

Madarach's Secret

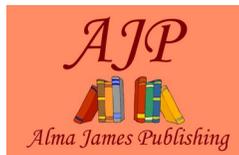


D. J. Mitchell

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*For Ethan with love.
May you follow the dance.*

Prologue

In the beginning there was only blackness. The blackness was all, and it had no opposite. Then the spirit of life moved through the blackness. The blackness felt joy in the spirit of life, and the blackness began to dance. It danced and danced until it rended itself, and light appeared.

Now blackness had an opposite to dance with, and together darkness and light danced the universe into existence. They danced space and matter, push and pull, motion and rest, sound and silence, energy and entropy, until all the framework of the world had been laid in place. And the spirit of life moved through it, for it was the spirit of life that caused the dance.

We can still see the dance of the blackness and light in the rhythm of day and night, in the circles of birth and death, in the melodies of joy and sadness, in the rising and falling of creation and destruction.

The dance between light and darkness is eternal, and we are all part of it.

From "The Song of Creation"
Translated by Benji Haight

Chapter One

Benji Haight was twelve Earth years old, and a gifted young man. He lived on a planet called Parisa with his sister and his adoptive family. He did well in his lessons, and was a good athlete. He could understand new languages quickly and easily. He could communicate telepathically with his sister, Lisa. But his most important gift, at least to his own mind, was his ability to communicate with a spacecraft named Madarach.

He had found Madarach two years before while exploring the land around his new home on Earth. Behind the house had been an ancient well. When Benji looked into the well, stars had appeared, and when he touched the stars, he'd found himself floating in space enclosed in a bubble.

That bubble was a sophisticated spacecraft that communicated with Benji through telepathy. By shifting just outside the fabric of space, it could take him anywhere in the universe very quickly. His first trips to the earth's moon, Saturn, Pluto, Alpha Centuri, and the Horsehead Nebula had astounded him. The Horsehead Nebula was 1,500 light years from Earth, yet he had reached it in a matter of minutes.

Two years later, the novelty of such rapid travel had worn off, but Benji's fascination with space had not. As often

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as possible, he liked to take Madarach on adventures. He enjoyed finding new places to see and new people to visit. He also enjoyed having friends on other planets, and he visited them often. He even had a girlfriend named Aelbreth who lived on a planet called Hadrin.

Today, though, he was visiting one of his favorite places which had no people at all. The planet was known in the Parisian star charts as D429-3, but his sister Lisa had named it Summerland. It had a mild climate, no land-based vertebrates, clean water, and so far as Benji could tell, no threats on land of any kind apart from some poisonous plants.

He didn't dare swim in the water. Madarach had told him that the planet's fish were far more developed than its land creatures, and that some of them were quite large and carnivorous.

Still, it had beaches that had never been walked on by another person. Benji enjoyed walking the soft sand barefoot, watching strange creatures skittering away from him, and listening to the wind and the soft waves at the waterline.

Today, Benji had seen a sea worm three feet long and about an inch in diameter. It had emerged from a burrow at the waterline, twisted its head around quickly in search of food, and receded again when it sensed Benji's presence.

He had also picked up a shell that was bright red in color, unlike anything he had ever seen before.

He had seen a crab with twenty legs, a giant seaweed flower washed up on the beach, and a fish with wings skittering over the waves.

Benji never tired of these discoveries. He was, he thought to himself proudly, an explorer.

Now, though, his legs were tired from walking for miles through soft sand. As he walked, he watched the landmarks

on the land side of the beach. Eventually, he saw what he was looking for, two giant palm trees taller than the rest. He turned away from the beach, crossed the sand, and found the bubble. Because it was transparent, he had to pay close attention to where he parked it. True, Madarach had the ability to come to him if called, but Benji considered it a point of pride to not to lose his spacecraft.

He put his hand on the side of the bubble and felt the surface give. Then he climbed in.

“Madarach?” he thought.

“I’m here,” the bubble replied in his mind.

“I saw some amazing things today,” Benji said. “But I think I’m ready to go home.”

“Parisa?” Madarach asked.

“Yes,” Benji confirmed, aware that he had more than one home these days.

Instantly, the bubble lifted off from the surface and began to rise. Soon it was sliding through the stars at an incredible rate. In a matter of moments, Benji was back on Parisa, six light years from Summerland. He barely noticed the familiar landing place next to an ancient, intricately-carved well. He walked to the street and began to make his way along the now-familiar course home.

Benji had lived on Parisa for the past two years. It boasted an ancient civilization that prided itself on peacefulness and sustainable communities that did not harm the environment. The streets were safe, lined with small houses with gardens in front. They looked like they were made of stone, but Benji had learned that all of their building materials were recycled. The people on Parisa were friendly, and the food was good.

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But what Benji enjoyed most about Parisa was that his gifts did not make him different. Everyone on Parisa communicated telepathically. In fact, most Parisans had given up language, except for singing. Benji's teacher and mentor, a priest named Nahum, still spoke. He learned languages quickly like Benji did. And though Benji couldn't telepath with people other than his sister, he felt that he fit there.

He'd spent his first ten years on Earth. They'd been okay, Benji thought, until his family moved to a small town to escape the city.

Benji's family had gifts. His father sometimes knew things without being told. His mom could sometimes see the future. And Lisa, back in those days, could sometimes read minds.

Their move to the small town coincided with the development of Lisa's gift and Benji's discovery of his own gifts. Some of the people in town sensed these gifts, and they didn't like them. The town's founding family, the Thompsons, had been rooting out "witches" for hundreds of years, and to the Thompsons, Benji's and Lisa's gifts made them witches.

The Thompsons had burned Benji's family's house in the middle of the night. Benji and Lisa, whose bedrooms were on the second floor, only escaped because Madarach was able to come get them. Benji's parents, who slept on the first floor, had gotten out, but not without injuries. Mom had gotten cuts and bruises when Dad had thrown her out a window. Dad had been badly burned, and had spent months in the hospital.

Madarach had taken Benji and Lisa to Parisa, where some friends had adopted the two children as their own. It had taken time for the two kids to adjust to their new life. Now, Parisa seemed more home to Benji than Earth.

Benji missed his parents, of course. He'd been able to see them a few times after the crisis was over. The legal matters had been resolved, and his parents had been able to move somewhere else. Only then had Mom decided it was safe for her children to visit. Mom and Dad had even come to Parisa for a few days. But because they couldn't communicate with other people, they decided they were more comfortable on Earth. Benji and Lisa, who were thriving on Parisa, stayed. Besides, they were safer on Parisa than perhaps anywhere else in the universe.

Now, Benji navigated the streets of Parisa and approached his adopted home. He opened the door and stepped in.

Tamar, Benji's adoptive mother, was cleaning the kitchen when he entered. He walked over to her and put his hand on her arm. Unlike the Parisans, and unlike his sister Lisa, Benji needed contact with another person in order to communicate nonverbally.

"Hi, Umma," he thought.

He had never been comfortable calling her Mom because he already had a mom, but the Parisan word Umma, which carried the same meaning, suited her well. She was, after all, Benji's Parisan mother.

"Benji," Tamar acknowledged. "Did you have fun?"

"I did," Benji replied. "I went to Summerland and walked on the beach."

Tamar nodded.

"Good," she said. "Lisa was asking for you. She and Tobin went to the park. Maybe you'll join them there?"

Benji smiled.

"I would," he said, "but I walked a long way in the sand. My legs are pretty tired."

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Tobin was the first friend Benji had made when he found the portal. It had been Tobin's job to watch the well in case anyone came through it, so he'd been the first Parisian Benji had met. At first, communication had been difficult, since Benji was not yet able to use telepathy. But Lisa had helped, and Tobin had become first a friend, and then a brother.

Tobin was even more to Lisa, who had fallen in love with him almost from the moment they first met.

Tobin's older sister, Miriam, had also come to love her new siblings very much. But from Benji's perspective, Miriam was much older and they had little in common.

"Why don't you take a nap?" Tamar suggested. "I'll have Lisa wake you when she comes home."

"I think I will," Benji agreed.

He made his way down the hall and into the bedroom he shared with Tobin. There, he lay on the bed and closed his eyes. In moments, he was asleep.

Chapter Two

Benji?” said a voice.

Benji opened his eyes and saw Lisa standing over him. It would have to be Lisa, he realized, since Parisans didn’t communicate with language. On the entire planet, only his sister Lisa and his teacher, the old priest Nahum, had the ability to communicate verbally.

“What’s up?” Benji asked, sleepily.

“Did you hear?” Lisa asked him, telepathically. “Someone else came through the well!”

Benji’s eyes shot open.

“Really?” he exclaimed, aloud. “Who? Where are they from? Are they like us?”

“I don’t know,” Lisa replied. “They just came through this morning. They’re still talking with Nahum. No one knows anything yet.”

“Was Tobin watching the well when they arrived?” Benji asked, thinking that Tobin might have some information.

“No,” Lisa replied, sadly. “He was doing school. Someone else, a younger boy, was watching.”

Benji thought for a moment.

“But if they’re talking to Nahum, we could go in,” Benji suggested. “He said we’re always welcome at the temple.”

“Actually,” Lisa corrected, “he said *you* were always welcome at the temple.”

“But he won't mind if you come along,” Benji said, grinning.

Lisa grinned back.

“I was hoping you'd say that,” she said.

Benji jumped out of bed and slipped on his sandals. Then he and Lisa ran through the streets to the ancient stone temple. They slowed to a walk as they traversed its courtyard and walked between its huge stone pillars. The pillars had amazed Benji when he'd first seen them, but after two years of daily visits, he now barely noticed them.

The watcher, a boy about Benji's age, sat on a stone bench just outside the main temple door. He smiled when he saw Benji and Lisa approach. He knew them, as everyone in the city knew them. Probably everyone on the planet had heard of them, because Benji and Lisa were the first visitors to come through the portal in a hundred years.

Lisa communicated with the boy telepathically, and nodded.

“He says the visitors ate lunch, but they're still talking to Nahum,” Lisa said, for Benji's benefit. “He says we can go in.”

Benji and Lisa stepped softly through the main temple to the side room where they had first eaten lunch with Nahum, over two years before. Benji peeked around the door and caught Nahum's eye.

Nahum, an old man with white hair growing over his ears, broke into a smile and gestured for Benji to enter. He did, and Lisa followed.

At the table with Nahum sat two strangers. They were human in appearance, though smaller in stature than Earthlings or Parisans. They looked young, about Benji's age, a boy and a girl. Both were at least a foot shorter than Benji.

They wore their blonde hair long, tied in ponytails that hung halfway down their back. And their clothing shined, as if made from some sort of plastic. Their gestures and voices seemed quite familiar, though their language was unrecognizable. But the truly remarkable feature of the two was a subtle blue glow to their skin.

Nahum explained something animatedly to his guests, apparently in their own tongue, and Benji guessed that their host was explaining that Benji and Lisa had also come through the portal.

The two children turned to greet Benji and Lisa, and their eyes widened.

The boy spoke first.

“He says his name is Quanda, and his sister’s name is Queelie, and they are pleased to meet us,” Lisa said, relaying Nahum’s telepathic translation.

Benji’s mind had already begun matching words with thoughts, picking up rhythms and patterns, and formulating his reply.

“Benji I am and sister Lisa this,” he replied in the newcomers’ language. “We are pleased also to you meet.”

The grammar was tortured, but Benji’s reply was understandable, and Quanda grinned in amazement.

“You have the gift of languages, like our host,” Quanda observed.

“I do,” Benji agreed. “Do you have gifts?”

“There will be time for that,” Nahum interrupted. “These two come from a planet they call Hassyr. They discovered the portal some days ago, and just today decided to seek out its source.”

Benji grinned.

"The same as us," he replied. "We made some visits in our own system, and went to see some of the spectacular sights before we thought to ask where the portal came from."

Benji's grammar was improving by the sentence, and Quanda smiled at him, approvingly.

"What did you see?" Queelie asked. "Did you see the Helix Nebula?"

"We did," Benji replied, "but later. The first thing I wanted to see was the Horsehead Nebula."

Queelie frowned.

"I do not know it," she said.

"Let me show you a picture," Nahum suggested. Apparently he was able to project the image into Queelie's mind, because she smiled.

"The Eternal Flame!" she exclaimed.

"Ah," Quanda added, "that is spectacular."

"Yes," Benji agreed. "And that's what first amazed me about the bubble. The nebula is 1,500 light years from my planet but I got there in minutes."

"It is astounding," Queelie said.

"I hope to learn how that works," Quanda said, nodding at Nahum.

Nahum explained the basics of how the bubble was able to move slightly sideways in time, so that distance was no longer a concern.

"That is *farchedan*," Quanda said. "We have nothing like that on our planet."

"Ask them what their planet is like," Lisa suggested to Benji, telepathically. She was able to follow the conversation through Nahum's thoughts, but couldn't say anything the newcomers would understand.

Benji did.

“It’s very beautiful,” Queelie replied. “We have many mountains, and many oceans. Most of us live in the lands between them.”

“How many people are there?” Nahum asked.

“A lot,” Quanda said. “More than half a million.”

Benji couldn’t stifle his laugh.

“What?” Quanda asked. “That is funny?”

“Parisa has two billion people on it,” Benji explained. “My planet, Earth, has eight billion. We have cities with ten million people in them.”

Quanda’s eyebrows went up.

“I don’t know where we’d put that many people,” he said. “Our planet must be smaller. It’s very crowded.”

“I think there is less habitable space,” Queelie said. “We struggle with overpopulation because there is nowhere for people to go. All the land we can live on is crowded.”

“Like one big city?” Benji asked.

“Yes, it is city,” Quanda confirmed. “People live in cities, no?”

“On my planet, people also live in small towns and villages,” Benji said. “A lot of people don’t like being so crowded together. And that’s where our food comes from. But I prefer the city.”

“Our food comes from the oceans,” Queelie said.

“And the mountains?” Benji asked. “Do people live there?”

Quanda laughed.

“No,” he said. “They are much too cold and dry. There’s nothing to eat but rocks. But they are beautiful to look at.”

“You must come visit,” Queelie said.

Then she glanced at Lisa.

“Both of you,” she said, insistently. “Lisa, too.”

They chatted for hours. When they finally stopped, Benji felt as if he'd known their language forever, and as if Quanda and Queelie had been friends for years.

"We should get home," Quanda said. "Our parents will be expecting us for lunch."

"Lunch?" Benji exclaimed. "But you've been here all day."

Queelie pulled a small electronic device from the pocket of her shiny pants and glanced at the screen.

"This is my companion," she said, to Benji's curious look. "It's a computer. It says it's only been half a day on Hassyr. We'll be home in time for the noon meal."

They said goodbye to Nahum, and together the four kids left the temple. The watcher guided them back down the street toward the well as Benji chatted and laughed with the other two.

Then Lisa stopped.

"Benji," she said, "I feel left out. I want to see if I can communicate with them."

Benji nodded.

"My sister wants to take your hand and see if she can communicate," he explained to the two newcomers.

Quanda shrugged.

Queelie stepped forward and held out her hand.

Lisa took it.

Then Queelie's eyes lit up.

"*Farchedan!*" she exclaimed. "I can hear her!"

Quanda looked skeptical, but held out his hand as Queelie had done.

"*Farchedan* indeed!" he agreed, as he grinned widely.

"What's *farchedan*?" Benji asked.

Quanda and Queelie looked at each other, but it was Lisa who spoke.

“It’s something they say when they are amazed,” she explained in English, reading their thoughts. “It seems to literally mean ‘dancing.’”

Benji wrinkled his brow.

“Dancing?” he asked, in their language.

Quanda looked confused.

“Yes,” he agreed, tentatively. “But it’s just a word we say.”

“It’s from the old language,” Queelie added. “It has to do with the old religion. We don’t really think about its meaning. It’s just ‘*farchedan*,’ you know?”

Benji thought.

“I guess we have words like that, too,” he said. “I mean, our people say stuff like ‘righteous’ or ‘cool’ when something is really great, but it doesn’t mean anything about the thing’s morality or temperature.”

They continued walking, with Lisa now between Quanda and Queelie, holding their hands.

“It’s been great to meet you,” Quanda said.

“I really hope you’ll come visit,” Queelie added.

“*Farchedan*,” Benji replied, and they all laughed. “But how would we find you? It sounds like you live in a big city.”

“We do,” Quanda confirmed. “And the well isn’t in the city. You’d never find us.”

“What if we came back for you?” Queelie suggested. “You could even bring your own bubble, so you can leave when you want.”

“That would work,” Lisa said, telepathically. “Will I be okay if I can’t speak your language?”

"Of course," Quanda said. "Benji does, and besides, we won't let anything happen to you."

"I'd really like it if you came," Queelie said. "Can we come for you in a few days?"

"Your days or ours?" Benji asked.

They all laughed.

"It gets complicated, doesn't it," Quanda observed.

"Give me a time here, and I'll put it in my companion," Queelie said, pulling out the black electronic device again. "It will do the conversions."

They agreed on a morning a few days away, and Quanda and Queelie approached the well. To Benji's surprise, it was Queelie who summoned the stars. He didn't know why that surprised him. Until now, Benji himself was the only person he knew who could do it. He also knew that his great-uncle James could do it, and he just assumed that of the two, it would be the brother, Quanda, who had the ability.

He'd been wrong.

Benji and Lisa watched as the two newcomers disappeared into the stars.

"So that's what it looks like from this end," Benji commented.

Lisa looked troubled.

"What?" Benji asked her.

"Does it bother you that they really wanted me to come to their planet before we could even communicate?" she asked.

"They were just being friendly," Benji suggested. "They were very friendly people."

Lisa thought about this.

"Maybe," she said. "It just felt like there was something else. Maybe I was imagining it."

Benji gazed at his sister's face. She was sixteen years old now, in Earth years, and very beautiful. She also seemed very wise to him, when she wasn't chattering on about love and stuff. If she felt something was wrong, maybe it was.

"Something else like what?" he asked. "Can you be more specific?"

"No," she said.

She seemed annoyed, though whether with herself or with Benji's questions, Benji wasn't sure.

"Okay," Benji said. "But let me know if anything else comes to you."

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***Madarach's Secret* by D.J. Mitchell**

In this sequel to *Benji's Portal*, Benji Haight and his sister Lisa continue their adventures throughout the galaxy with their trusted spacecraft, Madarach. They encounter other travelers and reconnect with old friends. But Lisa contracts a mysterious disease during a visit to a new planet, and Benji must trust Madarach to help save her. And when Benji decides to help his friends bring peace to the war-torn planet of Zeblack, events spiral out of control. But Madarach has a few secrets to reveal. One of these will change his relationship with Benji forever.

Coming soon in paperback and Kindle.



D. J. Mitchell is a pastor with a passion for building bridges and helping the lost. He is the author of nine books, including the popular dystopian novel *Ordinary World*, and has just published his first non-fiction work, *The Soul of an Addict: Understanding the Complex Nature of Addiction*.

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