DREAM TRAVELER (Book 3 - The Imagination Series)

By : NeilOstroff

300,000 years from now, human spirits called Phelastians are finally making peace with ape-like creatures called Dwellers. Formality requires that a twenty-first century Earthling be present as witness to the treaty. A Phelastian travels back in time and recruits Whitmore Middle Schoolâ s newest student, Jamie Richards. When a Dweller overlord sabotages the celestial link connecting Jamie to her own world, she vanishes from the signing, crumbling the negotiations, and sending her on a series of mind-bending, alternate-reality adventures. Every time Jamie Richards falls asleep, sheâ s bounced through time and injected into possible futures. And all of these diverse futures lead to one horrifying conclusion; the end of everything. Can Jamie save trillions of lives, prevent a war that has already occurred, and stop herself from meeting her self, all while attempting to stabilize creation and find her way home?

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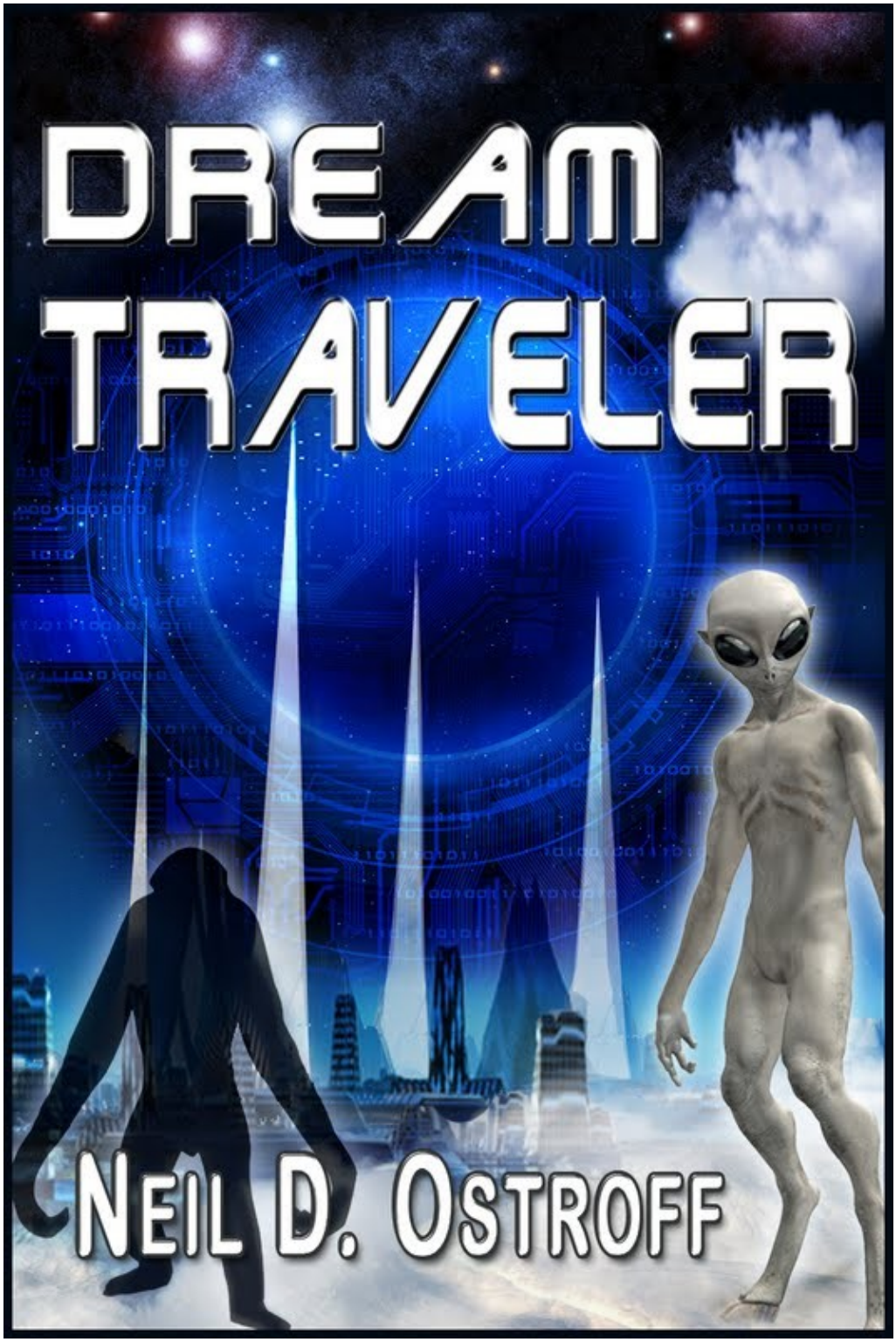

Chapter 1

â Nothing happens unless we first dream.â

Carl Sandburg

I am Vixtan!

Words came into Jamie Richards mind as clearly as if someone had spoken them aloud. She was instantly awake. Nausea swirled in her belly. Pins and needles prickled her skin.

â Who said that?â she questioned.

She sat up against the trunk of the old apple tree on Macungieâ s orchard.

Mid-afternoon shadows had lengthened since sheâ d laid down to nap. The sky was mirror clear except for a puff of cloud suspended lazily above.

I must collect you.

The voice startled her. It was so clear, so distinct. She spun around and noticed someone lying beneath the apple tree with their hands pillowed behind their head. Her jaw dropped.

â Thatâ s me!â she shrieked.

She looked down. There was nothing there. Her hands swished through empty space where her chest and stomach should have been. Fear spiked.

â Whatâ s happening?â

The cloud dropped and enveloped the orchard in dense mist. The mist swirled and condensed into a single ball of continuously curling fog.

You do not require a mortal shell to house your spirit as we travel the strings. I will provide a duplicate of your physical when we reach our destination. Your spirit will only be away from this dimension for a few seconds. Your body will be safe.

â What is this?â Overwhelming feelings of incredulity engulfed her. â Am I dreaming?â

The dream world can be as real as the physical.

The cloud enveloped her consciousness and they bolted into the sky. It was as if she were inside a balloon. Her belly swooned. Borders of the orchard disappeared as they reached the bright white haze of the upper atmosphere. Dots of multi-colored light appeared, swirled in a tornado around her, and assembled into her body complete with the brown button-down shirt and blue jeans sheâ d been wearing. Air beneath her feet became a solid, yet marshmallow-consistency. She patted her face, her sides, wiggled her fingers, and ran a hand through her long, brown hair. It all felt real.

A human-like being, small and rail-thin, stepped toward her. Two black eyes the size of goose eggs stared at her from above a small, knobby nose and horizontal slot of a mouth. The being wore a gray body suit that covered from head to toe like skin.

â This is what my people looked like before we evolved into pure energy,â the being said. â I am Vixtan.â

â What is this?â Jamie questioned, her voice quaking. â Where am I?â

â Not where,â Vixtan corrected. â When. This is the city of Phelastia, which exists three hundred thousand years in your future.â

Mist cleared as if wiping a foggy lens. Huge, ivory-colored, geometric-shaped structures jutted into the pearly atmosphere and sparkled in the ultra-bright light shining from a pinpoint sun. A clear spheroid dome formed a soaring roof above the cityâ s gleaming spires and encased the entire metropolis within a colossal, arcing, transparent shield. To their left, a shimmering, silver path cut through the swirling cloudscape and led into the great city.

Jamie stood stunned, slack-jawed, and stupefied. She scratched absently at a mosquito bite on her arm.

They stepped onto the shimmering path which jiggled like gelatin as they walked. Dozens of beings identical in appearance to Vixtan rose from the cloudscape and knelt as if Jamie and Vixtan were passing royalty.

â Those who are able wanted to greet you outside the city despite the danger of drifting patches of Ru,â Vixtan said, and quickened his pace. â Most have never seen a pre-nova human, especially the chosen Fen Ta.â

Jamie kept up beside him and nearly stumbled into one of the kneeling figures before regaining her balance on the wiggling walkway. She glanced back along their path. The crowd of Phelastians followed a few yards behind and formed an entourage that swelled in size as they neared the city.

They approached two ornate iron gates guarded by Phelastians wearing full, knight-like body armor. The armor-wearing Phelastians bowed and waved them into an immense courtyard constructed of opalescent marble. A massive three-tiered fountain bubbled glacial-clear water that bounced and refracted brilliant winks of light. Manicured bushes covered with various shades of blue and green leaves grew in gold cylinders along the perimeter. Thin wisps of cloud-haze pooled in the uneven grooves and corners of the floor.

â This is amazing!â Jamie stated.

Vixtan nodded. â Our great city of Phelastia was our pride and joy.â

Jamie cocked her head. â Was?â

â Everything will be explained in time.â

Vixtan led her through a smaller gateway into an ornate cathedral with high, ivory walls. Crystal chandeliers hung from the vaulted ceiling.

They continued down a wide columned hallway patterned with varying shades of white and gray marble. Pictures of orange trees ripe with fruit lined the walls. The hallway ended in a spacious room draped with elaborate tapestries of vivid color. Four Phelastians sat around a rectangular table carved from a huge purple gemstone. The Phelastian at the farthest end stood up.

â Welcome, Fen Ta,â the Phelastian greeted. â We are honored at your presence. My name is Shooka Ella. I am High Chair to the Council of Phelastia.â

An alarm blared. The mood instantly electrified. A dozen Phelastians clad in armor marched into the room and lined up against the wall. Each held a metal tube about the size of a baton. Vixtan ushered Jamie to stand beside Shooka Ella.

â Whatâ s happening?â she asked.

Phelastian soldiers aimed their metal tubes at a set of tall double doors at the far end of the room. Handles jiggled and the latch appeared to strain outward, as if something huge were pushing against it. Doors burst open and the odor of raw onion overspread the room.

A towering, albino, gorilla-like creature lumbered through the doorway and up to the table. It had huge, pupil-less black eyes like the Phelastians, but fine, translucent fur covered its burly body. Knife-size talons poked from its thumbs and three fingers. It wore a brown tunic.

The creature faced Shooka Ella and then glared down at Jamie. A shiver raced along her spine.

â Is this the pre-nova human?â the creature growled.

â Yes,â Shooka Ella replied. â She will be the Fen Ta at the signing as Delegate Zare agreed.â

â I am Core!â the creature announced. â Leader of the Dwellers and successor to become overlord.â

Core lurched back from the table and the Phelastian guards targeted their metal tubes at his head. He curled his lips, exposing long, yellow, plaque-encrusted teeth and laughed with a sound like a slaughtered pig.

â No need for this aggressive display,â Core said. â If I wanted to destroy you, Shooka Ella, youâ d already be a pile of dust sifting across your beautiful courtyard. We meet two hours before lights end at the Shrine of Bella to sign the treaty and formally end the hostilities. This is all I came here to say.â

Core loomed over Jamie and glowered. Fear prickled the hairs on her neck.

â Your generation is weak, human!â he stated. â It sickens me that I evolved from you.â

He strode through the double doors. Two soldiers moved quickly to close and lock them.

Shooka Ella turned to Vixtan. â Take the Fen Ta to the nutrient replenishment structure and show her the places we discussed. Then bring her to my chambers for a final briefing.â

Chapter 2

They crossed the courtyard and entered a huge, octagon-shaped building. Identical-looking Phelastians sat four to a table in dozens of long rows. Each table had a large crystal about the size of a bowling ball in the center. Bowls of different colored sauces graced the tables. The only sound was the slurping of the Phelastians as they ate.

â Please, sit.â Vixtan said. â Are you hungry?â

â Not really,â Jamie whispered, and took a chair.

â You do not have to lower your voice. The others are involved in their own telepathic conversations. Pre-nova verbal communication is not an intrusion to them.â

â Why is everyone calling me that? Pre-nova?â

â Pre-nova is the period before the sun collapsed into a neutron star, after which we base our linear time. Much like your culturesâ system of A.D. and B.C.â

Jamieâ s attention piqued. â When does the sun collapse?â

â Not for tens of thousands of years after your end.â

Vixtan stared at the crystal, which then flashed as if a match had ignited inside.

â I ordered nourishment,â he said. â It will strengthen the cohesion of your spirit and allow you to remain on this time level for a longer period.â

A Phelastian approached and placed a silver tray containing two golden bowls of brown sauce on their table. The Phelastian also put down two spoons and two crystal goblets filled with clear liquid.

Vixtan lifted a spoonful of sauce. His lips morphed into something that resembled an elephantâ s trunk and he slurped the contents.

His lips retracted.

â Please eat,â he said. â It is important that you consume the Jiji broth.â

She dipped her spoon into the bowl, lifted, sniffed, and then sipped. The Jiji broth tasted like diluted beef gravy. She drank some of the clear liquid, which tasted like water, and then cleared her throat.

â Who are you?â she asked. â What is all this?â

â Phelastians are the final great mutation of humanity,â he said, poising his lips to sip. â The last evolutionary stage of mortal consciousness on this dimension.â

Jamieâ s mind filled with questions. â You were human once?â

Vixtan finished the Jiji broth and rattled the spoon in his empty bowl.

â Consume your broth,â he said. â There are some unpleasant sites you must visit before you fulfill your role in these proceedings.â

She guzzled the remainder and then followed Vixtan across the courtyard and into a mammoth square building. They walked down a long, white, sterile hallway toward a dead end. The closer they approached the dead end the more the air smelled of bleach and antiseptic.

â What is this place?â she asked.

Vixtan pressed a button concealed in the wall and the dead end slid open. Emotions of sadness and agony blew over her like a physical wind, knocking her back a step. She grasped at the entranceway for balance, her mind exploding with telepathic Phelastian despair.

Inside a huge, warehouse-like area, hundreds, possibly a thousand beds lined up like the tables at the nutrient center. A Phelastian ghost-cloud swirled in each bed. Instead of being white, their cloud mist was slate gray. Dozens more wearing body suits scurried around and tended to their needs.

â Whatâ sâ ¦â Jamie struggled to speak. Psychic anguish pounded in her head like a beating drum. â Whatâ s wrong with them?â

â They are casualties of war,â Vixtan said.

Jamie noticed a Phelastian on a bed close to her trying to swirl its wisps into a more solid form. Its color was almost black. In a strained, telepathic projection, the Phelastian attempted to communicate. A piercing headache hit Jamieâ s mind like a bullet. She winced against the pain.

Are you the Fen Ta?

â Yes,â Jamie gasped.

At last!

The Phelastian settled back onto its bed. Its lower half flared white and then turned into dust. A burst of agony jarred Jamieâ s mind. Her knees weakened and she stumbled. Vixtan steadied her and then led her quickly out of the room and down the hallway.

â Azaria has ended,â Vixtan said, and his voice was morose with sadness.

â That Phelastian just died?â

Vixtan nodded. â Yes.â

â But you didnâ t even try to save her.â

â There is nothing we could do. Our medicine supply in the city is depleted.â

â Whatâ s wrong with them?â

â They are infected with the Ru. A synthetic disease manufactured by the Dwellers. Dweller terrorist groups concoct ways to fly up here and pump Ru into the city. Those Phelastian citizens are the casualties from the last wave of attacks, before the treaty and agreement to end hostilities.â

They stepped outside. Jamie felt relief from the psychic pressure, but emotionally drained.

Vixtan leaned close and his voice grew soft. â Weâ ve kept our casualties hidden, but we donâ t know how much longer we can keep them a secret. We have stashed a few units of a medicine that acts as both a vaccine and a cure for the current virus. It comes from the juice of an extremely rare fruit. We donâ t have enough to treat those already infected, but the immediate population is protected for now. Dwellers believe we have become immune to their laboratory diseases. We canâ t let them know we used this medicine. Core would never have agreed to this treaty if he fully realized the advantage the Dweller Empire has. He needs only to manufacture a new strain and he could end the rest of us.â

Jamie looked skyward. The translucent outline of the dome protecting the city reflected the stratosphere like smears of rainbows on glass.

â What am I doing here?â she asked. â And whatâ s a Fen Ta?â

Vixtanâ s face set into unreadable lines. â Only Shooka Ella can tell you the information you seek.â

â When will I speak with him?â

â Soon. There is one more place I was instructed to take you.â

Chapter 3

Vixtan led Jamie to a large triangular vehicle with a tinted glass roof. The vehicle hovered about a foot off the ground on a cushion of air. Silver doors flipped up like batâ s wings as they approached.

â Is this a car?â Jamie asked.

â Itâ s called a speeder. Originally, we developed speeders for Earth combat but they proved useless against the planetâ s terrible windstorms and raw, jagged terrain.â

Jamie lowered into the bucket seat. Except for a few buttons, a flat monitor, and flashing green LEDs along the dashboard, the interior was sparse and spacious. Vixtan settled beside her and the doors closed. He pushed a button.

The speeder jerked into motion and jetted silently across a vast, unoccupied area of the courtyard. Jamie stared out the windshield as they cut through misty wisps and approached another industrialized section. She watched buildings pass, each a different geometric shape from the next: rectangles, high cylindrical skyscrapers, various size octagons and hexagons.

The speeder slowed and stopped in front of a smaller gray building, the only structure in the city not colored white, which fostered the illusion that the structure was somehow more ominous than the others. Vixtan pressed a button and a shelf underneath the speederâ s console flipped open. He took out a small metal tube, placed it into a holster, and strapped the holster to his side.

â This is only a precaution,â he said.

Doors opened and he unfolded from the seat. Jamie followed. Four armed Phelastian guards stood on either side of a large, gray door. They nodded to Vixtan as he and Jamie approached. One typed into a device mounted on the wall.

A click sounded and the door opened.

Cankerous odors of rotting onion invaded Jamieâ s nostrils. She gagged and covered her mouth and nose with her hand. A guard handed her what looked like a blue motorcycle helmet.

â This breathing device is also for your protection,â Vixtan said. â If the occupants in here knew you were the Fen Ta, they would tear the place apart to get at you.â

She put on the mask and cool oxygen replaced putrid smell.

â Where are we?â she asked.

Vixtan stood a little straighter.

â The Dweller Detention Center,â he replied. â Our prison.â

Their footsteps echoed through the dimly lit hallway. Vixtan led her down three flights of stairs, where six more armored Phelastian guards stood at another door, this one heavily bolted. A guard typed into the wall and the others stationed their weapons.

With a pinging sound, the locks clicked open. Three guards escorted them inside. Hundreds of barred cells lined a seemingly endless stretch of hallway. Each small cubicle housed a single, isolated Dweller. Some stirred as they walked past, a few snarled. Jamie felt their dark eyes and harsh stares examining her.

These are terrorists and murderers, Vixtan projected. *The worst Dweller criminals.*

He led her to a cell some distance from the others. A huge Dweller emerged from the shadows and lumbered up to the bars. Jamie stepped back. The Dweller appeared old and decrepit.

â Greetings, Vixtan,â the Dweller grunted. His ancient, grapefruit-sized eyes shifted to look at her. â Is this the one?â

Vixtan nodded. â Yes.â

The Dweller lowered his head.

â Greetings, pre-nova Earthling. I am Zare, Emperor of the Dwellers and chief negotiator for the peace treaty.â

â Zare is here for his own protection,â Vixtan added. â There are still Dwellers who do not wish for peace.â

Zare poked a talon through the metal bars. Jamie reached out to touch it but her hand passed through as if it were a hologram.

â My time of ending is near,â Zare said. â These final negotiations must be resolved quickly. If Core knew my poor state of health he would cancel the treaty, wait for my end, and seize control of the delegation.â

â Core has agreed to meet this evening at the Shrine of Bella,â Vixtan said.

Zare nodded. â This is good news. Has the Fen Ta been told of her duties?â

â Not yet. Shooka Ella wanted her to meet with you first to show that not all Dwellers are like Core.â

Zare motioned for Jamie to come closer to the bars. She leaned in.

â This war started centuries ago by a fearful race because of their insecurities about their own evolution,â he said. â Times have changed. This senseless destruction no longer has relevance or meaning in our two societies. Only the ignorant still hate without reason.â

He growled low, in obvious pain. â Core is one of the ignorant. He wishes only that the Phelastians would end.â

Zare staggered to the far side of his cell, leaned against the wall, and slid down to the floor. His imaged dimmed. Jamie saw dirt smudges through the outline of his semi-transparent form.

â Go now,â Zare groaned. â We will meet again at the Shrine of Bella.â

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Chapter 4

Shooka Ella sat in a plush purple chair behind a huge, white marble desk, in the center of a palatial room that had the dÃ©cor of a Victorian castle. Gazing intently at a thin scroll of paper, he glanced up as Jamie and Vixtan entered.

â Now you know the horrible atrocities caused by this war,â Shooka Ella said. â And why it must end.â He rolled up the scroll. â Vixtan, please leave us.â

Vixtan bowed and stepped away. Shooka Ella stood and walked to the only window Jamie had seen in the city. Heavily barred, it overlooked the courtyard.

Shooka Ella indicated the chair. â Please sit, Fen Ta. I assume your first question is, why are you here?â

Jamie nodded, but remained standing.

Shooka Ella spoke; â In the simplest terms, the Fen Ta is an arbitrary witness to the signing of a treaty legalizing it into a binding document. In the truest meaning of the title, the Fen Ta must exist on a different time level or be from another planet and have no former knowledge of or opinions about the histories between the two parties. You are to be the Fen Ta at the signing of a peace treaty between the citizens of Phelastia and the Dweller Empire. As the Fen Ta, you will hold the treaty until all participants have arrived, then carry it to the table. You will stand beside Core; Zare will stand beside me. After Zare and I have both marked our insignias, you will take the treaty and follow us around the perimeter of the Shrine of Bella, where we will both put down our weapons. You will then pour the Krishka, a tannic liquid distilled from the petrified remains of field grasses, for the traditional drink of peace.â

Jamie stared at him with disbelief. â Thatâ s what Iâ m here for? Thatâ s why I traveled through time? To pour a drink?â

â There is always a great risk when one attempts to make peace,â Shooka Ella replied. â Every measure no matter how seemingly insignificant must be taken to ensure success.â

â Why me? Of the trillions of people through time you could have chosen?â

â Both sides agreed the Fen Ta must be from pre-nova, since that era in history is when humans possessed equal primal and intellectual capacities and emotions. Zare was the one who officially chose you, and Vixtanâ â

â Why did Zare choose me?â

â Ask him that question yourself after the signing.â

Jamie stepped beside Shooka Ella and looked over the courtyard toward the seemingly endless, misty horizon.

â Who started this war?â she asked.

Shooka Ella locked his hands behind his back and straightened his shoulders. â There was a time when all creatures on this time level, both physical and formless, lived on Earth as one great civilization devoted to intellectual gain. Those who were born without bodies could ride the strings and travelâ â

â Strings?â Jamie interrupted.

â Everything in creation from atoms to suns, are made from one ingredient, tiny vibrating strands of energy we call strings. Vibrations from these intense, microscopic energy rings are what build reality, including time levels, quantum dimensions, and parallel universes. Phelastians have learned to travel along these vibrations. Our travelers explored deeper and deeper into various Earth pasts until they discovered pre-nova, a period in humanityâ s evolution when emotions such as greed, lust, and anger were a part of everyday sensations. Travelers relished these primal feelings. Raw emotion is undeniably a more powerful aphrodisiac than thoughts and ideas. When the travelers returned they described these new sensations to those who could not ride the strings, those with material bodies. Initial excitement mutated into jealous envy. Those with bodies broke away from the collective and formed savage groups where they lived free of law and intellectual pursuits, exploring their own deviances. Calling themselves Dwellers, they preferred to reside in caves rather than abide by the rules of the world culture.â

Shooka Ella stepped back to the desk and picked up the scroll. â Dwellers soon realized that immersing themselves in primal emotions comes at a steep price; total and complete anarchy. Many longed to return to our society of spiritual and intellectual pursuits. To decide if a merge was possible, those who could travel formed the Council. They voted negative. Dwellers had become so violent the Council had no choice but to turn them away from the culture, back to the dead and blighted soil outside the city-state. In revenge, Dweller scientists developed the Ru virus, synthetic bacteria that destroy the energy cohesion of those without bodies, turning them into dust. Dwellers released it upon the city-state without warning, ending over a million in one day. Thatâ s when the war began. Thatâ s when we moved into the sky and built Phelastia. Now, both sides have sustained immense losses and pushed our civilizations to the brink of extinction. We have the technology to destroy the Dwellers and they have the ability to destroy us. Mutually assured destruction. We are at a stalemate in our political ideologies. We must move forward in peace.â

Vixtan and two Phelastian guards marched into the room. One carried a white robe, which it placed over Shooka Ellaâ s shoulders.

â It is a gesture of good faith to arrive early,â Vixtan said. â It shows our eagerness and willingness to sign.â

Confusion stirred Jamieâ s thoughts. â Where are we going?â

â Earth,â Shooka Ella replied, his voice dropping from oratory to determinate. â It is time to finalize the treaty.â

The group headed through the courtyard, the city gates, down the silver walkway, and into the puffy cloudscape. They approached a path of white flagstones that led to a hole in the cloud surface perhaps eight feet in diameter. Jamie stepped to the edge and looked down. The opening tunneled through the thick, cloudy interior. Far below, she saw patches of brown earth framed by dried out gullies and rocky dunes.

Shooka Ella lowered his head and touched his chin to his chest. He jerked his shoulders and his uniform detached and fell to the ground. His cloud hung in the air with his robe attached by some unseen force. Two Phelastian guards also detached their uniforms. Vixtan stuffed the uniforms in a pouch in the robe, stepped away from the group, and headed back to the city.

The robe is made of a special material that allows it to bond with my energy, Shooka Ella projected into Jamieâ s mind as he floated beside her. *Step into me.*

â What?â

It is the only way to travel to Earth.

She glanced down the hole again, summoned her bravery, and entered into the cloud of Shooka Ella. Her body exploded into sparks that quickly faded. She raised her hand in front of her face and saw nothing.

They lifted off the ground, floated over the opening, and dropped like a sack filled with water. At first, the interior cloud lining was milky-white, but as they lowered into dirtier stacks, the tunnel walls turned gray. Black soot darkened the last thousand yards.

Jamie/Shooka Ella exited the hole and flew through warm, soupy air that held an onion odor similar to the Dweller prison. Blue bolts of lightning tore across the gray, griddled expanse. Thunder rumbled in the distance. From their vantage point in the sky, Earth was the color of dried blood and littered with treacherous rocks. Petrified skeletons of torn wood stood where trees used to be. Twisted black branches sprawled like stone snakes. Jamie examined the western sky. Mountains loomed dark against the horizon. Turbulent squalls of cloud rolled around their peaks.

Shooka Ella sped over crests of boulders toward a flat mount high atop a summit. Jamieâ s sight tracked over the area. Cliffs plunged down around clusters of jagged stone that protruded like sharks teeth around the perimeter. Patches of prickly grass were visible against the granite face of the cliff.

As they got closer, she saw a large oval table centered in a ring of flared torches. The tableâ s smooth black surface reflected the flames like a witchâ s cauldron.

This is the Shrine of Bella, the holiest place in the Dweller Empire. Dwellers released the first Ru virus here. Dweller Emperor Bella started the war, and he died fighting it. It is only fitting that we end the violence at this location.

Shooka Ella settled to the ground.

Core and Zare will arrive shortly.

Jamie separated from Shooka Ella and watched millions of multi-colored specks curdle and form into her body. She patted herself to make certain she was solid. Shooka Ella and the soldiers sifted into their uniforms and handed her the treaty.

Core emerged from behind a column of rocks accompanied by two armed Dwellers. They strode to the table. Core towered over Shooka Ella, Jamie, and the other Phelastians. Shooka Ella kept his regal composure.

â Where is Zare?â Shooka Ella asked.

â Donâ t you know?â Core growled. â Zare ended in your prison. I will admit it was clever of you to hide him there.â

Core eyed Jamie and twitched his lip into a snarl. Saliva dripped from his jaw in a thin, pus-colored strand.

â Fen Ta, are you ready to perform your duties?â Core asked.

Jamie nodded and felt blood drain from her face.

Shooka Ella looked at Core and spoke calmly, â Let us proceed.â

Core stood at one end of the table. Shooka Ella stood at the other.

â Who is taking Zareâ s place?â Shooka Ella asked.

â No one,â Core gurred. â I alone speak for the entire Dweller Empire. Fen Ta, do you have the treaty?â

Jamie glanced nervously at Shooka Ella. He nodded assuredly.

She concentrated on keeping her hand steady as she placed the treaty on the table. Core snatched it from her fingertips and looked it over hastily. His eyes crinkled.

â I am not for signing this treaty!â he stated. â If I had my way, Phelastia would be a pile of rubble and its citizens rotting from Ru!â Core glared at Shooka Ella. â And your Ru-plagued body would be kept in a glass jar at the entrance to my cave.â

Phelastian soldiers tensed. Dweller soldiers shifted to offensive postures.

â Nevertheless,â Core continued. â I am the leader of my people, and to be a great leader one must follow the wants of the masses. And they, for reasons I do not understand, have forgotten the divine principles behind this ancient war.â

â Peace is the only way our two civilizations can survive,â Shooka Ella said. â You know as well as I the fighting cannot continue. It is time to ring in a new era. Let us benefit from each other and learn from each other, instead of taking away.â

â Learn from each other!â Core roared.

He punched his fists against the table for emphasis and spilled the flask of Krishka. Phelastian soldiers raised and aimed their weapons. Dweller guards raised and aimed theirs.

â I would fight to my end to destroy you!â Core roared. â You, who sit safe atop the clouds, existing forever on the simple pursuits of knowledge and discovery! You prejudge and discriminate against us because we are not blessed with your infinite life spans and ability to ride the strings. You frolic in your sky-palace while generations of Dwellers succeed each other on this miserable, dead planet. You have nothing to gain from peace except for us to stop producing Ru!â

Core turned to Jamie and smacked his claw against his chest. â We should be next line in the evolution of humankind, not Phelastians! Humans are primal animals who thrive on the struggle to survive; this struggle is what makes us unique in the universe. We are not meant to become gas clouds living forever in the sky!â

Core stomped from the table, his eyes blazing.

Shooka Ella widened his arms. â Peace will allow both our races to evolve separately into two unique but different species.â His voice was strained but steady. â It is not logical to want to destroy something that poses no threat.â

â I agree,â Jamie muttered.

Core spun around and curled his lips, exposing teeth. â You know nothing, Fen Ta! Phelastiaâ s very existence is a threat to us! It is only a matter of time until Phelastians see the Dwellers as pests and exterminate us without conscience.â

â We would never commit an act of genocide!â Shooka Ella stated. â We are a peace-loving society!â

â How can the Dweller Empire be certain?â Core said, and lumbered back to the table. â I am bound to sign this treaty because I represent my people and this is what they desire. There is no other reason. Peace will reign, but it will be an uneasy peace, until Phelastians have proven trustworthy.â

â Fen Ta,â Shooka Ella said, firmly. â Your role is to observe the signing. Move to the left of Core.â

Jamie puckered up her courage and edged to the side of the huge beast. Core glanced down and bared his teeth at her. Fear of the creature boiled within.

Shooka Ella stepped around to the other side of the table and refilled the flask of Krishka.

â Stop!â Core stated, and spun around to his guards. â Watch them!â

Dweller guards aimed their weapons before the Phelastian guards had a chance to raise theirs.

â Core, what are you doing?â Shooka Ella questioned. â We have worked so hard for this. Would you sacrifice your position, your people, for your own ego and personal beliefs?â

Core stomped around the table and up to Shooka Ella. His face twisted in contempt.

â My job is to protect my people,â he growled. â I will sign this scrap, but only if you allow my empire free and total access in and out of Phelastia. That is the only way we can be certain of your

sincerity.â

Shooka Ellaâ s smooth face formed into jagged lines. â That was not part of the agreement.â

â Agreements change! You have the means to visit Earth at your every whim, should we not also have the same right to visit your world? Total access to your great city will prove to my people that you are genuine in your quest for lasting peace.â

Thunder boomed in the distance. Core retrieved a hunk of raw meat from a pouch on his belt and bit off a chunk.

â Take all the time you need to think it over,â he said. Scraps of pink flesh stuck in the spaces between his incisors. â But if any of you leave the Shrine of Bella, I will consider it an act of war.â

Shooka Ella took Jamie by the arm and led her away from the table.

I cannot allow Core access into Phelastia, he projected. *The risk for sabotage is too great. Dwellers are pure, primal beings with no regard for any life but their own. Uniting must take time, generationsâ ¦ if ever.*

â What else can you do?â she whispered. â You donâ t want the war to continue.â

The price for peace may be too high. â Core!â Shooka Ella shouted and spun around. â Letâ s talk.â

They returned to the table. Core glanced at his guards and they relaxed their aggressive stances.

â Do we have an agreement?â Core asked.

Shooka Ella took the treaty and walked to one of the torches. He held the paper close to the flame while glaring at Core. â Would you destroy everything weâ ve worked for by making demands you know I cannot honor? I cannot, and will not, agree to free access to Phelastia by the Dweller empire. This treaty aims for peace, not cohabitation.â

Core snarled and a drop of saliva splat onto the table.

â I have an idea,â Jamie offered.

â This issue is not one that requires the Fen Ta,â Shooka Ella said, sharply.

â Let the Fen Ta speak,â Core growled. â Speak, Fen Ta.â

Jamieâ s whole body trembled. She looked at Shooka Ella, cleared her throat, and prepared her thoughts to explain the concept of integration. The process of slowly introducing the culture of the other so citizens can gradually understand and accept the differences. Sheâ d recently learned about it in social studies class.

Fighting fear, she drew a deep breath. â I think allowing access is possible ifâ ¦ â

She heard what sounded like sedate rainfall and felt drops hit her face. She looked up but saw only a thick layer of clouds. More raindrops kissed her skin. She touched her face; it was dry. So was the surrounding ground.

An invisible, steady rainfall pelted her. She looked at Core, then at Shooka Ella. Nausea slapped her belly.

â Fen Ta!â she heard Shooka Ella shout. â You must not go back! Fight it! Fight the urge to wake up!â

She looked down and watched her legs disappear up to her knees. Her thighs and waist vanished next in quick succession. Her vision blurred. She glanced up, barely able to make out something that had stepped around the rock perimeter: a human about her size with a brown shirt and mane of brown hair. She could not make out the face.

â Two Fen Taâ s!â Core roared. â What trickery is this? This is war!â

Chapter 5

Jamie woke up with the dream of Phelastia clinging to her mind. She opened her eyes. Bloated storm clouds drifted overhead and drained steady rain upon the orchard. She got to her feet, half-expecting to see her body behind her, but she saw only its impression in the matted grass with her math book getting soaked beside it.

Had it been a dream? No! It was real!

She looked at her arm. The mosquito bite was gone. And strangely, she was wearing a blue T-shirt.

â Shooka Ella?â she whispered.

Falling rain answered her.

â Shooka Ella?â

A sparrow huddled in the lower branches of the apple tree. Cicada vibrated in the thick tufts of grass clustered around the trunk.

Rain burst into a downpour. She grabbed the math book, shoved it under her shirt, and raced across the field to her bike. She peddled fast and within minutes had gone six blocks to her house. Dripping wet, she left her bike on the front porch and immediately climbed the stairs to her bedroom. She closed the door, stripped, slipped on sweat pants and a gray sweatshirt, and then dialed the telephone.

â Hello?â a woman answered.

â Hi, Mrs. Madison, itâ s Jamie. Is Tim there?â

â Timâ s away for the weekend hiking with his father. Heâ ll be home Monday night.â

â Mondayâ ¦ uh, okay.â She sunk dejectedly that her best friend wasnâ t around. â Iâ ll call back. Bye, Mrs. Madison.â

Jamie hung up.

â I canâ t wait until Monday,â she said aloud. â How can I wait till Monday?â

She dropped backward on her bed and sprawled her arms in frustration. She closed her eyes and tried to picture the peace talks in her mind; force herself to relax; to sleep. Nothing happened.

Frustrated, she hopped up and sat on the edge of the mattress. Her mind was spinning. Everything sheâ d ever believed about reality had been shattered. She needed to talk to someone. Someone who could possibly help. Someone who might actually believe her.

Someone who might end up being more trouble than heâ s worth, she thought.

Although he lived close, it had been nearly six months since sheâ d last spoken with Dan Larson. Theyâ d been friends once, but now their paths rarely crossed since that week went he went missing from his home and then was discovered a few miles away. He enrolled in a private military academy soon after that and disappeared out of her life.

This is going to be trouble, she thought. *But heâ s all Iâ ve got.*

She dragged herself to the telephone and dialed.

â Hello?â a man answered.

She grimaced into the receiver. â Hi, is Dan there?â

â This is him.â

â Dan?â She found her throat blocked and cleared it. â Itâ s Jamie.â

â Jamie!â he exclaimed, encouragingly. â Wow, itâ s been forever. How are you?â

She paused. â To tell you the truthâ ¦ not good.â

â Why? Whatâ s wrong?â

â This is gonna sound strange, but can you meet me somewhere? I really need to talk.â

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Chapter 6

Dan had agreed to meet her at the McDonalds next to the photo shop in one hour. She went early and sat at a booth fidgeting her fingers, waiting. Aromas of grease and French fries permeated the air. The chewed end of a white straw dangled from her lips. She listened to the background conversations of other patrons as they ate.

Through the rain-streaked glass, she watched a tall, handsome teenager wearing a safari shirt and khaki jeans stroll across the street and enter the restaurant. His coarse black hair was wet, but neatly trimmed and his face was clean and clear. He sauntered over.

â Hey!â he said.

Jamieâ s stomach came alive with butterflies. â Dan?â

â What ?â he said. â You donâ t recognize me?â

â Hardly,â Jamie nearly gasped. â What happened? I meanâ ¦ when did you cut your hair?â

â Bout six months ago. Had too for my new school.â

He slid into the booth, rubbed and massaged his hands. He eyed her cup of soda and the full container of fries.

â Youâ re not eating?â he asked.

â Iâ m not hungry.â

â Well, Iâ m starved. Let me get a double cheeseburger. Iâ ll be right back.â

Dan hopped from the booth and strolled to the counter. Jamie watched him order and then return with a tray. He sat down across from her, unwrapped the cheeseburger from its paper coffin, and took a huge bite. Ketchup squirted onto the front of his shirt.

â So, whatâ s up?â he asked around a mouthful of food while dabbing at his chest with a napkin. A red stain remained. â Why the sudden call?â

â Will you promise to keep this a secret?â she asked, her tone strained but steady.

Dan swallowed. â Of course.â

Jamie drew a deep breath and launched into her story. By the time Dan finished the cheeseburger she had finished telling him what she had experienced earlier in the day.

Dan put down what remained of the cheeseburger and spread his arms across the back of the booth with the expansiveness of a cat.

â Let me think about this a minute.â He glanced at a blonde girl passing by the window. â This might be a stretch of the imagination, but I thinkâ ¦â He paused dramatically and then said simply, â You were asleep.â

â It wasnâ t a dream!â she snapped. â Iâ ve never had a dream like that! That vivid and detailed! I remember everything, even smells! And it was in color. People donâ t dream in color, do they?â

Danâ s attention glued onto the blonde girl as she stepped inside the restaurant. He rubbed his hand through his hair until it stood like tiny flames and gave the blonde girl a long look.

Jamie noticed. Her anger swelled.

â Listen, Dan,â she said. â I gotta go!â

â What? So soon?â

â Yeah, why? What do you care?â

â Look, itâ s not that I donâ t believe you had this dreamâ ¦ or whatever it was. Itâ s just thatâ ¦ Iâ ¦ uhâ ¦â

â Whatever!â she said, with a biting tone. â Thanks for your input!â

She rose from the booth.

â Wait? Whatâ d I do wrong?â

She stood with her hands on her hips, glowering. â You havenâ t changed a bit! Always gotta look at someone prettier!â

She stormed toward the door.

â Jamie, wait!â Dan said, loud enough to pause her. â Iâ m sorry.â

She spun around.

â Iâ ll see ya sometime,â she said, and headed out the door.

Chapter 7

Jamie sat at her desk with her head in her hands and stared at the waterfall screensaver on her computer. Calling Dan had been a mistake. People donâ t change on the inside just because their physical appearance does. He was still a jerk.

The clock read 5:15 p.m. Exhaustion from the dayâ s events sunk into her bones. She inhaled a deep breath through her nose, closed her eyes, and emptied her lungs in a long sigh. Her mind began to drift. Muscles in her body relaxed.

Sleep came.

A quick feeling of nausea and wave of pins and needles flowed over her. A faint odor of smoke tickled her nose. She opened her eyes. The sun was a pinpoint smear of light against a dreary, polluted sky.

She snapped up. She was wearing the gray sweatshirt.

In the distance, it appeared as if a giant fist had come down and smashed Phelastia. Most of the huge, white skyscrapers and massive gates were now giant slabs of crumbled granite and marble. The glass dome that had enclosed the city lay in a huge, jagged pile around the perimeter. Some of the buildings were still smoldering, releasing stringy trails of smoke into the air.

Jamie ran through the haze toward the entrance. The silver path had dissolved into a dried, cracked gully. She climbed over smashed pillars, wove between huge pieces of razor-sharp dome, and raced into the crumbled ruins of the courtyard. Marble was powdery and loose. She stopped a moment to catch her breath and saw a human form scurry alongside the devastated fountain. There was a lot of smoke, but she noticed the human had a mane of brown hair and was wearing a blue shirt. There was a red spot on its back.

â Hey!â Jamie shouted.

The human scaled a broken wall and disappeared into the decimated surroundings.

â Wait!â she yelled, and ran after it a few steps. â I just want to talk

toÂ–â â

She slowed to a stop and her jaw dropped with horror. Hundreds of dead Dwellers lay around the buildings their faces contorted in agonized expressions of pain. She saw the entire front wall of the hospital had crumbled. Thousands of beds were smashed against the far side. White dust coated the floor like sand.

She stepped inside and banged her knee on a chunk of marble.

â Ow!â Her voice echoed through the huge space.

â Whoâ s there,â someone wheezed.

Her blood turned cold. Psychically, she felt sudden sheets of agony.

â Jamie,â she whispered, and her eyes welled with tears.

â Fen Ta,â the voice strained. â It is I, Vixtan. I am here.â

She saw a bed positioned on an angle against a pile of other beds. A withered Phelastian was on the floor propped up against a pillow, a metal tube by its side. Half its body had already disintegrated into dust and the other half had turned translucent. Only a dim outline of its form filled what remained of its shredded uniform.

Jamie ran up beside Vixtan.

â What happened?â Jamie asked. â How could this have happened?â

Vixtan turned what was left of his head in her direction. His eyes had already powdered, leaving two empty, skull-like sockets.

â You . . . you donâ t look good,â Jamie said.

â I am of no consequence. Matters that are more important than I are at stake. Have you returned on your own?â

â I fell asleep and woke up here.â

â Core did not abduct you?â

â No, how could heâ â

â It may be too late.â Vixtan slumped. Nonexistence is cycling in the vortex. Everything will end if we canâ t break open the time curve continuum.â

â What are you talking about?â Jamie shook her head with confusion. â Vixtan, how did this happen?â

â Dwellers tricked us.â He coughed and his arms turned to powder. â When the alternate you appeared at the treaty signing Core accused Shooka Ella of sending the original you to infiltrate the Dweller caves. With no way to prove where the original you went, Shooka Ella had to agree to Coreâ s demands for the signing to continue. Dwellers were allowed access into Phelastia.â

â An alternate me?â

Vixtan coughed again and more of him sprinkled to the ground. His pain shot into Jamieâ s mind.

He drew a ragged breath. â After the treaty was signed, Core took Shooka Ella, the alternate you, and the security team prisoner, and then headed to Phelastia proclaiming a new peace. He told the gate-guards that Shooka Ella, the alternate you, and our security team, were staying on Earth as guests, and to extend to him that same courtesy. The first Dwellers who arrived brought two gifts with them, a massive bomb and a newer, deadlier form of the Ru virus. Somehow, they had found out we had a vaccine for the old virus. We had no choice but to retaliate.â

Vixtanâ s head lolled. â Core assassinated Shooka Ella and the alternate youâ â

â Vixtan! Vixtan!â Jamie shouted, trying to rouse him. â What happens to me?â

The remainder of his body disintegrated into a white pile of dust. Remnants of his uniform dropped on top.

A tingling nausea built inside Jamieâ s belly. She heard her motherâ s voice call her name as a distant echo. Her surroundings wavered. She reached over and deftly grabbed a handful of Vixtanâ s powder.

The Phelastian hospital dissolved into darkness and the smell of roasting chicken overspread the nothingness.

â Jamie!â he mother shouted. â Dinner!â

Jamie opened her eyes, raised her head from her desk, and blinked. She was home. She unclasped her hand. A small pile of dust glowed with a dull white light in her cupped palm. She was wearing the brown button down shirt. The mosquito bite was back.

â Coming!â she responded.

She grabbed an empty drink container, emptied Vixtanâ s dust, screwed on the cap, stashed it in her desk drawer, and headed downstairs. A plate of chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans waited at the table. She sat down across from her mom and stared at it, not feeling hungry. She swished her food from side to side.

â You okay?â her mom asked.

â Huh? Oh, yeah. Iâ m fine.â

â You sure?â

Jamie pushed the plate toward the center of the table. Her thoughts spun with confusion. â May I be excused? Iâ ll eat later.â

Her mom nodded, but had a stern look of concern on her face.

Jamie took her plate to the counter, wrapped it in plastic, put it in the refrigerator, and walked back up to her bedroom. She closed the door and immediately dialed Danâ s telephone number.

â Hello?â

â Dan, itâ s Jamie.â

â Look, Jamie, Iâ m sorry about this afternoon. I wasnâ t really looking at that otherâ â

â I donâ t care about this afternoon!â

Dan paused. â Oh. Then whatâ s up?â

â Can you come over to my house sometime later tonight after my momâ s asleep?â

â Sure, why?â

â I canâ t talk about it over the phone. Just make sure you come over tonight and be really quiet.â

â Okay. What time?â

â Eleven.â

Chapter 8

All the lights in the house were out except for her second floor bedroom. Jamie paced. 12:35 a.m. and still no sign of Dan. She cursed herself for thinking she could depend on him and couldnâ t wait for Tim to come home.

She heard a sharp tap on the window and pulled back the peach-colored drapes. Relief washed over her. Dan crouched below next to some bushes. She slid up the pane.

â Hey,â he said, and dropped a couple of small stones that he had in his hand.

Her index finger flew to her lips. â Shh. Stay there. If my mom knew you were here this late, sheâ d freak.â

Jamie shut off her light, tiptoed down the stairs, and unlocked the front door.

â Whereâ ve you been?â she asked, heatedly.

â I had to help my mom paint the bathroom. Took us until now to finish.â

â Oh.â Her anger subsided. â Come in. But be quiet.â

Dan followed her into the dark house and up the stairs to her bedroom. She closed the door, went to her desk, opened the drawer, and took out the container. Vixtanâ s dust spread along the bottom and illuminated the room with a pale, ghostly glow.

â Whatâ s that?â he asked.

â This,â she said, and felt sadness at the memory of Vixtanâ s demise. â Is a dead Phelastian.â

Danâ s eyebrows shot up. His mouth dropped and he looked at her with pure astonishment.

â Canâ t be,â he murmured.

â Proof,â Jamie said, resolutely.

â Then itâ s true?â Dan took a step back as if the dust posed a danger. â Everything you told me?â

Jamie nodded.

â Did you kill it?â

â Of course not! I fell asleep before dinner andâ ¦â She hesitated, scratched at the mosquito bite, and stared at a bare spot on the wall. â The cityâ s been destroyed.â

â Destroyed? How?â

He step forward and took the container from her. The light from the dust fluctuated in intensity. Dan put the container on the desk and the light dimmed.

â There was a warâ â she began, and a floorboard creaked in the hallway.

Jamieâ s heart leapt into her throat.

â My momâ s awake!â she stated, in a harsh whisper. â Quick, get under the bed!â

Dan dropped to the floor and tunneled through a pile of dirty clothes into the dusty recess. Jamie rolled onto the mattress, closed her eyes to slits, and pulled the covers to her chin. A moment later, she heard another creak and a thin slice of hallway light brightened the room. The small silhouette of her mom stood in the doorway.

Jamieâ s heart fluttered. She gripped the covers. On the desk, the container glowed with milky phosphorescence. Her mom noticed it and stepped quietly into the room and up to the desk. Dan slid further beneath the bed. Jamie lay tense and motionless.

Her mom touched the container and the dust brightened. She lifted the container and examined the dust. Her face distorted with worry. She glanced at Jamie and then put the container down. Her mom stepped out, stood uncertainly in the doorway, and then closed the door behind her.

Jamie listened to her momâ s footsteps grow faint down the hallway and then waited a few seconds before crawling from the bed. Dan shimmied from his cramped hiding place.

â Here,â she whispered, and handed the container to him. â You keep it for now. Iâ ll tell my mom you came by early this morning and picked it up. That you got the dust at the science store in the mall.â

Dan grabbed the container and stuffed it under his shirt. The front of his shirt glowed.

â Man, this is weird stuff,â he said.

â Wait a few minutes before you leave,â Jamie whispered. â Until I know my momâ s gone back to bed.â

â Iâ m not goinâ out the front door.â

â Whereâ â

He kissed her quickly on the cheek, stepped to the open window, and lifted his leg over the sill. Jamie felt her face blush.

â Call me in the morning,â he said, and stepped gently onto the roof.

He reached out to a tree branch, climbed over to the trunk, and swung down to the grass.

Jamie watched until his profile disappeared down the street. Her thoughts zoomed inside her head, flashed to the incredible destruction of Phelastia, the treaty, Core, Vixtanâ s dust; and a little to that kiss.

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Chapter 9

Jamie tossed restlessly under the bedcovers. She couldnâ t fall asleep. 2:00 a.m. beamed from the alarm clock. She fluffed the pillow for the hundredth time and breathed out a long sigh. Finally, her muscles began to relax as exhaustion took over. Her body vibrated.

Soft cottony mist brushed her leg. She opened her eyes to discover she was resting on cloudscape. She scrambled to her feet. She was dressed in jeans and the gray sweatshirt shirt. The mosquito bite was gone.

She shaded her eyes and gazed in the direction of Phelastia. The city glimmered in the distance, clean and sparkling in the diamond sunlight. She rubbed her eyes and peered at it again.

â Impossible,â she muttered.

She walked onto the silver path toward the high, solid gates, which were unguarded and open slightly. An eerie feeling of unease dripped down her spine as she stepped inside.

The grounds were empty except for a few twirling, tumbleweed-like balls of Phelastian clouds that seemed not to notice her presence. She walked across the marble courtyard to Shooka Ellaâ s building. She pushed open the doors and continued down the hallway to his chambers. She knocked on those doors and pushed them open.

â Hello?â she called. â Anyone here?â

â I am here.â

Shooka Ella stood statuesque by the window, glaring out over the courtyard.

â Youâ re alive!â she exclaimed. â This is crazy! How did you repair Phelastia so quickly?â

â You are not part of this time level,â he replied, somberly.

â Huh?â Jamie cocked her head. â What do you mean?â

He turned from the window. â The vortex that brought you here is closing. Somehow, your spirit got caught in the closure frequencies. You are now being bounced through time and injected into fluctuating dimensions.â

Jamie scratched her head. â I donâ t understand. This isnâ t where I was before?â

â No.â

â Then where am I?â

â I donâ t know. Perhaps an alternate future past. Perhaps you are not the real you. Perhaps none of this really exists. All I am certain of is that this incarnation of you is not a part of this time level.â

â Where is everyone?â she asked.

â The others are here in the clouds. I am the only one in Phelastia wearing a uniform since I am the only one who knew you might arrive.

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