

The Paradox Syndrome

A Sci-fi Novella

by:
Megan Cutler

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to real people or events is entirely coincidental.

THE PARADOX SYNDROME

Copyright © 2018 by Megan Cutler.

All rights reserved.

Cover art by Beth Alvarez

This book is protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without the express written permission of the author.

First Edition: March 2018

“Don't lose your tokens. No one will be permitted to access the Pristine Lands without a token.”

The speakers moved through rows of anxious people, displaying the small copper indicators in case anyone had forgotten what they looked like. A few desolate moans escaped the throats of those who had yet to acquire their key to safety, though the heralds paid them little mind. Sobs accompanied nervous shuffles. Dread hung over the caravan like a shroud, though everyone was used to the routine by now.

“Those without tokens are welcome to travel with us as far as the third marker. From there, you can arrange transport to a nearby town or clinic. The caravan departs promptly in two hours. You don't want to be left behind.”

The heralds repeated their message from the beginning, listing all the ways to acquire a token. Most of the caravan's complement couldn't afford to purchase a journey beyond the final marker, forcing them to resort to less reliable tactics. Lottery was the easiest, but the chances were slim and, while a parent could bring one child with them, a whole family couldn't travel on a single token. Service was probably the best option, but most laborers died before they could claim their reward. At least they could will their token to a loved one.

“Iris!”

The call jolted her attention away from the window. Uninterested in tracking the proceedings, Iris turned, dragging messy auburn hair out of her face, tucking it into the collar of her shirt for lack of a hair tie. The sorrow of the lottery losers always overshadowed the joy of the winners anyway.

“What is it?” she asked, mustering only a faint smile for Athyrr as he approached. Somehow he always managed to look pristine, despite the dust and grime of the road. He was dressed like an old style dandy; all he needed was a monocle to complete the ridiculous look. His black hair was cut close to his skull, carelessly slicked back so that the stubs stood on end.

“Don't forget this.” Grinning, the young lord flicked a small copper token into the air, caught it and extended his palm toward her, face up.

Iris frowned. “I thought you said I wouldn't need one.”

“You won't need a token to pass the markers, but that doesn't mean you don't get one. You can use it to bring someone with you, if you like.”

“Is it that simple?” Iris muttered, not expecting an answer. What a cruel twist of fate that so many of the caravan's passengers toiled day and night in hopes of gaining freedom, and someone handed her an extra helping though she hadn't lifted a finger to earn it. “Shouldn't all the extras go to the lottery?”

Athyrr shrugged. Not for the first time, it struck Iris how familiar he seemed when he tilted his head just so, as if she had spent her entire life watching him perform his sleight of hand tricks.

“You can donate it to the lottery, if you want. Or pick the person you think deserves it best. Those lotteries are hardly fair, you know.”

Ignoring Athyrr's self-assured grin, Iris snatched the token from his palm and tucked it into an interior pocket of her jacket. The idea of dictating someone's fate made her stomach twist, but it was better to lift one poor soul out of darkness than helplessly watch them all suffer. It might be the only life she managed to save.

“Best get your mask on,” Athyrr said. “It's about time to pack up.”

Iris stole one last glance out the window before she turned and shuddered. They were lining up for the lottery.

Spinning on her heel, she scampered deeper into the old manor house. The dishes had already been scoured clean and returned to their places for the next group. The beds had been stripped so the linens could be washed, and a pile of bags formed at the base of the stairs.

Iris had only one small duffel. She retrieved it from the room where she slept and headed back downstairs without pausing. There wasn't much to see; while it provided comfort, the manor was hardly a luxurious sanctuary. Its walls were bare of decoration. Its furnishings were threadbare. Even the cutlery was chipped and scratched. Everything about the world it inhabited had been stripped down to bare essentials, made utilitarian out of necessity. No one stopped to admire the countryside anymore. They had no time to ogle paintings or décor. Everyone focused on a single task above all others; survival.

While other passengers passed their bags into the care of the caravan crew, Iris clutched her duffel straps tightly between both hands. Aside from a few changes of clothing and her identifications, the small zipper pouch contained all that remained of her old life, the few precious treasures she couldn't bear to lose. Pictures of her mother and brother, along with whatever bits and bobs had been in her pockets at the time. They were hardly valuable to anyone else but, without them, Iris might go mad.

She opened the bag enough to retrieve the small plastic mask given to her at the start of the journey. Trying not to flinch, she set the strap over her head and settled the thick face plate over her nose and mouth. It quickly formed a tight seal against the side of her face that Iris would spend the rest of the day trying not to disturb, no matter how badly it made her ache or itch. A few minutes later, one of the caravan crew handed her a small canister attached to a harness. She hooked the tube from her mask in place with deft fingers and settled the harness over her shoulder, along with her duffel.

She always waited as long as possible to step through the decontamination shower. She wasn't sure why they had to use it while exiting the manor, where the environment was supposed to be safely sterile, but she had long since learned not to question the safety procedures. Even with the mask, she could smell the heavy chemicals long after the spray shut off.

Athyrr waited on the other side of the short tunnel. He never strayed far from her side when they left the safety of their havens. He ushered her to the small carriage reserved for their use, ready to fight anyone who got in their way.

Iris always felt a small rush of relief when Athyrr sealed the door behind them, no matter how guilty she felt about the extra leg room. Most of the travelers crammed themselves into the backs of old trucks, enduring the day's high heat while their vehicles navigated the blighted landscape. The small chamber she shared with Athyrr cycled cool air and muffled the sounds of both vehicles and crowds. It was almost like traveling by train, if a tad bumpier.

Within minutes, machines buzzed to life, engines turned over and the various vehicles that made up the caravan lurched into motion. If they were lucky, they would reach their next stop before sunset. Four months she had been on this journey. One more week of endless travel and they would reach the lab, where Iris could hopefully put this whole experience behind her.

Leaning her head against the padded chair back, Iris stared out the window and watched the barren, cracked landscape slip by, hoping she would fall asleep, knowing she would not.

* * *

As soon as Iris pulled her clunky sample case free of the station, she had an extra set of hands to help her. As she struggled to lift the kit over the first obstacle, it jerked free from her

grip. Under most circumstances, she would have been annoyed, but Jurremy had helped with enough of these excursions, she trusted he knew how to handle the delicate equipment.

“Just you let me take care of this, Lady Iris,” he insisted as he eased the case over the remains of a crumbled wall.

“Miss Iris will do just fine, thank you,” she replied, knowing he would hear despite the muffling effect of her mask. “I’m not a lady after the fashion of your people.”

“But you’re Lord Athyrr’s guest and that makes you close enough as far as us common folk are concerned.”

“I’m not sure *guest* is the word I would use.” But she offered no further explanation, pausing instead to catch her breath. She was unused to the harsh heat, and several weeks of travel hadn’t helped her adjust. Then again, she was also unaccustomed to hiking and dragging bulky equipment up and down hills.

Jurremy waited at the top of the incline, looking fresh and ready to run a marathon. Iris tried not to be jealous as she wiped the sweat from her brow. Her companion was both taller and stockier than her. With his thick, blocky jaw line and short crop of ruddy brown hair, he looked more like a farm hand than anything else. But his earthen eyes radiated kindness, and that was more than she could say for most of the occupants of this godforsaken land.

“You seem to know this place fairly well, my friend, have you been here before?”

“It’s my third circuit with the caravan,” Jurremy beamed. “If you look there, you’ll see the third marker.” He held one arm aloft, pointing to a tiny blinking pin-prick on the outskirts of the broken city.

Iris squinted, hoping she could determine the light’s pattern if she watched long enough. It wasn’t Morse code. Could it be a visual form of tap code? Who was it meant to signal anyway?

“How far are the last two markers?” she asked, abandoning that particular curiosity. Bending, she unhooked the clip holding her sample case closed and slid it open. Several rows of empty test tubes waited inside.

“I don’t rightly know, Miss Iris,” Jurremy admitted, clearly somewhat embarrassed. “I’ve never been beyond the third. Haven’t earned my token yet.”

Iris paused with her hand poised over a pile of loose soil, ready to scoop it into one of the test tubes.

“Just two more circuits,” Jurremy went on without waiting for a response. “Then they have to give me one.”

Iris winced. A full caravan trek lasted six months in either direction. That meant her dutiful friend had to risk two more years traveling highly contaminated landscape before he would earn his chance to be inoculated.

“Aren’t you worried you’ll get sick?” She tried to sound casual as she went back to taking samples, but the possibility troubled her. It was hard enough to watch desperate mothers struggle to maintain face for their children or broken men accept the inevitability of their fate. Jurremy was such a bright soul, the only one she had really enjoyed talking to on the journey. She couldn’t stand the thought of him wasting away.

“Nah,” he replied with a flick of his wrist. “I’m young and strong. Besides, I was born in these lands.” He thumped one fist against his chest. “It can’t reject us all.”

If only it worked that way. But according to Athyrr, it hadn’t; the so-called noble families were immune to the disease. Because they predated it. But if no one else survived the creeping contamination, humanity’s viable pool of DNA would soon be too small to ensure the continuation of the species. Which was why Athyrr risked waking her; they had to find a cure, or

at least a way to prevent the spread.

In the absence of an answer, Jurremy kept talking. “Besides, it gives me a better chance than working in one of those clinics.” He shuddered. “No matter how many precautions they take — fancy vacuum sealed suits, full head masks, triple gloves and endless decon showers — every caretaker gets it. Sooner or later, it seeps into their skin and they become one of the patients. All except the nobles.”

Iris wondered which would be worse; watching the world succumb to a slow and inevitable doom or dying before she had a chance to live. She hoped she would never have to answer that question.

“What about you?” Jurremy's voice startled her back to the moment. He had taken a seat on a nearby section of wall that remained intact. His hands rested on the rough rock beside him, bracing his weight as he leaned forward to watch her work. “You ever been here before, Miss Iris?”

She sealed her latest sample and hesitated. Her eyes drifted back to the blinking light in the distance before they swept the horizon. “Once,” she murmured, her voice barely more than a whisper. But time had not been kind to this place. It bore no more than a passing resemblance to the pristine spires of steel and glass she remembered.

The city's modern sectors fared best; some of those hulking buildings still stood in a cluster near what had once been the financial district. The windows were broken, the glass long since crushed to fine powder, but a few of the lower floors were still livable. People carved a meager existence out of the shops located there. They still had goods to trade even if luxuries were few and meals were simple.

But she remembered this place as it had been, each image as keen as though it had been captured by an expensive digital camera. She remembered the smoothly paved streets, the bricked sidewalks and the trees which lined the walkways. She remembered gardens spanning entire blocks, with bright blossoms growing in intricate patterns. The hedges had been emerald green, trimmed and shaped, rather than overgrown snarls of brown thorns ready to snap at the slightest disturbance. There had been stone and marble buildings decorated with fine statues instead of piles of rubble lining the streets.

That city had been alive, filled with joyful people and playing children. The markets had been brimming with fresh produce and the sky had been the bluest Iris had ever seen. Her family had spent an entire summer in that city before her father died and her mother decided she could no longer bear to occupy the sunny vacation house. She sold the villa and bought a cottage along the coast instead, but Iris had always wanted to come back here.

“What was that?” Jurremy's voice once again startled her from her reverie. “I'm sorry. I didn't hear.”

Iris shook her head. This wasn't the same city, couldn't be. Even if she recognized the faded remains of the sign marking her favorite bakery and the familiar shape of the hills where the villas once stood, it had to be a dream, a nightmare or some cruel joke contrived by the universe.

She shook her head harder and focused on her samples. Each carefully sealed tube had to be run through a portable sterilization machine so they could be safely handled in the lab. Considering what she had seen, Iris couldn't blame anyone for taking extra precautions, though it made the process painstakingly slow. But comparing the air and soil samples she collected here, close to the edge of the danger zone, with those she had gathered from her origin point would be a critical part of solving this mystery. Especially if proximity to some environmental element allowed the Pristine Lands to remain clean.

Jurremy filled the time she spent working with friendly chatter. The topics were frivolous and Iris only half paid attention, but she appreciated his efforts. She appreciated anything that took her mind off the last four months. Anything to distract her from the chaotic disaster her life had become. Anything to keep her from longing for a home to which she could never return.

“And they say the land beyond the final marker is still green,” Jurremy remarked as Iris set the last sample back into its velvet-padded slot. When she glanced at him, his eyes were shining. “If the stories are true, rain still falls there and everything!”

As soon as Iris finished latching her case, Jurremy swooped forward to lift it. “Will you be taking any other samples today, Miss Iris? Or should I take this back to the station?”

Iris scanned the city one last time. They were close enough to the city's center she didn't think moving would uncover anything new. “If you could get us a ride to the edge of the city, it might be worth the effort. Otherwise, let's turn in.”

As she brushed the dirt from her jeans and jacket, her hands encountered an unfamiliar lump in her pocket. As soon as she pressed it flat against her chest, she remembered the gleaming copper disc flipping through the air just before Athyrr's hand engulfed it. How could she have forgotten?

“I can get you a ride to the edge of the city,” Jurremy promised, a wide grin splitting his lips. “Lord Athyrr said to take care of whatever you need, and his name holds a lot of weight around here. He's the only noble that ever helps us common folk anymore, you know? Comes over the barrier from time to time, ships fresh food, and makes sure we get as fair a chance as possible at survival. I'd do anything for him, though I'd help you anyway, Miss Iris. You're twice as kind as he is.”

It was hard for Iris to imagine Athyrr as kind. He struck her as savagely smug and only marginally aware of the commoners' plight. She thought his desire to save them had more to do with saving his own kind, but if no one else bothered to pay attention, she could see where Jurremy's good opinion originated.

“You mentioned rain in the Pristine Lands,” she said as she followed Jurremy back down the hill. “Doesn't it ever rain out here? Where would you get water otherwise?”

Jurremy chuckled. “Most of our water comes from deep in the ground. The doctors say it's safest to drink. The ground is supposed to filter it, you see? But it does still rain out here, from time to time. Bad rain, though. Eats at stone and metal too. According to the stories, you can drink the rain in the Pristine Lands right out of the sky.”

Iris answered his grin with one of her own. “How would you like to see it for yourself?”

“That's the dream,” Jurremy replied, undaunted. “Two more years and-”

“How would you like to see it now?” Reaching into her pocket, she produced the token, holding it between her thumb and forefinger so that he could read its markings.

Though Jurremy's jaw dropped, he had enough presence of mind to keep a firm hold of her case. “Where'd you get that, Miss Iris?” he gasped as she pressed it into his hand. He held it like a sacred object, cradled in the center of his palm. Then, with growing horror he closed his hand around the token and shoved his fist in her direction, clearly trying to give it back. “It's yours, isn't it? You can't give me your token, Miss Iris, you're so much more important than a scamp like me!”

Iris held up both hands, palms outward, refusing to take the token back. “It isn't mine, Jurremy. It's yours now.”

Her words did seem to placate him. At least he stopped trying to return the coin, though distress remained etched into his features.

“Athyr gave it to me,” she explained, her tone soothing. “He said I could pick one person to bring with me. I choose you. I’m going to need a lab assistant and you’ve been helping me with my equipment from the start.”

Tears glistened near the edges of Jurremy’s eyes as he clutched the token to his chest, his hand resting just over his heart. “Oh Miss Iris, how can I ever repay you for such kindness? I’ll earn this token proper, I swear it to you.”

Iris chuckled to show she wasn’t the least bit concerned. “I’m sure you will.” She was equally certain he already had.

* * *

“Be careful with those!” Iris cried, turning sideways to navigate the crowded tunnel. The careless tech carrying her cages bumped against yet another cart, causing the animals inside to skitter and shiver with fear. The man didn’t even bother to glance back at her and she was about to unleash another outburst when a hand caught her shoulder.

“Don’t worry. Everything will get to the proper place.”

Iris spun on Athyr, ready to unleash her tirade anyway, but the anger died on her lips when she saw the cool patience on his face. How he dealt with the cramped quarters and stale air without care, she couldn’t guess. But she supposed he was used to this sort of thing; he made the journey often enough that everyone living beside the last three markers knew his name and face.

Iris drew a deep breath, ignored the stench of stale sweat and tried to appreciate the fact that she no longer needed to wear a bulky mask. But it was hard to say if the tunnels extending between the final marker and the lab were any better than the arid caravan track. At least out there, air circulated freely.

“It won’t exactly be easy to replace those critters if they’re inadvertently bludgeoned to death. In four months we only found the three. If we’re going to develop a cure, we need some way to test the potentials and I’d rather not test treatments on humans.” She gave him a significant look.

Athyr didn’t even flinch. “We’ve already passed word back along the caravan lines. Every group will keep an eye out for-”

“I don’t want to have to wait six months between tests-”

Athyr squeezed her shoulder to silence her. “You won’t have to wait a full caravan run. The next group will be here in six weeks, and they’re sure to have something. Besides, not every group is in as much of a rush as we were. We needed to get you here so your work could begin.”

Iris drew a second deep breath and willed the tension to ease from her shoulders. “I’m sorry. There’s a lot to consider and I’m having trouble keeping it all straight.” She shook her head.

Sliding his hand to the small of her back, Athyr guided her through the flow of traffic. A path seemed to open for him, because of his height, perhaps, or because of his familiarity. At the moment, Iris didn’t care.

“I already told you, everything you need will be provided for you. The lab has been ready for some time, we just needed someone to run it.”

“When did you lose your last real biologist?” Iris asked. It was a strange, haunting question, but it kept her mind off other worries.

“Almost five years ago now, and he wasn’t particularly well-trained. Even those with immunity aren’t exempt from the dangers of the blighted cities, and the panic grows a little stronger each year.”

“It's a wonder you've managed so long.”

“People do what they have to in order to survive. That's the story of human history. People don't wake up one day and decide to do something great, they just don't have a choice.”

Iris wondered if that was supposed to make her feel better. She was far from great. She wasn't even sure she was good. She had only been three months past graduation and barely into her first project when her memories grew fuzzy. Had she really agreed to enter cryogenic sleep in such a rush she hadn't even packed a proper box to be stored along with her? Shouldn't there have been some kind of preparation process? Papers to be signed? Goodbyes to be said? And why had she been chosen in the first place? Anyone would have been better suited to managing this crisis than her. Certainly someone with at least one success tied to their name.

They passed through a small door into an empty room. The walls were white-washed and the floor was made of white and black tile. It had a cold, sterile feel to it, but at least it was familiar.

“There's something you're not telling me,” Iris said as soon as Athyrr closed the door behind them. “Something still doesn't add up. If I really have been in some kind of frozen sleep for the last hundred years, it should have taken me a lot longer than a couple of hours to recover.” The nasty headache and fuzzy coordination all seemed logical at the time, but she kept coming back to it, unable to deny how wrong it all seemed. “I'm a biologist. I know how the body works. If my body was inactive for that amount of time—”

Athyrr interrupted her with a sigh. It was the first time he had expressed anything aside from serenity or happiness. He was so unflappable, Iris felt downright paranoid by comparison.

“You're right, Iris, I haven't told you the whole truth. I hope you'll forgive me, but I thought you needed to see the world for yourself before you'd believe me.”

She waited for him to elaborate, arms crossed in front of her chest, foot tapping an impatient rhythm against the hard floor.

“I didn't wake you from cryogenic sleep. It's an unreliable technology at best, and it was still highly experimental during your time. The truth is, I opened a portal through time and pulled you through. It's a disorienting experience but, thankfully, the side effects pass quickly.”

“Time travel?” He was right; four months ago she would have rejected it as hogwash. But now that she had seen the blighted lands, the crumbling cities and the desperate population? It at least filled the holes in her logic. “But why me?” she demanded, abandoning her stance to pace.

“We didn't have a lot of information to go on. We knew the location of a laboratory where the scientists were likely to be able to help us. Actually, we had several potential locations, but I favored that one. It was familiar to me. I remembered it for some reason, and I thought I should follow my instincts.”

“You picked me on a *whim*?” Her voice squeaked slightly. “You opened a portal through time to acquire a biologist and you accepted me because I was closest to hand?” All her well-formed opinions of Athyrr as logical and reasonable began to crumble.

“I wouldn't go that far,” Athyrr insisted planting one hand on his hip. “When you live as long as I have, you learn to trust certain instincts. Given a number of equally logical choices, how do you narrow them down? You can choose at random. Or you can do as I did, and go with your gut. I simply trusted that a qualified individual would be close to the portal when it opened.”

“That's an awful lot of trust to put in a total stranger.”

Athyrr smiled and, suddenly, Iris realized why he looked so familiar. He had the same sly crook to his mouth that always made her younger brother look like a scamp. And the

resemblance didn't end there; he had the same shine in his deep-set eyes and the same slightly hooked point to his chin. Could Athyrr be some distant relative even if her family name hadn't survived?

“Consider that I put my trust in the universe, if it makes you feel better,” he said with a dismissive flick of the wrist. “The point is, I found a biologist. If you can teach us a fraction of what you know, it will have been a worthwhile endeavor. We lost so much in the early days.”

Iris glanced around for a chair and found a stool next to a large window on the far side of the room. It overlooked a large lab that, from the looks of it, hadn't been used in some time. She ignored the screeching of the stool's feet as they scraped the floor and sat down.

“How did all this start? How accurate is the information you've given me?” The haze surrounding her mind when she woke in the bunker lasted several days before it loosed its grip, and only now did she understand the full implications of her position.

The hand on Athyrr's hip looped gracefully toward his head, the fingers sliding through his hair as he gathered his thoughts. “I certainly fudged the timeline a bit. It has been at least five centuries since you disappeared from the lab, which means that the illness has not escalated quite as quickly as you assume. It all started with an enhanced genetics program. The idea was to cure genetic defects. That's where all the good science starts, isn't it?”

“But it moved beyond cures?” Iris prompted, not in the mood for Athyrr's tendency to ramble.

“Quickly. As soon as the wealthy elite got wind of the first successful treatments, they started asking how gene therapy could be used to benefit themselves. And as we all know, the thing every aging person fears most is death.”

“They went straight from curing genetic diseases to a fountain of youth?” Iris arched an eyebrow, wishing her disbelief ran deeper.

“It took a few decades, but when your years number five hundred or more, that seems like the blink of an eye.”

Five hundred? Could Athyrr really be that old? Iris scanned his face again, but he didn't look a day over thirty. He had yet to lose his youthful vitality either, though perhaps it was because he did less backbreaking labor than the rest of the caravan workers.

“So the noble families who survived this blight are the same ones who commissioned the original gene therapy?”

“Some of them,” Athyrr agreed. “Though most won't cross the barrier anymore. They don't like to see what their selfish desires did to the rest of the world. They got their wish. We found a way to eliminate human aging. Our cells regenerate without that pesky little defect that eventually causes our vital organs to fail. In about eighty-five percent of those treated, that was the result.”

“And the other fifteen percent?”

Athyrr shrugged. “Failure to halt the aging process, or so it seemed. No one knows how the mutation occurred. What we do know is that it spread rapidly. By the time we identified it, it had already begun to infect people who hadn't received the original treatment.”

“Then how do you know the two are related?” Iris demanded, holding up a hand to halt the explanation. “They could be two wildly different things. I mean, people used to think that ice cream caused polio because they discovered more cases in the summer, but that was just foolishness.”

“A couple of reasons. First, because immunity is linked to the original treatment. Those whose treatments are successful never catch the disease. And I've walked among the infected for

three centuries now, though many are too afraid. Second, because those rare individuals who survive the disease have acquired the original anti-aging effect. The anti-aging effect seems to act as an antibody or inoculation for the disease. But it doesn't pass through reproduction and we can't isolate what causes the treatment to fail."

"Probably a quirk of the immune system," Iris mused. "But I'm going to need to test a few of those individuals. They could be the key."

"I thought you'd say that, and they're already on their way. There are more detailed records in the lab computer, and I'm certain you'll want to spend the next few days reading over them. Suffice to say, there's ample evidence we caused our own demise. In the early days, we tried to isolate it. We quarantined whole cities, managed to keep pockets of the world uninfected. But as soon as it started infecting other animals, we lost control."

"It must have mutated drastically if it was able to infect the land."

"That may have had something to do with our attempts to eradicate it. But in any case, here we are. We need a biologist capable of running the lab. We have enough eager young apprentices to serve, but we need someone who understands both the data and the methods."

"Speaking of eager young assistants, mind if I recruit one more?"

Athyrr arched an eyebrow. "You've already found someone you want to work with?"

"Not necessarily work with, but Jurremy will make a good runner."

"Jurremy? Did he win one of the lotteries?"

"No, I gave him my token. The one you gave me, remember?"

"You gave your token to Jurremy?"

Athyrr's incredulous tone made the short hairs on the back of Iris's neck stand on end. A prickle of annoyance ran down her back and she lifted her chin in defiance.

"You said I could give it to anyone I wanted. Why not Jurremy? He's been more helpful than anyone, aside from you."

"Weak blood," Athyrr muttered. "He's probably already infected."

Iris clenched her fists at her sides and tried to resist the urge to gnash her teeth. "So are half the people who won those tokens. Unless you're telling me the lotteries are rigged?"

Athyrr frowned and Iris shivered. *Don't think about it. You don't need that right now.*

"Besides, he spoke highly of you," she said, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "Though I imagine that would change if he heard about this conversation. I'm rather fond of him, personally. It will be nice to have someone around that I enjoy talking to."

"You aren't here to play house," Athyrr growled. "You're here—"

"To fix your mess," Iris hissed. "I'm well aware. But that doesn't mean you get to dictate how I do it. The tattered remains of my life are still mine to govern, and I'll thank you to keep that in mind."

Her tone was so biting, Athyrr raised both hands, palms outward, as if to ward her off. "Peace!" he insisted. "You're right, Iris, the decision was yours to make and I shouldn't have criticized it. Please, I know how difficult this must be for you. I, too, lost my family to this disaster."

Difficult seemed a gross understatement. Iris straightened her shirt and squared her shoulders. "They didn't receive the gene therapy?"

Athyrr shook his head. "My mother refused. She was a fearless old woman who insisted on meeting her natural end." A small smile lit his face momentarily. "My sister..." All sign of Athyrr's good humor faded. "My sister was killed in one of the most heinous acts of terrorism ever committed; an attack against the facility working to find the cure. It was in the early days,

before we outlawed the carrying of weapons outside the armed forces.” His face took on a pained expression. “She was a prodigy. If anyone could have cured this pandemic, it would have been her.”

Iris pursed her lips, wondering how skilled the man's sister had actually been. Any sibling was bound to think the other was fantastic. She would have heaped the same praise on her brother, had medicine been his field. Instead of probing, she changed the subject. “Tell me, Lord Athyrr, if you possess the means to time travel, why didn't you just send someone back in time to prevent the creation of this gene therapy in the first place?”

“It never worked in the movies.” When Iris didn't react to his dry humor, he shrugged. “Would you believe someone who tried to tell you your work would destroy the world? Every generation has its disasterists, its grand proclamations that the end is nigh. Who would ever take our representative seriously?”

“But it was our plan until we stopped to think about it. It will take years to regenerate enough power crystals to try again. We couldn't risk failure. We maintain control of the situation by bringing someone here.”

Iris pursed her lips, recalling those first few hours after her passage through the portal. One minute she had been on her way into the lab and the next she had been laying flat on her back, staring into Athyrr's blurry face, wondering how a truck hit her. Between the throbbing of her head and her dark-rimmed vision, she had convinced herself she was delirious. Athyrr's rambling about cryogenic sleep almost seemed like a fever dream now.

Swallowing hard, Iris nodded. “Right. Well, I'd better get started then.”

Athyrr shook his head. “Not until you've had a proper rest. Besides, you'll need time to familiarize yourself with the data. I can't make heads or tails of it, so I won't be much help, but hopefully there'll be something useful in the logs.”

One step at a time. She motioned for Athyrr to lead the way, hoping the housing section of the lab would at least provide a breath of fresh air.

* * *

Jurremy's face filled her thoughts. Though his blocky jaw line once looked clunky, it now seemed delicate, as if it had been sculpted by a fine artist's hand. His eyes were exactly the color of damp earth after rain. And the way the sun glinted off his short crop of ruddy brown hair made it look soft as silk.

His warm smile brightened her drab room when she woke, slowly blinking sleep from her eyes. His calloused fingers brushed hair from her face, tucking it gently behind her ear. His laughter became a sweet, lilting tune that inevitably drew a smile to her lips.

They strode together beneath tall, green trees, listening to an endless chorus of birdsong before they settled in the springy grass to watch lazy clouds drift by. Jurremy liked to announce what the fluffy formations looked like to him. Tools, mostly. Here he saw a wrench. There a hammer. Now the underside of a caravan truck or a smattering of suitcases.

Laughing, Iris pointed to similar formations and pronounced them creatures from her youth. “A rabbit,” she said the first time.

“Rabbit?” Jurremy's brow furrowed with confusion. “What's that?”

“A cute little furry creature with big, floppy ears.” She held her fingers up to illustrate.

“Rabbit,” Jermey repeated the unfamiliar word. “You ever seen one?”

“Tons,” Iris replied, her tone wistful. “Though not since Athyrr pulled me through the

gateway.”

She rolled away to hide her frown, but not before Jurremy caught a glimpse of it. Instantly his hand grasped her shoulder and his nose pressed against the back of her head. “You must have seen a lot of critters back then, when they were still plentiful.”

“Yeah,” Iris murmured. “These pockets of green are nice, but they’re nothing like the world I grew up in.”

“You aren’t the only one who misses it.” Jurremy’s tone was as soothing as the touch that trailed down her arm. “There are still some nobles left from back then. Athyrr’s one of the oldest.”

Iris closed her eyes and relaxed into her companion’s warmth, allowing it to surround and sooth her. “I suppose it makes sense he’d work so hard to save the world if he remembers how it used to be.”

Jurremy pressed a light kiss to the side of her neck and it sent a thrill down her spine. “Tell me what else you see in the sky,” he pleaded, his voice barely more than a whisper next to her ear.

Iris turned and he rolled with her, until they lay side by side on their backs, hands clasped beside them. “That one looks like a bear,” she said, pointing to a fluffy mass. As the weeks went on she spotted deer and otters, raccoons, squirrels and a dozen other woodland creatures. She paused to describe each one and where they lived. It was almost a game.

Until one day Jurremy lifted his fingers to announce, “That one! Yes, I see it now! A rabbit. Just like you said.” And suddenly, Iris realized she had fallen in love.

The image of the fine spring day flickered and faded, replaced by the smooth darkness of her ceiling. The room had barely grown familiar and Iris still wondered where she was every time she woke in the middle of the night.

The whole experience came rushing back to her in those few moments. Athyrr’s calm face as he explained that she was safe and asked her not to freak out when he told her the truth. The first horrifying sight of the blighted landscape; the earth parched and cracked, the only life brittle and brown. The months of travel. The stark sterility of the lab facility. The overwhelming amount of information and organization required to start her work.

Then the panic passed, her heart rate returned to normal, and Iris drew a deep breath before she rolled over — secure in the knowledge she slept beneath the underground facility.

She expected to forget the dream, or start a new one, but her mind carried the thread with her when oblivion once again swept her away. It started with Jurremy’s face. It always started with his face.

Together they walked, hand in hand, while Iris admired the thin silver band on her left ring finger. Their ceremony had been a small affair, at her insistence. From a distance, the laughter of children drifted to her ears and she imagined a pair of youngsters circling herself and her companion. But were these truths or merely aspirations?

Soft pressure against her hand drew her attention.

“Would you tell me something, Iris?”

“If you insist,” she replied with a teasing smile.

“Why did you give me that token all those years ago?”

“Why not?” She shrugged. “Who else was I going to give it to?”

Jurremy laughed, but the look he shot her afterward was stern. “There had to be a better reason than lack of choices.”

“You were kind to me. Not just once, for months. You helped me take samples, even if it

made no sense to you what I was doing. And you told me about the world. Not the sterile narrative Athyrr wanted me to hear, but the truth as you saw it. That helped me a lot, you know.”

“Really? I thought I was just some eager young lad chatting your ear off. I kept waiting for you to send me away.”

Iris chuckled. “You have no idea how much I needed that distraction. I was in a strange place. I had no idea what was going on. Some days, I didn't even know what was real. But you always had something to say, something to keep me anchored in the moment. And if I'm honest, I may have already liked you the day I decided to bring you with me.”

“Honestly?” Jurremy asked with a grin.

“I decided to put that token into a lottery, or give one of the most desperate in the lot relief. But I couldn't bear the thought of you spending another two years on that trek before you got a chance to see green. You deserved it, my love. Honestly, you did.”

“I'm not sure I'd go as far as deserve. But I'm grateful and I'll never question that.” He leaned down to kiss her and Iris lifted onto her tiptoes to speed the meeting of their lips.

The gentle pressure faded as darkness once again consumed her vision, broken only by the dim glow of her clock incessantly insisting it was time for her to rise. Living without the sun took some getting used to. Iris probably would have slept all day if the facility's alarms didn't keep her on schedule.

She felt like she had barely slept at all. Dragging herself the few feet from her bed to her private bathroom was more difficult than it should have been. Her legs were heavy, her eyes were crusty, and her head was swimming. She stared at herself in the mirror, at the wild twists of her auburn hair and the bloodshot streaks in her green eyes.

She passed out every evening, exhausted by her work in the lab, and rose every morning feeling as though five minutes had passed. But the clock measured exactly eight hours before it roused her. How could she not be getting enough sleep?

It couldn't be the dreams. She had to be asleep to dream, though she dimly remembered that REM occurred early in the sleep cycle, prior to the restful slumber she sought. Getting stuck there could be causing her fatigue.

But it didn't explain why she had dreamed the same thing every night for the past three days.

* * *

The lab already buzzed with activity by the time Iris arrived. By now she had most of her helpers trained to handle samples and prepare slides. But in order to prepare solutions and run tests, they needed to wait for her.

She was somewhat surprised her days didn't blur into each other. Maybe it was the data that kept it all organized. She remembered running a particular test on Tuesday so that she could follow up on Friday. She remembered promising results on Thursday and disappointing setbacks from Monday. Aside from wishing she had peers to share the small triumphs and discuss the various challenges with, work proceeded much as she imagined it would in any other biology lab.

Except the entire world depended on her ability to produce results.

She had just finished labeling the first set of test vials when the door hissed open to announce a new arrival. Athyrr met her eyes from across the crowded room and scuttled quickly to her side, perhaps hoping to avoid other conversations.

“How's it going?” he asked when he reached her, leaning close to the counter to keep his

voice quiet.

“As well as can be expected, I think,” Iris replied as she removed her gloves and tossed them into the biohazard waste bin. “I’m afraid I don’t have many results for you yet. It could take years to get the kind of results you’re hoping for and that was back when a whole team of scientists worked on these kinds of projects.”

“But you feel confident?” Athyrr pressed, an unusually anxious look on his face. Had his peers sent him to get answers? Were they likely to skin him if he returned empty-handed?

“The work doesn’t leave me much time to worry,” Iris admitted. “But I haven’t gotten to the dirty work just yet. I’m still trying to determine what this virus does and does not do.”

“What it doesn’t do?” Athyrr sounded confused.

“Yes. If we want to know exactly what effect our test solutions have on the virus, we first need a better idea of exactly how it works. And while it does seem to attack human DNA, none of our plant samples have responded.”

“If you’re using plants from this side of the barrier, I’m not sure what you’d expect,” Athyrr protested. “They’ve all developed an immunity.”

“Of course, which is why I used them as my control sample. But the plant DNA I collected from the wastes hasn’t shown any results either.”

“Hasn’t the virus already worked its ravages on them?”

“That was my assumption too.” Iris reached for her notebook and flipped to the hastily scribbled chart where she tracked her results. “But most of my work has been with the sample seeds you took out of frozen storage. These are plants that predate the original infection. They can’t all have developed an immunity. Some of these species are practically extinct beyond the barrier.”

Athyrr’s brows furrowed as he scanned her messy handwriting. Iris feared he couldn’t read it but, after a while, he shook his head and handed the book back. “If these were physics equations, I’d be right with you. But I’m afraid biology isn’t my area of expertise, Iris. What are you trying to say?”

“That while your plague probably is related to the gene therapy you developed, it probably isn’t the only problem you’ve been battling for the last several centuries. I’m hopeful I can develop a serum that will treat the sickness. Perhaps one day we can even develop an inoculation against it. But it isn’t going to save the faltering flora.”

Athyrr cleared his throat and glanced over his shoulder, perhaps worried they had been overheard. “If you can save humanity but not the planet, how will we feed the survivors? If you think the lotteries are bad now-”

“You don’t have to tell me, Athyrr,” Iris hissed. “I’m well aware of the consequences. But as far as I can tell, the plant problem is environmental. It might not even be related to the plague.”

Athyrr heaved a sigh. “Perhaps we will have to rely on time travel after all. If you perfect your cure and take it back with you, you could prevent the original outbreak-”

The hiss of the door interrupted. Both Iris and Athyrr glanced across the room to note the entrance of several lab techs. Jurremy stood at the front of the group and Iris couldn’t help but flash him a smile. He waved and hurried to her side, a case of test vials clanging lightly beside him as he walked.

“Got a delivery especially for you, Miss Iris. These are the ones you sent to the UV lab two weeks back. I remembered you saying they were time-sensitive.”

“Well thank you, Jurremy. I was just thinking I’d better check on those and this saves me a trip.” If her smile was a bit more familiar than she intended, and if her hand lingered against his

for an extra moment as she accepted the case, could she really be blamed? After the dreams, it was hard not to notice the strong line of his jaw and the light of kindness in his eyes. She felt like she knew him intimately, even if her memories were just conjured fantasies.

Ignoring Athyrr's frown, Iris smiled. "I had a minor favor I wanted ask-" The statement became a scream as a loud bang echoed through the small space. The case of samples hit the floor, shattering its tubes in a spray of glass shards and liquid. Red blossomed across Jurremy's chest. His mouth opened as he fell, gurgling, to the floor beside the ruined case.

A second shot rang out. Chaos engulfed the tumble and clatter of the second victim's fall as lab technicians dove from their chairs to cower beneath tables. Those behind the gun bearer darted through the door into the safety of the hallways beyond.

Iris barely noticed the second body, splayed next to the first killing weapon. With tears blurring her vision, she fell to her knees. "*Jurremy!*" her crazed call echoed through the sudden stillness.

Some rational part of her brain knew no one could survive with a hole that size in their chest, but the clinical part of her brain commanded her to apply pressure anyway, to stem the flow of blood by any means necessary. "Don't leave me!" she sobbed, pressing her hands against the hot, sticky mass oozing from the center of Jurremy's chest.

How would her dreams come true now?

She was only dimly aware of heavy footfalls as they crossed the room, of Athyrr's stern rebuke as he knelt beside her, of hands closing over her wrists. But when the still-smoking barrel of a gun trained on Athyrr's head, it drew Iris's gaze.

The woman standing over her wasn't dressed like a lab tech. She wore black leather, similar to the protective clothing worn by caravan crews. Her face was weathered, her lips drawn in a grim line. But aside from that, she was a match for the image Iris glimpsed in the bathroom mirror that morning. Her hair was sun-bleached, but bore the same wild tangle. Her eyes were bloodshot and somewhat crazed.

One gloved finger slithered over the gun's trigger.

"I can't tell you how refreshing it is to finally wipe that self-assured expression off your face, Athyrr," she spat. "Glad I finally got your attention."

Careful to hide the way his limbs shook, Athyrr raised both his hands, palms turned outward to show they were empty. "Where the hell did you get that? We haven't allowed the use of guns since-"

"I brought it through the portal with me," the stranger replied, a wicked grin splitting her face. "Do you like it? It looks like an antique but it's actually new. You'll start manufacturing them again in a couple decades. Hungry populations are oh so fond of guns. You might ask where your friend over there got his, though." She glanced over her shoulder and Iris followed her gaze.

The gun beside the dead man was smaller, a battered, clunky device that fired high-caliber rounds. But it was difficult to focus on the weapon with the corpse's face twisted in horror, its unseeing eyes wide, its lips parted in a silent scream.

Athyrr clenched his teeth so hard, Iris heard them grinding against each other. "If you know anything about the time travel device, then you should know how destabilizing it is to bring inorganic material across the barrier-"

"Oh, I stopped caring about that several cycles ago. Probably around the time my husband disappeared." If looks could kill, the acid glare she leveled at Athyrr would have melted him.

"Who the hell are you?" Iris demanded around the lump in her throat. Jurremy's sightless

eyes stared at her while his blood dribbled between her fingers. She was keenly aware of the lack of movement beneath her hands.

“Don't you recognize me?” The stranger tossed her long, auburn hair over one shoulder before brushing it out of her face with her free hand. “I may be a little older. I'm certainly a lot wiser. But I'm still you, sweetheart. Still the same old Iris.”

“You've lost your mind,” Iris snarled, rejecting all logical evidence the woman spoke truth.

“Time travel will do that to you,” the stranger replied. “Our dear friend Athyrr didn't warn us about the side effects, did he?”

“There shouldn't be any side effects if you only go through once,” Athyrr snarled, his fingers curling as though resisting the urge to make fists. “Nothing that lasts long-term.”

“But I had to keep going through,” the stranger insisted, a wild light glowing in her eyes. “Once I determine to do something, I see it through to the end. Maybe you haven't learned that about me yet. Maybe it comes as a surprise to you.”

“Not really,” Athyrr's tone was dry.

“Why are you here?” Iris demanded, unable to bear the useless banter any longer. She didn't care if the woman shot her. Could she even take the risk? If this woman was her, wouldn't killing Iris erase her from history? *Welcome to the beginning of your very own paradox.* “Did our efforts to cure the plague fail? Did you come back to try again?”

The alternate Iris snorted. “I solved that problem my first go-around. I haven't bothered with it since. But then, I haven't come this far back in a long time. Though it doesn't seem to have helped.”

“How many times have you been through the gateway?” Athyrr demanded, alarmed.

“Enough to lose count. But don't look at me like that, Athyrr, like you're concerned about your little science project. You should have thought about that before you took Jurremy away from me!”

Jurremy.

The name echoed through Iris's head, growing louder and louder until she unleashed an agonized wail. “You *killed* him! How could you possibly blame Athyrr?”

“*He* killed Jurremy,” Iris's double snarled, pointing at the dead man across the room. “Probably at Athyrr's request. He started this mess when he pulled us away from our normal life to fix his mistakes. But I could have forgiven him for that. Did, once upon a time. It was Jurremy's disappearance I couldn't abide. This shithole future just isn't worth living without him.”

The dreams flooded back to her, flitting rapidly through her brain, events all out of order. Had they been memories after all? Memories she hadn't made yet?

“At first, I thought I could hop backwards a little bit, go back to the day before he disappeared and keep track of him,” the alternate Iris explained, her voice strained. “But the world into which I emerged was entirely different. Jurremy didn't know me and the disease hadn't been cured.

“So I hurried back to the portal, thinking I set the wrong date. I jumped back to our wedding day, the strongest day in my memory. I thought I got it all back, but I must have carried a mutation of the disease through the portal with me. Jurremy caught it and died within a week.”

Iris's heart pounded so hard it filled her ears and drove the air from her lungs. How could this be possible? Athyrr said it would take years to recover enough of the power source to open the time portal again. But if her dreams were memories, by the time she married Jurremy, there should be enough power crystals to open the portal again. And if this other Iris always arrived in

a time before she used them, the power source would be readily available.

“What does any of this have to do with me?” Athyrr demanded. “I may have safeguarded my device against tampering — and who could blame me — but I don't have the power to change time while you're moving through the ether.”

The other Iris folded her lips as though she were trying to keep from spitting in his face. Her hatred and disgust were obvious, but she swallowed them in order to speak. “I spent years trying to trace the differences in that second timeline, so that when I jumped again I could set it right. I went all the way back to the beginning, brought myself through the portal just before Athyrr opened his. I tried it several times, but my foreknowledge always tainted the timeline.

“So I started watching. The pain and suffering might be worthwhile if I could save Jurremy for a younger, less tormented version of myself. I came through shortly after you did — well, she wasn't you. But she wasn't me either. Time travel makes my head hurt.” She shook her head, as if to clear it.

“Where was I? Oh yes... I knew when Jurremy was going to disappear, so I trailed him. You'll never believe what I saw; it was Athyrr. He asked Jurremy to meet him in the middle of the night and shot him the moment he showed up. Then he told his lackeys to make him vanish, to make sure no one ever found out.

“And you want to know the sickest part of all, Iris? He comforted you — her — us. He laid his arms around your shoulders and whispered soft reassurances after he shot your husband. That's what he's going to do — what he was going to do — if I hadn't stopped him. But I came too late. Somehow, I always come too late.

“I've followed alternate versions of myself through a dozen or more timelines,” she went on, ignoring Athyrr's horrified gasp. “It happens at different times, but it always happens. Athyrr kills Jurremy. So I decided to confront him. And you know what he said? That the plague mutated. That Jurremy caught it. That he had to control the spread. *Weak blood*, I believe those were his exact words.”

Iris's stomach dropped. Hadn't he made the exact same claim the day Iris admitted to giving Jurremy her token? Had she set this whole sorry drama in motion the day she chose to bring him over the barrier?

“So what is this?” Iris demanded, waving her blood-stained hands in her double's direction. “Some kind of demented revenge?”

“It's my solution to the problem,” the alternate Iris said, her tone prim.

“Curse you,” Athyrr spat.

“Your solution?” Iris cried. “Stop speaking in riddles and explain to me what the fuck is going on!”

“You already know the answer,” Athyrr said, surprisingly calm given the circumstances.

And all at once, Iris put the pieces together. “The plants,” she murmured. “The environmental trigger.”

Athyrr closed his eyes as he nodded confirmation. “A time portal or two in one localized time period can slip through the fabric of the universe unnoticed. But a dozen or more? The effects could be catastrophic!”

The alternate Iris snorted. “That's right, Athyrr. Unfortunately, your machine doesn't come with a disclaimer. Physics and quantum mechanics are hardly my areas of expertise. I didn't realize what I had done until it was too late. By the time I linked the worsening of the blight to my jumps, I couldn't untangle the timeline. I'm in too many places to find a singular choke point. I had to improvise.”

“Why didn't you just say something?” Iris insisted. “Between the three of us, I'm sure we could have found a solution.”

“Why would I want to work with Athyrr after what he did? I'm sure he already plans to do it again. Besides, it was never our problem to solve.”

“So you're going to shoot me?” Athyrr mocked. “What the hell good is that going to do?”

“I didn't come here to murder you,” Iris's double replied, though she didn't lower her gun. “I know your story about how long it takes to regenerate a power source for the time device is a load of crap. And I suspect that many of the other things you told me about this place were lies. You knew how dangerous the time gateway was, so you concocted a story to keep people from using it outside of emergencies.”

“Because finding your husband was clearly more important than saving the human race,” Athyrr retorted, his tone more biting than Iris had ever heard.

The alternate Iris clicked her tongue. “Don't blame me for this paradox, Athyrr. I'm reasonably certain it didn't originate with me. Do you know how to solve the problem of a paradox loop? Because I do.”

“Oh?” Athyrr's voice dripped disdain. “And how's that?”

“Are you taking notes?” the alternate version of Iris asked as the barrel of her gun shifted between Athyrr and Iris. The dark metal held a cold, sinister gleam beneath the hard, fluorescent lighting.

Iris's heart lodged in her throat as she started to her feet. If this older version of herself had lost her mind, how could she get it back? Would any action she took now have an immediate effect on her counterpart? Was time a looping line or a series of alternate realities? She remembered reading the question somewhere but couldn't remember the answer.

Iris never got a chance to protest. The sound of the gunshot slammed into her ears at the same moment she opened her mouth to speak. By the time pain tore like lightning through her chest, breath had already fled her body.

“Clean up your mess,” her twin commanded, tossing Athyrr the gun. “You know what you have to do.” She seemed like little more than a dim outline now, but Iris couldn't tell if the crazy woman was fading, or if it was the last trick of a dying mind.

Darkness claimed her vision before she hit the floor, mindless, cold and deep.

* * *

Iris stood at the crest of the ridge, her face turned upward, her eyes closed against the sun's glare as she drew a deep breath. The salty scent of the sea drifted on the breeze as it rustled the trees, shaking several leaves free of their branches. In a month, the leaves would shed their green for autumn, painting the entire area with fire. She wished she could see it.

Opening her eyes, Iris spun in a tight circle, taking it all in, burning the image into her memory. It would be a long time before she saw it again.

“I can't believe Mom is selling the house.”

Three feet down the hill, her brother lifted a hand to his chest and barked a laugh. “I'm sure she'll miss the view as much as you. But it doesn't erase Father's memory.”

Iris's lips formed a momentary pout. She should have been past such childish gestures, but she couldn't help herself. One summer was all it took to fall in love with this place and she had been hoping to return when classes let out. She would certainly need a chance to relax, given the heft of her chosen course load.

Then again, she was only nineteen, moving in and out of her parent's domain on whim, enjoying the best features while flitting between social engagements. How different it must be to be married, to share a space with another person, and suddenly face filling it on your own.

“Besides, it isn't as if you're going to be in the new house every day.” William smirked as he flopped into a patch of springy grass at the top of the hill. The action shook his hair across his forehead and he raked his fingers through the dark, stubby locks to set them on end again. “You just had to choose a university half the world away, didn't you?”

With a smirk of her own, Iris lifted her chin and folded her legs beneath her, gracefully dropping to the ground beside her brother. “What, are you worried I'm not going to write? Don't worry, I'll still have plenty of time to help you with the usual. After all, what are big sisters for?”

“Mostly making fun of me at social events, from what I can tell.”

Iris's arm shot out, her fingers snapping across the flesh of William's shoulder before he could duck out of the way. “And helping finish your math homework. Not to mention relationship and career advice.”

“Wouldn't you need to have a relationship first?” William teased, though they both descended into laughter at the same moment.

“Fine, you'll just have to become the relationship expert and I'll come to you for advice.” Iris brushed stray grass from her jeans before settling her hands behind her. She leaned back and peered up at the sky. “I'll take that as repayment for all the scientific knowledge I'm going to fill your head with after my studies resume.”

Though William was three years Iris's junior, they had always shared an insatiable thirst for knowledge. She wouldn't be surprised if he caught up to her someday, or surpassed her. It was a good thing they weren't particularly competitive, though their age difference hadn't prevented them from being close.

The wind picked up, whipping Iris's hair in front of her face. She dug into a pocket, withdrew a small elastic band, and used it to bind her hair in a loose bun atop her head. “Odd,” she murmured, glancing over the edge of the ridge. The sea was calm, and there was no sign of storm clouds.

“What's that?” William exclaimed, pointing over Iris's left shoulder.

She spun, pushing herself to her feet, half-expecting to see some woodland creature darting across the clearing. Instead she saw a tiny flicker of light, like a distant lightning strike, except it hovered over an empty patch of grass.

As she watched, the illumination spread, a second tendril of light striking toward the sky and a third to the side.

Iris leapt to her feet and stumbled backwards, almost tripping over her brother as he, too, retreated from the strange phenomenon.

William's fingers closed around her arm, drawing her farther back as the light flickered blue and green and white, growing larger with each passing second.

Iris shifted, drawing her arm free of her brother's grip so she could wrap it around his shoulders and pull him close. Suddenly they were clinging to each other, two frightened children who had just seen a monster beneath one of their beds.

“Could it be ball lightning?” Iris asked, trying to assert rational control over the panicked portion of her brain.

“Can that happen outside a thunderstorm?” William yelled to be heard above the crackle and pop of the lightning ball. The rush of wind and a sound like thunder added to the cacophony.

Not ball lightning, Iris's mind screamed as the leading edge of the light began to swirl,

forming an oval in the air above the hill.

“Run!” she cried. Turning, she grabbed a fist full of her brother's shirt, dragging him down the slope as the oval storm grew larger. From the corner of her eyes it resembled the top-down view of a hurricane, though she couldn't discern what lay within the blur of the storm's eye. Could it be a man? Or was she reaching for shapes in a formless mass?

The sound that issued from the center of the storm was unmistakable. *Thunder*, Iris's brain insisted even as her brother's shirt tore free of her grip. She fumbled to catch him as she turned, but her hand closed on empty air. Her brother crumpled to the ground.

The storm disappeared more quickly than it formed, folding in on itself until only a hint of a swirl remained. Then that, too, flickered and faded.

Iris barely noticed, her eyes riveted on the red blossoming across her brother's chest.

“William!” She screamed as she dove to his side, pressing her hands against the hole, ignoring the sticky sensation of blood oozing between her fingers. The sound lasted until she needed to breathe, ending in a choked sob. She was alone up here; what was she supposed to do?

“William Arthur Blake, don't you dare leave me!” she cried, shaking his shoulders with one hand while the other tried to bridge the gap in his flesh.

But by the time someone responded to her screams, by the time they lifted his frail body into the back of an ambulance, the life had long since gone out of his eyes.

* * *

The waiting room was green. Not a bright shade of forest green, or a rich shade of emerald, but the dull, puke-green often associated with medical scrubs. Whoever chose it must have hated this place. Iris shifted her eyes from the walls to the floor, which consisted of faded, dull-grey tiles meant to emulate the appearance of marble. She needed something to keep her mind off the murmuring silhouettes of scientists and administrators on the other side of the conference room window.

She had been in a dozen waiting rooms over the past three months. Some had been drab, some had been cheerful, and Iris had marked the characteristics of each simply to keep her mind occupied. All the top-rated universities expressed interest in her research. But all of them were equally skeptical. They had to be careful with a topic like this, couldn't have the wrath of the public eye fall square on their shoulders.

It's what they would be murmuring about. Determining their final questions, deciding how severe they wanted to seem. Iris's fingers twitched, eager for something to do, but she kept still. She needed to look the picture of poise.

The door clicked as it opened and one of the committee members stepped into the hall. “We're ready for you, Ms. Blake,” she said and motioned toward the door.

Iris rose from her uncomfortable plastic chair, smoothed the unwrinkled surface of her suit jacket, and lifted her shoulder bag. She navigated the hallway at a measured pace, careful not to seem too eager.

The committee consisted of a dozen stone-faced participants, their lips drawn in various expressions of disapproval or disinterest. Iris nodded to them as she entered, each movement carefully calculated to create the ideal impression. She set her bag at the head of the table and settled into her seat. She straightened her back but rested her arms on the table, the fingers of both hands intertwined so that she looked both professional and relaxed.

A quick survey of the dour faces revealed little. This meeting was bound to go much like the

others; they would discuss the merits of her research, then she would have to defend her ambitions in a way that warranted the money she hoped the university would devote to them. Afterward, these faces would blur into her memories of this endless parade of monotony. Sooner or later, someone would take the risk. Then everyone on the fence would regret their inaction.

“Thank you for joining us today, Ms. Blake,” the man at the far end of the table said after the usual pause to let her sweat, officially calling the meeting to order. A pair of half-rim glasses perched on the end of his long, pointed nose, making him look severe. “We have reviewed the information you presented and, I must say, we find it fascinating.”

“Thank you, sir. If you require any clarification, I would be delighted to expound upon the details.”

“Actually, we're curious about your interest in the topic.” A woman on the left side of the table jabbed a finger at the outline sitting in front of her. “The effect of time on quantum mechanics is a far cry from your original majors of medicine and biology.”

Iris offered the woman a thin smile. “Though I originally applied to university to study those fields, I switched before I started classes. I assure you, I have always been dedicated to this field.”

“But you must admit,” rasped a man on the far right side of the table, “time travel seems a bit science-fiction, doesn't it?” A few light chuckles accompanied the question.

Iris didn't smile. She unfolded her hands and reached for her bag. From it, she pulled a small, sealed plastic bag which bore a large red and yellow label. Silently, she slid it into the center of the table so that every member of the committee could get a good look.

“Seven years ago, doctors pulled this bullet from the chest of William Arthur Blake—”

“Your brother, wasn't he?” a woman sitting only three chairs away interrupted.

“My younger brother,” Iris confirmed. The admission summoned extra tension into the room. This point was always of particular concern to university committees. Iris ignored it. “As you can see from the markings, the bullet's caliber was unidentified at the time it was retrieved. It has since been re-classified.” She pulled a notecard from her bag and set it beside the bullet. It depicted the same caliber bullet before it was fired and listed the guns which made use of it.

“These were designed three years ago.” She tapped the note card. “And as you can see from the updated notes, the match is a hundred percent accurate. There's no question one of these guns fired the bullet that killed my brother.”

Silence. She had their attention. Iris cleared her throat and continued. “It's only been within the last year that these guns have seen common use. So I wonder; how did someone use one to shoot my brother four years before the design was complete?”

“Your theory fails to consider development time,” announced a man who wore a smug little grin, as if he had single-handedly solved the entire mystery.

“Development and testing would be a valid explanation,” Iris agreed, unperturbed, “if not for the strange circumstances under which my brother was shot.” She pulled a final object from her bag; a blurry photo of an odd circle hovering in the middle of the sky over a distant ridge.

“We have been over your testimony regarding the incident,” the committee's head commented, adjusting his too-small glasses. “It hardly bears repeating.”

“Indeed,” Iris replied. “But I did not take this photo. There have been several eyewitness reports from the day in question, offering explanations for the strange phenomenon through which the bullet came, but none have been scientifically confirmed. My brother and I first believed we were looking at ball lightning. And when my brother fell, I believed it had exploded. Until they pulled the bullet from his chest.”

An uncomfortable shuffling followed; none of them knew how to respond.

“And you believe time travel is the most likely explanation?” the head of the committee prompted when no one else spoke.

“It is a distinct possibility,” Iris replied. “It fits all the parameters, though I'm still exploring other possibilities. The nature of my research is urgent enough that I was able to get this evidence released into my care until the scientific community is satisfied with my conclusions.” She indicated the small bag holding the bullet.

“No offense to you, Ms. Blake,” one of the men sitting beside her murmured, “but are you certain you're the right researcher for this task? You're a bit too close to the issue, aren't you?”

“It is a personal matter, I won't refute that.” A cold smirk split Iris's lips. “I want to know who killed my brother. Anyone in my position would. But I won't allow my personal feelings to interfere with my research. I'll just as willingly prove my theories wrong, if that's what the tests show.”

“One of your possible proof scenarios involves preventing the death of your brother.” The chairman absently tapped a pen against the table while he spoke. “Wouldn't that be a paradox?”

“A living example,” Iris agreed. “Who could ignore the existence of such an anomaly on their doorstep? But I should remind the board that I have also calculated the probability of fulfilling that scenario as impractically slim. I'm more interested in discovering the potential benefits of manipulating time's flow.”

A flurry of discussion followed. It wasn't unusual, and Iris didn't pay much attention. She had nothing left in her arsenal; she simply had to wait for the committee's decision. Her thoughts turned to William. Had he lived, this was the field he would have chosen, the work he hoped to do. Could that be why the portal stole him away from her that faithful summer afternoon?

The committee chairman called the meeting back to order with the clearing of his throat, startling Iris back to the moment. “Well, I don't think it will be any trouble to tell you now that the board has already approved your grant. You've certainly managed to assuage our concerns. We'd like you to submit your team selections by the end of next month.”

Warmth spread through Iris's chest as her heartbeat quickened. She had been waiting for this, for someone willing to seize her project's potential despite the risks. And if she was fortunate, she'd have a dozen more offers by the end of the week. She'd have her choice of the top scientific minds, of grant amounts and facilities. Her goal was finally within reach.

“That shouldn't be a problem,” she replied with a careful smile. *I'll find you William, she vowed silently. Wherever... Whenever you are; we'll be together again.* Iris never doubted the inevitable outcome. Once she set her mind to accomplishing something, she saw it through to the end, no matter the cost.

Author's Note

Thank you so much for reading this little story. I don't do short fiction very often, but this tale came to me in a dream, just demanding to be told and I couldn't resist. I wrote this, in part, as a thank you to my newsletter subscribers who have stuck with me through the past year. And, of course, as a thank you to everyone willing to join my newsletter and follow me for the coming year!

If you'd like to leave feedback on your favorite parts of the story, or see sneak peeks of upcoming projects, consider joining me on Facebook (facebook.com/megancutlerauthor/) or Twitter (twitter.com/Megan_Cutler); I'd love to hear from you!

For more of me check out megancutler.net where I blog every Monday and release free short fiction every Friday.

If you liked Iris's little adventure, I encourage you to check out *Island of Lost Forever* the tale of a mysterious island that appears out of nowhere, drawing the attention of two intrepid university professors. It has its own time and physics bending aspects. As does *Eternity's Empire* which involves its own brand of time loop (complete with a few paradoxes)!

Until next time!
~Megan Cutler

Also by Megan Cutler...

Island of Lost Forever
Book 1 of the Mystical Island Trilogy



[Purchase on Amazon](#)

Is the island paradise or does a nightmare lurk beneath the surface?

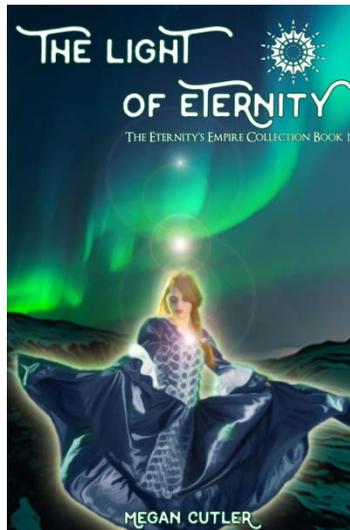
When a mysterious island appears off the coast of San Francisco, two intrepid academics risk everything to discover its secrets. Catilen Taylor has struggled all her life with the ability to sense others' emotions. Damian Cooke studies an ancient art he calls 'magic.'

The island boasts an idyllic retreat, ruled by the enigmatic Sentomoru, who invites them to share the wonders of his bathhouse. But as the travelers strive to unravel the island's secrets, Catilen senses danger stalking their steps.

Neither Catilen nor Damian know how long the island will remain on Earth. If they can't solve its riddles quickly, they may be trapped wherever it goes when it vanishes.

Also by Megan Cutler...

The Light of Eternity
Book 1 of the Eternity's Empire Collection



[Purchase on Amazon](#)

The moment she laid her hands on the crystal, Erica's life fell apart.

The special archaeological dig in Antarctica was supposed to be a path to redemption for Erica Brown, a chance to escape university conduct probation and looming threats of expulsion. But a chance to explore the dig's prized temple ends in disaster when Erica damages the site's most valuable artifact.

Now she and her friends are haunted by strange visions and stuck in the center of a bizarre series of events. While her friends appear to have acquired magical powers, Erica isn't so lucky. Her next misstep could be a death sentence and she's powerless to help her friends. United by their plight, the girls struggle to make sense of the situation while preventing further catastrophe.

Can Erica discover her hidden strength in time to solve the mystery?

This book contains chapters 1-5 of the *Eternity's Empire* saga (*Crystal Shrouded Goddess*, *Light of Eternity*, *Curse of Chronos*, *Dance with Death*, and *Dark Rituals*), previously published separately.