

CHAPTER I

THE PATHWAY was before him, he could almost feel it. In his chubby little fingers Mytah held a complex toy, roughly fan-shaped and covered with intricate designs marked out in colored wire and beads. The beads slid along the wires in complicated, curving patterns that confused the eye. The lines appeared to connect but if you looked carefully you'd notice that they really didn't. Certain areas appeared unaccountably blurry, out-of-focus. It was a strange thing that would certainly puzzle highly-educated scientists but it was merely a toy to these six-year-olds, a tool to help them understand multi-dimensional travel.

The assignment was simple—investigate possible outcomes for three probabilities the teacher had indicated. They'd demonstrate the answer by sliding beads in the correct pattern. The children worked swiftly, confidently, sliding beads across the patterned surface. As beads crossed blurry segments they disappeared and reappeared at other points in the design. In a few minutes, all but one child had finished. The children looked at Mytah with expectant glances.

The boy's eyes were closed, and his youthful face screwed up with intense concentration. He moved his hand jerkily along the wires, hesitantly, pushing a bead first this way, then that. Unlike the others, he could not immediately visualize the outcome. In-

stead, he used mnemonics and finger counting to help imagine the correct path. The visualization made him dizzy each time he tried it, resulting in a headache. He persisted with the task, which should have come to him as naturally as breathing. Finally, he pushed two of the three beads along the correct lines. They vanished and reappeared elsewhere in the design. There remained one path that he couldn't visualize, and the last bead remained fixed on the board. He let out a frustrated snort and opened his eyes.

"You can't find the last path?" The teacher asked. His voice was patient, kind.

Mytah shook his head. His mouth frowned, and sweaty dark curls drooped into his line of vision. "No, teacher. The first two are the only viable paths anyway. The last one keeps leading into secondary loops."

"That's correct. Try to visualize it again. We will wait." The teacher appeared to be a vital man of thirty, although his actual age was closer to three hundred.

Mytah tried and failed again. He made a small frustrated cry and hung his head. "I can't find the way. I'm sorry, teacher."

One of the other children tittered. The teacher gave her a stern look. "Please tell us about that last loop, Amina."

The dark-haired girl threw Mytah a haughty glance. "Twice the path projects a viable course but at the second juncture point loops back on itself and dies out."

"Good, Amina." The teacher turned back to Mytah. "Look at it again and understand the proper course."

The boy tried again and this time he saw the path, albeit dimly. He slid the bead across the wires and it disappeared where it was supposed to, reappearing at the proper location. He smiled triumphantly but then remembered this was no victory. "I see it now," he mumbled and put the toy down in his lap.

The kind teacher smiled a little sadly. "Very good, Mytah. There's no need to be embarrassed. You simply have it harder than the others, that's all." He raised his kindly eyes to the rest of the class. "You must be considerate, children. Mytah is unique, a Time Keeper without genetic memories. His case is quite interesting and you would do well to learn from him."

Mytah felt his cheeks grow warm at the unwanted attention. His little fists clenched in exasperated anger.

"He recalls our ancient ancestors," the teacher continued, "those time explorers who began our lineage. Believe it or not, Mytah, I envy you a little. You will learn to navigate the time roads by heart and courage alone. That is a great feat." His comment, meant to be compassionate, made the boy feel even worse. He slumped dispiritedly.

The brown-haired girl sitting beside him piped up with a question. "Teacher, why doesn't Mytah share our memories?"

"That is unknown. The elders believe that the recessive traits of his human ancestors are dominant."

"And humans don't have racial memories?" The little girl's eyes were wide, her voice hushed.

“No, Phyllesse, they do not. Search your memories. At the beginning of our lineage some of our ancestors interbred with humans. Most famously, our first leader. Many of you have human DNA in your genetic lines, but it’s dormant. Not so with Mytah.”

Phyllesse raised a hand to her lips and gasped. “So Mytah’s not a ... a Time Keeper?”

“Of course he is. He’s no more human than you are. It is simply that his memories have not awakened. They might yet...” the teacher hesitated, fair brow furrowed. The children recognized his far-off expression; he was imagining probabilities. After a few seconds, he resumed speaking. “I’m unable to foresee a timeline where his memories awaken, but that does not mean that they won’t at some point. Until that time, Mytah, you will simply have to work harder.”

CHAPTER II

THE EDGES of the big oval amphitheater shimmered, seeming to merge with the bright golden light of the surrounding time portal. Through the fantastical window was a scene from Earth's ancient past. The white stone of the Colosseum was blindly bright under the strong yellow sun. Behind it, sea and sky merged into various gradations of cerulean and turquoise. A portion of the sea-wall was visible at the extreme right of the scene. Beyond that, all manner of ships rocked at anchor.

Mytah watched the scene through wide, serious eyes. He noticed immediately that the amphitheater's crowd was cosmopolitan—heavily favoring Greeks, but there were also Romans, Judeans, Egyptians and Carthaginians in the excited crowd. As he watched, a Greek man wearing a toga entered the stage, lyre in hand. The musician was followed by the chorus—a small group of people wearing theatrical masks. There was a stool on the stage and the man sat. He strummed the lyre and began to recite a poem. Although he didn't understand the words, Mytah understood that this was a tragic story by the man's serious expression.

"Where is this place, children?" the teacher asked. As one, nine of the ten children closed their eyes. Mytah kept his eyes open. His glance flickered here and there, quickly and shrewdly assessing de-

tails within the scene. At twelve, Mytah was still without his genetic memories but, like a person who'd lost his sight, other faculties compensated. He wasn't born with a photographic memory but by twelve, he'd developed one. He used that precision to create mental maps of the timelines he studied. Thus doing by mechanical means what should have come as naturally to him as breathing. It was far from a perfect solution, but it allowed him to mostly keep up with the other children his age.

At this stage of schooling, the children's lessons were practical—how to spot subtle gradations in timelines, for example. Or, how to find their way to a particular timeline. For most of them, it was an exercise in memory. For Mytah, it was a lesson in resonance. First, he'd choose a baseline iteration of a particular timeline. This was called a recollection of that timeline. Then, he'd expand his consciousness sideways away from it, to near parallels. The farther he went from the original timeline, the more the line's resonance would change. The boy would memorize the resonance of each iteration until he located the one he sought. It wasn't an elegant system, more like a legless man pulling himself along with his arms, but it worked.

"Earth. Ceasaria Maritima," one of the boys piped up. "95 AD. Timeline A43, recollection 157." He grinned confidently as several other children nodded their agreement.

"Not quite right, Remmi," the teacher reproved. "The time period is correct, but the line is wrong. What's wrong with it?" His gaze took in all of the children.

Remmi frowned. "But teacher, the markers are all correct; I don't understand."

"You're not really looking," the teacher replied. "There are at least four close time tracks near this one. How do you know that this is recollation 157 and not 165, or even 189?"

"I ... don't know," Remmi admitted, feeling stupid.

"Study the scene, children. Tell me what is unique about it."

"There are too many Greeks," Mytah piped up.

The teacher nodded. "Go on..."

The curly-haired boy cleared his throat. "Well, I think that, in the most common timelines, all the Greeks had been ejected from this city by now. In this timeline, there are too many Greeks, so I think it must be recollation 220, at least. Probably more like 250, though." His heart was pounding. Had he gotten it right?

The teacher nodded again, looking pleased. "It's recollation 248, actually, but excellently done, nonetheless."

Mytah let out a breath. He noticed Phylesse was beaming at him. He blushed and smiled shyly back.

The teacher waved his hand and the image in the portal changed. Now it showed a ruined city in a lush jungle. There was no writing, no imagery, and no people. Mytah's smooth young forehead creased in thought. Where was this place? And when?

The other children considered the scene and, for once, all of them looked as confounded as Mytah felt.

"That place ... it's new," said one of the girls.

“No, not brand new,” Phyllesse corrected. “Someone’s been there, or will be there?” She shook her head, clearly perplexed. “I don’t understand, teacher, how can this be?”

“You’re right, Phyllesse, this place has not yet been mapped. What you are feeling is a premonition of the future. One of us will come here one day and that day is today! We shall map this new place ourselves.”

“That’s amazing!” Mytah burst out. “If no one’s ever been there then....” He let the sentence hang in the air.

“Then you’re all on even ground for your discoveries,” the teacher concluded. “It will be a good test.” He gestured and the viewing portal expanded. “Come, children, we will go through and look closer.”

Before this, they’d only been allowed to view history, but now ... Mytah glanced at Phyllesse who looked a bit scared. He took her hand. “Don’t worry, we’re traveling!”

His confidence was contagious and soon her expression brightened. She was all smiles now.

The teacher stepped through the flaring portal and, once on the other side, raised his hand, beckoning the others to follow. Mytah and Phyllesse led the way, and the rest of the children trailed behind. The jungle air was oppressive—sultry and moist. Sweat broke out on their bodies, making their clothing sticky and uncomfortable. Despite these discomforts, none of them looked unhappy. This was an unmarked location on the time roads, something none of the children had ever before experienced.