A FREE VISIONARY TALE

THE OBSERVER

BEYOND THE BORROWED LIFE



Zachary J. Blessing

FREE READER EDITION

THE OMNI-GALACTICAL ORDER PUBLISHING

THE OBSERVER

Beyond the Borrowed Life

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This is a work of visionary fiction. Its characters, institutions, hidden cosmology, and supernatural events are fictional. Its questions about power, conscience, despair, and compassion are offered for the reader's own consideration.

Contains a serious, non-graphic portrayal of suicidal despair and recovery.

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The first thing they took was his time.

The last thing they expected him to reclaim was his love.

Contents

Prelude - Before He Had a Name for It 6

Chapter One - The Payment Due 7

Chapter Two - What the Darkness Did Not Say 10

Chapter Three - The Mouth Behind the Mask 13

Chapter Four - Three Accounts of a Fire 16

Chapter Five - The Distance Between Voices 20

Chapter Six - The Man Who Knocked 24

Chapter Seven - The House With the Open Door 28

Chapter Eight - What to Look For 32

Chapter Nine - The First Step 37

Afterword - A Message from the Observer 42

A Note for a Reader in Distress 44

The Door Remains Open 44

PRELUDE

Before He Had a Name for It

Years later, people would ask the Observer when he first saw the prison.

Some expected a constellation to open. Others imagined a forbidden book, a voice from the ceiling, a light that erased the ordinary world.

He always thought of a woman in a supermarket.

She had stood ahead of him with a carton of milk, a packet of rice, and a small birthday cake. When her card failed, she returned the cake. Then the milk. Her daughter watched the conveyor belt carry away the things they would not have.

The Observer had bought cigarettes that evening. He remembered the brand. He remembered the small convenience of looking at his phone until the woman left.

He had not been cruel in any way that could be entered on a charge sheet. He had simply been tired, preoccupied, anxious about his own money, and practiced at keeping the suffering of strangers outside the borders of his day.

For a long time, he believed the terrible thing about his old life was that someone had taught him to obey.

Later he understood there had been a second lesson.

He had been taught which people he could stop seeing.

This is the story of how that lesson came undone.

CHAPTER ONE

The Payment Due

At five forty-three every morning, the phone beside Aruhn Qorveth's bed began asking him to return to his life.

He silenced it before the second vibration. There was no one to disturb, but the habit remained from an apartment he had shared eleven years earlier with a woman who sometimes cried in her sleep. He could no longer remember the sound of her laugh without first remembering how they had divided the furniture.

Forty-six years old. One bedroom. A refrigerator with a sound like an insect trapped in a wall.

He stood barefoot in the kitchen and watched his bank balance load.

Two hundred and fourteen dollars.

Rent would clear on Friday. The car payment would clear on Thursday. Neither transaction knew about the other, and neither cared whether there was enough left to buy food.

He moved money from one account to another. A number became smaller in one place and larger somewhere else. For a moment, he experienced the satisfaction of having accomplished something.

Then he opened the credit account.

He had paid it every month for six years. The balance had scarcely moved. He could no longer name most of what he was paying for: a water pump, a funeral journey, groceries during a layoff, a winter in which the gas bill had become more urgent than the future.

On the television, a cheerful woman explained that financial freedom began with the right attitude.

He switched her off.

At the distribution center, he processed returned merchandise beneath a banner that read PEOPLE ARE OUR GREATEST ASSET. The company had placed it above a clock that counted the seconds between scanned items.

His supervisor called unmeasured time leakage.

He had stopped wondering what, exactly, was leaking out.

There had been things he intended to do. He once drew birds on the backs of envelopes. There had been a plan to drive west with no destination except a place where the horizon was not interrupted by a building. Once, at twenty-two, he had promised himself he would learn to build a table.

There was still no table in his apartment. He ate at the counter, beside the envelopes containing the things he owed.

That morning a message arrived from his sister, Marnie.

Come for dinner Sunday. No excuse involving laundry. I know how little laundry one man can have.

He smiled. Typed *I'll try*. Deleted it. Typed *Yes*.

It was the smallest rebellion he would ever commit, and for years afterward he would be grateful that he had committed it.

Outside, the city of Carrow was blue with the hour before sunrise. The pavement smelled of rain and old engine oil. A sparrow hopped beneath his car, dragging something white from a crack in the asphalt.

He waited for it to move.

At the end of the street, a traffic light changed. The radio started an advertisement for a loan to help people get ahead. Aruhn looked right, then left, then pulled into the intersection.

There was a horn.

He saw the other vehicle with an impossible clarity: the fractured plastic around its headlight, a paper cup turning through the air inside it, the driver's open mouth.

Later, the police would tell him the driver was drunk.

In that moment there was no explanation. There was only the violent arrival of something he could not negotiate with.

Metal folded.

The advertisement continued for part of a second after the world broke.

Then everything that had been his morning disappeared.

CHAPTER TWO

What the Darkness Did Not Say

He would want, afterward, to give the darkness a shape.

A corridor. A sea. A room without walls.

But those were things the living mind added later. What he remembered was absence, with no reliable measure of time. No one came to explain it. There was no face, no punishment, no welcoming hand.

Eighteen days passed in the hospital.

For Aruhn, they had no length.

When he opened his eyes, a woman was adjusting something beside his bed. He tried to ask where he was and discovered that his throat would not produce a human sentence.

The woman looked at him.

"Mr. Qorveth? I'm Odetta. You're in the hospital. You were hurt, but you're here."

She said *here* with an assurance that made it seem like an achievement.

His sister arrived wearing one blue sock and one gray one. She had left home in such a hurry that she had not noticed. He stared at her feet until she began crying, and then he did too.

"You absolute bastard," she whispered, holding his hand. "You said Sunday."

It hurt to laugh. He did it anyway.

Recovery was smaller and more humiliating than resurrection ought to have been. It was help with a washcloth. It was learning how far he could

move before the room began to rotate. It was a plastic cup of water that took both hands.

The doctor spoke carefully about injuries and rehabilitation. Aruhn listened for the portion of the explanation that would tell him who he was supposed to become now.

It never arrived.

One afternoon he asked Odetta, "Did I die?"

She checked the line beside his bed before answering.

"Your heart needed help. You were very ill."

"I didn't see anything."

She sat down.

"That frightened you?"

"What if that's all there is?"

"I don't know what there is after life," she said. "I know a coma doesn't give us a reliable answer. And I know your sister has been here reading a book aloud that she claims you hate."

He looked at the paperback on the windowsill.

He did hate it. She had been trying to irritate him back into consciousness.

For a few minutes, the darkness lost some of its authority.

Then visitors went home, evening settled against the glass, and he was alone with the thought that he might have spent nearly his entire life paying for the right to postpone it.

The company sent a card. Seventeen people signed it. Someone from payroll included instructions for accessing his leave forms.

Tobin, who worked at the scanning station beside his, added a crooked drawing of the supervisor being eaten by a cardboard box. Aruhn kept the drawing. He misplaced the forms.

As the days passed, he began noticing the language around him.

The hospital called him a patient when a nurse entered and an account when the billing office telephoned. An insurer wanted to know whether the accident belonged under one category or another. A representative thanked him for choosing their service, although choosing was not something he remembered doing while unconscious.

He watched sunlight move across a wall and thought of the clock at work.

All those measured seconds.

None had been deposited anywhere he could retrieve them.

When he finally came home, Marnie had cleaned the kitchen and stocked the refrigerator. A paper bag held his belongings from the car. His keys. His wallet. A shirt the nurses had cut away.

There was a leaf inside one of his shoes.

He stood looking at it for a long time.

That evening, after his sister left with a promise to return in the morning, he opened the mail.

One envelope congratulated him on qualifying for a higher credit limit.

Another warned him about a missed payment.

He placed them side by side.

Then he went to bed in the room he had nearly never entered again, and slept.

CHAPTER THREE

The Mouth Behind the Mask

In the dream, the church had no address.

He found it on a street he knew, between a closed pharmacy and a building that had been demolished when he was a boy. Its doors stood open. Warm light filled the entrance. Somewhere inside, a congregation was singing about being found.

He went in because he was afraid.

The fear was more difficult to admit than anything he had endured in the hospital. He had spent years being too busy to think about his soul. Now he could think of little else.

If there was a God, had he offended that God by failing to investigate? If there was a judgment, would exhaustion be accepted as an explanation? If there was nothing, what did it mean to have surrendered so much of his brief existence to things he could not remember buying?

A preacher stood beneath a wooden cross.

"There is one way," the man said. "One name. One door."

People murmured agreement.

"You may be kind. You may give everything you have. But unless you believe in Jesus Christ, eternal fire awaits you."

Aruhn felt the congregation turn toward him without moving their heads.

"What about someone who never heard?" he asked.

His voice sounded very small in the high room.

The preacher smiled.

"The truth does not change to accommodate your discomfort."

"And a child?"

The smile stayed in place. Something behind it seemed to move.

"You are being offered mercy."

"It sounds like a threat."

The organ stopped.

There was a soft tearing sound, like damp wallpaper coming away from plaster.

One edge of the preacher's face loosened beneath his ear.

Aruhn watched it slip.

The familiar human features sagged, empty as a glove. Underneath was a face that seemed assembled for a different purpose: dark plates of bone, narrow eyes, a mouth that opened too far. The teeth were small and numerous. Fine threads ran from its throat into the ceiling.

The thing kept speaking in the preacher's gentle voice.

"Be afraid," it said. "Then be grateful that I have told you what to do with your fear."

The congregation bowed.

Some wept. Some smiled with desperate relief. The threads above them thickened, carrying something upward.

He saw that the cross cast two shadows.

One was only the shadow of wood.

The other had fingers.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The creature leaned toward him.

For an instant the whole church seemed to inhale.

"I am the voice you were taught to mistake for God."

Aruhn woke sitting upright, unable to get enough air into his chest.

The bedside lamp was still on. His apartment smelled of the soup Marnie had made. A car passed outside, ordinary tires hissing over ordinary rain.

He pressed both feet against the floor until he could feel the rough edge of the carpet.

A nightmare, he told himself.

He said it again.

But the dream had found a question he could not put back to sleep.

How much of what he believed had he examined? How much had he accepted because a confident voice spoke before he was old enough to answer?

He did not suddenly know the truth about religion. He did not suddenly know the truth about anything.

He knew that fear had been speaking with authority in his life for a very long time.

He had mistaken that authority for evidence.

At four in the morning, he found an old notebook in a kitchen drawer. The first page contained a shopping list from three years earlier. He turned to a blank page.

He wrote:

What have I never been allowed to ask?

Then, underneath it:

Who benefits when I stop?

The refrigerator rattled. The city continued sleeping.

Aruhn stayed at the counter until sunrise, trying to remember the last time he had changed his mind because he had learned something, rather than because someone had made him afraid.

CHAPTER FOUR

Three Accounts of a Fire

The first lie he could prove concerned a fire.

It began with a photograph in the municipal library: women standing outside the old Carrow textile works, most of them so young that he first mistook them for schoolchildren. He recognized the building from a history lesson. A fire had killed nineteen employees. The textbook described a tragic accident that had inspired enlightened reforms.

In the photograph, one girl held a sign.

The catalog caption said the writing was illegible.

Aruhn enlarged the image.

WE WARNED THEM, it said.

He brought it to the woman at the reference desk.

Bellis Rowe wore a yellow cardigan and repaired books with the concentration of someone setting broken bones. She looked at the photograph, then at him.

"Do you want the official anniversary booklet," she asked, "or do you want what survived?"

By closing time they had found a letter from a factory worker, a fire inspector's suppressed report, and testimony given by a woman who had escaped through a loading hatch.

The exits had been locked.

The owners had known about the overloaded wiring.

Nineteen employees had died, but nineteen was not the number of people inside. The contractors had kept a second payroll. Five girls were absent

from the memorial because admitting their employment would have exposed another crime.

"They taught us the wrong story," Aruhn said.

Bellis turned the inspector's report carefully at its brittle corner.

"They taught you a comfortable story. That sometimes takes more work."

"What else is wrong?"

"That's a question large enough to waste your life unless you make it smaller. Start with this fire. Find out who changed the account. Find out whether the documents agree. Then look for what would prove your conclusion mistaken."

He did not want the last instruction. He wanted a doorway into everything.

Still, he copied the records.

The textile owners' foundation had paid for the textbook. Their successors now held contracts to manage the city's collections system, employment records, and housing assessments. Morcant Civic Solutions appeared at the bottom of all three contracts.

It also appeared in the fine print of his hospital payment portal.

That evening, he spread the pages across his counter.

For the first time, his ordinary worries seemed connected to a history he had been taught to admire. The same family name. The same polished language. A succession of people who had called themselves indispensable while deciding what others could afford to know.

He felt anger, then an almost intoxicating relief.

If the lie had an author, perhaps his misery had an explanation.

At the edge of that thought, something dangerous began to grow: the wish for a single answer large enough to explain every wound.

He did not recognize the danger then.

He returned to work on reduced hours. His body protested the concrete floor. Tobin brought him a stool that the supervisor said violated procedure, then stood in front of it whenever the supervisor passed.

"How's your cardboard monster?" Aruhn asked.

"Management survived. Hard to poison anything without a digestive system."

They laughed. Then Aruhn began talking about the fire.

Tobin listened until the next cart arrived.

"My grandmother used to say there were more dead," he said. "People called her confused."

That was the second thing Aruhn could not set aside.

The third happened at the civic accounts office.

He went there to challenge a fee that had been added while he was unconscious. A clerk explained that the system could not distinguish unconsciousness from noncompliance unless he provided the appropriate document.

"Here," he said, sliding his discharge papers through the opening.

"It needs to be submitted through the portal."

"The portal sent me here."

The clerk's hand stopped above the keyboard.

For half a second, every sound in the room ceased.

The clock stopped. A boy near the entrance stood with one foot off the ground. Water hung below a drinking fountain in a bright, curved thread.

Only the clerk continued moving.

She turned toward the black screen beside her desk. Her reflection turned an instant later.

The reflected face had no eyes.

Then the room resumed.

Water struck the basin. The boy put his foot down. A printer began its irritated mechanical chatter.

The clerk returned his papers.

"Is there anything else I can help you with?"

Aruhn backed away from the window.

Outside, he sat against the building until his pulse slowed. He called the number on his hospital discharge sheet and described what had happened. They arranged a follow-up. He accepted it.

Then he wrote down the event without adding an explanation.

The notebook now contained two kinds of thing: documents anyone could examine, and an experience only he could report.

For several days, he kept them separate.

Then he stopped sleeping properly.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Distance Between Voices

He began waking before dawn to read.

By the end of the month he was scarcely sleeping at all.

One story led to another. A genuine scandal opened onto speculation. Speculation led to a recording whose source had disappeared. Someone on a screen explained that nothing happened by accident. Someone else explained that the first person had been planted to mislead him.

Each claimed that asking questions was essential.

Each became furious when the questions turned toward them.

He ate at the counter without tasting anything. His curtains remained closed. When sunlight found a gap, it startled him.

The facts about the factory fire were still facts. But around them he had built a much larger structure, and he no longer knew which walls rested on evidence.

He tried to explain it to Marnie over dinner.

"The schools. The banks. Those numbers they give us. They make you into an entry before you know what a person is. Then they spend your life telling you the entry is what matters."

"Some of that is fair," she said.

"Some?"

"You're talking about six different things."

"Because they're connected."

"Then show me one connection at a time."

He heard dismissal where there was fatigue. She had worked a long shift and still made the dinner he was barely touching.

"You don't want to see it."

Marnie put down her fork.

"I want my brother to eat something and tell me how he is."

"That's how they keep us occupied."

"Feeding people?"

He flinched, but by then he was too angry to turn back.

On the bus home he watched the passengers staring into their phones and wondered whether any of them were real. The thought frightened him. Then, because it frightened him, he began mistaking it for something profound.

At his medical appointment, Dr. Neris Salcedo asked about headaches, sleep, fear, and the accident.

He told her about the clerk.

She did not laugh.

"We should investigate experiences like that," she said. "Your recovery, your sleep, and what you've been through all matter. I won't pretend to know the answer before we look."

"You think I'm psychotic."

"I think you're distressed. I think you deserve help without being humiliated. Those aren't insults."

But outside the clinic, strangers were less careful.

He posted the factory documents alongside a long account of the eyeless reflection. People who might have read the documents argued about the reflection instead.

Someone clipped his voice into a joke. Coworkers played it in the break room. A man he had never met told him to increase his medication. Another said the accident should have finished the job.

He read that sentence more times than any of the supportive replies.

At work he began cornering people beside the time clock. He wanted them to understand before another shift could consume another day.

"I believe you about the mill," Tobin said. "I can't do this every time I take a break."

"When are we allowed to talk about it, then?"

"When we're both talking."

Aruhn stood silent.

Tobin looked older than he had before the accident. There were pale marks at his wrists where he had worn out the cuffs of his gloves.

"My kid's sick," he said. "My landlord's selling the building. I have room in my head for about one thing at a time."

Aruhn wanted to say that all of it belonged to the same machine.

He said it.

Tobin went back to work.

The supervisor documented Aruhn's absences and arguments. The reduced schedule became a meeting. The meeting became a termination notice delivered by someone who would not look directly at him.

There were reasonable words on the notice. There was no reasonable place for his life to go afterward.

He missed two appointments with Dr. Salcedo. He stopped answering Marnie's calls because every conversation now seemed to end with someone wanting him to rest.

He wanted someone to say that he had found something terrible.

He wanted someone to say that surviving had meant something.

By winter, the apartment was cold. He had sold the television, then the little desk he never used. The counter remained covered in documents.

One evening he watched a group of people across the street laughing outside a restaurant. He decided their happiness was proof that they did not understand.

Then he remembered how quickly he had once looked away from a woman returning a birthday cake.

He closed the curtain.

He had begun by questioning a world that reduced people to functions.

Now he could scarcely look at another human being without sorting them into awake or asleep.

There was no one left, he thought, who could hear him.

There were messages on his phone.

He could not make himself open them.

CHAPTER SIX

The Man Who Knocked

On the night he decided to die, the city was receiving its first snow.

He had expected the decision to feel dramatic. Instead, everything became narrow and terribly quiet. There was the bedroom. There was the unpaid heating bill. There was the certainty, false but complete, that his future contained nothing the present had not already exhausted.

He did not feel brave.

He did not feel chosen.

He felt tired in a place that sleep could no longer reach.

Someone knocked.

He remained still.

The knock came again, three separate sounds.

"Aruhn?"

A man's voice, unfamiliar.

He wanted the voice to go away. He wanted it to keep speaking. The two wishes frightened him with their equal strength.

"Bellis gave me your address. Your sister asked us to check on you. My name is Rusk."

The door was not locked. Aruhn had stopped thinking about theft when there was so little left to take.

It opened a few inches.

The man on the other side wore a black robe beneath a wet winter coat. Snow had collected along one shoulder. He looked like someone arriving

from a ceremony and discovering that the world had continued having ordinary emergencies.

His gaze moved across the room and changed.

"I'm coming in," he said softly. "I want to stay with you."

"Go away."

"I hear you."

The man remained near the doorway. He did not reach suddenly for anything. He did not raise his voice.

"I can't do this anymore," Aruhn said.

"Then we won't ask you to do all of it tonight."

"You don't know anything about it."

"Tell me the part that hurts most."

The question undid him more thoroughly than an argument could have done.

He tried to answer. What came out was a noise he had never heard himself make.

Rusk waited.

"I survived," Aruhn said at last. "And I don't know what for."

"You don't have to earn that."

"Nobody wants me here."

"I want you here. Your sister wants you here. I know that feels impossible to trust just now. Stay with me while we find some help."

Several minutes passed. Rusk spoke. Aruhn listened to a sentence at a time. Eventually he moved away from the place where he had intended to end his life and sat on the floor.

The man sat a little distance from him.

"What are you?" Aruhn asked.

"At present? A man with cold knees."

An unexpected breath escaped Aruhn. It was almost a laugh.

"The robe."

"I serve the Interdimensional Omni-Galactical Order of the Divination of G.O.D."

Aruhn stared at him.

"That's a long name."

"We have been told."

"Did God send you?"

Rusk considered before answering.

"I believe I was sent to bring you a message. But Bellis made the call, your sister kept asking for you, and I borrowed a car with a failing heater. I wouldn't leave the people out of the account."

"What's the message?"

"That your life is still yours. That there are people willing to stand beside you. That whatever has been done to you, it does not get the final word tonight."

Aruhn covered his face.

Rusk asked whether he could call for immediate help. Aruhn nodded. He asked whether Marnie could come. After a long silence, Aruhn nodded again.

The next hour contained no revelation.

It contained an emergency clinician, a blanket, questions answered with difficulty, and Marnie standing in the doorway with her coat half buttoned.

She knelt in front of him.

"I'm angry," she said through tears. "I'm frightened. I'm here."

"I thought you'd stopped believing me."

"I never stopped loving you."

They were different sentences. He had forgotten there could be a difference.

He accepted care. Others helped make the apartment safe. He did not spend that night alone, or the next one.

Rusk left after dawn, when there were people beside him and a plan for the hours ahead.

At the door, Aruhn called his name.

"The clerk," he whispered. "The reflection."

Rusk looked back.

"Bellis showed me what you wrote. There are things we need to discuss."

"So I'm not-"

"You are a person who nearly died tonight. That comes first. You can be in pain and still have questions worth answering. No one needs to make you into a symbol before breakfast."

Then he went out into the snow.

Aruhn stayed on the sofa, his sister asleep in the chair nearby.

For the first time in months, there was something in the room louder than his own fear.

It was another person breathing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The House With the Open Door

Five weeks passed before Aruhn visited the headquarters.

They were not five weeks of steadily improving weather inside his mind. Some mornings he could shower, make tea, and feel almost ordinary. Other mornings he needed Marnie to remain on the telephone while he got out of bed.

He returned to Dr. Salcedo. He told her the things he had been ashamed to say. They made a care plan he could actually follow, including what to do when the terrible narrowing returned.

Rusk visited without a robe on Tuesdays.

He brought bread. Once he brought a small wooden bird someone at the headquarters had carved from a broken chair leg.

"Bellis says you used to draw."

Aruhn turned the bird in his hands.

"A long time ago."

"The hands usually remember."

On the fifth Tuesday, Aruhn asked to see where it had come from.

The headquarters occupied an abandoned observatory above the old railway cut. Its dome had turned green with weather. Ivy gripped the brickwork. A sign beside the gate offered hot meals on Wednesdays and advised visitors that the entrance around the back had no steps.

He had expected secrecy.

A boy was sweeping the front path with a broom much too large for him.

Above the door hung a black metal seal: a triangle inside a broken circle, a many-rayed sun at its center. Around it, branching lines suggested both a tree and lightning. The geometry seemed to move when Aruhn looked away.

Inside, someone had burned toast.

People occupied a long room beneath the old dome. A woman repaired a bicycle. A young man sorted blankets by size. Two elderly men argued over whether a donated wardrobe could be moved without being dismantled.

Bellis stood at a table, writing the names of the five missing factory girls on clean cards.

"You came," she said.

"I thought there would be guards."

"There are people who watch the place at night. Mostly for the pipes. They freeze."

Rusk led him to a smaller room overlooking the railway. On its walls hung maps of cities he recognized and star charts containing unfamiliar arrangements of light.

"Before you ask," Rusk said, "there is no fee. You do not surrender your money, your family, your judgment, or the right to leave."

"And what do you ask?"

"Help when you can. Honesty when you can't."

"What happens if I don't believe you?"

"Then we eat lunch and discuss something else."

Aruhn looked toward the doorway.

"No oath?"

"No one here owns your conscience."

"But you have leaders."

"People responsible for work. If someone starts treating responsibility as a claim to worship, bring it to the rest of us. Especially if that person is me."

From the long room came a crashing noise, followed by a dispute about the wardrobe.

Rusk sighed.

"We remain a practical organization with practical limitations."

Aruhn almost smiled.

Then he asked about the clerk.

Rusk listened to the account from beginning to end. He did not interrupt when Aruhn described the stopped clock or the empty reflection.

"And you told Dr. Salcedo?"

"Yes."

"Good. Keep telling her what happens."

"You think it was only the accident."

"I think you deserve a careful answer. You won't get one by refusing to consider anything except the explanation you want."

Aruhn looked toward the window. Below it, the old railway cut held rainwater and a scatter of bottles. A man was walking a dog along the footpath.

"Then why did you come for me?"

"Because your sister was afraid for you. Because Bellis said you'd found records that mattered. Because a person needed someone to knock."

"Nothing more?"

"Those are already good reasons."

Bellis joined them, carrying three cups of tea.

"There are things the Order can explain," she said. "There are other things we believe, and things we're still trying to understand. We ought to tell you which is which."

She set a cup in front of him.

"I've spent months trying to understand everything," he said.

"How has that been going?"

He looked down at the tea.

"Badly."

Bellis sat.

"Then perhaps we can begin with a smaller question. What has the search been doing to the way you live?"

For a while, Aruhn watched the steam rise. He thought of Marnie's uneaten dinner. Of Tobin trying to tell him about his son. Of the woman at the next door, standing beside him in the hall without asking him to explain the whole world first.

"I've been so frightened of being deceived," he said, "that I've stopped letting anyone near me."

Rusk nodded.

"We can talk about the archons. But I would like you to have a life to return to after the conversation."

From the long room came the scrape of the wardrobe finally moving through a doorway, followed by a small, exhausted cheer.

Aruhn reached for his cup.

"All right," he said. "Tell me."

CHAPTER EIGHT

What to Look For

They talked at an ordinary table, in a room where the radiator never quite warmed the far corner.

Rusk began with the word itself.

"Archons. Rulers. In the Order's understanding, they are powers concerned with keeping consciousness confined: afraid, divided, obedient, and too exhausted to examine the terms of its own existence."

"And they feed on us."

"On fear and anguish, yes. That is part of our spiritual account of them. But I don't want the word to become a shortcut that stops you thinking. You can call something archonic and still be mistaken about what happened."

Aruhn considered the distinction.

"Then what am I supposed to look for?"

Rusk turned over a scrap of paper and placed it between them.

"A demand that you surrender your conscience. A claim that questions are disloyal. A system that profits from keeping a person afraid, then presents itself as that person's only protection."

Aruhn thought of the letters on his kitchen counter.

"A loan to help me get ahead."

"Read the terms," Bellis said. "Find out what it costs. Ask what happens if you lose a month's income. Those are questions you can actually investigate."

"And the number they give you? Your account. Your credit. Your identity."

"A number can help someone keep a record," she said. "The trouble comes when a record is treated as the full measure of a human being. You were an account to the billing office. You were a person to Odetta. Remember both."

He rubbed his thumb over the edge of the table.

"I used to think doing everything right would eventually make me safe."

"You were promised a reward for obedience," Rusk said. "You kept postponing your life while you waited for it."

"So I should stop working?"

"You should decide what your work serves, and what it costs you. We still need food grown, roofs repaired, people cared for. There is dignity in useful work. There is harm in arranging a person's circumstances so that they have scarcely any life outside it."

Aruhn remembered the banner above the scanning clock.

PEOPLE ARE OUR GREATEST ASSET.

"I thought it meant they valued us."

"Perhaps some of the people there did," Bellis said. "Ask how the company behaved when valuing you would have cost it something."

He was quiet for a time.

Then he asked about the preacher.

"In the dream, he said he was the voice I'd mistaken for God."

Rusk leaned back.

"A frightening image. You went looking for reassurance and found a demand for submission."

"Is that what religion is?"

"It can become that. So can politics. So can a movement that claims to have escaped both. Judge what people ask of you, what they do to those who refuse, and whether their teachings leave room for compassion."

"And G.O.D.?"

"We believe G.O.D. is real and good: the living source beyond the limits of this realm, beyond any authority that claims to own it. We don't believe love begins with a threat."

"Then who is the Demiurge?"

"In our account, the maker who mistakes his enclosure for the whole of existence. He claims the authority of the source, and the archons maintain his rule. His deception depends on making the limits he imposes seem like the limits of everything that could ever be."

Aruhn looked again at the man walking his dog below the window.

The man had stopped to free the lead from a patch of brambles. The dog waited impatiently, trying to walk away before he had finished.

"And we are supposed to ascend."

"Toward a greater awareness," Rusk said. "And toward a better way of living with what we become aware of. A person can learn a great deal and still treat everyone around him badly."

"I have."

"Then you have somewhere to begin."

The words hurt less than Aruhn expected. Rusk had spoken as though beginning remained possible.

"How do I tell someone else what I've learned?"

"First find out whether they want that conversation," Bellis said. "Listen to what they have experienced. Bring the records you can support. Leave room for them to question you."

"And if they won't listen?"

"They still get to be people."

Aruhn looked down.

"I thought everyone around me was asleep."

"Some are tired," she said. "Some disagree. Some may understand a part you haven't seen yet. You won't find out if you decide what they are before they speak."

Rusk moved the scrap of paper closer.

On it he had written three questions.

What do I know?

How do I know it?

What can I do that helps?

"We have a saying," he said. "One sign is noise. Two are an echo. Three are testimony. We call it the Law of the Third Witness. It reminds us to seek independent confirmation. Repeating the same claim three times doesn't establish it."

"So I keep questioning."

"Us too."

"And what if questioning everything leaves me where I was before?"

Rusk's expression softened.

"Then let someone sit beside you while you find your footing. You needn't carry every unanswered question alone."

They heard dishes being set out in the next room.

Aruhn realized that he was hungry.

It was such an ordinary sensation that it almost embarrassed him. They had been discussing the nature of existence, and his body wanted soup.

Rusk stood.

"Come and eat."

"Am I one of your observers?"

"You could be, if the name helps you remember to pay attention. It gives you no authority over anyone else."

Aruhn folded the paper and put it in his pocket beside the wooden bird.

In the next room, someone had saved him a chair.

CHAPTER NINE

The First Step

His first opportunity came outside the supermarket on a Thursday afternoon.

A woman had set two shopping bags on the pavement and was trying to rearrange their contents. One handle had torn. A packet of potatoes lay beside her shoe. People passed around her, careful to leave enough room without quite stopping.

Aruhn had come from looking at a notice for part-time work in a furniture shop. He was thinking about the hours, the bus fare, and whether his body could manage the lifting.

He almost passed her too.

Then he stopped.

"Would you like a hand?"

She looked up, measuring him with the understandable caution of someone alone with a stranger.

"Only as far as the bus stop. I can manage from there."

"Of course."

He picked up the potatoes and took the heavier bag. She kept the one containing the eggs.

Her name was Dessa. She lived three stops beyond his street and disliked the new shopping bags because, she said, they had been designed by someone who had never needed to carry anything home.

He laughed.

They walked at her pace.

He learned that she used to mend clothes for a living. That her daughter had moved away. That the bus had once stopped outside the supermarket, until a change described as an improvement added a long walk to every journey.

"You could complain," he said.

"I have."

"What did they say?"

"That passenger convenience had been taken into consideration."

He recognized the language immediately: words arranged to make an unanswered question look settled.

For once, he did not rush to explain everything the words reminded him of.

"Would it help if someone wrote with you?"

Dessa thought about it.

"Maybe. I'd like them to know what that walk is like in winter."

"Then that's what we could tell them."

At the shelter, he placed her bag on the bench.

The bus was late. She made room for him to sit.

"Do you work around here?"

"I used to work at the distribution center. I'm looking for something different."

"Better money?"

"I hope so. But I'd like some of my life back as well."

She nodded, as though the answer required no explanation.

"I kept saying I'd go places when I retired," she said. "You get used to putting things off."

"Have you gone?"

"A few. There are still a few I'd like."

They talked about a coast neither had seen. Aruhn admitted that he had not gone farther than the edge of the city for years, except for a funeral and the accident that had brought him to the hospital.

"You don't have to start with the coast," she said. "There's a river a mile from here. Half the people in this city have never walked beside it."

He looked toward the road leading away from the shopping district.

He knew exactly where it began.

He had driven past it for years.

When the bus arrived, he carried the bag aboard and set it where Dessa could reach it. She checked the eggs, then looked up at him.

"Thank you for stopping."

"You're welcome."

He gave her the Order's public telephone number, written on the back of an old receipt, so she could ask for him about the letter. He explained that people there could help put it together if she wanted.

"Do I have to join something?"

"No."

She tucked the receipt into her purse.

"Good. I've enough to keep track of."

He stepped down before the doors closed.

For a moment he stood watching the bus pull away. He had not changed the city's transport policy. He had not answered the question of what waited beyond death. There was still a balance on his credit account, and the furniture shop had not yet offered him a job.

But a woman had carried less weight because he had stopped.

He could feel the significance of that without needing it to become something larger.

On the walk home, he called Marnie.

"Are you busy Sunday?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing."

He smiled.

Later, at his kitchen counter, he opened the notebook that had once filled his nights with questions he could not put down.

He still had questions.

About the history he had been given. About the debts he had accepted without understanding them. About the voices that made obedience sound like goodness, and the habits that had made him overlook other people.

He would keep asking. He would look for evidence, listen, and change his mind when he needed to. When someone wanted to talk, he would share what he had found. When someone needed a hand, he would try to notice before walking past.

The Order had given him a way to recognize the patterns of control it called archonic. It had also reminded him how easily a search for truth could become another confinement if fear occupied every hour of it.

He wanted to see more of the world now. There were places beyond his usual streets, people he had never met, books he had never opened, and things he had once wanted to learn. He could begin with the river. Later, with Rusk or on his own, he could go farther.

Freedom was going to involve decisions he would have to keep making. How much of his time to surrender. When to speak. When to refuse. When to ask for help. What he would do when standing up for someone cost him a little comfort.

He had not become fearless. Some mornings would still be difficult. He would keep the appointments that helped him, and answer the people who cared enough to call.

He turned to a clean page and wrote down Dessa's name so that he would remember the letter.

Below it he wrote:

Walk to the river.

Then he put on his coat. There was enough light left to go outside for a while.

At the end of his street, the familiar road led toward the distribution center. Another turned toward the water.

He took the one he had never taken.

AFTERWORD

A Message from the Observer

If this account has reached you, I would rather leave you with a question than an instruction.

What is one part of your life you have surrendered without ever deciding to surrender it?

It may be your time. It may be the belief that you are allowed to ask why. It may be the expectation that love must be earned through usefulness, obedience, wealth, or suffering.

I cannot decide the answer for you.

I once wanted to replace every answer I had been given with a new certainty of my own. For a time, I called that freedom. It left me unable to hear anyone who complicated the account I needed to be true.

Keep the right to question. Keep it when a government demands your trust. Keep it when a religious leader speaks with the authority of heaven. Keep it when a business describes your exhaustion as ambition. Keep it when someone promises to liberate you, including anyone who uses my name.

Then do the patient work that questions require. Examine evidence. Ask who produced it. Look for independent accounts. Admit what remains uncertain. A lie does not become true because it opposes another lie.

And remember the people beside you.

They may not be ready for your questions. They may be carrying burdens you have never asked about. They may disagree with you and still arrive when you call. Do not reduce them to obstacles in the story of your awakening.

I learned that too late to avoid hurting people. I did not learn it too late to begin repairing some of the harm.

Your worth was never a credit score, a job title, an account number, or the approval of a crowd. Those things can affect your circumstances. They do not contain the whole of you.

Work can feed a family, build something needed, and express a skill worth taking pride in. It can also be arranged to consume nearly every hour a person has. You are allowed to notice the difference. You are allowed to want a life with room for rest, friendship, curiosity, and the work that gives you meaning.

You do not have to solve everything before helping someone. You do not have to become fearless before asking for help yourself.

I cannot promise that compassion makes its own reward arrive on schedule. I can tell you that I would not be here if people had waited for a guarantee before offering it.

If despair has made your world small, please let another person know. There were nights when I could not imagine a future I later lived to welcome. My inability to imagine it did not mean it could not exist.

There is work ahead. There are questions I have not answered. There is a chair at my table for someone who needs to sit down.

I am keeping it there.

- The Observer

THE OBSERVER

A Note for a Reader in Distress

The Observer's recovery begins with accepting company and immediate help; his later purpose does not replace that care. If you are considering harming yourself, tell someone you trust and seek immediate support. In the United States and its territories, you can call 988, text 988, or use https://988lifeline.org/chat/. Elsewhere, contact your local crisis service or emergency services. You deserve care without having to prove that your suffering is important enough.

THE OBSERVER

The Door Remains Open

This story introduces the Interdimensional Omni-Galactical Order of the Divination of G.O.D. through its ideals of compassion, freedom of conscience, discernment, and practical help.

No reader owes allegiance, money, agreement, or worship to an author, a character, or an organization because a story moved them. Carry forward what withstands your own honest consideration.

For more books, art, and music from Zachary J. Blessing and The Living Ghost, visit www.omnigalacticalorder.com.

Offered freely, with the hope that it reaches someone who needs an open door.