

K e n t a s h

Schott



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DEDICATION

For the Lions, Tigers and Bears

PROLOGUE

This book is not about myths or legends. It is not about interpretations, but events. Every event recorded actually happened. Whether a particular event is important, relevant or symbolic—that is for the reader to judge. And yet, no book could be deemed truly factual or objective. Every author has his or her bias, just as the world is different through every keyhole. Therefore, there may be sections in this book you find strange, dubious or incredible. However, there is something you can be certain of. Behind every word, every statement, every inclusion and omission, there is one thing always present: purpose. Perhaps, in trying to understand its purpose, truth will be yours.

SCHOTT

1 THE HARDEST PATH

"To lose the will to live is the greatest tragedy that can occur to any kentash."
—Quelen, Former Alkaz Science Officer-in-chief, 1023 AC

Trinda watched the embryo through the viewer of the incubator. It looked so small and insignificant. She sighed at the thought that this embryo represented thousands of days of research, spread over countless fields; from Phase theory to Iafora coding. She was exhausted and could not bear another failure. There had been 407 failures so far. The Hermandryced had somehow obtained the Mode Iafora but it had not helped. Every single one of them died—no, failed. They were not to assign them the same qualities as a human. They could not die. Even when they reached maturity, they were still only kentari—mindless and expendable.

Except for this one. Madras had insisted that the only way they could make the desired modifications was to use the Mode, untouched. Only compatible mods would be included. The military had balked at this but Madras had been adamant. Having a biological self-destruct—among other idiocies—was simply not feasible. The stabilising elements that prevented accidental detonations were themselves unstable, and while they prevented the kentari embryo from exploding, they also killed it before reaching maturity.

When Madras had his first victory, the rest came easier. He replaced entire sections of the modified segments with Mode Iafora. He made modifications of his own, but they were always cautious

changes. “Respectful,” he called them. While he was a Seln scientist, he still believed in the old god, however ridiculous it seemed to his colleagues. But this ‘respectfulness’ made him less arrogant and thus his experiments were nearly always successful. He approached the Mode as he believed it to be: flawless.

Seln scientists had always believed people were weak because their Iafora was not quite right. “A few design flaws,” they joked, referring to the old god with relish. But when Madras became the first scientist to *ever* create a Crushnah that survived, they were silenced.

The military had long desired to increase the capabilities of the kentari to more than just cannon fodder. The kentari were not a race. The name itself was not Seln. It was Nephilim. The Seln certainly did not believe that the kentari were human but the name was used during the early years, when the Council of Raderan was still in place. The Nephilim had insisted that the creatures the Seln created were not used for war and that although they were not human, they should be recognised as sentient beings and thus kentash. The Seln agreed, merely to appease the Nephilim. But when the Council was disbanded, the name stuck. However, it was only a name. The kentari were less than animals to the Seln. They were merely biological weapons, to be used and discarded.

But the military wanted more. The kentari they created were savage, but their methods were crude and they could not be taught complex tactics. The military demanded better.

And so we've made better, Trinda thought, *or rather Madras has. But what will it be?* she wondered.

Madras had told them what to expect. But she did not believe him.

“He will not be like what you’re used to. He is made from the Mode. That means he will think. A lot. He will surpass common kentari within the month and he will surpass you within the year. Don’t laugh. I am quite serious.”

“But how can you know that? You have totally removed our neural upgrade sequences? He might make a decent politician, but...”
Laughter.

“You laugh at this idea. But you will see. And he will be the strongest kentash ever born—by far.”

“Now we know you’ve lost your sanity, Madras. You cannot obtain more energy than what is taken in by the kentash. We’ve tried

additional storage and you know where that ended. A big puddle on the floor.” More laughter.

“You do not understand.”

And when Trinda was at the inception, she understood.

“We’re almost there, bring me the forceps.”

“This thing is huge! Who in Salen’s name made this?!”

“Never mind that. We have to get it out. It’s going to die if we’re not fast enough.”

A heaving blue mass covered in helio gel rolled onto the floor from the gestation sac. The attending doctor immediately tried to roll it over but was unable to move it on his own. Trinda scowled at the nurse and pushed her aside roughly. With her help, they were only barely able to move the creature. It coughed and helio gel erupted from its mouth. Trinda half expected a cry to come from the creature. The doctor tried to roll him again.

“Please.”

Everyone froze.

“Di... Did it speak?” No-one answered. The creature went into a fit of coughing, then settled into laboured breathing.

Suddenly it pushed against the floor and stood. It easily reached the ceiling. The nurse whimpered involuntarily and the doctor stood frozen, mouth slightly agape. The creature blinked with its outer lids. Its eyes were completely black.

“Hello.” The voice resounded in the room. None dared to respond. The creature frowned and the nurse screamed and ran out of the room, overturning the instrument tray as she ran. Instruments flew onto the floor in a cacophony of metal on rock. The doctor did not move.

The creature turned to Trinda. “Hello.”

Trinda could not speak. Fear and awe gripped her throat and her knees trembled.

The dark eyes pierced her.

“Do you speak?” The voice was genuinely curious.

“Y... Yes I speak. But how...” Her voice died as she saw the creature swell as it breathed in. It exhaled, and all she could hear was her own heart pounding; a hammer against an anvil.

The creature tilted its head. “Yes?”

But before Trinda could open her mouth, Madras burst in. He stopped dead at the sight of the immense being. Madras' eyes opened wide but Trinda saw it was not fear. He was smiling.

"Hello, Pyron."

The giant actually smiled. "Hello. Do I know you?"

"Good morning, David."

"Good morning, Mr Olsen."

Mr Olsen's glasses flashed as a beam of sunlight reflecting from his office window ran through them. David blinked and smiled.

"Sir, I came to drop off my assignment. I apologise for it being late but I..."

Mr Olsen interrupted, "It's alright, David. Your father called me and explained everything. Your assignment won't have marks deducted."

David hesitated before speaking again.

"Mr Olsen?"

The teacher looked up from his papers.

David was never quite sure how to read his History teacher. With some people, he could sense what they were like by just looking at their faces. Mr Olsen's face was a blank page.

"Do you remember how I once asked about that book on the history of Razor Ridge? How you mentioned that if I was serious about it you would lend it to me?"

Mr Olsen's eyes sharpened almost imperceptibly.

"Yes?"

David breathed in and continued. "Well, I went to the State Library last Sunday with my father and I looked up the geological survey maps. I took copies of the maps of Razor Ridge and I mailed them to Kenneth University where a professor in geology examined them."

Mr Olsen looked at David closely. "A professor helped you?" he asked, his voice suggesting incredulity.

David spoke up quickly. "My dad used to know him."

"And?"

"He said the fault lines correspond with the mountain ranges on this side of the state."

Mr Olsen's eye sharpened a fraction more.

"As would be expected..."

David interrupted, "Except for Langrove Mountain Range."

Mr Olsen stopped short. “He said that?”

“Yes. But he was going to consult with one of his colleagues to make sure.”

“Oh. Well, we’ll have to wait then.” His gaze wandered to a picture over the doorframe.

“Mr Olsen?”

“Yes, David?”

“There was something else.”

The teacher turned again towards the boy.

“The professor also analysed a sample of the rock that forms the Cathedral. He said the rock was not the same as that of the mountain range.”

A twinge passed through Mr Olsen’s body. “How did the professor get a rock sample from the cathedral?” he asked.

“I got it and sent it to him.”

Mr Olsen scrutinised the small figure whose left arm hung lifeless by his side. Even if he had managed to somehow make it over the lake, he doubted that any child would dare venture to the cathedral alone.

The Stone Cathedral was the name given to a rock formation on the main island of Granite Lake. Granite Lake was a peculiarity. It had currents, fed by subterranean springs. The State Geological Survey Team had only recently discovered the springs while they were mapping the Langrove Mountain Range. But the turbulent water had been observed for centuries and too often been attributed to the legend surrounding Granite Lake and the Stone Cathedral.

It was said that sometime during the 17th century, while Christians escaped persecution in the Old World, another people of unknown origin had likewise travelled across the ocean seeking a new beginning. These people did not worship the Christian God. Instead, they venerated a creature whose name they did not mention. But according to second-century historians who had written about this peculiar sect, the creature was known as Argashtenab. It was said that the cathedral was built in honour of their deity—a building of darkness and doom. This is an excerpt from Paul Melier’s account of his grandfather describing the legend.

But one day, God noticed these people and his anger burned against them. He watched their vile practices and suddenly commanded the elements to purge the evil that existed within their midst.

Rain and hail tore the atmosphere, while thunder and lightning pierced the eyes and deafened the ears. The worshippers laughed and scorned God. "You cannot hurt us", they taunted. "You are too weak. Our god is strong."

Suddenly, a flash of lightning struck the top of the cathedral and its roof and walls began to turn into stone. The terrified worshippers ran towards the entrance, but as they reached the vast stone doorways, they became statues, forever frozen in the very essence of the earth. The Cathedral became their tomb, as they died for their sins. Their cries could still be heard on certain nights, when the air near the Cathedral was warm and the water of the lake was turbulent. It was said that their spirits disturbed the water as they pleaded to God to release their trapped bodies, so they might have peace. For centuries, the myth was propagated from generation to generation. Even now, the story prevailed. It was told in hidden corners and dark places. Whispers were exchanged in the night by the people of the town, as if trying not to be heard by the spirits of the Cathedral. The town folk seldom ventured there, and the lake and the Cathedral became a place of mystery and dread.

Tales from the superstitious and ignorant, thought Mr Olsen, but the lake is known to be unpredictable. The flows of water from the springs could sometimes surge and cause dangerous eddies. A few unfortunate would-be explorers once had their boats capsized by the surging waters. Hardly a cause for concern, unless you were not a strong swimmer.

"David, the lake is dangerous. You shouldn't go there. Your father told me he had forbidden you to go near Razor Ridge."

David looked down and said nothing.

"Does he know?" Mr Olsen asked.

David looked up. His face appeared troubled. "No, he doesn't know. Please don't tell him, sir. He worries enough about me as it is."

The history teacher removed his glasses. He had reservations about children wandering around the forests of Razor Ridge. Its name was not without reason. And Peter was a friend of his.

However, David had shown he was serious about the book. He removed an ancient volume from his bookcase.

"Take care of it."

Freedom. Freedom was walking through the trees in any direction. Freedom was the absence of people. Freedom was sitting on a rock, watching the lake's surface broken by air and water. The trees on the island always had the same brooding look. They were old

trees, carved over the years by growth and decay. The cathedral was even older. David only crossed when he knew it was safe. He was naturally cautious, knowing his disability was always to his disadvantage and that any accident would prove disastrous. Today, the water was calm but he knew better. Still, he enjoyed simply looking at the trees and listening to the wind. But the sun was beginning to approach the horizon. He would have to go home.

David walked past the ridge and in the distance he could see his house faintly through the late afternoon haze. He wished his father did not have to work so late, but it was futile to hope for the impossible. David's father had to provide for them and nothing in the world could change that.

Trinda closed her eyes and tried rubbing them to remain awake. They had been going for 18 hours but the kentash was still wide awake. Worse, his answers were coming quicker and their questions slower.

"So," the Atriad continued, "what would you do if you were captured?"

"I wouldn't be."

The Atriad frowned. "You are cut off from your support group, the enemy has air superiority in your area and you are now surrounded by three Coraq divisions that will be homing on your position in less than three trets! Did I forget to mention that your energy pack is drained, you are out of conventional ammunition and there is no energy source nearby?"

"Hmmm. Yes, you did mention that," Pyron grudgingly admitted.

"And?"

"Well, there is the wreckage."

The Atriad's expression changed from frustration to sheer exasperation.

"What about the wreckage?" the Atriad shouted. "What are you going to do, throw it at the incoming fighters!?"

"No," Pyron said slowly as he looked towards the ceiling, "but now that you mention it..."

The Atriad stood up explosively, tipping his chair in the process. "Is this what you call the ultimate soldier, Perdra Madras?! If it was human, I would call it a fool!" And with that, the Atriad stormed out, his staff following close behind.

When the Atriad had left, Madras began to laugh.

“Madras,” Trinda said as she turned towards the older scientist, “was it being serious?”

Madras looked at her with sadness in his eyes. “He’s right here, Trinda. Ask him.”

Trinda pursed her lips and lowered her head. She had been able to hide her true motives by pretending she held the same disdain for kentari as everyone else. But she did not discount him. She was simply afraid.

“Pyron?”

“Yes?”

“You wouldn’t really have thrown the wreckage, would you?”

“No,” Pyron admitted, “it is much too large. But a small section torn from the fuselage would have been ample.”

She scrutinised him closely. After one solid year with the creature, she could decipher his expressions almost as well as another human’s. He was serious.

“And if that had failed?”

“It would not. I would not miss.”

“No, I mean, what would you do if that was enough to stop only a few of the fighters?”

“Then I would have extracted the fusion core and thrown it at the largest ship.”

Trinda looked confused. “And the others?”

Pyron frowned but did not answer.

“He does not answer because he believes you know something he does not. But he is incorrect,” Madras said as he walked over. “It is crystal clear to him. The ship's autodef would obliterate the core, creating a phase dilation strong enough to destroy anything for several hundred perq. And if the autodef failed, the impact would cause the same result.”

“And what about him?”

Madras shrugged. “What about him? Pyron, what will happen to you?”

Pyron looked confused. “I do not understand.”

Trinda looked directly at his face. “How will you survive?”

Pyron frowned. “Once the fusion core explodes it will cause a phase dilation.”

“Yes I know that... Madras, why are you laughing?” Trinda demanded.

Madras composed himself. “Because, my dear, once the fusion core explodes, it has in effect, restarted.”

“Great gods. He will have enough energy to create a shield and fully recharge his pack.”

“Precisely.”

Trinda looked at the creature. “Is there anything that could kill him?” she asked in a small voice.

Madras craned his neck, stretching his sore muscles. “We will soon know.”

“Why don’t you look where you’re going!”

David did not respond. His books lay sprawled on the ground and Trevor stood only a metre away. Along with some of Trevor’s friends, Karina and Gale sat on the brick wall that lined the school.

“Hey, David!”

David ignored the voice and began to pick up his books. A sharp push sent him sprawling to the ground.

“Boy, you are clumsy.”

David conceded. “What do you want, Trevor?” he asked wearily.

“You dropped your books. I’ll pick them up for you.”

Trevor bent down and picked up a large, worn volume—*Razor Ridge: A Collective Journal*. Trevor’s eyes widened in delighted surprise.

“Getting a little extra credit again, are we?”

David did not even hear his voice. All he could hear was Mr Olsen’s words. Trevor was holding the book by the front cover and a small tear was beginning to show.

David spoke in a low voice. “Put the book down, Trevor. You’re ripping the cover.”

Trevor looked at David and smirked.

“Or what? You’re going to make me?”

Yes, of course. You’re twice my size and have both your arms.

“Please, Trevor, put it down.”

Trevor chuckled and pulled the cover.

Why is there never a teacher around when you need one? David thought angrily. He dropped to the ground while the others laughed, and his hand grasped a stone.

In one motion, David stood and sent the rock flying. Before Trevor could react, the stone had hit his hand and he dropped the book in shock. David did not hesitate. He grabbed the volume and ran with Trevor’s best friend in hot pursuit. David knew he could not

outrun him. He ran towards the library and crashed into the principal.

David sat quietly in one of the chairs in the principal's office. He had never been in trouble at school before. And it had been his word against theirs. To the principal, that was all that mattered.

Great. Now what? Dad will bear their story first and then... that's it. I'm done with this. And everyone else.

David looked at the door. It was open and the sky outside begged to be walked under.

The fiery ball yearned for the horizon as it reached for the mountains in the early afternoon. David walked through the fields towards the setting sun, occasionally jumping cattle fences. The school disappeared and became nothing more than a memory.

2 THE WALK OF THE DEAD

“Crushnah, this is Rarihém Flight Group Ital. Are you receiving us?”

“I am here.”

Pyron’s armour was flecked with shell impacts. His blue surface was pitted like a small moon. The cracks oozed with a mixture of blood and heliodar. He felt no pain but the last shell had gone through his shield and hit his head. He felt woozy and was having trouble with his vision.

“Are you alright? Do you need backup?”

“No,” Pyron quickly replied. “The area is still too hot. Keep the teams out. The enemy will fire soon enough.”

“Are they still shelling?”

“They’ve stopped for the moment.”

Pyron looked at the reason his shield had failed. The small creature barely moved. It was a cat. He had seen it just as the mortars had fired. He had dropped a phase shield over the creature, then hastily erected another over himself. But the energy in his pack had not sufficed to keep both shields intact. He had tapped the kinetic energy from the shell and that had saved his life—but only just.

The cat mewed pitifully. Pyron picked it up. He could tell it was hurt.

“Crushnah here. Coming back to base.”

“What’s the matter?” came the urgent reply. “Are you hurt?” They had never before seen him injured.

“Have the doctor waiting.”

An entire medical unit was dispatched to Rarihem base. Two Coraq units had also been diverted to make sure the Crushnah would be able to escape the enemy. And so, everyone was surprised when he walked calmly into the base with something small in his hands.

Pyron reached the medics and gently placed the cat on one of the tables. “Can you help it?”

The doctor spat on the ground and walked away in disgust. But one of the medics spoke up. “I will try.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you hurt?”

“My head is not right. I received a partial shell impact. I believe I have concussion.”

Another medic spoke up. “I’ll look at that.”

The rest of the team came close and helped Pyron onto his trolley. Pyron closed his eyes and fell asleep.

“A light concussion. He’ll need some rest but he should be fine in a day or so.”

“Excellent,” Madras said as he patted Pyron’s arm. Pyron smiled and closed his eyes.

The Atriad burst into the room, shouting and cursing. “*A cat!* You stopped an entire attack because of a worthless creature that you decided needed to live its miserable life a few seconds longer!!!!” Flecks of spit and foam flew from the Atriad’s mouth.

“It was hurt,” Pyron said as he frowned, “and I know that eventually the enemy will run out of shells. Until then, we can wait.”

“YOU WERE NOT MADE TO THINK!!! YOU WERE MADE TO DO AS YOU’RE TOLD YOU USELESS SCRAP OF FILTH!!!”

Pyron did not reply. He remained calm and shrugged.

Suddenly, a junior officer entered the room. He carried the cat in his hands.

“So,” the Atriad said, “this is the source of our problems!”

Before anyone in the room could believe what had happened, the Atriad had pulled his battle knife and slit the cat’s throat. Pyron’s armour immediately turned blue and hardened. The room instantly dropped in temperature and every instrument in the hospital went dead.

Pyron had not moved but the Atriad suddenly clutched his throat. He was having problems breathing. Then he disappeared.

The Atriad floated in darkness but he could sense someone near. He still could not breathe but suddenly he could see.

Pyron was engulfed in a blue aura. His voice emanated as a threat in the dark.

“Had you managed to create what you desired, you would at this moment have your matter spread through 3000 perq of wasteland. However, take this as a warning Atriadener Hikkar. You may insult, curse and abuse me. But if you *ever* hurt something under my protection again, no power on earth will be able to stop me rending you limb from limb.”

The darkness faded and the room appeared once more. The Atriad dropped to the floor, coughing and hacking. The nurse rushed to his side.

Madras looked at Pyron, but Pyron spoke first. “Do not worry. I only warned him.”

The peaks of Langrove Range were digging into the red heart of the sun. The wind was cool and the shadows were stretching out as if trying to run away from the infernal ball. The mountains were covered by the green and grey hues of leaf, light and shadow. David had always thought the mountain ranges were beautiful.

He walked along the lake’s edge and looked towards the stone cathedral peering through the trees. He yearned to go there, but it was far too late.

Suddenly he stopped. Unfamiliar noises tickled his ears: the rustling of leaves against something that moved with purpose and precision. David stood perfectly still, his heart racing. He slowly turned around and saw a mountain lion, about 50 metres from the lake’s edge. He knew he could not outrun the big cat. His only chance was the boat he often used to get to the other side of the lake. He would normally need a few minutes to get in the boat and use the pole to push against the lakebed and this was painstakingly slow.

David had to decide quickly. If he ran, he would be caught almost instantly. If he made for the boat, he just might manage.

David ran for the boat, pushed with all his strength, and then threw himself headfirst into the moving vessel. The momentum carried the boat a few metres, but the mountain lion was moving fast. David stood quickly and pushed off with the pole. The boat began to

move but the cat was running in the water now. It had almost reached the boat when suddenly the water became deep, forcing the mountain lion to swim.

When the cat was no more than two metres away, David pushed the pole against its chest. But the animal was determined and kept swimming. The boat began to move across the lake. Then the pole slipped and in a panic, David hauled the pole in and pushed against the cat's chest again. The cat became enraged but it was forced to keep swimming. The boy and the cat struggled for several minutes and David knew he could not keep this up. He was already tired and the shore was now distant.

But the cat was showing signs of tiring, too. Its stroke became weaker and less frequent. The island's shore now seemed close. The water became lighter as the lakebed began to show. David waited for the boat to hit the rocks, then ran. The cat tried to run but its legs collapsed under it. David did not look back. He ran because he could not think of what to do next. The hunter would recover and there was nowhere to hide on the island. The lions could climb anything and there was nothing on the island but trees and the cathedral. He ran as fast as he could and soon began to feel a burning ache in his limbs and throat. He looked back as he ran when, all of a sudden, he tripped and felt a rush of air as he met empty space instead of solid ground. An instant later, his head hit something hard—and he knew nothing more.

<-- Translator begin -->

<Alkaz Research Station 003.1 Tira Date 6501.171345AC>

<Unauthorised access detected - 2 kentari(?being-plural)>

<1 Sentient, 1 non-Sentient>

<Sampling Sentient - Sentient is human child, kenten-atz-iafora(?being

coded sample) matches 16 authorised samples>

<iafora(?code) match is inconsistent. Alkaz Science Officer-in-Chief will be notified>

<Sentient entered into nefron(?data,mind) as b2b3ga990. b2b3ga990 is under Minor Security Protection according to Alkaz Protocol Statute 49.7

<-- Translator end -->

A roar woke David. His head pounded with pain from the impact and the noise coming from above made it worse. He became petrified. The noise he heard was from not one but two lions. He held his breath and tried not to move. All of a sudden, the noise became distant. It sounded like one of the lions was moving away. Eventually he heard nothing. David took a deep breath and as his eyes adjusted he noticed he was in a cave. He desperately looked for a way out but then something caught his eye.

The cave branched into two separate tunnels. Many reasons flooded his mind as to why he should get out and run home as fast as possible. *The mountain lion must still be on the island*, David thought. And it was almost dark, which meant more lions. But curiosity gnawed at the boy's mind like never before.

He carefully walked to the right-hand tunnel and after a moment's hesitation, entered it. He could see nothing, so he retrieved a penlight from his bag. In the dim light he could make out nothing more than earth and rock. He followed the tunnel until it ended abruptly. He had gone 20 metres by his reckoning. He had never heard of mines anywhere near Langrove Mountain. He was trying to think of a possible explanation when the penlight slipped through his fingers. He bent over to pick it up but the light now illuminated the opposite side of the tunnel.

Precise curvilinear symbols were inscribed in the rock. He took several steps towards the wall and saw what appeared to be symbols, unlike anything he had seen in museums or books. They were linear in appearance, much like cuneiform. But this was not Sumerian. David knew it well and this was altogether different—and strange. The rock appeared clean and smooth. The symbols looked recent, with no sign of erosion or weathering.

Five beeps broke the silence. His watch shone in the darkness. Five o'clock. He had to go.

David cautiously made his way back to the mouth of the main cave. He tried to climb out but hauling himself up with one hand proved impossible and he panicked momentarily. But after calming himself, he made a closer examination and found footholds in the rock. When he eventually emerged, he was exhausted. He quickly made his way to the boat but as he reached the shore he saw something move. The lion—it was moving fast and the boat was hopelessly far. He looked around desperately but there was nothing to defend himself with. He started to run.

Then he heard a roar. He looked back and the lion was running away from him. Confused but not without his wits, David threw his bag into the boat and pushed the vessel into the calm water.

David's father listened patiently to the principal as the agitated teacher apologised profusely for David's disappearance. Peter understood that David would not have run without due reason. But that did not excuse him from violence. He would have to talk to him.

"Peter, I realise you must be upset with the current situation but I assure you we will help with whatever we can."

Peter laughed inside while he smiled politely. "It's all right, Lee. I'm sure he went home. I don't think he would've done anything rash."

The principal sighed and nodded.

"Well, I'd better get going. David will need his dinner before he arrives home."

Peter walked to his truck and sighed as he got in and turned the engine. The engine coughed several times before idling lazily. The sun was low in the sky and it would soon be dark. The truck slowly ambled onto the main road and sleepily made its way to the house that David called home.

The golden fields of wheat and corn that stretched to the horizon, were the kingdoms of farmers who ruled them with tractors and harvesters. The ocean of crops went on for kilometres but there was an island among the countless farms and fields that dominated the rural community of Genoa County. A small farm, whose mechanical implements now rested quietly in an old barn, was this island. Its fields grew nothing more than the green grasses and white wildflowers that dominated the view for several kilometres.

Peter looked at the fields of white and sighed. It had been such a long time and yet it didn't feel that way. And the memory was still raw, even after all these years.

"We're very sorry for your loss, Mr Freeman."

It was two detectives from Darsontown. Peter sat down and did not speak for a while.

"How... How did it happen?"

"The driver must have lost control of his van. When they hit the tanker... I don't think she would have felt any pain."

Peter thanked the officers and when they had left, he sat on the floor while tears ran freely down his face.

David was running. The forest was far behind and he could almost see his house. He was exhausted but instinct told him to keep running. He was confused and the events were a muddle of fear, claws, light and water, all jumbled into memories that fell over each other in a tangle. But the view of his house brought reality into focus and David breathed easier. As he reached the inner fence, he could make out Princess streaking across the field like a small twister. David hugged her and she licked his face fervently.

The sky turned pink and dark blue as the final wisps of light began to fade, and the wind moved the grass in undulating patterns, a dark green ocean under a dark blue sky. The fear left him and he forgot about the brooding forests behind. He walked to the house with Princess at his side.

The house was quiet and tendrils of moonlight crept in through the windows. *David must be asleep*, Peter thought to himself. He went to David's room and opened the door quietly. David was sleeping soundly, with Princess on the floor next to his bed. The dog awoke immediately, but resumed her sleep when she recognized Peter. Peter sighed and closed the door. He would talk to David at breakfast.

The morning sun broke through the mountains, mixing yellow light with the dappled green and brown of the trees. The sky was cloudless and the morning spread strawberry jam over blue toast. The lake reflected the brilliant sun as it peeked over the mountains. The canopy of the forest was seamless, broken only by the lake and the south-west turret of the cathedral. The rock pushed through the foliage and pointed to the sky as if to mark the way for something or someone, ever hopeful that they would return. It was a new day and with it came hope—unlooked for, but always welcome.

The new day woke David. The energy drained from him by the previous day's troubles had been restored by the coming of the sun. It shone through the window, fingers of light caressing the floor and walls. He sat up and felt new strength coming from the light and warmth of the benevolent star. He washed and dressed himself, then went downstairs to have breakfast.

His father had been up before daybreak. Peter normally woke early so he could collect his thoughts and make breakfast for David and himself. He was in the kitchen making scrambled eggs, which was unusual for a weekday.

“Morning, Dad.”

“Morning.”

Peter divided the eggs onto two plates. The toaster popped with eerie timeliness.

“So how was school yesterday?” Peter asked with only a slight smile. David looked up.

“I guess you already spoke to Mr Andrews,” David said with a look of apprehension.

“I did. He said you threw a rock at Trevor.”

“I threw it at his hand.”

“You threw a rock at his hand? Why?”

David looked at his father. The boy’s face showed restraint but Peter could see the anger there as well.

“Do you remember that old book about Razor Ridge that Mr Olsen has?” David asked.

“Yes?”

“He lent it to me.”

Peter raised an eyebrow. Jack Olsen was not in the habit of lending antique books to children.

“Yeah, he did. I was going to my next class and Trevor tripped me. Then he picked up the book by the front page and it began to rip. Dad, Mr Olsen told me to take care of that book. I know what it’s worth.” David paused to compose himself.

“I threw the rock at Trevor’s hand because I knew he would drop it. After I had the book, I didn’t really care.”

Peter looked at David and smiled. “But the book is still damaged. And you will still have to explain to Mr Olsen what happened. And you know what I’m going to say.”

David looked down in defeat. “Violence is the refuge of the incompetent.”

“Yes, because had you thought ahead you would have seen what would happen. Violence solves nothing. So what have you learned from this?”

David looked up at his father. “You must always think ahead.”

“You already know that. Yes, you must always think ahead but especially when you are afraid. Fear and anger will cloud your

judgment. It is easy to think ahead when you are calm. It is not so easy when your heart threatens to escape through your mouth.” Peter looked at David’s plate. It was untouched.

“You’d better eat your breakfast.”

“OK, Dad.”

“And David,” his father continued.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Things are rarely as black as they seem.”

3 REVOLUTIONS

Wilfully do the leaves fall,

they obey creno (?season of cold:causality), they have no choice.

The darkness comes,

And the cold will tear %the warmest heart%(transliteration error 983a – heart of fire).

—Cerinel Ilureme, Iluremean 7th century poet, scholar and suspected madman.

All was darkness. No light, no matter. Nothing living or breathing. But here he was safe. In the very construct of the universe. Phase space. It was what tied real space to the rest of the other universes within their altiverse. It was what ultimately somehow linked the many altiverses, even though they technically did not exist. He could feel it slowly pulsating as matter moved around it and energy moved through it. It was total darkness but he could still see movement and intent. He could tell what things were and where they were in relation to him. But it was a strange place. Madras had called it a half-dimensional space, due to its movement through time but also because it referred to the curious nature of spatial relations in phase. Every object seemed to be immediately next to every other. It was near-impossible to gauge distance here. One speck of matter was as easily felt as another. But he knew this was not the case. If he tried to move one that was far, it would take much greater energy to do so.

Madras had taught him how to use this technique to estimate distances and size. It had taken a long time, even for him.

“Pyron?”

Trinda looked inside the darkened room. The night lights gave off an ethereal blue glow. The staging area was empty. But Madras had said she could find him here.

“Pyron? Are you in here?”

“Yes.” It was a strange disembodied voice. She could hear it but could not detect what direction it came from.

“Where are you?”

“On the platform.”

The platform was empty. She frowned and felt irritated. She did not feel like playing games.

“There is nothing on the...” she began, but immediately stopped when a streak of light appeared on the main platform of the staging area. The streak expanded and became a dark void that spread into a dark shape.

“How... How did you do that?”

Pyron frowned. “Do what?”

“You just appeared! Out of nothing! You’re not even wearing your kirenan!”

Pyron looked at her closely. Madras had mentioned to him that he could be open with Trinda, but she did not appear to know much about him. She had all his files, every section of his Iafora, but she seemed constantly surprised at what he could do.

“I was just in my trap.”

“Your what?”

“Trap. It’s a term the military invented for a fully-sealed phase foxhole. It’s in your documentation under the heading...”

“I know what’s in the documentation,” Trinda said in exasperation. “I don’t need to be told!”

Pyron opened his outer lids and walked two steps towards her. Trinda cringed and made a noise a small animal might make before it is about to be crushed. Pyron looked at her, sighed, then sat down on the floor.

“You are strange, Trinda Rialamer. You ask me what something is, then rebuke me for explaining. Why do you hold such hostility towards me?”

Trinda could feel butterflies in her stomach. “I read the documentation. I just... The documentation said those techniques had code dependencies. You shouldn’t be able to do that.”

“And what were the dependencies?”

“It was classified. It doesn’t matter anyway. That code was never given to us and it was certainly never added to your Iafora.”

“That so-called classified code was a butchered section of the Mode. Nothing else.”

“How do you know that?”

“Madras told me. He was the one who rejected the idea and threatened to leave the project if they insisted on using the code. He said that using the original Mode sequences untouched would yield far greater results.”

“That can’t be. The Mode is from the First of us. He couldn’t do what you can do.”

“How do you know that? You’re not old enough to have met him.”

“There is nothing to say that the First ever did anything like that. My grandfather said he could not even see well in the dark. And that was the source of the Mode.”

Pyron laughed. “You, who have read every section of my Iafora, watched every waking second of my life since inception and after Madras, have spent the most time with me... . You still don’t know what I can do! You have never met the First, never seen him eat, sleep or talk. What could you possibly know regarding his abilities?”

Trinda opened her mouth but promptly closed it. He was right. She knew it. “I don’t know.”

Pyron shifted on the floor. Heliodar was pooling in his flesh and it ached. He crossed his legs, then looked at Trinda again.

“You avoid me and yet Madras says I can trust you. Of all the things he tells me, this is the only one I find hard to believe. You do not trust people who fear you. Why do you fear me, Trinda? You know I will not harm you.”

Trinda looked into the enormous eyes. Those eyes could see beyond the spectrum of visible light but sometimes she thought they could see straight through her, into her very soul. She bit her lower lip and looked at the ground.

“You are too big.”

Pyron raised an eyebrow. “I cannot help that. But wh...”

“No. It’s not that. You’re too big. Too large. Too far beyond what I know. I feel like a child when I speak to you. I am constantly in doubt when you look at me because I feel I might have said something you would find stupid. Your train of thought seems inexplicable. What we struggle with in our minds, you play with as if it were a toy. You make intuitive leaps that nobody can follow. When the military suggested that the Crushnah should transport the supplies using a portal, you created a phase portal that spanned 2000 perq. They were joking, Pyron! It was a joke; something totally insane and impossible—and you thought about it for a few minutes, created the portal and informed the captain that the supplies had arrived! While you were still in the room! When you look at me, I feel insignificant, but even worse, I feel alien and out of place. As if I shouldn’t be allowed to instruct you or tell you what to do. I’m just...” And with that Trinda choked and sobbed quietly.

Pyron rubbed his neck. There was so much he didn’t understand.

“Trinda?”

Trinda looked up and saw that Pyron was offering her a hand towel. She took it and wiped her face.

“Thank you.” She had stopped crying but she would not look at him.

“Trinda, look at me.”

The young woman looked up at the blue creature.

“I know what it is you feel. Confusion. Anger. Fear. I feel the same way. I am told what to do by people who cannot possibly understand me. The military is run by intellectual microbes. I am constantly having to explain simple things to people who should know much better. And...”

“You feel what I think you feel. You resent me because...”

“No,” Pyron stated firmly, “I do not resent you. You and Madras are different. You are not arrogant. Madras does not always understand but he questions me incessantly. I never tire of him. His constant questions are because he honestly does not know and wishes desperately to understand. He is not proud or afraid. I have felt your frustration but never your arrogance. I have felt your fear but not your hate. And that is why I found you strange. But I think I understand now.” Pyron stood, then knelt before Trinda.

“Trinda, I want to trust you and be your friend.” Pyron gently took her hand. “I do not wish for you to be afraid of me.”

Trinda smiled and looked up at him. "I am not afraid. And I will be your friend."

Just as Genoa was brilliant in the mornings, it was haunting at night. The mountains released an occasional fog that spread like honey over the surrounding fields and valleys. The sky was a lampshade full of pinholes and the trees moved gently to the rhythm of an unseen wind that ran through the valleys. The creeks and brooks murmured in strange tongues and danced in ever-changing swirls and eddies. Moonlight reflected off the pale stone of the Cathedral and the lake was alive with the creatures and currents of water, each pushing against the other in an orchestrated battle of life against element. The last ripples reflected off the shores of the lake, then a stillness settled on the water. The wind tried in vain to rise, but it too was silenced. The night reigned supreme and the flesh, element and spirit of the lake bowed to the wishes of the night mistress.

The weeks passed and the monotony of life burdened David. He spent his spare time immersing himself in countless books; his only escape from the attention of the others. Trevor didn't bother him for a while but the snide remarks continued. And he was sure Karina was behind it. Why would Trevor hate him so much? David rarely spoke to him. But Karina was different. Gale kept telling him about all the things Karina told Trevor to do. He constantly saw Karina with Trevor and he began to hate her.

David came home from school one evening, tired and dejected. Princess was waiting for him at the gate. It had been a long time since he had taken her out. She had faithfully sat next to him while he read his books but he reminded himself that she should not suffer for him. They would play catch. She loved that.

David picked up the disc that was in the hallway closet. He called for Princess and she eagerly responded at the sight of the wonderful pink circumference. She was well accustomed to flying through the air and snapping at it while in mid-spin. David threw the disc and it sailed up while Princess waited just a fraction before exploding from the grass. Well-honed instincts and patient training propelled the canine bullet until it leapt and, with the ease of a dancer, caught the helpless toy. She landed and returned the disc to David. He smiled at the eager face as he threw the disc with all his might. She hesitated for a moment before rocketing off again. This choreography of boy

and beast continued until the first stars could be seen through the lavender-blue sky.

“Good morning, Peter.”

“Good morning, Ben. How’s Jackie? I heard she hasn’t been feeling well.”

“I’m afraid so, Peter. She got a nasty cough on Tuesday night and now she’s worse. Doctor Goldberg gave her some tablets and told her to drink plenty of fluids. Not much else she can do now,” Ben said as he grinned.

“She’s a little better now but the school told her to stay home until she’s no longer contagious. Can’t have the teachers spreading it now, can we?” Ben continued with his easy drawl. He was a native of Elderpress and could talk the ears off anyone.

Ben laughed and said, “Well, anyway, school will be out tomorrow because two other teachers have come down with it and Andrews decided they should close the school for a day. Now what am I supposed to do with Jesse and Kelly? Have them in the store, I suppose.”

Peter smiled and almost laughed. Ben did not like his routine broken by anyone, much less an ‘ejicator’. Besides, he could not close his store on whim. His livelihood depended on it.

“Let them stay home, Ben. After all, how much mischief can they get up to?”

No school. Two words savoured by students universally. The oppression of algebra and quadratic equations held at bay by the weapons of chance and good fortune. But for David, it was more. The image of the cave in which he had found himself those many months ago had been growing in his mind. He had not been near the cathedral since. But he needed to take Princess for a walk and this was as good an excuse as any.

The walk to the lake went smoothly. It was midday and the sun was shining. The boy and the canine ambled through the forest, walking amid the gnarled trees. The woods cleared and for a moment through the foliage, David could see the edge of Razor Ridge. And in front of him was the lake.

The lake was slightly turbulent and he could see currents of water near the centre. He could not cross here. He would have to try the opposite side.

The boat was where he had left it. As David began to push the craft into the water, Princess jumped in.

“We’re not going yet, Princess!” David laughed.

Princess cocked her head and David continued to push the boat in, while keeping a firm hold on the rope. When the boat was near the water, he straightened himself and wrapped the end of the rope in his hand as he pushed. The boat scraped on the pebbles and gravel for a few seconds, then slid easily into the water. David began to walk along the edge of the lake with the craft in tow.

The eastern side of the lake was a lot calmer. The water was disturbed but there were no currents. David cautiously pushed the boat further out onto the lake and jumped in. Princess barked excitedly from the prow.

David looked at the island. The trees stood like the battlements of an ancient castle. The cathedral pierced through the silhouette of trees, a menacing tower among the walls and turrets that guarded the perimeter.

The boy began to feel uneasy. He had no idea what he would find and this worried him. He pushed the boat slowly through the water, leaving unsteady ripples on the surface of the lake.

The two stakes cut easily through the soft earth. David frowned. They might not hold his weight. He looked around but there was no other practical anchor on which to secure the ladder. He had found the hole easily enough as the brush was still broken where he had fallen through.

David threw the rope ladder into the pit, then picked up his pack. “Princess.” The dog looked up at him expectantly. “Guard.”

To continue the story, you can buy the printed book or ebook online at kentash.com.