

THE CORDS OF  
**ORION**

Book One *The*  
*Dominant*  
*Arise*

Gary Henderson

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# *Prologue*

A scream and metallic crash jerked my attention to the front of the plane. I leaned over, straining to look down the aisle, and lots of other people did too. A bald man in a black coat and faded jeans was hacking at the door into the cockpit. I could see bare legs, I guess one of the stewardesses, lying on the floor behind him. He kept kicking back at her body, as though it were in his way.

The pilot came on the intercom. Sounded like a young guy, scared. He said, “Get in your seats. Brace for impact!” The nose of the plane suddenly dropped, and we were falling out of the sky. The people who were out of their seats never had a chance to get back into them.

We went straight down, best I could tell, from thirty thousand feet. The guy hammering on the door fell, then stood up on the door, which was now below him, and began shooting into it. I don’t know where the gun came from, but he had one. I guess he killed the pilots. He never got that door open. The plane began tumbling; I lost all sense of up or down. I squeezed the armrests, tried to focus on the seat in front of me, and just endured the horrible sensation, trying not to throw up. Books and cups and laptops flew through the air. Panicked screams and prayers filled the plane. It seemed to last forever, and then we slammed into the ground.

The world exploded. The plane crumpled in, a tin can suddenly smashed from all sides, and we were inside. Everything crushed against everything else. In the midst of chaos and sudden agony and the inferno of exploding jet fuel, blackness swallowed me up.

A moment passed, surely no more. I opened my eyes. All the pain was gone. The horrific fire and smoke swirled around us, but left us untouched. All around me, others straightened up and looked at each other. Some hugged those next to them. We stared at each other in amazement.

I don't think anyone lived through it. We slowly moved away from the wreckage and fire, because our bodies were destroyed, of course. One little child was still clinging to his body. There was not enough left of it for him to live in it again, and I helped him let go. A violent explosion consumed what was left of the plane. Nothing remained. I remember cars, and a truck or two, so maybe there was a road and some traffic there.

As we wandered away from the wreckage and out into a pasture, grazing cows stared at us from higher ground in the distance. Or at the fire, really, I doubt they saw us.

I noticed a man walking among the people, a head taller than anyone else, and as bright as the fire we had just left. He spoke to each one, and touched them, carefully and only once, as though he were conveying something specific. He wore a simple robe, and a quiet, almost hidden power was in him. A power you could trust, I thought, not a power to fear.

He looked at me, with eyes as deep blue as the evening sky just before the stars leap out, and a smile that would not be refused. His hand paused just before it reached me, as though it were only an offer, not yet quite given, a gift that needed acceptance. I found myself leaning into his touch, and in an instant peace flooded my heart. I relaxed and took a deep, deep breath.

He touched the last one standing there and turned toward the crowd that now was entirely focused on his face. He ignored the gathering cars, the fire engines, the billowing inferno, the sirens.

"Come."

Come?

A thousand questions threw themselves into my mind. Where? Come where? After all the talk about life after death, after years of wondering and study and speculation and argument and chosen belief, I found myself with no answers at all. What was about to happen? Where was he taking us? Who was he, really?

"Come," he said, and there was no doing otherwise. We came.

# One

It was Thursday when I met Him.

Funny how time still goes on. I always thought of eternity as a time without ... well, time. But it makes sense. Planets still spin, tides still flow, seasons change. Years pass. It just doesn't matter in the way it used to. We're not being used up, like we were. We're actually... what? Strengthening? Becoming more real? I don't know, but I feel it, and I see it in the others. There's a real peace that comes from the knowledge that this never ends. There's no rush. No hurry. We've got time.

If that makes sense.

Of course, what day of the week it is... that's gone. Once that Thursday was past, it ceased to matter. For us, anyway. For me.

He was so matter-of-fact about my arrival, and seemed delighted, as though welcoming a long-awaited houseguest. Naturally, He had known forever that I would be there that day. And I had been more certain about Him, more settled, as the day approached. Though I didn't know, of course, at the time, that the day was actually approaching quite that soon. We always think we have years to go, I suppose. And then when it happens, you're so caught up in the event that there's no time to prepare for what comes next. Whatever preparation you've made, whatever relationship you're already walking in with Him, well, there you are.

And there I was.

He seemed to be waiting for me, with a small group gathered around. As I arrived, He looked at me, and the face I had so longed to see was suddenly before me. I could not speak. Suddenly everything was clear, everything was settled. I knew, and He knew, everything there was to know about my life, everything I had ever thought, felt, or done, and the only thing that mattered was what He had done for me. The rest was gone, and all was new. Completely new.

“Well done,” He smiled, and I knew instantly every moment of my life He was blessing. Every time I followed His lead, yielded to His touch, and saw His power and healing flow into the world through my obedience. Gold and silver, precious jewels, never to be lost. All else was gone.

A sudden panic swept over me, swirling with remorse. What about my family? What about all that was left undone, all those people and things that had consumed my attention on earth, just ... just moments ago?

He must have known my mind even as the thoughts arose, and with His look a confident peace rose in my heart, a certain knowledge that His hands held them all. The panic seeped away. Peace beyond understanding. His peace.

They welcomed me into the group. Clearly they had all known I was coming. Who were these people?

Linus towered over me, and his bear hug enveloped me in strength and in the smell of woven linen. Julia’s red hair blazed in the morning sun, and her smile was all freckles and impish mischief, forecasting an eternity of unpredictable moments!

The morning sun?

John’s serious blue eyes caught mine, and pressed in to know what sort of man was joining their company. In a moment I knew him, and I suppose he knew me. Knowing, as we were known; He said it would be like this!

Where *was* that light coming from? There was no morning sun. How could there be? There was no “morning” anymore!

It flowed from nowhere and everywhere, delighting itself in eluding the eye and playing upon whatever you looked upon to present that thing, to your eye, in that moment, in the most glorious light possible. Beauty was everywhere, and I realized it was continually being put on display by the living light, moving and changing and leading the eye to new delights in every direction.

He was watching me and laughed as I realized it. Enjoying the effects of His creation on those He created it for, I suppose! I laughed as well, a

joy flowing up within me that seemed to complete the healing of all that had come before. I was home...

Home.

I needed some time to be alone, to say my own goodbyes to those I had left so suddenly. The sweet face of my life-long love filled my mind. I would never touch the curve of her cheek again, after so many years together. I could see her tears as though I were there, and I ached to hold her. And my little ones – not so little any more, really. I saw them come close around her. They'll watch over my love, and the new babies they bring will give her comfort.

I left the group to wander and stare at the beauty around us. I looked quickly for my camera, and had to laugh at myself. Who needs a camera in heaven? I wandered out the main gates and down a winding road, through meadows dancing with color, to a bank of clouds that came up to the road like fog on a high mountain pass. I stepped out onto the clouds and began running, just with the delight of being there and being able to do it.

I wished for a sunset and the ability to run in the clouds before it.

I came to a towering mountain of cumulus clouds blazing white on one side, facing the late afternoon sun, with feathered plains flowing away from the feet of the mountain. Behind it deeply shadowed flanks accented the stark white tumbling mass.

The clouds in front of me seemed pure mist, soft and featureless. But there it was, the sun, setting in front of me to the left, casting a soft orange glow over all the landscape before me.

If the sun were setting, and these were clouds, I must be above the earth. How had I gotten there? I looked behind me and saw no road, no meadow, no gates, just more blue sky and higher clouds bathed in the same glow of the evening light.

Ahead, the misty landscape was broken by low cumulus clouds, foothills rising up in clusters. Their rims glowed with backlit edges, and the color washed from bright orange down to deep purple at the bottom.

Rows of tumbled ridges followed one after another then faded back into the mist. An island of ruffled hills drifted in the sea of softness.

Further ahead a massive thunderhead rose up, blue and purple and dark grey, an ethereal mountain casting dark shadows across the cloudy plains. It rose thousands of feet through another layer of orange, purple, and white cloud above me, then spread out into a flat-iron crest, deep blue-grey on the side towards me, pure white at the top where the sun smote it fully, and glowing orange around the edges all the way down. A cloud of rain drifted down the north side, diffusing a grey screen across the orange of the more distant clouds. A cirrus horsetail drifted up in front of it, delicate wisps of orange against the soft grey behind them.

In moments I was sitting on the mountain's crest and staring into the heart of old Sol, a magnificent sight my earthly eyes could never have taken in. The deeper I looked, the more intently I focused, the more I could see of the nuclear holocaust, until I was watching the liquid fire swirl and explode at its very core.

Then I ran straight down the tumbling masses and across the flowing plain, with no sense of tiring or fear or being lost, though I had no idea where I really was, if 'where' even mattered.

On an impulse I dove into the mist at my feet. It offered no resistance. Passing through a deep layer of grey below the orange-washed surface, I came out into evening dusk with a landscape below of farmland, roads, and a great river weaving its way through the greens and browns. Miles ahead of me the river, splattered with white and deeply shadowed by cliffs rising on either side, suddenly dropped out of sight.

I flew towards the cliffs, still diving from where I had been, moving effortlessly through occasional drifting clouds, one layer below the next. The sun broke through underneath the clouds above me and painted the land below with a brilliant backlighting, a deep red glow playing on the horizon. Glancing behind me, I saw no shadow on the clouds where mine should have been. A softly glowing rainbow formed a full circle around the spot.

Coming to the river, I drifted in between the shadowed cliffs. The evening light touched the top of the eastern cliffs, but night was falling quickly. I stepped onto one of the boulders in the middle of the stream,

and the river threw white water high in the air all around me as it crashed into the stone. Lifting my hands to heaven, I whispered, "Thank you, Father, for all this beauty, and for eternity to enjoy it."

The roar of a waterfall called to me from just ahead. Somehow knowing I had nothing to fear, I dropped into the water rushing and crashing about my feet. I landed on the gravel bottom of the stream, with waters streaming and surging past, but pushing me not at all. A big trout hung in the backwash behind the boulder I had stood on, not startled at all by my sudden arrival.

"Of course not," I said. "He can't see me."

Did I just speak? Underwater? Apparently! I laughed, then marveled at that as well.

Pushing off from the streambed, I floated just above it, deep within the river, and swam around the rocks as they emerged. Suddenly the floor of the stream changed from gravel to rock, and the water seemed to speed up. I braced myself, and as the riverbed dropped suddenly away, the water about me plunged down with it. I floated straight out over the falling, crashing water and the clouds of mist and spray boiling up from the bottom of the falls.

Far below me the stream now swirled and bubbled, smoothing itself out into a new path soon bordered by pastures and fenced farmlands. Night covered the land as I drifted above it, and lights came on in the homes and barns.

I decided to return to the sky, and the very thought became action; the land and river dropped away into the distance below me.

As I reached the first layer of clouds, all was dark below me, out to the horizon where a narrow band of deep red spanned the edge of the world, diffusing quickly into a sky of orange and pale blue. A thin band of cloud spanned the horizon above it, offering a stripe of deep grey with feather-tips of bright orange on the bottom side where the sun, almost below the horizon, still reached that band for a few more minutes. Suddenly the tips of orange gave way to fiery red; a bare sliver of the sun threw a final splash of color on it before disappearing.

I paused to watch the transition. In moments the sun was gone. The flame red died to an ashen grey, with the pale blue of the sky above

quickly fading to deeper blue, purple, then black. Stars sprang out to decorate the velvet deep.

Behind me the moon was rising, full and bright. I turned toward it, and willed myself to a great speed, crossing the distance more quickly than I could have imagined possible. I knew something of the physical distance involved, and it crossed my mind that such things simply did not matter anymore.

The face of the moon was in full daylight, but my eyes made the adjustment naturally and easily from the total blackness behind it to the overwhelming brightness of the sun reflecting off the dust. Almost immediately I stood on the surface of the moon, my feet sinking an inch or two into a powdery softness.

I sensed the Spirit with me as I stood looking at the Earth, backlit below the Sun. He seemed to be enjoying the beauty of it as much as I was, and I delighted in His presence. "Thank you," I whispered again.

When I had gazed for a time, I was ready to return Home. Not knowing quite how to do it, I simply turned my mind to the Gates I had left, and willed to move in that direction. The scene behind me disappeared, and the road up to the Gates was under my feet. I strolled along enjoying the fragrance of the wide, flowered pastures and the fruit trees that lined the way, until I passed into the Gates once again and on to the home ... and the adventure ... he had prepared for me.

Job and Jolina sat in a side room on the first floor of the four-story mansion, sipping lemonade. She thought back over their long life together.

"It was devastating when everything came apart." She looked at him, before continuing. "You were amazing. I gave up long before the end, as you know, and I'm sorry. You were right to pursue Him, to believe in His love in spite of all the pain."

Job smiled at the one who had borne all his children. "You are so beautiful."

She laughed. "You always thought so!"

“And He healed our sorrows afterward, and now has healed them forever. What more could we ask?”

“Nothing, nothing at all,” she agreed. “But now your new adventure begins.”

“With some interesting companions.”

“You haven’t said much about what you expect. Has He told you?”

Job pulled another of his favorite apples from the bowl between them, and bit slowly into it. Jolina studied the man. His peace and confident strength were still a delight to her.

“These are really good,” he said, when his mouth wasn’t so full.

She waited.

“We have a new role to play.” He looked intently at her, and a smile slowly spread across his face. “Like what Adam did. But more, much more!”

She strained to keep from laughing at the little boy she saw within him, the child’s excitement at a new adventure. She gave up, and laughed.

“What?” A hurt look replaced his secretive smile.

“I’m sorry,” she managed to say, wiping her eyes. “I’m sorry. Go on. Your new role?”

“He’s sending us to new worlds. Think of it! New, completely new, and waiting for us!”

She searched his eyes, wondering at the immensity of God’s intent.

“Like Adam,” he continued, “but more. More than Adam. He was the gardener, as Father created the garden, created Eden, and populated the Earth. But now ...”

He shook his head.

“Now our word -- God’s word, in our mouth -- carries power. We’ll do as we always do, of course, watching and listening for Him, for His will, and then moving in that. But the balance has shifted; we have power now. As Jesus did! Much more than Adam ever knew.”

She stared at him, trying to comprehend. To speak new life into being? To participate in creation itself, new creation? How would that ...?

Then something else occurred to her.

“Job, you’ve always had hundreds, or thousands, at your side. Now you go to danger, adventure, challenges we don’t know, with ... with four.”

“Five.”

She counted the ones she knew about. “Who else?”

“He said He would never leave us ... I think that makes five!”

“Yes, of course, you’re right,” she laughed, and chose peace.

They sat quiet for a moment. “Is there more?”

He pursed his lips, and looked down.

“You know Leviathan was captive on Earth with the angels who rebelled...”

He looked up at her, and she nodded.

“But his kin were not. His spawn. Father scattered them across the stars. I don’t know if they’re all in rebellion, or how much they can do... but I think one of them is close to ... is being held ... where we’ll be.”

“Really! Of all the places in the universe ... that’s not accidental!”

“No, obviously not.”

Imagining those creatures held in physical form was hard enough. Imagining their attitude, and what they might do ... was even worse. She looked at him.

“He offers repentance to all,” suggested Job, with a shrug. “Perhaps it is offered to them as well. Perhaps our task is to be there when this creature decides.”

She nodded grimly. “Perhaps so.”

She decided not to consider what might happen if that decision did not go well.

# Two

He awoke hungry.

Rousing slowly, Livya-Gadol, son of Leviathan, uncurled his long body and looked about. The damp, murky cave was empty, and smelled of nothing in particular.

How long have I slept? Where has He put me?

Outside, the sky offered no particular help. Deep, deep black, with billions of stars, but no familiar patterns. No Pleiades, no Bear, no ... Orion.

He put me in Orion.

Memory flooded back.

Lucifer had recruited an army and challenged ... Him. Challenged God Himself.

What a fool, what a proud, beautiful fool. The masterpiece of Creation, but that wasn't enough. He had seen what was coming next, the crowning glory of God's masterwork, and was enraged at the idea. Furious that something else would be created, something in His image, that would take precedence even over Lucifer, over the most beautiful being ever to exist. The idea was intolerable to him.

So Lucifer gathered his forces, and they fought, and the Universe was blasted in the battle. Earth would be remade, and the Plan would proceed. God's plan, not Lucifer's.

Lucifer, and all the angels with him, had been thrown down to Earth and locked in.

But what about us? Leviathan's kin, the "sons of Pride", the Dominant. We were ... dispersed. Caged.

Not angels, but swept up in the rebellion with them. Not to be kept imprisoned on Earth, like them, but imprisoned nonetheless, given time to reflect.

We did not actually “leave our rightful places,” so He gave us time to make a new choice.

Or not.

Hunger growled insistently. It was a new sensation to him, but unmistakable in its meaning. Looking around, the creature saw no shrubbery, no ferns, no trees. A pool, black in the starlight, offered refreshment and the hope of catching something edible. Surf pounded close by, just out of sight. Angry, violent surf.

At Home, eating was for pleasure. Clearly it was more than that in this place, and would be something crucial to existence. What an odd thought.

Are others here? Leviathan was thrown to Earth, with Lucifer. But the others? Am I alone somewhere in Orion?

Hunger was so foreign to his experience that it spawned a new thought.

I’m physical. How did that happen?

Feeling of his muscles, stretching, easing out to full length, he moved to the pool. Sliding into the water, he found it cool, and sweet to drink. And empty. Nothing lived there, to his surprise. But a current moved through it, from the desert towards the sound of the sea.

Two moons were rising. Under the pale light he saw gravel, and sand, and rocky mountains rising around him. No vegetation at all.

Truly a prison planet.

Suddenly very tired, he slithered back into the cave and curled up into dark and sour dreams.

“Are you ready?”

Jesus smiled, obviously knowing the answer. I had never been more ready in my life.

“Father asked Job if he could ‘restrain the Pleiades’ and ‘loose the cords of Orion.’ At the time, Job could not possibly have answered.”

He looked around at us. “But now he has done so, and he is ready. Ready to ‘loose the cords of Orion.’ You’ll join him to begin the task;

when Orion is free, others will pick up the work from there.”

I was stunned. I knew the verse well -- it had always fired my imagination. What in the world -- what in the heavens? -- could it mean, to “loose the cords” of Orion?

“It always spoke to your heart because of the part you have to play,” He explained, as my thoughts must have visibly run across my face. “Linus and Julia felt the same. You’ll go together, and John will join you. Are you ready? Job is waiting.”

Job was strolling in a courtyard garden of apple and pear trees, working on a red Perfect Delight that I could smell from 50 yards away. This was the apple that all those trees on Earth were trying to produce! My mouth watered, and I was soon sharing his pleasure with a crisp, juicy sample of my own.

Suddenly it was clear. So many things we knew on Earth were simply copies of the reality that awaited us, the reality that now surrounded us. Those were references to horses, and trees, and mountains, but with a nature much more responsive to Him than the ones we knew. Had we not realized what we were reading? And the temple, built exactly like the one in Heaven. Did we not understand? Copies on earth of the realities in the heavenlies, to encourage us, to help us believe, to help us understand what he was preparing for eternity. Including apples!

Job looked us over. He was a man used to command, used to leading groups and accomplishing whatever his hand found to do. His smile took us all in, and I thought he was comparing one or two of us with his own sons and daughters. I decided to ask one of those questions that had always puzzled me.

“Job, tell me something.”

He lifted an eyebrow, and a smile began working its way across his mouth. I suddenly realized my question was probably nothing new. I forged ahead.

“God said you would have three times the sons and daughters you lost, but the scriptures only describe twice the number.” He laughed, and waved a hand towards the mansion rising behind the courtyard, with

many windows reflecting the golden sky. “They’re all here! My first family, and my second! I have them all!”

Of course. One plus two makes three.

I blushed with the obvious answer. Would I find all the “hard questions” that troubled me on earth answered so readily?

Morning surprised him with its heat and oppressive light. Hunger raged in his belly. Almost without thinking, Livya-Gadol moved out of the cave and towards the sound of a great sea pounding its fists against a rocky coast. The cliff dropped away so suddenly he almost fell over it, down into the white foam of tall waves throwing themselves into a wall of rock that rose up from the surf below. Forgetting he was now held within a physical body, he leapt forward into the air, and found himself falling toward the wet rocks below. Instinct took over. His great wings unfolded, caught the air, and swept him up from the spray.

Of course. Of course I can fly. I’ve always had wings. Now they’re ... physical.

He worked with them, learning to turn, to dive, to soar.

So what happens down there?

Holding his breath, Gadol dove straight down. Far enough from the coast that he was sure it was deep water, he plunged through the waves, straight down into the sea. Tucking his wings in tight, he tried different things and discovered he could move through the water fairly well by moving as a snake would.

He also discovered food. Something swam past and he turned and swallowed it, almost on instinct. Suddenly he understood the process that would keep him alive, and eagerly sought out more of the silver morsels.

Eventually tiring of that effort, and having satisfied the craving in his belly, Gadol returned to the surface. Bursting through the waves, he ascended.

Clouds had rolled in, blanketing the sky with grey and misty white. He steadily rose, the sun now stabbing, now glimmering through solid

or shredded banks of drifting clouds, until he passed the first layer. A wide view awaited him above, orange from the desert dust and obscured in the distance with plains of rolling, soft clouds underneath him. Higher he flew, suddenly rising above the dust. Clear blue skies opened up around and above him. Far above, thin layers of cirrus marked the end of moisture; beyond that, the air would gradually disappear and the vacuum of the universe would dominate. No longer could he go there, bound by his body of flesh and its need for oxygen, food, and sleep.

Not yet.

The enormous sun above him turned the clouds below into searing white and baked his skin. On he flew, and on, but the cloudbanks below him seemed endless, and he could see nothing. The air grew colder; this must be north, he thought.

If the planet rotates in the normal direction.

Weary muscles begged for relief, and he reluctantly decided to turn back. Just then he saw a bit of snow and a black, jagged rock piercing the heavy blanket of clouds below him. Swooping down, he circled the mountain and found an open place to land -- an island in a sea of cold fog, but a place to rest before returning south. He set down on hard rock with no soil or gravel to get a grip on. Sliding on the damp shale, he tumbled into a crevice and fell hard on his right side. Snarling, bitter thoughts ran through his mind. He hated the planet and the One who had put him here.

He climbed out of the pit, favoring a leg obviously bruised but not broken. On the sloping rock where he stood nothing offered a possibility of either food or water. Further below, on a steeper slope, some gravel softened the sheer bleakness of the place, but there was no evidence of any growth at all. A few steps further and the mountain disappeared into wet, drifting clouds. He had no desire to wander into that soup.

Testing his wings for strain, he found them only weary, not damaged, so he spread them and took to the air again, heading for home. Such as it was.

When he finally reached the cliffs and cave of his awakening he stumbled inside and fell into the sleep of sheer exhaustion.

The next time he awoke it was morning and the sky was clear. After a long drink from the pool and a leisurely breakfast cruising in the waves nearby, he rose into the air for a better look at the planet. Past the cliffs, above the nearby peaks, into the coppery sky. Little enough lived in the sea, and nothing on land; what lived up here? Were there any birds, insects, anything? Were any more of Leviathan's offspring here?

Higher he rose, now circling as the air grew thinner and flying was more difficult. Searching the sky for miles around, he saw nothing. He looked down and realized the planet was truly barren. No indication of vegetation met his eye in any direction.

The simmering hatred of God that always ran like acid in his veins now boiled. A prison planet, indeed, with just enough food in the sea to keep him alive! Forgetting that such provision was a gift, and that the treatment he had earned with his rebellion was far worse, his heart raged.

Higher and higher he rose, to the very limits that the disappearing air would allow. Straining, closer and closer to the blackness of deep space, closer to the realms that were his playground and refuge before the war. Coasting at the limit of his ability to breathe, he yearned to be up there again among the stars. Finally, exhausted, he began drifting down towards the planet's surface.

And he heard his name.

"Now I have a question for you!"

Surprised, I looked up from my embarrassment. "I'll try." What in the world could he have to ask me?

"What are the cords we must loose?"

Silence among the group. We were intensely interested in that question!

"Too bad! I was hoping you knew! I guess we'll find out together."

He gathered us around a marble table at the center of the courtyard set with bowls of fruit and steaming fresh bread. Spread across the table was a map of the constellation Orion as we had always seen it from Earth. Around each star were circles, each with a dot and a word placed

somewhere on the circle. Their planets! The planets, and some of the stars, had names I didn't recognize. Alnitak I knew; one of its planets, circled in red, was labelled 'Nsol.

"Father delights in our creativity, so He often adopts the way we have represented things. You remember he told Adam to name the animals? Whatever Adam called them, that became their names."

He pointed to the map. "So He considers Orion to look like this, just the way it looked to us. Obviously, from anywhere else in the universe these stars would form an entirely different pattern, but you'll find this is the view assumed by the angels as well as by us."

He touched the star at the left end of Orion's belt.

"Alnitak is where we're headed. Linus, you may have heard it called 'An-nitaq.' Of course, men could not see well enough to find and name its planets, but it has several. We'll be on this one at first" -- he pointed -- "the one called 'Nsol."

We looked at the map, tracing the circles, wondering what we would find there.

"In many solar systems Father has placed a planet at precisely the distance from that star to support life. Now ..."

He paused, looking around at our faces.

"Now those planets are waiting. It is our job to move out into the universe and carry out the original plan."

"Our job? The four ... five ... of us?" I exclaimed.

Job laughed. "No, not just us. Adam's sons, all of them! Earth was the starting point, but it was never the end of the plan, only the beginning."

Linus shook his head. "Of course. That's always been His way. Start small, light a fire that can't be quenched, and let it grow! We should have known this was coming!"

Julia laughed. "Just like in Ireland. He lit a fire there, and we started out across Britain and into Gaul, spark by spark, pushing back the darkness."

Talk about pushing back the darkness! Deep space. The universe. Good thing we have eternity to get it done!

"How do we get there?" John appeared to be quietly thinking it through, and had gotten one step ahead of us. "Where are we now, in

relation to ... well, to any place in the universe, for that matter?"

"My guess is that we're one step away," Job answered. "I think He'll just open a door for us and we'll step into that world."

"How do we get back?" Again, John was thinking far ahead of the rest of us.

"Guess we'll find out when it's time to come back," Linus offered. "I figure we'll operate there just like we did on earth... just like He did. Watching Father and doing what He does!"

Job smiled and looked up at him.

"Tell us about that, Linus - about watching Father, and doing what He does. You know my story, of course. Tell me yours."

Job settled into a carved marble chair hung with scarlet cloth panels and decorated with intricately stitched or woven cushions that blazed with vines and flowers.

"Mine?" said Linus. "Not much to tell. I was in Rome, got to meet Paul. Pretty obvious what happens, when you meet Paul -- you meet Jesus next! Changed my life, and lots of others, too. The number grew rapidly. We learned to pray and to set people free from ... from all sorts of things, really. That's what I mean. Just like Jesus did in Jerusalem: listen, watch, obey.

"And eventually, we learned to hide. There was a lot of idolatry and cruelty in the city. There were a lot of wounded people. So we saw lots of healing, lots of deliverance."

"How did you meet him?" asked Julia.

"Paul?"

She nodded.

"We'd been visiting the synagogue, my father and I. Just listening, thinking about their ideas, their faith, and the news from Jerusalem, the amazing things they said had happened there.

"You had to worship Caesar then, and after that whatever else you liked, that was fine. But Caesar was just a man, no more. A fool could see it, but no one could say it, of course.

"But we thought there had to be more. More than Caesar and the temple idols.

“And the gods - Artemis, that Ephesus pushed, any of them, just stories, just fancy tales anyone might make up.

“But the Jews - they were different. They had something that was real. We couldn’t figure it out, though. All those rules, all the things you had to do to please God. Didn’t seem like God cared as much about all that as they did, from the stories.

“And where was the power? None of our synagogue friends were about to float an axe-head down at the river! Or anything else that happened in their old stories!

“But they knew Him, through all that. They honored something worth honoring -- more than I could say for the rest of us!

“Then Paul came. In chains, at first, and always with a guard.

“We heard he wanted a day at the synagogue to explain about the recent happenings in Jerusalem. Sounded like a storm had blown through that city, and he was fresh from it, so we made sure to be there.

“Not much to look at, Paul. Have you met him yet? You’ll see. And not a strong speaker, not loud like the ones you heard in the public squares or in the city meetings.

“But he knew Him! He knew God like no one I ever met.

“And the synagogue - oh, they got stirred up! Some could hardly listen without pacing and muttering and interrupting. And others - Father and me, too - could not hear enough. We strained to hear him over the grumbling of the old beards.

“Because he was sure, absolutely sure. Like a man who’s seen something and knows he saw it. May not understand what he’s seen, and there were things Paul was still sorting out -- but he was sure, nonetheless, sure enough that he was hanging his whole life on it.

“So they couldn’t argue. They’d say, ‘That’s impossible!’ He’d just shrug and say, ‘It happened.’ Or he would point them to a Scripture and explain that God had told them years ago He would do this, and walk it out for them, step by step, in the ancient writings.

“But you could read those prophets differently, and they were good at that. Some of them would rather argue than eat or sleep, I think.

“So Paul would let them object and complain and threaten, and then he’d take a drink and open a new topic.

“Made them very upset, many of them. But a few listened. Like us.

“Then the synagogue was about to split up. It got so bad, Paul couldn’t teach there any longer. Too much anger.

“He rented a house from Claudius, I think, the butcher, and settled in. We almost lived there, we went so often! And you couldn’t wear him out! We’d wear out our ears before he wore out his voice!

“I think that’s why he spoke so softly, and a little rough - doing that for years would use up anyone’s throat! But like I said, he knew God. It was like God had opened up the old writings and said, ‘Paul, here’s what I meant. Here’s where I explained it. Here’s where I told you this was coming.’

“Because Paul, you know, used to be one of those angry Jews. Never met Jesus, and was so contemptuous that he wouldn’t go hear Him when he heard Jesus was in Jerusalem. Figured he was just an ignorant troublemaker likely to get the city upset like other pot-stirrers had done.

“And he didn’t believe the miracle stories. Thought those who did were fools, naive, gullible.

“Then came that trip to Damascus when God knocked him down, blinded him, and turned his head around.

“Must have been amazing, to go back through the books he knew so well -- maybe had memorized, even -- and discover he had never understood them after all. And had memorized all the wrong parts!”

We all laughed.

“What was that ‘thorn’ he talked about?” I asked. “I’ve never heard anything I believed was right, and he didn’t really explain it in his letter to Corinth.”

The others glanced at each other and smiled.

“You’ll have to ask him,” Linus said with a wink. “I’ll tell you this much -- he was amused that it became such a guessing game for God’s people for all those years!