

CHAPTER 11: ASSISTANCE

Log date: November 4, 9999 of the Eternal Era

Location: The *Vaughn*

Log note: A single point of light can unravel a great deal of darkness

THE RECEIPT OF A MESSAGE was staggering news. Monroe and Merlin were in different galaxies when the news arrived, but they both received word at the same time. Within the span of an hour they had put aside their other tasks and met one another on the *Vaughn* in order to analyze this long-awaited transmission.

They were not the only ones to hear the news. The information had also been sent to Star City University, and was received by the engineering department with great joy. At last there was some new data to analyze! This was good news indeed. Although the message was not sent to any reporters, they quickly learned of it from the engineers at the school. By the time Monroe and Merlin once again stepped on board the *Vaughn*, the news was making its way across all of mankind.

Monroe had already brought up a holoscreen and was studying it when Merlin appeared beside him. "It is good to see you again, old friend," Merlin said.

Monroe warmly shook his hand. "And it is good to see you as well. It's been, what, nine months?"

"That is correct. I saw you at the Crystal Flame. You were leading a tour, I believe. I wanted to stay and talk but I was on a mission and could not tarry."

"I understand. There's an interesting story behind that little episode. I don't normally give tours, you know, but – well, perhaps another time. I'm sure we both have much to tell each other, but that can wait! Have you had a chance to examine the message?"

"Not in any level of detail. I only briefly glanced over the data. It looks quite complex. What have you found?"

Monroe gestured at the screen. "Have a look for yourself. I'm afraid it's quite alien, in more ways than one."

Merlin stared at the data on the screen. The communications device that they left on board the *Vaughn* had captured the message, but could not decode it. The message did not match any protocol that it understood. Since the transmission could not be interpreted, its raw data was dumped to the screen. Monroe presented the message in several different formats in an attempt to make sense of it, but none of them made a difference. The more Merlin stared at the screen the less he understood what he was seeing. "What is that supposed to be? Are those random numbers, or is there some sort of hidden meaning?"

"I have no idea," Monroe replied. "I'm not even sure where to begin. I've never seen a puzzle quite like this before."

"I suppose this was inevitable," Merlin said at last. "Based on what we already knew, we should have expected this data to be cryptic. After all, messages can be encoded in many different ways. There are different packet structures, different message headers, and different encoding schemes. In our civilization we've standardized messages and have ensured that all technological races communicate in the same way. This race, though, is not a part of our community. They have

developed their own message format and encoding scheme. If you think about it, the fact that we cannot understand this message is actually a hopeful sign. It indicates that it truly is from the aliens themselves. If it was from any other source we would be able to decode it with ease."

"I agree. But surely we can find some way to translate it. After all, these numbers must represent individual letters in some sort of alphabet. Given that all races share the same language, that should make our job simple. We no longer live in the era of Babel and confusion. All we need to do is treat the message as a cypher."

"Not necessarily. There are many possible interpretations of this data. Text messages are not the only kind of transmission. What if this message is in audio or visual format? That would present a completely different decoding challenge, as there is nearly an infinite number of ways to turn sound and light into digital data. This could even be a binary message that is intended for the ship itself. We have no idea what kind of information we're dealing with, and that will make it much more difficult to decode."

Monroe made some gestures in front of the screen and brought up a different set of data. "Now that is interesting. Do you see that?"

"That is puzzling. If that is correct, it means that the message is not in a digital format at all. What we have received is an analog message. That is quite peculiar! Digital messages have been the standard for this entire Age. In fact, they were standard back in the days of the Spanish Empire. This race must be isolated indeed."

"And yet they have invented very advanced nanites," Monroe pointed out. "It simply makes no sense. Why use such an old message technology?"

"This civilization must have developed along different lines from ours. They have a different history, so they produced different technology."

"Or perhaps there is something fundamentally different about them. Given the fact that interpreting this message is essentially going to be a decryption exercise, it might be wise to bring in some experts. We need some technical people who can dive into this technology and find out what is going on."

"I'm sure that the engineering students at Star City University are already working on it," Merlin replied. "If they discover anything they will surely let us know. But I don't think we've exhausted all the possibilities yet. Let us do a little investigation of our own before we seek another expert resource. This may not be as difficult a problem as it seems."

The two men connected to the Diano Corporation's extensive communications archive and searched for a match. Unfortunately, nothing turned up. The message format was completely unknown.

"That is not conclusive, of course," Merlin commented. "The archive only records message formats from this Era. We only have limited data from the old universe – and no data from the future, of course. If this ship is from the Rangers or the Spanish Empire then it is quite possible it is using a format that has been lost."

"That seems highly unlikely. Surely if our ancestors possessed this level of technology there would have been some record of it! I find it easier to believe that this ship is from the future than to believe it is from the past."

"I agree. I am merely pointing out that a negative result is not conclusive. Our search must continue. Since there is no exact match, we must now dive into the realm of pattern recognition. Can we determine the content type?"

The two men set to work – but were interrupted a few hours later when the *Vaughn* received another message. To their surprise, the new message was identical to the old one. They were even more surprised when this situation repeated itself. Every few days, at random intervals, the message was received yet again. It was a very perplexing situation.

Since they could not get a fix on the source of the incoming transmission, they focused their efforts on the decryption process. The two men tried all sorts of algorithms to decode the message – as did the engineers at Star City University. They first attempted to treat the messages as text, and employed numerous ways to convert the numbers into letters. But nothing that they came up with was intelligible. Each decoding technique resulted in a long and meaningless stream of characters. The results never even came close to making sense.

Next they attempted to decode the image as visual information. They assigned colors to specific numbers and tried to render the data as a visual stream. But after thousands of attempts and weeks of work, using different resolutions and decoding mechanisms, they came up with nothing. Every attempt resulted in a random, constantly shifting pattern of color. Nothing recognizable was ever found.

“Are we sure that this message is intelligent?” Monroe asked at last.

“The numbers are not purely random,” Merlin replied. “The data stream does contain information. There is also the fact that this same message is repeated every few days. Someone is deliberately sending this specific set of information to this point in space. We simply need to figure out what they are trying to say.”

“Could it be a matter of compression? Maybe we need to use a different filter.”

“We have tried countless techniques – and the rest of mankind has tried even more. If any of them were even close to working then we should have seen *something* recognizable, but that has not occurred. Besides, this message only contains a small amount of data. That data could represent a long block of text, but it would make a very short video – depending on the resolution and dimensions, of course. If it was intended to be a high-quality video then it couldn't be more than a few seconds long.”

“Which leaves audio,” Monroe replied.

“Or some other type of alien communication that hasn't even occurred to us,” Merlin pointed out.

The two men tried thousands of different ways of converting the stream of numbers into an audio message. Once again they were hampered by the fact that they had no metadata on the stream. By assigning arbitrary conversion values they were able to turn the numbers into sounds, but the results were not promising. No values that they chose translated the data into an actual language. The best they could come up with was some haunting melodies.

“But that tells us nothing,” Merlin commented. “All sorts of numeric sequences can sound fascinating when their numbers are assigned arbitrary audio tones. People have even turned the digits of pi into a song.”

“I know,” Monroe agreed. “We have spent three months working on this and our feeble attempts have never produced anything that might be a language. We haven't found any actual speech. If this truly is an audio message then that brings up two possibilities: either the message contains speech but is using an encoding technique that is unfamiliar to us, or else the message doesn't contain speech at all. Perhaps this message actually is some sort of melody.”

“Exactly. We know nothing about the motivations of the aliens who transmitted the message.

We do not know their priorities or their understanding of the universe. It is entirely possible that it is a simple melody and we have decoded it correctly – but there is no way to prove that. There are too many possible answers, and there is no way to tell which answer is correct. The data that we have is inconclusive.”

“I agree. What we need is a technical expert – someone who excels at understanding the unknown. Someone with incredible brilliance and computational power. I think there is one clear candidate that is superior to all the others.”

“The Artilect,” Merlin agreed. “I am hesitant to ask for his assistance, given his responsibilities, but I believe we can make a reasonable case. So what is the procedure for requesting his aid? In all these years I’ve never had to use his services.”

“I haven’t either. Usually he is reserved for technical problems, and that is not my field. I’m a scholar, not an engineer.”

“Should we start by going to the Diano Corporation? After all, they were the ones who built him. Perhaps Ramon Diano could help us.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Monroe replied. “It’s true that Dr. Mazatl commissioned the Artilect and guided its construction. But the Artilect is his own entity now. He is under the authority of the Administrators, not the Corporation. If we want his help then I think we will have to talk to one of them. They will bring it before the group and vote on it.”

“Doesn’t the Artilect get a say in it?”

“Of course – he is included in all the discussions. I’ve heard that sometimes he comes up with alternate plans that resolve the matter without the use of his resources. But he has never refused a request approved by the Administrators. He was built to obey them, you know.”

Merlin nodded. “That is true. Fortunately for us, you happen to know one of the Administrators. In fact, you knew Amy Stryker back in the old universe! Your connection to her goes into ancient times. I believe she has even helped you in the past – to save the natives of Earth from that genocidal maniac, Evan Maldonado.”

“Yes, that is true. Unfortunately, though, I did not help her in return. I viewed Amy with great suspicion and made her last days harder, not easier. I had a chance to be her friend but I did not take it. I sincerely wish I had made a different choice.”

“But that’s all in the past. Things are different now.”

“I know,” Monroe said. He thought for a moment. “There’s no telling where the Stryker twins might be. They’re rarely at home.”

“But surely the Diano Corporation would know, wouldn’t they? It’s hard to imagine that they are not keeping track of them. I have no doubt that the Twins are working on an important task somewhere, and if that is the case then surely the Corporation is aware of it. They must have the data that we need.”

“It’s a good place to start. If they don’t know then we could always ask Richard Stryker. Surely their father knows where they are.” Monroe made a gesture in front of the holoscreen and brought up the communications console. He established a connection with the Diano Corporation’s network and navigated to the personnel directory. Monroe read over the names for a moment, and then selected Ramon Diano.

“Really?” Merlin asked, surprised. “The founder of the company?”

“If he doesn’t know then no one does,” Monroe explained.

The connection was made. They were on hold for a few minutes, and then Ramon’s face

appeared on the screen. "What a pleasant surprise! It's Monroe Araiza and Merlin Hardin, is it not? I have not had the pleasure of speaking with you for a very long time. How was the Crystal Fire?"

"It was a tremendous experience," Monroe replied. "Thank you very much – and thank you for taking our call. I hope we're not inconveniencing you. I know you are a busy man."

"Not at all! It is always a pleasure to speak with two of the most noted scholars of our time. I have heard that you are investigating the *Vaughn*; is that true?"

"You are correct. In fact, there has been an exciting development! The ship has started receiving regular communications. We believe that the aliens who created the vessel are trying to communicate with it."

"That's what I've been reading in the news. It's quite exciting! Have you been able to decode the messages?"

Monroe shook his head. "I'm afraid not. We have tried many different techniques but nothing has worked. We haven't had any more luck than the rest of the universe. In fact, that's why we're calling. We are looking for some help."

Ramon smiled. "I believe I know where this is going. You have a mysterious signal that cannot be cracked, and you want to hit it with the biggest hammer that has ever been built. That means you want the aid of the Artilect. You're looking for an Administrator."

Monroe nodded. "I was hoping you would know where Amy Stryker is. I'd like to talk to her."

"As a matter of fact, I do. Amy and Amanda are on the Ayalan homeworld. I'm sure Amy will be delighted to see you again. Tell her and her sister that I send them my highest regards."

"Thank you," Monroe replied.

"If I can be of any further assistance please let me know. The mystery that you are investigating is one of the most fascinating ones I've seen! Please let me know if we can provide you with any assistance of any kind. Also, when you have a moment, please stop by and pay us a visit! It's been too long since we have shared a meal together."

"It certainly has," Monroe agreed. "Until next time."

"Until next time," Ramon replied.

After the connection was terminated, Merlin turned to Monroe. "I take it we're off to Ayala?"

"Absolutely."

"I have never been there before, but I've heard it is a fairly large world. Do we know where on Ayala they might be?"

Monroe smiled. "They're the Stryker twins. I think they will be easy enough to find."

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The planet of Ayala was a dense, rocky planet that was completely devoid of all vegetation. It was an enormous world with immense gravity, tucked away in an otherwise uninhabited galaxy in a far corner of the universe. The race that inhabited this strange place was one of the oldest ones in the new Era. When Dr. Temilotzin sent the Nehemiah V probes into space, they discovered this world and its civilization – and were startled to discover that the Ayalans had been there from the beginning. As far as anyone could tell they were the first new citizens of the Eternal Era.

The world was inhabited by only a single life form – the Ayalans. The planet orbited a white dwarf star at a colossal distance of fifty billion miles. The world was extremely cold and had no atmosphere. Other planets were filled with trees and grass; this one was populated with crystals of all

shapes and sizes.

The Ayalans were a peculiar race. They appeared as small glowing points of light that zipped through the air with ease. Each one glowed a different color. Although their colors could shift, depending on their mood and level of emotion, each one had a dedicated hue that they emitted. They seemed to come in all colors of the rainbow. The Ayalans could talk, but they had no hands or arms or legs. Mankind began calling them wisps, for that is what they looked like – small points of light that lit up a dark and cold world.

To the Ayalans, however, their world was not cold or dark; instead it was their playground. They had the amazing ability to phase into solid matter and animate it. They could merge with the crystals that dotted the landscape and reform them into any shape they desired. Their structures did not resemble the houses or skyscrapers that populated mankind's world, but they were still beautiful in their own right, and they fulfilled the needs of the wisps.

The Ayalans were different in another way as well. Other races grew and multiplied, but the Ayalans did not. They had a fixed number – 16,383. They were equally divided into eight different clans. One clan had one fewer members than the rest, a fact that puzzled the race of men. The Ayalans themselves had no explanation for it. Until mankind came and began teaching them, the Ayalans had no sense of history or the past. All they knew was the present.

Some thought that one of the wisps had left the planet on an epic journey of adventure and discovery. Perhaps this wisp was a leader among its race – a visionary pioneer who sought to blaze new trails. Or maybe he was simply hiding in the depths of the planet, out of the sight of men. After all, the wisps did not count themselves. They were too busy enjoying their home to be concerned about numbers and statistics. If the wise knew the answer to this riddle they did not share it.

In the early days, after their initial discovery, mankind spent a lot of time working with this new and curious race. However, men quickly learned that this race was still young. The wisps had little interest in learning, discovery, and advancement. They were content to enjoy their youth and play among the crystals. Since the Ayalans were faring well and were not in need of help, the race of men turned their attention elsewhere. After all, the universe was filled with things to do, and there was no need to help someone who did not need it. The day would come when the Ayalans would grow out of their childhood and begin asking questions, and when that day came the race of men would be there for them. But for now they let them play.

On February 9, Amy and Amanda Stryker were sitting at the top of a cliff that overlooked one of the eight Ayalan factions. From their vantage point they could view a sea of crystals that glowed and shimmered in the darkness. The planet was cold and devoid of atmosphere, but this did not inconvenience either of the twins. Even in the old universe their nanites enabled them to survive in any environment. Their new, incorruptible forms only made that even easier.

When Monroe and Merlin transported themselves to the Ayalan homeworld, they had no problem finding the only other human beings on the planet. Their nanites located the twins almost instantly. The men quickly stepped through space and appeared a few feet behind them.

Amanda turned around to see who had appeared. When she saw them she immediately stood up. “Monroe!” she exclaimed. She reached out and hugged him. “What a fantastic surprise. And you must be Merlin. I've heard so much about you! How are you doing?”

“Quite well, thank you. Am I interrupting something?”

“Not really. We're just sitting here watching the wisps. They're so fascinating! It's like watching

children. The whole world is a joyous wonder to them, and they delight in it. They're such a simple, happy race."

Amy turned to Merlin. "You're here because of the *Vaughn*, aren't you?"

"That is correct," he replied.

"I thought you'd need our help eventually. I've been reading your reports on the ship. They're quite thorough and very precise. Noel uncovered a very difficult mystery, and you have left nothing to chance. You've done an excellent job of analysis."

"Thank you."

Amanda spoke up. "I'm so glad you're getting us involved! I was really hoping we'd get a chance to join in on all the fun. So how can we help?"

Merlin spoke up. "Actually, miss, what we need is the help of a friend of yours. We were hoping that you would introduce us. The truth is we have not been able to interpret the messages the *Vaughn* has been receiving. We have collected a lot of data but so far we have not made any sense of it. We're not technical people, you know. Therefore, we wanted to see if the Artillect could help us put the pieces together. We simply do not know what to do next."

"I see," Amy said. "So what you really want is an Administrator who can approve your project request."

"Precisely. This is, after all, a worthy cause and a great mystery. Who better to explore its secrets than the mightiest thinking machine ever devised?"

Amy looked at her sister. "What do you think?"

"Well, obviously, we should help them! This is a really amazing project and has *fun* written all over it. I can't wait to meet the builders of the *Vaughn* – for all we know they might be rock monsters or something. You just never know, do you? But before we give this problem to the Artillect I'd like to try to solve it myself. How could we pass up a great chance like this?"

Monroe spoke up. "I mean no offense, but is this really worthy of your time? I have no doubt that the Artillect could solve this riddle easily."

"Oh, I'm sure he could," Amanda agreed. "He's quite smart. But really, where's the fun in that? It almost feels like cheating."

Amy nodded. "You have a good point. You know, we're not really doing anything important right now. We could take a few days to go study the *Vaughn*. After reading so much about it I'd kind of like to see it for myself."

"Exactly! We can hop on board and do a little investigating. If we can't crack the mystery then we can go visit the Artillect and ask him for help. And that's not all. We can even bring along a friend!"

Monroe spoke up. "A friend? Do you mean the Sentinel?"

Amanda laughed. "No, not the Sentinel. As much as I love Steve, that would kind of be like cheating. He never misses anything, you know? Besides, he's busy right now helping Miles find the Black Bottle. No, I was actually talking about Velvet Dawn."

"Who?" Merlin asked.

"She's a wisp. She helped us a few years ago and we promised her that one day we'd repay her by taking her along on one of our adventures."

Monroe spoke up. "I'm a bit surprised. I did not realize that any of the wisps possessed curiosity or a drive for exploration. Has any Ayalan ever left this world?"

"It doesn't happen very often," Amy agreed. "Normally we don't take any alien offworld until their race has develop that capability on their own – unless it becomes clear that they're not a

technological race, in which case Noel builds Gates for them so they can get around. With the wisps it's just too soon to tell what they're going to grow into."

"Right," Amanda said. "But taking her with us *would* be a lot of fun. And we did promise her! Promises must be kept, you know."

"True and true," Amy agreed.

"Wait a minute," Monroe interrupted. "Wisps have genders?"

Amanda smiled. "That is an excellent question, isn't it? We know that they are basically living points of light, and light isn't usually associated with a gender. None of the wisps on this world have reproduced, as far as we know – the population hasn't changed since this place was discovered. But that doesn't mean they *can't* reproduce. I think there are all sorts of things the wisps might be able to do once they mature a bit."

Amy spoke up. "Besides, it just feels so wrong to call Velvet an 'it'. I mean, *rocks* are 'its'. It's so cold and impersonal. She deserves a little more warmth than that."

Merlin spoke up. "I think it is admirable that you wish to bring your friend with you, but won't it seem rather boring to her? After all, the *Vaughn* is a rather cold and sterile vessel! There isn't going to be much for her to look at."

Amanda laughed. "The Ayalans are young, Merlin. To them *everything* is wondrous and amazing. Most of them have never left their planet, or been in space, or seen a spaceship before. Velvet Dawn will definitely *not* be bored. I don't think they even understand that concept! I bet they could entertain themselves for years with just a cardboard box."

"We should try that sometime," Amy commented.

"Very well," Monroe replied. "I trust your judgment. Do you want me to explain what we've found so far, or do you wish to get your friend first?"

"We'll get her and be right back," Amanda said.

The two girls then vanished.

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Amy and Amanda found Velvet Dawn deep within the crystal city. She was a bright purple point of light that was busily zipping around a large green crystal.

"What are you doing?" Amy asked.

"Oh, just staring at this crystal," Velvet replied. "These crystalline entities are so mysterious, you know! They're the giant, quiet citizens of our world. They're always growing and never talking about it. What do you suppose they're thinking about?"

Amanda laughed. "Crystals aren't really alive, Velvet. At least, not like you and I are. They don't have minds and they don't think thoughts. They're just rocks."

"Are they happy?" Velvet asked. "I *do* hope they're happy. We appreciate them, you know. Ayala wouldn't be the same without them. They're beautiful and majestic, and they offer a comforting physical presence. And it's so much fun to make them dance."

"I'm sure they're happy," Amanda replied, smiling.

"Do crystals ever go anywhere?" Velvet asked. "Without us being inside them, I mean. I've never seen them move, but that doesn't mean they don't move around when I'm not looking."

Amy shook her head. "No, I'm afraid they stay rooted in one place. The truth is they lead rather monotonous lives. But speaking of moving, how would you like to go on a trip?"

Velvet Dawn zipped excitedly through the air and hovered in front of Amy. "To where? Have you found something new? There's so much I haven't explored yet! The world is such a big place. How can any of us explore a whole world?"

"Do you remember a few years ago when you helped us solve the mystery of the Whispering Shard?"

"You mean that weird talking thing you found in my clan's village? Yes, I remember. That was fun! I haven't found any more, though."

"That's because there was only one," Amy explained. "Anyway, you helped us figure out its purpose and put it to work. We told you that in return, you could go with us on our next adventure. Remember?"

Velvet Dawn glowed brightly. "You mean it's time?"

"If you're not busy. Now, if you have other things going on then we can wait."

"You would *wait* on me?" Velvet Dawn asked, astonished. "But why?"

Amanda spoke up. "Sure. I mean, why wouldn't we?"

"Why, *because!* You are two of the Redeemed ones. Your race rules over all of creation with the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord has put your race over all other races. You Redeemed are incredibly old – older than this universe, even. You have great power and so many important things to do. But I'm just a simple, lowly wisp who stares at crystals and rocks and elementals. I don't have anything important going on. If anything, I am the one who should be waiting on you."

Amanda laughed. "You know, Velvet, if you're not busy then there's no need for anyone to wait on anyone! You can just come with us and we'll get started."

"Then let's go!" Velvet Dawn exclaimed. "Only – how do we get there? Do I need to follow you? Is there some path through the skies that we need to take? I've never gone into the void before. I'm not sure that I know how."

Amy smiled. "Don't worry. We'll handle the transportation."

The three of them then vanished.

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Amy, Amanda, and Velvet reappeared at the top of the cliff. They found Monroe and Merlin watching the clan below.

Monroe spoke up. "You know, you're absolutely right. It is quite peaceful and relaxing to watch the Ayalans go about their day. The interplay of their colors through the crystals is quite a sight to see."

Amanda nodded. "It's a nice break from spending all that time reading, isn't it?"

"Why, reading is one of the great joys of life. I have spent many happy and fruitful hours in the pages of a book."

"Oh, I quite agree. But sometimes you need to leave your books behind and go out into Creation. That is where all the action is – out in reality."

Amy spoke up. "Which, if you think about it, was one of the huge problems with Lane's vaults. He could not offer mankind anything of substance. The fantasies that he created were poisonous and led to ruin. In a universe that reflected the glory of God, he chose to dig a hole in the ground and create a corrupt dream in his own image. It was a foolish mistake."

Velvet Dawn spoke up. "What are books?"

Merlin looked surprised. "You mean you've never seen a book before?"

"Our race does not have such things. We are young, you know. You don't happen to have one I can look at, do you?"

"I can make one," Merlin offered. Using the nanites in his bloodstream, he materialized a thick blue hardback book and levitated it over to Velvet. "Here you go. This is my most recent work."

Amanda eyed the title. "*On The Use Of Polymorphic Nanites In Industrial Manufacturing*. Goodness! Really, Merlin?"

"Sorry. I don't usually write books for children."

While Merlin held the book in the air, Velvet hovered over to the book and phased inside it. The book immediately came alive and began glowing a brilliant purple color. It then opened and its pages began to turn.

Velvet's voice came out of the book. "Oh, right! I remember hearing about these. You fill these with words and the book keeps them safe. Then when someone opens the book, they see all the words and the book talks to them. These symbols on the page are words, right? Oh – and I see pictures!"

"Right," Amy said. "In other worlds there are professors who teach people how to understand the symbols and learn what they have to say. Your race hasn't developed writing yet. That's something we're going to teach you so you can help us."

Velvet exited the book. It immediately stopped glowing. "Is it fun?" Velvet asked.

Merlin made a gesture with his hand, and the book vanished. "Reading is very rewarding. A good book can both entertain and educate. This skill will be a valuable addition to your civilization."

"I love things of value! So when do we get started?"

Amanda laughed. "We have some other things to do first, you know. You haven't even been properly introduced yet! Velvet Dawn, this is Monroe Araiza and Merlin Hardin. They are two friends of mine who are here because they need our help investigating a mystery. A spaceship is giving them messages, and they need help understanding where those messages are coming from."

"Ooh, that *does* sound exciting. I've never been on a spaceship before! And it's nice to meet your friends. Are Monroe and Merlin friends from the old universe?"

"Yes and no," Amanda replied. "I never met either of them while I was still there. Merlin died while my sister and I were traveling through time, and I died before shortly after arriving in the 73rd century. Amy did get to know Monroe, though. Toward the end of our old universe she helped him save the lives of the people of Earth."

Velvet Dawn looked surprised. "Do you mean you *died*? What's it like?"

"It's bad. I don't recommend it. I'm very glad that death is not a part of *this* universe. God put an end to it at the Great White Throne judgment. No one else will ever die."

"But why did you die?"

"Carroll Lane killed me," Amanda explained. "He trapped me in a star system and used a Nehemiah IV probe to blow up the star. My body was vaporized. Amy survived because she wasn't with me at the time."

"But that's not very nice! Why would he do that?"

Amanda sighed. "Carroll Lane was full of darkness and corruption. He hated reality and spent his life living in a make-believe world. When my sister and I came to his planet he was afraid that we would take away his fantasy, so he killed me and the rest of my family in order to stop us. Amy is the only one who survived."

"That's terrible! But I don't understand. Why would he do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"

"Because he hated God. In the old universe most people hated the Lord and were in rebellion against Him. Our ancestors, Adam and Eve, chose to disobey God. Adam's sin was passed on to his descendents, making our entire race wicked and broken. To us it was only natural to do evil things."

Velvet spoke up. "That's why the Lord Jesus Christ became a man and died for your people, right? To save you and make you righteous. And that's why you are called the *Redeemed*. Because He redeemed you."

Monroe spoke up. "So you have heard the gospel!"

"Of course," Amy replied. "All races know what God has done for mankind. You must not get out very often! Every race is fascinated by the gospel."

"But no other race needs to be saved."

"True. But it is still the greatest story ever told, and it will never be forgotten. That God would die for sinful men – it is the greatest wonder of all."

"So what about this spaceship?" Velvet asked.

Monroe spoke up. "If you wish, I would be happy to take you there and show you what we've discovered so far. All we have found are dead ends at the moment, but perhaps you can find something that we missed."

"Absolutely," Amanda agreed. "After all, we have plenty of time."

Amy interrupted. "Until May 3, that is. That's when we have our reunion in Ahexotl Tower, remember?"

"Goodness!" Monroe exclaimed. "You're quite right – I had forgotten all about that. I think we are all supposed to be there. I'm looking forward to it. I won't miss it."

"And neither shall I," Merlin agreed.

"I'm ready!" Velvet announced. "Let's go take a trip into outer space. This is going to be great!"

Monroe smiled. A moment later the entire group vanished.