smugness.

Adam steps forward. “Nice to meet you, sir; I’m Adam.” He gestures to me. “This is my friend, Norman Grounder. He -“

“I did not request your presence, Norman Grounder.” He stares me down, and I get the urge to look away, but I hold my ground. “You can leave.”

“Hey, I’m not going anywhere.” I’m not the type to back down easily; this psycho’s going to have to do a better job of persuading me.

“In that case...” he rubs his beard thoughtfully, “...would you mind removing your clothes for me, just briefly?”

“What!?” I jump back, mortified. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Really?” He smiles wickedly. “Why refuse such a request - unless you’re wearing some kind of recording device?”

“Oh, really? That’s the only objection I could find with your request?” I’m ready to fight him - he’s obviously insane. But Adam stands up for me.

“Listen, Norman’s been my friend for nearly two cycles - he’s the most trustworthy person I know. There’s no need to doubt his loyalty.”

The man is visibly displeased; however, realizing he can do nothing about it, he sighs, and says, “Very well. But I’ll have you stand near the doorway.”

“Whatever.” At this point, I’m inclined to stay as far away from this loon as I possibly.

“Now, then.” The man rises from his seat, and beckons Adam to come to the table. Once Adam approaches him, he offers his hand. “I am Sam Smith, a fellow student of Elwand.” Adam shakes his hand, and Sam grins. “You have a very firm handshake, Adam.”

“Um... thank you,” is Adam’s nervous reply.

“In my experience, you can tell a good deal from a man by his handshake. It’s like an exchange of personalities. If a man gives a firm handshake, it means he’s trustworthy. If a man’s handshake is...shall

we say, flaccid, it's obvious he can't be trusted." I consider myself lucky; in the darkness of the doorway it's unlikely Sam sees me rolling my eyes in disgust.

"Sam, I'll have to get right to the point." Adam takes his seat, and folds his hands - a common thing for him to do while negotiating. "When you sent me that message yesterday, you told me you had information on what really happened to Tonie Gradios."

"Ah, yes, well...I must warn you; you may not like what you are about to witness." Sam points his Wristwatch at the wall. I bend over to get a good view of the image that Sam has just transmitted. It appears to be security camera footage of the school. I realize I'm looking at Gradios' classroom, on the rotation he arrived at the school. It's long past the end of school, and Gradios is quietly working at his desk when he is greeted by visitors dressed in dark-blue uniforms, well-built, and fully equipped with standard-issue laser guns: Borealan officers. Gradios looks up, entirely unsurprised by their arrival.

"What took you so long?" Gradios stands, making no attempt to resist them. Without a word they place energy bands around his hands, constraining him. The two officers escort Gradios out of the room, and the footage vanishes. I look over to Adam, and see he's not sure how to feel about this. He's clearly devastated; and it's a shame, Gradios really meant a lot to the guy. I personally didn't think much of him, but to Adam, he meant a lot. The only question I have left is, why was he arrested in the first place?

"You shouldn't be so surprised, you know," Sam explains, his pompous smirk now turned to a bitter scowl. "The Borealan government is a master of this sort of unwarranted arrest. Gradios had done nothing wrong; he simply spoke his mind, and encouraged others to do the same. Now, I have never met or heard the man firsthand, but I can say that any enemy of the system is an ally to me." Sam rises from his seat, and begins to pace the room, arms crossed, staring grimly at the floor as he walks. "Government is the enemy of freedom; they live to leech off of our liberties and our rights; yet people

continue to shower these abominations with unwavering support.” His little speech is bordering on paranoid lunacy at this point; I have to bite my tongue. “People need something different; they need anarchy. They need to do what they desire; and so long as government remains, that is an impossible task. The only salvation is for us to rise up and overthrow this government - all government! Only then will...”

“Enough already!” I can only stomach so much insanity. Sam shoots me a confrontational glare, as though he were aiming to penetrate my soul with his eyes. Adam senses the danger and butts in.

“What Norman means is we’d just like to know what exactly happened to Gradios, and where he is now.”

Sam stands still, his feet firmly in place. “Your friend’s quite rude, you know?” he says in that superior tone, as though he had proven his intellectual dominance simply by staring me down. He then glances dramatically through the nearest window to the outside world, and calmly states, “Were I forced to fashion a guess, I’d profess that Gradios is probably being contained within the walls of Circle Nine Prison in Kea-Hu-Saw - a high-security prison reserved for traitors against the government. The planet itself is about an hour away by spaceship, but the prison is said to be all but impregnable.”

“All right; it’s time for me to ask a question.” Sam and Adam both turn to me. “You obviously know a good deal about this whole situation - but why tell us about it? What motive do you have?”

“Ah, very good question, Mr. Grounder,” he replies, with a haughty flair that turns even this compliment into a condescending jab at my intellect. “And I’m glad you asked, for it draws us back to the topic of the fallacies of the Borealan government.” He raises his hands high into the sky, sinking all his energy into this one, simple gesture. “Here is where their control originates; at this educational facility we are all conformed to a ‘thinking standard.’ Those who refuse to conform, such as Gradios, are met with the full punishment of the law. Such is always

the case when one refuses to believe what the masses have already adjusted their minds and freedoms to accept as true.” I wait and wait for him to get to the point - I’m starting to believe his speeches are simply the result of how much he loves the sound of his own voice. “Another example is the fascism of the almighty ‘Viggoth, the Wyrms God’. What foolishness! Illogical, ill-conceived - yet easy to swallow if one passes on giving it serious consideration. Do you understand my point, gentlemen?”

Adam and I look at each other- I can tell that he’s as confused and fed up with Sam as I am.

“Ah! You see, my point, friends, is that Viggoth is nothing more than an invention of Borealis!” Adam and I look at one another again; Adam silently urges me to keep my mouth shut, and I disdainfully oblige. “All this nonsense about Viggoth, and the gift of humanity, as well as the threat of Infinity – all highly improbable if one pays heed to scientific knowledge. But it is rather simple to brainwash people with the teachings of a fictional deity. Believe what we believe, and you shall be rewarded in another life; stray from the path of conformity, and you will suffer forever! Well, I for one prefer to be rewarded in this life, not any other - and I can never manage that with this oppression, this affront to our liberty, breathing down my...”

“Answer the damn question!” However furious that statement must have sounded, I feel a good deal angrier than I let on.

“Please, Sam - your speeches are great and all, but we really just want to know why you called me here tonight.”

“Very well.” Sam runs his fingers through his hair, stands up straight, and begins to speak more slowly, more concretely. “I am sick of this life, this conformity. I have shown you the true nature of Borealis so that you, too, will understand. For a long time now I have been planning to escape this world and live freely.” He beckons Adam to come closer, and I lean forward as well since his voice gradually reduces to a hushed whisper. “On the outskirts of North City lies an

interspace hangar where spaceships fly in and out regularly. It is my intent to infiltrate this hangar and commandeer one of these marvels for my own. For this I request your help, Adam Zefir" - he looks at me - "and of course you are welcome to join as well. I can promise you no monetary rewards, but I *can* promise you the most important thing - freedom. Freedom from the bounds of government, religion, law, and the universe itself!"

"Okay, I've heard enough." I turn to Sam, and take his glare head-on, with no intent of backing down. "Adam, not only is this man insane, he's a criminal. We were better off not coming here." I turn to leave, but Adam remains firmly in place.

"I accept your offer, Sam Smith - but on one condition."

I wheel around, outraged. I try to comment, but words escape me.

"Before we do anything, or go anywhere else, we must free Tonie Gradios from his imprisonment."

I can hardly believe what I'm hearing. "Adam...you're not actually going to trust this maniac, are you?"

Adam turns to me solemnly. "I have no choice, Norman; there's no other way out."

Sam strokes his beard, pondering this new proposition. "I am skeptical of accepting this condition, Adam. Why should I be forced to compromise my mission to assist you? What do I stand to gain from it?"

"Allow me, as a response, to ask you this: if you could have accomplished this mission on your own, why would you have summoned us in the first place?" Sam frowns, but says nothing. "You need our help - so it's only fair that we ask you for yours."

Sam again strokes his beard, and then smiles slightly. "I find this to be a reasonable demand. Very well, Adam Zefir - we have an

agreement.” Sam offers his hand, and Adam reaches out to shake it. As a friend and a law-abiding citizen, this is about as much as I can stand.

“You’ve lost it too, haven’t you? Have you even considered the illegality of this little endeavor? If the police catch you –“

Adam raises a hand to stop me. “Norman - don’t you get it? This is our only escape. I have to free Gradios - and more importantly, I can’t live here on Enicar any longer.”

“So you’re willing to break the law and abandon your friends and family all for some ill-conceived enlightenment quest?” My words feel almost like an echo, a reverb - as though I’m merely dreaming, and could wake up at any moment - but I know that this is real. And the determination in Adam’s eyes is real, too; he has no intention of going back on this. “So be it.” I turn away from my closest friend - my only friend - and say what may be my final words to him. “You and your new best friend can do whatever you like - I won’t rat you out, or anything, but I’ll have no part of it.” I turn to leave, the weight of this encounter resting heavily on my shoulders. When it comes to supporting Adam or obeying the law - I make the decision I believe to be right. But I know, deep down that what I have just done was dead wrong.

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I can’t believe I’m doing this, but there’s no turning back now. As my car comes to rest atop what appears to be an endless bastion of wasteland, I look around and shout into my Wristwatch, “Okay, I’m here.”

Adam’s voice rings out, “I can see you now. I’m opening the door right now. Look out.”

To my left the ground begins to crack and vibrate and a small section begins to open up. I see Adam’s face pop up from underneath the earth. I’ve never been happier to see him - from the moment I left

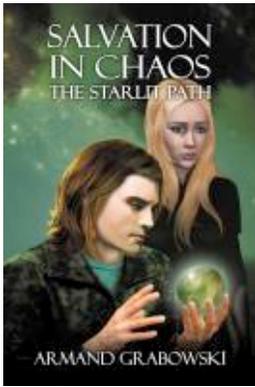
him behind 3 rotations prior, I knew I'd made a terrible mistake. Apologizing for my mistake - nursing my wounded pride - was one of the most difficult things I'd ever done. But I couldn't be happier. I walk towards the hole in the ground and dive into the bunker. There, I see Sam, hard at work on some strange, ball-shaped device. "Shut the damn door!" he shouts, and Adam obliges. I look around, impressed - the shelter is adorned with rows upon rows of high-tech gadgets and weaponry. I also spot shelves of food and drink - I can't help but wonder if Sam has been living in this dark, musty place. Adam turns to Sam, who glances at me, then says, "So, you've decided to join us, have you?"

"Yes. I have." As I speak, I become aware of everything I'm sacrificing. My education, my friends, family; my stability in a word. Beyond this world lies a universe of uncertainty. I glance back at the door, wondering if there's still time to back out - but I remove myself from such thoughts. I have a new life, a new mission.

Adam looks at me and smirks slightly. "Are you sure you want to face all those nasty little 'dangers' you were complaining about earlier? I'd hate to see your skin get ripped off by the Scarlet Phoenix after all."

I can't help but smile at that; even in such dire times Adam's attitude is admirable. Then I answer seriously, "My life has boiled down to one simple fact - I'll never be happy, as long as I'm on Enicar."

Adam's face twists into a bittersweet smile as he pats me on the shoulder. "Welcome aboard."



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