

The Wish

by
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and
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Forward:

It is not often that the CSU Authors get a suggestion from one of our readers that produces something like what you are about to read. We usually get ideas and suggestions for characters or small plot-lines that become integrated into the larger stories. This is, in fact, the first time we've had an idea from a reader that has spawned a stand-alone 'CSU Short Story! MittensCatt came to me with an idea that, after a bit of working around and smoothing out, has led to the following. The characters involved may well turn up in the future in the main stories... but that, of course, will be "another story" to tell.

So, please welcome MittensCatt to the CSU Group, and please sit back in enjoy his story....

Iluvantir

Time: Three years before Saint Mikey rescued Joel Short from the Hell Universe.

Location: Somewhere Else...

The ripple that passed through the air seemed to shatter and expand throughout the universe. Such was the power released that it woke the being that had slumbered for ages uncounted.

He recognized the pattern, not because it was familiar, but because of its foreign qualities. In this universe, no other being would feel the alien presence, or understand how out of place the boy would be. He, however, could feel that the presence did not truly belong, but he was not sure where it had actually come from.

The ten-year-old boy who was the source of the disturbance opened his eyes in the new place he had suddenly found himself in, and began the logical process of defining his surroundings: trying to understand the simple questions of 'who', 'what', 'where', and 'why' he was there.

"Joel."

Without being startled, the boy looked back at the corner of the abandoned hotel room. He saw that the corner, which had been empty only moments before, was now occupied by a chair. The chair was little more than a tiny wooden stool with a simple hand carved design. Even the most untrained eye would have admired the simple craftsmanship of the tiny thing... if it had been unoccupied, that is. Instead it held an elderly-looking man whose age could not, it seemed, be defined. Joel studied the man's white beard and contradicting youthful hands. In those hands, a wooden pipe was held, and the man puffed out a sweet-smelling cloud of smoke as he looked right back at Joel.

Knowing that the man knew his name, Joel came to the logical conclusion that the 'old man' must know other things about him. Things that he himself could not remember, for some reason.

"Do I know you?" asked Joel as he continued his assessment of his surroundings. It seemed that his full and complete attention he was giving to this man did little to distract him from also forming the logical functions of gaining his bearings. Neither did it prevent him from formulating lists of priorities that had to be checked and referenced to create a solution to his current problems at hand.

One assessment was the conclusion that this was not a normal human function.

Another was the understanding that he had already answered his own question; he did not know the man who was sitting quietly in the corner of the room.

The old man – or wizard it seemed, for he was dressed in a thick blue robe and a pointy brimmed hat – raised his head and lifted one eyebrow with a look of mild curiosity. "Fascinating," he said. "Let me answer your next logical question by saying that you do not belong here." As the smoke from the straight wooden pipe raised and curled into fanciful shapes and colours, the old man raised his unoccupied hand in a stopping motion, "Wait, I haven't finished yet. You see, unlike other beings of power, I don't want to leave you with cryptic answers that seem to explain everything and yet nothing. I won't hold the puzzle to the universe over your head – I have no reason to sooth your conscience while keeping secrets just out of your reach."

Joel, of course, picked up on the obvious truth behind the statement and offered, "If that wasn't a cryptic answer to a logical question, then you seem to be speaking the wrong form of the English language. Communication requires clear explanations in order to form an adequate summary to such inquiries."

Grinning, the old man amusedly returned the vocal joust. "Young master Joel, if you might give me some room to formalize the answers you require, I will try to be as clear and complete in all the information you would want to know. But for the moment, I can easily say that you have not yet asked the logical question that was destined to pass through your lips. Logically, you should have simply asked who I was. Having many names that I have been known by over the time of my existence, any answer I could simply give you would be incomplete."

The two occupants of the dusty abandoned hotel room stared at each other, one of them processing information with intelligence and speed of inhuman quality, the other waiting and watching with inhuman patience. Joel calculated the odds of this situation being a game of sorts. Redirecting many forms of attention to his surroundings, he listed and prioritized situational dangers and possibilities. He formulated questions that had a seven percent chance or better of being relevant to this situation, and some that would simply satisfy a need of curiosity. "Complete or incomplete though the answer may be, the value of an identity justifies the query of who you happen to be, for the moment."

Many similar beings, if not all other similar creatures, would begin to get angry with such an insolent child. The skills and patience of this unusual man did not bring forth a wrath or anger toward the young boy, but instead it caused him to take a moment to muse on the idea that he could play the 'give and take' game endlessly. It would entertain him to great lengths. "Good. You understand that you will not need to ask the simple logical questions before you get the simple and logical non-answer. So, for now you can think of me as Paladin, and you as Joel."

"You are who you say you are, and then you are more?" Joel asked.

"True."

"More information is logically expected. You have justified the required answer. Now which one of us is being rude? I have come to the conclusion that you are something of power and importance and I am lacking the understanding of due courtesy."

"Is it rude to make someone laugh; is it wrong to be amused?"

"I don't know. I don't understand what laughter is; it is beyond me to be amused." Still processing information and reassessing his situation, Joel let loose all his attention, and he prioritized all his understanding into one single conclusion, "Beyond the name 'Joel' I do not even know who I am."

The old man jumped to his feet and pointed a finger into the air in gesture of a grand explanation. In a loud voice he said, "AH HAH! There's the rub!"

Having powers of observation being so quick, Joel processed the antics of this crazy person into an answer that was the next logical conclusion. He said, "I am Joel. I am who you say I am, yet I am more. This is a cryptic answer, and it is also clear and complete. It fills the requirements of the query, but can be evaluated in depth far deeper than the simple truth."

"You learn quickly, my young pupil. This is the classic example of why some answers must remain cryptic and seemingly incomplete, because the question is in itself infinite."

Joel now understood the relevant conundrum – crux of the issue. He asked, "Does it even matter if the question is asked or answered simply if it cannot explain the complete truth?"

"Of course it matters. There would be no reason to exist if there were no questions to our existence."

"So the answers have travelled in a circle to where they must begin again. Since it matters to ask, it is logical to question who you are."

"Would it be acceptable for me to answer the question of who you are first?" Paladin asked instead.

"I was attempting to understand why you said that I do not belong here. I concluded that since I was already here, the reason for being here was similar to the reason that you are here also. It would be logical to believe that since you belong here, the answer would not be foreign to the existence of the person who did belong in this place. If I understood who or what you were, I would be able to establish a reason for who or what I am."

"Very well then, I will give you a simple answer first, but then you will be afraid of me," Paladin responded. "Please, my young friend; do not fear me because I cannot and will not harm you. You will not be happy with my answer."

"I seem to have a lack of knowledge of what 'happiness' is. It seems to be as strange of a word as 'laughter' and 'amusement'. Why should I be 'afraid' of you? How would telling me more about you make me feel frightened?"

"Because, Joel, I might be your enemy. I could be your enemy. For as long as you are here, you cannot truly be where you belong."

Joel blinked a couple times while he thought about the answer, "Logically I do not belong here, you will not harm me. This leads me to believe that you are not my enemy. So what are you, if you are not my enemy? And where do I belong?"

Paladin moved in front of the boy, his blue robes swished with all the force of gravity and friction. It created a grand swirl as he turned to pace back and forth across the room. Puffing on his pipe and stroking his long white beard with his free hand, the old wizard started to explain. "You are foreign to everything in existence. You have no relevant association to this or any world that ever has been, or ever will be. Simply, Joel, you do not belong. You have no memory here, yet all the memory you have ever had is what creates and defines you, thus... since your only memories are of 'here', you exist here and now." The man stops and turns to face Joel, "You must go back. You must belong."

"I see it in your eyes. I am familiar with fear, and shame, and pain. I see it in your eyes," Joel whimpered as he began to shake. His body betrayed his logical mind and tears crept down his cheeks. He sat back on the bed and leaned against the wall, then he grabbed his knees and pulled them into his arms. "I don't want to go back."

The old man fell to his knees before the child, "Then don't go back. You made a wish and it came true. Today is the fourteenth of February. It is a day of joy and love. This is your birthday... in this place. You are an emissary of..." He stopped mid sentence. The old wizard looked down at the floor in horror as he covered his mouth to stop him saying the wrong thing.

Joel whispered aloud words that his mind processed in disconnected thoughts, "A wish, A world, emissary, I exist, but I do not belong. I belong where I do not exist?"

Paladin's voice shook with uncertainty, not because he was lying or unsure of his thoughts, but because his voice was breaking in sorrow, "You exist, Joel. You have never left. You have been broken and shattered many times in your life. Each time you have pulled yourself together to become whole... but at this time, it is a moment where you have arrived here. A broken piece of your own self. You are an amazing and wonderful child. Everything a person could wish for. You made it happen with a wish."

Joel looked at the broken down old man. Paladin's pipe lay behind him, still smoking on the floor - forgotten. The old wizard's face looked withered in pain and the age of uncounted centuries. "Old man, you are holding back and speaking in riddles. Cryptic answers that only create new questions. You have been leading me toward the questions and the answers you have been expecting me to follow blindly. Why are you doing this, and what is in it for you?" The frail old man seemed to look down and study the ground, so Joel continued. "You are a creature unlike many, with powers above most or all. You undoubtedly know the answers, whether or not they are asked. Logically it is not that you cannot tell me: it is that you *will* not tell me everything."

"True," Paladin said, but did not look up.

"Then what is the reason for your existence if it is in your abilities to know, yet you are not going to share that knowledge?"

"I do not want to be your enemy, but there is a question I do not know."

"If there is a question that you do not know, why don't you ask?"

The old man looked up at the boy, and Joel watched the ancient mask of doubt melt off of Paladin's skin like magic. "If I ask, even if only to myself, then I will know the answer. This is a power of an Immortal. Of the many creatures not unlike myself, I am the most powerful, and I am afraid."

"Every problem has a solution. No solution can be known if the problem is not understood. To understand a problem, you must ask the question of what it is," Joel tilted his head as his attentions brought an observation to the surface of this thoughts, "I am here because I made a wish, yet I am afraid to go back. However, you are afraid that I *have* to go back. Why are you here?"

"For the same reason that you are here. I have made a wish."

"What was your wish?"

"You wished to be here, and I also wished for you to be here."

"Again there is a logical question that can be asked, but is the answer infinite or quantifiable?"

"You want to know why I made a wish?"

"Yes."

"I am The Immortal. One of two Guardians, in this existence I won. The other lost."

Joel smiled, "Cryptic as anything can be."

"I am ensuring that you will follow the explanation."

"I am listening."

"The other would be my brother, where in another place, and another time, he did not lose to me."

Joel nodded silently.

"Long ago I won and became the only one, I share my existence with none other like myself."

"There is no one else like you, you are the only one, and you are powerful?" Joel asked.

"The most powerful in existence as I know it."

"Who knows this?"

"Both of us, you and I."

"You are lonely."

"True."

"There is more."

Paladin smiled, "You are paying attention."

"I don't have plans for anything else at the moment," Joel grinned.

Rolling his eyes, the old man continued, "A long time ago, a very long time, moments after creation, I had a disagreement with my brother. I acted in haste and banished him into the nether. You might think of that place as a non-existence between worlds where he no longer has a physical form, but do not worry. He still exists and performs his tasks as an Immortal should. Even I cannot kill a Guardian."

"Then why would you banish him?"

As the man moved to sit on the bed, Joel crawled over to sit in his lap. The old man gathered the boy in a comfortable embrace and continued his story as if he were not interrupted. "Since I had won, I gained the freedom to alter and make changes to existence as I saw fit. So I did. You see, I am a Guardian. I am the Master and Commander of every existence. I am the Lord of Dimension. I built this existence; you might think of it as a version of all versions. The ultimate work. I did it. I did it all."

"I am not sure I understand, but I think you are talking about alternate realities. Paths of existence that are possible?"

"Yes. I have done it. Completed my work. I created every path and possibility that can or will ever happen. In another place, me and my brother, Forever, still exist together, but I did not win. The Guardians in different Realms, it seems, struggle for domination. There, where you are meant to be, the other 'me' is locked away and banished from making the changes as he thought he should be able to. He is angry and vengeful, and full of hate and bitterness. I saw the result as it would happen, it was not the result I desired. Vengeance, hate, and revenge. These are not good qualities. Quite the other way around."

"You banished your brother to escape from being locked away, or being banished yourself?"

"I knew you would understand. You are a brilliant boy."

"So how did you make so many changes? Did you travel back in time and alter the future?"

"AH! That is exactly the kind of question I would expect from you. Perfectly expressed. You instantly define the difference between my brother and myself. I have the power to control the patterns of a dimension, but very little influence upon the flow of time itself. Unlike my brother who can go back and fix a moment in time, I had to change only the outcome of a future. Imagine it like the butterfly effect where if you go back and change the smallest aspect of the past the differences in the future change more dramatically as time moves on. I had free rein to change the smallest things bright and early in the infancy of the universe. I was able to force a breeze that changed the direction of the first butterfly in every direction in every dimension, so the slightest changes took place. Every possible change in every possible dimension."

"What would have happened if you had not banished your brother?"

"We might have tripped over each other for all eternity, effecting change and changing it back so that nothing ever happened, or maybe we would have been able to agree on everything and had the perfect universe. One direct line of chance where only a utopia existed all the time everywhere."

"So you say you have done it and created every possibility. Logically you must have created the utopia in one of your dimensions."

"Oh, I'm sure I have, but wouldn't you know it, I don't know which one it would be! It could be the one where everyone is a platypus, or the one where everyone only eats a certain kind of fish. Maybe it is the one where everyone is a werewolf and only have fun at night, and don't remember anything the next day."

"But, you're so nice. I mean I can feel it in your heart. You know about love, and you have sorrow and pain in your eyes. I feel it, you are sharing it with me. You would never hurt me, would you?"

"Joel, you are my wish, an equivalent love. You are my reward for all the things I've ever done. I love you, and I know you can love me. This is your truest nature. I cannot describe how thankful I am that you are in my arms."

"Why are you so old? I feel a youth inside you. It's kind of dull and lethargic, like a wet sponge. You're not really old, you're just denying your youth. You refuse to remember it."

"It's not my fault, really. This is the form you gave me."

"Me?"

"You're running out of questions to ask, so now you're just picking on me."

The boy bolted forward and twisted his head to look into the old man's eyes. "I am not!" he whined as only a ten year old boy knew how.

"Ok, Ok, you win. I kind of picked this image from your mind so you would not be afraid of me, but it is still your projection that made me into this form. You did the same for yourself, because you exist in the image you see in your own self. You have never seen your true form, so you are lacking the physical traits that you should have. I recognize some elvish qualities that you see in yourself, and believe me when I say it is quite cute, but you don't see the true picture, because you haven't ever seen it before."

"Elvish? I'm an elf?"

"No, No! You are not related in the slightest to any of the Faye folk, or fairies. Even in this world we are on now, they do not exist; although I can remind you that it might have been a possibility. The reason why I tell you that you look Elven to me is because I think you would be less offended than if I said you looked like an alien."

"Like big bug eyes and egg shaped head, with pasty grey skin? I suppose I *would* rather look like I belonged in a tree-shaped factory baking cookies all day!"

"I quite agree," nodded the wizard.

Leaning back and wondering how he could remember so much and yet almost nothing, Joel continued to talk of things his mind raced through. He knew he was almost ignoring the real situation or what he could do to solve the problem he was having. "So I'm in the company of the most powerful magical entity in all the universe. What else can you do? Do you have to look like an old fart, or can you look any younger?"

Paladin knew when he was being teased, so he started to poke and tickle the little rascal till he was having fits on the floor laughing and panting heavily.

Joel could see the glint of joy reflecting in Paladin's eyes. And found he understood what it was like to be amused. Just as quickly his smile faded. "Paladin, I have to go back. I don't remember anything before today. I am not familiar with these feelings of happiness and love. I know these words, and recognize their alien qualities. You are lending me your magic so I can see and feel these things. I won't remember anything when I go back."

Paladin had left the child on the ground to get up when he recovered. The question only proved that Joel's mind was working on several different levels. He lent the boy a little bit of his power so that they could understand each other better, but not enough to encourage Joel to be something he was not.

"Joel, in this universe, all things are possible, it only matters what path you choose to take. All paths are available, until you have made your choice."

"Oh... so that is the rub."

"Yes, you see the truth."

"You gave a cryptic answer again. You tried to lead me to think everything would be fine."

"Yes, it's important to know you have a choice. Here, and now. You can follow me, stay with me, until it is time to go home. Or you can leave now. I promise you won't remember anything about me, so there will be no lasting effect on your future. But, but, um, I have to tell you the truth about choosing to stay."

Tears rolled down the old man's cheeks once more.

His hair suddenly changed and darkened. His height shrunk and his eyes changed from misty grey to dark blue. His robes reformed into clothes fit for a young almost teen boy. Solid blue large tee-shirt almost stretching past matching blue oversized shorts. Matching blue trainers, and athletic socks with the same solid blue stripe around the top nearest the calf. His knees were very white as if they had almost never seen the sun. His hair was so dark it almost reflected blue, and it matched Joel's own overgrown mop.

"Wow, Paladin, that was cool! You changed to look just like me almost. Well, I guess you look like my older brother, but I don't have an older brother!" Joel bubbled with awe.

The 'old man' felt a slight breeze brush over his knobby knees, and He began to shake. He gasped with a surprised look on his face, "Joel! What did you do?"

"That's weird, for someone with phenomenal cosmic powers, you sure look surprised when you make something cool happen."

"I didn't do it! I didn't finish telling you, but I can't do these things any more!"

"But you said you were the most powerful entity in all creation! Who else would be able to do this to you?"

"I *was* the most powerful. I *could* do anything, but you see, I already have done it. It's all been done. There are no more changes that need or can be changed. For every event I changed or controlled I lost a little of the control or power to make a difference. Without my brother to counteract all the things I ever did I wasn't able to regain the power. I had the ability to make infinite changes and do anything I ever wanted to do, but now that I have done it all, that's all there is." Paladin covered his face with his now just pre-teen hands and started to cry.

"Ok, I think I understand, but then how did you get all young again?" Joel asked, his head tilted to one side.

"It was my wish, my stupid wish, and now it's all wrong! I wanted you to know the truth and everything, 'cause that was the only way you would believe me. Now it's all messed up, and you're going to hate me!"

Paladin began to cry harder. Joel tried to comfort the poor boy but it only seemed to make it worse.

"Go away, Joel! I'm just bad, I guess I know the answer to the question I was afraid to ask. So you have to leave, you can't stay with me any more! I screw everything up!"

"How did you mess it all up? I thought you said that it was a matter of choice and everything was possible?"

"I'm a bad person, Joel! I won, and I beat my brother, and I was the only one left. It all became my responsibility, it all became my fault. Everything bad is my fault, and I can't do anything right!"

"Stop it, Paladin, you have to stop because if you did make a mistake, you can't fix it if you're crying! Besides, I don't know how to leave! I don't know where to go."

Paladin seemed to sober up a bit, but he had a nasty case of hiccups that he couldn't seem to get rid of. The fact that he was mortal came to him with the understanding that he couldn't control the snot that seemed to be dribbling out of his nose. The use of his forearm seemed to only smear it around his face while he felt helpless not knowing what to do.

Joel turned and ran to the abandoned rest-room and brought back old dusty tissue paper from the left-over roll. Shaking off the dust as he walked back over to his new friend, he handed the undusted lump of toilet paper to Paladin.

"Thank you," squealed the former old-timer in his breaking near-teen voice.

"Tell me, Paladin; what exactly did you wish for?"

"A pbpbpbttthother," the ex-wizard replied while attempting to clear the mucus out of his nose.

"Errr, what?"

"A brother, OK!! I wished for a brother! I knew mine would wait at least an eternity before ever forgiving me, so I wished I had a brother, because I was so alone!"

Never before had Joel's mind ever failed to correctly fire off his synaptic charges or understand a completely understandable sentence. "What did you say?"

"OK, I KNOW I'M DUMB TO WANT A BROTHER!" Paladin lowered his voice back down to a whisper, "I know, it was stupid and when I realized I was going to get my wish. I was excited, and then I saw who it was and I was disappointed, and then I thought how it could work, but then I knew you would get hurt, and then, I am so sorry, Joel, I'm mortal now, I can't even send you home again, and you're stuck with a loser brother like me."

"So, you're my brother now?"

"Yeah, I'm your stupid older brother who makes a mess of everything."

"I've never had a brother before..." Joel mused, a slight smile growing on his face. Then, "Maybe you can still fix this, or help me do what ever I need to do to get back home? Even if you're just my big brother, you can still help me, even a little, cause that's what a big brother would do!"

"OH, why didn't I think of that?! See how mortal I am now, I don't even know all the answers anymore. I mean, I still know a lot of stuff, and I can help you with a lot of things. I even know that we got to get going home before it gets dark because our Mom and Dad will get mad if we don't make it before dinner!"

"Errr, what?" Again Joel's formidable brain power seem to get stuck on a simple idea that should have normally been obvious to just about anyone else.

"Oh, goodness, I'm messing things up again! I mean Mom's name is Rachel, and Dad's name is Bill. Mom married Dad, so their last name is Martin, but we just call them Mom and Dad, so you don't even have to know their names. Your name is Lonnie, Joel, and our last name is Dagget, and why you still staring at me, we got to go home! It's your birthday, and it's almost noon, and you're gonna get presents and we get to eat cake!" The older boy stopped to catch his breath for a moment and began to start all over again.

Joel stopped him. "Wait, stop, Paladin! Are you telling me I got a Mom and Dad, like - for real?"

"Of course, I just told you! Oh, but I'm not Paladin, well, I'm still me, and it was one of my names, but I'm not called Paladin, I'm Billy! It was supposed to be Bill, but Dad is Bill, and our real Dad is Lonnie - like you - but He doesn't really come around any more, and Dad is really Dad even though he is our step Dad, he still cares about us and we call him Dad anyway, and..."

"Wait, um, Billy, it's Ok. You can explain on the way home. We aren't going anywhere till you show me how to get there, though."

"Oh, yeah! You see how mortal I am? I'm acting like a kid... well, I guess I am one, now."

They both left the Motel and started on a two-hour walk toward a home that Joel had never seen before.

Billy excitedly told his new brother of all the things they would do together, and how much he was going to make it wonderful. He ran out breath several times chatting away and apologized profusely for all the silly mortal things he was finding himself being surprised about.

Joel just listened and walked beside his brother, mildly hoping that everything would turn out OK... but mostly, he enjoyed the feeling he now had - he was with his big brother.

For the next five years, they grew up together. Every now and then they would laugh about the day they met. They seemed to stay as close as any two brothers ever could have been.

On the day that Billy graduated high school, he happily accepted the diploma and walked off the stage smiling.

He suddenly felt his blue graduation gown become bulkier, and then his hat shifted slightly on his head. As he reached up toward his pointy brimmed hat, his hand got caught in his long white beard.

He understood what was happening because he asked himself the question. "I'm Immortal again," was his answer.

Joel, who had become a good-looking fifteen-year-old version of his older brother, was once again the ten-year-old boy he had originally been. Their Mom and their Dad were frozen in time, along with all the rest of the parents, friends and relatives of the graduating class of 2002.

Joel walked up to the old wizard, and said with a smile, "You're Paladin again. I think I know the answer, but I'll ask anyway. What happens now?"

"I've been forgiven. I've been a good brother, and my real brother has come back to... to thwart my plans... maybe..." Paladin smiled down at the small boy.

"You mean you will be undoing each other's work until the end of eternity?"

"Yes, it will be a great adventure! Except for one little detail."

Joel raised his eyebrow in curiosity, "Oh? What will that be?"

"I will miss you," Paladin said sadly.

Joel felt the tears running down his cheeks and hugged his big brother. "I hope I find a big brother just like you waiting for me in the place I truly belong."

"Oh, Joel, I hope that you do find a big brother waiting for you! I really, really hope you do..."

A ripple shook all existence, and Joel faded from Paladin's arms.

Paladin found that he was once again sitting on the old wooden chair that was hand made many sizes to small for his formidable frame. He looked around at that very same hotel room where he had first met Joel.

A knock on the door caused him to get up and opened it. "I have missed you," Paladin said with true sorrow to a being who seemed very much like himself.

The other looked quizzically at Paladin. "Who are you?" and just as quickly he had his answer. He said aloud, "You are my brother." Then he began to look around, and look down upon himself.

This new brother noticed that he was dressed in the same fashion as the man who seemed to be waiting for him. Matching white beards, and pointy brimmed hats, but the heavy robes that covered his form were completely without colour. If he had known any better, he would have said that they were white. Rainbows of colour danced just under the surface of the material, as if they were threatening to stain the outer layer. This was what kept his the cloth from having a translucent quality, so that they could not be seen through.

Of course the next logical question for this person standing in the doorway was, "Who am I?"

Instantly, the newcomer wondered why it was that when he had asked his first question, he already knew the answer - but when he asked the next question, his mind drew a blank. How could he know so much, and then know almost nothing at all?

Paladin felt a shiver of remembrance, "We are brothers, you and I. Immortal Guardians of all existence." He pointed at the other and then himself, "You are Forever, and I am Dimension; we are just like our Other selves, from that place where my brother, I mean where Joel belongs."

"Why do you think that?" his brother asked.

"Because... because..." Paladin started, yet stopped as another presence filled his senses. Both of them began to look nervous. Whatever this was, it was more powerful than anything they had ever experienced.

In their mind they felt the presence of a very powerful pure white Being formed of light, looming over both brothers like an adult over two children.

"Who...?" both brothers started to ask.

//I am Forever, and the Guardian of it//

The other looked at Paladin, "I thought you said I was Forever!"

"I thought you were," Paladin shrugged helplessly.

"Who am I, then?" the brother of Paladin asked.

//You are you. You have yet to find a name. Your brother has found many. Paladin has discovered them. You never have//

Paladin looked up toward the Presence, "Are you from that other realm?"

//No// the Guardian answered, //I am Forever. I am Everywhere and Everywhen. I am Nowhere and Nowhen. There is no place that I am not//

"I... ah... what?" Paladin's thinking seemed to grind to a halt. His Universe, his Reality – he knew it well. And now that his brother was back, he had power to think, feel and experience it all again... yet this Being before them... the power was a level of magnitude so far beyond Paladin's own that his mind seemed to reel back from it. "I'm... we're not Guardians?" he asked almost as if it were a statement, pointing at himself and his brother.

//You are not// The Guardian stated clearly. //There are only two. There is myself and my brother. There are no others//

Paladin blinked, "I thought we were the Guardians of this Realm and you were Guardians of the other!"

//No. I am Guardian of all//

The two Immortals felt their bodies shape and change without their control, and then they were both young, childlike and youthful copies of each other. Their dark hair and midnight blue eyes were mirrors to the other. Paladin of course was wearing all blue, and his brother was dressed in all white with hints of different colors teasing the surface of the white cloth. They found themselves floating as they stood in a void where nothing else existed but a single wooden hand crafted chair.

Paladin looked around quickly, "What has happened? The Universe! All the possibilities!"

//What should not have been, is now no more. You and your brother will be together. What began shall begin again//

They looked up at the Guardian, "What do you mean?"

//When you first began, you fought. I did not interfere, instead I waited. One half overcame the other. The victor became incomplete. The winner had lost and was broken. One brother was alone and wished it were not so//

//I sent my Sa'ren to heal what was wounded. To mend what was torn apart//

"You sent Joel to save me from myself," said the boy in blue, "To heal."

"To show you what a brother is like," said the one in white. "To teach."

"To learn," they both said together.

//To know the power of a brother's love, and to share that love of my Sa'ren with the other//

//Now you are ready to begin again//

"To begin what??" Paladin trembled.

//To begin as you should have. To guide this place. To prove yourselves worthy of more//

//Enjoy. Play. Grow//

//Teach each other and love one another//

//Together you will protect the life Our Father shall plant here//

The young brother dressed in blue felt his knees shake. He grabbed the small hand carved chair that was now almost large enough to match his smaller form. "This existence, it was not Reality, it was just a model? I thought it was an alternate, I thought it was real?"

//What you knew was real. Now it is finished. What you remember is real; yet what was, is now no more//

Paladin laughed, "Cryptic. The riddle of truth, but not complete." A single tear showed how he missed Joel, the only brother he really knew. "There are more realms than I can see? More than here and there, where you were... are... umm...?"

His brother was patient and watched, waiting to understand.

//There are many Universes, and they exist in two distinct types. One type Open, linked. The other Hidden, separate. Such is this place that you and your brother share... your own universe. It is Hidden. You can see this place and no other Hidden Realm... but you can see one other Universe. The other you see is the Core of Creation... Alpha Prime. Neither of you can see the other type, the Open Universes. Neither can you go anywhere but here. My wish was not to be if you had been able//

Paladin remained silent as his brother asked, "So there are many more? How many?"

//Many. A number too great even for you// The Guardian answered. **//This place is for you. This place may be Hidden, yet it is no less real than any other//**

The Guardian of Forever's voice seemed to turn its focus on the young child in white as if it were explaining something just to Paladin's brother. His voice was still easily heard by the other. This did not go unnoticed by the boy who wore blue. **//Your brother believed that he was a reflection of my own brother. Misguided, he believed himself to be like Vae'Za; like a Guardian. He had simply recognized in himself much of what once drove Vae'Za. However...//**

The focus of The Guardian's attention changed and turned. **//However, unlike Vae'Za, Paladin does not hate nor destroy. He was Proudful like My brother, but he is not evil//**

"I got so angry, we could not agree on anything, I saw the other me... No. No, I saw how the other Guardian was trapped. My brother could have banished me, so I was afraid, and angry. I changed it before he could..." He gasped and gripped at his seat.

"You made a mistake," his brother stated flatly.

"I made a mistake, and many since," Paladin agreed, and then he thought of something else, "I lied to Joel... I lied to my little brother."

//No//

"I was wrong, I did not tell him the truth. He chose to be my brother based on a lie!"

//You did not know. You did not lie. He had been broken and shattered. You were there for him. In time he will find his true brothers, in a little while. You have given him the strength that he needed for his last moment of his dreadful race. Even with that, he will not know. He will not remember you... not until... well, maybe not then. All you can do is remember him//

"Can you not help him now?" Paladin's brother asked.

//No//

//What is to be will be. There is no option but to let it be so. Sa'ren's Destiny is to great for me to interfere with//

Paladin stiffened for a moment. "WHY? You are so strong and powerful! How can you let him suffer? How can you let him hurt? I know he's in pain, I felt it even as I first found him. I... I.. I almost choked... and then it was gone. Now he's back there. He's lost and alone? WHY DON'T YOU DO SOMETHING!"

//It is against Mandate. Regardless of how I feel, it must be//

Paladin thought for a moment, then wiped his eyes carefully. "With all that I know I can do, I feel helpless. I can't imagine how you feel." He then looked up, fighting with doubt. He felt responsible for Joel, but he understood. "You said something about 'your wish'. What wish, Guardian?"

A new wave of feelings passed over the brothers. It covered them both, and they felt warmed by it.

//My wish was YOU. Both of you, and the Father allowed//

The boy in white cocked his head to the side just a little, and he asked slowly, "And we are... what, exactly?"

The brothers could see him surround them. A great bright light that seemed to take form before their eyes. They more than felt him as he gathered them within his arms.

//My children// his strong voice resounded, **//You are my children//**

After what seemed like an eternity, Paladin pulled back from his father's arms, "Will we ever see Joel again?"

The brothers felt something... Somewhere between joy and regret, and then it was gone without a moment passing.

//Even I cannot foresee the outcome. Maybe my brother will win, maybe he will not. Do not trust to hope. Love must do as Love has always done. Hope is fleeting, yet it does remain//

//You may indeed meet my Sa'ren again, if Destiny allows//

And so the brother's hugged their dad again, while the Universe around them burst forth into life anew, with brilliant light flying everywhere.. and with hope.

Both brothers started laughing together. A contagious stream of mirth that passed back and forth from one to the other.

//Go, children. Go and play in this new beginning you have been given//</strong&>

As they head off towards their new beginning one of them said, "What's my name again?"

"Dufus!" replied the eternal child dressed in blue.

"NO! You're Dufus!"

"Nuh huh! You are!"

"Noooo... you are!"

//Boys; behave or I will send you each to your own Galaxy//

"Yes Dad!" they both said, **"Sorry!"**

The End

End Notes:

I've just read Sa'ren Book 2 Chapter 3.

Jason is way upset, I'd be afraid to be on a starship the he is on, he needs to vent bad, I'm sure I would be afraid of a breach, 'Ay-chee double toothpicks!' I think he's gonna split it down the middle, and turn it into ashes. That's not good news for the crew, better get them into the life pods and call for General order 13 all hands evacuation. (maybe I'm being paranoid)

Iluvantir, I think you made it onto the Evil Authors most wanted list with that chapter. Especially after little Kevin's dirty kung fu fighting with Juan.

Poor Joel, good thing he's the good guy, and the Hero of the story. That means he's gonna be Ok. I'll cross my fingers that everything works out well in the end.

Thanks to the Evil Author Iluvantir, with the ideas he came up with, and giving me enough room to make it mine, I was able to match up a lot of the plot from the beginning of my story, so I could use it again in the ending. Together we were able to bond the two ideas together and I have a stronger richer story out of it.

Together we solved the WIFM (Whats In it For Me) between Paladin and Sa'ren, and worked out a good reason for why they both needed each other.

Thank you for letting me share. and Thank you for letting me hang out with the great story tellers of the Clan Short stories.

Mittens.

Archivist Notes:

As the owner of the character 'Joel Short', and as the primary developer of 'The Guardian of Forever' and the 'Order of the Guardians', it was my privilege to work with Mittens on this short story. He gave me his completed idea and asked if it was 'right or not'. Mostly, it was. Some fine tuning in places. However, I saw a chance to do more than just have a stand alone CSU Short-story that was off happening with little to no links with the rest of the stories. With my idea accepted and ran with, Mittens smoothed both together into this wonderful, thought provoking tale, and then passed back to me. Again, I smoothed over the Guardian and Joel (although, not much was needed. Mittens has Joel down very well, especially the 'shattered piece version' that appears in this story).

What the outcome of this tale will be... well, that will be revealed in "Sa'ren" itself. But I don't think we've seen the last of Paladin, his 'White-brother'... nor that curious wooden chair that remained at the end... or was it the beginning?

Keep watching, my children, as we continue to spin the tale of the Legend of Sa'ren...

Iluvantir

Author of "Sa'ren", Silver Dragon, Gallifrey and Vampire