

THE SAGA OF THE  
LIGHTRIDERS®

# NEXUIS OF BOOK TWO SWORDS

They found Truth in Victory, and Wisdom in Defeat.  
Without the journey, there was nothing.  
Only the True Light knew the way.

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Find truth in victory,  
And wisdom in defeat.  
Without the journey,  
Life has no meaning.

Light will show you the way.

## — Prologue —

The night sky of K-Nadu was the color of a dead soul, a sullen tempest of thunder and rain that smothered the heavens like a cold assassin. A huge orb, darker than the night, sliced downwards through the storm with inhuman speed, decelerating only as it neared its target, a solitary dwelling snuggled on the crest of a meandering hill. The warsphere quivered as it toiled to maintain a delicate balance, hovering in the planetary gravity. The sub-sonic buzz of its magnadrive was lost to the wind rustling through the trees. Only rivulets of water beading on the hull betrayed its sullen mass.

The dwelling was a deceptively humble affair, nested amidst a grove of danda trees that provided shade and seclusion. A solitary light glowed from a second-floor bedroom window, betraying the presence of its remarkable resident. An eternity seemed to pass until the second-floor light winked out. The rain grew heavier, saturating the hillside. Liquid fingers of water slithered through the grass and down the gravel road to the glen below.

The warsphere remained motionless until another speck of light beckoned from a window half-buried in the hillside. Instantly, the ship came to life and descended with a stealth and finesse that barely bent a blade of grass. A narrow ramp telescoped to the ground with a protesting whine and disembarked a procession of cloaked figures, almost with the rhythm of the rain. Their hooded robes shielded them against detection and the elements, though the crimson glow of their battle-axes betrayed their numbers. With stealth and purpose, they serpented through the wet grass until

they reached the open window, then vanished inside as effortlessly as a gust of wind.

The warsphere rose towards its next objective: a second-floor balcony at the rear of the house. As silently as before, it dispatched a detachment of mercenaries down the rain-spattered ramp. They leaped one-by-one across a moonless gap to the balcony, tossing their weapon to their comrade before them.

The world seemed to pause and catch its breath as the rain diminished. Even the wind withheld its caress. Only the storm overhead continued to grumble uneasily.

B’Obadine Pelucidor was glad to be off his feet. He yawned broadly as he sunk into his overstuffed bed. Even the unseasonable storm outside would not delay the elderly physician’s rest. Of late, his schedule had been especially trying. K-Nadu was a world of inhabitants with minor ailments and rare injuries, so the Wizen-physician was surprised to find himself with a new influx of patients. Each was pleasant in his or her own way, but B’Obadine knew why they were really there. Word had spread across the countryside that a famous Lightrider had sought sanctuary in their humble community; the young warrior who had single-handedly won the Battle of *Geos-P’X*. This had brought the physician unwanted notoriety and distraction from his regular patients. Nevertheless, he welcomed the company of his famous visitor.

It was Jonas Goodwill’s second visit, and each time B’Obadine had treated him as if he were his own son. With the death of Goodwill’s real father, there was no one else. Physician and patient had formed a solid, caring bond. Jonas had mended stronger than ever — thanks to the physician’s unique bioengineered potions and the Lightrider’s remarkable recuperative powers. When time came for Jonas to return to the Rings of M’rrr, B’Obadine was sorry to see him leave.

However, it was time for life to turn a new page for Jonas Goodwill.

The elderly physician massaged his bare scalp, rubbing away the rigors of work, then stretched his frame under the soft linen sheets. He glanced at the reassuring silhouette of his wand

beside the bed. His favorite lab coat was draped over a nearby chair. The garment was frayed and worn, its pockets stuffed with pungent potions. He cherished it like an old friend and would never retire it from daily use.

BIX, his pet griffin, was at its usual nocturnal post at the foot of the stairs, while Lutha Radwaste, his research partner, had activated the perimeter defenses from her basement quarters. Following her off-world absence, Lutha had finally rejoined the physician and together, their research was producing astounding results.

The patter of rain on B’Obadine’s roof was rhythmic and soothing. Such storms were quite rare this time of yahren. The rain would keep the surrounding landscape green and lush, including his personal garden, and was therefore welcome. The physician felt guilty that he had neglected his vegetables of late, but was too tired to give it serious thought tonight. He yawned one last time and doused the light.

His head barely touched the pillow when he heard an odd shuffling, then an eerie howling. He sat up with a start and glanced anxiously about. It did seem unusually dark tonight. The distant lights of the city and spaceport usually glowed through the balcony windows, providing some illumination. Though it had been raining all night, there was always that glimmer of light, no matter how subtle.

B’Obadine listened carefully for the sounds of the glen, but instead he heard something else, barely audible. A sound that had escaped his attention until now. It was the ugly buzz of a magnadrive coil, and not the sound of his old land cruiser — something more pronounced.

Without warning, the balcony doors burst open. The glass exploded from its frames. A torrent of rain and wind poured into the room, followed by a flood of intruders. It was not the wind howling — it was the intruders. Their crimson eyes glared from beneath rain-soaked hoods. Gaunt, dead-blue hands pointed the burning tips of crude battle-axes at the frail physician.

B’Obadine instantly recognized them from Jonas’ terrifying description. Goodwill had called them “deadly by design and relentless by nature” — soulless assassins that would persist until they killed or captured their prey. Minions of the Demon Wielder.

*The Kr'ill!*

B'Obadine grabbed his wand and leaped out of bed. He bolted for the doorway, but paused at the top of the stairs. His initial fright turned to anger. His nostrils flared. This was *his* home, after all. He ran his fingers over his bare scalp as if to solidify his resolve, clutched his bio-wand, and chanted angrily. He hesitated to use the device as a weapon, but it would not be the first time he had acted in self-defense.

Fingers of light surged up the wand's coils and spat a blue burst of energy at two of the intruders, punching them against a bedroom wall. They hit with a solid thump; the sound of broken pottery and glass followed them to the floor.

B'Obadine did not wait to count survivors. He made his way down the spiral staircase as fast as his wiry frame would carry him, cursing that he had not better illuminated the passageway. His mind raced. *Why had the perimeter alarm not sounded? The defensive shield should have risen. How had the Kr'ill reached the balcony in the first place?* It was a long drop to the hillside. There were too many questions and no time to think. His heart pounded as he reached the main floor. He could hear the intruders stumbling down the wooden steps after him.

Where was BIX? *Some guard!* Then he gasped as he saw the body of the griffin lying motionless on a rug in the dim light of the hallway. His heart sunk as he ran towards the pile of burnt feathers and fur. He could not believe his eyes. No wonder it had not cried out.

BIX was dead.

A chorus of bone-chilling howls rose from the shadows. The physician realized that this was no time to mourn — he was not alone here, either.

“B'Obadine!” called a familiar voice from the shadows.

The physician held his breath as he tried to locate the source of the voice. “Jonas—what are you doing here?” he whispered. “I thought you had returned to M'rrr.”

“B'Obadine!” called the voice again, more urgently. “I'm over here. Hurry.”

The clamor in the stairwell grew nearer. B'Obadine knew time was short. From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed the flash of a battle-axe and dropped to the floor as a dirty ball of fire seared

overhead. In the pulse of light, he tried to count the intruders and place them in the room. The blast struck the wall with a frightening sound. The smell of burnt wood stung his nostrils.

“No!” barked a strident voice. “Alive, you fools.”

B’Obadine rolled over to find Lutha Radwaste standing over him, silhouetted by a stark amber light from the basement. Instead of her customary lab clothes, the R’Horne was dressed in a black jumpsuit laden with rows of small buckles. She cocked her head at him as if studying a lab experiment. The long ridge of cartilage that extended up both sides of her nostrils and curved and around her ears seemed to sneer more than usual. Her nostrils flared with steam in the cold night air as she spoke.

“The Lord of Vulpecula wants the physician alive. Damage him and I will personally see you roasted alive,” she scowled. Then, she glared at the physician and mimicked the voice of Jonas Goodwill again. “Get up — *now*.”

B’Obadine was stunned. “Lutha? What are you doing?”

“Move, B’Obadine. Our partnership is ended. I got a better offer,” Lutha said with her typical insolence.

The physician had endured her sour disposition and argumentative nature because her genius as a bioengineer had outweighed her shortcomings. She had even vanished for a time, taking valuable experiments to a lab hidden half a continent away. Eventually, at the urging of the benefactors of their research, Lutha had reconciled and returned. Obviously, something had changed for the worse.

B’Obadine frantically surveyed the floor for his wand. Distracted by what he believed was the voice of his former ward, he had neglected to secure his only weapon. He had to think fast. He tore off his necklace and held it tightly in his grasp. It bore a solitary green gemstone that glistened subtly in the gloom. He chanted to it under his breath, then with a furtive glance at his assailants, he tossed the charm discretely under a chair, and turned to the R’Horne.

“Lutha, you can’t give the BIX away,” B’Obadine pleaded, struggling to his knees. He winced in pain. The carpet was thick, but he was not as young as he used to be.

“Is that what you think?” Lutha wrinkled the bone ridge above her nostrils with disdain. “I’m not giving anyone the BIX.

I’m giving them *you*.”

“What? I don’t understand—”

“You have been an obstacle ever since I arrived. With you gone, I can develop the BIX *my way*,” Lutha sneered. Spotting the physician’s wand on the floor, she quickly scooped it up and twirled it between her clawed fingers.

“You won’t be needing this where you’re going. Come, B’Obadine. I have someone who wants a word with you. Someone who is willing to ... lighten my burden. It’s about that former patient of yours.”

“Lutha, don’t do this,” B’Obadine pleaded. “Think about your career with the Biotechs, the importance of our work—”

“I’ve thought about it, Humaine,” Radwaste interrupted. “It is you who never saw the potential of our work. And you never will. I don’t need you anymore — or the Biotech Council. They’re too shortsighted. Magnog will take care of you —” Lutha started to say more, but realized she was in a room full of single-minded mercenaries. She turned and gestured to them brusquely.

Two cloaked figures grabbed B’Obadine and pulled him to his feet like a rag doll. He stood with dignity and looked into the face of death. The Kr’ill’s horrific appearance sent a chill through him. They glared at him through crimson eye slits, deep in the sockets of their emaciated skull. Their jutting jaws and rows of ugly cartilage seemed to grimace at him. The dried-blood color of their clothing reeked of death, and they smelled as bad as they looked.

B’Obadine gave the remains of his griffin one last mournful look as he was dragged up the stairs. Passing his study, he could see his transputer and vidscreen being dismantled, probably to search it for secrets.

*Fools — they’re wasting their time*, he shrugged to himself.

The Kr’ill hustled B’Obadine through his disheveled bedroom and towards the balcony. He still found it odd there was no visible glow from the city of Namuré beyond the glen. As he was led onto the rain-slick balcony, his jaw dropped in shock. Floating before him was the daunting silhouette of a massive warsphere that filled the sky. A ramp led from the bent railing of the balcony to the dark void of the ship’s boarding hatch. The buzz of its magnadrive grew louder now. Louder than the storm.

Until now, B’Obadine prayed this whole scene was a bad dream that he would awake from at any moment. Or, if this were real, he would find a way to repel these intruders and their soulless assault. He was quite unprepared for the cold reality of the warsphere.

Only as B’Obadine was lifted up the ramp and aboard the ship, did he realize the true depth of his peril.

## Part I

### The Depths of One's Greatest Fears

— 1 —

The Rings of M’rrr were unique in all the universe, symbols of everything Lightrider. From space, they appeared as three mammoth arcs of silver and gold, suspended around the mystical sun of M’rrr. The star was more than a source of power, it was home to a god. The early Lightriders had accelerated the cosmic evolution of cosmic matter floating in the spiritual nexus of the C’Hamarande into a vibrant sun and sanctuary for the Infinite Light. Generations of Wizen — wizard engineers — spent their lives constructing the Rings in orbit over M’rrr with no notion of how long it would take to complete. Some saw it as an epic dream, others as a cosmic nightmare.

Apprentice Lightrider Jonas Goodwill took one last look through his bronze-tinted eyeshades at Capital Ring, the largest of the three. It was a splendid metropolis of mirrored skyscrapers that reflected the solar fury of M’rrr like burning metal. However, the skyscrapers now appeared gaudy and tarnished to Jonas, soiled by everything he had endured. The magic was gone.

Jonas took an Intrabridge from Capital Ring to Academia Ring, the fabled school in the stars where science and magic were taught and improved upon. Its five colleges and twelve schools occupied the thousand-kilomen-long arc of the second ring.

He took the roundabout route after receiving a memo from the regents that advised him, “...for the good of the other students to remain inconspicuous until the disruption of your return diminishes.” The words sounded like those of Quidam Xhiambole, Chancellor of the College of Powers — certainly not one of Jonas’ biggest fans. Earlier, the young Lightrider had unintentionally

caused a political uproar that almost cost the chancellor his job.

At the time, Jonas had no choice: the assassination of his father had inflicted him with traumatic amnesia and a painful wound in his soul. During his desperate journey to find his father’s killer, he had blundered into the hands of ruthless adversaries, allowed a friend to be killed, and seemed to disrupt the lives of everyone he met. He had also saved countless lives at the Battle for Geos-P’X, and found the real killer of his father — a vile shape-shifter. While the Council of United Sentient Beings had cleared him of all charges and reinstated him with full scholastic credit, Jonas took little satisfaction in these victories. Dav’d Goodwill was more than a Grand Wizen and Protector of the Infinite Light, his father had been his best friend.

Jonas arrived at the College of Beliefs at a discrete entrance on the third floor. From his vantage, he surveyed the Grand Hall like an explorer mapping his terrain. A colossal sculpture of crystal spheres, translucent spirals, and emerald cones hung near the front of the Hall. The light of M’rrr bled through a row of stained-glass windows, illuminating the sculpture with amber and ruby light. He remembered it as a glistening marvel, suspended over the entrance as if by a magic of its own. Now it seemed lifeless and aged, desperately clinging to the rafters.

Jonas strode confidently in his boots along the walkways, owning the space in which he moved. He was not substantially taller than others, yet he suffered none of the ungainliness of others his age, and stood out in a crowd. His clothes fit exceptionally well, bearing the work of the best weavers and tailors. He wore his lightvest with the utmost respect. The symbiont was tuned to his DNA and had protected him from harm on more than one occasion. He patted his bio-wand in its thigh holster on the seam of his trousers for reassurance. The magical shaft was a medium for his powers, and served him in ways he barely understood. He never let it out of reach.

He relaxed the rhythm of his walk as he took notice of the other students and instructors. They seemed out-of-step with the rhythm of his stride, but he didn’t care. Earlier, he feared what they might think of him. He was Jonas Goodwill, rumored to be the True Light — though no one spoke of such things in public. Now, he felt more self-assured and began to look forward to his first

session. As most of the students were headed towards the classrooms and study halls, he knew time was short. He made his way down to the second level and hurried across an elevated walkway. It was as vibrant with activity as ever. His enhanced senses amplified every sound, every footstep, every heartbeat.

A familiar voice rose above the rest, calling to him. "Jonas! Wait up!"

Jonas stopped and turned as well-dressed Altarian ran up to him.

"Shane!" Jonas exclaimed. A thin smile broke out on his face. Shane of Myanmar was his closest friend. The Altarian was younger, yet tall for his age and could easily pass for an upper classman. He was the cleverest person Jonas had ever met, with a knack for transputers and tech that was amazing. He could operate any device he touched and could take it apart and put it back together again — often better than before.

Shane's silken tunic and finely leathered vest bore the aristocratic patches of his noble house of Myanmar. His shoulder bag seemed less stuffed with gadgets than usual, perhaps due to the earliness of the semester. There was one obvious change in his appearance.

"Quite a haircut you've got there," Jonas observed wryly.

Shane smoothed his closely-cropped head of blond fleece and tried to appear unruffled. "Father insisted. It's my first semester, you know," he replied, a bit chagrined.

Jonas threw his arm around the Altarian affectionately. "Never mind the hair," he said. "I'm glad to see you. What brings you here?"

"I did it. Got myself assigned to the same commons as you," Shane replied, his large feline-like eyes widened appreciably.

"No!" Jonas exclaimed in mock surprise.

"You know it's impossible to find quarters near the School of Society, Ethics and Religions. I never thought I would get in. It helps to know someone important," he winked knowingly. "Otherwise, I'd be quartered with other first semester students. And how could I study with those greenies?"

"Glad I could put in a good word for you. Besides, I need someone to beat at a game of *O*."

"On K-Nadu we played almost every night, didn't we?"

“We will again. I think you owe me a rematch.”

Before Shane could reply, the sound of a perfect fifth chimed in the hallway. As the Rings of M’rrr were in geosynchronous orbits, there was no day or night, no judging time by visual reference. Tradition dictated periods for work, study, leisure and sleep; each was announced by a different melodic chord.

Jonas frowned at the announcement as a row of symbols paraded along the wall. “I’ve got an orientation session. I can’t be late. I’ll see you later,” he apologized and hurried up the walkway.

Shane’s response was lost in the sea of noisy students.

61440 was a small meeting room with translucent walls and plush chairs surrounding a crystal conference table. A group of students had already taken their seats. Jonas stood in the doorway for a moment, feeling he had arrived at the wrong time or place.

“And you might be?”

The voice was that of a Phibian sitting at the head of the table. Her fine skin of bluish-green scales glistened as she leaned into the light. A bone ridge sat atop her head like a crescent crown. Some believed the ridge was used to communicate under water; in reality, it was a genetically-evolved medium that amplified their telepathic powers. Her clothes revealed her calling. There were three sects of Lightriders: Wizzen, the scientists and magicians; Protectors of the Infinite Light, the crusader-warriors; and Élan, the theologians and mystics. This Phibian wore the black shimmering cassock and golden collar of an Élan priestess.

Jonas realized that all eyes were on him. “I am looking for the graduate orientation seminar.”

“Then fortune and your good sense of direction has guided you to the right place. Join us, young Lightrider.” The Phibian managed Humaine lingo well, considering her species difficulty in forming certain consonants. She motioned him into the room with a graceful wave of her webbed hands, then placed them ceremoniously on either side of a PCA on the table.

“Forgive me if I’m late,” Jonas said, as he sank into the nearest chair.

“Not at all. In truth, you are right on time,” she replied. “To know each other is to live life and grow. Shall we introduce

ourselves? You first, young Lightrider.”

Jonas swallowed hard and fidgeted with his armrests, trying to sink further in the chair. He was afraid that if he spoke, his head might explode. He was not ready for this moment.

The Phibian sensed his hesitancy and interceded. “Ah! First-day jitters? Well, then I will have the honor to make the first introduction. I am Samsun 9010, counselor to this post-grad group. I am Phibian —” she paused expectantly, gauging everyone’s reaction, “but unlike my T’Ritan cousins, my secretions are not venomous — which I know you will be glad to hear.”

The students laughed nervously.

Phibians originated on the water worlds of the TehWahTe’ region. Samsun’s “9010” designation meant that she lived ninety percent of the time in an oxygen-based atmosphere and ten percent under water. Jonas surmised her parents must have selectively bred their child, as most Phibians were closer to 50/50.

“I have the honor to live life as an Élan of the Lightriders,” Samsun continued. “And blessed to be a counselor at the College of Expressions in the School of Languages — written, spoken, implied and telepathic. Yes, I am a telepath, second order. However, it would be a violation of the Rules of RITE to probe your minds without your consent. I am not here as your instructor in the normal sense. You have graduated from your respective schools; your knowledge has been tested. However, knowledge itself is not power. Wisdom is — all the power you can imagine. I am here to help you find that wisdom. Spiritually and emotionally. Look to me as you would a mentor — like *Wizzen B’Obadine Pelucidor*.”

Jonas was stunned to hear that name in his head. He glanced furtively about the room seeing that the other students appeared similarly affected, as if each had heard the name of someone close, someone only they knew and trusted.

“Now, it would be an honor to have each of you introduce yourselves,” Samsun spoke aloud, slightly bowing her head.

The student sitting directly across the table spoke first. Ankara Aldabak sat at attention in his WAM fatigues as he announced himself with the typical arrogance of a R’Horne. He touted his graduation from the School of Wands, Armaments, and Machines as if wielding a weapon. The long ridge of bone that

curved from his nostrils and around his ears reminded Jonas of a wild animal with a bad attitude. There would be no real friendship here.

Seanne Maratu introduced herself next, pronouncing her given name as *She-Ann*, and her surname with pride. She was a botanist and graduate of the College of Science, School of Physical Sciences (the Physics and Chemistry of nonliving things). She spoke with a gentle clarity, which Jonas found charming, as she touted her clan’s reputation for innovative healing potions. Her colorful, beaded dress rustled as she moved. She was striking for a New Mauritian. Her golden skin was a graceful canvas of tattoos in an especially delicate style, as if each had been hand-painted with fine copper and silver. She bore only a few markings of her clan; with most of her life still ahead of her, much of her skin remained blank. Only the exotic dagger hanging from her belt was a visible reminder of her warrior lineage.

Next, was Kristian of Oudenaarde, an apprentice Lightrider. At first glance, he appeared to be an Altarian, though he had an unfinished look about him. His face was featureless with thin lips and no facial hair or eyebrows, which made his feline-like eyes appear even larger. His short fleecy locks were combed back, and combined with the flair to his ears, gave his head a sleek look. Kristian was a member of a genetically-evolved species known as New Altarians. They shared the same detached demeanor as their genetic cousins, which was often mistaken as aloofness. In reality, they were believers in the Rules of RITE and would never intend the slightest disrespect. This was Jonas’ first meeting with a New Altarian — and a Lightrider at that.

Kristian introduced himself simply by speaking his name and said nothing more — it brought the room to total silence.

“Welcome Kristian of Oudenaarde,” Samsun said to break the silence, then turned smoothly to the next student. “Please continue.”

Mamen A’Complie was a Humaine mutant and the palest person Jonas had ever seen. The albino had six fingers on each hand, with bright eyes and unkempt orange hair that gave him a slightly comical air. He introduced himself as a graduate from the College of Powers, the School of Magnetic and Cosmic Influences. Jonas frowned inwardly. His last encounter with someone from

there was Malvere of the Maje, who proved to be a vile shape-shifter. Nevertheless, Mamen was a kindred Humaine and deserved Jonas’ friendship.

As the other students took their turn around the table, Jonas had time to think. He did not fear that he would recover from his wounds, or if his memory would fully return; nor if his life would be the same again when he returned the Academia. He feared being *different*, outcast by his peers and somehow marked. Now that he was here, they seemed much like him, each in their own way. Young, energetic, passionate about their heritage and schooling, and hopeful about the future. Perhaps it would not be so bad after all, he mused.

Then it was Jonas’ turn. He leaned forward in his seat. His words hung in his throat. “I am apprentice Lightrider Jonas Goodwill. I am here because, like my father, I want to become a Protector of the Infinite Light. Although, well, I haven’t formally declared my vocation —”

He stuttered to a halt. He could see the light of recognition appear on a number of faces.

“*You’re* the one,” Aldabak exclaimed.

“I’ve heard of you, too.” Mamen leaned across the table as if studying someone under a microscope.

Jonas suddenly felt extremely self-conscious.

— 2 —

Jonas sat at a table in the study hall with Shane, watching drops of water stream down his arm as if studying a lab experiment. The rivulets followed the contour of his wrist before settling into a shallow pool in the palm of his hand. He contemplated the water glass in his other hand before setting it down hard on the table. If the liquid would have made him invisible, he would have poured it over his head.

“You knew this might happen, Jonas,” Shane said, sitting patiently across from him. “With all the talk about you, it was likely someone would recognize your name. Son of a famous Protector of the Light...hero of the Battle for *Geos-P’X*...slayer of a Kha’Melon...”

“And freak!” Jonas spat. He turned his hand over abruptly and smacked it against the tabletop. It made a short wet sound. He glared at the back of his hand. His fingers tingled and warmed as the liquid evaporated.

Shane glanced about the study hall, concerned other students might have been disturbed by the outburst. The room was long and low, divided into a number of study and social areas by translucent panels that glowed with data streaming from the Academia’s Knowledge Bank to the study terminals. As everyone seemed buried in his or her own studies, Shane returned his attention to his friend.

“You know that’s not true—” the Altarian began.

“True *what*?” Jonas snarled, leaning across the table. The

reference was obvious to him.

Shane looked perplexed by the questions. His eyes widened even more than usual.

*“True Light* — isn’t that what you were going to say? That’s what my father left me. A vague legacy and a cryptic mantra: ‘From here, it all begins, From here, it all ends’. Whatever *that* means. I feel less like a hero and more like a freak—” Jonas cried, then paused. He gave Shane an apologetic look and stood, edging his chair back with his legs. “Forgive me, my friend. I’m not angry at you. It’s me. It was bad enough I had to endure the scrutiny of the USB Council...”

“They awarded you the Order of the Spectra,” Shane dutifully reminded him.

“It made *them* feel good—not me,” Jonas shrugged. “Besides, I hoped the stories would fade by the time I returned here. I just want to fit in, be my own age for a while. You know, Shane. You understand, don’t you?”

The Altarian started to reply, but Jonas could no longer contain his emotions. He turned abruptly and rushed from the room.

Jonas trudged sullenly along the corridor back toward the Commons. He hated feeling this way. Last yahren, life had been much simpler. The universe seemed so magical, so full of wonder. He only had to cope with his day-to-day life, not the destiny of billions of others. Now, having to deal with his impossible destiny seemed unfair. He hated feeling that too.

Jonas had chosen that particular study hall to meet because it and the connecting walkway were sparsely used. Yet, as he walked along, something nagged at the short hairs on his neck. He could sense the vibration of footsteps on the deck, a change in the spectra, subtle reflections on the walls. His face felt flushed, as if the temperature and air pressure were rising. Whether it was due to his Lightrider training or his genetically-evolved senses, did not matter. He sensed ... a presence.

Abruptly, he stopped and turned. At first, he saw nothing out of the ordinary: a few students and instructors walking and talking, oblivious to the celebrity in their midst. He told himself he was experiencing FEAR — False Evidence Appearing Real.

Perhaps his paranoia was playing tricks on him, he thought. *No one cares about me here. I’m just another student. There are no assassins, no Kr’ill, no Kha’Melons. No one is following me.*

Then, much to his surprise, he recognized Mamen A’Complie and Seanne Maratu walking towards him. He sighed in relief. He had sensed their approach, and there was nothing sinister about it.

“Ah, Jonas! We thought that was you,” Mamen exclaimed.

“*Opakapaka*,” Seanne greeted in New Mauritian. She had traded her beaded dress for the olive-green fatigues worn by many botanists. Her short, spiky hair glistened with crystal dust like distant stars.

“*Opakapaka*,” Jonas answered, feigning a thin smile. “I hope I didn’t offend anyone by leaving class early. I’ve been away for a while —”

“Think nothing of it,” Mamen replied. “We’ve all heard the stories...”

“—Amazing stories,” interjected Seanne. “Some of us got talking. We were afraid we had offended you. The Rules of RITE do not permit such disrespect. We wanted to apologize—”

Jonas was taken aback. “Offend me? No, not at all. It’s just that I’ve been the subject of too much attention. If one more person ever asks me what it felt like to fight a Kha’Melon ... well ... I just want to be with others who don’t know — or care who I am.”

“My father once told me that the mark of a good warrior is to know when to be valiant and when to be humble,” Seanne said admiringly, then shrugged. “Except in times of battle, of course.”

“Jonas, you *are* somebody,” Mamen said earnestly. “You’re the only other Humaine in my graduate group — Humaines are becoming a minority here, if you haven’t noticed. We have to stick together.”

Jonas was at a loss for words. Perhaps life wouldn’t be so bad here, he told himself. Nevertheless, he still had an uneasy feeling in his gut as he walked back to the Commons with his newfound friends. But he had no idea why.

— 3 —

B’Obadine Pelucidor awoke to a new kind of hell. He was shrouded in darkness and suspended by both arms. The only light was from the energy cuffs that bound his wrists over his head. He strained to see if he was tied to a rafter or to nothing at all, but the movement sent pain through his arm sockets and shoulders. Nausea swept over him that he was unable to wish away. Whatever potion Lutha had given him, left his mind dazed and unable to perform a proper spell. His bedclothes were gone, but the nakedness he felt was that of vulnerability.

He had never felt so defenseless before.

His eyes began to adjust to the dim light of his surroundings: a large roughly-carved cavern with small dirty-flamed torches that lit the chamber at irregular paces. Vague shapes moved about in the murk like illusive specters. The air was actually quite cold — it was B’Obadine’s blood pressure and indignity that kept a fire in his veins.

“Ah, you’re finally conscious,” the deceptively cordial voice resonated in the chamber. Its owner was unmistakable.

“Lutha, what have you done?” B’Obadine spat.

“Now, B’Obadine. We’ve been over this,” Lutha fussed. “We both have to get on with our lives — although yours may be shorter than mine. I have someone who wants to meet you. You should be honored.”

B’Obadine craned his head, trying to locate the source of the voice. Just as he thought his neck would break, he found Lutha’s silhouette standing defiantly, hands on hips. The reflection

of the torches glistened off the ridge of horns framing her face. Her eyes were masked in shadows.

"Let me introduce ... Magnog," she said, turning to someone next to her.

The physician strained to see "Magnog," but there appeared to be no one there. At best, the space next to the R'Horne glowed, as if the air itself was angry and ready to ignite. The shape — if there was one — was too large to be another person. A Kha'Melon? Unlikely. Shape-shifters always kept some form, even if it were little more than a gaseous state. They were never invisible.

"That's all right, B'Obadine," Lutha said. "Your eyes do not deceive you. Our host, if I may call Magnog that, travels between the metaphysical planes. Magnog is an inquisitor with unique powers of persuasion. It has questions for you. Questions I suggest you answer quickly and truthfully. You are a truthful person, are you not, B'Obadine?"

The physician considered her question absurd and not worthy of answer. Then he began to tremble with apprehension as the meaning of her words sank in. He was no hero when it came to torture.

Lutha stepped into the light of a torch. Her eyes blazoned. She called out, almost gleefully. "Magnog, you should introduce yourself."

As if on queue, the air shimmered and ignited in flame, coming alive in the most impossible shape, if only for an instant. Then the blur of nothingness moved toward the physician. Its footsteps left deep molten impressions in the floor. A monstrous voice spoke as if born in the depths of hell. "B'Obadine Pelucidor. Physician to the Humaine, Jonas Goodwill. You will tell me what I want to know. Answer my questions and those of my master, or you will know my wrath."

Before the echo of the creature's words faded, a claw appeared like liquid flame, and raked across B'Obadine's body. He had never felt such intense pain. It was as if his torso was on fire. Every organ in his chest burned for release. Then he mercifully collapsed into unconsciousness.

When B'Obadine awoke again, he was being propelled

through space at mind-numbing speeds. Stars flew past him like flickering insects . Beyond the hellish chamber and its invisible tormentor, beyond planets and solar systems, beyond the constellations of the C'Hamarande, and beyond the farthest outposts of the protectorate of the Lightriders themselves. Everything seemed surreal, yet the forces tugging at his body felt real and palpable. He was still outstretched, but it was only the result of the way he had lost consciousness and not due to his former restraints. He waved his gaunt hand before his eyes to validate his freedom.

B'Obadine was accustomed to lightship travel, but this sensation was more akin to an out-of-body experience. A gaping crimson maw appeared, a whirlpool of cosmic matter unlike anything he had ever seen before. He struggled to alter his course, but it was useless. He was drawn relentlessly into its horrific vortex like a wretched insect to a trap. The light radiating from its core was blinding, yet oddly compelling. He shielded his eyes, hoping this would end.

Suddenly, the sensation of motion ceased. The air cooled; the light dimmed. B'Obadine felt neither hot nor cold. There was no odor, no smell of anything. In fact, he found that he was barely breathing at all.

A ruddy light flooded into his eyes. Four obelisks, carved with ornate alien glyphs, materialized around him. He was standing on a rough crystalline surface that radiated an ugly crimson glow. Something seemed to be moving restlessly beneath the surface, stirring like a caged animal. The horizon curved and dropped sharply away, which led B'Obadine to surmise that he was imprisoned on a large crystal sphere or small moon. Its surface was littered with ruins and debris, strewn about like the broken playthings of a giant child. In the distance, through the soupy atmosphere, a seamless surface of wall and ceiling teemed with crude dwellings and a sea of creatures that moved about with indecipherable purpose. They were extraordinarily frail with haunting faces of blue skin stretched over bare skull. Revulsion stuck in B'Obadine's throat as he realized they were walking on a carpet of bodies and bones.

*Kr'ill! Thousands of Kr'ill! Mindless mercenaries of the Demon of Vulpecula. The Vulpecula Anomaly? That was*

*impossible!* he thought. In the fastest lightship, it would have taken yahren to travel such an absurd distance.

Out of the corner of his eye, B’Obadine saw Lutha Radwaste leaning nonchalantly against one of the obelisks. At the sight of the R’Horne, the physician became enraged. He charged at her without thinking, running through the hologram of her body and into a restraint barrier, which stopped him cold. He hovered and flailed for a moment before regaining his feet and he hoped, his dignity.

Lutha shook her head at him.

“B’O! I’m surprised. You don’t really believe we’re here, halfway across the galaxy, do you?” Lutha chuckled and snorted at the same time, as she waved her claw accusingly at him. “Vulpecula is far too hostile for either of our species. This is an astral projection, just for you. You’re still the guest of Magnog.”

B’Obadine’s heart sunk. Astral projections were black magic, tools of evil. They defied light and the integrity of the sentient spirit. This was worse than being out of body, it was — *unnatural*. The obelisks were some kind of receiver/transmitter, like a lightvid. He finally understood what Jonas had said about immoral forces being at work against him. Ironically, B’Obadine’s recalled once saying that there was no evil left in the C’Hamarande because the Lightriders had eliminated it.

He was obviously wrong.

Before B’Obadine could dwell further on his misery, he saw the demon. It stood less than fifty paces away on a pile of rubble. Its body glistened in the fiery crimson light of the crystal beneath its feet. It was grotesquely muscular with a mottled skin stretched over bone and joint. Its wings were liquid flames that singed the murky atmosphere. It stood on four powerful legs that bent in different directions with cloven hooves as large as the physician’s head. The demon contemplated a broken, dripping wet skull it held in its claw. It glanced over at the physician through a quartet of eye slits.

“Magnificent, are we not?” the demon asked with a voice that rasped in B’Obadine’s mind. “We are Lord of all we survey. Including creatures like this one, born to serve us, Pelucidor — as you will. It is only a matter of time. As *all* will, ultimately, serve the Absolute Darkness.”

B'Obadine could not believe this horrific creature was addressing him as if they were sitting comfortably on the second floor balcony of his home, trying to engage in polite conversation. He looked to Lutha with questioning eyes, but she had vanished.

"Now take this young ward of yours, Jonas Goodwill," the demon continued as it strode across the exterior of the crystal. "He believes otherwise. So did his father and the Lightriders. They value other things. Hurtful things."

B'Obadine flinched as the energy field around him crackled. He felt as if he was in a cosmic fishbowl, protected only by the black magic of the obelisks. He reached out tentatively to touch the invisible shield, which immediately stung his fingertips. He winced and stuck his fingers in his parched mouth, trying to cool them. With his other hand, he reached out to grasp an obelisk. His fingers passed harmlessly though the rock.

*Some astral projection!* He could feel pain, but not solid objects. He stared at both hands trying to understand what was happening to him.

"Don't hurt yourself, physician."

B'Obadine looked up to discover the demon had moved closer. He trembled at its proximity, not knowing if his next breath would be his last.

"It has been difficult here, this last millennia. No one enters or leaves Vulpecula of their own volition. Except for some of our servants. The lucky ones, deemed worthy to carry out our will," the demon said with disdain. "Free to roam the universe, while we are trapped here. Hardly fair, would you agree?"

B'Obadine could not imagine how to answer the demon.

"That ward of yours is not who you think," the demon continued. "Do you know he has killed — murdered — many of our subjects? They were only acting on our behalf, performing innocent tasks. We care for all our subjects. We give them warmth in the heart of Vulpecula, and comfort in the embrace of the Absolute Darkness. We are worshiped on many worlds by many races. A well-deserved tribute to our infinite ... versatility. Yet, we have been imprisoned here since before your kind can remember."

The demon peered out from behind an obelisk almost playfully as it spoke. "Do you think that fair, to imprison someone when you do not know why?"

“No?” B’Obadine blurted out. He cursed himself. He could not believe what he had just said. The demon’s rationale was strangely hypnotic.

“Of course not,” the demon gestured broadly in agreement. “Yet we remain trapped here! You could help us find some...comfort. A little conversation. Yes, a few words just like this with your good friend, Jonas Goodwill. That is not asking so much.”

B’Obadine found it increasingly difficult to shake off the demon’s hypnotic influence. His eyes grew heavy, his limbs weak.

“A simple thing. That is all we ask. Then we will show you the future of the universe.” The demon’s chilling voice rose as it began to chant, running a deadly-sharp claw along the carvings in the column.

The chamber began to spin around B’Obadine, slowly at first, then faster as currents of energy swirled between the obelisks in furious eddies. The demon’s voice sounded increasingly reassuring and trustworthy; its words were oddly not without merit to the physician.

*How could he refuse such a simple request?*

“Tell us, physician, where we can find Jonas Goodwill. Just to speak with him, you understand. Nothing more.” The Lord of Vulpecula stretched its fiery wings, illuminating the air.

In his heart, B’Obadine knew this demon. Humaines and others called it by many fearful names. Jonas had called it the Demon Wielder. He said it was responsible for the murder of his father and B’Obadine’s former student, Dav’d Goodwill.

In the midst of his anguish, for the first time, the physician became frightened for his life.

— 4 —

“What do you see, Goodwill?” the voice asked in a whisper.

“White. Everything is white.”

“Are you sure?”

Jonas squinted, craning his neck around in search of a horizon. Beyond the tip of his nose, he saw nothing. “Yes,” he replied more confidently.

After a long moment, the whisper asked, “And now?”

Before Jonas could reply, a flurry of light and dark matter appeared in the distance, swirling with frantic abandon. As it grew closer, the particles blossomed into colorful wisps of pollen and floated on the ether, like rivers of thought. They merged into a sea of pastel, pulsating with waves of electromagnetic energy. Jonas did not see it in the visible or infrared spectrum, yet he knew it was there.

“There...is something...” Jonas offered, reaching out tentatively with his hand. But the images were either beyond his reach or born of his imagination.

“Yes?” came the whisperer.

The particles darkened, still spinning, more frenzied now. Storm clouds appeared overhead, sullen and heavy. Rain began to fall. Not a light drizzle that fell fresh on the cheek, but large faceted droplets that fell towards him like wicked daggers. And at great speed. They grew larger, more threatening.

“Is this real? I...I don’t understand,” he cried. His body tensed, anticipating the potentially lethal downpour.

“Understand what?” the whisper asked. Though it was alien, it was decidedly female.

Before Jonas could answer, the daggers melted away and splashed lightly into the waters of a tranquil lake. Steamy mists wafted through a tall grove of trees along a shoreline and out over the calm waters. Jonas found himself sitting in a long canoe of bleached woods. It had no sail, but moved lazily along with purpose, barely breaking the plane of the surface. The prow was wrapped in brightly colored scarves that hung over the bow and licked the waters. Jonas found the sound of water against the bow soothing. A sense of peace washed over him, as the fresh smell of the forest curled in his nostrils.

“Understand what?” the voice asked again.

Jonas looked at the front of the canoe to find Samsun 9010 sitting there in a contemplative position, watching him. The Phibian wore her customary cassock and a broad green scarf with square eyeholes over her face. The gills in her neck quivered slowly, almost hypnotically, just above her golden collar. She reached behind Jonas, took a long multicolored scarf from the prow and draped it over her shoulders. It bore the religious symbols of an Élan Priestess.

Jonas stirred in his seat, increasingly uncomfortable. The séance had started innocently enough. He had sought the counsel of an Élan ever since Hathsid and the Kha’Melon had revealed their allegiance to someone called the Demon Wielder. They both claimed to have acted on its orders to kill him and his father. At the time, Jonas found their claims insane. He could not imagine why anyone would want him dead. Since then, he realized that irregardless of his opinion, he was marked for death.

The boat seemed to have a mind of its own, swerving to deftly avoid an outcropping of rock along the shoreline and continue its journey downstream. Beyond the tall trees and thick evergreen stood a range of proud snow-capped mountains.

“I don’t understand what I’m seeing,” Jonas said, growing annoyed.

“You see what you want to see. Things that have happened; things that have not,” Samsun replied. “The mind is a wondrously creative machine. Its inventions are not bound by science, or gravity, or light, or even logic. It stores what it assimilates, and

offers endless combinations to suit your imagination.” She leaned forward, almost touching Jonas. “Now there is something that truly defines a sentient creature: imagination. The ability to form images and ideas in your mind, even if you’ve never experienced that notion directly.”

Jonas pondered her words. “Yes, but what about soothsayers? There are those with the power to foresee the future, like Grand Wizen Magellan of Proponus. He is a great Seer of truths. He’s not just imagining things, is he?”

“No, Jonas. Magellan and others like him have genetically-evolved powers, gifts from the Infinite Light. He has learned to use them wisely to separate truth from fiction. To some degree, I imagine he might feel rather cursed,” Samsun said. “As a seeker of the truth, perhaps he lacks the ability to dream of impossible things. No imagination, such as you and I possess. All he can see is...stark reality. To some, that might seem like a curse, don’t you think?”

Jonas’ eyes widened as he considered this carefully. “I find it hard to imagine someone who can’t ... imagine,” he replied, tasting the irony of his words. He envied Magellan’s incredible powers, being able to use the Orb of Tlaquepaq as a magical medium. He knew if he had such powers, he would not be here seeking answers to impossible questions. He would simply will the Orb to search the currents of time, and find anything he wanted to know. He would discover who ultimately ordered the death of his father, what role the Demon Wielder played, and answer the riddle of his father’s words. Lastly, there was this legacy of the True Light. Something Jonas felt, not in his head, but in his soul.

“Wizen Samsun,” Jonas said, gathering his thoughts. “Élan are known to be more than religious theologians or shamans. Your sect studies the teachings of the great historians such as Zhan the Élan. He had a profound understanding of historical events and how they influenced each other. Events of the Infinite Light. And perhaps of the Demon Wielder,” Jonas said almost in a whisper.

Samsun’s eyes narrowed. She bowed her head slightly, her crown of cilia vibrated with almost imperceptible speed. She gave him the most curious look, one that defied interpretation.

The surreal mountain lake scene flickered like a badly-tuned lightvid, then melted away until only a barely-furnished

chamber remained. Jonas was back where he had begun, sitting on the padded floor a few paces from the Élan priestess. The air felt cold, as if the mists from the mountain lake had lingered in the room. Jonas shook off the sensation — it was only his fear of discussing the Demon Wielder. He had not told Samsun that was the real reason for his visit. He had only said that he needed help focusing his psychic powers of perception. Not a lie, just an omission.

*“A pretty obvious omission, Goodwill,”* Samsun thought.

Jonas was startled by the voice in his mind. It was as subtle as the Élan’s spoken word, but it carried greater impact. He had fooled no one, but himself.

“I meant no deception,” Jonas said apologetically.

“I know,” Samsun said aloud as she climbed to her feet. She walked to the far wall where a pair of eyeshades hung by a doorway. She donned them and waved her webbed hand. A panel slid open and the bright light of M’rrr poured into the room.

“Walk with me, Jonas.”

Jonas stood, and stepped awkwardly over the floor cushions. He donned his favorite bronze eyeshades, a gift from Femke Hu that he treasured dearly, then ventured onto a narrow balcony atop a spire at the College of Beliefs.

Below, he could see the graceful arch of Academa Ring and the stately row of structures that compromised the twelve schools of the Academa. Each consisted of a Grand Hall surrounded by clusters of structures that clung to it like insecure children. Colorful gardens and walkways connected each of the colleges. At this height, pedestrians looked more like scurrying insects than students and faculty. Below the Ring, the eternal fires of M’rrr provided endless illumination and energy, and some said, a bright hope for the future.

The Capital Ring and its fabled city of golden-mirrored buildings hung in space on a tangent to Academa Ring, causing it to appear more like the bold sliver of a golden moon than an artificial satellite. For a fleeting moment, Jonas wondered why people didn’t call it the Capital “arch” or the Academa “ellipse” — for that is what the Rings were at this stage of construction. The term had a decidedly less gracious sound in his head, less befitting such a wondrous creation.

“Ring” sounded more ... purposeful.

The Capital Ring had grown to almost twenty degrees of arc over the last five hundred yahren, while the Academia Ring barely spanned ten, with no estimate for completion. The Rings of M’rrr was a grand project begun by the early Lightriders. As the Protectorate of United Sentient Beings grew, so did immigration to Capital Ring. Presidents, kings and warlords arrived to establish their embassies, often with huge entourages. They joined the USB Council, which in turn, attracted more wealth, influence and power; and in turn, even more people. It never ended.

Samsun was privileged to have quarters — or a sanctum as she called it — on an upper level with access to a balcony. Jonas surmised it was shared by others of her calling. Many Élan were spiritual reclusives, while others traveled the stars and preached the truth of the Infinite Light. Most Élan who call the Rings of M’rrr “home” lived in the Lightrider compound on Capital Ring, however Samsun 9010 had chosen to live among her colleagues.

The Élan Priestess walked slowly, gripping the inner railing firmly in her webbed hand. Her step seemed uncertain as if the height intimidated the Phibian, yet she had chosen to walk the balcony anyway. Jonas tried to keep pace alongside her, but the walkway was too narrow to accommodate both of them side-by-side, so he walked along the outside rail. He could feel the current of the protective forcefield in the hairs on his arm, so he leaned in.

Finally Samsun spoke. “I know why you are here, Jonas, and I am honored you chose me. The Demon Wielder is no legend, even though we have no firm evidence of its existence. Just as we have no proof that evil is a living entity, we believe in the existence of the Absolute Darkness. Just as surely as we believe that Light is the greatest power in the universe and that the Infinite Light manifests itself as warmth, energy and life. Therefore, we must equally assume that evil really exists in its purest form, as well. In our humble existence as sentient beings, we have come to terms with the concept of good and evil. Élan believe that the Lightriders and Protectors of the Infinite Light keep evil at bay. In an eternal balance of power.”

Jonas nodded, but said nothing. He did not want to miss a syllable. He leaned in further until he was virtually tugging on the long sleeve of her flowing cassock, as she spoke again.

“The Demon Wielder is the oldest servant of the Absolute Darkness, even before recorded history. It has never been seen by anyone directly. Only through its demonic manifestations as it appears to the weak-minded, have we learned of its existence. There are stories of temples on the Moons of Bakshti where rites of sacrifice were performed by the Sha’Ken. The demon appeared to them as...”

“Zahra Dolodun,” Jonas interjected.

Samsun nodded solemnly. “The Sha’Ken blame Zahra Dolodun for all their misfortunes, including their nomadic existence. Supposedly, it chased them from their own worlds into the uncharted territories of the Ratanots. Then, they vehemently denied that such a demon existed at all. Other races speak of the demon, Katchighouli, as if the mere mention of its name will bring eternal damnation raining down on their heads. I’ve heard of similar ravings from the Kr’ill. They speak of the demon of *Vulpecula* as if they had met it personally.”

Jonas shuddered. He knew the Kr’ill well. *Senseless killers and assassins — all of them*, he cursed to himself. They had attacked him and his father aboard *Geos-P’X*, then again on K-Nadu, M’Terrene, and finally back aboard the space station where he finally avenged his father’s murderer. Jonas saw no purpose for the Kr’ill as a species.

Then he realized that Samsun was still speaking.

“The Demon Wielder is all of these manifestations—or infestations if you will. The most devious servant of the Absolute Darkness, it seeks to destroy the Lightriders and end the reign of the Infinite Light, as if such a thing were possible,” the Élan scoffed. “Legend has it that the Demon is in hiding, awaiting some moment in history to make its reappearance. No one knows where, no one knows when. Except that its strength continues to grow.”

“But why is it hiding? Why doesn’t it simply appear if it is all that powerful?” Jonas asked. “Certainly if it is everything you say, it must have a physical hiding place, or refuge.”

Samsun turned and looked at Jonas with narrowing eyes. “This consumes you, Goodwill. It will interfere with your studies and your future. Why not give it up?”

“Because I believe the Demon Wielder is ultimately responsible for the death of my father, and will be the death of

many more if I am unable to prevent it. I did not seek this destiny — it sought me. I must find the demon and end its madness. So, I must know where it lives.”

Samsun placed her webbed hand on Goodwill’s chest and spoke solemnly, “I thought it was obvious, Jonas. The demon lives in the heart of your greatest fears.”

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