

I—ACROSS THE STARS

CHAMONIX, FRANCE — 8 MARCH 2161 CE

The old clock kept immaculate time. At precisely seven o'clock, a jolly little bird popped out from an alcove under the gabled roof of a carved wooden house and chirped seven times. The clock's pendulum, painted with a folksy rendition of a dusky brown cuckoo, swung back and forth with military precision—each tick counting off the seconds that had slipped away since Matt Ravel's father had taken his last breath.

Reeling from the loss, Matt made his way to the window and pushed back a set of thick blackout curtains. Black, like his mood, they framed the swift-flowing water of the Arve as it surged past his condo. His thoughts raced along with the milky-green current, tumbling over a riverbed of memories polished by the years gone by.

It was on the banks of the Arve that he and his twin sister, Maddy, first learned to fish. Brown trout—agile and sleek—fell victim to their primitive poles that Papa had cut from sturdy willow saplings. Hours would pass, with Matt and Maddy sitting by their father's side. Shaded by the drooping boughs of the willows, Papa taught them to cast upstream and let their lures drift with the current until a sharp tug announced the arrival of their quarry.

A smile tugged at Matt's lips at the memory of his French father, fingers gently curled around his mother's hand, translating the names of the trees that lined the shores of Lac des Gaillands. *Bouleau...birch. Aulne...alder. Épinette...spruce.* While he and Maddy sang out the words with perfect pronunciation, his mother's very English Canadian tongue would trip over the foreign words, and Papa would laugh and kiss his wife on the cheek.

"Mom and Papa... they were always so happy." Matt turned away and let the blackout curtains fall.

Elise Laurent stood and carefully arranged her white linen skirt. She ran a hand through her dark brown hair, patting its lustrous waves into place while her little son, Charles-Antoine, sat on the floor immersed in an interactive story cube. She reached out to Matt and pulled him into her arms, but instead of finding a release of emotions, her fiancé remained as hard as a steel rod.

"If I'd known earlier, I would've flown home right away," Matt said. "I'm a doctor. I could've gotten him the latest treatment that would've saved his life. He didn't have to die. He didn't."

Matt pushed Elise away and threw himself onto the couch with such violence that the room shook.

From the floor, Charles-Antoine looked up at Matt with confusion in his eyes. Even the child could sense his pain, and without a word, he climbed onto the sofa and settled himself in Matt's lap.

"Mama tells me," he began in his high-pitched childish voice, "that when someone dies, they become an angel. I think your papa is looking down on us now."

"I think so too," Elise said, caressing her son's cheek as she sat down next to Matt. Pouring herself a glass of Pétrus from her father's costly collection, Elise swirled the rich, ruby-red wine before taking a sip. She put down the glass and laid a hand on Matt's thigh. "But you cannot blame yourself. Your father did not want you to worry. That is why he kept everything a secret, and your mother..."

“Should’ve told me the minute she found out,” Matt finished abruptly.

“It was his request,” she replied in the gentle tone she used to soothe Charles-Antoine’s little scrapes and cuts. “And you have to respect that.”

Matt hunched on the sofa, his tall frame curling into a ball. He thought of the lazy days of summer when Papa brought the family back to Chamonix. He and Mom would leave Matt and Maddy with their grandparents while they hiked in the shadow of the majestic Mont Blanc. Matt would sit under the towering pines, Papi whittling away on a willow wand and Mémé fussing over plates of savoury cheeses, cured hams, and crusty bread, while Maddy braided chains of flowers.

Those were magical days. Together with his sister, he had hiked through dark spruce forests and across alpine pastures and meadows, and in the evening, he would listen to his grandparents’ stories of their youth, when they were both champion downhill skiers. So bewitched was he by the charm of the pretty alpine town that he had taken a position as a traumatologist at the Hôpital de Chamonix.

Over the child’s head, Matt turned to Elise. His grey eyes sparkled with unshed tears. “Papa only turned sixty a few months ago. He wasn’t ready to die.”

Out from its little alcove popped the plucky cuckoo to signal that another hour had slipped by. Elise glanced at the clock, then at Charles-Antoine, who had fallen asleep in Matt’s lap. “It’s getting late,” she said, the expectation on her face telling him she wanted to stay the night. Instead, he gathered the little boy in his arms and rose from the sofa.

Matt shifted the sleepy bundle and, walking to the threshold, held the door open for Elise. “Let me see you to your vehicle.”

It was a short ride from his fourth-floor condo down the GlideLift, and although its floor-to-ceiling glass walls offered a panoramic view of the stunning alpine landscape, Matt saw none of it. His mind was filled with midnight darkness, a black pool of ice water that was pulling him down into its depths. A retreat into this vast pit of gloom was all he desired, so he started in surprise when the door zipped open and the early evening sunbeams streamed cheerfully through the condominium’s main entrance.

Elise’s sleek white aeropod, docked only a few steps away from the complex, jumped to life at their approach. Its doors swivelled upwards and retracted smoothly as its hoverfans purred, primed for takeoff. Matt’s mind was a thousand kilometres away as she settled Charles-Antoine in his seat, then slid in beside the little boy.

“Call me if you need anything, Mathieu,” she said, adjusting her skirt primly about her legs. He flinched at the use of his French name, so reminiscent of his father’s fondness for formality. For a moment, Elise was silent. She cupped her chin in her hand, then raised her eyes to Matt. “But you must not forget the meeting with Papa tomorrow. He has an exciting proposition for you.”

He barely nodded, feigning an interest he did not feel, as the vehicle lifted into the air. For a fleeting instant, it hovered above him, Elise’s hand raised in a wave he did not see. His gaze had already turned inward, away from the sun-kissed evening with its happy tourists ambling along the ancient cobblestone streets. Ignoring the open doors of the GlideLift, Matt took the stairs two at a time, retreating to the darkened rooms of his spartan home.

Alone now, he sat in the living room, eyeing the half-consumed bottle of wine. An emptiness filled him, gripped him in a stranglehold, and with a groan he raised the bottle to his lips and drained it to its last drop. Five thousand global credits’ worth of wine did nothing to fill the void inside him. Matt

slammed the bottle down on the table when a sudden tingling sensation at the base of his skull grabbed his attention.

No larger than a grain of rice, a neural implant had been embedded behind Matt's left ear on his first day of school. Though too young to grasp how the interface worked, he had quickly understood its power. He didn't need to know that it read subtle electrical impulses and converted them into digital signals capable of travelling across the global neural network. What mattered was that he could summon information or reach out to someone who lived half a world away—even as far as North America, where his mother and sister lived.

"Damn! I thought I disabled my implant," Matt grumbled, before remembering the override function he'd programmed for his family. Settling back on the sofa, he closed his eyes and allowed the prickling sensation to grow in intensity until Maddy's thoughts pulsed into his mind.

«Matt, Mom's picked a date for Dad's celebration of life. You think you can make it for Saturday?»

«I'm not living in Vancouver like you, where I can hop on a cross-continental hyperloop at the drop of a hat,» he countered, wanting to remain cocooned within his shield of darkness.

«C'mon, Matt. You know there's always space reserved on the Sub-Atlantic VacRail system for compassionate travel.»

Matt sighed and raked a hand through his hair. «I know...» His voice faltered, and he swallowed the lump in his throat that threatened to choke him. «I'll put in for a few weeks of compassionate leave. It's not like we're overly busy. Ski season's over, and the hikers won't show up for a while yet.»

He chewed his lip at the thought of the upcoming trip back home. Winters had become shorter and milder since his parents moved to the resort region of Collingwood, on the shores of Georgian Bay. A smile crossed his face at the memory of his father griping about the skiing at Blue Mountain, although Matt knew that less and less snow now fell on the legendary Grands Montets and surrounding alpine slopes as well. With rising temperatures curtailing the ski season year after year, Matt wondered for a moment if Charles-Antoine would be able to ski at all.

«Mom told me you're blaming yourself.» Maddy's blunt statement brought him back to reality. «And you really shouldn't. There wasn't anything you could do. Dad kept it to himself almost right up to the end. By then, there was no hope.»

Matt's shoulders rose and fell, and he clenched his fists. «So everyone keeps telling me.» There was a deep sadness in his thoughts, undercut by a blazing anger that struck him in waves. «I spoke with Tante Maryse today.»

A momentary gap in the neural network signalled Maddy's surprise. «You think she'll want to come too? Remember the last time she crossed the Atlantic? She swore never again.»

From his experience, Matt knew that death could either bring a family together or rip it apart. «Zip me the deets, and I'll share them with her.»

An impression of deep, searing pain radiated over the neural network, slamming into him like the avalanches that had killed so many innocent vacationers over the years. Every tear, every tremble, every sob of his sister's was conveyed to him.

«I miss Papa so much, Matt. I can't believe I'll never see him again.»

«Or watch him hitch up his pants for the thousandth time because he won't buy anything new.»

«Trop cher... always too expensive! And how about how Papa takes off his reading glasses whenever we walk into the room?»

«Mom says he doesn't want to admit he's getting older,» Matt continued with a chuckle that faded into silence, bonding the twins—neither wanting to leave the comfort of the other's thoughts.

After what seemed both an eternity and a split second, Maddy said, «I'll leave you to it then. Safe travels.»

«Thanks, Maddy.»

«And Matt? I love you.»

«Love you too.»

Matt barely managed to send this last thought through before the connection broke. He got to his feet and padded into the bedroom just as the cuckoo burst out with nine cheery tweets.

Making a mental note to put the bird into hibernation mode, Matt threw a few T-shirts and sweatpants into a duffel bag before rummaging through his closet for a dark suit, a white shirt, and a pair of dress shoes. Packing completed, he sat on the edge of his bed and pinged the neural network.

«Bureau du Chef du Département de Traumatologie.» It was a familiar thought-imprint, but not the one that Matt had accessed.

«Julien, this is Mathieu Ravanel. I need to speak with Dr. Sophie Moreau.»

«Je suis désolé, mais...»

In frustration, Matt gritted his teeth. «No *désolé*. I get that she's at home with her family, but this won't wait,» he insisted. «Mon père est décédé. Stage Four cancer. You understand? I need Dr. Moreau's approval to return home for my father's funeral.»

«Ah... mes condoléances, mon ami. Un moment, s'il vous plaît.»

While waiting for Julien to transfer him, Matt bounced his knee impatiently. His nerves were frayed; he needed action. Just then, an image zipped directly into his visual cortex. Matt quickly scanned it as Sophie's thoughts pulsed into his brain.

«Mathieu, I am so very sorry to hear about your father. I had Julien prepare your documentation. If you need more time to be with your family back in Canada, just ask.»

Matt took a moment to review the scanned document before nodding. «I'll contact Lucas Bernard in Sallanches and ask him to cover for me.»

«No need. You go, Mathieu. I will take care of everything.»

Matt stifled a chuckle, knowing this would fall to the already overworked Julien. Still, it was one less thing to cross off his long list, for Matt knew that his father was not one for paperwork—and that a mountain of administration as high as Mont Blanc would be waiting for him.

«But there is one thing, Mathieu, that I would like to clear up,» Sophie insisted. «Why did you not tell me of your father's illness earlier? Even though it was the high season, I would have been amenable to allowing you to travel to his bedside, to be with him during his final hours.»

«It's not like that. I promise you.» How difficult it was to conceal his thoughts from his boss, to keep from her the secrets his mother had so easily hidden from him. Sophie did not need to know about the dysfunction in his family; in fact, he could barely understand his father's decision to maintain a cloak of silence.

«Well,» she continued as the gap in their communication grew uncomfortable, «in any case, you must never put your work before family. It is not healthy—not good for you or Elise. Do you understand?»

«Yes. Of course,» he agreed, and quickly—before Sophie could intrude any further into the realm of confusion that reigned within his mind—he dissolved the connection.

Pulling off his socks, Matt leaned back on the bed, hands intertwined behind his head. Through the transparent wall of his bedroom, he stared out into the night sky, where a waxing crescent moon cast a silvery glow on the Arve's rippling surface. High above the now-empty streets, the brilliant star Arcturus was rising above the eastern horizon, bathing the Bossons Glacier in a ghostly blue light.

"You up there, Papa?" Matt called out to the evening sky. Knowing there would be no answer—not expecting one from the father who was no more—he continued, hoping that the spirit of Joseph Ravel might somehow intercept his words. "Stubborn old man. If you had called me... if you had let me know... maybe I wouldn't be talking to my walls right now. I could've brought you here. We're testing a prototype that might've saved your life. Papa? Can you hear me?"

In the velvet darkness, the stars twinkled and the Arve shimmered in the moonlight. Other than the gurgling of the river as it tumbled over smooth, round stones, there was only silence. *Who am I kidding? Papa's gone... and I'm just wasting my breath.*

Matt made a sweeping gesture at the bedroom wall, and it shimmered before turning opaque. "Long day tomorrow," he muttered. "Better get some sleep."

Ripping the covers off his bed, Matt threw his head onto his pillow and squeezed his eyes shut. Darkness enveloped him in a black shroud. Maybe Papa was an angel now, was the last thought that floated through his mind as Matt drifted off to sleep.