

Black Storm Rising

Chapter One Excerpt of
Book One of the Orianus Creation Series

Christian Science Fiction/Fantasy

David Shane Burton

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Historical Background

Imagine, if you will, that instead of just our solar system, God also created other solar systems connected to the Earth through rifts in space. During the time when God's creation was initially corrupted by sin and Adam and Eve were ejected from the Garden of Eden, these penumbral rifts were huge, and they deposited some of our animal and plant life on distant worlds capable of supporting life. Most of the rifts then closed within the next hundred years following the corruption of God's creation due to sin.

Ages later, several hundred years after the great flood of Noah, a small tribe of people wandering through the wilderness passed through one of the few remaining rifts. The people soon realized they'd emerged upon another world. Many of the animals and plants they were familiar with had obviously passed through the rift at some time in the past and seeded the new world. Not long after this, the rift closed and stranded the tribe. Occurrences like this happened many times throughout the Earth's history, but they became rarer as time went on.

In the solar system of Orianus where the tribe had arrived, instead of all the planets being in their own orbits and at great and separate distances, God had created them all close together--each about twice the distance between our Earth and Moon--about four hundred eighty thousand miles apart. The Orianus system has seven planets. Five of them follow each other in the same orbit like beads on a string. The sixth planet is above the orbit of the five, and the seventh planet is below the orbit of the five, each in their own separate orbits. How do they retain this formation you ask? How do they not collide into one another, thus forming one giant sphere? Ah, that's the mystery. Forty million miles away, yet encircling the planets, we find a massive, natural cosmic structure known as The Great Arc. The planets are all approximately the same distance from their star and are set in the center of The Great Arc, and are perpendicular to it. The composition of The Great Arc has yet to be determined, but its width is approximately the same as that of the first planet, Kaeldon, which is comparable in size to Earth. Kaeldon is at the forward, leading edge of the five planets' orbit when you consider the orbital direction of the planetary system as the forward edge. The Great Arc and the planetary system as a unit orbits the star Orianus, which is comparable to our own Sun. The distance from Orianus to the center of the planetary system is approximately the same as our Earth to Sun distance, thus placing all of the planets within Orianus' life zone.

God created Adam and Eve on Earth and the events of the Bible occurred there. Several hundred years after Noah's flood, Kaeldon was discovered by the wandering tribe. Kaeldon's history proceeded quite differently from the Earth's, but the plan God designed to redeem fallen mankind would still come to pass, and God would cause the gospel message and the Bible to reach Kaeldon. The people of Kaeldon retained the knowledge that they'd come from another planet long ago and that Man was created on the planet called Earth. Eventually, the people of Kaeldon would learn of Jesus the Messiah and that God's prophecies were being fulfilled on the planet of origin.

Long ago, in honor of the Messiah's birth, the majority of Kaeldon adopted the calendar system of Earth that was taught to them by the messenger the Lord had used to bring the Bible to Kaeldon. Our story begins in the year of our Lord (A.D.) 1998.

The first planet, Kaeldon, has a large continent named Treffle, which is located in the planet's northern hemisphere and extends down near to the equator. A large sea separates it from the slightly smaller southern continent of Marriot that extends from slightly above the equator down into the southern hemisphere. There are several other smaller continents and islands on the same side of the globe. The other side of the globe is separated from them by a longitudinal, mid-ocean storm band that completely encircles the globe. It is impassable with normal ships or aircraft. Only with the advent of spaceflight has some of the globe's opposite side been revealed.

On the side of the planet we're concerned with, the major continent of Treffle is composed of provinces, which are analogous to whole countries on Earth. The other major continent, Marriot, has many separate factions, but the whole continent is politically ruled by a monarch. Presiding over Treffle is the Trefflian High Council, which is made up of two councilmen each, from ten provinces, and one councilman from Grell Province. There are therefore twenty-one councilmen from eleven provinces controlling the legislative branch of The United Provinces of Treffle. They have a court system for the judicial branch, but the people vote on who will be High Council Chairman and act as the executor, instead of voting for a separate president.

On Kaeldon there are many denominations that claim to be followers of Christ, as well as many pagan religions. Some Kaeldonian denominations teach anti-Biblical doctrines, yet claim to be Christian. There are also churches that try to truly follow the Lord.

As far as technology goes, Kaeldon advanced slightly quicker than Earth. By the late nineteen-hundreds, Kaeldon had exceeded our present level of technology in most fields of science. I will refer to Earth-like vehicles and technologies within the story by the same or similar names to those on Earth for clarity's sake. Where I use Kaeldonian names, I will describe the Earth technologies that would be most similar to the Kaeldonian form.

On Kaeldon there are various ethnic differences as on Earth, but Kaeldonians also display genetic

differences that are only fantasy to us. Many human variations were thought to exist in ancient times, which have all but disappeared from Kaeldon. Variations such as Giants, Nephilim, Trolls, Ogres, Dwarves, Elves, Halflings, Orcs, and Goblins, among others. The variations of people that we would call “normal” humans are known as the Kael, from which the name of the first planet, Kaeldon, is derived. There were also other variations of humans that existed in the distant past upon Kaeldon, of which modern Kaeldonians have no knowledge. All of these variations are commonly referred to as different “races” of man, but truly they are all just different forms of the human race. In deference to modern word usage, I'll also refer to them as “races” of humanity.

In modern times there exists a new race of giant-like men on Kaeldon. They average eight to ten feet tall, but their height is mostly due to excessively long legs, unlike the Giants of old who were proportionately large. They comprise the large majority of the population upon the continent of Marriot.

The second planet of the five orbit-sharing planets is named Uriaheel. There are unique races that exist on Uriaheel. Unbelievers and Chancists (evolutionists) believe they arose on their own. They do not believe ancient peoples were capable of traveling there, and they also relegate the historic link to the planet Earth as mere legend. The Designists (scientist-believers) believe that by some unknown method mankind made the journey from Kaeldon to Uriaheel and colonized it, long before modern interplanetary flight.

Presently, Uriaheel is in a feudal era, similar to Earth's own Middle Ages. Soon after first contact was made with Kaeldon, Uriaheel's dukes quickly hired Kaeldonian instructors to teach their children the Kaeldonian language and to act as interpreters. Most men on Uriaheel of thirty years or less in age, now speak modern Kaeldonian, as well as their own language. Modern Kaeldonian is actually a form of Earth's English language. A rare penumbral storm transferred a large British town to Treffle's Tamriel Province in Earth's late Middle Ages. In that era, the British people brought many advancements to Treffle and therefore became a focus for trade. Their language became known far and wide due to this, and it eventually was accepted as the official Trefflian and Kaeldonian language.

With the advent of interplanetary flight many decades ago, Kaeldon's modern technology made its way to Uriaheel, giving the feudal lords the ability to decimate their planet with advanced warfare. Within the last ten years, Kaeldonian law had made it illegal to sell, trade, give, or export in any way, Kaeldonian technology to Uriaheel--but it was too little, too late. A few of the learned men of Uriaheel gained enough knowledge to be able to reproduce the technologies and weapons of war on their own. The damage was done.

Our story does not begin on Uriaheel however, but on Kaeldon. It begins with a Chancist and a Designist exploring a country foreign to them. It soon broadens to include many other places, including the planet Uriaheel and beyond.

Let our story begin.

Chapter One

On the Edge of Ancient Secrets

A beast darted into the underbrush. On the world of Kaeldon, two science apprentices explored a heavily wooded area on the continent of Marriot. They'd just startled another foot-long, salamander-like creature. After thirty-two of the beasts, they'd finally become accustomed to surprising them. Number thirty-three was somewhat interesting, though.

"That one was purple!" exclaimed Noshia Tran.

Crendelon Kendall looked down at his fellow third-year zoology science apprentice, who was a petite young woman. Her long black hair swished as she turned to him.

Noshia looked up at Crendelon, as the dark, well-built, young man was also tall. He looked down at her with an expression of disbelief.

Crendelon asked, "Look, we've counted fifteen blue, seven red, and ten yellow--now you're telling me there are purple ones?"

"Yep."

Crendelon shook his head as the two forged on. They noticed that the immediate forest contained strange fruit trees that were each about thirteen feet tall. The trees consisted of smooth trunks with only their top few feet bearing branches, leaves, and bright yellow fruit.

"Strange," Crendelon said "It looks as though something picked fruit from that tree, but so far the only animals we've seen would have to wait until it fell to the ground before they could eat it."

"Maybe one of those badger-like creatures got to the fruit," Noshia guessed.

"No, I don't see any claw marks on the trunk."

Suddenly their conversation was shattered by a loud "Wugga, wugga! Wugga, wugga!"

After lurching forward, the explorers quickly spun around and spotted a brown, furry animal, around the size of a juvenile boar.

In response to the scary, quick-spinning action of the humans, the now wide-eyed animal beat a hasty retreat.

The explorers were amazed that it looked remarkably like a miniature woolly mammoth, bearing a trunk, small tail, and shaggy brown fur, yet lacking in tusks.

Before either of the explorers could say a word, out stepped a man with extremely long legs. Those legs caused his otherwise regularly proportioned body to tower at least nine feet above the ground. He was wearing an engraved Marriotian skullcap that all adult male Marriotians wore. It was inscribed with a Marriotian pledge in their ancient tongue. Beneath the skullcap his head was shaved, as was the rest of his face. The explorers watched as the tan-skinned giant calmly picked two pieces of fruit from the previously discussed fruit tree. He took a bite out of one and then dropped the other one to the ground. It was quickly consumed by the miniature woolly mammoth.

Looking down at the explorers and smiling, the giant said, "Hello. I'm sorry if Snaggle startled you two. His favorite activity involves sneaking up on creatures and 'wuggaing.' Usually they flee, so when you both spun around... well, he got a taste of his own tadsberry."

"What?" the explorers asked in unison.

"A taste of his own tadsberry. A... um... taste of his own healing herb... uh... I think you Trefflians say 'A taste of his own medicine.'"

"Oh... Ha! He sure did," Crendelon chuckled. The reality of the giant's presence in the woods then prompted Crendelon to ask, "Hey, if you're a Marriotian, how come you're way out in the wilderness, instead of in your country's restricted metropolis areas?"

Responding thoughtfully, yet somewhat vaguely, the giant said, "Because of a blessing and a curse in one, and because of my too easily given trust to non-Marriotians. I can't return to the city, so may I offer my services to you as a guide of the area? I could then leave with you and travel to Treffle, if you don't mind. You see, I'm exiled here. You may be short-legged, yet you seem more given to peace and kindness than my people are."

Noshia and Crendelon looked at each other. Though they had reservations, the man's words broke through their doubts about him, so they agreed to take him back to Treffle when their pilot returned for them.

They asked him to reveal all he knew about the forest, to which he readily agreed. Then later, shortly before they left, Noshia realized they'd never exchanged names. She told him their names and apologized for the oversight.

"Oh, I forgot also," the giant said. "I've always used my nickname. You may call me Broadcast."

"*Miguel Spieder, what are you doing here?*" Spieder asked himself, as he sensed something watching him in the darkness. He didn't like the sensation. He'd been in many caves before, but now he stood in pitch black darkness. He was quite dedicated to his work, but this complete and heavy darkness weighed on his soul.

As if reading his thoughts, the only other person with him in the cave said, "They're only fruit bats hanging from the ceiling, Spieder." Everyone was accustomed to addressing Miguel by his last name.

"How do you know that they're *'fruit'* bats?"

"The shape of the head," Barry said.

"I didn't know your natural infrared sight was that detailed."

"Yes, it's much better than any artificial infrared detector." Even in the complete darkness, with his rare gift, Barry could see a strange version of his friend, Spieder, who he knew in the daylight would have a naturally tan complexion, as contrasted with Barry's own pale, white complexion. Barry reasoned that since his fellow scientist was a well known planetary sciences professor, he must be eager to move beyond the bats and explore the cave. The problem was that Barry was a biology professor who sought animal life. The bats were interesting, yet it was fish that Barry truly wanted to find, as his specialty was Ichthyology, the study of fish.

Spieder asked, "Are you finished scouting around in the infrared spectrum yet, so we can turn our helmet-lights back on?"

"Yes. We'll soon be beyond the point where I believe any more bats will live."

The explorers turned their helmet-lights back on and forged ahead in the cool, ankle-deep water. The interior of the cave appeared to be untouched by human hands. As the two scientists traveled deeper in, the water became colder and the air gained a mineral-like scent. It didn't smell like air that was utilized by members of the plant kingdom. Spieder and Barry strode deeper and deeper into this newly found subterranean mystery. They continued about a mile upstream to where the water level was halfway up their shins.

Suddenly, Barry leaped to one side and yelled, "Yeowtch!"

"What?" Spieder yelled, "What is it?" Spieder couldn't see because Barry blocked his view.

"Wait... Oh. Ha! It's fish!"

"What kind of fish? Large ones, or--"

"No! It's blind cave fish! There are several near my feet trying to eat my boots!"

Set at ease, Spieder said, "I've got some at home in my aquarium. They'll try to eat darn near anything they bump into."

"I don't recognize this species!" Barry said excitedly as Spieder shined his helmet-light upon them. "Spieder, give me one of the nets and a jug so I can collect some of them!"

Barry dropped a few crumbled crackers into a "V" he'd formed with his feet. Soon the area was teeming with the small creatures. Barry easily netted ten of the fish and placed them in a collection jug.

Spieder quickly said, "I want at least six."

"Okay, okay, I'm getting them. You know, blind cave fish are usually a fleshy pink color. These bright orange ones are strange indeed."

"They'll make a good addition to your 'Rare Species Zoo'," Spieder said.

"And to the next edition of my *Known Fish of Kaeldon* book," Barry added with a smile.

"Barry, you realize, of course, that there must be some type of vegetable matter or smaller creatures nearby that these fish feed upon."

"Yes, hopefully another new species. I'd better turn on the jug's aerator, and we'd better watch the stream more carefully."

"Barry, this is a river, not a stream."

Barry, who was from the southern Delta Province, said, "This would be considered a ditch where I come from. Our rivers are several thousand yards wide."

Hundreds of miles from the cave at this time, a small research airship landed on the campus of Bainville University. The university was located in Bainville Province, which was part of the country of Treffle. The pilot had just returned from his mission to retrieve the researchers from Marriot.

Noshia and Crendelon exited the ship with boxes of samples, nearly eight pages of biological and chemical information, and a cage containing several salamander-like creatures of varying colors. Exiting with them, carrying a share of the materials, was someone that the hoopball coach would love to meet--a Marriotian named Broadcast. They were met by the usual small crowd of science and chemistry apprentices, who stared wide-eyed at Broadcast

and Snaggle. Snaggle quickly made himself at home by eating several karad nuts from one of the chemistry apprentice's hands. They all had the opportunity to meet Broadcast, as he squatted down to be nearer their height.

Noshia and Crendelon decided to introduce Broadcast to Dr. David Macy, Dean of the Science Department. The two students still had to write their mission trip reports, so they'd leave Broadcast with the dean. The three made their way to the science building.

Snaggle seemed to want to follow Noshia and Crendelon home as they were departing from Dr. Macy's office. Broadcast explained that Snaggle was not his pet and that they were welcome to keep him, so they happily agreed to do so.

When the others left, Broadcast looked down at Dr. Macy, who was dressed in a gray suit with a red bow tie. Broadcast noticed that the man's skin color was much whiter than Crendelon's dark complexion and even lighter than Noshia's skin tone, which had a yellow tint to it. The man appeared to be in his late sixties and was bald on top with gray hair on the sides. Broadcast noticed immediately that the dean always spoke and acted in a formal manner, yet was not aloof. The wide variety of Trefflians was something he'd have to become accustomed to.

Dr. Macy indicated a chair, so Broadcast sat down and stretched out his legs. The eight-foot ceiling in the science building caused the tall Marriotian to have to lean over when standing. Soon, as they talked, Dr. Macy discovered that the mentality of most Marriotians was the exact opposite as that of Broadcast. Their suspicious and unfriendly nature explained why Marriotians rarely allowed outsiders within their metropolis walls. It also explained why the Marriotians only rarely allowed small, limited research teams, like Noshia and Crendelon's, into the great forests of their country. The forests of the southern continent of Marriot were of high scientific interest to the rest of Kaeldon, because they were so inaccessible and largely unexplored.

Broadcast explained to the dean that he needed to find a job, as all he had were the clothes on his back.

Dr. Macy reflected, as he rubbed his chin between his thumb and index finger. He decided, "Mr. Broadcast, you must certainly meet Mr. Farnsworth. Yes, Mr. Barry Farnsworth may be just the man you need to converse with. He has many connections."

Broadcast was about to ask more about Mr. Farnsworth, when the sound of booted feet on tile interrupted the conversation. Broadcast stood and looked down upon a large, tanned, muscular man, who approached them. The man had a short beard and mustache, and short, straight brown hair. Broadcast noticed the man's attire was comprised of a flannel shirt, blue jeans, and hiking boots.

The man looked up (something he wasn't used to doing) and extended his hand to Broadcast. He said, "Never met a Marriotian before. The name's Paul--Paul Evans."

Accepting the handshake, Broadcast said, "I go by my nickname, Broadcast."

Soon Broadcast's story was condensed and repeated. When Barry's name was mentioned, Paul said, "That reminds me of why I tracked you down, Dr. Macy. Did Spieder and Barry leave without me? I can't find them anywhere."

"Yes they did, sir. They told me that you had a personal problem that needed attending, and that they surmised, by your attitude, that you did not truly desire to make this trip. They assumed that you would much rather handle your personal problem."

"Well... it's all straightened out now," Paul said, but by his voice's tone and inflection, anyone could tell he was speaking, at best, a half-truth. "How long ago did they leave?"

Looking at his watch, Dr. Macy said, "Two hours and three minutes ago."

"In that case, I'll try to catch up to them. You can come along, Broadcast. You can meet Barry, and we always end up needin' more help than we have."

"I'll be glad to join you, Mr. Evans, but where are we going?"

"We're goin' to some new cave that a hunter stumbled onto. The cave has been determined to be the above ground beginnin' of the Tarod River. Spieder and Barry are tryin' to trace it to its farthest underground point, while explorin' the cave at the same time."

Dr. Macy interjected, "Well, gentlemen, you should best be off."

"Yeah! C'mon, let's go, Broadcast. By the way, call me Paul. That 'Mr. Evans' stuff messes with my mind--makes me feel old."

In a short time, Broadcast and Paul entered Paul's small, atmospheric aircraft that was powered by two turbofan engines. Paul helped Broadcast adjust his seat for maximum leg room, which left Broadcast's knees bent near his chest height, instead of above his head. Next, Paul checked over the supplies that were on board, and then he ran back to Spieder's office to retrieve extra supplies and equipment for Broadcast. Paul quickly returned.

Paul turned a key and the two turbofan engines wound up to their operating idle speed. Paul got clearance to depart and then jammed the throttle forward. The dark green aircraft shot off the airstrip. Paul would have to use his aircraft's vertical landing and takeoff abilities in the small field near the Tarod Cave, as it had no airstrip. Paul

shortly reached the proper speed and altitude and set his cruise-pilot controls.

"We'll be there in about twenty minutes. Their research pod-hopper is a lot slower than this old girl. We should only be about an hour behind 'em when we get there."

Broadcast responded with an affirmative nod of his head.

Paul wondered aloud, "Was that strange, woolly-mammoth-like animal yours?"

"He came with me from Marriot, but he has a strong will of his own. He's taken a great liking to Noshia."

Paul remarked sullenly, "Yeah, that's who I saw him with. I spoke to her shortly before I met you."

Broadcast could guess that this had something to do with Paul's "personal problem," so he changed the subject by asking, "So, Paul, what kind of scientist are you anyway?"

In a happier frame of mind, Paul said, "Oh, I'm no scientist--I'm a professional treasure hunter! And a historian also. I teach history on campus."

"What? How surprising!"

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Back in the Tarod cave, Spieder noticed a hole in the cave wall into which a trickling tributary of the river flowed. The hole was large enough for a human to crawl into, roughly four and a half feet in diameter. Though the hole had an irregular shape to it, it didn't appear to be quite natural. It was as if someone had crudely beaten through the wall of stone for however much distance was required to allow the tributary to flow uninhibited. Barry and Spieder were nearly two miles into the cave, under a tremendous depth and tonnage of earth and stone. The amount of stone and earth that would've been removed to form this passage was considerable. Taking into account that neither man had seen any evidence at all that humans had ever been in the cave, much less carried out a project like this, the passage must just be an odd, natural occurrence.

"This is incredibly odd. By all geological processes I know of, this shouldn't be here," Spieder said as he bent over to inspect the passage.

After a few moments of silence, Barry asked Spieder, "Well, you're the resident archaeologist, geologist, and all-around scientist--so what's the verdict?" Barry totally expected Spieder to figure out some rare but natural explanation to the existence of the passage.

After a few more sweeps with his helmet-light, Spieder stared back at Barry and said in a low, astonished voice, "It's man-made."

"You're joking."

"I'm serious, Barry."

"No way, Spieder! We've walked nearly two miles underground along this river and haven't seen one shred of evidence to suggest that humans have ever set foot in here, much less performed a tunneling job of this magnitude."

"Barry, have you ever known me to be wrong about one of these things yet? Maybe humans didn't make it, but something other than natural forces created this side-tunnel."

The geologist shined his helmet-light down into the stream some eight feet past its entrance into the cave wall. The stream there had grown larger and deeper. Then, moving his light toward a strange sound, Spieder noticed a green streak in the water.

"What are you looking at?" Barry asked, because he could see the quizzical expression on Spieder's face, even though all the light was directed into the hole in the wall.

"I'm not sure, it--" Spieder was suddenly interrupted by a splashing sound. All Barry saw was Spieder's quick movements with the helmet-light. Spieder saw something quite a bit more interesting.

"What is it, Spieder?"

"This is ridiculous! It looks like a piece of... of..."

"Of what?!"

"Of toilet paper! Green, swimming toilet paper!"

After a short pause, Barry asked, "What? Spieder, have you gone mad?" Immediately Barry pushed Spieder to one side, stuck his own head in the hole, and looked. Sure enough, he spotted two pieces of green colored toilet paper flopping around in the water, obviously disturbed by his helmet-light. Barry turned his head to Spieder; a mixture of bewilderment and amazement spread over his face.

"It looks like we've both gone mad," Spieder said.

Barry quickly caught the living toilet papers with a net and put them in a collection jug. Through its clear sides, two creatures could be seen. They were about five inches long, four inches wide, and a quarter of an inch thick.

Spieder said, "They have no eyes that I can see."

"Well, they wouldn't need eyes in this complete darkness."

"Are they fish, Barry, or something else?"

Barry's analyzing mind took over. "They have tens to hundreds of small tubes on their white undersides and no gills or scales that I can see. Their bodies appear segmented, and they have strange ridges--two of them--that start--" Barry cut short his analysis when one of the short ridges in question suddenly popped straight up and wiggled around, feeling the wall of the jug.

"Diplopod!" Barry said, "An aquatic, oddly-flattened diplopod! This is unheard of, and we've got two of them! Be careful though, Spieder, as they may squirt poison as some other diplopods do."

After a brief moment of thought, a grin spread across Spieder's face and he said, "Diarrhea bugs!" The geologist then nearly fell down laughing.

Barry laughed at the jest, but not nearly as much. As a biologist, he was too excited with the find to focus on the bad joke.

It didn't take long before both men were crawling through the side tunnel in about a foot of water. Barry followed close behind Spieder, and though they were on the lookout for them, no more "diarrhea bugs" could be seen. After they traveled nearly twenty feet, the tunnel curved back in the opposite direction for about five feet. It then curved to one side, where it opened into a large cave. Immediately a familiar sensation washed over them. It was the presence of light. Directly in the center of the cave ceiling, some fifty feet up, was an opening that was roughly shaped like a winged man. The light shone through like a solid thing. It caused the perfectly clear pond, which lay directly below it, to shine at its surface like polished chrome. If a breach to the surface was above them, then they must be beneath the valley of the first two mountains in the Tarod Range.

The ceiling of the cave possessed the most magnificent and largest stalactites either of the explorers had ever seen on Kaeldon, either in real life or in photographs. Stalagmites were strangely absent. On closer inspection, the rock floor of the cave that surrounded the pond appeared to be highly polished, but not to the point of being slippery.

Barry and Spieder approached the edge of the pond. Along the water's edge, about fifty "diarrhea bugs" could be seen. Barry quickly netted ten bugs before the rest of them managed to wriggle away from the shore. The bugs headed across the pond while swimming on the water's surface. Spieder then noticed for the first time that the pond had an egg shape to it, and the shoreline was very smooth, with no rough edges.

Barry interrupted his thoughts with an excited "Look!" Spieder gazed in the direction of his colleague's extended finger. Barry was pointing at one of the "diarrhea bugs" that was swimming about twelve feet offshore. Spieder was about to question Barry, when suddenly the water convulsed rather oddly and the bug disappeared.

"Did it dive, or was it a fish attack, Barry?"

"It was a fish! It looked like some type of trout, but it was nearly transparent! I vaguely saw a row of clear vertebrae, with a slightly churning green mass below. The fish must have eaten a bug just before I spotted it. It also had two silvery eyes that I could discern."

While this was a great find, Spieder was more interested in the design of the cave. He looked into the clear pond and could see all the way to the bottom. He then saw an incredible sight--the missing stalagmites were lying sideways on the bottom of the pond! They were formed into a set of five ancient runes, followed by a gap, and then three more ancient runes. It was obviously a message of some sort.

"Look, Barry, on the bottom of the pond! Our missing stalagmites are formed into some kind of message. Do you recognize those ancient runes?"

Barry stared at them in wonder for a few moments and finally said, "Well, that message is obviously *not* a natural occurrence. I'm sorry, Spieder, but I don't recognize the characters. Write them down, and we can run them through the computer back at the university."

Spieder excitedly removed a device from his belt and flipped a switch, causing an extending antenna to telescope out of the top of the device for several feet. Spieder pressed a button and a humanly imperceptible tone was emitted into the pond. "Twenty-five and a half feet deep," Spieder said.

"That's nice, now get out your fishing equipment and help me catch some transparent trout."

Spieder had other things to do. He'd just finished writing down the runes in his notebook when suddenly the fifteen-foot-thick cave wall, through which the tunnel passed, began to glow an eerie red color. The color was emitted from the wall like light. It grew in intensity until it matched that of the white light coming from the ceiling's center. The light blended to make an almost perfect pink. The next moment they heard the loud sound of the wall crumbling into small, round stones about a half-foot in diameter, which rolled toward the pond. Barry and Spieder had to dodge them by running around to the pond's opposite side. The stones were so numerous that they now completely covered the pond's bottom.

A voice rang out in a strange language that sounded as if it had passed through a sewer pipe. "Frijaz!"

Barry and Spieder beheld a large figure, at least ten feet tall, standing in what was previously the center of the cave wall. It walked forward toward the water's edge, each footfall sounding like a bass drum. They could see it clearly now--it was a humanoid figure made of what appeared to be living stone! Its head was that of a hargel, which was a ferocious predator on Kaeldon that had five pointed horns on top of its head. The rest of the head resembled that of an Earthly Tyrannosaurus Rex, but it was covered with short, black fur. The rest of the body resembled that of a common, yet giant, man. The creature looked around fiercely, as its eyes burned with rage. It spotted Spieder and Barry, and the hate in its eyes quickly turned to glee. It burst forth with a high-pitched laugh that caused the explorers to think it must be insane. It stopped laughing after a few moments and sat down, legs crossed, and just looked at them with the eyes of a lost puppy and a slightly strange smile. The creature then flexed its odd set of "pigtail" ears out straight and then back to a curled position, several times, which caused Barry to stare inquisitively and Spieder to burst out laughing.

In a stifled shout Barry said, "Shut up, Spieder! You might upset it!"

Spieder looked at the ground and held in the laughter, but as soon as he looked back up, the creature flexed its ears quickly, three times, causing Spieder to laugh louder than before.

The creature looked as though it were trying to remember something. A few seconds later it said in plain Kaeldonian, "Thank you, friends."

The creature's tone reminded Barry of some of the modern televangelists who seemed only out to make merchandise of the gospel.

Spieder, obviously too amused with the creature to be very frightened any longer, responded, "You're welcome, friend, but just who and what are you?"

Barry reacted to Spieder's calm and unwary attitude with an angry, puzzled glance. Barry was totally intrigued, yet still scared stiff.

The creature quickly stood, put its left arm across its mid section and bowed. It said, "I'm Markoth, and I'm at your service--oh, great rescuers!"

So Spieder asked, "What do the runes on the bottom of the pond say?"

Markoth peered into the clear water and saw nothing but a layer of small stones on the bottom. He then looked back to Spieder questioningly.

"They're covered now, but I'll write them down." Spieder copied them, larger, onto another sheet of paper. He tore out the page, placed a rock in it, crumpled it into a ball, and then threw it across the pond.

Markoth caught the paper, opened it, and dropped the rock. He read the message and then quickly looked back up at the two men and asked, "You don't know its meaning, do you?"

"No. Do you?" Spieder asked.

A smile broke out on Markoth's lips as he replied, "Of course I do! It roughly translates into 'Pleasure and Prosperity,' which is why I'm here, good fellows."

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At that moment in time, Paul Evans and Broadcast, having passed the "fruit bat surprise," now encountered Spieder and Barry's little, orange, underwater friends.

"I hope Barry noticed these. He's sort of a fish nut, you know," Paul said.

"I know now."

After the two had gone about another half-mile, Broadcast asked Paul, "Do you expect to find any treasure in these caves?"

"Well, I've been lookin' for the lost treasure of the ancient Spodizian tribe. Historical research leads me to believe that when a great war was threatenin' to overrun the palace, the king of the time sent most of his treasure away with a small group of his most ingenious men, to be hidden somewhere in the surroundin' countryside. These men were supposedly killed after hidin' the treasure. None of the rare items of the treasure have ever turned-up, so most likely the treasure has laid untouched for a period of nearly three thousand years."

"My word! How much is this treasure worth, Paul?"

"Oh, it's priceless! I could probably sell a few gold coins from it and be set for life."

"Wouldn't your government claim most of it?"

"No, we're a government basically run by the people, by vote. The laws that are on the books are constantly monitored for defects, so that the moment they're found unjust in a certain circumstance, they're publicly amended. In the treasure business its finders-keepers, well... after the items have been officially cataloged, that is."

Suddenly, from around the bend, a shaft of light appeared, darting to and fro.

“Who's there?” Paul shouted.

“Is that you, Paul? It's me, Spieder, and Barry also!”

“Yeah, it's me, Spieder, and I've got a friend with me, a Marriotian.”

Barry, Spieder, Paul, and Broadcast soon came together. Paul introduced everyone with voice and movement of helmet-light. Paul then asked about the events of Barry and Spieder's trek. Spieder and Barry relayed everything up to the point of the wall collapse correctly, but they left out the stalagmite symbols part. They told how they woke up on one side of the pond with various bumps and bruises that had apparently been caused by the falling stones. Then, after finding no scientific reason for the wall's collapse, they went back to the pond and managed to catch four transparent trout, using “diarrhea bugs” as bait. Paul and Broadcast looked at the various specimens with their helmet-lights.

Paul asked, “Hey, why didn't y'all continue on further upstream after the side-cave incident?”

Barry said, “Well, after being hit by falling rocks and carrying all these heavy water and specimen-filled jugs, we decided to bring what we had back and then return with you tomorrow.”

“Well, if you guys wanna go further in, Broadcast and I can share the load.”

Broadcast confirmed, “Yes, of course. That would be no problem.”

Barry, having been injured more severely than Spieder, said, “Let's come back tomorrow with more supplies and equipment. I don't feel so good right now.”

“He may have a slight concussion,” Broadcast said, to which they all agreed after inspecting Barry's bruised cranium.

Soon they all followed the river's downstream course out of the cave and headed back home to Bainville City.

In the same area of the cave that our explorers met, yet several hours later, footfalls in water could be heard. Standing in the middle of the underground river was a tall, well-built man. His dark black hair hung to his shoulder. He wore kingly attire over his tan body. The man walked downstream in the total darkness without bumping into any of the irregular rock formations. It was as though he could actually see in the complete darkness. Not infrared light, given-off by heat, as Barry could see, but the man could somehow see the cold rocks and water in his pitch black surroundings. Upon his back he carried an ancient quiver full of arrows and a powerful bow. He held a pair of ancient sandals in his left hand, as he strode down the cold river, barefoot. He suddenly spoke aloud, as if responding to an unseen person in the cave with him. “Eh? You have a means of infiltration? Excellent! And what? A choice? Ah, the bow and arrows, or just the bow. War or diplomacy. Ha, ha, ha!”