



SEQUENCE



Kenneth Rogers, Jr.



Sequence

by
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12620 FM 1960, Suite A4-507
Houston, TX 77065
www.sbpra.com

ISBN: 978-1-61897-764-9

Design: Dedicated Book Services, Inc. (www.netdbs.com)

For Sarah . . .



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Introduction

IN SIXTH GRADE I FELL IN LOVE WITH THE IDEA OF MYTHOLOGY. I can't remember reading any of the stories taught by my English teacher, Mrs. Dye, but I do remember being surprised and excited that all of the gods, demigods, adventures, and characters were considered fact at some point in history. Somewhere in the world, people believed these gods and heroes existed and controlled their lives—until, eventually, they became mere myths, legends, and fables, replaced by proven facts and theories.

A few years ago, I returned to these ancient myths, but rather than ponder whether or not they existed, as I did in sixth grade, I wondered *why* they were created in the first place. Why would a society ever have a need for them then, now, and possibly in the future? And, if these fantastic stories of creation and impossible exploits of ancient heroes *were* ever needed, what would be the state of the world? From these questions, *Sequence* began to take shape—about a world of Clouds that cause unexplainable power outages, electrical storms, the disappearance of wildlife, and the gradual extinction of plant life. The idea of new beginnings in the midst of chaos, explaining the essence of humanity through tragedy, and the exploration of the heavens through the reinforcement of mythology, were the foundations of the story. Just as mythology attempts to explain the origins of mankind from the beginning, *Sequence* uses the experiences and memories of Remus and Charon to describe the range of humanity, what it means to live and love amidst the presence of severe loneliness and depression. *Sequence* begins at the end of humanity and progresses into chaos explaining that as one existence ends another begins.

While reading, remember this: just as Charon and Remus have hidden identities, each of us have our own secrets, lives we conceal and keep separate from the world. Our individuality keeps us alive, safe. When it is exposed, when we are

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completely vulnerable to those around us, what do we become? And, more importantly, do we have the strength and will to survive?

Pandora

AS THE MAN IN BLACK OPENED THE DOOR AND STEPPED through, wind, heat, and sound rushed in behind him. Andrea Remus picked up the small bag beside her foot and followed.

There was no sunlight.

Above, Clouds billowed in and on top of themselves, menacing the sky, radiating heat. In the barren distance, absent of thunder and vegetation, lightning flashed from ground to sky—the only visible light for miles in all directions.

Sweat speckled Andrea's brow. Before wiping it away, moisture evaporated from her skin, cooling her body as the temperature dropped, instantly changing stifling wind to cold breeze. Her fingertips lost feeling.

As they stepped across dry earth to enclosed rocks, the darkened landscape transformed into blackness. Footsteps faltered on loose gravel and dirt as the man in black walked with sure steps toward a gray hatch. Kneeling, he entered five digits before pulling the manhole cover back on its hinges. White light radiated from below, providing definition to the cave and Andrea with light to guide her steps.

The man in black made his way down the stainless steel ladder to a fully lit hall of white incandescent light. Andrea followed, clutching her bag and closing the hatch as she descended. Stepping down, she turned to a hall of seamless white tile, spotless white walls, five steel doors with matching handles, and deafening silence.

The air was still, tepid. Feeling returned to her fingertips.

Two closed doors were on the left, two more on the right, and one straight ahead. The man in black walked to the first on the left and opened it. He spoke: "This is the research room. Inside you will find star maps, tools for calculations, astrological books, magazines, journals, reviews, your own personal notes, and the latest photographs of star systems taken with all spectral lenses. Everything you will need

when you are not in direct contact with Pandora will be located in this room.”

Closing the door, the man in black stepped across the hall, his footfall filling the complex with sound, and opened a second door, revealing a single bed, desk, lamp, small closet, dresser, mirror, shower, and drain separated from the room by a plastic curtain, and an overhead light that flickered to life when they entered.

“This will be your room. As you can see, living arrangements have been dictated by current changes. Besides the shower, the layout is the same for both rooms. Because of the need to conserve energy and resources, we could only have one installed. As before, it is on a fifteen-minute timer that can only be set and used twice daily.” Without another word, the man in black walked to the door next to Andrea’s.

Before closing the door, she placed her bag on the glossy floor and followed him toward what she remembered to be the kitchen.

“There is no refrigerator. The door on the right wall gives access to the pantry, which contains all the dry foods you’ll need. There is a stove, and kitchen accessories are in the cupboards. Like the shower, the sink is set to dispense two gallons of water a day and the stove can only be used for two hours. There’s no washer or dryer. To wash your clothes, include it in your water usage from day to day, or use bottled water.”

The man in black walked to the back wall of the kitchen, continuing to speak. “Trash can be put here.” He pulled back a slot that blended seamlessly into the white wall. “It leads to an incinerator lit once a week.”

The man in the black suit closed the slot, walked past Andrea and out of the kitchen toward the control room. There was no label to distinguish it from the other rooms.

Inside were three screens that wrapped from one side of the room to the other, filling the entire back wall. Displayed were three separate images. To the left was a detailed diagram of the solar system, showing the planets, known meteors,

and comets moving in their orbits around the Sun, filling the screen with vivid color. The screen to the right was a halo of frozen comets outlying the 5.9-trillion-mile graviton radius of the solar system's Sun. And the center screen showed a spiraling galaxy of dazzling yellows, purples, blues, and blacks as they rotated in sync around a glowing center.

Seeing the screens, Andrea began feeling anxious.

Below the screens was a single computer console, with two monitors and keyboards on either side and a clock in the center, the only one in the facility, displaying the time, day, month, and year in black lettering on a green background.

Sitting in the chair to the left, staring into his monitor, was the haggard image of Thomas Charon.

He turned from his monitor with an expression of horror and surprise on his unshaven face. Realizing who the two individuals were and why they were there, fear dissolved from his features.

The man in black continued to address Andrea. "This will be your connection to Pandora. To the right is a display of the Oort Cloud—"

"Hello, Andrea—it's been a long time."

Thomas stared at the profile of the woman before him, studying the new wrinkles and lines of her face since their last meeting twelve years prior. Andrea's eyes remained transfixed on the spiraling galaxy. The man in black attempted to continue, but Thomas cut him off.

"I think we can take it from here, Munin. This isn't our first rodeo."

Munin, the man in black, turned and walked toward the open door. Before leaving, he turned and spoke. "Dr. Charon, you have all the information for Dr. Remus. See to it she receives it. The terms of the agreement are the same as before. Besides living arrangements, nothing has changed. Our data shows the Pandora operating systems are the same as before. There should be no problems. We look forward to hearing from you both, soon. Good luck."

With that said, Munin turned and walked down the hall and climbed up the ladder into the raging storm above. The closing lid echoed throughout the hall.

Andrea and Thomas were alone. Electricity filled the empty space.

He attempted to sound pleasant, but exhaustion came through in his voice. “So? How have you been? Do you enjoy teaching high school students, or is it more frustrating than configuring orbital equations?”

Rather than answer, Andrea asked questions of her own. “You haven’t been sleeping?”

Her eyes remained focused on the screen ahead. Thomas shifted his weight. He looked toward the ground.

“How long have you been here?” she asked.

“Not sure. It’s hard to keep track. You know how it is.”

He looked into Andrea’s face. She wouldn’t meet his gaze. “I wanted to check out the system. Make sure everything was working properly before you arrived. I figured it would be best to limit your exposure.”

“Only mine?” Andrea turned from the screen to Thomas. Both could feel the tension that had not dissipated since their last meeting. Andrea shifted her attention to the task before them and her eyes back to the screens.

“The Outages have gotten worse—much worse than I think anyone planned. It’s projected to continue.”

“How long do we have?” she asked.

“As long as we need.”

“Or as much as we can handle.”

Both knew she was right.

“Have you seen her?”

It was a question Thomas was prepared to answer honestly. “Yes.”

“So nothing has changed?”

Thomas paused, questioning whether he should tell her now, or wait. He knew he would have to eventually, if she did not discover it on her own. “Not from what I can tell.”

With a heavy sigh and a cluttered mind, Andrea said, “What’s the destination? Is it still Gliese, or has it changed?”

Thomas would not meet her gaze. Instead he turned to his monitor and picked up a manila folder marked with the word “Pandora” in bold print. He handed it to Andrea.

Andrea’s expression became stern when she looked at its contents. “HD? Epsilon? Kappa? There are eighteen planets on this list.”

Thomas said nothing.

“The compositions of most of these are unknown. What’s the point of sending data if they can’t support life?” She closed the folder with disdain. Thomas sat in the chair, not knowing what to say.

“You know how long it took me last time. And Gliese was a quarter of the distance. It’s been twelve years, Tom. I haven’t done any major calculations—I’ve been teaching high school English.”

Andrea shook her head, her eyes on the ground. “It’ll take too long. I can’t do it.”

“What choice do we have?”

Frustrated, annoyed, Andrea turned and walked toward the door and the empty white hall. “Try to get some sleep,” she said without looking back.

“Andrea?”

She stopped, but did not turn.

“If you need me tonight . . . for anything—”

“Thanks, Tom, but I’m sure you’ll have your own demons to face.”

Thomas watched as she walked down the hall and into her room. Sitting there, silent, he thought of the storm raging above, affecting every aspect of their lives. As he looked at the Pandora’s screens, sunlight shined down from a corner of the room. It grew in intensity, blinding his vision before fading, allowing sight to return.

In place of screens he was seeing a window that revealed sunlight and leafless trees. Instead of a computer and monitors, there was a kitchen table. Dish soap and the scent of lavender filled the room. Cupboards, dishes, utensils, and appliances lined the walls and filled drawers, replacing flashing lights and rotating chairs. Thomas saw the image of

his father in running shoes, shorts, and shirt pass the window toward the suburban street.

Parked in the driveway was a fully assembled black motorcycle with orange waves lining its frame. Thomas admired its craftsmanship, then called to his mother, who materialized before the sink, washing the lunch dishes.

“Mom? Where’s Dad going?”

“For a run.”

“What’s he running from?”

The woman smiled. “He’s not running from anything, Sweetheart. He’s exercising. He likes to stay in shape by running through parts of the neighborhood. It helps him stay strong.”

“How far does he go?” Thomas asked.

“About five miles.”

“By himself?” Thomas asked in amazement.

The woman shook her head, continuing to smile.

Surprised by his father’s physical endurance, Thomas turned in his chair. Sunlight faded. The window vanished. Visions of his mother and father dispersed, along with the happiness. Computers returned, screens appeared, and sadness lingered.

Thomas moved his hand across his face, clearing away thoughts. Instead, he just wiped away sweat. Breathing deeply, he studied his monitor. Another memory appeared, waiting to be analyzed and loaded. Looking away, he made his way toward the door and his room. Entering, he closed the door, went to his desk, picked up the tape recorder, and began to speak.

“I saw my parents. It was the day I . . .”

Thomas paused, letting emotions drain before continuing.

“The replays are growing stronger, more vivid. The stronger the relationship I build with the device, the more frequent and longer the flashes occur. As was reported by Dr. Remus and myself twelve years prior, the flashes only occur when we’re not working in direct contact with Pandora. However, this may not be the case. To try and minimize its

effects, I've decided to try a different method than before. Rather than working on Pandora in small intervals, building toward longer and more intense occurrences, I'm working on the machine as much as possible in an attempt to keep my memories from jumping from one time frame to the next. So far it has worked, but there—"

Thinking he heard something from the hall, he lowered the recorder. As he did, the sound faded. Concentrating, Thomas continued. ". . . but there have been instances. It's growing harder to pull myself from the past. So far I've had fourteen replays—all different. I have reason to believe our previous work on Pandora is a factor. Dr. Remus arrived today—"

The sound of voices on the other side of the door began to fill the room. Trying his best to ignore them, he finished his report as best he could. "I'm not certain how long it will take Andrea to make the calculations, but our minds were tested to take months of Pandora's effects. At least, they used to. I'm not so sure anymore."

Thomas took a breath before continuing, allowing time to process his thoughts. "There's always a connection. I just have to find it."

He turned off the recorder and placed it on the desk, then walked to the door. The voices had grown too loud to ignore. Grasping the handle, taking a deep breath, he prepared himself for what he was about to see. He opened the door to rushing teenagers heading out of the school building toward buses and cars. Down the hall was Melissa Pomene.

"Hey, Mel!" Thomas yelled.

Melissa smiled. "Hey, Tom. I see you're ready for practice." Thomas looked down to see shorts and running shoes. He leaned against the locker beside Melissa's.

"What does coach Hertzsprung have you CC boys doing today?"

"Hill work, I think. But you never know. Could be quarters, half-mile intervals, maybe even a time trial. You never know."

"Wow. You make it sound so exciting."

“What can I say? It’s a gift. You ladies have a game today, right?”

“Yup.”

“Nervous?”

“Yup.”

“Really? I thought you got over your nervousness about games last year.”

“I did, but that was when I was playing as a freshman. Today I’m playing varsity.”

“Varsity? Congrats, Kid! You deserve it. First time?”

Melissa nodded.

“Don’t be nervous. I’ve seen you play. You’re great.”

“I’m good, not great.”

“Good enough to make varsity as a sophomore.”

Melissa gave him a fresh smile as she pulled her bag out of her locker and began loading it with textbooks. “Thanks, but some of us do feel pressure. We all can’t excel without even trying.”

“I try—”

“When was the first time you were put on varsity? Freshman year?”

A smile was his only reply.

“I thought so. Not only do I have the game tonight, but a geometry test tomorrow, and pages to read for Mr. Haley’s class. I don’t even want to think about there being an Outage tonight.”

“You’ll get through it. Just focus on one thing at a time. That’s what I do.”

“Really? I thought you got straight As without even picking up a book.”

Closing the locker, Melissa made her way down the now deserted hallway. Thomas walked beside her. “For your information,” he said, “I did pick up a book—once.”

“I hope I can say that my senior year. Then she changed the subject. “How’s your dad?”

The smile dissolved from Thomas’s face. “He’s hanging in there. The headaches are getting worse, but he’s got most of the motorcycle put back together.”

“Well, remember—my window is always open.”

“Thanks.” The smile reappeared on Thomas’s face. Down the hall, other boys in shorts began making their way toward them.

“Here come your buddies—Hooligans, or whatever you call yourselves these days.”

“This year we’re the Outcasts.”

“Is there a reason?”

“Because we do better than the football team and get no recognition.”

“That’s a pretty good reason.”

Without saying a word, two of the four boys grabbed Thomas beneath the arms and lifted him from the ground. He didn’t struggle. The smile remained on his face.

“Sorry, Mel—we need to borrow him for a bit. You can have him back later,” one of the boys said.

“Keep him. I don’t want him anymore.” Melissa watched as they carried Thomas away.

“Aww, that hurts,” he called over his shoulder. “But I still love you. And don’t worry about the game—you’ll do great. I’ll see you tomorrow!”

“I don’t see why you two just don’t date,” another of the boys said as they put Thomas back on the ground.

“Who?” Thomas asked. “Mel and me? We’re just friends. And besides, she’s a sophomore.”

Melissa Pomene gave a final wave and a smile before turning toward the girls’ locker room. Thomas watched as the high school hall faded and the door to the control room reappeared. Shaking his head, he returned to his room, closed the door, and sat on the edge of his bed.

Staring at his feet, Thomas was trying to relax his mind when he heard the voice of his freshman history teacher and high school football coach, Henry Russell, getting louder. The sound filled the room, blinding his vision as pain pulsed in his head. He closed his eyes, hoping that would block Russell’s droning voice. When he opened his eyes, he saw his room was filled with twenty classmates, friends, posters and art depicting aspects of world history, papers, notes, and

a chalkboard filled with notes. Mr. Russell called his name from the front of the room. In his hand was a call slip.

“Tom, you’re needed in the office.”

Standing from his desk, Thomas retrieved his books from beneath his desk, stepped toward the door, and walked out the Enriched History class to the school office. When he walked in, his smile was greeted by the secretary’s somber expression.

“Tom, gather your things and meet your mother in the front of the building in five minutes. Here’s a hall pass.”

“What’s this about?”

“I can’t . . .” She tripped over her words, unsure of how to respond. “She’ll tell you when she gets here. Hurry—she’ll be here soon.”

Thomas took the pass and headed toward the door as the school bell rang, startling him to the present emptiness of his room as he sat on the edge of the stiff mattress of his bed.

Breathing heavily, sweat dripping from his chin, Thomas was unable to shake the fear washing over him. Pain pulsed in his head. Standing, he removed his clothing, exposing his skin to the slightly cooler air. He put on a robe, grabbed his shower supplies, and made his way to Andrea’s room.

He knocked twice. Receiving no response, he opened the door. Andrea was sitting at her desk, her back to him, reading.

Thomas stepped into the shower and closed the curtain, then took off his robe and put his shower kit on the floor. He turned the faucet and let the tepid water run down his head and over his body, the feeling on his eyes and face calming his nerves.

Thomas heard nothing from Andrea on the other side of the curtain. He was completely immersed in the few moments of relief Pandora had allowed him before again sending him back to the past. Fearful of letting his mind wander, he focused on the water and nothing else. He didn’t think of Pandora, the storm raging out of control above, or the

woman on the other side of the shower curtain reading Roman mythology.

Thomas did not turn off the water. He let it run before it shut off on its own after its fifteen-minute allotment was used up, leaving him naked and wet, his eyes closed and head down. Concentrating on the movement of air in and out of his lungs as water dripped from his body to the drain, he attempted to regain his composure.

Putting on his robe and picking up the kit he didn't use, Thomas pulled back the curtain to reveal the naked body of Andrea Remus.

She did not move. She stood in the middle of the room, looking into Thomas's eyes with a distant expression and the sad eyes he remembered from twelve years ago. They stood looking at the other, waiting to move or speak, when a name Thomas didn't mean to say escaped his lips.

"Melissa—I . . ."

As the name came and went, Thomas knew his mistake. Breaking the trance, Andrea walked to her bed, dropped on top of the white linen sheets, and stared into the wall.

Her back remained bare and exposed. "Leave," was all she said, and needed to say.

Thomas left her room and went to his own. She continued to stare at the wall as the cool air of the complex rose bringing goose bumps to her naked skin when suddenly the weight of 210 fully clothed pounds caused Andrea to gasp. Silent tears rolled from eyes that now saw a bedroom ceiling speckled with the glow-in-the-dark neon green stars her brother, Michael, had helped her put up years ago. Slow, heavy breathing was muffled by the pillow under her head. Andrea lay still, counting the moments. Feeling the middle-aged man's pace increase, she braced herself for what was to come.

Slow moans of pleasure began to rise deep inside Daryl Tyr's chest as he pushed harder and faster. Andrea, sheets balled in her hands, held back groans of pain. With a final release, Daryl let his body relax.

Andrea remained stiff and tense.

Daryl's heavy breathing and full weight forced Andrea to lie still. She concentrated on the ceiling and not on the hairy forearm pressed against the side of her face.

Daryl lifted himself from the girl's body, closed the bedroom door, crept to Evelyn Remus Tyr's room, and slipped in beside the still form of his wife, Andrea's mother.

Andrea did not move. She remained motionless, staring at the ceiling. Outside, black Clouds blanketed the night sky, hiding the stars.

Tears ran down her face into her pillow as the slow hum of Pandora circulated throughout the room.

Something had changed.



Thomas opened the door to the white-lit kitchen to see Andrea sitting at the small circular table opposite, drinking a cup of coffee. Closing the door, Thomas pulled the only other mug from the cupboard and poured a cup for himself. He leaned against the counter behind the woman.

The only sound in the sterile room was the electricity humming through lights above their heads from three magnetic generators buried beneath their feet. In a place where silence filled time and space, a moment could feel like an hour, and sound was a necessity.

"Couldn't sleep?" Thomas asked, eager to fill the void.

"I guess you could say that." Andrea stared into the contents of her cup.

"No caramel milk?"

"All we have is powdered. Doesn't taste the same," Andrea responded, keeping her head and eyes focused on the contents of the cup.

Thomas shook his head, taking a sip of his own coffee.

Both sat silently, pondering their thoughts. Thomas felt obliged to show Andrea what he'd discovered, knowing he should, but moments before opening his mouth to speak, he

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