

CHAPTER 3 PUZZLES



“But 'tis strange: and oftentimes, to win us to our harm, the instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray's in deepest consequence.”

—Macbeth, Act I, scene 3, lines 134-138

ELLIOTT RUBBED his face and switched on his desktop computer. The aged device whirred to life with its usual dramatic flair. It was by far inadequate for most tasks, and certainly for those Elliott's engineering courses were training him for, but managed to squeak out enough cycles and RAM to complete the tasks given him for Project Alexandria.

The logo for Project Alexandria appeared and rotated every so often to indicate loading. He watched the logo, examining it afresh as he did from time to time. It was a vibrant red with a stylized flaming phoenix rising from an open book lying on its spine facing the viewer. Around it was a pyramid missing its sides but with the angles visible to give the impression of the pyramid's presence.

Each side had a corresponding word written, “UNIVERSALIS. SCIENTIA. RENATA.” Elliott had never bothered to learn what the words meant, but he knew the phoenix had been chosen

because its mythological origins were Greek and Egyptian, with debate over which was the true source of the initial tale. Its legendary fiery rebirth fit the theme of Project Alexandria burning away the old way of things and a restoration of a lost era.

At least, it was the explanation they gave to all of the initiative's newcomers. Undoubtedly it was meant to impress the importance and awe of the whole thing on those fresh to it. Perhaps he was being too skeptical, but Elliott often questioned what lost era they referred to, given even Alexandria's famed library was confined to a single location.

From nearby, Elliott heard a knock on the hard plastic of his cubicle frame. Waiting at the cubicle's opening was Terrance, Elliott's co-worker and former roommate. The two had been friends in high school, been selected for the same major, and since had drifted apart. Terrance worked down the hall. For the past few weeks, he had been creating a database of images to enhance older periodicals in the process of digitalization.

Tall and lean, he had short-cropped, sandy-brown hair and piercing blue eyes. It had been some days since he'd spoken to Elliott and his angular face displayed an expression of displeasure.

Elliott arched an eyebrow and asked, "What's wrong?"

"She came by my cubicle today, asking about the project."

"Oh, really?"

Terrance rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. "No, I'm telling you for no reason. She's asking whether or not you've been keeping your quotas this month."

"Tell Kendra I'm doing my share of the work," Elliott responded. "Tell her—"

"Tell me what?" a distinctly feminine voice echoed into the cubicle from an unseen location. Terrance shuffled to the side, his arms still crossed, and the much smaller form of Kendra paced into view. Her hair was caramel colored and her eyes were a light green but so much sharper than Terrance's. She was

wearing a form fitting red skirt and dark top, possibly to throw into relief the jewelry she wore.

She blinked once, drawing attention to the dark shadow over her eyes. Her lips, the color of a bruise, were pursed. A high heeled shoe clicked on the tiled floor. Perhaps her impatience was directed at both of her colleagues, but she only looked at Elliott.

"That he'll have his part of the project done by the end of the week," Terrance offered. He gave a quick glance at Elliott before smiling easily at Kendra.

The short, tan-skinned woman narrowed her eyes and said with some chagrin, "Still might not be good enough. The department wants to see our progress soon. We can't move on to real work until we finish this busy work."

Her eyes returned to Elliott and fixed there critically, battering against his will like a siege engine. Elliott stared back, resisting the urge back down.

It wasn't easy, it never was to stand against what she wanted. At one time he had been taken with her. Fleeting though it may have been, his past infatuation seemed to have interminably placed him on uneven footing with her. Getting to know Kendra had extinguished whatever candle of affection he had held, and in its absence, the temperature around her always felt degrees cooler.

"I can pick up some of his load," Terrance offered with a shrug. "I can handle it. My coursework is low this week."

Kendra turned her gaze on him and her expression softened like butter in a warm skillet. "That's so thoughtful of you, but they're watching us. You can't rescue him this time." Her smile faded to stony reticence as she stepped back and pointed to Elliott. "Stop spending all your time reading your silly books and flirting with Hopewell. Focus."

"See you later, Terr-terr," she added with a wink and departed, a slight sway to her steps. Terrance watched her as she

left, undoubtedly the intention of her swagger. It was a painful exchange for Elliott to stomach.

Sighing, Elliott looked up at Terrance and with brows knitted moaned. "Terr-terr?"

Terrance smirked and said, "Yeah, shut up."

The smile faded and Terrance's brows furrowed. "She's right though. You gotta stop spending all your time reading and do a little more coding."

Elliott looked down at the ground and nodded. "I suppose I can get a few more done if I don't try to read them."

"Mhm, I'd take that bet. Maybe even before I take the bet on you having a shot with Lara Hopewell."

Elliott's cheeks flushed with color. He managed to mutter, "Oh, is that so?"

"Yup," Terrance answered, laughing. "Not for your lack of trying either. You wanted to take her to Rosa's? Isn't it the definitive stereotype of backwoods antiquarian culture?"

"Well, I thought it has ... er ... had ... a nice atmosphere?" Elliott replied stumbingly.

Shaking his head, Terrance started to walk off, stopped, smacked his large palm on the side of the cubicle entrance and said, "Right, well, just remember, Kendra isn't exaggerating. They're watching us and if we want to do some worthwhile stuff for our capstone, you have to get on it, man."

Before Elliott could counter, Terrance was walking down the hall.

Breathing in deeply and running his hands over his face and through his hair, Elliott let out his frustration in a rush. It seemed like none of his co-workers appreciated a good book. Not that they didn't read, but they were more often engrossed in their next-gen tech and the apps for them. There was always a launch of the latest device to look for, a new program revolutionizing daily life. What use was a plain, paper book?

If Terrance and Kendra were right, then they were all in trouble. Elliott would have to double up on his work in order to

meet the deadline Kendra imposed. He may have been seventeen and an advanced track student like the others, but he certainly didn't have the ambition that simmered just beneath the surface in his peers. There were things Elliott aspired to, but none of them had to do with making a new app for social interaction, or business process refinement via matrix-based algorithms.

Spinning around to face his console, his fingers tapped lightly in a swift succession, entering his password, "hope4TheDay," without any wasted motion. The operating system began to initialize, load, and then execute the system's software which rigidly defined how he and the other students interacted with the University's central file structure.

A message popped up telling Elliott to change his password. He ignored the little popup till it disappeared. The password had been the same for more than a year. Ever since he had accepted Christ as his Savior, he had been finding new ways every day to allow his faith to permeate the rest of his life, suffusing it with light.

It was a rarity now, to become a believer. It was viewed as foolish and defying acquired knowledge to believe in any form of influences on the universe beyond the natural. But Elliott was captivated by the message of the cross and by the wonder of a night sky. Not the skyline of a city, but on the brief occasions when he was younger and was able to venture into the woods on family vacations, he would look at the stars and wonder. So vast were the heavens, yet every star was comprised of the same minuscule atoms. Every bit intricately fitted into a magnificent whole.

Seeing the depths of the heavens illuminated by thousands of pinpoints of light, it seemed impossible they were suspended there by mere chance. He understood gravity and planetary motion and enough of chemistry, electromagnetics, and astrophysics to know the how, but the why was beyond such simple answers that equations offered.

Absently he began to rub the links of the loose necklace hanging round his neck and into the inside of his shirt. At its focus was an argent cross, a gift from his parents.

There are so many constants in the universe. How did it all arise from chaos?

“User has been idle for three minutes,” asserted the computer monitoring system in its over friendly voice.

Grimacing, Elliott moved a hand across the interface field, and the whirl of the fans cooling the trillions of micro-transistors could be heard. “Identifying ... Elliott Calhoun, student. Rank: Senior. Major: Computer Architecture Engineering and Software Design. Login time: Four minutes.”

“Whew.” He had managed to squeak past drawing the ire of his instructors. Too much idle time and they cut his grade.

For the next two hours, he worked on the project as he was instructed to, absorbed in the tedious task of developing programs to convert some of the more unique periodicals into digital formats in batch operations. The formats and information had to be checked against existing national databases, correlated and properly indexed for archiving in the central data repository of Project Alexandria for print materials. Even former RSS news feeds were being included in the project, as of this year.

Project Alexandria was not strictly a single data store. The project represented a single location from which other sites could access and then display data. There were hundreds of lookups and thousands of lines of code to evaluate and write with the ultimate goal as a single, virtual repository of all available human knowledge from all of history. A world-wide link to all of mankind’s thoughts, past and present. The endeavor was named Alexandria, after the ancient city with its famed library, said to have housed nearly all the works of the ancient world.

At 3:29 PM, Elliott’s mobile began to vibrate. A minute later his workstation’s bleating message service informed him, “You have a class in thirty minutes. Current traffic patterns allow for timely arrival at your course, if you leave now.”

Rather than instructing it to shut down verbally, as he could have done, Elliott touched the settings area of the console, selected shut down, and spun his chair around. Rising to his feet and lifting his backpack over one shoulder, he slid the other in the opposite strap, the weight of it settling on his shoulders in an unexpected way.

For a second, he stood considering the lightness of his backpack.

Lara has the book.

She would already have left by now for her own classes.

He could try to get the book from her after her last class, but that felt a bit too clingy to him. In a few months that book would have to be destroyed, after any unique material within it was placed into the system. Each day with that book was one more day to peer into the thoughts of his grandfather, to understand the things he valued. To keep him alive in more than simple memory.

Checking the time once more, he stalked out of the cubicle and down the hall. His pace quickened as he rounded each turn on the way out. He had to get to class.