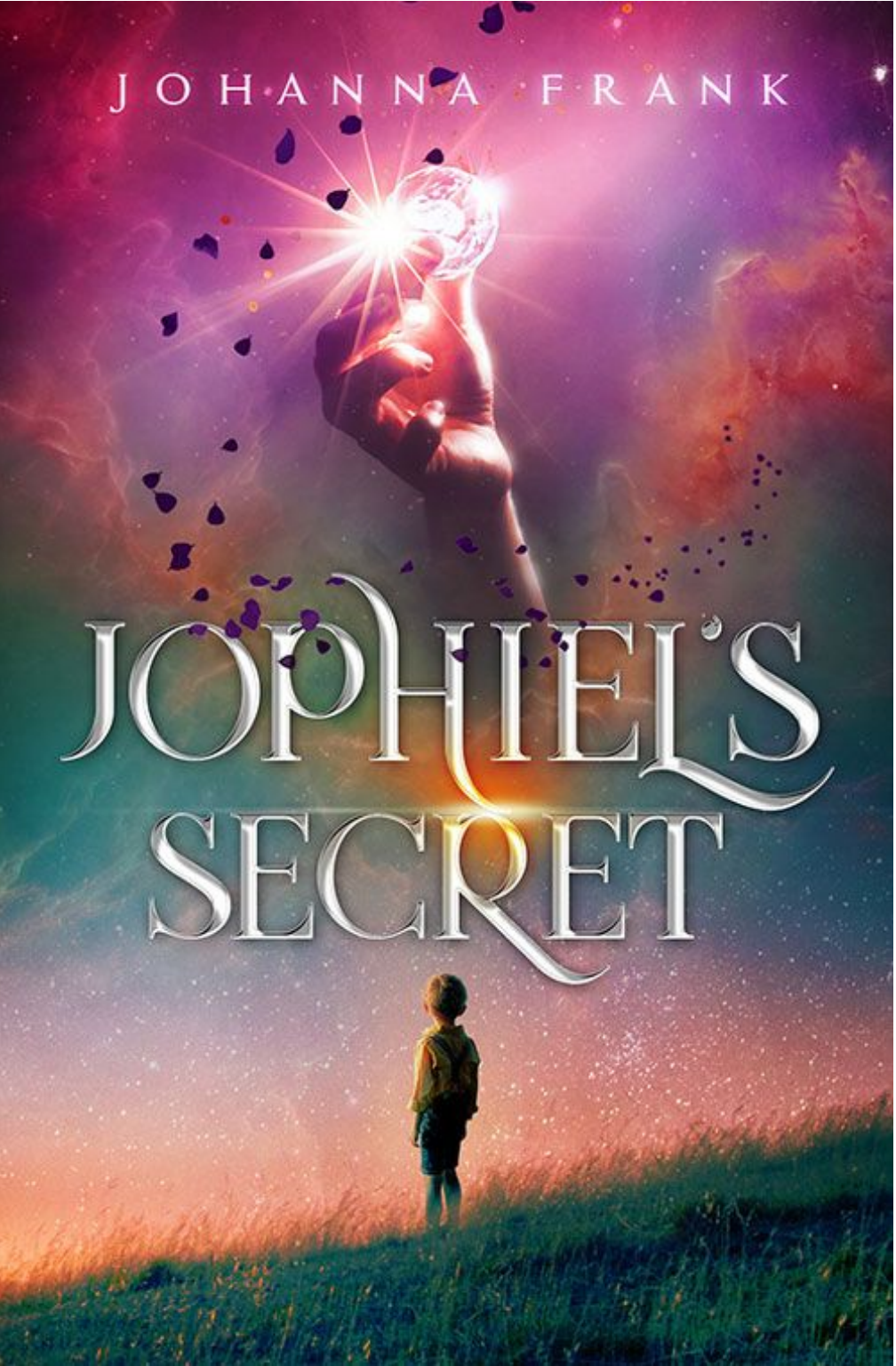
JOHANNA FRANK
JOPHIEL'S SECRET

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Marrow Publishing
Jophiel's Secret
By Johanna Frank
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JOPHIEL'S SECRET

JOHANNA FRANK

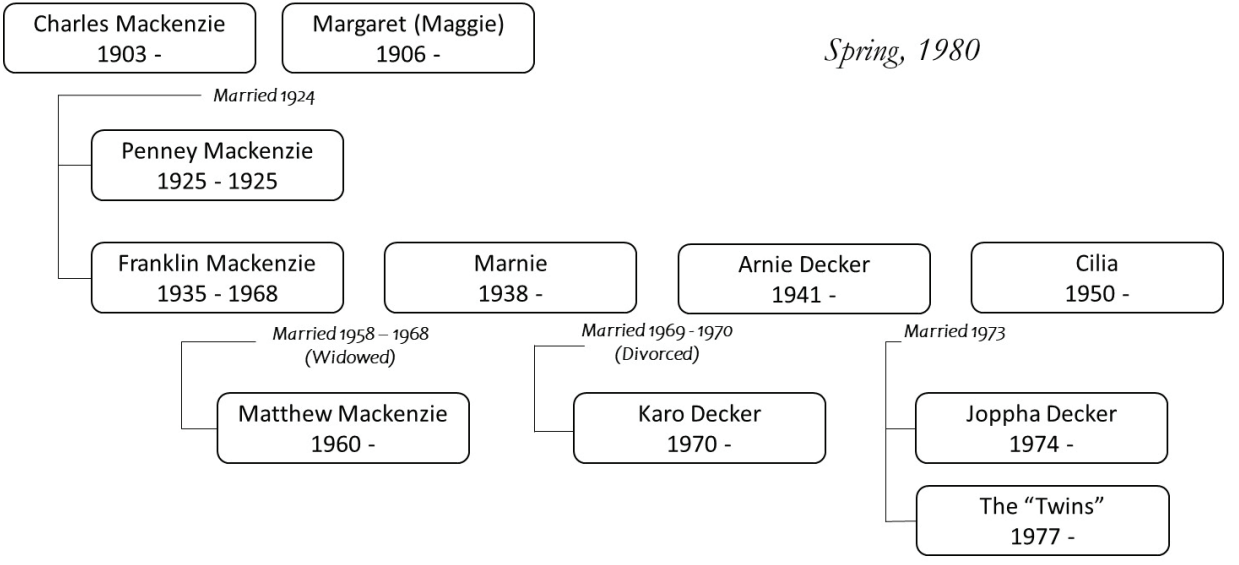
A Lifeline Fantasy Series by Johanna Frank

The Gatekeeper's Descendants, Book #1
Jophiel's Secret, Book #2
Kasartha's Tour, Book #3, *Coming next and going back in time*

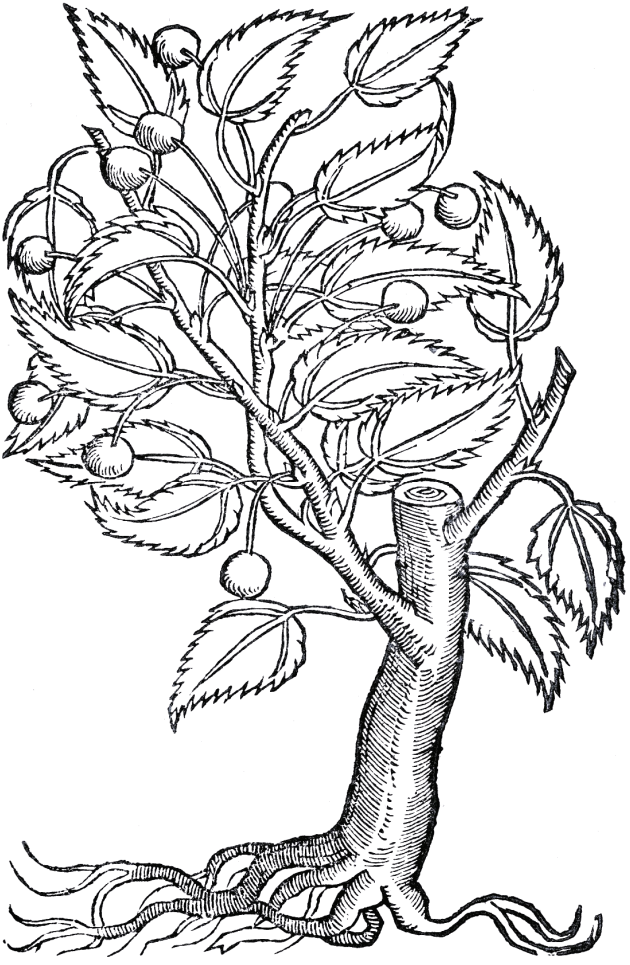
Same great characters. Stand-alone plots.

Jophiel's Secret is a work of curio-fiction fantasy, combining everyday living with the whimsical. While a few theological underpinnings are at work throughout the story, many are fantastical, born of pure imagination.

For my mother,
who for a time was shoeless,
and always said,
"You can bet your boots; He's real."


Charles Mackenzie
1903 -
Margaret (Maggie)
1906 -
Married 1924
Penney Mackenzie
1925 - 1925
Franklin Mackenzie
1935 - 1968
Marnie
1938 -
Arnie Decker
1941 -
Cilia
1950 -
Married 1958 – 1968
(Widowed)
Married 1969 - 1970
(Divorced)
Married 1973
Matthew Mackenzie
1960 -
Karo Decker
1970 -
Joppha Decker
1974 -
The “Twins”
1977 -

Spring, 1980



CHAPTER ONE
Cherry Strudel

In the Outer Courtyard of the Kingdom

ONE MORE RUNNING scissor jump. *Goodness, Mother, will you be surprised when you see me!* A graceful landing on both feet and then up again, airborne, straight through the gate and into the outside world—the Kingdom's Outer Courtyard. The place where she grew up from childhood. A couple more sprints to drain the day's nervous energy, then she scampered into a squat. Here, in a patch of lavender, she would watch and wait.

Pipiera's mother was due to arrive.

Papah, the man who had pretty much raised her, was nowhere in sight. Unusual, since he was the Head Gatekeeper and rarely left his post for any length of time. *He can't be far,* Pipiera figured. *I know he wouldn't miss this for anything…he knows how I've ached for decades; this reunion means everything to me.*

Legs stretched out, leaning on her elbows, Pipiera admired

the wide and majestic horizon, a familiar view that shaped her very existence. A shoreline crested with incoming waves, one after each, powerfully pulling through galaxy upon galaxy, dutifully bringing forth Arrivals from a faraway world, a place the Authoritarians called Earth. A place where she had lived once herself, some years ago, for a mere number of days. The Outer Courtyard was the final stretch of the journey. Arrivals would be gingerly delivered in front of Papah's gate, the Kingdom gate, their delivering wave then taking a deep and gracious bow before gently melting into the ground.

Soon, Mother will come over that horizon, riding on a wave. I will meet her. It shall be grand!

Thankful she wasn't late, Pipiera closed her eyes and let the gentle breezes push her bangs back while she drank the day's aroma, each day different, each day healing. Today's a mixture of citrus and vanilla. She checked the delicate package tucked close to her body, secured by her left elbow. The baked strudel filled with plump cherries hadn't leaked inside its wrapping and didn't appear squished. *A little miracle,* she thought, given all her excited jumps. Well, not too squished, anyway.

Pipiera knew little about her mother, but one thing the ancestor aunties, Serena and Alexien, had told her was a story about their generational line's crazy love for cherry strudel. Pipiera wondered if they had made the story up simply because it was Serena's favorite thing to bake. Besides, who could resist the flesh of the Kingdom's own vibrant selection of sweet, red cherries enveloped inside Serena's hand-stretched layers of paper-thin dough? It was perfect for kicking off a homecoming celebration.

But never mind that—far more splendid would be the long-awaited moment when Pipiera could meet the eyes

of her mother. A new page written; instead of sadness and grief, Pipiera imagined joy and happiness. Instead of a story wrapped in a blanket of blackness, her mother could glow freely with abundant light. *I simply cannot wait for you to hold me, Mother. We will never be separated again. Ever.*

The excitement of it all was excruciating. Yet a haunting rush of anxiety coursed through her veins; she couldn't place her finger on any cause for worry. *Surely Mother will arrive at this gate.* Her emphasis on *this.*

This moment was far too precious not to share.

"Now, where is he?" Speaking to her host of lively purple lavender, Pipiera looked around. No Papah Megalos. "Surely, he knows what today is!" Jumping up for a better scan—it was habit—she placed one hand on her hip and buckled her lips, toes dug into the soft vegetation. "Papah…*where* are you?" she sang at a pitch only her own ears could appreciate.

Though momentarily absent, Megalos had held his prestigious role for well over 300 years. Head Gatekeeper for the Kingdom. Pipiera was proud of the work he performed day in, day out, greeting and processing Arrivals. Sometimes having to turn them away. Rebels, of course, were mostly to blame for that. Of more personal importance, Megalos was Pipiera's outright favorite relative. Adopted relative, that is—there is quite a story behind the adoption. Another day for that tale. All that mattered now: Pipiera adored Megalos and Megalos adored Pipiera.

Roly, Megalos's faithful second-in-command, emitted a quick hello-nod her way. As much as Pipiera wanted desperately to inquire just where in the blazes her Papah 'Megs' was, she decided that wasn't such a great idea. Interrupting while gatekeepers are in the midst of processing Arrivals was never

a good idea. Chuckling, she recalled the few instances when she had marched over and demanded attention at the most awkward of times. *Oh dear,* she shook the memories away. Not funny then, quite laughable now. *I've grown,* she applauded herself. She would have to wait for him, too.

Still searching for Megalos, Pipiera noticed both aunties, Serena and Alexien, sitting themselves down at a picnic table in the citizens' waiting area. She bolted over to join them, nearly dropping the strudel.

"Oh, good. You *are* here," Serena said with zero excitement.

Why the somber tone? Pipiera wondered. *There was no reason for that, not today.* "Of course! Where else, for the Kingdom's sake, would I be? Mother is about to arrive." Pipiera held up the wrapped package with both hands. Well, that got a slight rise of a smile from Serena. Though not from Alexien. *Something's up. Something's wrong.*

Pipiera slipped her legs under the table and settled in. "What's going on?" she eyed the pair, one at a time, not liking the face either had composed. Then her heart sank, pulling her shoulders with it. "No. Don't tell me. She's not coming." Pipiera curtly tossed the wrapped strudel onto the table, cherry guts seeping out.

Dismayed, Serena pulled the package together while Alexien appeared to contemplate an explanation. This day was, in fact, a long-awaited one; the arrival of a family member always was. Completing an Earth tour and returning home? Well, that was something to celebrate.

"No, Pip, that's not it. Maggie will arrive as scheduled." Alexien's voice was dry.

Pipiera exhaled sharp and quick. *Whew.* She took an inhale and looked behind her toward the horizon, where soon

her mother would roll in along with one of the Kingdom's escorts. *Toward me. Toward the next forever phase of our lives.* Not sure what the aunties were bothered about, Pipiera wasn't about to let them ruin this moment. *My moment. No, I won't allow anything to interfere. Whatever they are upset about, they will have to deal with on their own.*

She glanced toward the gate. Still no Megalos. Small groups of gathered citizens were excitedly chatting at other tables, waiting for their own loved ones to arrive, all under a myriad of grapevine archways and large blooms of climbing white roses.

Her attention resigned back to the aunties. "Oh, what then? Come on, tell me."

Alexien was the wise and cautious one, at least according to Pipiera. Serena was the creative, scheming one, always having something new and fun up her sleeve. The aunties had taken Pipiera under their wing once she herself became a citizen. They were ancestors, great, great, many-times ancestors, and they, too, had been adopted into a line of descendants now belonging to Megalos. They were all one family now.

Alexien spoke slowly as if the words were painful. "It's — *Jophiel."*

Serena's mouth twisted about. She was the one who would blurt everything out and then some. But at this particular moment, it seemed she preferred to hold her tongue. Rare.

"Serena?" Pipiera probed. Alexien remained seriously quiet.

This can't be good. It was automatic, Pipiera's fingers clasped in time to catch her chin. *No, please, King, let my Jophiel be alright.*

"Well," Serena tilted her head, readying herself to spill. "There *is* good news. He's coming home early."

"What? No! He can't come home early. I mean, of course, I would like that. But no, he's got plans, I'm sure of it. He wouldn't have taken a journey without a purpose, I mean, or without a major goal at heart. Why can't he stay longer?" Thoughts racing in circles like a wild rabbit trapped inside a cardboard box, Pipiera continued to blurt out questions as though her aunties were in charge, as though they would have some answers. "Is he hurt? In trouble?" Both hands slapped the table, giving Alexien a jolt. "What and why? Why does the King want Jophiel home so early!?"

Having been somewhat afraid of what Pipiera's reaction would be, Alexien and Serena shook their heads in unison, simply acknowledging her rant.

Ugh. Pipiera hated when they did that, the unison part. Catching her own attitude in the look of caution in the eyes of her aunts, she gave herself a scold. "Trust the King," she whispered softly.

The aunties heard the murmur and nodded, again in unison.

Scratching the back of her head, she twisted about to check on the horizon. It was a legitimate way to stall the discussion—was her mother coming yet? *Nope*. Agitation got the better of her. "Where's Papah Megs, anyway?" *I need him right now.* Her Papah Megs could always put things in the proper perspective, the Kingdom's perspective.

Alexien glanced toward the watch post that towered above the Kingdom gate. Atop it was a room, a humble room with not much but an ornate wooden bench that Papah liked to sit upon when he needed to contemplate. A single window provided a view of the entire horizon, so careful watching never ceased.

"He's up there. With Aivy. I suspect she's telling him to expect Jophiel soon." Alexien employed her voice of wisdom. Aivy was the Kingdom's transition agent, in charge of the list: the list of all scheduled arrivals. "We thought you could be happy for Jophiel, to know he would soon be on his way. And besides, all journeys have purposes and goals, no matter their length. *You* better than any of us know that, Pip."

Jophiel and Pipiera had a history. They met a mere six years earlier when Pipiera had been elected to take part in an intervention, her one and only mission. He had been the assigned escort to ensure that her travels to and from Earth were free from danger. During it all, they bonded. Supportive and special to each other. Jophiel was now on an Earth tour himself.

Pipiera calculated. He would be six years of age by now, still a boy. A young boy with the gift of intelligence beyond his years, she was sure of that. *Even so, what purpose could he have possibly accomplished?* She pushed the somber dispute down, hard. Though the aunties were right, she should know better than anyone that the length of a tour was not a key measurement.

A dewy wetness soaked her lashes. "I am. Happy for him. Don't get me wrong; I can't wait to see him. It's just…just…"

Alexien interrupted, "We know, Pip. And we get it." Her counseling tone conveyed an understanding. Neither Serena nor Alexien wished for Jophiel to come home before he could accomplish his tasks and build the character he was meant to build. Serena leaned forward and grabbed Pipiera's elbows, eager to share something else.

Alexien placed a hand on Serena's back as though to caution her words.

Pipiera leaned in. Might there be a scheme of some sort? Leave it to Serena. "I'm listening."

"Risks," Pipiera could barely hear Alexien's voice. "Mind the risks."

So, there is a plan!

Serena's telling face, her mouth twisting all about, eyes artfully churning to a squint, invited Pipiera to lean in even closer.

Whatever it is, it looks like these two might not agree. Pipiera leaned in closer anyway.

"Okay," Serena started. "Three things. You'd have to go now. And I mean now. And you must stay there, like, be an earthling and all, not just coming and going. You'd have to stay there for awhile, maybe even the entire summer. Secondly, you cannot use any powers—no disappearing and reappearing, don't go floatin' about or anything; you mustn't raise any suspicion."

Pipiera's back stiffened as she pulled away. "Me? Go there? Stay there? What? *Why?*"

Before she could reject the plan resolutely, Serena injected with term number three.

"And most of all, Pip…are you hearing this? Most of all, do not—and I mean *do not*—create close relationships. No one must discover just who you are. You've a job to do. Get in, stay the course, get out. One summer at most. That's it."

Is she serious? Pipiera examined the faces of her two aunts. Dead serious, both of them. "Am I missing something? Why would I need to go *there?* Besides, my mother is about to arrive." Totally baffled, she cast a firm, "No way!"

Her knee banged the underside of the tabletop but didn't slow her from making a stand. She would have walked away,

but these women meant so much to her. Those two words—"No way!"—wavered visibly inside the airspace of the three women, churning into a circular motion, rotating the tension until it simulated a fierce column, a whirlwind of sorts. They all watched as it darkened, a soft light growing from its inside. Then it all disappeared.

Pipiera sat back down. She admired and trusted her aunties. But their suggestion that she needed to go to Earth for the summer, pretending she was an earthling? And all of this right out of nowhere?

Serena rested her head on the table, hands covering her short, brunette curls.

Alexien offered a resolution. "It's okay, Pip. We really didn't think you'd be up for it. It's a far-fetched plan, anyway. We simply couldn't come up with anything else." She then glanced again at the tower room. Pipiera figured it was her way of suggesting the deal for Jophiel to end his Earth-journey at such a tender age and return to the Kingdom was being finalized at that very same moment.

"My mother," Pipiera bullied her defense. "You think I could leave now? Now that I've waited so long for her arrival? I've been preparing for *so* long for this moment. You're both crazy. Seriously!"

The aunties remained quiet, eyes cast downward to where the whirlwind vision had come and gone.

"You'll have your mother forever when she arrives. Jophiel won't get another chance. You know that. One Earth-journey per person…" Pipiera could see that Serena really was serious. And persistent.

Alexien interrupted, "Unless, of course, we cause a commotion, an unofficial interference, a mission."

"Unofficial?" Pipiera gasped. "Uh, you remember how I fumbled the last one?" she added.

"No, no…Pip, it all ended well. There was no fumbling. All ended well, remember?" Alexien was being encouraging.

Shifting her seating direction, Pipiera nodded hesitantly. That one and only mission she had taken was something she'd rather forget—except meeting Jophiel, that is. She thought about Alexien's words for a moment. *She's right; it did end well, I suppose.*

Pipiera pushed her back up tall to begin a line of questioning. "Let me get this straight. I'd be a real person, a human earthling whilst there?"

"Just for the summer," Alexien said.

"I have it all figured out," Serena added in a tone full of hope.

"I need more details."

"You'll get them. We don't have time right now," Serena replied.

"Pipiera, dear, you literally must leave now. Now, before Megalos comes down those stairs and out of his tower. We need to tell Aivy and him that you've already left to help young Joppha. They'll *have* to pause his return then," Alexien explained.

"Well, no, they don't." Pipiera was pretty sure they didn't.

"Megalos will insist they wait if it's *you* who went," Serena pleaded. "He'll fight and plead with the Authoritarians. They'll *listen* to him." Alexien moved in closer. "Pip, it *has* to be you."

Oh, I get it now.

Pipiera knew Papah always gave in to her. And though this unofficial plan of her aunties' felt wrong, helping her friend Jophiel, whom she promised to watch over, felt so right.

"Jophiel did say in a letter that he took the Earth-journey knowing he had me to look out for him. What would he think if I disappointed him?"

The two aunties nodded, signaling agreement, in unison. But then Serena crouched low. "Psst, we gotta go. Now! C'mon."

Pipiera scanned the horizon. No Mother.

"C'mon!" Serena grabbed Pipiera's elbow and pulled her off the picnic table. "Alexien will stay behind. She's gonna tell them you've jumped in the main tunnel, all distraught and determined-like. You left to help Jophiel. But we must get a head start!"

Pipiera choked. That tunnel. The last time she jumped in, it was a nightmare. Terror. Trauma. The very reason she'd sworn to herself she'd never go on another mission, despite any promptings from that Intervention team. She had adamantly rejected their repeated invitations to join their group. Though with those words, 'but it ended well,' ringing in her ears, her nod was slight and just enough for Serena to grab her elbow and pull her along till they were both sprinting in the direction of the main tunnel.

Pipiera glanced behind. A leaky strudel on the table, no mother on the horizon, and an absent Megalos to guard the gate. She kept running, though she wondered why. Two people she loved so dearly were about to meet: her adopted Papah Megs and her earthly mother, Maggie.

And I won't be there for the celebrated moment. King, I pray I'm doing the right thing!

CHAPTER TWO
Get Her on the Train

MEGALOS STOOD, ARMS crossed, chest puffed. "He really wants him home early—the King wants Jophiel back now?" Megalos cast his eyes away from his tower room window to focus on the beloved half-pint, vinegar-filled visitor standing in front of him. Aivy, who really was half the size of Megalos by height and even three times narrower by width, wasn't the slightest bothered by the annoyance Megalos filtered into the tiny room.

"Yes," was all she said, as she had already said enough. Aivy was a Kingdom transition agent, one of the best. In fact, she led a whole host of transition agents, which pretty much meant when someone was on the schedule to arrive home, back from their earthly tour, then she most assuredly knew about it. She herself prepared the daily arrivals schedule, complete with precise measurements of time, all based on information that came straight from the Authoritarians, which, of course, came straight through from the King himself. Many details had to be worked out as adjustments and changes happened all the

time. It surely was a living schedule and a lively job—one she found quite satisfying most of the time. This particular moment, however, was one of the odd and unusual awkward times. She had even admitted it.

Megalos breathed in heavily and let his heavy shoulders slump in concert with the exhale. That was Aivy's cue—he's considering her proposal. She touched his lower arm gently, which was now hanging lazily by his side. "She's gonna be okay. I promise."

'She' was Pipiera, a most adored, officially adopted, great-times-a-few-granddaughter to Megalos. More than that, they were friends. Dear friends. Aivy had just talked Megalos into concurring with a plan, one that required Pipiera to leave the safety of the Kingdom for a mission where she could integrate as an earthling into the daily life of another descendant and future head gatekeeper for the Kingdom, Matthew Mackenzie. Oh, she could never be harmed—well, not truly harmed—because she was a Kingdom citizen, of course. She could, however, be quite traumatized by the process. Earth was a tough place more often than not, and even the slightest of visits can cause lasting damage. Megalos shivered at the thought of his Pip going back for a mission.

He reiterated Pipiera's role as he understood it. "All she's gotta do is *influence* Matthew."

"I would say, *inspire*, but yes, Megs, that's it!" Aivy held her head and hands high like it was a simple cheesecake kinda job.

"What if she fails? What if Matthew doesn't take the bait? What if he can't, in turn, influence Arnie Decker? And what if Arnie, in turn, doesn't, in fact, become the light and strength for that whole community? What then? It sounds like a long

shot to me. A strange girl coming into town, just showing up like that."

"We'll take care of the details, I promise you," Aivy's head cocked to one side. That was her empathic pose. She knew just how much Megalos would concern himself the entire time Pipiera would be away. But Megalos wasn't fully convinced, and she could see he was starting to walk back, away from the plan.

"What if he recognizes her?! Have you even thought about that? This won't be her first visit. Don't play the fool with me, Aivy. You know he's *already seen* her!"

"He won't recognize her. Most likely, anyway." Aivy felt the heat coming directly from his face to the top of her head. "Look, he may find her *familiar*. But he won't recognize her. That's simply not possible. Besides, we are counting on that familiarity. We need Matthew to let her into his life, and fast. We only have two months. And having a *familiar* attraction is helpful."

"Two months?" Somehow that part of the plan had been skipped in its presentation.

This time it was Aivy who needed to take a step back. She breathed in and exhaled, too, with her own shoulders slumped, her face turned upward to his.

"No." He continued, "I'll agree. I already said it. But one week max."

"Megalos. You're being impossible. Whip up. Five weeks." Aivy pushed her head high. She was in negotiating mode now.

Megalos didn't like this. A few more quibbles, then the two shook hands and agreed on exactly twenty-one days, though Megalos knew full well the length of time would be precisely what was required, not a day more, not a day less. Their agreement was truly pointless.

Megalos stepped up to the single window and took in the sweeping view of the grand horizon. So magnificent. The real purpose, though, for his peek was simply to check on the activities around his gate. He smiled. Roly, his number-one assistant, was managing the Arrivals and their processing just fine. He thought of another question before Aivy could slip away. "How, for goodness' sake, will you even convince Pip to take an assignment, anyway?" He chuckled, thinking that'd be the showstopper. The Interventions Desk has been inviting her involvement for the past five years, to which Pipiera denied any and all interest in the opportunities.

"Oh, I've got a little plan for that." Aivy was back to her chirpy little self, practically singing the words. "I've already set my idea in motion."

"Huh?" It was most definitely a cross tone. "You already moved forward? Without my concurrence?"

Aivy knew she'd have to respond fast and get out of there. "Unofficially, of course. I simply let some information leak—like, err, Jophiel's possible premature return."

Megalos was astonished at this tidbit of information. Aivy had broken a rule. The arrivals schedule is never to be shared with Kingdom citizens until it is authorized for such. "Aivy, have you lost your mind?"

Aivy twisted her body about and pursed her lips. "It had a purpose. And…I think it worked. You see, I leaked to Serena. *And…,"* Eyebrows arched high, she checked his face, presuming he would know where she was going with this. "Well, you know Serena and Alexien and Pipiera were all out there in the waiting area moments ago." She pointed out Megalos's window toward the picnic tables. "And look! Now, only Alexien is there."

A horrified wash fell over his face. "I almost forgot!" Megalos exclaimed. "Isn't Maggie arriving today? Now, in fact? Huh! She's been waiting for this moment for so very long. I can guarantee she won't be going anywhere, not when her mother is about to arrive."

A sly look came over Aivy's face; she stepped aside so he could have a look-see out the window himself. "Well, Megs, she wouldn't miss that moment for anything, *unless,* of course…,"

"Unless, of course, she's slipping away to help her friend Jophiel." He sighed. "You got me."

As Aivy bounced her way out the door and down the staircase leading to the Kingdom's Outer Courtyard, Megalos called out one last instruction, "At least get her on the train route. You know how badly her trip in the travel tunnel went the last time!"

CHAPTER THREE
A Fallen Stranger

In the Town of Havensight, May 1980

PIPIERA REGARDED FOUR walls, examining each, one at a time. Yellow-gold paint. Oddly shaped shadows cast from a glass sphere hanging above her. A single window positioned high, a mere few inches from the ceiling, and a fully-armed, green plastic chair beneath. Double-paneled blackout curtains. An oversized armoire for her sparse belongings. She would spend an entire summer here in Havensight and this room would be home base.

She sniffed the air. Something stale and water-logged lingered. She flicked a switch; not much light. She rubbed a curtain panel between her fingers; flower prints would have been nicer. A loud, hollow bang echoed from somewhere inside a wall; cold air whistled and blew fiercely from a vent into the already-chilled room.

"Get settled." Her voice was as commanding as it was sarcastic, though no one was around to hear. "Just how does one

get settled?" She tossed her peach fedora hat onto the bed. She followed next, jumping onto the perfectly dressed mattress and settling into a cross-legged position, deciding to review Serena's instructions once again. *Get it right. Do not deviate*, echoed in her head. *Rules, rules, rules. Yeah, yeah, yeah.*

A soft knock tapped on the door as it cracked open enough for the landlady to peek inside.

"May I come in?" Mrs. Damien said as she slipped into the room anyway. "Are we getting settled?"

Pipiera smiled at the tall lady with the humpback and expectant expression.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Oh, so wonderful to have you. I'm not used to another female in the house. I've only one son, so if there's anything you need, anything I've forgotten, do tell."

"Thank you, Mrs. Damien."

It was too early; Pipiera didn't know what she might need. She caught the gleeful curve on Mrs. Damien's lips turn upside down as her eyes stopped abruptly at Pipiera's feet, all packaged up tightly inside shiny new three-inch-platform shoes. Though fashionable, according to Serena anyway, Pipiera wondered if it was their mucky residue on the bedspread that Mrs. Damien didn't like.

"Um," the lady spoke quietly. "We usually don't allow exterior footwear on our beds."

"Oh!" Pipiera jumped off the bed. "I'm so sorry; I'm not used to wearing shoes…er, I just forgot. Silly me." She hoped her blushing didn't give her away. Was that even possible, that someone might catch on that she had simply injected into an Earth form temporarily? A fraud, some might even think.

"It's okay, dear, not to worry." She paused before adding,

"Now you know. Supper is at five, but there's plenty of time before that to show you around the kitchen. Just make your way up." Then away she went.

"Show me around the kitchen? Whatever for?" Pipiera wondered what room and board really meant. Was she not supposed to have her meals made? Might she have to make her own, or worse, *theirs?* She plopped onto the bed again, mud-caked shoes included. "Serena! I need more details! And why am I in a basement?"

The door propped open again. "Did you say something?" Mrs. Damien hadn't gone far and now here she was again in the room with a disheartened look on her face. *She really doesn't want my shoes on the bed.* Pipiera jumped up again, "I'm sorry."

The discouraged Mrs. Damien mumbled that her son, Emerson, would be home later and he would be happy to show her around town. "I think you two will get along just fine," she snapped, vacating the room, leaving a slightly unpleasant odor behind while closing the door with an abrupt shut.

Oh, fiddle ducks. Pipiera flopped onto the bed once again. She freed her toes from the harsh shoes that suddenly weren't feeling so lovely, only heavy like cement blocks weighing her down. She pulled out the oversized Kingdom manual Serena had camouflaged as a hard-covered textbook entitled *Eldercare* and opened it up. Leafing past the "Mission" and "Helpful Hints" sections, she went straight to the largest part of the book: "Rules - Read and Report Daily." One bullet point midway down the page stuck out in particular: "Be kind and polite—do not stir up any negative emotions unless absolutely necessary to complete the mission."

Well, off to a good start. Not!

She flipped over to the mission checklist. Spotting a pencil on the floor underneath the armoire, she thought of a better idea. *Hmmm, what would I like to do now that I am here?* She pinched herself and giggled her way out of a bad mood. "I've wondered my whole life what I missed. Now's my chance. Adding a few things of my own surely won't do any harm."

Pipiera had indeed had her chance at an earthly tour more than several decades ago. It was brief, very brief. She had passed away at only a few weeks old. To have this chance, to be on a mission as a human for an entire summer—what an amazing opportunity! She scribbled furiously.

"Ride a bicycle." *A definite list item. Run into the watery waves that melt into the sandy shore. Yes!* "Jump waves." *I wonder what it's like to sit in a classroom. I bet much different from the hall of awareness in the Kingdom. I should visit a forest, talk to the trees, the flowers, the birds.* "Forest walk." *That ought to be lovely.* She sighed at her next thought. *At last, long last, to spend time with my Earth-father.* "Father." Now, that one was already on her mission list. In fact, there were many rules surrounding the expected time she would spend with Charles, what she could say and more about what she couldn't reveal: notably, who she, herself, really was. *Another rule.* She got busy creating a long list of things she wanted to do, figuring the summer would not only fly by but would be so much fun.

Pipiera kept coming back to Jophiel. "Best of all, I plan to tease the dickens out of you, in your little Joppha form! Now *that* is gonna be so amazing." Her head fell backward, plopping into and displacing an assortment of crocheted pillows.

She remembered the first time she met him. Jophiel. A majestic height well over twice hers, at least; his powerful wingspan impressive beyond measure. Eyes like blue sapphire,

and that crooked grin. She even loved the remembrance of his scolding and jabbing. And now, Jophiel had taken on the challenge, from Kingdom escort to the most treacherous of all: an earthly humankind tour. As much as Pipiera knew, Jophiel was the sole reason for her visit, an unsanctioned mission as it was. *Curious and stubborn I bet he is, even as a youngster.* She chuckled at the naming upon his earthly birth, Joppha, though the precarious scenario of the present triggered a sigh. They would cut his fate determination short unless she could change something. As to what that was, she hadn't a clue; she believed she had all summer to figure that out. She had to admit to herself that her admiration for Jophiel was great. Otherwise, how could she possibly let herself be talked out of being present at her own mother's arrival? Heaven forbid.

"Forgive me, Mother! But I promise, you *will* understand," she whispered upward.

CHAPTER FOUR
Joppha's Gate

JOPPHA SAT UP tall, eager and anxious. His neck arched to see out the backseat window. The driver, his favorite babysitter and best uncle ever, pulled the old Impala toward the curb, angled in, and slid it back. The car ticked, clacked, then gave a huge, chugging exhaust. Joppha giggled. "Sounds like it farted."

"Just for you, buddy," Matthew chortled.

"Nice work, dude," Emerson, also in the car, chimed in. He was truly impressed with his best friend's parallel parking job.

Matthew smirked at Emerson and, while at it, looked back and winked at a wide-eyed Joppha.

"That's it. That's the bus station, Jopphie. *The* gate to the world."

Joppha had never been out of Havensight in the entire six years of his life. The small camping tourist town was his entire world. His favorite outing was to the pebbly beach west

of town, where, with the careful guidance of his parents, he would jump the waves.

His fists pressed firmly into the ripped foam padding of the back seat, his little arms straightened to hold him up so he could get a real good look. Mouth gaped open, he scanned the long, wide building and its centered, revolving doors, people coming and going carrying suitcases of all colors and sizes. He blinked a couple more times before returning the gaze that his 'Uncle' Matty cast upon him. "Can we go in?" he asked, with a voice an even higher pitch than normal.

Given their age difference, Joppha's father, Arnie Decker, insisted his son refer to Matthew as uncle. Since Joppha's birth, Matthew had, in fact, become part of the family and using the uncle label provided a simpler reference than *'your stepsister's brother.'* Fewer questions.

"Like, look at everyone else. They're just walkin' in. No guard or anythin'." Joppha exclaimed. It surprised him that there was nothing to stop all those people from entering. "Why ain't there no gatekeeper?" he asked.

Emerson and Matthew caught each other's eyes and shared some silent chuckles. It was just another 'J.S.'—a Joppha saying, when he says something bizarre, yet sometimes perfectly logical. Though sometimes a handful, and sometimes his super-sensitive nature drove them around the bend, Joppha could always make the boys smile.

Emerson turned to face the backseat, where Joppha was fully absorbed with the goings-on. "Now, why would the bus station need a gatekeeper, Jopphie?"

Joppha mumbled a response, annoyed with the supposed near-grownups in the front seats of the car. "A new world

should be clean," he announced with a six-year-old's sense of knowing.

Matthew smiled, "Right, buddy." Matthew knew just how serious Joppha was about his own logic and respected the little guy's infectious imagination. "So, uh, Jopphie. Is it *safe* for us to go in?"

Joppha pulled out a couple of plastic toy soldiers from his pocket. With one in each hand, it appeared a tête-à-tête was called for in order to decide. Joppha lifted his head and nodded. "Yeah, it's okay, they're gonna watch out for the enemy; we just gotta be careful." He added a fierce whisper of caution, "Don't think it's a joke."

Emerson cracked into a laughing rage and play-punched Matthew on his forearm, "Ooh, be careful, Matty, boogey-man's gonna getcha."

Joppha tucked the two soldiers in his pocket and crossed him arms. He didn't like Emerson much.

"So, let's go." Lifting the mood, Matthew reached both arms over to tickle Joppha's sides, shaking him into a roaring giggle. "You and Emerson get out here. I'll boogie to the parking lot and meet you inside. Laura's bus isn't due for another fifteen, anyway."

"Yeah, bud, we'll sneak past the guards and check out the surroundings!" Emerson teased some more.

Joppha shook his head. *You guys know nothin'.*

The threesome was there to pick up the woman Matthew often referred to as the love of his life—to be—one day: Miss Laura, Havensight's summer school dance teacher, only child of longtime residents, Mr. and Mrs. Bing, admirer of Matthew since grade eleven, and now in the ten-percent club of Havensight's population to have earned or be actively working on a

university diploma. An unofficial club, of course, as no one ever really counted. Laura had completed the final exam of her first year just that morning and would at this very moment likely be rounding the bend following an arduous, five-hour, two-transfer tour home.

Emerson and Joppha headed toward the building. Joppha insisted on being alone in one of the revolving door wings. Waiting patiently, Emerson agreed and let three people with large suitcases pass through first.

"Okay, go now," he urged Joppha.

It didn't take much urging, Joppha jumped in, huge grin included. That is, until the door jammed for no apparent reason.

Panicked, Joppha glared back at Emerson, who was still outside. "I can't breathe! There's no air in here." The palm of his hands flattened against the door, attempting to push the door back the way he came in. "Get me out, get me out." His little fists pounded on the glass.

Emerson could see the redness literally rise from young Joppha's neck up to the top of his head, till a blush was visible even through those boyish blonde curls. He did his best to stifle and cover up a laugh, but the more Joppha was terror-stricken, the more Emerson cracked up.

A high-pitched, airy sound caught the attention of Emerson and several bystanders, followed by an official-looking guy in a dark-blue suit, gold buttons and a cap. Pulling a whistle out of his mouth, he motioned for all to stand back as he forced the stuck door to release and revolve once again.

Once free of the door, Joppha took a run for it. Embarrassed, yes, but mostly angry at Emerson Damien. *Some friend he is. I'm telling Uncle Matty.* Like a captive escaping his captor, he ran.

It was a long, wide hall filled with rows of grey metal waiting room chairs, ticket counters, and big television monitors bolted up high. The super-shiny floor was slippery, but Joppha kept running. He passed crowds, bumped into people, even pushed some kids out of his way.

Ducking inside a book retailer, Joppha dove behind a tall magazine rack, its looming shadow providing much-needed refuge. *Emerson, you nincompoop,* he silently accused his attacker, and he felt his heart thump like the beat of a trap drum. Fast. Bouncy. Repetitive.

A glimmer of light fell from the ceiling, spotlighting a magazine and grabbing the boy's attention. The warm, inviting photo on the cover depicted a forest of odd yet strangely familiar super-tall trees with gnarly roots amidst a soft blanket of petite and colorful flowers. Each trunk and branch creatively ornamental, full of truly artful twists. All branches curved and wound inward toward each other, forming a canopy ceiling for a single happy picnicker sitting below it. Silver birds perched upon nearly every branch, camouflaged aside white flowering buds, their beaks tucked inside their wings as if they knew someone were watching, memorizing the view. Joppha was truly amazed. He had seen that place before, been there, he was sure of it. *I know that place. I know it!* He couldn't read the headline, only a few words: *heaven…back…testa-something*. Joppha grabbed the magazine off the shelf, rolled it up and tucked it as best he could into his left suspender, then pulled his sweater vest over top. He had never, ever taken anything that wasn't his, but this was different. He needed to have that photo. It somehow made his very existence feel unconditionally safe. That need for an assured feeling had been festering and growing over the past six months. The battle his toy

soldiers fought daily to protect him was never-ending. The enemy was no joke to Joppha.

The precious magazine would become to Joppha a hidden gem, a scroll he would guard as though his life depended on it. He looked around cautiously, as though the entire world—well, at least all the people in the bus station—would now be after him. "C'mon, let's go," he whispered to his precious package before slinking out of the store and farther on down the hall. He would find a new place to hide and keep away from Emerson till Uncle Matty would come and save him.

CHAPTER FIVE
Joppha Goes MIA

MATTHEW ARRIVED INSIDE the bus terminal to find a panicked Emerson and no Joppha.

"It's not my fault, I swear!" Emerson grabbed Matthew's forearms and shook him silly. It was quite the greeting. "Ya gotta believe me."

"Whattaya mean? Where's Jopphie?" The swoosh of the revolving door behind him continued aggressively. It didn't take Matthew more than a few seconds to realize Joppha had taken off, bolted to hide and be alone somewhere. He often did that. *Oh, I knew I shouldn't have brought him.* "You need all eyes on that kid; you know that, Em!" Matthew's voice cracked. He had a bad feeling.

Joppha was super-smart, super-mature, and supersensitive. Moments like this took Matthew's mind back to images of Emerson's taunting in their high school days. He, himself, had endured the cruelty of being mocked by Emerson. In fact, 'my worst enemy' would have been how Matthew described him back then.

Emerson still liked to mock and make fun, and poking fun remained, to some degree, part of the friendship between the two. But Emerson could not seem to recognize that there is a time and place when these are not okay. Matthew knew instantly that this was the reason Joppha bolted again. It was becoming an annoying habit.

"You made sport of him again, didn't you? You know the little guy is going through a rough time," Matthew snapped while he struggled with an inability to think. *Don't panic. Stay calm.*

Shifting his weight, Emerson pursed his lips, obviously thinking about what to say, what reasoning could make sense. He managed a mumbled response: "Sorry, bud. The little dude is, like, so *touchy.*"

"C'mon," Matthew grabbed his friend's right forearm, almost lifting him off his feet. "Let's go find him."

Now technically young adults, Matthew and Emerson understood and accepted each other's many quirks. Emerson lived with and kept his mother company—who, in Matthew's view, was far too much in his face about everything.

Subconsciously, Matthew patted his front right jeans pocket before sprinting. *It's still there.* The ring. What Laura would call a pre-engagement ring. It was all the rage these days: to snag a girl and reserve her as the one you'll likely marry years later. Laura had been hinting when she left for university that she just *might* move to a bigger city, and *that* scared Matthew. *This is not how my day was supposed to go.* He was supposed to be securing his future, not chasing an emotionally charged kid around a busy bus depot.

"Which way did he go?" Matthew looked right and left and then right again. Long hallways in each direction. No

sight of Joppha. "Jopphie, c'mon, where'd you go?" Matthew muttered aloud. Then he pointed to the terminal's Information Desk, and the pair darted over.

After sharing the news of a misplaced young boy and describing his height, hair color and clothing, the clerk urgently picked up a walkie-talkie to call security, though loud shouts down the hall caught everyone's attention. A round, overweight man with arms waving hollered, "Stop that thieving kid." A crowd of onlookers, although intrigued with the excitement, made no response to the repeated plea. In fact, travelers stepped aside to let the so-called thief—just a young boy—get by. Furious, the shopkeeper hollered even louder and pointed to the boy who had by now reached the furthermost exit, the gateway to the bus platform where only paid passengers could go. Once the boy could no longer be seen, the shopkeeper threw his upheld arms downward and let out an enormous and resigning, "Hummpfff, where's security when you need 'em?" before returning to his racks of books and magazines.

The clerk, annoyed, put down the walkie-talkie, "That yer kid?"

"Jopphie?" *No, Jopphie's no thief. Confused, maybe. Overly sensitive, yeah. Too smart for his own britches, for sure. But thief? No way.* The pieces didn't add up.

This time it was Emerson who did the yanking. He wrapped Matthew's left forearm with his own hands and pulled hard. "Out there. We need to get him. Before he gets on a bus or somethin'. C'mon, Matt."

Emerson and Matthew rushed toward the gate, Emerson leading the way, till Matthew caught up to take charge. Both out of breath, they were stopped from entering, the heel of a burly man's hand stretched out firmly to block them said it all.

"Nuh-uh. Need yer tickets." The deep, monotonous voice of the large ticket collector suggested he was both stubborn and bored.

"No…you don't…our boy…is in there," Matthew managed between breaths, while Emerson nodded, pointing toward the platform.

The ticket collector raised his eyebrows. Two boys—neither appearing old enough to be a parent—both claiming *their* boy was somehow on the passenger platform, expecting him to simply let them by with no ticket? He chuckled. "Now I've heard everything. Move aside." He waved them off and proceeded to collect the tickets from other folks. As three buses were leaving in the next ten minutes, a considerable crowd was forming around the gate, approaching with a polite yet distinct form of pushiness, their offensively hefty suitcases in serious play.

"A boy, Joppha, I'm responsible for him—he just got through here, not even two minutes ago. We need to get him!" Matthew pleaded to whoever would listen.

"Call security," the ticket collector yelped to the crowd's satisfaction and nodded toward a pay phone across the hall.

"Aw, forget it," Emerson announced loudly. Matthew caught his friend's wink and stepped away as if to head toward the pay phone as directed. Desperate to get through the crowds and over the turnstile, their boyish play, instinctive to both, was in action.

Emerson whipped around and crouched over, grabbing his intestines and forcing some hurling motions. A definite crowd disperser, and it worked.

Perfect.

Matthew had only seconds for his part, but mere seconds

were all he needed. He had an open space thanks to Emerson's intense distraction, and he had a target: a twenty-nine-inch, three-pronged turnstile. He readied himself, a tiny grin emerging thanks to the challenge and the adrenaline. A swift step one, then a second on his toes, he dug low into his heel and swung his arms from behind to a front block for a vertical jump. The transfer of energy took him up and over the turnstile to reach his goal: the other side, the bus platform. He scrambled up and off quickly to begin his search for Joppha. Truly, the boy couldn't have gone far.

When the ticket collector grabbed Emerson's forearm, Emerson smirked and reveled in sarcasm. "Maybe *you* should call security."

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