

# EVENT PLANNER

## A Story of the Spiralchain

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### Core

Ervin Jaske was running. Anyone who had ever met Ervin would tell you that this made no logical sense. He was a man of science, a man of principles... and a man that studiously avoided any kind of physical exertion that was not strictly required for survival. And yet here he was, jogging on the long circuit of pathways that encircled Gray's Lake. It was very early in the morning on an unseasonably warm January morning, and he was soaked through with sweat. His allergies were killing him. Allergies that, in any other year, would have been long dormant by this time of year. The heat—the loss of this entire winter, according to the government climatologists—was just one of the unfortunate side effects of the Event. It was an uncommonly clear day, with far less miserable particulate matter in the air, but that didn't actually make it any better. Every fiber of his being was suffused with abject misery.

He wasn't the only one running at this ungodly hour of the morning, but everyone else indulging in the ridiculousness seemed to be at least fundamentally suited to it. While Ervin gasped for air, they moved steadily past him. One young woman, with her dark hair tied up tight at the back of her head, gave him a sort of knowing, almost encouraging, smile.

It wasn't all that encouraging, of course. The only thing that made Ervin feel even remotely good about this was that he was about to have company.

He rounded a particularly lazy curve that brought him past a pair of benches where another prospective jogger was making ready to run. The fellow in question was a short-statured, slender young man of Asian descent. He was wearing a pair of shorts—rather immodest by Ervin's admittedly prudish standards—and a loose-fitting tank top. He started his own jog just as Ervin passed by his bench, and the younger man kept pace with Ervin for a short while.

"You're late," Ervin wheezed.

"Couldn't get my scrambler to work this morning. It's been acting up," the other man said.

"Vince, do I look like the kind of person who can just jog around inconspicuously for an extra twenty minutes?"

Vinson smiled. "You look like the kind of man who could use an extra twenty minutes of jogging. Does that count?"

Ervin grunted. They grew quiet as they passed a woman who had rolled a bright pink yoga mat out on the brittle brown grass and was engaged in some implausible stretches. If there was anything Ervin envisioned himself less capable of than running, it was stretching.

“Sorry, Ervin. I am. But this is a big one, and I didn’t want our high-and-mighty friend listening in,” Vinson said in a low tone.

“What do you know?”

“I was able to do it. I was able to open a micro-breach into the extra-dimensional space.” Vinson’s eyes were wide.

Ervin drew to a sudden, almost skidding, halt. He looked around, panicked. “You weren’t supposed to actually do it! You were just supposed to investigate the possibility!”

“But last night, I finally realized what was missing! I... I got excited and had to test the actuator. It was brief. Just three seconds,” Vinson explained.

Then Ervin saw them. A group of three men were jogging equidistantly from one another on the path. All were fit, and all moved in the same rhythmic cadence. They wore black, and they had those annoying little earplug radios in their ears. They were obviously together, no matter how hard they were trying to look like they weren’t. They were getting close.

“I didn’t tell anyone,” Vinson said, putting one hand on Ervin’s sweat-soaked shoulder. “It’s fine. We’ve been careful – we’ve followed every safety procedure Mr. Candor set up for us. You worry too much.”

Ervin had nothing with him, no weapons or tricks that would get them out of this. And Dr. Lu... Vinson only knew what he needed to know. So that meant he knew next to nothing. For his own good.

He probably didn’t know that those men jogging towards them were agents of their enemy, Sierra Veil. All he knew about her – other than the obvious things that had been all over the news for the past three months – was that she was a wealthy businesswoman that was a rival to Nathaniel Candor. He certainly didn’t know that she also happened to be a mythological dragon hell-bent on controlling the Earth. He also didn’t know that his experiments – experiments that Sierra had spent millions thwarting in every other scientist on the world – were perhaps the key to saving the entire universe. And he didn’t know that they were now absolutely, unavoidably, inescapably doomed.

The first of the men slowed in his jog as he approached the pair, and Ervin braced for the inevitable gunshot. Admittedly, he couldn’t see a gun anywhere on the man, but these were professionals.

The only consolation to all of this was that he was going to die standing instead of jogging. He’d have never been able to rest easy if he died jogging. What would his friends think?

“Dr. Jaske. Dr. Lu. I’m afraid I need you to come with me,” the meat-headed jogger said in a rich baritone growl.

“Excuse me?” Vinson said. He looked twitchy, like he was about to run. Ervin grabbed his arm.

Raising his other hand in a gesture of surrender, Ervin said, “Just do it here. I’m tired, and I’m sweaty, and if I have to die, I’d rather get it over with now.”

Vinson looked at him in horror. Maybe keeping all of those details from the young scientist had been a mistake.

The man smiled as his two compatriots joined them, forming a triangle around their quarries. "You misunderstand, gentlemen. Our employer would like a word with you. She needs your help."

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Sierra Veil looked like a human. Ervin kept telling himself to focus on that. He knew better, of course. He'd never seen her in her true form—thank goodness—but he could imagine. In spite of his intense affection for the measurable and observable aspects of life, he had a rather good imagination.

He sat, still in his stinking jogging clothes, in a plush leather armchair. Vinson sat next to him. A third seat was arrayed on their side of the desk, but it was empty. He imagined that she'd expected to put Nathaniel in that chair, but that wasn't going to happen. She'd had her claws on Ervin's former employer once before, and the man was now taking extreme measures to make sure it did not happen again. He wasn't even in the states these days—not since they'd turned up information that Sierra had been orchestrating excavations in eastern Europe over the past few years. He was out there, getting to the bottom of whatever she was up to. For clear reasons, he wasn't safe in the country. He hadn't been since that day in October when she'd gone on television and... Ervin shuddered. He couldn't bring himself to think about it. Whether the events of the fall were more or less terrifying than the Event of the early winter... it was hard to say. Things were, either way, irretrievably screwed up on this world.

On the far side of the desk, Sierra sat, occluded by shadows. Her long, thin fingers tapped on a rectangular pane of glass she held—a tablet computer of a type Ervin had never seen before.

Since they had been escorted into the room, she hadn't looked up from that tablet. Now—all of twenty minutes later, during which time neither he nor Vinson had been able to muster the courage to speak—she set the tablet on the desk and looked at them.

Her eyes were cold and multi-colored, sort of gold and green and blue all at the same time. They were clearly visible even though morning shadows spilled slats of darkness across her face. It was very dramatic, which he supposed suited everything he knew about this implacable foe of theirs.

"I have been tolerant," Sierra said simply.

"I don't understand what's going on here," Vinson stammered. "Are you— are you who I think you are?"

"The most powerful woman in the world? Yes. And you, Dr. Lu, are the fool inventor that rejected my generous buy-out offer of your little start-up. And then you disappeared off the face of the Earth. Yet here you are, in my old stomping grounds. How... coincidental."

Ervin closed his eyes and asked, "How long have you known we had him here?"

"I confess... not as long as I would like. For the first few months, you were very clever. But you made a mistake. Your kind always does."

Vinson looked at Ervin and whispered, "What does that mean—*your kind*?"

Ervin shook his head. This wasn't the time.

"Secrets don't make friends, Mr. Jaske," Sierra said with the faintest trace of a smile on her lips. "Do you know what your mistake was? What gave away your clever ruse?"

Ervin thought back, but he didn't have to work very hard at it. Everything had changed for the work that he and Nathaniel and Vince were doing on the night of the Event. The meteor. It had been a little over a month now, but its effects would be felt for years. So much damage. So many lives lost.

"We were careful. Ridiculously careful," Ervin asserted.

Sierra looked pointedly at Vinson and said, "Not all of you."

Ervin turned to Vinson and asked, "What did you do?"

"When?"

"The night the meteor hit. What did you do? Oh no. Did you call someone? Did you call someone on the damned telephone?" Ervin asked.

Vinson narrowed his eyes and said, defensively, "My parents knew I was in the Midwest. Was I supposed to just let them worry that I was under that thing when it fell?"

Sierra drummed her neatly manicured fingernails on the desk. That brought both Ervin and Vinson to a quiet pause. She said, "We lost seventeen blocks of the city. You were right to let your poor mother know you were safe. And ever since, I've had my eyes on you. And that led us to your little exercise dates with Dr. Jaske. But, try as we might, we've failed time and again to find Mr. Candor. You've been oh so careful, Ervin. Do you care to share his location with me now? It would make things easier on you all."

Ervin shook his head adamantly. "Why are we here? Why did you bring us in today, if you've been watching us since the Event?"

She stood up. Her height surprised him—she was all of seven feet tall. That wasn't a familiar trait to him—why had no one mentioned it before?

"You," she said, pointing one dagger-sharp finger at Vinson, "did something foolish last night. Had I not been watching you, had I not been prepared for your damnable human hubris, you might have undone everything I have worked so hard to build here."

"Good," Ervin said, surprising himself with his vehemence.

"I am not the enemy. You spent too much time with those children, I see. I am a guardian, whether you and your brethren choose to accept it or not. I am making the world safe for you all. But you try harder and harder every day to kill yourselves in the grandest fashion possible. Some days I wonder why I bother. Yet bother, I do. It's in my nature."

"I do not have one freaking clue what this is all about," Vinson said. "You think my work will destroy the world? Seriously? It's like... is this like a Large Hadron Collider thing? Are you secretly one of those anti-science nut jobs?"

"Science," she hissed. "Hubris. Arrogance. Folly. Pride. Your world has so many words to describe its end. I do not *think* your work will bring Armageddon down on you, Vinson. I *know* it. I have seen it. The fall of your world is burnt into every scrap of my memory, and my sole purpose is to prevent it from happening. Last night, I did so. I did it in the kindest way I could manage—I interfered. The next time you try to turn on your machine, I will not be so kind. If you attempt to test your theory for even one second more, I will kill you and every single person you have ever spoken to in your entire life."

She sat back down and tapped one finger on the tablet in front of her. "I have that list right here."

"What list?" Vinson asked in a quiet voice.

"The list of everyone you have ever spoken to. I am done with subtlety."

"So, you brought us here to threaten us? That seems beneath you. Don't you have bigger things to do these days?" Ervin asked.

Sierra flashed a much more obvious—and disconcerting—smile. "Of course. You are a smart one, Ervin. I need your help. In exchange for your help with a small thing," she looked pointedly at Vinson, "and your promise to abandon your research for good..."

"Never," Vinson said.

Ervin shushed him and said, "What? What will you give us in exchange for those things?"

"I will leave you alone. You can all go back to ordinary lives. Nathaniel can move his family back home and stop cowering in whatever hole he is hiding in. Vinson can return to his company in California—I will even give you the money to start investigating some other line of research. Anything but quantum tunneling. Ervin... whatever you want to get your life back in order, it will be yours. And you'll never be troubled by me again... assuming you keep up your end of the bargain."

"What's the favor?" Ervin asked.

"I'm not giving up my life's work!" Vinson protested.

Ervin looked over at the younger scientist and snapped, "You're twenty-six! Your life is maybe a third of the way over. We'll find something else you're good at." He looked back at Sierra and asked, "The favor?"

“A bit of confession by way of context,” she said softly. “The Event... was not a meteor strike. Surprise.”

Ervin’s eyes grew wide. “What was it then? I tried to get past the security cordon, but you’ve got an obscene number of men patrolling that impact zone.”

“The children appear to have survived their journey to Nur. And, more improbably, they seem to have found a way to reconstitute the destroyed Spiralgate. The meteor was, in fact, the new gate apparatus installing itself at the Army Post Road facility. The facility was not up to the task of surviving the installation... and neither was the surrounding city. I imagine they would be most distraught to know that their good deed did so much damage... cost so many lives. Of course, that is how you humans work, isn’t it? Action without thought of consequence. It might as well be your motto.”

Ervin stared at her, shocked. Of all the things that he had hypothesized were happening behind the layers of security, it had never crossed his mind that the Spiralgate had been restored. Steven and the others had promised to find a way, but... he hadn’t believed them. They’d been gone for so long.

“What the hell is she talking about?” Vince asked.

“Dr. Jaske has a great many things to fill you in on the way to my favor,” Sierra said softly. “But that does bring us to the nature of the favor, doesn’t it?”

“We won’t help you without access to the gate,” Ervin said suddenly, vehemently. It was his life’s work. Even as he was bartering away Vince’s dreams, he had the possibility of grabbing hold of his once more restored. Life – the universe – was a perversely unfair place.

Sierra’s lips twisted up into a deeply ironic sneer. “Oh, that should be no problem at all. That’s actually what I need you to do for me, my good doctors. I want you to get to the bottom of what is happening at the gate. After it crashed down out of the sky, it just sat there like it always did. Then, two days ago, it turned on. Something came through.”

“No,” Ervin gasped. “Not an Obliviate. Not now. Not with the Children of the Line gone.”

Her eyes narrowed into a hard, contemptible expression. “If that were all it was, I would have no need of your assistance, human. This is no simple Epheirm. You’ll see.”

“I don’t know what you think we can do that you can’t,” Ervin said carefully. “But we’ll take your deal.”

“Good, good,” Sierra said. “I’ll have one of my agents drive you over. Then they’ll take you home after you get that little mess cleaned up. And Dr. Lu, when you return home, you’ll find we have already done you the favor of removing that little miniature actuator you had cobbled together. I wouldn’t want you to get tempted to break our arrangement.”

Vinson glared at her, his hands gripping the arms of the chair so hard that his knuckles had turned white. Ervin wanted to tell him that it would be OK, that they would find a way to work around this.

They had to agree to her terms to get what they wanted, but they didn't have to keep their word. Promises like that were for men and women, not for evil dragons with a penchant for torture and a newfound proclivity for politics.

"What do you want us to do when we get to the gate?" Ervin asked.

"Oh, you'll know what I want when you see it. You may not be the perfect person for the task, but you are the most ideal candidate available to me at this time. Go forth and earn your lives back."

She looked away from them, back to her tablet, in a clear sign of dismissal. Ervin stood, and Vinson joined him, still visibly shaking with anger.

"I don't understand you, Sierra," Ervin said shortly as they moved towards the door.

"That won't do at all, Dr. Jaske. We are not friends. You will not call me by that name. I've earned my title... and I think I would like to hear you say it. It won't be as satisfying as hearing Mr. Candor say it, but I've grown accustomed to the little disappointments of this world."

Ervin looked back at her and said, in a voice as even as he could manage, "My apologies. I don't understand you, Madam President."

She inclined her head gently, and the next thing he knew, secret service agents were ushering the two of them to a large black SUV.

Yes, indeed, things had gone horribly wrong on this world. Sierra Veil was the president of the United States, despite having no qualification whatsoever other than wealth and fame. How did that even happen? The answer was simple, of course – she had powers. Many, many powers. But the fact remained that she was now virtually unassailable. It made her even more dangerous than she'd been before... if that was even possible. And now... he was about to do her a favor.

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The clearness of the morning gave way to an overcast day as the gleaming black vehicle trundled through the security checkpoint that cut off Army Post Road as it cut eastward into the Event Zone. For years, Ervin had taken this road to work, and he knew its every bump and imperfection like the back of his own hand. None of that knowledge was in any way congruous with what he now experienced.

Images of the devastation inside the Event Zone had not done the scene justice. The impact of the meteor – no, he corrected himself, the Spiralgate – had triggered a shockwave that struck and blew apart houses and trees with equal fervor. He had seen the disastrous effects of tornados before, and this dwarfed that phenomenon by leaps and bounds.

Vinson was looking out the opposite window of the SUV, and he too looked utterly shocked. The vehicle lurched as it transitioned from the edge of the paved road to the tightly packed gravel trail that Sierra's agents had put down to make it possible for people to move around across the shattered surface as they approached the epicenter.

"How many people lived out here?" Vinson asked in a low voice.

"Hundreds. We're lucky, in a way. This is the least populated part of the city – between the airport and a few farmers out on the city limits who refused to sell, the old Army Post Road installation was mostly surrounded by trees, grass, and concrete. But still... a lot of people lost their lives or their livelihoods out here."

"We're coming up on the site," the driver said.

The SUV came to a halt outside a large green canvas tent. It looked as though they had made enough space in the gravel surface for a half-dozen cars to park, but they were the only one here right now. For midday, that seemed unusual.

The driver unlocked the doors and muttered, "I'm gonna go back up the road a ways. I'll be able to see the front entrance there. If you come out, I'll come down and get you."

"You aren't going to wait here for us?" Vinson asked.

"Nope."

Ervin felt his stomach wrench with anxiety. Inside that tent was the Spiralgate, and he had to see it for himself. "I don't suppose you care to give us any kind of hint about what we're going to run into in there?"

"Nope."

With a sigh, he stepped down out of the vehicle, feeling the loose gravel slip under his running shoes. Vinson quickly joined him, coming around the back of the SUV. The moment they were both clear, the driver took off, wheels spinning.

Ervin fixed his eyes on the heavy flaps that hung at the apparent entrance of the tent. He took one cautious step towards that point, but then Vince grabbed his hand.

"Hey," he whispered, "do you hear something?"

Ervin closed his eyes for a moment and concentrated on the sounds around him. There were few natural sounds, of course – no birds or people were anywhere near this place. But there was something – a faint, keening sound. Steady and high, it sounded a little like wind howling through a small opening, but it was too even and constant to be wind.

"Only one way to find out what's inside," Ervin muttered.

“What’s a Spiralgate?” Vinson asked.

“A... well...” Ervin struggled with what to say. They had been keeping the secret for so long, bringing someone new into the mystery seemed profoundly wrong. But he deserved to know. Ervin had, after all, bargained away Vince’s life’s work in exchange for access to this thing. “A device that opens portals to parallel worlds.”

Vinson hissed, “A what?”

“You heard me,” Ervin said shortly. He continued towards the tent flaps.

“You have a quantum tunneling machine already? Then what’s so dangerous about my experiments?”

“This one only opens to specific places,” Ervin replied. “Apparently, the problem that our enemy wants to avoid is caused by opening a tunnel into other places besides these pre-selected ones.”

That seemed to quiet Vinson – at least for the moment – and Ervin walked up to the flap of the tent and held its thick canvas edge in one hand. He found himself unable to pull it back. Something – some horrible sense of dread – had squeezed its icy fingers around his heart.

“Go on, open it!”

Vince’s words spurred him to action, breaking the momentary spell of fear that had inexplicably come over him. With a deep breath, he pulled the opening apart and stepped inside. Vinson followed immediately behind him.

The interior of the tent was lit by large battery-operated lamps that hung from wires strung between the tent’s support poles. The muted, amber light of those lamps gleamed off of the shining silver hemisphere of banded metal that rested in the center of the tent. Ervin had studied the previous Spiralgate for hundreds and hundreds of hours, and he knew instantly that this new gate was not the same. It was newer, of course, but it was also made differently. Its metal appeared to be of a different composition than the previous apparatus.

He doubted, however, that he would ever get the chance to study this new one in any particular detail.

The reason that the lamps did not more fully illuminate the inside of the tent had nothing to do with the quality of the lamps. The problem was that the air of the tent was full of dozens – maybe even a hundred – of swirling, ephemeral forms. At first, he thought they were Oblivates. He had seen the shadowform that such creatures preferred to assume many times, and they haunted his nightmares on an almost nightly basis.

But these were different. These were man-shaped shadows, and they were not the inky black of an Oblivate. Rather, they were a pale, filmy gray in color. Their legs were imperceptible – their entire body

seemed to fade away as the eye followed down below their waists. They whirled and swirled and thrashed about in the air, each whispering that keening sound that Vinson had first noticed outside.

The shapes were particularly concentrated to the left of the gate. They spun about there so densely that he could not even make out any shapes inside of the mass.

“Are those ghosts?” Vinson asked. “I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“You know, I don’t really either,” Ervin muttered. He wanted to turn and run, but the shades were not making any kind of hostile move towards him. That meant that, perhaps, it was safe to investigate further.

He crept forward, towards that dense mass of ghostly shapes. They slowed and parted in their motions as he approached, and he saw that their mad orbit was indeed occurring around an axis. Resting on her back on the ground beside the Spiralgate was a large, dark form.

It was the shape of Celia Walsh. One of the Children of the Line... one of the young people who Ervin knew had escaped from this world to go forth and stop the forces of evil that ravaged the whole of the universe. What was she doing here? If she had come through the portal recently, as Sierra had said, why had she not reached out to him? They had left several ways for the children to contact them at the old Candor house.

He moved forward and knelt down, placing one hand tentatively on Celia’s shoulder. She was dressed strangely, but otherwise appeared quite normal. Healthy, even. But the moment his hand touched her shoulder, her eyes snapped open.

They were lit from within by the crackling, sparking lightning of an Obliviate.

Celia Walsh was possessed by one of those evil creatures.

“Run!” Ervin said to Vinson, turning and shouting even as he ripped his hand back away from Celia. He wanted to charge out of the tent, to run hard and fast and far from all of this.

But it was too late.

The spirits in the air all around them were suddenly washed in a deep, reddish haze. Their outstretched fingers curled into grasping, slashing claws. Their gentle keening wail blossomed into bloodthirsty, violent screams.

The last thing Ervin saw before they fell upon him was Vinson rushing towards him, trying to pull him away from the horde of ghosts.

Ervin’s final thought was a simple one: He wished he’d run more.