



PARADOX



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By Aaron Johnson

I could barely see anything. Ash and smoke made every breath feel like torture, as I struggled to stay conscious. Howling flames burst forth from doors and windows, their harsh tongues lapping at the walls, scorching them black. People lay motionless on the ground around me. I felt like I knew them yet I couldn't recognize who they were. How had everything gone so wrong? I couldn't remember. I couldn't think. My head throbbed and the world seemed to be spinning. I was aware of someone approaching me from behind, grinding something metal against the ground. Before I could turn around there was a rough grunt, followed by a shrill whistle. My world suddenly became nothing but blinding white pain, and the large, pointed end of a sword through my chest. I felt flesh and bone part ways as the blade was wrenched back out. Falling to my back, I looked up to see my attacker. Tears, blood, and ash stained my eyes. All I could make out was the figure of a man looking down, laughing at me. He opened his mouth to speak "BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!" I shot bolt upright, unable to keep myself from yelling. A cold sweat ran down my forehead as I looked around, realizing I was in my bedroom. "Just another dream," I breathed a sigh of relief. When I got myself out of bed, I noticed that there was someone else who had been in the room with me. "Good morning, Artemis." I yawned, sleepily greeting the young maid. "Good morning, Master Isaac." Politely bowing, she kept a pleasant smile on her face. Artemis was a kind young woman who had joined our personal staff around two months ago. She was rather short compared to most considering she was the same age as me, twenty-four, with eyes the same pale blue as the morning sun. She often kept her long blonde hair braided in order to keep it out of the way but despite this, it still brushed the ground as she walked. She served as my Assistant while at home, as well as my sister's Nanny and personal Bodyguard. People with Cybernetic Enhancements are in high demand nowadays, especially in the arms and legs, of which she had both. "I hope you slept better than your recent outburst would imply." Awkwardly, I laughed a little, trying to avoid the subject. Recently, I had begun having extremely vivid dreams and most of them I passed off as just that, dreams. But strangely, that one felt different. Shaking off the uneasy feeling, I took up the pile of neatly folded clothes that had been lain out on my dresser and took them into my prep room to prepare for the day, emerging a few minutes later dressed in a sharp black suit and a golden neck tie. "How has Andrea been treating you? Not too much for you to handle I hope?" Andrea was my little sister. She had become infamous in New

Pangea for chasing off nanny after nanny. Our staff around the house has decreased quite a bit since she's been born. "Not at all, Master Isaac. She seems to have gotten used to me." I nod, picking up my briefcase from the floor and entering a code into the small screen next to the door. With a "HMMM" and a "Whoosh!" the door slid open to reveal a long white path, flanked by a lush green lawn. "Have a nice day, Master Isaac." I stepped into the doorframe, which had just been displaying the image of the front lawn, and the screen bubbled and slurped as I passed through, emerging on to the front lawn. Behind me, the screen whirred as it powered off, changing to a flat black wall. It was a chilly morning and I'll never forget how beautiful the sun looked. The pale blue light cast a misty hue through the glass bubble surrounding New Pangea as it looked down on surface of the planet from it's perch in the upper atmosphere. It was an unfittingly pleasant morning for what would turn out to be the worst day of my life.

The com-device on my wrist buzzed. The image on the little screen showed a picture of my sister Andrea. It was at that point that my quiet morning was viciously interrupted by the shrill yell that greeted me upon answering. "Where do you think you're going?!", Andrea's high pitched voice hollered. "I have to go to work Andrea," I answered, unplugging my ears "You didn't say Good-bye," She whined "That's because you're supposed to be asleep this early in the morning. Besides, I'll be home early today so I'll see you then. Artemis is there if you need anything and Mother is up in her room. Now back to bed for you." With a laugh, I hung up and continued on my way. My walk to work was only a few blocks and on that walk I often encountered morning sun gazers out in the early morning, so I didn't find anything strange about the man walking behind me. I didn't think anything of it when he started taking pictures. The only thing that was slightly strange was that he seemed to be taking more pictures of me than the sunrise. I put the strange man out of my mind as I approached my workplace. The figure of the large, white building loomed in the early morning light. Heading inside, I hurried to the staircase instead of taking the lift. I didn't really need to come in today, at least, not for the same kind of work everyone else was here for. My family's company had handled the distribution of all products that had been approved by the Council as appropriate for the citizens. Basically, if you own anything at all, you got it from us. However, this was not why I was here. Once I reached the third floor landing I stopped and took three steps back down the stairs, then, back to the landing and five steps up the next staircase. I tapped my foot against the wall carefully then suddenly, there was a small beep followed by a small voice "*We need help.*" Looking around to make sure no one was coming I whispered back "And we will save you." With a small *ding* a panel on the wall whirred to life, showing a small, dark room illuminated only by the blue light of the many computer monitors that lined the wall. With a

burble the screen shut off as I passed through it to the small room. The sounds of technology filled the room, dings and whirs came from every monitor. I sat down at the single empty chair that watched over all the monitors. The largest screen, placed in front of the chair, displayed a message *"Please enter the password."* A few clicks later and I was in. Video feeds began opening on each monitor, displaying faces of people from all over New Pangea. I recognized most of them as my fellow co-conspirators but I also spotted a couple new faces among the monitors. "Hello everyone. Glad to see you all could make it." I cleared my throat. "As I'm sure you all know, for reasons unknown to us, any and all association with the surface of the planet below New Pangea, is strictly against the law. But I have reason to believe that there are people down there on the surface that need our help." Quickly, I searched through files on the computer. "This was a broadcast we received from the planet's surface about two months back." I opened the file and clicked play. The audio was garbled and full of static but through it all that could be heard the words *"We need help."* as well as, *"Please save us."* When the playback ended, I returned my gaze to the monitors "The broadcast last for only about one minute before it cuts out but we're positive it came from the planet's surface." One of the new people cut in. He was a younger man who spoke with a rough voice "Alright, so there's someone down on the surface. What are we supposed to do from here? There's no way to get to them. Anyway, they're probably dead by now." From a separate monitor another voice chimed in, my co-founder, Clorica Debry. "You have a valid point, but you see this is exactly the opportunity we've been looking for. It's obvious that the Council is hiding something from us. Why else would they forbid citizens even learning about the planet? We don't even know it's name for goodness sake!" The young man spoke up again. "I don't see what that has to do with this mystery person down there." Holding back a look of rage, Clorica continued, "I was getting to that. If they really wanted to keep whatever they're hiding a secret, they would try and get whoever's down there out as fast as possible before they find anything."

"And that's our plan. You see, we weren't the only ones that received that broadcast. It was heard throughout the entire capital city so, of course, when the Counsel got wind of someone living down there it launched them into a panic. They're sending a team of what is supposed to be sixteen highly trusted members down to the surface with the sole purpose of tracking down whoever sent that message and returning them to New Pangea. Our mission will be to infiltrate this team with as many of us as we can and establish a small transmitter base down on the surface. That way, we can finally discover whatever is being hidden down there. Everyone will be informed of their role on a need-to-know basis. You're dismissed." One by one, each of the monitors snapped off until just Clorica and I remained. Her face wore a look of concern and slight distress, she kept finding excuses to look over her shoulder. *I don't know*

~~why I never thought anything was wrong. I could've stopped it. I could've saved them.~~ "This is it my friend, in just a few short weeks we'll finally obtain what we've been after all this time."

"You know, I've been thinking Isaac, maybe it would be best if we just gave this up now?" I took a step back, in shock after what she had just said. "I mean, small scale stuff in New Pangea is one thing. But we're talking about something much bigger here! Couldn't we just leave it alone? Say we never saw anything and walk away? That would be better for everyone, right?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. This was the woman who had helped me since the very beginning. The one who had, no matter what, backed me up 100%. "What are you saying, Clorica? The plan to go to the surface was your idea to begin with." Eyes watering, she choked out an answer "I'm just trying to protect you Isaac!" A pinch of anger welled up in me. "I'm willing to put myself in that kind of danger for the sake of every living person in New Pangea and now we're closer than ever to finally achieving our goal. We have to be willing to put ourselves on the line!" I was angry now. How could she be backing out on me when we had come so far? "I don't know what's gotten in to you Clorica, but we're going through with the mission. Take some time to get your thoughts straight, then we'll talk."

"Isaac, Wai-" I hung up and cut her off. ~~Why did I get so mad? Why didn't I listen to her?~~ After shutting everything down and gathering my things I got up and headed back out into the main building through the gate door. I felt a small prick in my arm then suddenly, everything went black. When I woke up, I was sitting at a metal table, cuffs digging into my wrists and holding me to the chair. Looking around, I noticed that the room around me was shaped like a cylinder and was just barely large enough for two people. For a long time, I sat there in silence, wondering what had happened. Perhaps I was dreaming again? If only that had been the case. It felt like I had waited an eternity in that room, just sitting and worrying. I had told Artemis that I would be home early today. It must've been hours since then. Someone had to have noticed that I was missing by now, right? Just as I had settled into that thought, a gate door opened behind me. "Mr. Goldtree," a smooth voice glided into the room. Just the words felt like a snake coiling itself around my neck. The man that greeted me upon looking over my shoulder embodied everything I did not want to see at that moment. A tall man, well built with grey hair and a wicked sneer that would make a demon run in fear, slowly strode around to face me at the other end of the table. I recognized him immediately, Daniel Anolden, Chairman and head of the High Council of New Pangea. "You've caused us quite a bit of trouble with your little band of rebels though it wasn't anything we didn't know about." He looked down at me from across the table, his beady eyes drilling holes into my head. Every ounce of my being wanted to tear my eyes away from him and look anywhere else, but I couldn't. I couldn't let him see my

weakness. "Killing me won't change anything. You have no way to track down anyone else. We'll continue to make your life hell even after I'm gone. I'm not alone." Suddenly, he burst out in a violent fit of laughter. "It seems you didn't hear me correctly. You see, you've always been alone." Slowly, he began to circle the table. "We've known about your little operation from the very beginning. In fact, you might say we co-founded it." I had no idea what he was talking about. "We fed your little group every single one of your members. No one has ever been on your side." Furious, I yelled back at him. "Liar!" He sneered. "I'm afraid not. Your 'partner' was all too willing to give us the location of your hidden gate door, what was her name again? Clorica, was it?" He sighed sarcastically and held up his arms. "She was such a faithful pawn. It was quite unfortunate that she had to show weakness right there at the end." I launched myself up only to be held down by the chains. "What have you done with Clorica! What have you done with her!" This evil man had had a wicked smile on his face since the moment he had entered the room but now it seemed like his smile had grown even larger. "Why don't you look for yourself." He clicked a button on the wall and suddenly the walls of the room changed to display a picture of every member of my resistance, then right below it a video showing each of their executions. I watched helplessly as the men and women I had worked with dropped dead, one after another. Their screams echoed off the walls of the small room like ghostly wails. "We obviously had to erase everyone who had been involved with you. We didn't want any seeds of resistance to grow, now would we?" I looked around but the one screen I couldn't find was Clorica. "Where is Clorica? Tell me now!" Suddenly, the room went dark and the small screens were replaced with one large screen. "I love a good movie," he sneered.

What followed made me want to throw up. There she was, sitting with her arms tied to a chair, facing the camera. She had bruises on her face. It looked like she was starved and dehydrated. But how could that be? I had just seen her a few hours ago. Behind the camera, someone could be heard opening a door. "*You don't have to do this. Just stop and think.*" There was a click, like the sound of one of those old gunpowder pistols being loaded. "*You're being controlled! Please, stop!*" Then she said something that chilled me to the core. "*Isaac, it's me. You can trust me, right?*" There was a pause, then the silence was broken by an earsplitting "BANG!" Clorica's body fell limp before a figure stepped in front of the camera. I couldn't see their face at first but when I did, I couldn't believe it. It was me! I didn't understand. There was no way I had done that! "What was that?" I asked, my voice shaking. "That was you my boy! You killed her in cold blood. You can't argue with the video." I couldn't have done that. "What are you talking about? I-I woke up here. That couldn't have been me." The chairman laughed again, a twisted laugh. "Well we had to drug you of course. We had to show you what you were capable of." I didn't understand. My whole world had been torn down in a matter of hours. The

Chairman sat down across from me, that sick grin still plastered across his face. "This is what you can do, Isaac." I shook my head, I opened my mouth to speak but no words would come. Slowly, he got up and strode over to the gate door. "This world is about to change, Mr. Goldtree, and you have a choice to make. The others were expendable nobodies, but you have power in this world." I yanked harder at my chains one more time but to no avail. "What are you trying to do?" I grumbled at the old man. "I'm giving you a way out. Come work under me in my new world. Why do you think I left you alive?" I mustered up all the courage I had and laughed at him this time. "I will never work for you ever again." He sighed and activated the gate door. He stepped through it and once it had shut off, I was alone in silence...for about three seconds. Suddenly, the lights in the room turned red, a horrible alarm began blaring. The Chairman's voice cut through it all, still echoing off the walls of the tiny room. "It's a real shame you feel that way Isaac. You could've had everything you ever wanted. But now I'm afraid you'll have to die just like the rest." As he spoke, I started to hear metal bangs coming from the outside. "You'll die in the place you wanted to visit so very badly." Suddenly, there was a loud scraping sound as the metal walls of the room scratched against the outer walls. The room was now falling rapidly but I could tell I was in some sort of tube since the room was staying upright. Well, it was upright for a while. The grinding sound stopped as I exited the tube but what greeted me next wasn't much better. The room began flipping end over end as it hurtled through the air. It was at that point that I learned that the chair I was in as well as the table, had been bolted to the floor. I lost track of how long I had been falling before there was a sudden, harsh jolt as the room's roof collided with the ground. A blinding white light was all I saw before I lost consciousness, a sensation I was getting quite familiar with.

How I survived that fall while strapped to a metal chair I will never know. The next thing I saw, upon waking up...was sand. "*Sand? Why is there sand on the roof?*" I thought to myself in a haze. Then I realized that I was the one out of place. The chair, somehow, had stayed secured to what had originally been the floor. Now, it left me dangling from the ceiling. Well, it turned out that it wasn't as secure as I had thought. As soon as I made a move to try and escape from my current plight the chair decided to do the same and wrenched itself free from the floor-now-ceiling and sent me face first into the sandy floor. With effort, I removed my head from the sand and was lucky enough to find that the arms of the chair had been bent, allowing me to easily slip my hands out. Rubbing my wrists, I looked around for some sort of exit. The gate door wasn't much of an option now. After about an hour of searching and thinking, I picked up the chair and held it like some sort of battering ram. I never thought much of my physical strength, but I realized then that I had much more of it than I had thought. With the twisted chair, I bashed my way through the weakened wall of the room expecting to meet more sand

on the other side. Instead, all that greeted me was a sea of blinding white light that made me long for the shelter of the crashed pod. I couldn't even look down since the sand under my own feet had now joined its blinding brethren. With my only safe-haven now gone, I decided to venture out into what I guessed was a desert since there was no use staying inside. So, there I went, looking for help in a wasteland where no one could even see. I kept my gaze to the sky so I wouldn't go blind. Suddenly, there was a cloth pulled over my eyes "Great," I thought "Two kidnappings, a massacre and a murder attempt all in one day!" I jerked my head forward, freeing myself from the attacker, only to then be staring straight into a large white dune. "AAAARGGH," I hollered, slapping my hands over my eyes. Then my would-be attacker spoke up. "Would ya hold still! Or d'ya want to fry yer eyes out?" Even with my eyes closed all I could see were big blue dots bouncing around inside my eyelids like a psychedelic circus. With effort, I struggled my way up the steep dune, eyes still closed tight. I heard whoever had grabbed me shouting from the bottom. "Where d'ya think you're going now?" I turned in the direction the voice seemed to come from and hollered "I've already been through one abduction today. Not doing that again." Before I could take another step though, I walked straight into someone. "What! Did they get up here before me?" Suddenly, and without warning, I was hoisted off my feet by the back collar of my shirt before they carried me back down the dune. "Hey! Put me down! Unhand me you buffoon!" I heard a sigh from the other Desertman "Evan, knock him out please? He's not gonna make this easy." As soon as I heard the words 'knock out' I started thrashing about even harder. No way was I about to do that again! I flung my foot backwards into, who I assumed to be Evan's, face. It bounced off and somehow, I was the one who ended up injured! "Oww!" Foot now throbbing, I tried to reason with the two "Look, mayb-" I didn't get very far. "Would you please just shut up! Look pal, we ain't tryin'a hurt cha, we ain't tryin'a rob ya, so would ya quit actin' like yer under attack! Yer the one that wandered into the desert in the middle of the day like some sorta crazy person!"

"Well you're out here aren't you! What does that make you!" The unnamed one let out an angry grunt. "Get him inside Evan. It's too late to head back now." Evan carried me back into the crashed pod. I hadn't made it very far staring up in to the sky. Once inside I was dropped on the ground and heard a crunching noise, like metal being bent. Even with my eyes closed I could tell that the blinding light had receded for the moment and decided to sneak a peek at my current circumstances. The hole I had bashed in the wall had been pulled back together. Light still leaked in through the cracks where the hole had been. One of the desertmen was standing near the hole, trying to cover up more of the light. My eyes turned next to the two people in the room with me. They were identical in size and both wore a brown robe with its hood up over their heads and several white clothes over their shoulders. Along with that, they both

wore thick goggles with tinted lenses. The one on the left also carried a long metal stick of some sort across her back. I guessed that's how they managed to survive out in the light. The two popped the goggles off and removed their hoods and it was at this point that I had to make sure I hadn't hurt my eyes. The two of them looked exactly the same. Every aspect of their faces was mirrored in the others. The similarities even extended to their short, white hair. They seemed to be sisters. While I was trying to figure this out, the one standing closest to me spoke up "So, who are ya? Yer not from 'round 'ere I can see that much. No one is stupid enough to try going out fer a walk in the middle of the day without goggles." Standing to my feet, I tried to recover whatever dignity I had left after stumbling around the desert and introduce myself. "My name is Isaac Goldtree and I'm afraid I'm a little lost at the moment." I dusted myself off and eyed the woman wearily, staying very aware of the large stick on her back. She couldn't have been older than me and her head came to about my shoulder. "And who might you be? I think you owe me that much after that panic you caused outside." She huffed, obviously not happy with my accusation. "That was all yer fault and don't ya even try t'argue!", she yelled back. She took a deep breath and composed herself. "The name's Mira Stroud and that ova there is Evan. We're scavengers from the village of Limberlost", she explained, pointing over her shoulder at the other white haired woman. "I see. You're twins then?" The two looked at each other nervously. "Sure, if that explains it!" Mira quickly changed the subject which only made me wearier. "How 'bout chaself? People don't just a pop up outta nowhere 'round 'ere and yet, 'ere ya are." How was I supposed to explain it? *'Well you see, I led a group of rebels against the most powerful person in the world then murdered my best friend as punishment when he caught me and now I'm presumed dead after being dropped from the sky?'* Yeah, she'd definitely buy that. The still silent Evan now stood at her side, waiting for an answer. "It's a rather long story." Mira laughed and sat down on the ground. "We're 'ere till sundown my friend. We could use somethin' t'pass the time." So, with a reluctant sigh, I sat down with the two desertmen and began to tell them the story. As the hours ticked by, I told them more and more. How I had led the group of rebels with Clorica and how that same group had met an untimely end. When I finished they just stared at me for a long moment before Mira broke the silence. "So now yer stuck 'ere eh?" I nodded. "So what're ya gonna do?" I hadn't thought about that. I couldn't stay here. Daniel and the counsel would tear New Pangea apart. And I couldn't just leave my family, Mother, Father and Andrea, they needed me there. But at the same time, how would I ever get back? I shook my head "I have to get back to New Pangea. I don't know how, but there's too much at stake to just give up." Mira nodded and jumped to her feet. "Alrighty then it's settled, we're goin' wit'cha!", she exclaimed. I reeled back in surprise "Wh-what! This has nothing to do with you guys! It wouldn't be fair for me to drag you into

this." At this, she laughed in my face. "Fair, Shmare. Do ya know how long I've been wantin' to get outta this dump! Besides, I think there's someone in our village that might be able t'get ya started on the right path and uh, ya don't even know where Limberlost is." She had a point. I had no idea where to even begin or where to go. "Well, I suppose your help is better than none at all." Slowly, I got to my feet. "So, when can we go meet this person?" Mira walked over to the crack in the wall and looked out, "If we start out now we'll make it t' Limberlost by 3AM. If we wait any longer we'll have t'wait till tomorrow night to avoid the sun since ya don't have nothin' ta cover yer eyes with. Evan, could you get the door please?" Without a word, Evan got up and walked over to the door. With barely any effort, she bent the metal outwards again to make a hole large enough for us to fit through. I looked to Mira, slightly shocked at just how strong Evan was. All she gave me was an uncomfortable grin. "Guess the metal in this room was pretty damaged huh?", was all she said before heading outside after Evan. I stepped out behind them and stood in the shadow of the crashed pod. "No time to waste", I said and off we went up the dune. When we reached the top of the dune, the sight that greeted us was so beautiful. I would've traded every New Pangean sunrise to see it every day. Just as the sand reflected the sun in the daytime, it reflected the night sky. The dunes had become an ocean of rolling deep purple waves, tipped with pink as the last rays of sun faded away. The stars glistened on the surface like gemstones. Looking off into the horizon, it was hard to tell where the sky ended, and the desert began. We stood there atop the dune, filled with awe and peace from the scene in front of us and as we began our march across the desert, we never could've known the scale of the quest we had just undertaken.

The trip through the desert was much easier now that the sun had gone down. Before long, the village was in sight, just barely peeking up over the top of the dunes. As we got closer I could see lights on in little metal houses as well as in the streets. It didn't seem like the kind of place that slept through the night very often. "Welcome t' Limberlost. Home to the only people crazy enough t'live where ya can't see fer half the day." I had to admit, it was impressive what the villagers had been able to make. All the houses were constructed from large pieces of scrap metal that seemed to have come from New Pangea. There were old pieces of construction equipment being used as supports to hold up houses and even discarded chunks of walkways being used as roofing. The streets were lined with shops and haggling. All the people looked like Mira and Evan. They were all rather short with dark skin as well as stark white hair. "How come everyone has white hair?" I whispered to Mira.

"Side effect of livin' in the extreme sunlight." She explained.

“And what’s the deal with your sister?” I said, continuing to whisper as I looked over my shoulder at the ever-silent Evan. Mira gave an uncomfortable laugh. “Oh yeah, she just...doesn’t talk much.” I nodded, pretending to understand but still eyeing Evan suspiciously.

As I looked around, I noticed that each corner of the town sported a large tower, each mounted with a large gun. I recognized them as early models of Solar Powered Pulse canons, the primary defense of New Pangea. “Where did you manage to find those?”, I asked gesturing to one of the towers.

“Ya like ‘em? Some of mah finest work if I don’ say.” A rapid, high-pitched chirping rang out above the noise of the village and the ground began to shake. “Looks like ya’ll get t’see ‘em in action. C’mon!” Mira took off running, Evan and I following close behind. From the edge of town, we spotted a large creature emerging from the sand. It had a long, worm-like body covered in shaggy white hair and six arms. Its eyes were covered by tinted bubble like spheres and its mouth was adorned with large pincers. “What in The Seven Stars is that!”, I exclaimed as the creature drew closer, swimming through the sand.

“Goggled worm. Nasty things but they ain’t a problem.” The Goggled worm was upon us now, its pincers chirping as it barreled down us. “FIRE!” Suddenly, from out of nowhere, the worm was blasted with a blue-green flash of energy. It let out one more earsplitting chirp before it began to topple over...straight towards us. We dove out of the way as the worm fell between us. Standing up, I dusted myself off and walked around to the other side of the dead worm to check on Mira. Mira was on the ground grabbing Evan by the arm as she tried to free herself from under the worm. It appeared as if Evan hadn’t made it out of the way in time and now her right arm was pinned down under the dead worm. Mira was pulling as hard as she could but Evan wouldn’t budge. “Hey, be careful. You might pull her arm-.” There was a harsh crunch followed by a small squeak and all of a sudden Evan’s arm had completely come off. “There ya go. C’mon, we better go getcha a new one.” Small sparks were popping from where Evan’s arm used to be. Cords and wires dangled out from the socket. Mira noticed my odd looks as Evan picked herself up off the ground “Oh, Heya Isaac! So, remember when I told ya that Evan and I were sisters?” I nodded. “Well, I mighta told a tiny little lie. She’s kinda.....a robot. Ok glad we got dat all cleared up!” And with that she paraded on past me into town. When I started following her, she told me that “*It’s gonna take mah a while t’build a new arm. Ya should go visit the town elder. He might be able t’help ya!*” I went around the village asking people where I could find the elder but all anyone would say was, “Oh he’ll find ya if he wants to.”

I was as confused as ever now. I had thought that I had run out of places to look when a young boy suddenly ran up to me. He couldn't have been much older than Andrea. "Ya wanna see th'elder, yeah? Yew'll follow me then, yeah? Try an' keep up!" The boy spun on his heels and took off down an alleyway.

"Hey! Wait a second!", I shouted, taking off after him. Whoever this elder was, he sure had a strange way of sending messages. I kept chasing the child as he raced down side streets and alleyways until finally I turned a corner and he was gone. At the end of the alley was a door. There was nothing seemingly special about the door, yet it seemed to beckon me closer. The door itself wasn't moving, it was more like the space around the door seemed to be shaking. It seemed like the air had become cold as I approached the door and I felt like a huge weight was pressing down on my back as I drew closer. Heart racing, I grasped the handle and wrenched the door open. The room behind the door was small and dimly lit with just one candle and the moonlight poured in from an open window. Sitting in front of the window was an old man. His face was ancient and his eyes were piercing but also loving and wise. At his side sat a young man and woman, as well as the child that had led me here. "Enter, Isaac Goldtree. There is much of which we must speak." The old man's voice seemed to shake the room and sent shivers up my spine.

The weight on my back became greater as I closed the door behind me and sat on the ground in front of the old man. "I am the Elder of this village, the man whose name has been lost to time, and you, the one who fell, have sought an audience with me. For what purpose have you come?" My mouth was as dry as the desert. Something about the Elder felt strange. It was like I couldn't bring myself to look directly at him.

"I-I've come to ask a question if I may?"

"You needn't say any more. You've come seeking a way back to your home in the sky, correct?" I couldn't help but be a bit shocked. There was no way he could've known that's what I was after. "I can tell you what you wish to know in time. But for now, you will listen, for what I am about to tell you will be critical to your success." I had no choice but to hear the Elder's story so I sat and listened as best I could. "Long before we arrived on the planet there lived a people named the Engosis. The Engosis were a brilliant people. They harnessed the power of the planet to build a thriving civilization. They created incredible devices far ahead of their times. But of all the wonderful things they created, one stood above all the others. It's name was Peekmereti and with it the

Engosis were able to control time itself.” It sounded too crazy to be true. Controlling time was impossible. “Many people wanted this power for themselves so the machine was sealed away deep underground, never to be moved. But one day, someone broke in, an Engosis by the name of Mire. Mire attempted to gain control over the machine but failed and was captured. In the end, Mire was banished into the Peekmereti, sent to wander time forever. Not long after, the Engosis were wiped out when war visited their home and their devices were lost. All but four.” The Elder made a motion and the man that sat beside him rose and retrieved several strange looking objects. A sword and shield, a bow, a two-handed sword, and a staff with two large square blocks affixed to both ends. “The weapons of the Engosis champions, each with the power to control a type of weather.” I looked at each of the weapons then back to the elder. Before I could say anything the Elder spoke again. “Isaac Goldtree, you wish to return home. Take these tools with you and travel east in search of the Cave of Dreams. There, you will find your way home.”

I looked back to the weapons laid out on the floor. I didn’t have the slightest clue how to use any of them. But I couldn’t see any other option. I picked them up, sword and shield in hand, carrying the rest on my back. “Thank you very much. I hope I will be able to repay you some day.” The Elder said nothing in return.

“The Elder is tired and needs to rest. He will speak no more.”, said the man next to him. “I see. Then, farewell.” I left then with a new objective. I would need to learn more about this Cave of Dreams. But first I needed to find Mira and Evan. They had run off so fast I hadn’t been able to find out where they were going. I searched in vain for a while, looking rather strange carrying the gifts from the Elder. Eventually, the sun began to peek its head up over the tips of the dunes. The villagers packed up their stands and blocked off their windows. The bustling streets had suddenly become like some sort of ghost town. Soon, the only sounds heard were the shrill whistling of the wind and the distant chirping of another Goggled Worm. Through the quiet I heard someone call out from behind me. “Isaac! What’n th’world are ya doin’ jus standin’ there!” I turned around to see Mira running toward me at full speed. “Ya need t’get inside right away! Suns comin’ up and ya don’ wanna be out ‘ere when that happens!” Without stopping, she sprinted past me and rounded a corner. I tried my best to keep up. “Where exactly are we going!”, I yelled after her as we tore through the streets

“My place! We’re gonna have t’wait the day out there!”, she yelled back. Soon we had made it to a small metal hut on the edge of the village and ducked inside just as

the first rays of the blue sun began to hit the town. The room was completely dark when Mira shut the door since the hut had no windows. "Lights please!" She huffed and the room lit up with several small bulbs. Evan sat slumped over in a chair across the room, arm still missing, next to a large desk with a computer and covered in a mess of tools and blueprints. "'ave a seat, we're gonna be here a while." Mira sat down in another chair and did something with the computer. She picked up a small chip from the table and popped it into the computer. I looked around in awe at all the technology that she kept in the small hut.

"Did you build all of this on your own?", I inquired, admiring the complexity of some of the devices. Nodding, Mira continued to mess with the stuff on her screen.

"Everythin' from the computer t'the speakers.", she said without even a glance. She seemed rather preoccupied with whatever she was doing. "Evan, throw the blueprints for right arm model 91-B up on the wall please." My eyes shifted to the figure of Evan slouched in the chair.

A voice answered, seemingly from nowhere, "Displaying blueprints for right arm model 91-B." Suddenly, blueprints were being projected onto the wall space above Mira's desk. She moved the chair over to the desk and began working on what I guessed was the new arm. "So, I betcha have a few questions. Where d'ya wanna start?" I thought for a moment.

"Well, we have some time. How about the beginning?" So, to pass time until the night came, Mira worked and talked. She told me about the AI named 3V.4n, or Evan as she called it, and how she had found it by mistake while scavenging. "I built it a state of the art body and now Evan helps me out 'round here. Ain't that right?", she said with a little laugh.

"Correct, I am very grateful for everything Miss Stroud has done for me.", Evans voice echoed. While Mira was going on at Evan for calling her Miss Stroud, something piqued my interest.

"Evan, I have a question for you if I may?"

"Certainly Mr.Goldtree."

"From what Mira told me, I know she didn't create you. So where were you created?" There was silence for a long while. I turned to Mira. "Did I say something wrong?", I asked, a little worried.

She shook her head. "Ya just didn't know. Evan's memory was corrupted when I found it. It can't seem to recall anything from before it started staying here." It was strange, I thought, if Evan wasn't developed here then where could it have come from? Mira went back to working on the arm in silence for a while before she asked, "Ya've been gone all night, then ya show up wit an antique shop on yer back. What happened? Ya get punked by one a' th'vendors?" I laughed a little and took the objects off my back.

"Not quite." I told her about what happened with the Elder and what he had told me I needed to do. I also explained the weapons as best I could (which wasn't great). "Do you know anything about this Cave of Dreams he talked about?" Mira shook her head. "Evan, do we have anythin' bout somewhere called The Cave of Dreams?" There was a long pause before Evan spoke.

"There is nothing about it in my logs." Mira sighed. "Well that's just perfect. All we have t'go on is a name an' a direction. Guess all we can do is start walkin'". I nodded. We didn't talk much more for a long while until Mira stood up and shouted, "Finished!" With a bit of effort, she hoisted the metal appendage off the table and fitted it to Evan's shoulder. "Perfect fit. Yer ready t'go Evan!" Suddenly, she slapped herself in the forehead. "Oh, wait a minute!" Removing the cloaks from Evans head, she popped open a small hatch in the body's neck and pulled out a small, sand covered cube and tossed it haphazardly across the room. Mira rummaged around in a small drawer beneath the desk until she found another, sandless cube and fitted it into the place where the old one had been. "There, brand new speaker. Now yer all set." There was a slight popping sound coming from the speakers in the room as Evan shut them off. Mira took the chip out of the computer and fitted it into a slot in the back of the body's head. Mira rushed over to the door and cracked it open to get a peek. A good few hours had passed but it was only about noon and it was far too bright to try and leave. So, we decided to stay and rest until the sun went down. I did have one more question for Mira. "We received a transmission from the surface of this planet around two months ago. Do you know anything about that?" Mira clapped her hands together. "So dat fricken thing actually works! I thought I was just talkin' t'midair!" It turns out Mira was desperate to get out of Limberlost. She had built a transmitter to try and get help from New Pangea but it had broken after only a few seconds.

It was a peaceful sleep, there in the dark little hut in the desert. Once night fell, we packed up our stuff and headed out. Mira handed me a pair of goggles like hers and Evan's. "*In case we get stuck out there during th'day!*" I gave Evan and Mira one of the

weapons the Elder had given me. Mira took the staff and Evan, the bow. It was strange though, they told me the weapons were speaking to them. Like they were asking to be taken. I looked down at the shield on my arm. It had never said anything to me. In fact, it looked rather unimpressive compared to the other three. I wondered if the Elder had just given me a plain old sword and shield on accident? Shaking the thought from my head, we pressed on into the night. Even with the sun gone it wasn't exactly easy going. The desert-dwelling creatures hunted us constantly, always just one step behind us. But soon, even they stopped being a problem. What the Elder had told us about the weapons was slowly starting to show itself to be true. It appeared as if Mira's staff had some kind of control over the wind as many Goggled worms quickly discovered. "Well I'll be..." she gasped as she watched a worm be picked up and tossed by a sudden gust. Evan's bow on the other hand showed no similar attributes. Despite that, we all became rather proficient with our respective weapon.

Through the night, we hiked across the desert, fighting off whatever worm or other strange beast came our way. When day came, we stopped for a short rest, but without anywhere to take shelter from the sun it was pointless to just sit around, so we continued on, day and night across the desert. Water was rare and after a week, even Evan was starting to slow down. We all became frustrated with our situation and started taking that frustration out on each other. Our food had already run out, even with just two of us actually eating it. We had started welcoming the Worms since they were the only thing we could eat after a while. "How long does it take to cross the desert on foot this way?", I asked Mira after about two weeks of walking and skating by on whatever we could find.

"How am I supposed to know! No one from Limberlost has ever left the desert before! Or at least they've never felt the need to come back!", she snapped at me. She stopped talking to me for a long while after that. Soon, even the worms stopped coming after us and we made less and less progress every day. Eventually, I lost count of how long we had been walking for. It seemed like years.

One evening, as we were scaling a large dune, Mira collapsed, falling face first over the crest of the dune. Evan and I rushed over to her. "She is suffering from severe dehydration." Evan beeped. Frantically I searched for any sign of water but to no avail. Suddenly, an awful chirping noise rang out from underneath us. The ground began to violently shake as a massive Worm tore up through the sand a few yards away. "Get her away from here! Quickly!" Evan shouted, drawing the bow from her back.

“You can’t do anything to that worm Evan! You don’t even have any arrows!” Evan scooped up Mira in her arms and shoved her into mine. “Then I can’t buy you much time. Now go!” I hesitated a moment then sprinted as fast as I could in the opposite direction. Carrying the unconscious Mira, I hurried up the next dune. I heard the Worm screeching again from behind my back. I glanced over my shoulder and watched at the immense worm effortlessly swat Evan off to the side, sending her crashing into the side of one of the dunes. Without thinking I called out, “Evan!” The worm whirled around, its gaze now fixed on us. It raced towards us with incredible speed, its six arms flailing rapidly across the sand. I kept running but I had no chance of escaping the worm in the sand and it quickly blocked me off. It looked down on me, screeching wildly. Quickly, I put Mira on the ground behind me and took out the sword and shield. I didn’t know what I was going to do but it was my only option now. The worm reeled back and then sprang forward, pincers ready to strike. I raised my shield, bracing myself for the impact. Then, from over my shoulder there came a great burst of light through the fading twilight. It struck the worm and sent it sprawling down the dune. Overhead, clouds began to form and then, rain fell.

“What in the Seven Stars...!” The rain grew, starting as a drizzle, then strengthened into a full downpour. I picked Mira up off the ground and then realized “Evan!” I whirled around to see Evan standing atop the dune across from us, bow in hand. That’s when I figured it out. I smiled to myself, new hope rising in me now. “Mira, wake up. It’s raining. It’s raining in the desert.”

The rain gave us the energy to keep going. On top of that, I had a better grasp of what each weapon did. It seemed like rather than just control the weather, each one could create a different weather condition. I knew Mira’s staff could control the wind but that was too vague, there had to be something we just didn’t know yet. While Evan’s bow could create rain storms. The power of the weapons also seemed to be tied to how much energy the wielder possessed and if the weapon and wielder were separated for too long the weapon would leech energy from whoever wielded it. Mira learned this first hand. My sword however seemed to still be dormant and the final weapon still lacked an owner. But with the fear of dehydration behind us, we pressed on through the seemingly endless desert with new found vigor. Mira was back on her feet but still suffered mildly and was too weak to wield her staff properly. By day, we marched through the heat and the light, by night, we refreshed ourselves under Evan’s rain clouds. Our spirits

“That was not a very wise maneuver, Miss Stroud. I highly recommend you avoid similar actions in the future.” Mira just laughed.

“Oh, come on! I what’s the big d-“. Her sentence was cut short as the door to the cabin slowly creaked open. Through the crack, an old man glared down at her. Mira yelped and jumped back. “Who are you!” she exclaimed.

The old man glared back at her. “Why should I tell you? You’re the one’s that wandered onto my land.” He opened the door a bit more and I was able to get a better look at him. He was old but built strong. He stood a good few inches above us. His face was set like stone, with a firm jaw and chiseled features. I also managed to catch a glimpse of the wall behind him. The New Pangean flag was hung up there. It had been slashed and sliced to bits.

“That flag on your wall, where did you get it?” I asked, pointing to the flag. He looked back at it, then back to me. “You recognize it?” He seemed a little surprised that I knew what it was. I nodded. “It’s the New Pangean flag. It’s where I’m from. It’s also where we’re headed.”

The old man stepped outside and closed the door. “I see. Then you seek to do the impossible.” He sighed and looked us over. “My name is Alexander MoLagoon, former chief technician for the New Pangean military.” Stepping forward, I decided to represent us.

“I’m Isaac Goldtree and these are my companions, Mira Stroud and Evan.” Alexander kept staring at me. “We’re in search of somewhere called the Cave of Dreams. Do you know anything that could help us?” He laughed at my question as if it was the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard. “The Cave of Dreams, huh? I’ve got some advice for you. Don’t waste your time on fairy tales. I searched for that blasted cave for twelve years and I never found so much as a clue.” Mira had been getting more and more agitated ever since this guy had started talking, silently stewing as she waited behind Evan.

“ ‘nd who’s t’say we don’ ‘ave any clues?” she boasted, finally tired of sitting in the back. Alexander raised an eyebrow. “What are you talking about?” Mira stood up straight and smirked. “We know th’cave is somewhere north a’ere. I’d say that’s a pretty good start. It’s probably jus on the other side a’dis forest.” Mira started laughing. “Twelve years an’ ya stopped jus short!” While they continued to argue, I kept my eye on the forest. I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something odd but I couldn’t see what. The branches were lush and green. Berry bushes grew around the base of the trees. “What’s wrong?” Alexander had been watching my staring. I shook my head, trying to get past the strange feeling. “Nothing, it’s just,

something about the forest doesn't feel right." Suddenly, Alexander had a frantic look in his eyes. "Can you see it? Do you know what it is?" I took a step back. "N-no I can't."

The old man's face fell in disappointment before it returned to its normal gloomy composure. "If you all want to go wandering around that death trap of a forest be my guest. But don't expect any help from me when she comes for you." With that, he turned around and went back into the cabin. The three of us looked at each other, questioning what exactly he had meant by *she*. We were a little shaken up by the term 'Death trap' as well but with nowhere else to go, we headed into the woods. It seemed like a welcoming enough place, certainly more than the desert. As we walked, I took in the wonderful view, the lush green leaves hanging from the sturdy branches of the dark brown trees that towered above our heads. Streaks of blue sunlight snuck through the forests canopy and created pale blue patches that peppered the forest floor. "There's notin' spooky 'bout dis place! Dat old guy musta gone nuts out 'ere on his own!" Mira laughed. It was hard to argue with her. Everything about the forest was nothing but peaceful. It was a perfectly picturesque scene, almost too perfect. Everywhere I looked there was something wrong, but I still couldn't tell what. Before I could investigate any further, we stumbled into a clearing in the woods. On the opposite end of the clearing stood a strange wooden building. It was covered in moss and vines. The wooden logs it was built from looked wet and rotted, like they had sat in water for a very long time. It was very out of place since nothing else was even remotely wet. Behind it stood an immense tree. It rose up well above the canopy, but what struck me the most was that if you looked at it right, it looked like a man kneeling on the ground "What the heck is this place?" I thought aloud.

"It appears to be some sort of temple," Evan guessed. "Possibly built by an indigenous people some time ago." From the corner of my eye I could see Mira practically hopping up and down with excitement.

"We should go 'ave a look 'round inside!" she blurted out. "Maybe there's s'more info 'bout the Cave of Dreams!"

Evan nodded in agreement. "I believe it would be a worthwhile venture to take a brief look." I, on the other hand, wanted nothing to do with the strange temple. Of all the things that looked wrong in this forest, this place seemed to be the epicenter. Before I could even put up an argument, Evan and Mira had already made it up the temple stairs and disappeared inside. I knew Mira was a bit rash but this didn't seem like something she would do, Evan even less so. As much I didn't want to go in, I couldn't just let those two wander around that place on their own. Carefully, I followed up the rotted stairs and was surprised to find that they had already

headed in without me. I found them after a while, investigating something on the wall. The inside looked and felt exactly like the outside, the air was cold and thick with the smell of the rot from the wood. The walls were covered in unsettling markings and symbols. Looking closer, one symbol kept repeating itself. It was a pair of eyes except, one eye always had a hand over it. "I hope you've been collecting info like I asked you to Evan." There was a series of small clicks as Evan took several pictures. She had a camera built into the retina in her left eye and had been collecting information about everything we had been doing since our departure from Limberlost. We continued further into the temple and found nothing about the Cave of Dreams. Every room seemed to be completely empty. We had just decided to head back when, on our way, Mira pointed something out.

"I don't think we've been down this way yet." She was looking through a small hole in the wall that lead to a long dark hallway. I hadn't remembered a hallway there when we came in. Something about this was strange, as if things weren't strange enough. "It looks like there's something down there too. Let's go check it out!" She slipped through the small hole and Evan and I followed. At the end of the hallway there was a small green light. I started to feel sick, the feeling I had been getting since we had arrived was getting stronger. Something about this was very wrong. But what was it? I had to figure it out. When we got closer to the light, I could see that it was coming from a green gemstone resting upon a pedestal. The gem was in the shape of an outheld hand and about the same size, like it was waiting for someone to hold it.

"Wow, that sure is one awfully bright rock. It's like when you look at the sun," Mira whispered, ogling at the stone. I approached the pedestal to get a better look, the feeling of dread in my gut suddenly weakening the more I stared at the light. Slowly, I reached out my hand towards the gem. Just as I was about to take hold, something occurred to me. "Wait a minute, what did you just say Mira?"

Mira looked a little confused at my question. "What do you mean?" I moved away from the gem and back towards the other two. "You just did again. '*What do you mean?*' Tell me, Mira, when did you lose your accent?" Mira took a step back, a little twinge of fear in her eyes. "And I finally did it. I figured out what's wrong with this forest." Slowly, I began circling the two of them just like when I would deal with a particularly difficult client back home. "It tricked me at first. Probably because I had never been in an actual forest, but I've got it now."

"Wh-what do you mean?" Mira stuttered.

"That seems to be the phrase of the day, doesn't it? What I mean is that in any usual forest, there's usually more than just *trees* living in it. Yet on my walk here I didn't notice a

single little bird or anything.” Sweat was rolling down Mira’s forehead now. “But I suppose, there would have to actually be tree’s out there first before the wildlife.”

A cruel grimace spread across Mira’s face as she began to cackle. “Ha! You’ve really lost it! Any idiot can see the trees out there!” First rule of being a government-level businessman: Never lose your cool. “Well of course it looks like there are trees out there. But the trick doesn’t work if you realize they’re all the same tree. It looks to me as if someone is managing to project an image of a forest, but it must’ve been hard. I can’t imagine many trees grow around the desert. But suppose you got lucky and found one. You could feasible copy that one tree, oh let’s say, three hundred times into three hundred pictures of the same tree. Cause that’s all they are, pictures. That’s why then never move.” As I had been talking, I had discreetly slid my shield onto my arm and placed myself back in front of the gemstone “One other thing I happened to notice. Evan, my friend, you seem to have broken quite the sweat.” Evan wiped her forehead.

“May I ask why that is so important?”

“Well, no reason. Except, I don’t know many robots that can sweat. Well of course you can’t, you’ve never seen one before how would you know.” Panic filled Evan’s eyes. “And I bet whoever’s behind this whole thing isn’t going to like it very much when I do this.” Quickly, I spun around and smashed my shield down on the gemstone, shattering it to pieces sending the light with it in a flash so bright I had to turn away to shield my eyes. Instantly, the whole room shifted and a scream rang out through the halls of the ancient temple. When I opened my eyes again, it was like I could finally see clearly. I turned around to look where the gem had been to find a nightmarish scene in its place. Mira and Evan were unconscious, being held to the wall high off the ground by a tangle of emerald vines. The vines seemed to be fused to them like wires. The tangle of vines led down the wall to the ground and from there, into the back of an emerald figure who I hadn’t noticed at first. It wore a hood of the same emerald green it was to be made from and seemed to be floating off the ground ever so slightly. “Well, hello there.” I greeted the figure pleasantly. While the illusions themselves had frightened me slightly, the spellcaster itself didn’t seem at all dangerous. “I have to say it’s quite an honor to finally meet you face to face. I mean you are just brilliant. Creating an entire forest all on your own and near perfect replicas of my two friends? That’s just spectacular!” The figure swayed slightly almost like it was flattered. *‘This thing is **alive!** Not just alive, but intelligent!’* The figure pulled back the hood from it’s left arm and showed a harsh brake where a hand used to be. Then it hit me. “Oh, that was your hand! I’m really sorry about that. Not that sorry can fix your hand.” The shattered arm retreated into the cloak and the figure nodded as if to say ‘proceed’. “I don’t think we’re the first people to wander into your forest so you’re probably used to people

bargaining for their lives but I think I can offer you something better than this life you have. I mean, with powers like yours you could help so many people out there!" I gave the figure a pleasant smile. "So if you want, I can take you somewhere better. You won't have to capture people anymore." I looked back to Mira and Evan and saw the vines fused to their heads. "You're connected to them, aren't you? Look into their minds and find that small village in the desert. Can't you feel the love they have for the people there?" The figure was still for a moment. "Come on you beautiful create figure it out," I whispered to myself. Suddenly, the figure looked up, as if it had realized something. "That's right, now you see it. You see how much they did for the village and how much they can't do now that they're gone. Won't you help them? You can do so much more than just rot away in here." Slowly, the vines behind the figure began moving. They released Mira and Evan and placed them both gently on the ground, completely asleep. "Thank you. I know they'll appreciate it when they wake up." I chuckled. Then I remembered something. "Tell me something. If every tree in this forest is just a picture of one other tree, then what's the giant tree you keep out back?" The figure held the back of its hand up to where I think its mouth would be under the hood and its shoulders began to rock slightly, like it was laughing. Silently, it moved to the wall behind it and made a motion like it wanted me to follow.

"Stay away from it!" came a voice from behind me. I looked over my shoulder and standing at the end of the hallway was Alexander brandishing the large, two-handed sword the elder had given me. *'How did he get that!'* Alexander kept pointing the blade at us. I held out my shield and drew my sword but I wasn't sure I would be able to bring myself to use it against another person. Alexander barreled down on me like an oncoming train, bringing the blade of the giant sword down on my shield with so much force I was certain the shield would break and I'd be split in two. But to my surprise, the shield held.

"Do you even know what you're defending, boy!" he growled. Summoning more might than I thought I possessed, I pushed Alexander's blade back. "I'm defending a misunderstood person that deserves a chance at redemption!" I shouted back. Suddenly, my head started pounding, this all felt so familiar! The pounding got worse until I collapsed on the ground. I could hear the sound of Alexander's pounding footsteps as he charged forward, no doubt ready to kill the emerald figure. The ground began to shake as a wall of the emerald vines rose up between us. My thoughts began returning to me as the pounding finally died away and I could stand. Once again, the figure motioned for me to follow it through what I could now see was a small gap in the vines. We hurried through, Mira and Evan carried by the figure's vines, and I found myself at the base of the giant tree. The figure rushed over to the tree and ran its hand

over the trunk. Suddenly, the very earth itself felt like it was tearing in two as the tree began to move. Mouth agape, I watched as the tree rose up on two feet, standing proud like a knight of the forest. "By the Seven Stars..." I whispered. The figure seemed to find amusement in my shock and began laughing again. The golem kneeled and extended its hand for me and the figure to stand on. As it lifted us up in its palm I turned to the figure, "I just realized that I never asked, do you have a name?" The figure held out its palm and from it sprouted many tiny flowers that formed the name *Andrea*. I read it and smiled "Andrea, huh? That's my sister's name too." The golem placed us down on its chest, which extended out quite a bit. Andrea knelt down and placed her hand on the golem. The vines which grew from her back then connected to the golem and green light began to course through it.

"I get it, you pilot this thing. Like your own personal one man army." I walked to the edge of the golem and looked down. From where we were the temple was barely a speck on the ground below. The golem began to walk, its huge strides covering miles at a time. But it wasn't heading towards the desert, instead, it was heading back north, where we had been going. "Andrea, the desert is-" Then it hit me. "Oh I get it, you saw more than just where we had come from, you saw where we were going." Andrea laughed again.

"uunngh...mah head hurts..." I turned around to see Mira propped up on one arm, looking around with understandable confusion. "Also....where am I?" I laughed and walked back to her.

"That's a long story Mira. But I think I've got time to tell you." So, as the golem trekked across the world, its mighty footfalls shaking the earth as it went, I told Mira the story of what had happened since she fell asleep. Eventually, Evan woke up as well and I told her the story as well. "The only thing I can't figure out, is how that Alexander guy got hold of the last weapon."

Mira thought about it for a moment then said, "Maybe it was drawn to him. Like Evan's and mine, just a bit stronger." I nodded, not having any better ideas myself. Mira flopped over "Either way, I'm beat."

I laughed at her. "Tired? You've been asleep practically all day!"

"Well how about you try having your brain infested by magic vines next time!" she scoffed before rolling away and knocking out. I wanted to stay up and try and maybe learn about this mysterious Andrea but soon I also succumbed to sleep and drifted off.

I awoke several hours later to Mira shouting about something. "Would ya look at dat! Them are some huge mountains!" She was saying '*Mountains?*' I thought, still half asleep

'We're nowhere near any mountains.' Then I remembered what had happened in the forest with Andrea. After climbing up onto the golem's shoulder for a better view, I realized how unfamiliar our surroundings were.

"Wow, you can't even see the forest anymore," I mumbled to myself. Just as Mira had said, we were now approaching a large mountain range. As we got closer, I could hear a sound coming from the direction of the mountains. "Is that...someone screaming?" I asked aloud.

"Scans indicate that the mountain's interior is composed of a series of complex cave systems. It is likely the wind creates this sound when it blows through the caves," Evan informed me. I gazed into the mountains. It was certainly a rugged path. This wasn't going to be easy. Then, something caught my eye in the mouth of one of the caves. I could swear for just a moment I saw someone, or something, peering out at us.

"Hey Evan, run a scan for biological life anywhere you can pick up." Evan stood stock still for a moment as she ran the scan. "Only two biological life signs detected, Miss Stroud and yourself. Miss Andrea and myself don't register as biological life." I turned back to the mountains and whatever it was had retreated to the caves. We arrived in just a few paces and the golem lowered us to the ground on its hand since it couldn't pass through the mountains. Mira, Evan and I jumped off and looked around.

"Looks like there's a small path leading through the mountains. That's the way we'll take," I announced as I looked back to Andrea. "I take it, you're not coming with us?" Andrea shook her head dejectedly. She detached her vines from the golem and floated to the ground. "It was an honor to meet you, my friend. I wish you luck and good fortune. Where will you go now? Not back to your temple, I hope." The emerald figure shook her head and pointed back the way we had come. "You're going to Limberlost then?" She nodded gleefully. "When you get there, find the Elder. You can trust him." Andrea nodded again.

"Uh, guys," Mira cut in, "I hate to break up this very touchin' moment, but ya do remember that we still have practically no clues as to where the Cave of Dreams actually is right?" Andrea perked up, like she had remembered something. She reached into her cloak and pulled out a glimmering stone. The stone was shaped like an eye and was made of some iridescent blue gem. In the center where the pupil was, there was a vial of red liquid that shimmered in the sunlight. "This was the eye I saw on the symbol in the temple!" Andrea nodded happily as the emerald flowers sprouted from her hand again and spelled *gift*. I pocketed the gemstone. "Thank you. I'll take good care of it." With that, Andrea floated back into her golem's hand and it lifted her up onto its chest again before it marched off back the

way we came. Meanwhile, Mira, Evan and I turned ourselves to the mountain. The wind kept screaming through the caves, sending chills down our spines and made me question whether that figure I had seen in the cave was actually my imagination.

I took a deep breath, "Alright. Let's go." And we headed into the mountain pass. For a while, nothing happened and we were able to make decent progress. Then, Evan piped up, "Multiple unidentified organic lifeforms detected within twenty-five feet on all sides." Mira and I started looking around. But no matter where we looked, there was nothing but the mountain walls. The screaming from the caves seemed to be slowly getting louder. "Targets closing on all sides, now at twenty feet and closing. Now at fifteen feet and closing. Now at ten feet and closing." We all stood back to back, weapons drawn, all of us searching frantically for any sign of the approaching lifeforms. The screaming was earsplitting and unearthly, as if from the depths of the planet. Something that was never meant to be released. "Targets now at five feet. Four, three, two, one. Zero!" We expected some terrible beast to erupt upon us and tear us to pieces...but nothing came. The screaming died away slowly until the mountains went silent. "Are they gone?" Mira whispered with shaky, frantic breath.

Evan paused. "No organic lifeforms detected." Even after Evan's scan, we stayed back to back, too afraid to move. Eventually we began to slowly continue our way through the pass, constantly checking over our shoulder to make sure nothing was following us. It had been around three hours after the scare that I finally started to calm down when Mira yelped and jumped behind Evan. "Wh-wh-what is th-that?" Mira was pointing at something sticking out from behind the next corner. It looked to be a grey hand or claw of something that definitely wasn't human. "Wait here." I said coldly. Carefully, I inched closer to the hand until I was able to see what it was. "It's alright," I called back, "whatever this thing is, it's dead now." Mira and Evan joined me, Mira still hiding behind Evan.

"What's dat thing?"

"It is not a species recognized in my data base. Its outer skin appears to be covered by a thin layer of a material similar in composition to sheet rock."

"Look at its eyes, they're huge. This thing was never supposed to leave the caves and by the look of that nasty hole it's got in its chest, I'd be willing to bet that it didn't leave by choice."

"Large claws and limber body suggest this is a predatory creature, used to hunting and killing its prey quickly."

"What's this puddle on the ground around it. It's spread way too broadly to be blood."

“Scans indicate its contents to be 10% blood and 90% water. The smaller patches are also water.”

“I ain’t any kinda expert but I don’ think a whole lotta stuff lives ‘round ‘ere. So, would dat make dis thing the apex predator?”

“I could see that being true. But if it is, then what killed it?” We all stood there for a while examining the strange creature until Mira said something. “Hey guy’s, isn’t it gettin’ kinda cold for the middle of the day?” Then Evan got something too.

“Organic lifeform detected approximately one hundred yards north of our current location and closing fast. Now approaching ninety yards.” I had a bad feeling about this and I wasn’t about to stick around to find out why.

“Come on. We should move, now.” I motioned for both of them to follow me and we started heading backwards since our path forwards was blocked. “Target now closing faster. Approaching sixty yards! ETA forty-five seconds.” Now I knew whatever this thing was, it was definitely after us and that was all I needed to take off in a full sprint with the other two right behind me. “Target still approaching! It doesn’t look like we can outrun it Isaac!” Frantically, I looked around for anywhere we could hide.

“Quick, in here!” I exclaimed as I dove into one of the caves and ducked behind a wall. Mira and Evan quickly did the same and once we were all inside, we made no sound. After a while, I thought it was safe to go back outside when I heard footsteps at the cave’s mouth. They stopped right at the door for the longest second in my life, before continuing on its way and we were finally able to breathe again. Again, we decided to just stay there in the cave for a while with no real urge to go back out there. I don’t know what told me that I needed to run. It wasn’t like we couldn’t fight. Evan’s lightning and Mira’s wind were more than enough to get us through the desert so why was this any different? I looked down at my sorry little shield. *‘Was it you? Were you the one telling me to run?’* I knew Mira and Evan had said their weapons had spoken to them, but nothing like that had ever happened with me. I was still pondering this when Mira poked me. “Hey, Isaac. Somethin in yer pocket is glowin’.” I reached into my pocket and pulled out the stone the Andrea had given me. Sure enough, the red vial in the center had caught the light and was shimmering a bit, sending a thin beam of light into the dark of the cave. Not thinking anything of it, I went to put the stone back into my pocket when Evan pointed something out.

“The light isn’t changing.” She said.

I paused “What do you mean the light isn’t changing?” Evan took the stone from me and stood up. She turned the stone every which way and stood in every direction. “No matter where you stand or how you hold it, the light always shines that way into the cave.” I stood up and took the stone back. Sure enough, she had been right. I kept starring into the darkness of the cave, like something inside was beaconing me to come deeper. So, I followed the light from the stone, Mira and Evan followed me, rather confused. The light from the vial changed directions whenever we came to a corner or a fork, always showing us which way to go through the maze of caves inside the mountains. If it wasn’t for the stone, we could’ve been lost in those caves for weeks or maybe even forever. Then the light just stopped at a big flat wall with no other way to proceed.

I shook the stone in frustration. “Oh come on! You lead us all the way down here and then you just stop! You led us to our deaths!” I raised the stone above my head and prepared to slam it down on the ground and shatter it to pieces. Then I remembered what I had told Andrea, *‘I’ll take good care of it.’* So instead I just pounded my fist into the wall. Mira and Evan investigated the wall, seeing if they could find some way around it, but I had lost it again and just sat with my back against the wall. We had come so far only to get trapped underground, in a mountain. I banged the back of my head against the wall out of anger and it cracked hard against a hole in the wall. “Oww..,” I muttered as I turned around to see what I had hit my head on and discover a hole, about two inches in and about the same size as my hand. I looked at it. Why was this one hole here in an otherwise flat wall? Then I held up the stone to get a better look using the light when something clicked, literally and figuratively. I slipped the stone into the hole and suddenly it started glowing with an intense blue-green light. Mira and Evan jumped back as the flat wall slid away and revealed a cavern on the inside. It was covered floor to ceiling in crystals of red, blue and green. The floor was an icy blue dashed with white. In the very back of the cavern was a pool of water carved into the crystal floor and above it was a pedestal holding another Eye Gem that looked practically the same as the one we had used.

“This is it,” I whispered, still in awe of the scene in front of me, “The Cave of Dreams.” We stepped inside and suddenly, something floated down from the ceiling. It was another crystal figure, similar to Andrea except this one was made of the same crystal as the cave around it.

“Greetings, I am Milo, Guardian of Dreams.” It spoke, “You are welcome here in the Cave of Dreams. Here is where anything can become a reality.” I stepped forward. “My name is Isaac Goldtree and these are my friends Mira and Evan. We wish to travel to New Pangea. Can you help us Milo?” The being called Milo moved aside and held out a hand to the pool at the

end of the cave. "Only the ones who walk their true path may see their dreams become reality. Wade into the pool and speak your wish if you believe you walk this path." Suddenly, a cold blast of air rushed through the open mouth of the cave and froze us still.

"Hahaha, well wouldn't you know it. You punks actually managed to find this place all on your own. I guess I was wrong about you." It was Alexander. He had followed us all the way from the temple in the forest, just waiting for us to lead him right to the cave. He sheathed the two-handed sword and strode into the cave slowly. Its power seemed to be a blizzard. But how had he awakened it so fast! "So, all I have to do is step into there and say what I want then bang its mine? Hehehe this was almost too easy." Alexander waded into the pool and looked back at us, "To slow kids. I wish to return to New Pangea with the strength to crush the men in charge so that I can make it my own!" The water around him began to glow white and a beam shot from the pool and engulfed him. Alexander kept laughing madly, "Yes! Yes! It's finally time!" he shouted. Suddenly, the white in the water turned red and the beam turned from a warm glow to a pillar of fire. I could hear the old man's laughs change into horrible cries of pain. Then, in a flash, everything was gone and all that was left was the sparkling water of the pool. We all stared in shock. Even the sword was gone. I looked to Milo. "What happened to him?" I asked in a voice barely above a whisper.

"He did not follow his true path. It seems he strayed from his planned path. This is your last chance to turn back if you fear you shall meet the same fate." I looked to Mira, then to Evan and that moment we decided.

"We need to try." Milo nodded and stepped aside from the pool.

"Then step forward." I walked forward, a little shaken up but still determined and waded into the pool. I took a deep breath, knowing it could be my last. "I wish to travel to New Pangea. To save it!" I honestly didn't know what I had said after I had said it. Everything just became a blur. The pool began to glow and a beam of light shot from the water up to the ceiling, engulfing me in it. Then the water began to change colors. Then everything went black.

"Uggh, my head. I swear I'm getting used to this." Then I realized that I had been laying in a nice comfy bed next to a window that looked down on the planet. I whirled my head around and found that I was back in my own room in New Pangea. Everything looked the same as when I had left even though I must've been gone for months. Well, everything except for Mira and Evan passed out on the floor. I swung my legs out of the bed and stood up. It was strange being back in my own room after so long. Part of me had given up on ever even seeing it again. I looked into my mirror but I didn't recognize the man staring back. His hair was long

and messy and caked with dirt. His clothes were torn and dirty. His face looked like mine, only older. Behind me, Mira stirred. "Why can't we ever wake up somewhere normally?" she grumbled, pulling herself to her feet as Evan began to reboot. "And where are we anyways? Dis ain't no where I recognize. You know dis place Isaac?" I laughed.

"You could say that. I mean, seeing as it's my room, one would hope I would recognize it." I helped Evan get to her feet and we quickly gathered our belongings, some of which had been scattered to various places of the room.

"Has anyone seen my goggles?" Evan asked. We looked around the room for a while until Mira found the goggles underneath the bed.

"Found 'em!" she exclaimed. "Now uh, has anyone seen an Eye Gem layin' around anywhere?"

I looked at her, rather confused. "Didn't we leave that in the cave with Milo?"

Mira laughed nervously. "Of course we left *that* Eye Gem with Milo! I'm talking about the other one! You remember the one that was sitting up on that little pedestal behind the pool, right?" Now I was nervous.

"You didn't take it, did you?" I asked frantically. Mira held up her hands in defense.

"Allow me to explain. After your departure from the cave, Milo gave the Eye Gem to Miss Stroud as a gift. The only misdeed she's committed is misplacing Milos precious gift." Evan shot Mira a disapproving glare and she shrunk away. I sighed.

"Well it isn't in here, that's for sure. But that's alright. No one here would know what to use that thing for anyways. We can look for it later," I said, picking my stuff from the bed and walking over to the gate door. "Now that we're here I have some 'business' to take care of." I punched in a code on the gate door and it whirred to life. What appeared on the screen was an image of a burned hallway, scorched black by flames long since dead. "What?!" I exclaimed in horror.

"Eh, what's th'matter Isaac?" Mira asked walking over to me and looking at the screen. "Where's dis an image from?"

"It's supposed to be from the main hallway but, its completely trashed. Come on, get ready to fight if we have to." I took a step back and held the shield up in front of me. "We charge on the count of three. 1...2...3!" We charged forward through the gate door...one at a time, ready to take on whatever was waiting for us. But there was nothing on the other side

except an empty hallway. "Evan, scan for any signs of life close by." Evan froze as her scanner started working.

"Scans indicate there is a group of eighteen human lifeforms located approximately one hundred sixty feet east." I turned eastward and looked. They must've been around the corner at the end of the hall.

"That might be a rescue party, come on." I started running off towards the end on the hall, Evan and Mira right behind me. We stuck to the wall as we approached where Evan had said the life signs had come from. It was instinct to be cautious now after everything we had gone through. I peeked around the corner to get a look at what I thought was a rescue party. What I saw was a group of maybe twenty armed soldiers. "*What kind of search party is that well armed?*" Something told me these guys weren't here to help us. I listened closely to what the soldiers were saying.

"They're around here somewhere! This is where the signal came from!"

"Spread out! They're somewhere close by!" They were definitely looking for us, but why I didn't know and I wasn't sure I wanted to know either.

"They're after us?" Mira whispered.

"Yeah, and I don't think we should hang around to find out why."

"I suggest a stealth retreat." Evan whispered. Then, one of the soldiers pointed at us "There they are! Get them!" I turned back to Evan.

"How about a mad dash for the nearest exit?" She nodded and we all took off as fast as we could back down the hall with the soldiers right behind us.

"The Chairman just needs us to grab one of them! Kill the rest!" Barked one of them.

"Well, bright side is one of us 'll make it outta dis, right!" Mira shouted as we rounded a corner.

"Not if I've got anything to say about it! We're all making out!" I knew the soldiers were gaining on us and fast. We had to find somewhere to hide. But the only doors in the house were gate doors and they all looked out of commission. "We can't out run those guys forever! Our only shot is to make it to the emergency exit on the other side of the house! It's the only way out so long as it isn't blocked off!"

“Sounds like a good plan t’me!” Mira shouted. We had actually managed to pull away from the soldiers slightly as we rounded a corner. Half-way down the hall, Evan suddenly stopped and took a knee facing back the way we had come. “Evan what’re ya doing! Come on we don’ ‘ave time t’hang ‘round ‘ere!” Evan took her bow off her back and took aim at the corner where the soldiers would come from.

“Then I suggest you both get moving,” was all she said in response.

“Evan don’t be crazy! We can’t just leave you here.” I rushed forward and grabbed her by the shoulder. “Come on! Let’s get moving!” She shrugged me off.

“Your chances of escape are double if I stay here and buy you time.” She looked straight into my eyes, her own aflame with determination. “I’ll join up with you later.” Her eyes weren’t human, but they were alive. I could see in them that she had no intention of rejoining us. She would defend Mira at any cost. I nodded.

“Alright. Mira, let’s go. We have to hurry.” Mira looked at me like I was crazy.

“We’re really just leaving her here?” She asked, stunned.

“Evan will meet up with us later. You know where we’re meeting, right?”

Evan nodded, “The fountain in the center of town. Now go!” We took off at a full sprint. I felt a sadness growing in me. Not for me, but for Mira. She didn’t know there was no fountain in the center of town.

We made it to the emergency exit from there without a problem and hurried outside. Upon arriving however, I immediately wished I had stayed inside. The whole town was in ruins. Buildings were completely destroyed; the ground was cracked and the final embers from monstrous fires were left dying in the streets. My head started pounding again just like it did back in Andrea’s temple. This was just like that dream I had back on the day everything went wrong. But I pushed through it now, I couldn’t stop. “What da heck happened t’dis place?” Mira said, shocked. “And what is that!” She pointed up into the sky where a huge ball of blue energy had just grown from nowhere.

“I have no idea. It looks like it’s right over town hall.” We started running to get closer to the giant ball of energy but as soon as we got around the side of the house, a blast of energy flew past my face. “More soldiers! Go go!” Mira ran ahead of me as I held out my shield, deflecting the blasts as they came. I had to hand it to the Engosis, they sure made equipment that could stand up to anything.

“Watch yerself, Isaac!” Mira shouted. I barely had enough time to get out of her way when she sent a wave of shimmering wind at the soldiers, throwing them into a wall.

“What was that?” I asked, “Your wind has never glowed like that before.” Mira looked at the staff and gave a playful smile.

“Well, I never felt like I had really gotten t’know dis guy. Comin’ up ‘ere, I feel like I mighta changed dat. I can control him better.” She laughed, “My wind changed into sand!” That was it! I never thought of it before since I had never seen one before, but that had to be it! Mira’s staff controlled sandstorms! From there on we stayed hidden, avoiding the soldiers as best we could until we made it to town hall. The ball seemed just slightly smaller and now that we were closer we could see a strange device at the base of the orb. Four pillars on each side seemed to be constricting the orb. Mira and I watched it from behind a building, afraid to get much closer. There was someone at the base of the orb controlling the device.

“Who’s dat?” Mira whispered to me.

“I think its Chairman Anoldn. But what is he doing?” Just then, someone approached the Chairman from the side of the orb. He was tall and carried a large, two-handed sword in a sheath around his waist “No way...”

“There’s no way...” It was Alexander Molagoon. “But we watched him burn up back in the Cave of Dreams!”

“But dat’s th’blizzard sword!” Right then, the Chairman called out.

“Isaac Goldtree. Have you resorted to sneaking around like a common thief?” I stepped out from behind the building and strode out to the center of the cracked walkway. “I would say I was surprised to see you here, but of course, I’ve done this before.” Alexander took a step down the stairway and waited there. “But you’re just as lucky to be here as every time because, you see, you will be one of the few who shall bear witness to the birth of a brand-new universe!” Mira came out and stood next to me.

“What the ‘ell are ya babblin’ ‘bout?” she yelled up at the Chairman. Alexander started grinding his teeth together at just the sight of Mira.

“Well, young lady, this universe is simply too disordered form my taste. It needs someone to lead it all. Just to make sure everyone acts the right way. To make sure everyone stays where they’re supposed to be.” He explained.

“You want to take away people’s free will? Alright, let’s say you figured out some way to do that. Where would you even start?” The Chairman laughed.

“Why, you’re looking at it!” He threw up his arms, gesturing to the massive blue orb. “This miraculous device will give me the power I need to rewrite history! I’ll send myself back to when ‘free will’ wasn’t even a concept and take hold of the universe! To remake it the way it was supposed to be!” He broke into a horrible cackle, utterly pleased with himself. “Oh this is wonderful Isaac, the greatest invention!” he kept laughing.

“I see. But there’s a rather large hole in your plan.” The Chairman glared at me, daring me to continue. “Well you say you need to basically conquer the entire universe. That would mean you’d need to travel to the entire universe correct?”

“What’s your point?”

I laughed a little, “Well, no offense, but you’re definitely getting on in years. How do you expect to travel the entire universe in just a few years, when the concept of space travel hasn’t even been thought of yet?” The chairman started laughing.

“Very good, Isaac! But you see, your problem only exists if I was a human. I am something much more important, a race far too ancient for you primitive apes to even have legends about!”

“You’re one of the Engosis.” The chairman’s calm composure shifted slightly.

“Where did you hear that name?” he hissed.

“Does it really matter? The point is that I know, don’t I? And that device behind you, it’s a Peekmereti or at least a copy of one.” I smirked. I had it all figured out now. “You know, most people call you Chairman out of respect. But I think we’re good enough friends now that we can drop the formalities. How about I call you by your actual name? That alright with you, *Mire?*” The Engosis, Mire growled at us.

“Get rid of them!” he huffed before turning back to the Peekmereti as Alexander leaped from the stairs and came rushing towards me, sword drawn. I held up my shield, ready to block “Not so fast Mista!” shouted Mira as she knocked Alexander aside with a blast of shining sand. Alexander stood back up, more just angry than anything else.

“I’ve been waiting to do this since the moment I saw you,” he hissed.

“Sorry I’m gonna ‘ave t’disappoint cha, but I ain’t got any plans t’die today,” she said with a wink. I rushed forward to help her but I was too slow. Alexander jammed the blade of his sword into the ground and a harsh blizzard whirled up from nowhere, forming a wall between me and them. The blizzard became a mix of snow and sand as Mira kicked up a sandstorm. The sphere of the blinding sand-snow mix was too bright to even look at. “Mira!” I called into the light, not knowing what sort of an answer I was looking for. It was a minute or two before the ball of light finally dispersed in an explosion of blinding force so strong it knocked me off my feet. I pulled myself up and looked to where the ball of light had been. Through the dust, I could see the silhouette of two people, one standing over the other. “Mira?” I called quietly, but no answer came. When the dust settled, I saw Mira, laying on the ground, a gaping hole in her chest, blood running from the corner of her mouth.

“Change of plans,” Alexander said with a snicker as he lifted the barely alive Mira up by the throat. I couldn’t get myself to move. I just kept staring as Alexander carried her to the Peekmereti and threw her in. Her body vanished the second it touched the massive orb. I looked at her staff, laying in a pool of her blood and next to that, her goggles. All the confusion I felt inside me suddenly turned to rage and I threw myself forward at Alexander, brandishing my sword. Alexander held up his own, preparing to block. “HOW DARE YOU! HER LIFE WASN’T YOURS TO TAKE!” I brought the sword down with all the force I had. It collided with Alexander’s with a sharp clang and instantly snapped at the hilt, sending the blade soaring through the air. Alexander smirked before delivering a heavy kick to my gut. I fell back onto the ground, gasping for air. Alexander looked down on me and laughed. “Some hero you turned out to be. Couldn’t even protect your friends when they needed you.” He lifted his sword up preparing to bring it down on me. “Don’t worry. You’ll be joining her soon.” He brought the sword down and I clenched my eyes, waiting for the feeling of the blade piercing me...but it never came. I opened my eyes to see that I was holding out the shield or rather, the shield was holding itself out and stopping Alexander’s blade in its tracks. Light pulsed from the shield and it felt like it was calling me to get up and keep fighting. I bashed the blade away and jumped up. Alexander steadied himself and laughed again. “You’re gonna fight with just a shield?” Just after he said that, time seemed to stop altogether and two men appeared in front of me. I was a little startled to say the least.

“Have no fear, Isaac Goldtree, for we mean you no harm. We are the Engosis. I am Enus.” Then the other one spoke.

“And I am Enoom. We were the first to wield the weapon you hold. I, The Sword of the Moon.”

“And I, The Shield of the Sun. But even we were unable to wield both at the same time. Yet you, a human, were able to do what we Engosis could not.”

“It was written in our times that the one who controlled both the sun and the moon would be the one who would break the cycle of Mire, traveling through time on an endless loop looking for revenge. They would be named, The Eclipse.”

“That man is you, Isaac. You are the Eclipse. It is your duty to defeat Mire and break the cycle.” Enoom reached out and handed me a sword, blade as black as the night sky. Enus reached out and tapped the shield on my arm and in a flash, it had changed and became a brilliant white, emblazoned with the sun. “You may not be The Eclipse that defeats Mire, but you must try.” I nodded.

“Right, I have to try even if I don’t.” Then it hit me, “Wait, I might not defeat him?” Enoom nodded.

“The cycle of Mire is destined to repeat itself over and over until Mire dies of aging. That is how it must end. Every Eclipse must send him back in time here and be sent back with him to pass along the weapons to the next Eclipse. That is how it must be.” My head dropped.

“So the Elder in Limberlost...?”

“That was you, the previous Eclipse.”

“I see. Then I guess it’s time to go. Time has already been written.” Just as I said it, Enus and Enoom vanished and time flowed again. I was ready to fight now. “Well Alexander, that would just be silly. That’s why I have this sword.”

Alexander took a step back in surprise “Where did-“

“Sorry, no time to chat,” I sighed. With new strength, I bashed Alexander in the head with the shield knocking him out cold. “See? Didn’t even need the sword.” Mire began laughing.

“See! I knew it! You’re special Isaac! You’re above the rest of this human trash! Come with me! Come with and rule the universe!” I took a step forward.

“Alright.” Mire looked a little taken aback.

“What?”

“I said alright. Let’s do it. Just answer one question first.” A look of worry spread over Mire’s face.

I shot him a glare with enough ferocity to kill a man. “Where’s my sister?” Mire began to laugh at my question.

“Well, I needed something to power the Peekmereti-“

“So, you used her as fuel?”

“Don’t be so crude. Of course, I didn’t. Take a look for yourself.” He stepped away from the Peekmereti and pointed below it. I looked down and saw the missing Eye Gem, suspended in an energy bubble linked to a Crystal Figure. This one looked much younger though. I didn’t need to think very hard to figure out what was going on. “Why did you need a child?” I said quietly.

“A child’s brain is more creative than an adult, making it easier for them to handle all of time running through their head, seeing as the brain is what powers the Peekmereti.” I looked down at my sister, curled up inside the bubble, her entire body now green. There was nothing I could do.

“How did you bring Alexander back?” I asked.

“I didn’t. I simply pulled him from a different point in his timeline. The Peekmereti has the power to contain the resulting paradox.”

“This is the capital of New Pangea. Where is everyone?” I asked, though I was almost sure of the answer.

“Well, I had to remove them of course. I couldn’t have anyone interfering with my plans.” *Remove*. A psychos word for *killed*.

Silently, I walked back down the steps of the town hall, back to where Mira’s staff and goggles laid and picked them up. Then I went and took the two-handed sword from Alexander. “Where’s Evan?” I asked Mire. “Your soldiers said you needed to keep one of us alive. So, where are you keeping her?” He sneered.

“Right here!” Suddenly, a panel opened up in the ground. Usually that’s where the podium came from when someone gave a city address. But this time, Evan slowly ascended from the ground, bow in hand. Her eyes weren’t alive anymore, like she had been wiped clean. “It’s incredibly easy to rewrite your own programs. Now, I wonder if you can bring yourself to fight against your own friend. 3V.4n, Fire! Kill him!” Evan raised her bow, and aimed it at me. I made no move to block it. I don’t know how but, something in me knew she wouldn’t fire. Evan

just stood there, frozen. Mire got angry. "Didn't you hear me! I said FIRE. FIRE 3V.4n!" Evan suddenly whirled on him.

"m....m...my...na..me..is...Evan." She finally released her arrow, sending a bolt of lightning crashing into the Peekmereti's controls. The orb started to go haywire and everything started to get pulled in.

"No! No not again! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!" Mire yelled. The pull from the orb was so strong, we were all clinging to the controls with everything we had.

"MIRE! AS THE ECLIPSE, I DEEM THIS TIME PROTECTED!" I brought the shield down on Mire's hands hard, knocking him loose. I watched as he fell helplessly into the Peekmereti. "EVAN! GIVE ME YOUR BOW!" I yelled to her. With difficulty, she gave the bow to me.

"IT WAS AN HONOR TO WORK WITH YOU, ISAAC!" She said with a laugh.

"SAME TO YOU! SEE YOU ON THE OTHER SIDE!"

"PERHAPS NOT! I FEAR MY BODY WON'T BE STRONG ENOUGH TO MAKE THE TRIP!" Before I could answer, the pull from the orb became too great and tore Evan's arm off. She fell into the Peekmereti and her body exploded into shards upon contact. All but the chip in her head, which fell into orb. I got ready. I knew it was my turn to fall in now. I watched as Andrea and the Eye Gem were sucked in. The orb in the Peekmereti had gotten smaller now. I eventually figured out the smaller the orb, the further back in time you ended up. But right then I didn't know that. I took one last look around and spotted Enus and Enoom standing above me. They nodded in approval and I knew I had done well. Then, I put on Mira's goggles and let go.

When I woke up, the first thing I remember thinking was, "There's sand...in my mouth." I opened my eyes and looked around. I was back in the blinding desert. "Well, seems as good a place to start as any other," I muttered to myself and off I went. That's it. That's pretty much where my role as The Eclipse ended. But the story isn't over just quite yet. After I arrived in the desert I was found by a group of people who were stranded there after their ship crashed. I also learn it was the year 6000, more than a couple centuries before the year I made it to Limberlost in 6203. I convinced the rest of the people that we should build a village there in the desert. They were unsure at first but eventually, we founded the village of Limberlost. After that, I went on a little journey of my own to find Andrea, but I was never able to find her. I never heard anything else about the Emerald forest. That was the last adventure I went on. After that I settled down, even got married if you can believe that! Our only child was a boy that she

decided to name Milo. Raising a son was weird, especially when your aging has been slowed to a near halt thanks to some weird alien time travel. One day though, Milo left Limberlost without hardly any warning and never came back. He kept telling me, "It's calling me to the mountains." I never found out what happened to him. As the years rolled by I became a bit of a hermit, staying in my home most of the time. The people of Limberlost still looked to me for wisdom and guidance, even if they rarely saw me. One day, a young man from the village burst into my home. "Elder! A lady jus' fallen from th'sky! She's badly hurt and keeps insistin on seein ya."

"Bring her in." I said knowing full well who it was. A few men carried in a battered Mira on a cloth and laid her on the ground. "Leave us," I said to them. Once they had left, I knelt down next to Mira. The gash in her chest was still fresh, like it had just happened. And for her, it had. She looked at me. "Isaac...Yer th'Elder?" I nodded.

"Welcome to the past, Mira." She smiled.

"What happened in New Pangea? Ya beat dat guy didn't cha?" I nodded and held her hand.

"Yes, we did. Me and Evan together." Mira looked around.

"Where is Evan?"

"Her body broke before it made it here. But her chip is out there somewhere, just waiting for you to find it." Mira smiled. Her breathing was getting spotty and I could tell she had seconds, at the most.

"Look at chu. Yer so old now. I wish I could've come back 'ere with ya. But ya gave me the greatest adventure of my life. I couldn' think of a better way t'go." And with that, Mira took one last breath and she was gone. I gently closed her eyes. She deserved to rest.

"You're welcome, my friend." Mira was buried in the center of the town and was honored as a hero, though none of the villagers knew why. Years later, news reached me that a new baby girl had been born, a girl named Mira. I watched her grow up and made sure she got into as much trouble as she could, just like I knew she loved to do. More years passed and Limberlost continued to grow. One night, I sat looking out at the moon, thinking back to the last stand at New Pangea. I wondered how that time continued without us? Did people even remember our names? Then, there was a sound at the door.

“Elder! Elder! Cloud man’s come t’see ya!” the child exclaimed. A few moments later, the door opened again. I didn’t turn around, I already knew who it was. “Enter, Isaac Goldtree. There is much of which we must speak.”

Umm ok, uh hello! Don’t worry, the story is over this isn’t some sort after credits sequence like at the movies. I was apparently supposed to write some sort of bio about myself so uh, here I go! My name Aaron Johnson. I’m 15 years old and I’ve been homeschooled for...5 years I think? 🐼 I really enjoyed writing in this class. It really pushed me to come up with ideas. (I hope you liked them by the way!) But I do enjoy doing other things besides pouring hours and hours into writing! For example, I’ve been playing the flute now for around 7 years! I’m actually at rehearsal right now if you’re reading this during the presentation. Anyways I don’t really have anything else to say about myself so that’s it! Go read some other stories!

Oh wait! One more thing! I have to give a very special thanks to my friends Cierra and Carrisa Cable as well as Tembie Sexton for creating the amazing cover for Paradox as well as my mother for editing it. Without them all I’d have is a blank white cover and a story full of enough grammar mistakes and typos to drive you crazy.