

Quantum Space

Book One in the Quantum Series

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2nd Edition

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1 Scientists

1 Space

Sergei Koslov floated a few centimeters above his seat, enjoying the last few minutes of weightlessness. Soon enough, he would be back in the crushing gravity of Earth. Wobbly legs would be a small price to pay for the innumerable pleasures of returning home.

He glanced out the window. The gentle curve of Earth's blue-and-white horizon stood in sharp contrast to the blackness of space. Sunlight magnified the natural beauty of oceans and clouds, but it was the night side that revealed the lights of civilization. More than anything, Sergei missed the energy of a city at night—any city. He'd passed over most of them in the last three months.

Home. Almost there. The only thing separating him was a fiery ride down through the atmosphere.

Sergei and his two companions were wedged shoulder to shoulder in a space no larger than the backseat of a small car; cramped, but bearable for the short ride down from the International Space Station. A pencil gently tumbled in the air. Anton Golovkin grabbed it and secured it with a clip. In the center seat, Jeremy Taylor confirmed the computer trajectory, his reach to the control panel extended by means of a small stick.

A voice in their headsets interrupted the soundless cabin. "Soyuz, ISS. *Kak pashyevayesh?*"

Sergei keyed his microphone and replied in English, "Doing well, ISS. We're enjoying every minute. The view is much better down here. How are things with you, Nate?"

There was a slight delay in Nate's response. "Sergei, my friend. In your haste to get home it appears you've left something behind. A music CD? On the cover, there's a photograph of a beautiful young woman wearing a red scarf and... well, not much else."

Sergei laughed. “You found it quickly, Nate. A gift, to help you Puritans in America better understand the finer things in life. I hope you will enjoy.”

“*Spasibo*, Sergei, very generous... I think. When I get home, I’ll send you some of my favorite decadence from the West. Your view of me might improve.”

The Russian glanced over at his two companions and lifted his hands in the air. “Nate Erasco? Decadence? Not possible.”

“Tell it straight, Sergei,” Jeremy said. “But you’ll miss that Puritan. You know you will.”

Three months aboard the International Space Station had been a life-changing experience that was now coming to an end. Jeremy was right. Sergei would miss waking up each day to the incredible view from orbit. He’d miss the comradery of the ISS team, especially the Americans, even Nate. Back on the ground, Russia and America were worlds apart.

Sergei shifted to his role as Soyuz Mission 74 commander. “ISS, six minutes until descent burn. Changing to frequency 922.763.”

The voice on the other end also changed tone. “Roger, Soyuz, 922.763. *Bezopasnoye puteshestviye*—safe trip, guys.”

Anton pressed a key and a checklist appeared on his display. Each man flipped their helmet visor down, pulled on gloves and locked them in place.

Sergei peered once more through the small Soyuz window. Their orbital height had decreased substantially, and their speed of eight kilometers per second was now obvious. The clouds, ocean and land below raced by at high speed as if predicting the drama of atmospheric contact that would come soon.

Sergei reached out and pressed a button to engage the reentry sequence. From ports on Soyuz, tiny jets of nitrogen shot out into the silent vacuum of space, nudging them into perfect retrograde position for the

final burn. A countdown clock appeared on the computer display, and as the clock reached zero, the big descent rocket behind their backs ignited and shook the spacecraft with a deep rumble. Sergei and Jeremy bumped fists. The deceleration was immediate, and they were pressed into their padded seats. A few minutes later, the burn stopped as quickly as it had started.

“Descent velocity within target envelope,” Anton called out. “Six minutes to atmospheric contact.”

The computer displayed a large yellow light, and two loud bangs reverberated from behind their seats, followed by two more ahead. Jeremy visibly twitched at the sound of the explosive bolts.

Sergei looked out the window to confirm their separation from the forward docking module and the aft rocket. The discarded parts would never make it to the ground, destined to become globs of melted metal, disintegrating in the intense heat of reentry. Their capsule would take the same path, but thermal shielding would make all the difference.

Sergei shifted in his seat, anticipating the final, but most dangerous leg of their journey. *Home. Nearly there.*

Five heart-pounding minutes passed until the first shudder rattled the spacecraft. The top of the atmosphere.

The bumps increased, and a minute later, their seats were shaking violently. The three men briefly held gloved hands and smiled through their helmet visors. The bounces were frequent and strong. Larger jolts caused the entire cabin to rattle like an old pickup truck on a washboard road. But their smiles didn't fade. They had been through worse, and home was within reach.

Sergei keyed his microphone, his voice jittery from the bumps. “Moscow, Soyuz. Atmospheric contact, descent normal. We're picking up light chop.”

In his headset, a Russian voice replied. "Soyuz, Moscow, confirmed atmospheric contact, altitude one-seven-four kilometers, up range seven-two-zero kilometers. Status is green. See you in a few minutes."

Sergei's fingers dug into the armrests on his seat as the jolts increased in ferocity.



Far below, on the flat, dusty plains of western Kazakhstan, a lonely Russian soldier stood outside his truck. He lifted his sunglasses and gazed upward. A beautiful day, and warm by Kazakh standards, with only a light coat needed to protect from the chill of the wind. The soldier picked up his binoculars and scanned the sky, looking for the object he expected to appear at any minute.

His job was simple: visually confirm reentry and contact the operations commander at Korolyov Mission Control. Radar and GPS would do the rest, providing descent vectors and computing the exact landing site, where recovery teams would be waiting. Soyuz landings were good, but with somewhat older technology, Russia still employed ground observers just to be sure.

The soldier's patience paid off as he noticed a thin contrail high in the atmosphere, streaking west to east at high speed. He grabbed his radio from the truck's seat and spoke with pride and excitement. "Moscow! Moscow! Soyuz reentry visual confirmation at Caspian Station."

The response was loud and clear. "Caspian, Moscow. Confirmed sighting. Maintain contact."

He lifted his binoculars and located the tip of the contrail once more. But now, something was different. The air at the tip began to shimmer, as if looking through the heat above a fire. The shimmer intensified, making the air opaque and partly obscuring the view. He squinted.

An intense flash of blue-white light, blindingly bright, exploded across the sky. Reflexively, the soldier dropped his binoculars and covered

his eyes. Seconds passed as the brightness faded. A massive sonic boom shook the air and the ground.

His hands shaking, he lifted his binoculars and searched again. The long white contrail lingered in the high, thin air, marking the reentry track. But the contrail ended abruptly, and beyond it there was no spacecraft. No movement. No parachute. Nothing but empty sky.

The spacecraft was gone, as if it had never been there.

Confusion overwhelmed the soldier. *The blue flash... what? The boom... an explosion?*

He dropped his binoculars and for a full minute scanned the sky with his own eyes. He could pick out the remains of the contrail, wisps of white but nothing more. A minute later, a demanding voice burst from his radio.

“Caspian, Moscow. We have lost radar contact. Report!”

The soldier picked up the radio, collecting his thoughts before keying the microphone. He shook his head and kicked the tire of his truck.

“Blyad!”

2 Ground

At NASA's Goddard Spaceflight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland, Communications Specialist Dana Tunney pulled her headset off one ear and stared at the computer display. She rubbed her tired eyes and ignored several blinking lights. Equally neglected were the cup of cold coffee and half-eaten donut on her desk.

Her shift supervisor stood by her side, peering over her shoulder. She pointed to the screen. "Roscosmos reported simultaneous loss of radar and radio contact at altitude one hundred seventy kilometers. It's been twenty-five minutes and they've heard nothing. Nothing through the global network either. No telemetry, no voice."

The supervisor leaned in closer. "You were monitoring, right? What was the last transmission from Soyuz?"

She swiveled to face him. "All was well. They had just hit the top of the atmosphere. They were reporting some turbulence, but systems were normal and the descent trajectory looked good. But then... it just disappeared. Radar, communications, telemetry... everything. I'm continuing to monitor the comm frequency. Moscow is transmitting, but they're getting nothing back."

"Major malfunction?"

She sighed. "Yeah, I'm afraid so. Something big."

"Did it break apart? It must have burned up, right?"

"It sure as hell is pointing to that." She rubbed a hand across her forehead. "Good God, it's another Columbia disaster." She felt a chill as she recalled witnessing the space shuttle disintegrate on reentry. The fatal accident was years ago, but memories were still strong for those who were closely involved. And now the nightmare was repeating. Her mind played out the grotesque view of a spacecraft breaking apart, the burning pieces streaking across the sky and marking a path of destruction and death. And then, something clicked.

“Weird,” she said softly, her eyes still focused on the display. “They’re not tracking debris.” She looked up at the supervisor. “Radar should have picked up debris for several minutes after the loss of radio contact, but the Russians are saying that the radar contact disappeared. One minute it was there and the next... gone. That doesn’t make sense for a reentry breakup.”

“It might be the Russian high-altitude radar. It’s not exactly reliable. Have they reported any debris on the ground?”

She leaned back in her chair. “Well, they’re mobilizing teams across a wide area of Kazakhstan, but it will be hours before we get any reports. At this point, everyone’s assuming catastrophic structural fail...” But she didn’t complete her sentence. She held up her hand, pulled her headphones tight over her ears and stared straight ahead.

“What? You’re getting something?” the supervisor questioned. “Put it on speaker.”

Dana looked up, her face pale. She reached to the panel, switched communications from headphones to speaker and turned up the volume. The static was continuous and loud, like ocean waves crashing on a beach. But out of the noise, a faint voice could be heard. It was hard to make out, mixed with so much static. But it was a man’s voice, and he was clearly speaking Russian.

3 Americans

Daniel Rice ran down the dark residential street in Vienna, Virginia, extending his stride to avoid puddles from the recent rain. The Gear watch on his wrist displayed 5:30 a.m., and Billie Joe Armstrong poured a live version of “Warning” into his earbuds. He was in the zone. Every portion of his body moved in unison, and the running was effortless.

Since hitting forty, Daniel made sure that exercise was part of every day. The effort had paid off. He was fit, and stronger than when he was thirty. A morning run was his first choice for summer months, but now, in September, rain became a more frequent obstacle. Weekend skiing was a winter favorite, but that was last year. His new job had included a transfer from Seattle to D.C. From one Washington to another, but the two cities couldn’t be more different.

The move was a major step forward in his career, reporting to the president’s science advisor, Spencer Bradley, who had been a mentor to Daniel over many years. The day after Bradley was picked, he’d called Daniel and offered him a job. “My go-to guy,” Bradley had said. “The president may not know it yet, but he needs you.” Daniel’s decision was easy.

In midstride, his phone erupted with a ringtone that told him Bradley was calling. It also meant his run would be cut short. He slowed to a stop, took a few deep breaths and touched his watch.

“Rice here.” His voice was scratchy on its first use of the day.

“Daniel, sorry to wake you. We have a critical situation.”

“I’m awake,” he said between the panting breaths. “What’s up?”

“Sorry to intrude, then. I hope whatever you’re doing is as good as it sounds.”

Daniel laughed. “I hate to burst your fantasy, Spence, but I’m just running. If you need me, I can be back home in five minutes.”

“Four would be better,” Bradley suggested. “The topic is confidential, so I’ll fill you in when you get here. I’m sending a car, and pack a bag—you may need to catch a flight. How soon can you be ready?”

“Just send the car, I’ll be ready. Your office?”

“Nope, Situation Room.”

“White House? It sounds like a big deal.”

“It is.”

Daniel hung up. The White House wasn’t unknown territory. He had already worked on several programs that involved the president, including a working lunch once. But a classified science program? That was rare. Closer to nonexistent.

Twenty-five minutes later, Daniel was home, showered and dressed in a dark business suit and blue tie, his standard choice when meeting with higher-ups. He glanced in the hallway mirror and brushed his fingers through his hair. *A bit grayer every month. No worries.*

He walked into the kitchen, where a striped tabby rubbed his chin against the edge of the island counter. “Don’t worry, Darwin, I didn’t forget you.” He poured some food into the empty dish. The cat looked at the dish and back up at Daniel.

“What, not good enough for you? Ungrateful troublemaker.” He bent down and scratched behind the cat’s ears. “The vet says it’s better for you. Get used to it, my friend, it will make you strong.” Darwin rubbed the side of his face against Daniel’s hand and purred.

“Hey, buddy, I have to leave. I might be gone overnight. But if you’re lucky, Janine might stop by.” Darwin’s chin-rubbing intensified. “Yeah, you like Janine, don’t you? I don’t blame you. Maybe you can curl up on her lap. Lucky bastard.”

He slipped on a lightweight overcoat, grabbed his laptop case and stepped outside. A hint of the rising sun was just beginning to show towards the east. Clouds from the passing cold front lingered over northern Virginia,

but through a break he spotted Jupiter, shining brightly. If his telescope had been set up, he would have seen a nice arrangement of Jupiter's moons, with Io and Europa on the left, Ganymede and Calisto on the right. The four Galilean moons were his usual mental connection whenever Jupiter was in view.

On other nights, he identified the brighter stars and noted their distances from Earth: Sirius 8.6 light years, Procyon 11.5, Aldebaran 65.2, and on it went. There was no point to the mental exercise. It was nothing more than a checklist, a routine... an obsession, and it didn't end with astronomy. When in Salt Lake City or Los Angeles or Seattle, the routine switched to naming the surrounding mountain peaks, including their elevations. On any flight, it was a careful notation of every adjustment to ailerons, flaps, or landing gear. At breakfast, he estimated the atomic composition of his cereal or the diffraction of sunlight through the glass of orange juice.

Would the science inside his head ever stop?

Probably not.

A black SUV pulled up to the curb. The window rolled down and the interior lights came on. Daniel saw the familiar face of one of the Secret Service agents at the White House.

"Hey, Julian, how are things?"

"Doing well, Dr. Rice," the large man behind the wheel replied.

"Good to see you again. Sorry for the short notice."

Daniel climbed into the backseat. "Not a problem. Just missing a bit of my morning run, that's all. What's the scoop?"

"Sorry, sir, I have no information. All I know is I'm taking you to the White House. An aide will get you to the conference room where they're meeting. There's a fresh scone in the box if you'd care to eat while we drive."

“Thanks, Julian, I knew you’d come through.” Daniel reached into the box and pulled out the desiccated pastry. For the OSTP science team, scones were a *thing*. Daniel went along with it.

“So, it sounds important. Who’s at this meeting?”

“Not at liberty to say, sir.”

“Ah, that’s what I love about working for the government. Be ready to go at a moment’s notice, but we’re not going to tell you the subject matter or even who you’ll be meeting with.” Daniel patted Julian on the shoulder in a friendly gesture. In truth, he had no complaints about his job.

“Yes, sir, it certainly keeps you on your toes.”

Even at six in the morning, the traffic inbound to Washington was building rapidly. Julian made it as far as Arlington and then flipped on the emergency lights for the remainder of the drive. Ten minutes later they drove through the west gate of the White House.

Daniel hopped out, stretched both arms, and for a moment allowed the surroundings to soak in. The soft light of dawn lit the columned entrance to the West Wing in a pink glow. He looked up at the graceful building added to the White House in 1902 by Teddy Roosevelt and occupied by every president since. Anyone would be impressed by this historic place, and Daniel certainly was.

A Marine guard opened the door and Daniel walked into the marble reception area. The ground floor was for the president, visiting foreign dignitaries and members of Congress. The second floor provided work space for the president’s staff. The basement was for everyone else.

“This way, sir,” the Marine said, leading Daniel down the steps. They ended up in a dimly lit hallway and turned into the Situation Room, bright and already full of activity.

Several men in various military uniforms sat on one side of the long conference table, leaning toward each other in quiet conversation. On the other side of the table, Daniel recognized Augustin Ibarra, NASA’s

Administrator. Older, and balder, Spencer Bradley was seated next to Ibarra, and both were in conversation with a tall, well-dressed woman who clearly had their attention. Daniel recognized her from photos—the president’s national security advisor, Christine Shea.

On the other side of Ibarra sat a young woman whose focus was on the notepad in front of her. She was petite, with short dark hair and glasses, and she wore a dark business suit. Daniel didn’t recognize her, even when she looked up and made eye contact.

As Daniel walked in, Shea broke off her conversation and spoke directly to him. “Welcome, Dr. Rice, glad you could join us. Please have a seat, we have much to cover.”

“I’m happy to help,” Daniel replied and took the seat next to Bradley.

Shea walked to the front of the room. “Everyone... let’s catch up.” The side conversations died down and all eyes turned toward her.

“Four hours ago, at two a.m. our time, a Russian Soyuz spacecraft carrying three astronauts, an American and two Russians, from the International Space Station was reported destroyed on reentry over Kazakhstan. Russian ground controllers at Korolyov tell us that everything was running smoothly up to the moment when they lost radar and radio contact. They’re still researching the cause of the failure, but they believe the spacecraft broke up rapidly, or possibly exploded. The Russians have teams deployed now to search for debris and remains, but so far, no word on any recovery. The initial assessment is that all three on board were killed.”

“The American was Jeremy Taylor,” Ibarra added. “NASA has already contacted his wife.”

There was little reaction in the room, but for Daniel, it was entirely new information. He realized that by now the story was probably showing up on news sites and TV channels around the world.

Daniel scanned the room. The president's advisors, NASA representatives and military leaders sat around the table. They would all be needed for the coming investigation. But Daniel's purpose at the table was unclear. He provided oversight for government science programs. A spacecraft accident simply wasn't his domain.

"That's the basics," continued Shea. "However, as we were just beginning to discuss, there's more to this story. General Stanton?"

A white-haired man in an Army uniform leaned forward and cleared his throat. "Well, first let me caution that we're only a few hours into this and information is sparse. The Russians might have key details they've neglected to pass along to us. But from what we know so far, their story doesn't add up. Soyuz is two tons of metal, yet they're claiming their high-altitude radar didn't track any debris. Nothing. They said the Soyuz descent vehicle completely disappeared off radar."

"And what would you expect to see?" Bradley asked.

"Something. More than something, a lot. A blizzard of radar contacts. That's what makes no sense. When Columbia broke apart in 2003, our facilities tracked debris all the way across Texas and into Louisiana. Hell, hundreds of people saw it from the ground. Debris is part of any uncontrolled reentry, and it's a no-brainer to track it on radar. That's how you find it when it hits the ground."

The general glanced at Shea and waved his hand as if answering a question he knew was coming. "Yeah, yeah, it could be misinformation. It could be a Russian radar problem, or some other technical issue. Hell, I'd be willing to cut the Russians some slack, except for the communication Ibarra's guys picked up. That's pretty goddamned screwed up."

Augustin Ibarra elaborated. "Our people at NASA Goddard were monitoring the S-band communication. That's standard protocol, they monitor all near-Earth communication twenty-four hours a day via satellite relay. Just after three a.m., nearly an hour after the Soyuz event, they

picked up an audio transmission, a broken conversation in Russian. It was too faint to make out much, just a few words that didn't mean anything."

"What's strange about that?" Bradley asked. "Maybe a Russian CapCom?"

Ibarra nodded his head. "Right. Our people thought the same thing. That frequency is reserved for transmissions between space and ground. We use it for our missions, and the Russians use it for theirs too. All radio transmissions are picked up by ground antennas or geosynchronous satellites and put on a communications network, and our people at Goddard are tapped in to that feed. At first, they thought the voice was just a Russian ground controller still holding out hope. But they looked at the source signature, the metadata on every transmission. It wasn't coming from Russian Mission Control. The voice was from Soyuz."

Christine Shea shook her head. "A voice, coming from Soyuz, *after* it supposedly blew up. Or should I say, after it disappeared." She looked directly at Spencer Bradley.

There were several glances around the room, and Daniel saw the tell on Bradley's face. After many years working together, Daniel knew him well. Bradley was holding back, hiding something.

Shea looked up at the ceiling as if staring through the floor to the Oval Office above them and took a deep breath. "If we don't get this right... the president is going to have a fit."

Shea leaned forward with both hands on the table. "Ladies and gentlemen, it's time for action. This is an event that we need to fully understand, and we're not there yet. I believe there are three avenues we must investigate. The first and most likely possibility is that we're looking at a failure of the Soyuz spacecraft on reentry. Whether all aboard were killed is a separate question. NASA will take the lead, in cooperation with our Russian partners at Roscosmos. Augustin, any comments or questions about this part?" She looked over at Augustin Ibarra and he shook his head.

“The second is the possibility of an act of terrorism or war, that Soyuz was taken out by a missile or bomb. Ukrainians? Russian separatists? Who knows? While this may be unlikely, I want to know for sure. General Stanton’s team will investigate, jointly with the Russians.” Stanton nodded in agreement.

Shea paused again and took a sip of water. “The third possibility is also unlikely, but I want to investigate it just the same. This one’s politically awkward because it involves a classified program right here in the United States.”

Shea looked at Bradley and continued, “This program is an advanced scientific study run out of Fermilab in Illinois. It’s called Diastasi. It’s on the cutting edge of high-energy particle physics, and, at the risk of sounding crazy, they make things disappear. Literally, disappear. The descriptions we’ve heard of the Soyuz *disappearance* seem to me to have similarities, and I’m not a person who believes in coincidences.”

Daniel felt the energy in the room shifting, and like everyone else, he was puzzled by Shea’s statement. Daniel knew about the work at Fermilab. Buried under the ground in Illinois was the nation’s largest particle accelerator, a place where protons smashed into atoms, creating exotic particles like neutrinos.

Daniel perked up as he heard his name.

“We’re asking Dr. Rice to investigate this third possibility,” Shea continued. “Let’s keep this one quiet—no contact with the Russians, please. There’s no reason to stir up a hornet’s nest if we can investigate on our own and rule out any linkage to Soyuz.”

She turned to Daniel. “Dr. Rice, I know we’re putting you on the spot here, but I’m equally confident that you are the right person to help. Dr. Bradley can provide further details. Spence, can you get this investigation rolling?”

Bradley stood up, and Daniel followed his lead.

Ibarra held up a hand. “Before you go, gentlemen, I have a request.” He turned to the NSA and lowered his voice. “Ms. Shea, you raise a concern about a secret program. A program NASA is not involved in and had no prior knowledge of, but which could have caused a major spaceflight disaster? I can’t tell you how many alarms are going off in my head right now.”

Shea nodded. “Augustin, I completely understand, but remember that I’m only speculating. We don’t know if there’s any connection—that’s what Dr. Rice will investigate. It will probably be nothing.”

Ibarra settled back into his seat. “I’m sure you’re right, but the scenario is unsettling. NASA needs to know about any program that has the slightest potential to impact space operations.” He exchanged glances with the woman sitting beside him. “I had intended for Ms. Kendrick to work with Roscosmos, on your first scenario. But, given the circumstances, I think it would be better for her to join forces with Dr. Rice and Dr. Bradley.”

All eyes in the room moved to the unfamiliar participant at the table. She carefully removed her glasses and nodded in acknowledgment.

Shea turned to Bradley. “Any problems, Spence?”

“None whatsoever. We’re happy to include her,” Bradley responded. “Are you ready to go, Ms. Kendrick?”

The young woman stood up and grabbed her notebook. “I am, thank you, Dr. Bradley.”

Bradley ushered them from the room and closed the Situation Room door behind them, and the three stood in the quiet hallway.

She reached out to shake hands. “Marie Kendrick, NASA Special Operations. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Bradley, Dr. Rice.”

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Kendrick.” Bradley held her hand for a moment. Daniel knew the routine. She was young, maybe twenty-eight or twenty-nine. Fresh-faced, no lines around her eyes, no battle scars. Daniel had witnessed Bradley’s approach to hiring, with only the most experienced

people making it through. From the looks of things, even collaborators got the same treatment.

Bradley pointed to a NASA pin on her suit lapel in the shape of an eagle. "You've flown in space?"

She showed a puzzled look as she touched her lapel. "Oh, the pin. No. The eagle signifies NASA flight operations. In my case, seventeen training missions on the MD C9-B, better known as the Vomit Comet. Wild in its own way, but not in space."

"Training, I see." Bradley nodded. "You know, I've always wanted to do one of those zero-G flights. Does it live up to its reputation, Ms. Kendrick?"

"On the first flight, nausea is guaranteed. But you get used to it. And please, call me Marie," she asked.

Bradley nodded, his balding head glinting under the hallway spotlight. "Very good, Marie. Glad you could join us."

She had apparently passed inspection. Daniel held out his hand. "Daniel Rice, it's a pleasure having you on this investigation, whatever it is. I'm afraid I'm clueless. A classified program, potentially tied to a space disaster? Technology that makes things disappear?" Daniel turned to Bradley. "What the hell was that about?"

Spencer Bradley took a deep breath, his cold stare alternating between Marie and Daniel. "They say teams are built on trust. So, trust me when I say you're not going to like this next conversation." He pivoted and waved a hand. "Follow me."