Quantusum

James Mahu

The story of an ancient plan
and a modern man who collide
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Chapter 1: Awakening Alone

The first thing I realized was the sound of water, and then a thirst so strong that my body animated for only one reason: to drink. My eyes opened to a darkened world cast in a surreal mist of silver light. I was lying on my back staring up at a sky of glittering points of yellow and silver radiance, modulating in tiny pulses of indeterminacy.

I raised my head and looked around. Waves lapped the shore upon which I lay. My clothes were shredded and hung to my body drizzled with grains of golden sand. The air was warm and salty. My mind was awakening to the hazy form of questions. Who am I? Why was I here? What had happened to bring me to this strange place? A plaintive despair surged through me as no answers returned. I was alone—perhaps in the truest sense of the word.

I searched my mind for answers, but it was empty. No memories could be found. I, me… whatever was the thing held inside this body was completely absent—at least in terms of a past or memory. My head ached at the realization, sending a throbbing pain outward to my arms, gut, and legs. It was misery in its rawest form.

Nausea came quickly, and a feeling of grave concern attacked me. I realized that I would die if I didn't drink some water. I heard a voice from deep within, you have only minutes to live. A stab of helplessness was pushed aside as I forced my body to scratch and crawl its way to the water's edge only fifteen feet away. When I arrived—and I did—I cupped the water in my shaking hands, my elbows propped in the sinking sand, and drank like an animal. The grit of sand mingled with the water, but I gulped it down anyway.

The melody of lapping water and distant waves breaking on an invisible reef were the only sounds of this strange world. I could not recognize anything familiar. It was as if I were the only person, or creature for that matter, that was alive. I drank more of the salty, foul tasting water, knowing it was not what my body wanted, but I was in no position to be fussy. I could

feel the presence of Death’s Door like a cool draft in an otherwise warm room.

What is my name? This was the thought that flashed before my mind when I was drinking. Am I delirious and that’s why I can’t remember my own name? I splashed water all over my face, hoping it would awaken the part of me that slept. My hands, in the dimness of the night, were like foreign objects to me. I was apparently a man. How old, I couldn’t say, but at that time, I felt old. Very old.

It was too much for me to comprehend. I was abandoned on some deserted shoreline, in a condition not fit for a terrible beast, let alone a man. I was a man, wasn’t I? It was my final thought before I lost consciousness.

Chapter 2: Sunrise

Something urged me to awaken. It wasn't thirst. It was light. A luminance had transformed my world. A prescient glow from an awakening sun was filling my new world, and my eyes began to focus on the beach on which I lay. I was indeed alone. Nothing moved except the water that stretched out before me in an endless expanse, weaving its phosphorescent indigos and aquamarines like an immense tapestry of ever-changing light.

A short distance away was a small lifeboat that had become little more than a raft. There was an air of familiarity to its ruin—a kindred spirit that I shared, no doubt. It looked as seaworthy as I felt land-worthy. Perhaps it had been my ride to this place. The thought turned over in my head as I struggled to stand. I made my way to the boat in an awkward daze, and looked inside. There was nothing of value. No tools. No food. No water. My eyes roamed past a broken oar, an empty plastic bottle bleached by the sun, and assorted bones, which I surmised were once fish, but I couldn't tell for sure.

I walked past the boat, spotting something else further down the shoreline. It looked like a wooden crate, but it also appeared broken, and the contents, whatever they had been, were probably the possession of the sea. As I came upon it, letters became visible. They were in a language I wasn't familiar with, but to be fair, I'm not sure I had a language.

A muffled kick was the best I could muster, but it was enough to roll the crate on its side. My suspicions were correct. It, too, was empty. I dragged it closer to the tree line, thinking its wood might prove useful. At least it was something I could sit on while I pondered my fate. I was painfully aware that my next steps might determine whether I lived or died.

The sun was beginning to rise. Sunlight swept across the beach as I turned my attention to understanding where I was.

Why I was here, who I am, what happened to me, and all of the other permutations that were cluttering my mind would have to wait. I needed to know where I was and survey the environment to make sure I could find

fresh water, food and shelter, or find another that was like me who could help.

Standing on the edge of the shoreline, I noticed for the first time that I was in a sheltered bay that was surrounded by thick vegetation and tall trees. Behind the trees an upward sloping hill climbed steadily to a high ridge towering approximately three hundred feet above the bay. I knew immediately that I needed to go there. Only from this ridge would I be able to survey my environment and make sensible decisions on my next steps. Was I on an island, or an uninhabited mainland beach? Perhaps a city dwelled on the other side of that ridge. I needed to find out.

Chapter 3: Journey to a Ridge

Knowing nothing of my past, having no tools, no map, no trails, or even shoes, I set out to climb that ridge. Maybe conquer is a better word. I needed to know where I was, and this became my obsession, even if it killed me. The fact that I had no name or memory of my life previous to waking up on the beach seemed comparatively meaningless. What possessed me to undertake this journey amid all of my debilitations remains a mystery. I cannot, in all due honesty, express this in logical terms that would make sense to any reader.

There was a part of me, sane to be sure, that pleaded that I stay on the beach, build a shelter, find fresh water and food, and gather my strength, but I needed to gain a new perspective. I needed to look down on my situation from the vantage point of that lofty ridge.

Instead of creating a plan for my journey, I did the opposite. I walked into the lush vegetation that surrounded the crescent-shaped bay like a man possessed of a singularity rarely seen. I had no machete so I had to move cautiously, picking my way through the dense flora with care and deliberation like a spider in tall grass. I knew only the direction of the ridge, and that became my focus.

There was something calming about a focal point. One destination. One purpose. Everything else—hunger, thirst, and a thousand questions—inexplicably left my awareness. They couldn’t distract me any longer. Their power was diminished as my whole being became centered on the ridge. I controlled my attention, and the part of me that was attentive was the part I trusted. Any time I felt nudged by distraction, fear, or doubt, I knew it was from some other source that was smaller, uncertain and weak, and from that source I turned away.

The first among my many discoveries en route to the ridge was the large, funnel- shaped leaves that held rainwater pooled in their depths. I discovered them quite by accident. I stumbled on some roots and had fallen to the

ground, and as I looked up, I could see a liquid moving inside their translucent skin. I gently tipped one of the leaves and tasted fresh water. Within a minute, every leaf—and I'd imagine there were more than thirty within my reach—was emptied of its water.

My thirst was finally quenched and my health instantly restored. I noted that the plant, which I thereafter dubbed the funnel plant, was abundant on the forest floor. More importantly, however, if rain was plentiful in this place, then a stream of fresh water seemed likely as well. My ears became like radar dishes ever-listening for the gurgle of a stream or waterfall.

After about ten minutes deeper into the forest, I noticed trees with a peculiar fruit that looked like golden berries, except they were much larger than berries, more the size of small apples. I picked a few and ate one tentatively, unsure of its taste and whether they were safe to eat. I was pleasantly surprised. They tasted like nectar mixed with honey. I ate them covetously, and by the time I was finished I was a mess. Juice dripped down my tattered shirt like streams of liquid sugar, and my hands and face were saturated in sticky goo.

As I completed my feast, I had the uncomfortable feeling that someone was watching me. Licking my fingers, I half-heartedly yelled, "Is anyone there?" There was no response, though, to be honest, the sound of my voice startled me more than the absence of a reply. I knew it was my voice. There was definitely a familiarity to it, but it also sounded odd, even alien, especially in this place.

Suddenly it occurred to me how few insects I saw. Or birds. In fact, the place seemed unusually barren of animals, which was in sharp contrast to its profuse vegetation. Nonetheless, because of the absence of animal sounds I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched. It was all too quiet.

I found more of the funnel leaves and washed my face and hands in the water they provided. Lacking a mirror, I had taken note of my body and overall condition. I was not as old as I felt when I had woken up on the beach. My skin was taut, probably a man in my late twenties or early thirties I estimated, and it was dark, almost black skin, and freshly scarred cuts were common blemishes on my fingers, hands and forearms.

I had no rings on my fingers, or any distinguishing birthmarks or tattoos. I seemed fit. Perhaps a little bony in my midsection, but I reasoned that I hadn't eaten very much; otherwise, my body was lean and muscular. I felt strong. My energy level was zooming to new heights and it felt good to be satisfied of both my thirst and hunger, and to know that there were ways to sustain my life in this place.

Continuing my journey I walked with renewed energy, optimism and nimbleness. My focus returned to conquering the ridge that was unavoidably guarded by its verticality. As I came closer to the base of the ridge—where its ascent became obvious—I started to see outcroppings of brownish-gray rock. They were formations of interesting proportion, sometimes lifting into the air for twenty or even thirty feet like spires of a castle. They felt like sentries, guarding the steep incline that led to the ridge.

The first one I discovered drew my attention, because it reminded me of an abstract sculpture of a man standing in quiet repose. There were no chisel marks or evidence that it had been created by human hands, and yet I had the distinct sense that it was created by some intelligence other than nature. Its surface was weathered but still rough to the touch. I reasoned it must be volcanic and probably the handiwork of some ancient lava flow, but it made me a little uneasy as its form was so humanlike.

At least a dozen spires revealed themselves to me, after I discovered the first one. If I had walked parallel to the base of the ridge, perhaps I may have found many more, but I didn't want to explore. I wanted to climb.

For the next two hours I picked my way through every conceivable obstacle—loose stones, tree roots that seemed to mock my newfound agility, vertical cliffs that had only thin cracks for my hands and feet, and large, rough-hewn boulders that tortured my sense of balance and the soles of my feet.

As I neared the summit, I had to rest. My earlier surge of energy had been replaced by utter exhaustion. My body glistened with sweat and my thirst once again asserted its needs. I hadn't seen any funnel plants since I started my ascent up the ridge. No sounds of water either, or evidence of any kind that water was nearby, despite the lush tropical foliage that surrounded me.

The sound of rocks falling from above me grabbed my attention, and my gut winced in an instinct of fear. I stood quickly to my feet and looked up, scanning the ridge for any movement or sign of life. Ancient, weathered trees returned my startled gaze with quiet indifference. I looked intently for a few minutes searching the top of the ridge, expecting some animal to appear, but nothing peeked down at me. It must be erosion I told myself.

The scare had given me a shot of adrenalin, and I returned to my ascent up the side of the ridge. The grade was only getting steeper, leaving me to wonder how I would find the strength to make it back down to the beach without water, or shoes. My feet were already tender and sore from the journey. My only hope was that I would find a path at the top of the ridge that took me out of this place and returned me to my own kind. That hope was the source of what little buoyancy I could muster.

Approaching the top of the ridge, I began to notice that the wind had intensified and the sound of the surf below was unnoticeable. I turned for a moment, leaned against a tree, and looked out over the sea. It was a beautiful place—stunningly picturesque, but there was something terrifying to it, because I was alone without a memory of any kind that could pinpoint the reason for my presence there. I had only twenty feet left to get to the very top of the ridge, and I pulled myself up slowly so I could inspect my new vantage point to the other side.

At the summit, I literally crawled over the final barrier of rocks and tall grasses that hid the view of my total world. I looked expectantly over the ridge. I was on an island. The ocean spread out in every direction to a flat horizon of grayish blue. My heart sank. My body began to convulse in an uncontrollable shaking of anger and remorse. My loneliness expanded with each spastic breath, and though I felt tired, and my feet ached, and I was thirsty, it was loneliness that was my only concern in that first minute of knowing where I was.

From the top of the ridge I could see the entire island. It was small, maybe less than fifteen miles in circumference. It looked as though I’d be able to follow the beach all the way around the island and complete my trip in a single day. The interior of the island was thick with trees, but I could see a place, near the very center, where it looked like a small lake rested in quiet

repose. The light from the sun illuminated the island in a misty haze that hovered over the interior, so the lake was somewhat hidden from my view, but I was quite sure it was a lake, because I could detect the watery reflection of sunlight through the fog.

I estimated that the center of the island, where the lake was half-hidden beneath a foggy shroud, was about three to four miles away. The ridge circled the lake, though the part of the ridge that I was on was considerably higher than any other. It next dawned on me that I was on the rim of an ancient volcano. It was the only explanation. And the lake, no doubt, was the run-off of rain as it ran down the interior walls of the volcano. The island was like a giant funnel plant.

While I knew I needed to continue my journey, explore the lake and find fresh water, my body suddenly slumped in exhaustion and I had to sleep. I curled into the fetal position on the very top of that ridge, my forearms my pillow, feeling the warm breeze flow over me just as those rocks must have felt for thousands of years. My eyes were tear-filled, and even though a deep terror loomed inside me, I was so tired that sleep took me, just as the wind would take a seed from that ridge top and carry it to the sea.

Chapter 4: The Luminous Lake

It was once again water that awakened me, but this time it was rain hitting my face with stinging relentlessness. The raindrops were large, and the rain itself, torrential. I quickly moved down the interior wall of the ridge to an outcropping of rocks that looked bulky enough to provide some shelter from the driving rain.

As I inched backwards against the boulders, I sensed a cool flow of air behind me and discovered something that I can only describe as a crack in the rock wall. I struggled to fit through the crack, and—like a contortionist—wriggled myself inside. I couldn't see into its depths, but I had the uneasy feeling that the cavern was very large. I stayed by the entrance and watched the rain, relieved to have shelter.

Thrusting out my hands I was able to cup mouthfuls of water from the rainstorm and quench my thirst. The downpour lasted about thirty minutes and then suddenly vanished. Within seconds of the last raindrop, the sun poured out its warmth as if to say that all was forgiven. I looked, but through my narrow portal, no rainbow could be seen. I struggled out of the cave, making a mental note that it might warrant further exploration, but for now, the lake was my new objective.

The walk down the interior wall was much easier than the climb I had undergone to know my new world as an island. It was a gentler slope, for one thing, and for another, there were trails forged by flowing water. I simply followed these trails downward, and the recent rains had turned them into a mud-like substance that was infinitely kinder to my feet.

Within an hour, I had picked my way through the thick tangle of trees to a clearing that surrounded the lake. What caused this clearing? I felt that it was notable— perhaps even ominous. Why did the jungle abruptly stop? It was like an extinction

zone that surrounded the lake. Fifty feet from the lakeshore there was nothing but bare ground. Shouldn't the water create life? Several streams

were delivering their fresh water into the lake, and I could see unmistakably that the rushing water was crystal clear.

Still in the jungle, I approached the bank of one of the streams and dipped my hand within the fast flowing water. I inspected the sample, held within my palm, debating if I should drink it. I wasn't particularly thirsty. I had drunk my share of brimming- full funnel leaves on my way to the lake, but my curiosity was keen. I decided to smell it first.

The water was odorless. I didn't detect any foul smell, but the dead zone that surrounded the lake flashed a different message, and it was a warning: clear and unambiguous. I carefully carried some water back to a small fern uncoiled on the jungle floor. It was a dainty plant. Rain drops lined its softly serrated edges. I dropped the water directly over the fern, and waited. The fern was my innocent assayer—the one who would divine the water's safety.

Sitting next to the fern, my new cohort of the island's denizens, I reasoned that the center of the island had some concentrated toxicity. Perhaps when it had been an active volcano it released some chemical element that was toxic to plants and trees. Or, maybe the soil that surrounded the lake was permanently wet like a marsh, and the trees and plants effectively drowned, so they never took root.

After a few minutes of rest I looked down on the fern and saw no change in its demeanor. If the water was toxic, surely it would have had some effect by now. I decided to go the lake and test the water there. The clearing surrounded the lake like a corona, and as I walked to its perimeter—where it met the jungle—I noticed the vegetation was serrated. Something, or someone, was chewing on the plant leaves and the trees. What else could cause the sudden misshapenness in the vegetation?

As I walked the perimeter at every point where the jungle met the clearing, there was evidence of bite marks on the leaves. I looked up, and even fifteen feet up in the trees I could see the telltale signs of chewing leaves. I was not alone after all. And whatever was eating the vegetation, it was either very large, or could climb, or fly.

I found a large leaf the size of my face I suppose and examined the bite marks. They were large teeth, perhaps as large as my fist. Whatever was

eating these leaves was not prone to climb trees or fly. It was too large. As my eyes searched deeper into the clearing, I could see indentations made in the ground indicative of a large body slithering along the ground. No footprints, just writhing impressions and occasional scrapes.

It was at that moment that my mind whispered turnaround and return to the beach, but my body lurched forward into the clearing like someone possessed and perhaps a little deaf to the higher reasoning of my mind.

As I shuffled my way across the clearing, I swiveled my head so much that I was feeling dizzy as I came closer to the lakeshore. One important discovery of my journey was that the ground below my feet was firm. It was not too soggy to support vegetation. That was my intuition speaking, for I was not a botanist as far as I knew. I also noticed that the impressions were like channels or grooves and were about twenty feet across. I reasoned that if they were formed by an animal, that animal would be sufficiently large to eat me in one gulp. My knees wobbled at the notion.

The thought to run continued to scream in my mind, but it was an odd sense of purpose I felt. I needed to see the lake. I needed to know what I was up against. I moved forward, but my body language shouted “caution.” Maybe the channels were simply rainwater runoff, I explained to myself, but my mind rejected the rationalization. The bite marks were indisputable—they were certainly not caused by rain. A tooth, the size of my fist, danced menacingly in my imagination.

Finally, I could look over the embankment at the shoreline. The water was pristine and the color of gemstone turquoise. Its beauty was in odd contrast to the monsters I imagined lurking beneath its surface. I slid down the embankment, keeping my attention squarely centered on the lake. A soft mist hung over its surface and a gentle wind circulated it as if to hide its mystery. Nearer to the shoreline, however, I could see below the surface and noticed that the shoreline angled steeply down into an indigo depth. It was more like a giant hole filled with water than a small lake.

On the very edges of the shore was crystallized black sand that sparkled in the soft light. I knelt down to touch the water, never once taking my eyes off the water below. It felt warm. I cupped some of the water and smelled it. It was, like the water from the stream, odorless, but it was decidedly warmer to

the touch. Then it hit me, as soon as I stood to my feet, I flinched as I noticed my reflection in the still water. It was the first time I observed me. There I was, a lanky man, dark-skinned, long black hair tightly wound in curls too numerous to count, broad nose and mouth, and the whole of me sporting the tattered clothes of a beggar.

I ripped off my shirt in disgust; disgust that I was alone without a memory to hold. I felt like a pawn in someone else's story—a story that I was powerless to peer into. My disgust was so visceral that I even lost my fear. A sudden flood of anger entered me, and I didn't care if nature or some monster of the deep extinguished me, though, to be truthful, that sentiment only lasted a few seconds, but its ephemeral nature was for good reason.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw movement deep below in the clear water, perhaps thirty feet down. A huge, shadowy movement. My first thought whispered to me that it was a whale, but here? The dark shape was terrifyingly huge, and moved with a methodical supremacy reserved for animals that had no predators. I inched backwards, watching the shape, uncomfortably aware that my heartbeat was the loudest sound on the island.

I watched it with eyes that could not look away. The shadowy creature was a powerful magnet to my senses, and just when I thought I had seen it all, another shadow, deeper than the first, stirred beneath. There were two—perhaps more—but it was at that time that I realized I was running toward the forest as if I was following my feet.

While my body reached the safety of the jungle, in my mind I was still processing the images of those huge animals. Were their necks really that long? Were those luminescent eyes I saw really that bright? Had they seen me? And if they had, what would they do?

Hidden behind the jungle growth, I warily poked my head around a smooth tree trunk to see if the creatures had surfaced, or, worse yet, were pursuing me. There was no sign of them. My heart began its slow return to normalcy. I took a few deep breaths, and then and there decided to return to the cave that had protected me from the rainstorm and see if I could use it as a shelter. It had the obvious advantage of being far away from my newly discovered behemoth neighbors, and I'd be able to view both the interior of the island, and from the ridge, to watch for ships.

Water seemed plentiful, as long as the rain continued, and food, well I thought about the streams and wondered if fish might live in them. If not, I felt confident that I could find enough fruits and vegetables that would be edible. There was something about that cave that beckoned me, and then the thought of fire stirred somewhere inside me. How would I find fire? Again, my mind could ask the question, but seemed utterly hopeless to return an answer.

It was then that I determined, not for any particularly good reason, to stop asking tormenting questions. They reminded me of only one thing: I was in a world that seemed intent to find me inept. I made one other resolution. I would never come to the lake again. Ever.

Chapter 5: Caverns

Given the position of the sun, I reasoned it was about noon when I arrived at the cave opening. It seemed smaller to me than I had remembered and I wondered how I had managed to squeeze inside earlier in the day. I considered the possibility that I had eaten too many of the golden nectarines on my journey up the interior slopes, but I managed to force myself inside with some effort, noting that if I decided to make this my home that I would need a tool of some kind to widen the entrance— losing weight wasn't an option.

I decided to allow my eyes time to adjust to the darkness, so I sat down with my back to the only light source that was streaming in from the outside world. The interior of the cave was wonderful for two reasons: the darkness was a relief to my eyes, and it was at least ten degrees cooler even a few feet from the entrance.

As my eyes began to adjust, objects emerged. A large wall was the first thing to come into focus. It was about thirty feet away and seemed to have a curvature that made it disappear into the blackness of the cavern. In an attempt not to intrude on anyone, I yelled, "Is anyone there?" I had already seen evidence of monsters in the lake, so finding a monster in a dark and foreboding cave, I reminded myself, was plausible. It also seemed polite, because this place, unlike the lake, was enclosed, like a home, but there was one more reason, a scientific one at that: I was using my voice to plumb the size of the cavern.

I listened with all my awareness gathered inside me, and felt confident that there were no monsters, because there was absolute silence to my question. I was less confident about the size of the cavern, but instinctually I felt that the cave was large. It felt very large. My voice echoed for several seconds, and I sensed a downward trajectory. I yelled again, listening to my voice as if it were a radar signal. I sensed

that the curved wall had an opening, because my voice didn't seem to

reflect back to me when I yelled to my right side. To my left, and center, my voice reflected back promptly. I decided to edge my way to the right.

It was only about twenty feet from the entrance when I felt my leg strike something that protruded from the wall. I winced a bit as my shinbone hit the edge of some unyielding obstacle, and my hands immediately began to search like a blind man trying to make the invisible visible with searching fingertips.

My hands recognized the object as a large boulder, about three feet in diameter that blocked my path. On top of the stone I found something unexpected: a small box. My skin stippled at the discovery, and my body flooded with a mysterious hope. I was not alone. Someone else—human no less—had been in this very space. The only question was when?

It was a small box, but it was unmistakably human made. It was a carton of some kind and when I shook it, something rattled inside. I accidentally pushed on one end and it opened. They were matchsticks! I could smell the faint scent of sulfur. My hand scrambled to pick one up and strike the side of the box. My hands were shaking with excitement, and I paused to calm myself with a few deep breaths. I struck the first match, and it broke in half. Disappointment billowed with a long sigh. I pulled out another match, knowing how rare they each were. I struck it against the side of the box with delicacy. Too delicate, I admonished myself.

Finding the proper angle, velocity, and pressure, on the second strike it lit, and the cavern’s chamber suddenly leapt into a life of golden ochre and rich browns. The first thing I recognized was the scale of the chamber. It disappeared beyond the reach of the match light. A corridor led downward, but the corridor twisted into an impenetrable blackness, escaping my light and vision. The next thing I noticed was the writings, or drawings, scrawled on the walls. They were drawn by someone with considerable talent, who took great care in their creation, and I felt as though I’d entered an ancient art gallery.

The match went out, burning my fingers, and I shouted in pain. I needed a torch or candle I exclaimed, to no one in particular. The next thing I heard scared me more than I could imagine. A voice. It was unmistakably a voice, muffled somewhat, a slight echo carried it a bit wobbly to my ears, but however it found my ears, it sent a torrent of panic throughout my body.

I knelt down instinctively, swiveling my head to and fro as if a monster could break through the dark interior and devour me. Perhaps the lurking creatures at the lake had left an impression on me, but I felt such a deep fear at the sound of that voice that its content was insensible to me. It was as if my whole world was suddenly turned inside out and any form of normalcy was evicted. I tried my best to suppress any sound of my body, and gather my wits in the cold darkness.

Someone's here, that's good, isn't it? I reasoned with myself that another person could help me, but in the same moment, a more lucid thought convinced me that any person, living in this cave in the middle of nowhere, in pitch darkness, would not be a person I'd want to meet. It just wasn't right; there was no doubt about it.

I began to inch my way back to the entrance, making as little noise as possible, my hands touching the damp stone floor feeling my way. I listened with all my powers, but the sound of my beating heart and panicked breath was all I could hear. It was then that I realized I had dropped the matchbox. A single word escaped my mouth, "damn!"

It was said quietly, but with great intensity. Then I heard it again. The voice. "Come to me," it said in a commanding tone. It was feminine, but very strong. It was distant sounding and echoed around the cavern with lingering power. Two choices loomed with clarity: run out of that cavern as fast as my legs would carry me, or speak to that voice and investigate what its source was. The latter called, and part of me winced at the sound of my voice.

"Where are you? Who are you?" I managed to croak. My unfamiliar, brittle voice floated through the darkness like a disembodied spirit in search of a companion.

"Listen carefully to the sound I leave for you, follow it and you will find me. Find me, and you will know who I am." The voice began to sing a melody that I could only describe as otherworldly. I had no recollection of music or its notion of melody, but this song calmed me. Could something that was menacing sing in this way? I stood up slowly, mesmerized by the music, and edged my way toward the plaintive voice.

The cavern walls were labyrinth-shaped, curling one way and then another.

I had shuffled my way in the inky blackness for perhaps two minutes, following the singing voice as if I were in a trance. My hands gripped the walls of the corridor, feeling like a rat in a directionless maze, and with each step I felt my memory was being carved out by some insidious black fog. There would be no way to retrace my steps. Then I felt the corridor begin a steep descent. As I started down the passageway I sensed a very dim light fluttering up from below. As soon as I noticed the light, the song abruptly stopped! I was alarmed at the sudden stillness, but because I sensed light below, I gathered my courage and continued down the path.

I felt that I was going in circles as I followed the downward spiral, but after a few turns I came to an impasse. My hands searched for a way around what could only be described as a luminescent wall that blocked my path. Light was emanating from it in an odd way, as if I could see the individual photons as they leapt from the wall into the cool, damp, dark interior like miniature fireworks.

Even amid this light, I was still barely able to see my hands in front of me. My fear was that I was imagining the voice—quite possibly I had conjured the whole experience. Yes, that must be it, I thought, I'm hallucinating. Surely no reality could be like this, and if it were, what did I do to deserve such insanity?

One clarity swept over me: I was lost, and there was nowhere to go. In the darkness I would be unable to find my way out. Without light, I was like an object that had

been misplaced and forgotten, and the only light—if that's what you could call it— was at such a meager level it was contemptuous, affording me no comfort, and certainly no insight into my surroundings. I was at the end of my life where a few photons leered at me, and a deep stillness swallowed every sound of my body in absolute, ravenous disregard.

"You told me to follow you," I pleaded, "and so I followed you, but there is nowhere left to go. Where are you?"

I listened for a response. Stillness. Perfect stillness enveloped me like a heavy fog. I leaned against the wall with my shoulder wondering if I could move it, but it was solid rock, though I couldn't explain how there was light

coming from it. I reminded myself: hallucination. Craziness. I wanted to swear in some foreign language at the top of my lungs. I wanted to curse at God and man and everyone in between, and point out the absurdity of what they had put me through on my first day of being… whoever I was. But I didn't know any foreign languages, and I was quite certain that the efforts to curse God and all manner of creation was a waste of my energy and what little time I had left.

I slid to the ground wondering if I would be able to find my way out. Dejection was a good way to describe my state of mind. Anger would be another. Though I didn't put it to a vote, I'm quite certain that disgust trumped all of the synonyms that fit my sorry existence at that moment in time. I probably should have wept at that point, but my exhaustion was so complete that I had neither the energy nor the desire.

It wasn't quite the sense of giving up, though that was part of it. It was more a feeling that I should surrender to the situation. Let it have its way. Not try to assert any of my own will or interest in the outcome. I simply closed my eyes and listened to my breath, which was the only sound in the depths of the cavern.

Oddly enough, I had done this for a minute or two, and I began to feel better. For no particular reason, I had a faint sense of hope, a feeling that I could find my way out of the cavern, or at least I needed to try. Whatever was the cause of my hallucination, it didn't necessarily mean that I was incapable of re-tracing my steps.

I stood to my feet, and I looked one last time at the glowing wall of inexplicable light, and then it occurred to me: the light was passing through it, it wasn't emanating from it. There were tiny, imperceptibly small holes in the wall, and these holes were allowing light through. From my side of utter darkness, even a handful of photons shed some light. I needed a tool to enlarge the holes. If there were holes, the wall couldn't be that thick or strong.

Of course the reality of having no tools in a pitch-black cave required a very short time to make its impression on me, even in my crazed state, but I did remember stumbling on a few large rocks as I had made my way down the path, and perhaps with one of those, I could beat my way through this

wall. It was worth a try.

My search for a large stone ended in my discovering a new word. I was without shoes, and when I stubbed my toe against a large stone, a word came from my mouth that, well for me, seemed like a curse word brewed from powerful venom. I don't even remember it now, but it escaped my mouth, and in doing so, it released every alienated feeling, every angry thought and every ounce of energy, but what was particularly confusing, this anger resulted in laughter. I was actually laughing at the absurdity of my state of affairs—laughing as I hopped on one foot while my other foot throbbed in pain.

I picked up that stone in the pitch blackness, my laughter rolling through the cavern like a drunken bull, pitching against walls that provided no solace. Curiously, I was an echo of mirth that sought only one resting place, and that was a memory of who I was and why I was on this godforsaken island. Armed with my crude stone axe I readied myself to pummel it against a wall in the bowels of a dark cave. At that realization my laughter came to an abrupt halt, and for some reason I suddenly felt self-conscious about my riotous behavior.

As I found the holey wall, I began to seek out the place where the greatest amount of light escaped. It wasn't easy to find, since the holes were so small and the amount of light coming through so faint that I could barely establish where to start my hammering. It was not quite arbitrary, but after a brief analysis I decided it would be best to start banging away and see what happened. And so I did just that. I banged away.

When I had started, the rock in my hand was about the size of a coconut, and after two minutes of banging it against the wall it was diminished to the size of a large orange, but the wall, too, was showing signs of wear. As I brushed the wall with my hands, small chunks of debris fell to the ground and the holes were larger and the light a little brighter. The holes were still too small to make out anything on the other side, but I was making progress, and my attention held an odd sense of excitement at what I might find on the other side of this barrier.

After another five minutes of banging against the wall, my arm and hand were beginning to feel the percussive pain with each new swing of my

caveman hammer. As I rested to wipe away the rubble, I dropped to my knees to look through an opening that had expanded to the size of a small pebble. I put my eye as close to that hole as I could and peered through, eager to see the other side.

The source of the light was not immediately clear, but I could see something surging to the hole that I was looking through as if to block my view. I pulled back in fear. I wasn't allowed to look. I felt it. Something was trying to block my view. It was intelligent and decidedly willful; of that I was certain.

I stood to my feet, my heart palpitating in both fear and exhaustion, and decided not to give in to my fear and tiredness. My anger swelled as I hit that hole with my makeshift hammer over and over. I was irritated at anything that tried to repel me into a dark cavern where my survival was a subject of grave doubt. I soon found myself like a possessed man who was driven by some energy that was not his own. I stepped aside, no longer trying to connect dots or understand my situation, no longer looking for objects of blame, no longer feeling trapped or slighted by God, but rather, a simple, hushed calm in some quiet part of me was surrounded by a monster of power and force that I—in my very short life as me—was utterly surprised to experience.

It was an unknown quantity of time, but I noticed something was wet. The rock was slippery in my hand. I winced in pain as I realized my hand was bleeding. The hole was larger, but my attention was now on my agonizing hand. I slid back against the corridor and now wished I had kept my shirt so I would have a way to bandage my hand. Had I finally lost it? The question lingered longer than I would have liked. I fought the realization with whatever strength I had left, but the only way my body responded was to weep. I let myself weep in some strange abandonment that one can only take when they know complete isolation has come over them.

The feeling of loneliness was so commanding that I felt like a small leaf flowing in the curving clutches of a swollen river. I think I screamed in angst about my despicable condition, blaming some nameless force I could only label Injustice. I was a crazy man with no memory beyond a few hours of time, who unwisely—befitting a crazy man—positioned himself in a dark

hole with one tiny patch of light that mocked him.

My eyes were so tearful that I could barely see the wall, but I kicked it with my leg anyway. It was a terrifyingly powerful kick that shuddered through my whole body, but I heard some rubble fall. I lay on my back on the cold, rocky floor and positioned myself so I could kick with both legs against the wall. My hand was a bloody mess, but my feet were okay. I delivered another powerful kick, this time with both legs. More rubble fell, and I could sense light streaming through.

Chapter 6: Zenith

My vision was blurry from the tears, but of this I was sure, the wall was no longer a barrier to me. With blinking eyes, desperately trying to adjust to the new light, I looked inside and saw an amazing sight. There, standing with her back to me, was a woman of great beauty and form. Though she had ragged clothing like myself, she was clean, composed, and absolutely at peace with her surroundings. She seemed unconcerned by my intrusion.

I could only utter a slurred apology, my voice cracking from the stress of my recent efforts. “I’m terribly sorry to have broken down this wall, but you see… I was lost and I had no other way to find a way out… and I saw light. Please forgive me.”

The woman turned to face me as I finished my last word, and looked into my eyes with perfect poise. “Your apology is unnecessary as it was I who called you.”

“Why… why did you call me?” I stammered.

“To meet, of course, and to converse on topics of importance.” Her eyes narrowed as she spoke. “You are able to speak on such matters of importance, aren’t you?”

I stood transfixed. I remained in the outer corridor, looking through a broken wall into a room that was massive in comparison. It was lit with dozens of candles strategically placed to ensure every crevice of the large chamber was bathed in light, however dim.

In the center of the room was a circular stone table where twenty people could sit comfortably, but there were only two chairs. Inscribed onto the table’s surface were intricate carvings that I couldn’t make out, but they looked like creatures one would see in some surrealistic fantasy or vivid dream. The table dominated the room and appeared to be made of some kind of black marble, perhaps even obsidian, as it was polished like a mirror that faithfully reflected the stalactites that loomed above it.

The height of the chamber was at least thirty feet, and in circumference, I would estimate at least one hundred feet around, though it was not really circular in shape; more of an oval contour I would say, but that was just a guess, as I was mostly spellbound with the woman who stood before me only thirty feet away.

“Who are you? By what name are you known?” I heard myself ask.

“You can come in, if you want,” she said. “My name, though it is important to your kind to have such things, is not important to me, and therefore I have chosen none. You may refer to me as Zenith, if you must have a name for me.

“As for who I am, that is part of what we will discuss, for I have no way of disclosing myself in a mere sentence or two. It will require more of you than one question and a short period of listening.” She paused for a moment, motioning me inside with her delicate arms and sculpted hands that moved like ballerinas.

I stepped over the remaining rubble of the wall and came inside. I glanced around the chamber half-expecting to see other people, but she was alone.

“You’re injured,” she observed calmly. “Are you in any discomfort?”

I shook my head in a trance reflex. “No.”

To be honest, from the moment I began kicking that wall, my bleeding hand had not merited a single thought, but when she asked, it began to throb relentlessly.

“Let me see you. Come closer,” she instructed. Her voice was smooth and melodic with not a hint of stress at my presence. She was remarkable in every way, like a goddess, and I was a man in near nakedness, bleeding, desperation seeping out from every pore of my body. It was I who had broken into her home, and yet she was welcoming, bidding me to come in. Something was odd, but I reminded myself that everything I’d seen since I’d awakened on this island was odd, and I reasoned, without a memory to tell me otherwise, perhaps all of these bizarre events were normal.

“From where did you come?” She asked.

“I… I don’t know,” I replied, knowing the instant I spoke the words they

sounded disrespectful. “I have no memory. I woke up on a beach last night and climbed my way up a high ridge and ended up in this cave. I really don’t know where I came from or how I got here. It’s all very, very strange.”

I looked down on the ground, and noticed for the first time that the floor of the chamber was made from the same material as the table. It was a beautiful black, mirror-polished floor with intricate carvings of animals and various creatures I had no memory of; some of them looked fearsome, others quite benign.

“Are you familiar with spiders?” she asked.

I thought the question was amusing. “Yes, I know of such things. My memory’s gone for only those things that are of a personal nature.”

“Do you remember other people?”

“No.”

“I see,” she said mostly to herself.

“Let me have a look at your hand,” she said motioning me forward.

I dutifully came to within a few feet of her, watching her face the whole time. Her eyes were not entirely open, more half-mast I would say, as if she were both in this world and in a dream at the same time. Her skin was ivory-colored; not quite white, and her hair was slightly darker in tone, almost cream colored. She was delicate in her appearance, but I sensed a deep strength in her presence. Her sheer beauty startled me for some reason. Maybe, like me, she didn’t belong to this place. Surely, someone of her refined magnificence should not be hidden on a desolate island inside a deep cavern.

As she reached out to examine my right hand, I looked at her arms. They held subtle tattoos of the very same creatures that seemed to float on the floor and table. My curiosity boiled over. “What are these creatures that adorn your arms, the floor… and… and the table?”

“There is more to tell than I have time at present,” she sighed softly. “Hold still for a moment.”

Zenith, though it seems strange to call her by that name, a subject I will

return to later, took what appeared to be a portion of her arm as if she was pinching herself, and then waved it over my hand, dropping whatever it was she had acquired from her forearm onto my hand. My hand instantly felt better. I pulled away in amazement.

“How did you do that?”

She smiled, averting her eyes from my uncontrollable stare. “I can answer that question on many different levels.” Her voice trailed off invitingly.

“Perhaps explain it at the simplest level,” I offered, trying my best to sound humble, and I genuinely was. It was hard to have an ego when you didn’t know your name.

“I understand you have many, many questions, but the questions will have to wait for now. This is my home, and you are my guest. As my guest, you should first answer my questions before I answer yours.”

I shrugged a bit, wondering silently what answers I could possibly provide to her that would be satisfying or even interesting. I was happy to be in her presence; after all, she had healed my hand, so I felt indebted and was all too happy to comply with her wishes, whatever they might be.

“What is it you wish to know,” I asked.

She glanced at me with an expression of denial and started to walk away. “More questions… let’s sit down, and I will make some tea. Are you hungry?”

It wasn’t until the word “hungry” found its way to my ears that my stomach announced itself with a sharp pang. “Yes, very.”

“Then follow me, and I’ll get you some food as well.”

For a moment I stood still, mesmerized by her beauty as she walked away from me. I freely admit that having no memory of a human body other than my own image— the one I had seen in the reflection at the lake, my comparisons were small to say the least, but beauty as an archetype requires no comparison, and she was, for lack of a better description, the archetype of beauty in a human form.

She walked through a portal on the far end of the chamber and

disappeared. At the realization of her absence, I woke from my mesmerized state and quickly followed her. The next room, if I may call it that, was even larger than the first, and to my surprise, it contained a round pool of water that looked so inviting that I nearly dove in without thought or inhibition.

“It’s safe. You can go in,” she said. “You’ll feel better afterwards, and while you freshen up, I will get some food and tea ready.” She nodded to me as if it was settled and then turned away, walking further into the room.

I went to the edge of the water and looked down. It was deep. Bottomless. The color was deep blue-violet, the kind you might see in a twilight sky when the stars are coaxed to share their first light. I touched the water gingerly, unsure of what to expect. It was cool and refreshing. I can’t explain it, certainly not to my own satisfaction, but despite my fear of those monsters that I’d seen in the lake earlier, I dove in, and suddenly my whole being rejoiced. It was the experience of ecstasy when all of the layers of the old come peeling off, as if the moment for their release was ordained by an unseen, divine hand for which you had no conscious control. I came up for a deep breath and felt a reset to every gear, every mechanical and not so mechanical aspect of myself. It felt good. It was good.

Zenith seemed preoccupied in the preparation of food when I came up for breath, so I dove deeper down with my eyes open, searching to see if there was anything below the water. I didn’t know how long I could hold my breath, or how long it would take for my eyes to adjust to the dim light, but as my ears began to feel pressure, I turned in every direction to see what I could. The water was dark. When I looked up, I could see the diving hole and the candlelight of the chamber shimmering above. I estimated that I was forty feet below the surface, and it was then that I noticed the shadowy outline of underwater corridors that connected into the diving hole I was in.

The water was crystal clear and slightly salty. I didn’t see any fish or a single creature, and I was glad of it. I wanted only to feel weightless in the clarity of untainted water and to feel free, even if only for a minute. Then I felt something touch my leg. It was a subtle touch, but it was without a doubt real. My entire body lurched upward with all of its strength, adrenalin once again pumped through my body as if it was in limitless supply. I looked down to see if anything was pursuing me, but all I could see was darkness.

I didn’t look down again. All of my mental bandwidth was calculating how I would jump out of the water in one fluid motion when I reached the top. I was almost out of breath when I rocketed out of the water and onto the rock ledge that surrounded the opening. I was gasping for breath, and looked down at the water again from my safe perch, looking for any movement of the monsters I had seen from the lake.

“Did you find something?” Zenith asked with a puzzled look.

She was standing right behind me. In my haste to see if something was pursuing me, I hadn’t noticed her. “I didn’t see anything, but I felt something.” I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, exactly where she was looking. I imagined she was probably wondering if I was in the midst of a heart attack.

“I’m fine. Just a little startled and out of breath,” I explained.

Zenith nodded to a box behind me. “There’s a towel inside that you can use to dry off. It’ll help you stay warm. If you want some dry clothes, you will find some there, but they may be a poor fit, or not to your liking.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

I knew that if I opened the box and found clothes that were less appealing than what I was wearing, it would be an insult to my host, so I hesitated for a few seconds. I also knew her wardrobe, such as I had observed thus far, was quite, well, let’s say, “tattered” describes them well.

The box was wood and smelled of cedar. I took that as a good sign. Inside was a white towel, clean and soft; another good sign. Underneath the towel was a pair of folded trousers and a shirt that was threadbare but still usable. I felt rewarded somehow. “Thank you for these,” I said as I began to use the towel to dry my upper body.

She smiled and nodded once. “I will leave you alone so you may change.

She had already turned to walk away, and then stopped and held out her arm. “I have some food and drink prepared. When you’re ready, follow the path to that door and enter. It’s where we eat.”

“We?”

“You and I, of course.”

“Are you the only one who lives here?” I asked.

“I think we already had this conversation,” she said. “The one about questions and who gets to ask them…”

She locked eyes with me. “Be patient. There is no hurry to learn about me. I’m not the one with amnesia.”

There was a faint smile that crossed her face, and I took her reprimand in the gentleness in which she delivered it.

Chapter 7: The First Supper

I entered what appeared to be the dining room of this strange collection of underground caverns. More candles dappled the golden-brown walls of the dining room providing a pleasant light. There were no drafts that I could detect, and the candle flames bore this fact out as their light rarely flickered.

Zenith was waiting at a small table that overlooked the largest of the caverns I had seen thus far. The table was set on a ledge that looked down on row after row of what I could only assume were plants of some kind. I almost asked a question about what they were, but I thought better of it as I looked at my host.

The table was set with a simple plate and strange looking cups that were filled with an aromatic tea. The smell was heavenly. Not being an herbologist, I couldn't say what kind of herbs the tea was composed of, but I could barely restrain myself from asking another question as to the tea's source. My plate was filled with a type of plant I had never seen before; it had brownish, translucent leaves that were tinged red at their outermost perimeter. They looked a little like fins from a large fish.

"They are grown right here," she said, nodding in the direction of the plants below. "They are only found on this island."

I sat down and looked for a fork or some apparatus to eat with. There was none.

"Try the tea; I think you'll like it."

I immediately sipped the tea and smiled at the taste. It was slightly warm, sweet, and with a vivid, likable taste. There was also a feeling of calm that spread throughout my body the instant I swallowed it. "It is very good, thank you."

She smiled, pleased that I enjoyed it. "Tell me of your first experience when you arrived."

"There's not too much to tell, really," I began. "I woke up on a beach,

thirsty, delirious I suppose. I had no sense of how I got there, but I knew I needed to get some water or I would die. I dragged my body to the sea and drank what I could and then fell unconscious again."

"Was this in the day or at night?"

The question seemed a little odd to me. "It was at night."

"Was there any memory of your journey to the island's shore…" she paused, and then quickly added, "when you first became conscious?"

I thought for a moment, racking my brain to see if any memory would bubble to the surface, but none came. I shook my head, and took another sip of tea.

"Go ahead and eat," Zenith suddenly announced, as if her host duties had been momentarily lost in the conversation, and a sudden sweep of guilt caught her.

I noticed that she had only tea. Being without a fork, I wasn't sure if I should simply grab the leaves and stuff them in my mouth. I hesitated for a moment and looked around to see if there were any forks nearby.

"What do you seek?" she asked.

"A fork, if you have one."

"Ah," she said in a tone of surprise, "I have no eating utensils, for I do not eat. Please, you can use your hands, can you not?"

Once again, I started to form a question and caught myself. "Yes, that's fine, as long as I don't offend you."

"You will not offend me, don't worry."

I took a leaf from the plate and sized it up a bit, and then folded it into a shape that would fit into my mouth without too much trouble. The texture was quite rubbery, and the taste… there was none. It had absolutely no taste. At first I thought it would take awhile for the flavor to show itself like a subtle spice that creeps up on you, but this, this had no foretaste, taste, or after-taste.

However, as I swallowed my first bite, which required a significant amount of chewing I might add, it began to taste good to my body. I didn't have any

sense of its value in my mouth, but my body, as a whole, tasted it, and it loved what it received through my mouth. I devoured the rest of the leaves with great zeal. Underneath the leaves was a complex root, presumably from the plant I had just devoured. It lay there on my plate as if it were the bones of what I had just consumed.

“The roots are particularly powerful,” she explained. “They invigorate the entire body and mind. Perhaps they will help you remember who you are.”

I looked at the root, my appetite completely satisfied. It was a pale white color with tiny pink veins that encircled it, and it held no appeal to me, in terms of its appearance. However, my host had been more than civil with me in every regard, and I was intrigued by her statement.

I took it in my hand and turned it over, examining it carefully. It was, in an unpretentious way, a beautiful art form. It felt soft, almost gelatinous in texture. I noted that it was much more delicate than the leaves it produced. I split it in half with my hands and noticed a silvery substance ooze out of it onto the plate.

I took a quick glance at Zenith to see if she wanted to comment on the substance, but she only nodded, as if to encourage me to eat it. I placed half of the root in my mouth, and immediately felt a sensation that could only be described as bliss, and yet it was not bliss, for it was all feelings, all states of mind; it was everything. A million images poured across my mind in such rapid succession that I had no way to comprehend them. They were like an ocean wave that was trying to enter a small bottle.

“Do you believe in redemption?” I heard my voice ask. It was a distant voice, for I was in at least two worlds. It was as if my soul had woken inside two bodies that were separated by an ancient space so vast that time did not exist in any relevant form. I was little more than an echo of something that was so large, so powerful that I felt like a mote of dust carried by a wind that shaped universes.

“I believe in redemption,” she said. “For what reason do you ask?”

I heard her voice, but I wasn’t sure whose voice it was. I felt my vision blurred beneath tears, whether of sadness or joy I couldn’t say. I was in some holy rapture that held me in the softest grip. I only knew that I was being held

not as a prisoner, but as a coveted thing. I was essential, perhaps even indispensable.

How much time passed in this interval I cannot say. When I opened my eyes again, Zenith opened hers the very same instant, and smiled at me in such a way that I could only look away and regain my humanness.

“Why are you interested in redemption?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” I shook my head slowly—it was woozy.

“Will you eat the other half?”

I looked down at the root and saw that it had wilted and was now soaked in the silver goo that had spilled out of it. “No,” I said, shaking my head more vigorously. “I believe that’s enough food for today.”

Chapter 8: Lake Monster

“Tell me what you experienced,” she said.

I told her everything that I could put into words, stumbling and stuttering, probably like a madman. In any case, she seemed to understand, and was actually quite casual about the whole thing, as though it happened not that infrequently in her world.

“Would you like to try another approach to regain your memories?” she asked.

“I wasn’t aware that that was what we were trying to do,” I answered with a shade of indignation embedded in my response. It was suddenly clear to me that she was not so inclined to feed me, but rather had an entirely different agenda in mind: ignite my memories. Not something I was indifferent about, mind you, but I would like to know the agenda ahead of time.

“Perhaps people without identities do have egos,” she offered with a smile.

I looked at her for the first time without any fanciful hopes or impressions of her saving me, healing me, taking me under her wing as it were, but instead as someone who was a pure mystery. I should make no assumptions about this person, I told myself. She reads minds. She knows much more than she portrays in her words, and it was clear that she wanted to have power over our interaction.

“What method did you have in mind?” I managed to ask with some neutrality.

“I will show you,” she said, and with that she placed her hands over mine and squeezed them. “Close your eyes, and relax to the sound of my voice.”

There was, deep inside me, an instinct, then and there, to run from her, grab a candle and go back out the way I had come in. With light I was fairly certain I could find my way out, but then what? Having seen her beauty, I would be forever haunted that I had run away not trusting her. Besides, her touch was magnetic. My instinct to flight quickly disappeared as I listened to

her voice, and, like a dutiful child, followed her instructions.

Within seconds I saw an image come into focus. It was like a lucid dream, manifesting as I looked deeper into its outline, and suddenly all the details came into place. I was standing on the shore of a huge lake—a frozen lake. The ice was clear and appeared solid, perhaps two feet thick. It was night, and the sky was opaque, held by some fog that filtered the moonlight, casting a silvery, indistinct glow on the landscape.

Initially I didn't see it, but a glowing spark of some kind seemed to be pulling my attention to the middle of the lake.

"We can go there, if you'd like," she said.

It was Zenith, and I realized I was not alone. Her presence overshadowed the otherwise daunting landscape.

"Take my hand," she offered.

The two of us shuffled hand-in-hand onto the lake. It should have been cold, I thought, but I was comfortable in the heavy, hooded robe that I was wearing. Zenith, too, had a similar robe, but, unlike me, she kept her hood down.

The place was completely still. I had a sense that there were no other animals or people anywhere. We were alone.

"What is it?" I asked excitedly, pointing to the light source that glowed out on the frozen lake.

"They are your memories bundled together in the form of light. It is the knowledge that invents your being, your humanness."

"If they're my memories, how do I reclaim them?"

"You must touch them. You must embrace them. You must find a way to hold them in your arms and absorb them into your body."

With each step we took, I walked more assuredly, but as we got within two hundred feet of the light source, I could see it was floating above the lake, and below it was open water. I began to feel a sense of the subtle heat wave emanating from it.

"Its heat has melted the ice," I observed. "How will I get to it? The water

must be very cold."

"It is not the temperature of the water you should concern yourself with," she replied, pointing below the ice.

The glow of the light had been my focus as we had walked out on the ice-covered lake, but now, with Zenith's words, I began to look more closely at the ice, or, more specifically, what was underneath it.

The first thing that alarmed me was the sound of cracking ice. It was a good distance away, but it was, nonetheless, more than simply a sound. It was a vibration. Something was knocking against the ice, causing it to crack, and because I looked around to see what could be causing it, and nothing showed itself, I had to assume it was beneath us. Something under the ice was deliberately cracking it.

"If you know what's happening… what is doing that… then do tell. Please don't keep secrets from me."

"It will happen swiftly," she said, her voice trembling from a percussive blow to the ice field below our feet. A large crack formed just twenty feet from our position, and when I looked at it, I saw a dark form gliding below the ice. It was a least sixty feet long; its shape, amorphous, but fearsome due to its colossal size.

"What do we do?" I managed to scream.

"We're here for one reason: your memories. Go get them!" she shouted, pointing to the floating beacon of light.

It was just then that the monster heaved itself against the ice so close to where we were huddled that I fell. I could feel the water breaking through the top of the ice, and my very breath was seized by its utter coldness. I looked straight down below, and I could see the monster was diving deep so it could rocket to the surface and claim his food: us.

"Come with me!" I shouted. I grabbed Zenith's hand and ran as fast as the ice would permit. I knew the monster would thrust itself against the ice again, and if we stayed in one place, we would surely perish. Dream or no dream, I couldn't allow ourselves to become food for such a terrible monster.

As we got within thirty feet of the light, I came to a sudden stop. One, the

lake monster hadn't surfaced. Was it gone? And two, the water surrounding my memories—the light beacon—was itself surrounded by thinner ice. I could tell that the ice was broken and chipped, and that it would not support our weight, especially with a fiendish monster banging about.

"How do I get to it?" I said, nearly out of breath.

"What do you do when you see a monster?" she asked.

"Run!"

"No," she shook her head. "You expose it to light."

"Well, there's plenty of light there," I pointed to my memories. "Are you saying the monster won't come here because of that light?"

Zenith nodded.

I looked around and tuned my ears to see if I could hear any cracking sounds. All was calm and quiet, as when we first arrived.

"But how do I get to it? There's no boat. The ice will break, and I'll fall in and either drown or die of hypothermia—"

"You will not perish," she corrected. "You are in a dream world that you control. You are its author. Its puppet master. Be inventive and be persuasive."

"And how do I persuade that light to come to me… here… now?"

She came up to me, and pulled down my hood, staring into my eyes like a queen would look deep inside a man to assess his character for knighthood. "You will it."

"I will it?" I tried not to sound too incredulous, but the words came out so quickly that I'm afraid I failed my intention.

She simply nodded, as if that was enough of an answer for anyone with sufficient brain mass. Ah, perhaps I had found the source of my folly. I wasn't such a smart person. After all, I was without memory of myself. Perhaps, in my surly stupidity, I had left my memories somewhere. Whatever the cause of my problem, surely a lack of brain mass explained much of it.

"Think," she commanded, "what will your memories provide you that you

lack now?”

“Context,” I said. “I will know why I am here—well, not here, but on the island, and knowing who I am, once I know that, I will understand why I am here. Context!”

“This is not an island,” she said. “To what are you referring, my dear?”

I looked at Zenith, but her face had suddenly changed, dark hair framed her porcelain face, jewelry lay around her neck, her eyes were deep brown. I swiveled my head between her and the light that blazed, stuttering in disbelief. “The island, where we met… where… where I just ate the food… the food you gave to me—“

“My dear Solomon, have you lost your mind?”

I looked at her, searching for any sign that she was lying, but all I could sense was genuineness. I had a sinking feeling. My knees began to buckle, and I felt a thump— more ice cracking. I honestly didn’t care at that point if a monster came and swallowed me whole. Something had already taken me. Something had ripped me from the reality that I was supposed to live in. I wasn’t a puppet master. I was a puppet, and if one of the strings was made from memory, it had been cut. I was a defective puppet. It was my final thought before oblivion overtook me.

Chapter 9: One Question

When I regained consciousness, Zenith's face was the first thing I saw. She was hovering over me, and I was on the ground beside the table. I tried to speak, but couldn't. She offered me some tea and helped me to sit upright, which I did with some effort. My body ached, my head ached, everything was sore and out of sorts. I was in such a state of confusion that I wasn't sure if I was back inside a dream, or I had just left one.

I sipped some tea, hoping to find some relief, but only managed to dribble it over my chin and shirt. The little amount that found its way into my mouth was unsatisfying. I closed my eyes as the room became a whirling mass of atoms, and I suddenly felt caught up in the rotation as though I was a slow-motion electron of my reality. The next thing I knew I had vomited on the floor, as if my body needed to expel the experience it had just received, and this, as unpleasant as it was, was its way of doing it.

I felt like a child—a silly, sick child. "Forgive me," I managed to utter.

"Try to take some deep breaths," she offered, ignoring my apology. "Slowly… slowly."

"What just happened?"

"You experienced a new dimension."

"I'm well aware that I'm about to ask you questions that you may not answer," I said, "but I must ask them, so please answer me."

"I will respond to a question if you will walk with me."

I nodded in agreement, and stood to my feet very slowly. I held the back of my chair for support, uncertain if I would be able to walk, but the dizziness seemed to subside, and I was more or less stable, at least I was upright on two feet.

Zenith took my hand and placed my arm underneath her arm. "Are you ready?"

“I’m ready to ask my question.”

“Then walk.”

Her tone held a challenge, and I took a step and then another as if I were just learning to use my legs. I can’t explain what had come over me, but I literally felt like my body was not my body.

She took me down some stairs to the plants below and out the far side of the large cavern to a new room. This chamber was small with rounded walls and no furniture. It was only a waiting room or connecting chamber, for beyond it was a larger cavern, though it was mostly dark: one feeble candle provided a smidgen of light.

“Try to walk on your own,” she said, unlocking my arm from hers. “I think you’re getting your legs back under you. I have something I wish to show you, and then you may ask your question. Follow me.”

I mumbled in agreement and steadied myself against the wall with one arm. She strolled into the darkened chamber and I watched her almost disappear into the darkness, but my eyes were adjusted to low light, so I could track her shadowy presence.

I wondered what she could show me in darkness, when as soon as that thought surfaced, a light appeared. She had thrown a switch of some kind, and a light surged through the cavern like a lightning bolt. It came close to hitting me, but I could not detect any heat and, much to my surprise, I had no fear from its sudden appearance.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Is that your question, for I offered you only one?”

I shook my head, not wanting to answer her pointed question.

“I’m in a generous mood,” she said, after a long pause, “so I will tell you anyway. It’s a technology that heals imbalances within a human’s electromagnetic field. These imbalances are densities that weigh on the energy field that structures you at a subtle level—far too subtle for your eyes to see. You do not even know about these densities, and indeed, have become quite used to carrying them around with you as though they were a natural part of you.”

She came over to me and used her arms to position me in a certain place. “Stand here for a moment.”

I noticed it was the very spot where the lightning bolt had passed a minute earlier. “You’re not planning on using me as target practice, are you?”

I could sense her smile, though I couldn’t see it.

“No, not in the way you imply it.”

I watched her darkened form move away, and once again I heard the flip of a switch and a momentary flash that engulfed me. The light was so intense that even with my eyes closed, when I opened them, I could not see. I imagined that my entire body was like a giant, dilated pupil, flooded with light one moment and plunged into darkness the next.

Without any reason, without any cause that I could hold as a rational thought, I began to weep. Maybe it was exhaustion, or the jumbled events of my first day on this island, but whatever the reason, I felt tears streaming down my cheeks, and yet I didn’t feel sad or lonely. I felt relief. I felt unburdened. I felt that something, perhaps this lightning bolt, had washed away a heaviness that had engulfed me, and in some ways, consumed me.

“How do you feel?” Zenith asked.

I could see her form like a black mist that hung in the air. Thousands of light particles danced around her—the aftereffects of the light, I told myself. “I feel better… lighter.” I took a deep breath and expelled it slowly. “I feel more in control of myself… I feel that I have more… consciousness, if that’s possible.”

“Whatever patterns you have etched within your body, heart and mind, they have become a hindrance to your discovery of the moment—your present time. It is these densities that funnel your vision to the very things that distract you from your mission.”

I heard the word “mission” and immediately felt my heart unwind. My heart had been clenched, tightly holding something that I couldn’t pin down, but at the sound of this single word, for some peculiar reason, my heart, like a fist, splayed its fingers and opened. It only lasted a few minutes I suppose, but it felt glorious. I felt as if my heart was beating to the same rhythm as that

of whoever created me. It was this connection to my creator that felt wonderful, and I wanted only to bask in this feeling, praying it would never end.

When I regained my human senses, I noticed that Zenith had lit a candle, and I could see into the cavern with greater ease. An object that looked very similar to a large telescope was pointing at me. Behind it was a wall that appeared to be made from metal, perhaps silver, and behind that was another room, though I couldn't see into it. This cavern had the persona of science, as I could see other objects that appeared to be machines or technologies of some kind.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"Is that your question?"

I shook my head. "My question was about the dream I had, but now it seems like other questions are more important. Will you only entertain one question, or may I ask more?"

Zenith smiled at my obvious dilemma. "For each question I respond to, I will need something from you."

"What?" I said, putting my arms out, emphasizing my unreserved ownership of nothing.

"I will decide later," she said. "Do you agree?"

"Will you be reasonable in your request?" I asked.

"Of course."

I nodded. "Then, yes."

"Very well, we have an agreement, but before you ask your questions, let's go to the observation room where we can be more comfortable."

Chapter 10: Window

The observation room was a small chamber down a long, winding corridor that was flanked with stalactites and dripping water. As we walked down the corridor, I had the distinct feeling that I could smell fresh air.

“Do these caverns have exits to the outside?” I asked.

“One of the attributes of the observation room is that it has a small window that overlooks the island, hence observation room.”

When we arrived at the observation room, the smell of seawater was wafting in through a small opening in the wall. Being generous, I would estimate it was about two feet high and one foot wide. It was probably caused by some erosion, but I could see upon closer inspection that it had been chiseled at the bottom, presumably by human hands and a tool of some kind.

It was good to smell fresh air and see natural light, though my eyes took several minutes to adjust to the bright light. It was notable to me that Zenith didn’t have any problem adjusting to the light.

There were two wooden chairs that framed one side of the room, and one of the chairs was positioned to look outside; that was the chair that Zenith sat in. The other one faced the opposite direction, looking at a wall of ochre-colored rock with black, indecipherable markings.

“What do you observe in the observation room?” I asked as I sat down.

“Mostly weather changes, sometimes birds, sometimes… even visitors.”

“Were you watching me as I climbed the ridge this morning?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know anything about me?” I asked, emboldened by our agreement. “In terms of my identity, where I came from, why I’m here on this—“

“Of course,” she said. “This island attracts people like you. It is a web, sometimes your kind passes through, and other times, they are stuck upon it,

and I, well, I would be the spider that inspects the visitors."

"For what purpose?" I asked incredulously.

"To help them, of course."

"But a spider, as you just described yourself, kills its visitors and eats them. Why did you describe yourself as a spider?"

"Metaphors. Just metaphors."

I leveled my eyes at her. "Do you know anything about me that you haven't shared?"

It was the first time I could say that Zenith appeared uncomfortable with my questions. She shifted in her chair, and it creaked in accord. I felt a deliberate attempt on her part to collect and order her thoughts, which, in my calculations, could only mean that she intended to tell me partial truths.

"I will tell you this," she began, "you are not a simple man."

She paused, narrowing her eyes like those who fine-tune their memory and perfect their word choice. "On your planet, human beings exist as a species that were intended to evolve towards immortality. They were to do this on their own—through the proper choices they would make by their innate understanding of what is good and what is evil.

"A rift occurred in that plan, and it came in the form of emotional misconduct. It was as if humans could not control their emotions through their reasoning, and because of this, they became fractured, diminished, and pawns of those who decided to cultivate this dark side of humanity.

"You see, human beings—as a whole—possess goodness and moral beauty, but they also possess the absence of same, or what some might call soullessness. The soullessness of humanity is the part that obediently waits in the shadows of those who point the finger of destiny and define what humanity is and will become, while all the time, humanity already knows what it is, deep inside itself, right here." Zenith held her hand over her heart, and paused.

"When human beings decided to give away their power to those called gods, monarchs, kings, queens, priests, presidents, senators, and all the

variations that stood between them and the simple truths within their hearts, they became lost. In this state, they walked away from their truth, and the further they journeyed into the future, the further they lost their way until they finally forgot that they were lost.

“When humans have gone so far astray that they have forgotten they are lost, it is necessary to wake them up, and remind them of their condition. So, the Creator of your world sent avatars or immortals to remind human beings that they had unwittingly walked into a prison at the behest of those who rule them for greed and glamour.

“You were one of those avatars… but you failed…”

When her voice trailed off to silence, I sat in the realization that what she said was truthful. Failing my creator was a weight I had unconsciously felt since waking up on this island.

“How? How did I fail? Can you tell me this?”

“I can show you.”

My heart skipped a few beats as it lunged upwards to my throat. I wasn’t sure if I was prepared to see how I had failed in my mission. If there was one thing I felt certain of, it was that Zenith could do things, make things happen, that were outside of my reality. I believed her when she said she could show me, though I had no idea how.

Chapter 11: The Pedestal

Zenith leaned forward in her chair and placed her hands upon mine as she had done in the dining room. “Listen to my voice and follow me in all that I say.”

Her voice changed slightly. It held a more musical inflection, and a purer, concentrated tone. Within seconds after I closed my eyes I started to see the forest she had taken me to. Trees began to materialize inside my mind, and I was breathing inside a lush forest of huge trees, flowing streams and abundant wildlife.

I had some inkling of Eden, of how it would look and feel, and the forest I was in felt like Eden. It was a beautiful, untouched place where nature’s harmony had been uninterrupted for thousands of years. I looked around expecting to see Zenith, but I was alone.

I began to think that I had been there for many days. I had this feeling of tiredness that I hadn’t felt while talking with Zenith. I found that with every passing second of time, my connection to the island was fading. It was as if my reality were shape- shifting to a primordial forest, and I had no recollection once again of how I got there.

Within ten minutes of my arrival in the forest, I could remember nothing of the island, Zenith, or even my conversation with her about my failure as an immortal. My only thought was on finding something, but that object or person I was searching for was unknown to me. I saw birds, rabbits, deer, but nothing that looked fearsome, and yet, I held a fear.

Was my fear related to my search? I didn’t know, but I kept on walking. The path I was on, to the extent I could refer to it as a path, led me through the forest, snaking my way around tree trunks that were so large that it would take twelve of me, hand-in-hand, to encircle them. After a while I heard a sound emanating from a distance far away. It felt like a warning sound. I imagined it would be very loud if one were near its source, but there was something about it that called me.

There was really no way to understand my world, my motives, my interests, or anything else. I was, once again, manifested into a world I had no context or memory. I only felt one certainty, the origin of this strange sound was beckoning me, and I needed to find it. It was the only purpose I felt.

Eventually I came to an open meadow and stopped to rest for a moment. In the far distance I could see mountains scaling the sky, and flowers of every imaginable color danced in the wind across boundless fields. The sound was growing louder, pulsating in mysterious code. Out of the corner of my eye, across the field I could see a structure that appeared to be geometrical. It was far in the distance, perhaps two miles, but my eyes could see sharp corners, the kind that only humans made. I decided to make it my destination, because it was the most probable source of the sound.

The meadow was thick with flowers and tall grasses that were waist high. After ten minutes of walking through the field, I noticed a vibration like a sharp stutter of the wind. It felt like a jagged vibration, and it filled the entire field I was walking in. I considered running, but where? It was a low frequency, barely audible, and I had an unpleasant feeling of being observed.

I crouched down, my eyes level with the grasses and flowers, and turned slowly around. Something moved through the air, but at such high speeds, I could not see it anymore than one could see a hummingbird’s wings. I squinted as if that would make it appear, but it was a phantom. Then, out of the corner of my eye I saw what I could only describe as a ball of light approach my position with authority. Its brilliant core was about three inches, but it had an aura that was nearly two feet in diameter, and this was in open daylight. I felt like a trespasser, and the instinct to run sounded its alarm, but it was too late. My only hope was stealth. I froze.

The next couple of minutes were the longest in my life, or so it felt. The floating ball of light hovered within two feet of my head looking at my profile as I posed like a bronze caricature of a human. There was a subtle electrical field that I could detect as it slowly came as close as a few inches. It was clearly assessing me, and a part of me wanted to scream, to scare this light-ball into submission and send it back to the dark, sordid places it must inhabit when it wasn’t terrifying amnesiac humans, but I stayed my position.

As the ball of light slowly orbited my head and stared into my eyes (that’s

the way it felt to me), I looked deep inside its light and could see it was not a finite object. Its depth was enormous. I have no idea how it could be possible for something that was only three inches in diameter to appear to have the depth of a star field, but this did.

As quickly as it had arrived, it vanished. It sizzled into the sky and in less than a second, it was completely gone. I scratched my head in stunned wonderment. Perhaps these were common in this world, I couldn't say, but I would prefer not to meet up with another, because they were undeniably intrusive and disturbing.

The sound in the distance suddenly stopped. My heart trembled as I heard, for the first time, the utter silence of my world. I stood up just high enough to see the structure I was walking towards, and figured it was about a half mile away. I don't know why, but I started to run towards it. It was one of those decisions the body sometimes makes without asking permission from the mind.

As I ran closer and closer to the manmade structure, I could tell it was some kind of a home—to what I couldn't say, but it had a door and seemed to be made out of a shiny metallic material. As I came closer still, it began to come into focus. It was not a home, but rather a large pedestal or platform made from a golden-colored metal, possibly gold, though given its size, gold seemed an unlikely source.

The pedestal was huge, its column standing thirty feet high, supporting a round platform whose diameter was easily seventy feet. The pedestal base was square and its support column was many-sided, perhaps five, but I couldn't tell for sure. The circular top had an ornamental railing that surrounded its perimeter. I could see a door near the base, which I could only assume permitted access to a stairway that led to the top of the platform. I decided to go in, if no other reason than I would have a great view of my environment, and from there I could determine my next move.

As I entered the doorway, I felt the cool darkness of the interior. There was a spiral staircase, made from the same golden material that went up to the platform, as well as down into a sinister murkiness. I started up the stairs looking up, unsure of what might await me. I felt a presence. A presence that made my skin crawl. It was a gnawing feeling as if something was attacking

me from the inside. At one point up the stairs I looked down and could swear I saw a pair of eyes glowing below, its body hidden in the darkness. It was all I needed to sprint up the stairs.

There was an open door and I literally scrambled through it as if busting out of prison.

“I see you found me.” It was a deep voice, almost a bellow.

Chapter 12: A Change of Mission

I turned to see a large creature sitting on a golden throne. This creature was the oddest mixture that a fertile imagination could conjure. It had great wings like that of a thunderbird, a bull's body, a human's head, and legs that could only be fashioned from a mix of human and gorilla. It looked powerful, cunning and indisputably master of its domain.

I looked around and determined we were alone. My voice was lost. I wanted to say something, but I was too stunned by the appearance of this creature. I could only step back slowly, moved by something akin to awe, but more likely fear than anything else.

"I am your Lord," the creature said. "You are my guest."

At his pronouncement, I relaxed enough to find my voice. "You implied that you were waiting for me. I do not remember having any appointments."

The creature let out a great laugh that filled the air. "Ah, you will be an interesting one, I can see that now. Some who come unto me believe themselves to be superior. Some come to me with the quake of fear so deeply rooted that they cannot stand before me without a quiver in their voice. Some do not climb those stairs at all, preferring to go below where they feel a natural belonging.

"But you, you will be an interesting one, for you do not fit into any of those classes. You are what we call in my world a Sonverto."

"And what is a Sonverto?" I managed to ask, avoiding direct eye contact.

"They are the ones who unify, who build the paths of oneness in a fractured social order, or, in some rare cases, an entire species." The creature paused for a short time.

My mind was still measuring the enormity and stunning, unimaginable reality of the creature before me.

“Please, take me in with your eyes,” the creature said, standing to its feet. “When you’ve had your fill, do let me know, so we can have a conversation worthy of my time.”

The comment stung. I could feel the rebuff like a slap across my face. This was not a creature I wanted to upset. “I ask your forgiveness,” I responded with a subtle bow of my head. “It’s just that I’ve never seen a being such as yourself. What… what are you?”

“I already told you, I am your Lord.” There was more than a hint of annoyance in the creature’s voice. “The mere fact that you have not seen one such as me is proof that I am unique. I am He who sits above the rest. I am the One who is anointed to rule the common man.”

“Are you human or God?” I asked.

“I am neither. I am a new order of existence. I am that which is imagined by those who are manifest in bodies. I am the out-picturing of trillions of imaginations that ultimately collect in one place, that coalesce into one entity, and that entity is the combined power of all creatures great and small. They, all of them, have created me to be their Lord, and I, being of such immense power and compassion, have granted them their wish.”

I looked around again, thinking there must be others here, but we were alone. “Who do you rule? It seems there is no one here in this world.”

The creature once again laughed almost uncontrollably. “I have arranged this meeting in solitude to spare us any distractions. I can snap my fingers and have millions of your kind surround us in an instant. Is this what you’d prefer?”

I shook my head. “No, I prefer it this way.” I tried to sound as fawning as I could, and my tone seemed to satisfy him as he sat back down upon his throne.

“I can offer you anything you can imagine. You have only to ask.”

No one had ever extended to me such an open invitation to self-interest. I didn’t know how I should respond. I aimed low. “If you can, I would love a glass of lemonade.”

I’m quite sure that I hadn’t yet finished my sentence, and a glass of

lemonade was hovering inches away from my right hand, complete with a red straw and ice-cubes.

The creature laughed. “I like your unassuming nature; it is a customary trait of Sonvertos.”

“Do you really know who I am?” I asked, drinking the lemonade with both curiosity and relish.

“If I am your Lord, then would it not make sense that I know who you are?”

I nodded dutifully. “Yes,” I admitted. “Then please tell me who I am.”

“As I already said, you are a Sonverto. Your mission is to defile me,” the creature said with a smile. “However, as I will soon show you, you will not be successful, because you will become one of my finest servants.”

“Why would my mission be to defile you?”

“It is how you were designed.”

“By whom?”

“By your creator,” the creature announced.

“You are not my creator?”

“I am not your creator, I am your Lord,” the creature reminded, whispering something under his breath.

I studied his face for the first time. He was human from the neck up. His facial features were exaggerated as if they were removed from a giant and placed on an average-sized head. His forehead was very small and almost always seemed crinkled with a grin that started from his chin and rounded his entire face in an unbroken crease. His eyes, as large as they were, lacked any color, but if I had to choose one, it would be an ordinary, lusterless olive. His complexion was reddish in tone and had numerous pockmarks that competed for the eye’s attention, despite his disproportionately large nose, mouth and eyes. His head, as peculiar as this may seem, was the least appealing part of him, which is really saying something, because his ape-like legs and bull’s body were not, in themselves, things of beauty.

It was easy to feel relief that he was not my creator. “What credentials do

you have that prove you're my lord?"

"Ah, ninety-nine words, and you have already found the crux!" He started clapping his hands in mock applause. "You're the first; the very first! I was right about you. Less than a hundred words and you found the right question. I do believe I will enjoy having you as my servant. Yes, very much indeed."

He snorted a bit, snapped his fingers, and in the next instant, he was an elegant, middle-aged man, with slightly graying hair that was cropped tight to his head. He was, to anyone's benchmark, a handsome, well-groomed man; the polar opposite of what I had seen only moments earlier.

"I am the same… well, not the same in appearance, of course, but in every other respect, I am. Do you prefer this façade?"

Nodding in a trance, I managed a weak, "Yes."

"They always do," he replied with a laugh. "The one thing I can't change is my personality, but I believe you will find a way to endure me. My one weakness is that I like to change my appearance—keeps my visitors off balance."

I stepped forward, feeling more comfortable. "May I sit?"

"A chair for your comfort," he said, and suddenly a beautiful gilded chair with red velvet cushions appeared. "Perhaps a small table for your lemonade?"

Before I could answer his rhetorical question, a small wooden table materialized directly next to my new chair.

I nodded in stunned appreciation and sat down, placing my glass on the wood table beside me. It was a very strange scene as I'm sure you can imagine. Here I was, in a world I knew nothing about, sitting atop a golden dais amid a beautiful, but lonely world. I was talking to a creature that could become anything it wanted. It seemed to have unlimited powers, and an equivalent ego. I was overmatched to such a degree that I began to wonder what the point of my existence was. Why was such a creature as this even remotely interested in me?

"Let me return to your question," he said, interrupting my reverie. "My credentials are very simple. Look what I can do, and tell me, have you ever

seen another with such enormous powers?”

He stood up from his throne, and manifested a flat, circular tabletop that hovered above the floor by three feet, made of gold—polished, smooth and simply magnificent. Suddenly, miniature human beings began to appear on the surface of this tabletop, five, ten and then twenty or so, looking perfectly real in every respect. “Go ahead, pick one up and examine it.”

I shook my head. I didn’t want anything to do with his sorcery.

“Sometimes, it’s the size. Too big, and no one wants to pick them up.”

The people had been about five inches tall, but suddenly my host made them smaller, perhaps no larger than an inch. “Go ahead, pick one up. You’ll see they are absolutely perfect in every detail. Just… bite-sized.” He laughed again with his characteristic bellow, though in his new body it was shallower sounding.

“I want nothing to do with your sorcery,” I said. “Please, I will accept your credentials, stop this now.”

The scene was immediately removed from sight, and he sat back down on his throne. “You are indeed a fast learner. Perhaps I could make you more than a mere servant—”

“Why would you, with all of your powers, want me as your servant? What could I possibly do that you can’t do for yourself?”

“If you are my servant,” he replied, his tone turning ruthless, “you cannot serve your creator. I do not need you to do anything for me; I only need to make sure that you do nothing for the one who created you. That is enough.”

“Are you aware that I have no memory of my creator? I have no memory of anything relative to myself. I’m a hopeless case—either for you or my creator.” As the words left my mouth, I felt how pathetic I sounded, but it was true. I let the words hang in the air. I could no longer think of my host as a creature, but it was even harder to see him as my lord. Honesty would be my only protection against this entity, whoever he was.

The sun was warm, and a light breeze blew across the platform, carrying the heavenly scent of flowers. For a moment, just a glimmering moment, I felt my heart open with a depth of empathy that took me by surprise. Maybe

my host was just confused. All of his incredible power was boring him. His aspirations were broken for he had no hardships or obstacles to overcome. There was nothing to temper his heart's desire. He was empty.

"I'm aware of everything relative to yourself," he said with a slight growl in his voice. "You are the Sonverto I have been waiting for. It is you, in the absence of memory that is to bring a new medicine to your planet and species."

"What medicine? I'm not a doctor, am I?"

"It is not the medicine of a physician that I speak of," he replied. "It is the energy of a million stars, the light of a universe, the centermost part of love, the beautification of what is called into union. You see, these are all parts of your mission, and the beauty is that you know nothing about it. You do not understand what is coming from within you.

"My solution is a simple one: do not perform your mission. Join me instead. Is your creator here? Does your creator care about your amnesia? Does he, or she, or it ever speak with you? Your creator has placed this great burden upon your shoulders, but gives you no help, not even memory. You are told to help, no, you are compelled to help your fellow man, but why? Does your creator really care?"

He paused for a moment or two. "As a Sonverto, you will bring all of this to your planet without knowing it is being released—that it is being shared. You will get no notice. There will not be a single book that mentions your name as the contributor to this revolution that is to take place. You will gain nothing… in fact, you will lose everything, even your life. And for what? An unsigned mission? Why would you want to undertake this?"

I hadn't seen my host so somber, as when he said those words. There was a visceral gravity as he spoke. I felt my heart and mind slowly withering in his words like flowers strangled by an oppressive heat. My heart sunk in confusion.

"If what you say is true," I said, "then I have an important mission, and whether I know what it is, how it will unfold, or acquire any recognition for it, it doesn't matter. If I am truly a Sonverto, then I must perform my mission. Besides, your offer of servitude is far less inviting than you imagine it to be."

“Bravo,” he said, “you have found the next crux in our conversation.” He clapped again in delight like a madman. “I would propose that you take your mission and invert it. Instead of providing your special training to humanity without recognition or memory, you become the greatest messiah ever to teach on your planet’s hallowed surface. You dictate the terms of your mission to your creator, and your first dictate is to regain your memory. Should you be refused, you will have refuge in my world, and I will fulfill every desire you could possibly imagine.”

I suddenly saw how powerful my host really was. It was not his sorcery I had to be wary of, those were simply parlor tricks in his world, but rather, it was his ability to seduce, using the ego and emotions as his allies.

“If my mission is to help my fellow man, and to do this as my creator wills it, then I must do this. It is not for me to decide how best to serve the one who has given me life—”

“Why? Why is it your creator’s role to decide this? Don’t you have freewill? I have freewill. I can kill you right now with nothing more than a thought command. Do you think your creator would stop me?”

I shook my head. “Probably not, but I take your point, so please, no thought commands.” I hoped I had dodged his threat. “What is your offer for my loyalty?”

He looked at me with suspicious eyes. “Sonvertos are not easy to convince. Your question is insincere and offered only as a distraction. Do you think I am so easily misled?”

“Again, my apologies.”

His glare was disturbing. “I can end your life, or I can make your life a living dream of ease and pleasure. If you choose ease and pleasure, you will live in my world as an immortal. If you choose to serve your creator as a Sonverto, you will die in my world. That is my offer for your loyalty. It’s a simple proposition, is it not?”

“You say I will die in your world, but what of the other worlds? Will I die in those as well?”

My host leaned forward on his throne and almost whispered, raising his

eyebrows like orchestra batons. “I will see to it.”

Chapter 13: Simplest Path

There was finally some clarity. I understood this creature. He was a demon, perhaps, though I can't say this for sure, he was the demon. I was being tempted to dispose of my mission, even though I couldn't, if asked, tell anyone what my mission was.

I took a sip of lemonade and straightened my posture, and took a deep breath. "If I abandon my mission, my purpose for life is extinguished. I'd be like a candle whose flame is blown out and its wick extracted—meaningless. I'd simply take up space."

"Exactly!" he said excitedly. "You'd be normal. You'd fit in. If you'd prefer this destiny to living in my world as a perfected being with no cares or worries, then I can grant you that as well. I will only give you one chance to accept the life of ease and pleasure, and that chance is now. Do you accept my offer?"

I found my head shaking back and forth as if it were an autonomous appendage. "I can't abandon what my creator has made me to do. You tell me that you are my lord, but your only credentials are threats and sorcery. You have no real proof—"

"You dare to complain about my supposed lack of proof, when your esteemed creator sits on a throne in some far distant universe, ignorant of your plight? What is his proof? Do you not see the absurdity of your gamble?"

"I see that my gamble is to strike a deal with you. My decision is to trust my unseen creator, or a demon right in front of me that desires to enslave me or render me useless—"

"I never said 'useless'—I said 'normal,'" he corrected. "You can have a family, adoring wife, beautiful children, great job, all the material pleasures and signs of success. I can make it all happen. Does that sound useless to you?"

I shrugged, mostly because I couldn’t think clearly. I had no real response to offer, all I could think of was why would my creator let me sit alone in front of this demon and be tempted like this without any help. Was my creator going to let me perish?

I closed my eyes and prayed. I didn’t care if the demon saw my vulnerability. I didn’t care if I was under his scrutiny. I only wanted to send out a prayer to the one who created me and ask for help. Any help.

“My time is short,” the demon announced. “You have three choices, one of which, the most sensible choice, you have already turned down. So now you have two choices available to you: a normal life as a human being, or death as a created being that will forever be non-existent from the moment I send my thought command. Which is it?”

The vise was tightening to such a degree that I could almost see my prayer for help circling in some vast space unacknowledged, like a small leaf caught in a vortex from the depths of the sea.

The demon cleared his throat. “Before you make your choice, I will indulge you one last time. As I said to you before, other Sonvertos have made their way to me. Most have selected wisely, but occasionally, one like you, will resist. Of those resisters, I have made it my standard practice to be lenient, and let them talk with one of their own. The very first Sonverto who denied my offer is still alive. I made him my example of poor choices, so resisters, such as you, could see what awaits them.”

A screen of some kind suddenly appeared between us that was semi-transparent, and moments later, a man, naked, bleeding from various wounds, and completely tattered in every bodily way burst through the screen onto our platform, choking and writhing on the ground. The screen promptly disappeared. Without thinking I knelt beside him and tried to comfort him. I had no recognition of him, and yet he seemed vaguely familiar to me.

His skin was a pale yellow, smeared with layers of blood and dirt. The smell of him was vividly unpleasant, and his hair was matted in utter disarray.

“Tell him who you are?” the demon commanded, looking down on the helpless man gurgling in what appeared to be his own blood.

I grabbed my lemonade, but as I handed it to him, it vanished into the air.

The demon smiled, and wagged his finger at me. “Let him be, he’ll be fine in a moment or two.”

To my surprise, the man did compose himself, taking deep gasps of breath and bit by bit came to a point of relative composure. He looked around in dazed wonderment, and then I saw a look of dejection fill his face as he turned and saw me.

“I said…tell him who you are.” The demon spoke in measured words and severe tone.

The man looked at me with eyes that had seen misery for too long, and wished for death to take him. “I am the one they called Dou Xing.” After saying the words, he spit blood on the golden floor.

Dou Xing was the man who had ventured into the wilderness in China over three thousand years ago. He was a legend. It was said that he had communed with God for nearly two years in the wilderness, never partaking of food or drink during that time. He had amassed the greatest teachings ever assembled, but one day, as the legend goes, he was bringing his teachings to a monastery and was stopped on the road by a beggar, who recognized him, and asked him for food. Dou Xing, having none, replied that if the beggar would follow him, he would ask the monastery to feed him.

The beggar followed him, but that night he stole Dou Xing’s teachings, believing they could be sold for money to the Emperor or one of his underlings. The beggar, amid his journey to the Emperor, became curious and started to read what he had stolen, and it so transformed him that he tried to return the teachings to Dou Xing, but a great wind storm rose up, and scattered all of the writings into the Taklamakan desert.

Dou Xing, upon hearing the fate of his life’s work, walked out into the desert—a place that no one had ever returned from—in search of his writings. It was said that he searched for many months, but never found more than a handful of pages. But even these fragments of his work, which later became known as the exSpiritmentalist Handbook, survived the test of time as one of the most influential writings of humanity’s esoteric schools of thought.

Dou Xing was at my feet, looking up at me like a beaten dog. I could not fathom that it was actually he. “Can you prove it is you?” I whispered.

“I cannot prove anything,” he answered with a calm intensity.

“Are the legends true?” I asked.

“What legends?” he replied.

“That you communed with God for two years in the wilderness and created one of the greatest repositories of spiritual knowledge that later vanished in the desert, because a beggar had stolen them from you?”

He looked at me with such lost eyes. I had never seen such a gaze before, and I had to look away to save my sense of sanity. I knew one thing with absolute conviction, that death would be a better choice than what Dou Xing had endured.

Dou Xing coughed uncontrollably for several seconds, and then looked upwards to the sky as if he had not noticed it before.

“His question?” the demon said. “Answer it!”

Dou Xing remained with his head back, looking skyward. “I’m praying, and will answer you when I am done.” It was said like a man who had nothing to lose and cared naught for his safety.

“Yes, do pray,” the demon chided, “as I’m certain your creator is interested in your supplications and biased reports of my lack of care.”

Dou Xing remained in his pose of prayer, sitting like a tangled doll in total disrepair, yet there was an order of poise beneath his shell, unafraid, communing with the one who created him. I wanted to embrace him, and I would have, except he was praying, and the demon was watching. It was a scene as unreal as one could imagine, and yet there was a strange, luminescent beauty in what I saw. I watched him close his eyes, and I, too, prayed silently to our creator. I felt our hearts touch in a way that I cannot describe. Words are too feeble to convey this inseparable communion.

After a minute, I felt myself enter a different reality. It was so subtle that I opened my eyes and saw Dou Xing looking at me with eyes that carried a new energy. “The one that is within flowers in you, but will bloom only if

you turn away from this demon. What I am, or have been, is not important. What is important is what you are, and what you will become. We are brothers, and that is enough for you to know."

"How do I resist him?" I asked.

"Do not resist. Simply turn away."

"What do you mean, turn away? How do I do this?" My question's intensity took me from the altered state I was in, and I was once again sitting on the platform, Dou Xing between the demon and me. His head was still back in a prayerful position, but soon he opened his eyes and struggled to stand up.

"Your nakedness disturbs me," the demon muttered. Suddenly a hooded robe hovered in front of Dou Xing, to which he turned away and looked at me as if to say, 'it is that easy.'

The demon erased the robe in a wave of his hand. "Answer his question."

"The devil wants me to answer your question," Dou Xing began, "but he does not know which one I will answer, so listen closely. It is true that I communed with God in the wilderness, but it was for three months, not two years. Legends tend to lengthen time and expand space.

"The writings to which you refer were the sum total of my communion with God. There was nothing more. There never was. There was no beggar who stole the writings. They were designed to be simple. They were so simple, and the number of words so few, that the people of that time decided that God was either withholding from them or the vast majority of the work had been stolen or lost. Over time, the legend must have evolved as a way to understand the small number of words.

"In the simplest expressions you can turn away. Look at me." He put his arms out with his palms up, staring into my eyes, his back to the demon. Dou Xing mouthed the words secretly: "He cannot kill you. I am proof of this."

I felt the demon's eyes on us, and a palpable frustration was brewing from his direction. I could feel its unmistakable power swelling like a senseless storm cloud.

I wanted to make sure that Dou Xing was real, and not an artifact of

sorcery supplied by my host to confuse me or influence my decision. “Why did you pray?” I asked.

“I prayed to find the simplest path to my creator.”

“And what is that path?”

“It is love. It is always love. It has always been love. It will always be love. Love that is unconditioned, raw, pure, unfiltered, natural, flowing, unencumbered, innocent, free—”

“Ah,” the demon interrupted, “but you are not free, thus your love is tainted, your path unclear, as it is complex.”

Dou Xing, still facing me, swept a trail of blood from his forehead. “You are Satan who preys on human imperfection, whose worship is measured in torturous acts of manipulation and the invocation of fear. You have nothing to offer. Nothing to add whatsoever to this conversation or any other where the word of love is spoken. So please, let your mouth be the sanctuary of disease that it is, and never, ever speak this holiest of words again.”

The demon stood to his feet, his robe glimmering in the sunlight as he strode to Dou Xing, anger boiling over at Dou Xing’s bold rebuke. A knife appeared in the demon’s hand, and he swung it across Dou Xing’s neck from behind, opening a gaping wound where blood poured out in glistening streams. Just before the knife crossed Dou Xing’s neck, I could read his lips: “Love is the way.”

It happened in slow motion. His body slumped forward and crumpled before me. I don’t remember hearing anything. I don’t remember sound at all. It was slow motion silence as I watched one of humanity’s greatest unknown leaders fall before me like a puppet whose strings had suddenly been cut. I knew what I had to do then. It was all clear.

The demon was excited by his violent killing of Dou Xing, his face contorted in spasms of vicious laughter. He bent down over Dou Xing, and plunged his knife into his chest. “A gift that I’ve been meaning to give you.”

Dou Xing gasped, what I assumed was his final gasp of breath, but I was wrong. He looked into the demon’s eyes. “You are loved. Even you… even you.” A hush fell over him and his eyes rolled back into his head as his final

breath left him.

The demon’s mood abruptly changed. He was silent and expressionless, like someone who was in deep thought. Standing to his feet he glanced at me to read my reaction, but I was unreadable. What I felt was so deeply hidden that no one could understand or fathom what I was feeling and thinking.

“I will miss having him as an example,” the demon confessed. “He performed his duties well. Perhaps you would like to fill his role? His position is vacant, as you can clearly see.”

“I accept the role of a normal human,” I said without hesitation.

I watched as streams of crimson flowed across the golden platform. I was barefoot, and I observed it trickle in my direction as if it were reaching out to me. Perhaps it was. All I knew was that the essence of Dou Xing was alive; I had touched it when I was praying with him, and this red ghost moving towards me was not real. My world began to fade as the warm blood touched my foot, and I lost consciousness.

Chapter 14: The Interface

It was dark when I opened my eyes. The smell of the cavern, my only familiar root to reality, comforted me. I was laying on a bed in complete darkness. I could hear a dripping sound in the distance, and, with a little strain, I could make out a distant contour of the room I was in. Perhaps a light flickered down some corridor in the far distance. My head ached a little and my throat was parched. I needed some water.

As soon as I thought about water, my mind flashed to lemonade, and the whole incident with the demon, in every detail, rushed in with time-elapse speed and precision. I sat up and immediately wanted to find Zenith and tell her what I had experienced.

“I am here,” she said. “Welcome back.”

I turned to see Zenith’s dark silhouette sitting next to my bed on a chair. A light flashed as a match was struck, and she lit a candle nearby. She was exactly as before, and even in the dimness of one candle, her beauty overflowed the room.

“Do you now understand why you abandoned your mission?” she asked.

I rubbed my eyes hoping to see more clearly. “I do, though it is hard to believe that such situations can exist for one so simple as I.”

“There is power in simplicity.”

“I have no memory of what normal is, am I a normal human being?” I asked.

“You are normal in every respect except one: your mission is to change the world, and in changing the world, you will change the universe—”

“Forgive me for interrupting,” I said, “but everyone I meet seems to know my mission, except me. Why is that?”

“We recognize you. We know it is you—the one who is to start the revolution.”

“What revolution?”

“The revolution is a result of an interface that you will discover,” she replied.

I placed my feet on the floor, sitting on the bed and faced her. “An interface?”

“There was a time, a long time ago, when this island had hundreds of creatures that were unique, that could never be found on any other place in this entire galaxy. These were creatures of experimentation. They were creations of an enormous scientific mind—a group mind that invented these creatures for a very specific purpose.

“The purpose, I cannot disclose, but I can tell you that an interface was created that allowed inter-species communication. We, humans that is, could speak with these creatures.”

“All of them?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “All of them. They were our equals in nearly every way, and in some cases, they were our superiors in terms of their mental faculties. One species had incredible brain capacity that dwarfed us in much the same way that a human would dwarf the intellect of a field mouse.”

“From where did this group mind come?”

Zenith laughed playfully. “They came from the same place you and I did, of course.”

“What does this have to do with my discovering an interface?”

“I was only trying to help you understand what I meant by an interface. In thirty- seven years, a scientist of extraordinary caliber was to discover a way to build a human interface to a new dimension. Think of this new dimension as a finer-grained frequency of existence that is parallel to the one you are in now with me.”

She put her hand out in front of her. “It exists right here, right now, but can you see it?”

I remained silent, knowing the question was rhetorical.

“The human sensory system is unable to see this frequency, so it requires

an interface that allows a human being to experience this world of essence. It is this world of essence that has been missing in the human experience since life appeared on this planet."

"Why has it been missing?" I asked.

"It has been tuned out by the human body-mind system. Our bodies are so hyper- tuned to our three-dimensional world, that they have not tuned in to any other frequencies of light, color, sound and energy. Our sensory system has handicapped our mind's capacity to understand the real essence of what exists in the real world."

"The scientist you refer to, it's me in some future time?"

Zenith nodded, and leaned back in her chair with a sigh. "It was supposed to be you, but you made a decision in your past to give this mission up. Tell me about your experience."

I explained everything in detail. Occasionally she would ask a question to clarify her understanding, but for the next twenty minutes I relived the experience, my emotions remained intense, particularly when I spoke of Dou Xing.

When I had finished, Zenith offered me a glass of water, which I drank to the last drop. "Your experience is a memory, it is not a dream," she announced. Her words felt like thunder to my ears.

"How is that possible? It was clearly a dream. It was too fantastical to be a memory of something that actually happened. Demons like that, what I conjured, they don't exist, do they?"

I knew my voice sounded defensive and confused, I could hear it myself, but a deeper part of me suspected that she was right. It was a memory, but of where and when, I had no idea.

"Very few people," she replied, "perhaps one in a hundred million, will meet Satan and interact with him in the manner that you did. As the most powerful of all demons, he is able to see across timelines and observe a species as it begins to gain an awareness of this world of essence that I was speaking of earlier. You see, there are only two places—at the most basic level—in which we exist: the world of essence, and the worlds of

impressions. The worlds of impressions are the shadows or echoes of the world of essence.

“Satan holds a certain power over the worlds of impressions, but the world of essence is not one that he can venture into, nor does he have any power over it. However, he knows that as humanity begins to sense this world of essence, his power and authority will soon erode. This erosion of authority is the main thing he fears, and he will do anything in his considerable powers to avoid it, or, at minimum, delay its occurrence.

“When humanity’s forerunners experienced this world of essence, even a mere glimpse, they began to write about it, speak about it, and share their experience with others who are not attuned to the subtle frequencies. Over time, humanity, through the faculty of scientific reasoning, began to create technologies that helped it to understand the deeper structure underneath the visible worlds of impressions, but these understandings were caught up in esoteric theory and mathematics.

This time is known as the Grand Epoch, and it is foretold as a time of great change, for this is when the old ways of the worlds of impressions must release their grip to the world of essence. It is the unveiling that we have awaited since time began on this planet.”

Zenith paused for a moment, as if she were herding a specific thought to her mouth. “The interface you were to create is the bridge between these two worlds, and it would enable others who desired to see this world of essence and know, beyond a shadow’s doubt, that it was real and the true source of their identity and purpose as living beings. This interface was the tool of dispersion—of bringing all who desired to look upon the world of essence to a new realization of what was real, and what was illusion.”

“So I gave up on my mission, because I feared Satan’s power to destroy me?”

“You chose the only path you could, under the circumstances, but circumstances can be manipulated. You are on this island visiting with me, for example.”

“Why… why this island?”

“It is protected. Satan cannot find this place. It is beyond his purview. This safety allows us to talk like this without fear of being overheard… by anyone.”

I listened carefully to her words. I had to admit, I did feel safe in her presence, and whether it was her beauty, my amnesia, or the island’s isolation, I couldn’t say, but I was beginning to understand why I was there, and what I needed to do.

I took a breath and ventured a question that had circled me like a vulture since I first saw her. “Who are you?”

“I am a guide… I am your guide.”

“And where are you guiding me?”

Zenith looked away for a moment, as if she was distracted by something on the far wall. “Perhaps the term, guide, is a poor choice of words. Instead, let’s use the word, catalyst. You guide yourself. I merely open up a wider view, so you can decide your own path.”

I stood up and put my arms out with my palms up. “What do you think Dou Xing meant when he showed me this pose?”

She looked at me like a person who saw an interesting sculpture. “It is an ancient mudra. It means to open oneself to the eternal forces. It was also used to form a protective barrier between oneself and an antagonist.”

I wondered why it worked so poorly as a protective barrier against the demon that slit his throat and stabbed his heart. The memory made me shudder, and all I wanted to do was to stop thinking about it.

“I never got a chance to ask you about my vision in the dining room,” I said. “After I climbed to the ridge of the volcano, I went down to the lake and saw these huge monsters deep below. I also saw them in my vision. There’re even etchings of them in the cave’s floor and table. Are they surviving members of the experimental creatures you mentioned earlier?”

She nodded. “Would you like to talk with one of them?”

I was taken back by the question and my mind literally froze for a moment or two. “I promised myself I would not go near the lake again, and from my

vision, these creatures seem quite brutal in nature, as they were clearly trying to make me their dinner. What would I say to such a creature?”

Zenith laughed and stood up, taking my hand and pulling me from the bed. “Let’s find out what they will say to you.”

I could feel her strength as she pulled me up. For an instant, we were closer to one another than ever before and her full presence was upon me, and though dimly glimpsed, my body trembled. I could sense that her deep feminine eyes were watching mine grow brighter. I could feel my body was giving me away, but I was powerless to stop a reaction so fundamental that it literally ruled the universe.

Chapter 15: Quantusum

Zenith led me to the cavern where I had swum earlier in the day, and then to a hidden corridor behind the pool's opening that snaked its way downward at a fairly steep decline. After a few minutes the path leveled off, and I could see small chambers that looked manmade; they were too smooth and uniformly shaped to be natural structures.

Zenith explained that this place had been an experimental lab at one time, but the equipment had been taken out many years ago, and now it was only used for communication.

"The creatures that are left to grace this island are only six in number," she said with a solemn tone. "They are known as the Quantusum, and they are, as you have witnessed, very large. Their intelligence is… unusual, and it was they who helped our scientists to understand how to build the interface you are about to use."

A dozen questions were rippling to the surface all around me, and my mind sorted through them in order to find the most relevant question to pose. "Of the hundreds of different creatures that were created on this island, why are the Quantusum the only ones left?"

Zenith ignored my question as she motioned me to a small room that jetted off to my left. A thick glass portal looked out from the chamber into the depths of the pool, and while the water was crystal clear, the light was so dim that I could not see a single thing. A strange contraption, about the size of a small apple, was floating in the center of the room. I could not see any strings or platform upon which it was held, and it was vibrating slightly as if waiting for something.

I had the strange and somewhat uneasy feeling that this object was alive. "What is it?" I asked, pointing to the floating orb.

"Watch," she replied.

She moved her hand near the orb, and it suddenly activated and began to

glow, as if in resonance with Zenith's body. Its movement, or vibration, was speeding up as well, and it continued until—like blades of a fan—I could barely see it, especially in the dim light of the chamber.

A very subtle whirring sound could be heard, but the orb stayed in the same exact location, directly in the center of the room about five feet from the ground. I looked at Zenith who moved towards the glass portal, looking out to the mysterious, dark water on the other side.

"It's how we call them," she whispered.

I wanted to ask what she meant by 'we,' but before I could form the question in words, a giant shadow with a faint outline of luminescence could be seen moving towards the glass. Zenith motioned me to come closer, though I found my body unable to move at the specter of seeing such a colossal creature gliding through the water.

I would say it was at least eighty feet long, its color dark gray with hints of blue, and the entire length of its body held ovals of luminescence. It was like a sea serpent, and yet it was beautiful, regal, I could even think of the word, holy. The entire length of its body was lined in luminescent spots. Its huge head was crested with an amazing assortment of fins, horns, and tentacles. There was an odd outgrowth on the chin that could only be likened to a beard. As I looked closer, I could see its body had tiny sparkles of light that seemed to move around the creature in changing patterns. The eyes were a golden, fathomless light that glowed in a subtle, eerie way.

Zenith grabbed my arm and pulled me closer. "You are lucky today; we have the esteemed matriarch of the Quantusum. Her name is Trisiel. She is always interesting in her ways."

I looked into Zenith's eyes for a moment, and felt her breath brush against my face as she whispered. "Why are you whispering?" I asked, as quietly as my voice allowed.

"Come," She grabbed my arm and led me to an adjacent room that had a door and a single chair that seemed as if it had been carved from the same black substance I had seen earlier. Zenith pointed to the chair, suggesting I sit in it. The chair was cool to the touch, and was shaped more like a chaise lounge than a chair. There were about fifty tiny holes in it that emitted a faint

yellowish light, and as my body covered the lights I felt the chair vibrate very slightly.

“Place your arms here,” Zenith instructed, and then she positioned my legs. There was barely enough room in the chamber for two people, but Zenith managed to help me get in the proper position with ease. The chair was quite comfortable to my surprise. I leaned back at about a forty-five-degree angle, and could comfortably see Trisiel through the glass portal. I sensed that she was watching me, too.

My heart was beating wildly with anticipation. “How does this work?” I asked.

“They must have sent Trisiel for a reason,” she said. “She’s a bit unpredictable, so be open to what comes.”

“But how exactly do I… I talk with her?” I pointed to the floating giant outside the glass window.

“When I leave the room, the closing of the door will trigger the communication interface. I’m going to place these in your ears.” She handed me two objects that looked like miniature mushrooms, except they had a matrix of tiny lights. “They’re the listening devices. To speak, just talk normally, the chamber itself is a broadcast technology that will send your voice to Trisiel in a form of vibration that she can decode. And yes, she understands our language—probably better than we do.”

Zenith took the listening devices from my hand and placed them in my ears, one at a time, being careful to insert them properly. “Do they feel okay?”

I nodded nervously, my eyes never leaving Trisiel.

“You’re all set. Any final questions before I go?”

“Why are you leaving?”

“The Quantusum are very private creatures. They only speak to one person at a time. We do not know exactly why, but it was at their request, and we have always honored it. Enjoy your conversation.”

I heard the door close behind me, and the room was suddenly plunged into

a deeper darkness. The listening devices in my ear only added to my sense of isolation. I listened. Nothing. Perhaps I was supposed to speak first, and I was about to do so, when a subtle noise caught my attention. It sounded like electricity. It was frail— barely audible, but carried a complexity of sounds I had never heard before.

From out of this electrical noise, I heard a voice emerge. It was mechanical sounding, but there was a rhythm—a flow—that softened it.

“Life has meaning only when it is joined with expanding space that permits wisdom to enter. So let go of any limits that might be within you. Allow us to be limitless. Will you agree?”

Some part of me activated that had been dormant for a very long time, and yet I knew it was the part of me that would outlive everything else that I could label with a name.

“I agree. I wholeheartedly agree.” I answered. My voice sounded different in the chamber. I hardly recognized it as mine.

“What is your name in your world?”

“I don’t know my name; I have amnesia.”

“As do all humans. You are either a wise man, or you are referring to a medical condition. Which is it?”

I smiled. “Regrettably, it is the latter. I came to this island without a single memory of my past, including my name. In a vision that I had earlier today, I heard a name that was given to me, but I don’t know, truthfully, if it’s mine.”

“And what was that name?”

“Solomon,” I replied.

“Then let’s agree, for now at least, that your name is Solomon. My name is Trisiel.”

The great creature paused for a moment, and I waited, unsure of how to continue.

The electrical noise that seemed to precede Trisiel’s words sounded in my ears. “I have lived for one thousand, two hundred and twelve years upon this planet, and I have never seen the great sky and its iridescent flecks of light.

Yet, I understand that the great sky exists. How is that possible, Solomon?”

“I don’t know.”

“It is because I know the nature of this world. If it has depth, it has height. If I live in the depths, I know that there are other beings that live in the heights, because life fills this universe. It is the one constant that is understood by all intelligent life.

“So it is with memory. If one has lost it, they know it still exists. The experience that has drawn them to the place of here and now never acts unjustly. Memory is falsehearted, and do you know why?”

“To keep one’s attention on the here and now?” I ventured.

“Precisely. If memory is lost completely, as in your case, it enables you to see clearly what is before you without the clutter of a thousand faces and a trillion words. What do you see before you, Solomon?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but then waited in stunned silence. I could no longer see Trisiel. She had disappeared. The glowing luminescent outline, the one reality to her body that was visible to me, was gone. “I see empty water. Where did you go?”

“I am still here, just like your memories,” Trisiel answered.

For a moment I thought she was playing a game with me, but the notion that a creature of her intellect would play games with a stranger, well, it seemed highly suspect.

“Do you know how a creature of my size can disappear?”

I shook my head. “I have no idea,” I said, squinting to see into the water, but the harder I looked, the more I was convinced that she had truly disappeared.

“I am limitless. There is no cage or constraint that can corral me into one constant place. I am limitless. I can change, shift, overcome, transform, because I am not bound to a thing that serves me, and my body serves me. Thus, I can change my body to the consistency of water—all of the physical properties of water. In doing this I am completely invisible to your physical senses.”

“How did you come upon this ability… or realization?” I asked.

The giant form of Trisiel slowly came into being. I watched with awe as it rematerialized. Her massive body was coiled, effortlessly hovering in the deep water.

“My species is very small in number. Our genetic make-up is not the product of evolution in the natural order. We were created by beings of the great sky who were themselves limitless. They brought this possibility to our species to see how we would use it. For example, they wanted to know how intelligent we would desire to become, whether we would stay the size and shape that our genetic template predicted, and if we would serve our world or dominate it.”

“But if you were limitless, why did your creators think you would be anything other than what you wanted to be?”

“They did not tell us that we were unlimited,” Trisiel said. “In fact, they hid this knowledge from us, and we had to discover it. In some ways, we had no memory of our true nature, so we are more alike than you might think.”

I stared at the magnificent creature that hovered in the water only twenty feet away from me, and marveled at her presence. I felt I was speaking to a non-terrestrial goddess, except her form was not the kind they write about in fairy tales.

“How did you discover you were unlimited?”

“Like all great discoveries it was the product of experimentation. We tried to find a reason for our being dwellers of the deepest oceans; living in the silent underworld of total darkness. We have many eyes; I personally have two hundred and forty-two, but they are not eyes like yours. They see different frequencies of light, and because of this, we are able to see across dimensions of both time and space, and even non- time and non-space.

“This ability, to see past the folds of illusion that time and space produce, was our finest capacity, and we experimented as to how we could use this perception. We evolved sophisticated techniques for seeing deeper and deeper into the reality that creates realities. We found layer after layer, and every time we felt we had finally found the meaning of it all, the ‘root of

roots,’ as we referred to it, we discovered the endlessness of our journey.

“You see, with all of the capacities we had to perceive truth, truth always diverged into deeper, wider, higher spatial realities that were so refined, so tempered in love, that we could not enter. We were excluded by our desire to know. This was our limit—desire.

“We practiced for many generations to rid ourselves of this ultimate and cunning limitation. In order to extinguish the subtle tendrils of desire, we produced a set of techniques that became our Holy Work. It was this body of wisdom that was taught to all of our kind, and so we became unified in our beliefs. We created maps of our journeys and taught these as well.

“Our entire kind was focused on this work, and it occurred to us that other species could be interested in our Holy Work, too. However, we had no interaction with any other species on this planet. We were a solitary group, and at that time there were only about four thousand of us, so we sent one of our finest explorers to search out a species that might be interested in our discoveries in other dimensions of reality.

“The explorer’s name is a famous one in our world. He is called Kotari, and it was he who made first contact with humanity almost two thousand years ago.”

I tried to fathom the scope of her story. “How? How did he make contact?”

“Kotari had written many of the most profound passages within our Holy Work. He was our finest surveyor of the subtle realms, and it was really he, among all of the Quantusum, who was the most determined to share our insights. None of our kind had ever ventured to the surface of the sea—”

“Why?” I interrupted.

“It was too dangerous. We believed the surface was the barrier of our world.”

“But you just said you were able to see beyond time and space—”

“Yes, but this is different, because we experienced our world as one reality with different mixtures of energy, and physical light was not one of them. If we came even near to the surface world, we were exposed to the light of a brilliant sun, and this light was too harsh for our eyes. But Kotari had a plan.

He developed multiple layered sheaths for his eyes, which would protect him. Then he would rise to the surface of the sea and attempt to make contact."

"With who… or what?"

"We didn't know at the time," Trisiel said. "We knew there were other forms of life above us, but we had never interacted with them, so we didn't know with certainty if we would find others that we could communicate with, but we felt an obligation to share our Holy Works with others of this planet."

"Why?"

"It is a reasonable question to which I can only offer an unreasonable answer. We knew that we had broken out of a prison of illusion, and had seen the lands beyond its windowless walls. We knew we had special insight, because even in our journeys to more subtle realms of existence, we met entities that believed there was nothing beyond them. Everyone we met in our journeys believed their reality was the reality. They were always astonished at our stories of traveling beyond their world, and concluded that we were either fabricating stories or were simply crazy.

"The Quantusum were convinced that the vast majority of entities had tuned and adapted their bodies to the dominant reality of their realm so perfectly that they could not perceive beyond their world, and this reduced their sense of freedom, which made them easier to control. We felt a moral obligation to tell anyone who would listen that the universe was layered with such complexity that to be free—truly free—one would need to experience these other realms. Our Holy Works would enable any entity to do this with proper use and diligent application."

"Did Kotari succeed?"

"Not as we had hoped, he was able to make contact with humans, but was unable to communicate with them. He was too feared because of his enormous size, and, at least to human eyes, his fearsome look. He was seen as a monster, and certainly not a liberator of any kind, and humans either fled or tried their best to capture and kill him.

"He retreated after several years of trying and gave up. We all did. We felt the other creatures of our world were either not ready for our Holy Work, or

they liked living in one world, ignorant of what was merely a frequency shift away. A single, known world was comfortable, even normal for them, so we decided to abandon our self- appointed mission."

"How did it all change, I mean you're here now, communicating with humans… me. How did that come about?"

"In one of his many journeys to find a human to communicate with, Kotari had come upon this island. The woman you know as Zenith is known to us as the One Who Listened."

"Zenith was alive two thousand years ago?" I blurted out.

"Yes. She is the caretaker of this island, of the seas, of the entire planet."

I heard Trisiel's response. I realized she was speaking the truth, but at the same time, it didn't compute in my mind. How could one person, a beautiful woman in tattered clothes, living inside a volcano, possibly be the caretaker of an entire planet? It didn't make even a shred of sense.

Trisiel, as if sensing my confusion or doubt, spoke again. "You are understandably confused because she looks human, but she is much more. She is a representative of a consciousness that is planetary in scope. She is the voice of the planet, and it was the One Who Listened that helped us to communicate with other species and share our discoveries."

I shook my head slowly, trying to comprehend what I heard. It was not unpleasant information, but there was something that weighed on me. "How can this be?" I said, mostly to myself.

"Planets are more than physical objects, just as you are. They have a soul, too. This soul is the consciousness of the collective energies that infuse the planet with life— weather systems, rivers, trees, oceans, minerals, and animals. This energy is orchestrated to both sustain and evolve all creatures. Imagine the complex chain of events that was required to enable you and me to communicate in the way that we are. Humans would say that they created this through science and technology, but actually, it was this energy we call the One Who Listened.

"In one way or another, all discoveries, if they occur on this planet, have a thread that connects them to this central planetary soul, whether it is the force

of gravity, electricity, or the tiniest particle that makes life possible. Humans like to think that they are the ones who are making the discovery, when indeed there is an invisible force, secreted away on this obscure island that is the muse of all true invention, and without it, invention would be impossible."

"But humans invent technologies that destroy earth, like mining for gold or clearing a forest for paper production. Why would earth's soul want to help invent such destructive technologies?"

"Often, what appears to be destructive in the narrow span of time is actually a vital catalyst for creation when viewed from a wider perspective. You see, the One Who Listens is not of your time. She appears to be thirty years old, and yet, I assure you that she is more than four billion years old. She has held this continuity of consciousness for epoch after epoch, and so she understands a far different rhythm. She sees, hears, responds, feels, and acts in a completely different way than you, or we, could imagine.

"To her, the planet is an island in the sea of space and time. She is the caretaker of all who are upon her, but she also knows that the energies of all life and all physicality compose her real form, and she has only manifested as Zenith so you might have a sense of her soul and consciousness. It is like looking at a pebble to understand a mountain."

As hard as I tried to understand the concept that Trisiel was explaining, I couldn't accept it. It was too abstract; too impossible that a planet would have a soul and that that soul would manifest as Zenith in the middle of nowhere. It was all too much to take in, and I was beginning to wonder again, was I in a dream world? Did I lose my mind, and this was all some fantasy I had created?

"Don't take this the wrong way," I started, "but the scope of what you're saying stretches my capacity to believe. Even in my state of amnesia, what you're saying to me feels impossible."

"How ever it might feel to you, it remains what it is, the truth," Trisiel announced matter-of-factly.

"Why would earth have a persona in the form of a young woman on a deserted island?"

“This island is not as deserted as you might believe, and the fact that she is a woman to you is not relevant to the greater reality that she is the representative of earth embodied in human form. She exists in this way to understand what humanity is, but more importantly, to assist those within the human family to discover the Holy Works.”

There was a long pause while I searched for something to say, but nothing came to me. My mind sputtered like a helpless breath.

Chapter 16: The First Born

“What has Zenith told you about yourself?” Trisiel asked.

At the sound of her question, I regained my focus. “That my mission is to discover an interface to a dimension where people can experience themselves as soul.”

“Now I understand. You are the Kotari of humankind.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are always two approaches to the spiritual dimensions, one is the journey of subjective experience made by a few ardent followers of the Holy Works, and the other is through science—the lens of technology. The subjective always precedes the objective, just as the esoteric always precedes the exoteric.

“Kotari and others of our kind brought the simple yet profound truths that we mined from the higher realms and finer frequencies of soul. We crafted these insights into a form that we could share, and after years of searching, we finally found one who would listen and receive them.

“Zenith already knew of these dimensions we had discovered, but she took these materials and shared them with human teachers that she could influence, and our Holy Works began to take root in the human consciousness.

“But there is so much distraction in your world, that no matter how spiritually potent the teachings, or the teacher, the individual will be pulled by the reality of survival, the pressures of cultural norms, and the very real limitations of their human bodies.

“Within our Holy Works there is a prophecy of this technology to see the soul. It is called The Grand Portal. It is the quintessential discovery that catalyzes the most sweeping shifts in humankind’s trajectory as an evolutionary species. If you are the one who is to discover this portal, then you are the Kotari of your world. You are the one who invents, with the One

Who Listens, the inward telescope where all can see the stars of soul."

Trisiel twitched her massive tail. There was a long pause, then: "I realize it seems improbable and perhaps even farfetched, but if Zenith has said this about you, then it is true, and you must believe it, for she is not capable of errors or lies."

A strange emotion rose to my tongue. It felt like anger mixed with pride. "And even if that's possible, the bigger question, at least to me, is whether people would even care? If people cared to know soul as their true state of being, why don't they search it out through the Holy Works? You said yourself that the Quantusum traveled through many realms, and the entities who lived there were not trying to journey beyond to higher states. What of the will? Even if I could produce this interface, people still need to yearn to see it… to use it. Don't they?"

I waited briefly to see if Trisiel would comment, but I heard only silence. "No technology will produce the desire to look," I continued. "Consider the telescope. How many people have telescopes to see the wonders of the night sky? The technology exists, but so few bother to look. They lack the will. No technology can produce the yearning to know what is inside."

I had released what had been unacknowledged since I had first heard of the so- called mission I was allied with. Human will—that was what I felt was missing in the crazy equation of what I was supposed to achieve: people's will to understand the deeper levels of their existence.

The longest pause ensued. Trisiel seemed distracted in her own thoughts. Then the faint crackling of electricity surged in my ears.

"You are wise to question the will of humanity, because it has proven itself to be subject to control by the forces who desire to maintain a lesser reality in order to ensure that their form of slavery thrives. However, is the alternative to do nothing? If the will of humanity is broken, do you not try to mend it?

"The Grand Portal is the technological equivalent of self-realization. It is the interface between human and soul. If a human can see themselves as soul, everything changes. The walls of the prison come down. The prison guards are obsolete. A whole new way of seeing the depth of humanity and all creatures becomes the new paradigm. At first, it will only take a small

percentage to see the soul within them, and it will move out to the rest of the planet in wave after wave after wave. There will be no stopping it once it is unleashed."

I let out a slow, deliberate sigh. "Are you saying that the will of humanity will change? That all of a sudden people will care about what's inside them? Why? What's the reason for this change?"

"Science."

"Science? That's it?"

"It's not the only reason, but it is the dominant one. It is the one that makes people look, and when they look, they see what cannot be denied. They see a soul within them, and they see a soul within everyone else. It becomes irresistible to look, because it will be available to see in nearly every home on this planet. Your interface is the reason for the change. That is what our prophecy said."

"Where did this prophecy come from?"

"The same place that all our prophecies arise from," Trisiel said. "It came from our Creators."

"Can I see this prophecy?"

The silence that came from my question was absolute. I suddenly felt overwhelmingly tired. It was like a thick fog had entered my mind, and I was powerless to stop it. As it grew in scope and influence, I had no choice but to close my eyes, and as soon as my eyes surrendered, I began to see lights, which gradually turned to diffuse shapes, and these in turn began to appear as objects.

Suddenly, I was in a cathedral or huge room of some kind. It felt like a church or temple, but it was simple, infinitely pleasant in how it felt and looked. There was a clarity that was stirring inside me as if it wanted to burst out and make itself known to me. I looked around, but I seemed to be alone.

"Is anyone here?" I asked, tentatively, turning around to see the interior of a vast room with great archways and intricate stonework in every direction.

There was no response to my question. I could only hear the sound of wind

lightly blowing through the trees outside. It took my attention to an open, arched window framed in gray-colored stones. Outside were huge trees the size of skyscrapers burrowing into the sky. Their leaves were brilliant green and bluish aquamarine, jewel-toned and translucent, each leaf the size of a dinner plate.

Someone cleared his throat, and I turned to see a man who was dressed in a flowing blue robe. He was tall with soft blue eyes, and silver-white hair. His features were calm in every way. “Can I help you?”

I couldn’t find my voice initially. I was too mesmerized by what I saw. His skin, like the leaves of the tree, was translucent and radiated an inner luminance. “I… I don’t know how I came here,” I stammered. “Where am I?”

“Tell me the last thing you remember,” the man said.

“I was speaking to Trisiel… she… she’s a Quantusum, and we were on an island communicating, and… and she told me about this prophecy that I was a part of, and I asked her… if… if I could see it, and then I became so very tired… and fell asleep…”

He raised his hand in a gesture to stop talking, which I was all too glad to do, because I was aware that I was rambling incoherently. “You are with friends, so you may relax. We are very familiar with the Quantusum. Trisiel brought you here to show you a prophecy, and if that was her will, then I am all too happy to comply with her wishes.”

He gestured to me to come closer, and smiled welcomingly.

“Who are you? What is this place?” I asked as I walked towards him. His eyes were upon me like searchlights. I felt like a cave dweller who had emerged outside for the first time and fell under the inspection of a luminescent angel.

“My name is Ov-Ti-Su,” he replied with a slight bow. “I am a member of the Central Race who created the Quantusum. This place is my home.”

“You said Trisiel brought me here… how… how did she do that?”

“Would you like me to explain the process of your arrival, or would you like to see the prophecy that interests you? Your visit will be short, so I would advise that you stay focused on your primary interest. You will find

that everything in this world is very different than yours, and a hundred questions will follow each question that forms in your mind. Focus is the key in this world, or you can get lost."

He smiled down at me. He was much taller than I, and certainly more composed, and I realized his point was a good one. "Your counsel is appreciated. I would like to see the prophecy."

"Which one?" Ov-Ti-Su inquired.

"I don't know what name to call it, but it refers to an event called The Grand Portal. Trisiel said it was a prophecy within their Holy Works, and I play a role in its discovery."

As usual I had a thousand questions swimming in my mind. Who was the Central Race? How did they create the Quantusum? And if they could create such an advanced creature as the Quantusum, what else they did they create? Where was this place, and why did it feel so familiar?

"If you will follow me, I will show you the prophecy." Ov-Ti-Su turned and walked down a corridor that was dotted with round, glassless windows on both sides. I could hear the gurgling of a stream below, but I couldn't see any water. I had the sense that the corridor was a covered bridge that crossed over a river or stream.

As we got to the end of the hallway, we entered a large room where there were eight empty pedestals, each rising about four feet above the floor. The high stone walls of the room were covered in ornate tapestries, and the light was filled with a beautiful warm color that seemed to glow of its own.

Ov-Ti-Su went over to one of the pedestals and spoke a command after he touched it. It was in a language I didn't recognize, but I could sense a change in the room. Above the pedestal a sheet of darkness, about eight inches thick, descended like a projection screen, and within this darkness, in perfect color and detail, the image of an angel gradually appeared. It was not quite an angel as commonly depicted in literature and art. For one thing, its skin was blue. For another, while it had wings, they were relatively small. It was clearly humanoid, but I had a sense that it could be any shape it chose.

"Who is this?" I heard myself ask, mesmerized by what I saw.

Ov-Ti-Su glanced at me, and spoke a command that froze the image we were watching. “It is First Born. Within our known cosmology there are seven universes and each universe has a First Born that embodies the archetype for the sentient species of that particular universe. This one is ours, but there are six others. We know these beings only by this title, for they have not assumed names. It is they who hold the genetic substrate of the Central Race within their universe. They are our Creators, and through them, we are the creators of physical life on planetary spheres.”

“Then… it is God?” I asked.

“No, there is another who created the First Born, and perhaps, yet another beyond that. We do not know how far the act of creation extends. We believe there is an original creator—a single point we call First Source, but it is a mystery that we believe will always remain in the field of expansion.”

“God doesn’t exist? A single, omniscient God is a myth?”

“We do not know if a single Creator exists, or if there are multiple Creators who operate as one being. We do not know the origin of all life. Some profess that they do know, that they have met or spoken to the One Who Is All, but we only know the First Born of our universe, and it is the First Born that most species would call God.”

I pointed to the frozen image of the blue angel. “And humans, my kind, is this the God we believe in?”

“No, he is not the God you believe in. There are many gods that populate your planet’s history. The First Born is only met once a planet’s population passes through The Grand Portal, which is precisely what the First Born speaks of in this prophecy. Are you ready to listen?”

I nodded and turned my full attention to the dazzling image of the blue angel.

Ov-Ti-Su spoke a single word and the likeness of the First Born began to animate again, its wings were moving subtly, and it was as if it were speaking directly to me, though I knew I was watching the equivalent of a film. When the voice began, I trembled at the purity of its sound. It was unlike any other voice I had ever heard, and I am woefully inadequate to even begin to

describe it.

“The prophecy I now speak of is one in which you who listen are a part of, or you would not be hearing my words. We are the creators of this portal to the soul, and without it, an entire species would be left to perish in ignorance. This is a condition we will not permit. It is not a possibility. A species will endure to the threshold of this portal, and it will peer across the ages, the mind’s inventions of space, and it will see the great truth that is within the lesser illusion, and it will rejoice that the truth is free, without limitation, and part of the wholeness that is in all things great and small.

“The portal I speak of is the access point for a species to realize its inmost identity, that part of itself that encompasses all the experience of an individual soul integrated with empathetic receptivity to each encountered life form, and the unreserved transmission of love. This is the Sovereign Integral state of consciousness.

“The Sovereign Integral is the highest consciousness an embodied soul can aspire to. It is the penultimate perspective of individuality, and there are exceedingly few within the planetary spheres who can extract it from life by their own will. This is because the gravity of the lesser illusion is so strong that only a handful will break from its grip, climb the walls and secure a view of my domain.

“Even those who notice the other side can still fall prey to another veil of illusion that appears to be the highest reality, when indeed it is merely another layer of the lesser illusion. There are many layers. The omniverse is a maze that has been created by a near-infinite diversity of personalities who have sought personal gain in the face of universal union. This is the cross frequency of life and the current that has shaped the lesser illusion.

“If you are a builder of the portal I speak of, then you are surely one who has sought the universal union. You have found the higher consciousness to be exasperating in its subtlety, illusive in its whispered voice, and sobering in its view of the domineering currents of evolution. You have been witness to the engineering of time and space and the way in which it forms the walls that impinge on your sense of freedom and limitlessness. You have waited for an unfolding only to know impatience and the feelings of disappointment.

“The portal is the way that a species can reset its consciousness and renew its trajectory to a higher understanding of its real identity. A species is a collective. A collective has a baseline or common ground that establishes its conventions and culture. This becomes the reality-field of a species, and it can be a catalyst for discovery or a shield of protection. In most species, it is both. This is the primary battleground of life in planetary spheres that are incubating the Sovereign Integral consciousness.

“The two fundamental forces—discovery and protection—are competing, but in another view, they are creating the edge of consciousness and pushing it ever closer to the portal. Now, what is this portal? It is the interface of technology, connected to the planetary communication system, allowing individuals to see themselves as soul, unencumbered with the lesser illusion of a sheath, or bodies, or any form of covering.

“This interface is what gathers the small personality into a view of the immortal structures that support and nurture the large soul, what I previously called the Sovereign Integral consciousness. It is a glimpse. It is not the full experience. It is a way for individuals to see what they have never seen before: they are souls. They live within bodies that enable experience for soul. The soul is the true identity. The portal validates this reality over the lesser illusion. It verifies that an individual is an immortal soul first, and a mind and body second.

“Why create a portal? Why not require that each individual must earn this view or perception? The individual is already this. It is not a learned thing, and therefore, one does not earn access to this state. It is a jolt of memory. It is an awakening.

“A point in time comes when a species is protected from its knowledge by those who seek personal gain over universal union. This protective wall is constructed in such a way that the species does not even see it as a wall, but rather as an object of need, faith, protection, and security. This wall has a foundation, and this foundation is ignorance, and this ignorance is not the fault of soul, nor the fault of the embodiment. It is the design of creation. It is the way in which the universe unfolds outwardly, and expands inwardly. If there is fault, it would be with me—the creator of this grand design.”

There was a long pause, as the First Born seemed to gather a new

collection of thoughts. I could not take my eyes away. I wanted to look and see what was behind the First Born, where it was speaking, if there were any others nearby, but I could not turn my eyes from its face.

“The portal is not the only answer to the restoration of memory while living in a physical embodiment. It is, however, the most sweeping in its effects in that it captures an entire species’ attention and places it onto my domain, onto the dimension from which all planetary beings derive. It is the direct link to a new awareness of the relationship between creation and creator, as well as creation and creation.

“I am, and that is enough. I will be, and that is too much. I was, and that is too little. All the portal does is transform the species to an awareness of itself as a creative and empowered extension of my world. It destroys the wall that was constructed between the species and my domain. It takes more time for this to happen than most would like, but it is only because the wall established the tempo of time, when indeed, both the arrow and tempo of time are part of the lesser illusion.

“When a sentient species first evolves on a planetary sphere, the portal is not based on technology. It is heart-based. It is the feeling center of individuals, and they can feel this connection to my world, but the walls are quickly built by those who seek personal gain, and I am then intermixed with the lesser illusion. Thereafter I am relegated to a mere echo in the culture of the species, and many pose as me, hoping that others will follow and give them power.

“I know that the species will journey to the edge of my world for I beckon them, and when they come close enough, they will build with their minds a technology that will connect them. This is part of the design. It is not an accident. When they have the ability to connect, the portal will be brought to them in concept. It will be explained in words, shown in pictures, transmitted in music, and set forth in spiritual techniques.

“In these preliminary expressions it will attract those who are prepared to see the portal in more crystallized formats. They will be the ones who transmit the basic architecture of the portal, and it will have at its core the heart. It has always been the heart that is the portal’s keeper and sustainer, and so the portal, in part, will be generated by the heart. There is no other

way.

“The keystone of the portal is the field of the heart and how it is interpreted by the technology. This technology will be like a mirror of the higher states of consciousness, and as the individual peers into the mirror they will see a new image reflected, one that is radiant and unwaveringly pure. It will not wear the vessels of embodiment that plunge and rise in the waves of polarity; instead it will express the unmistakable perspective of soul.

“The portal comes as the wall continues to fabricate greater dimension, and more and more individuals begin to see and feel the wall’s real purpose. Some of these will be those whose minds are sharpened by the grinding stone of edification, and others whose hearts are powerful searchlights into the invisible realms. They will work in concert to build this portal of which I speak, and then one among them will step forward to complete the technology.”

The eyes of the First Born turned to me, and for a moment, I felt its gaze move through me, into a depth of my existence that had never surfaced or shown itself before, at least to me. It was like a hand searching inside a drawer for something unremembered, and all I could do was to watch as this hand searched inside me.

“You are the one who completes the interface to my world,” the First Born said. “You are the one who will notice what others have not seen. I am aware that you have your reasons to forget, but never doubt that I prevail, no matter how much time gathers, or by what path it unfolds. It will be done; if not by you, by another. I will never allow a species of my likeness to founder in ignorance.”

I turned to Ov-Ti-Su to see if he could explain what was happening, but he was not there. In fact, I was no longer there. I had not noticed that I had been transported somewhere else—a place that I cannot remember enough to even describe. I can only say it was like a field of energy, but I cannot remember a specific color, shape, or sound—other than the voice of the First Born.

Then I felt love, but it was more than love. It was a union, a convergence — something that was preordained as an event, yet unscripted as an experience. I felt every part of me coming together. Every life in which I

existed; every act of my mind and body; every desire of my soul; it all came together like a thousand tributaries flowing into a single river. I could watch it. It was amazing. It was the perfect completion of pieces that had been disparate, separated by time and space, but now, suddenly, interlaced like a precision mosaic that was rendered in one substance: love.

“You are the one who will discover that the circuit is outside of space and time, and that this circuit is what has been blocked by the wall of the lesser illusion. The portal will be evidence for what you now see.”

At that exact point, my field of vision collapsed, as if someone had pressed it down to a few inches in front of my eyes. I could not see anything beyond this range. Again, my field of vision was further compressed to a much smaller range, and it kept repeating two, three, four, five times. Each time I felt as if my range of vision was becoming an order of magnitude smaller. And when I felt it could go no smaller, it did. Except now, I was not looking out, I was looking in. I was looking inside what I presumed was me, but what was me, also felt like the universe.

It was a very strange contradiction. Space was becoming non-space. I lack only one thing to describe this, regrettably it is words, without which of course, you, the reader, are unable to understand, but if I could find words to describe this, I surely would. The best I can do is to state that my inner sight was like a telescope that raced across time and space, yet I felt no movement. When I arrived at the point of what I was, the distillation or essence of all aspects of my self, I discovered one whole that was intertwined in the whole that was you, and you, and you, and you, and every other of our kind.

When I say “our kind,” I do not mean the human species on earth. I mean all humanoid species in our universe across all time. I sensed that all of us, no matter how we looked externally, were united in the same creator and same purpose. We were a fusion of something that was being born in the universe whose purpose was unfolding in time, but was clear in non-time as a way to connect the physical universe with intelligent animations that could guide all of life to a higher harmony and purposefulness.

I saw this in great detail. It was absolutely clear in every aspect right down to the particles of matter that compose the bodies we wear. I felt the connection so powerfully that it was the only thought or awareness I held

inside me. I am connected to this movement; this grandest of all processes. A designed evolution. Everyone else is, too, whether they know it or not.

I could look down and see the layers upon layers of density, which looked like fog, fighting for supremacy. Each level labored to be more important than the other. I could see one individual pitted against another for reasons that were embroiled in patterns that were illusory and categorically silly. I saw how all of humankind's disagreements and dissonances were part of a false narrative that burrowed ever deeper into polarity and darkness, further from the clarity of universal union.

In this ever-deepening burrow of polarity I felt a tunnel assert itself, and I could feel myself tottering from some imbalanced weight that had been thrust on me, and I tumbled into the tunnel. I fell, twisting in the lightest of grips, as though some giant hand was guiding me to a place that was meant for only me. As I fell I could see galaxies strewn about like grains of sand on the black shoreline of space. None of it I could claim as mine. There was nothing familiar in any direction that I looked.

Then, far in the distance, a small speck of light caught my attention. I lost consciousness, and suddenly I opened my eyes to find myself inside the small listening chamber. I looked to see if Trisiel was still present, but the vague blackness in front of me gave little hope. I swung my legs over the edge of my chair and stood groggily to my feet, and then sat—perhaps fell—back down. I rubbed my eyes and groaned.

After a few minutes of appropriate self-loathing, the kind that comes from being in the most rarified atmospheres of the universe, and then suddenly finding oneself inside a dark chamber within a volcano, who knows where, wearing a body that I couldn't even name with confidence. I was only glad for the lack of a mirror; had that greeted me, I might have very well smashed myself against it, hoping to end both pictures.

Chapter 17: Sleep

I wasn’t sure when I would speak again. I had left the listening chamber, and Zenith had probably seen my expression and knew better than try to engage me in conversation. She simply escorted me back to the bedroom and left me there, telling me that she would bring me some food and water.

I had no way to talk about my experience, and even as the day wore on into night, I could feel my memory, clear and delicate, fading piece by piece like sand that is taken by an ocean wave as it recoils from the shore. My brain was not capable of holding such images or sounds. I had no storeroom that could accommodate the scope of my experience. I felt like a mountain peak surrounded by great distances in every direction. Never had I felt so alone.

I slept, wishing for a dream to make clear what I was to do next. How I should move forward. I wanted only to plunge deep inside myself and awaken in a new world that didn’t have demons or hidden islands. I wanted to see which paths were brightly lit, and which were darkened by a wall that climbed so high as to leave men quivering in its shadows. I wanted to see without ground, without anything crashing down or rising up. I wanted to see the field of my heart.

It was my final wish before sleep came and spread its merciful wings over me.

Chapter 18: Thorns

When I finally woke from a dreamless sleep, I decided to go to the observation room and look outside. I needed to get back out on the island and explore. I was feeling overwhelmed by my circumstances, and for some reason, speaking with Zenith was not something I wanted to do. I decided to return to the beach and look to see if any more debris had washed up. I reasoned that I could find more clues to my identity on the beach than in this dark volcano.

I know it seems like an odd choice to look for clues on a deserted beach when the matriarch of earth was a call away, but my desire to be outside was powerful and impossible to resist.

When I arrived at the observation room, I could see that it was daylight, and by my best estimates, early morning. The sound of waves in the far distance was a welcoming reminder of my plan to revisit the beach. I sized up the window carefully. It was, unfortunately, smaller than I had remembered. I tried to contort my body, testing to see if my shoulder would fit through.

“There’s an easier way,” Zenith announced quietly.

Her voice startled me for several reasons, but mainly because I felt like I had been caught in the act of escape.

“Even if you could fit through that window, the cliff is steep, and you could fall,” she explained. “Would you like to take the easy way?”

I nodded.

Without a single word, Zenith turned and walked out of the chamber. I followed her down a winding corridor that jutted out from behind a wall just past the observation room. She held a torch, though I did not see how she had acquired it, but the corridor she had chosen was decidedly devoid of light. I walked a few yards behind her, since the path was narrow, following the fragile light she held in her hand. The passageway darted like a serpent through reddish-gray stalactites that clung to the cavernous ceilings in a stark

and undeterred way.

After a few minutes of walking in silence, Zenith stepped to the side of the narrow corridor and pointed. “When you get to the end of this path, you’ll see a doorway covered in thick vines—it’s the only exit from this system of caverns that leads to the beach. Once you arrive at the beach, go to your left, I believe you’ll find what you’re looking for there.”

I nodded. “Thank you, I’ll return before dark.”

“Now you know the way,” Zenith said. She looked into my eyes briefly. “If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

With that, she handed me her torch, and turned and walked back the way we had just come. I stood for a moment, blinking from the bright light in my hand. The thought occurred to me that it would be wise to invite her to join me, but my mouth was still not ready to speak. I wanted to be alone, as much as I craved her company.

The passageway narrowed even more as I followed it down a fairly steep decline. Ten minutes later the telltale signs of the outside world were unmistakable as the distinctive smell of the ocean started to reach me. I knew I was getting closer. A few minutes later I found the vines that Zenith has spoken of. However, the vines were filled with thorns—sharp thorns.

There were thin fissures of light on the other side, seeping between the thick tangled vines that fell across the doorway like a waterfall. I could only imagine that on the other side, thorny vines, strategically placed, were growing above the doorway, and their stalks, nestled in huge clumps, had fallen down to block any trespassers.

“The easy way?” I said aloud to myself. “I don’t think so. I should have taken my chances with the window.”

Now that I’d said the obvious, I wondered if I should turn around and go back. That would be admitting defeat without a war. First, I had to try to make it through that thorny covering. As I looked around for anything that could be a tool to help, I wondered why Zenith hadn’t mentioned that the vines would be in full armor. I really needed a stout stick, or something equivalent, so I could push the vines apart, at least enough so I could fit

through.

The thought occurred to me that I could burn the vines with the torch, but I had no idea what might happen with the resulting smoke, and the possibility of letting loose a fire on the island seemed like an idea better suited for a last resort. No, a stick or pole was what I needed.

Then I saw it, it was a stalactite, long and properly sized for my task. I grabbed it with one hand and pulled hard, but it wouldn't budge. I put the torch on the ground and pulled with both hands, but again, no effect. I backed up a few feet and ran at the stalactite with all my strength, meeting it with my right shoulder and cupping it with my hands. I heard a loud snapping sound as I hit it, and felt it fall into my hands—a four-foot section that was about three to five inches in diameter. It was surprisingly heavy, nearly pulling me to the ground like an anchor.

Immediately I stuck the stalactite through the thick tangle of vines and leveraged an opening of about twenty inches, sufficient for me to step through. As careful as I was, I managed to cut my arms on some of the thorns, but I was so elated at breaking free of the volcano that I barely noticed the cuts.

The smells of a lush tropical forest greeted me along with sunbeams that glinted through the canopy of thick trees. As I looked up I felt tipsy. What was happening? A stroke? I looked around, seeking some cause for my rapid state of confusion. Dizziness overtook me, and I had no choice but to sit down. I felt a tunnel seize me, and I was powerless to hold it off. I knew only one act was left for me—to fall face forward into the soft ground before me.

I don't know how long I was out, but I felt someone was shaking my arm, and I felt a spark of curiosity to see who it might be, and so I opened one weary eye. It was a strange creature. I don't know how else to say it, but it looked a little like an elf— though it had more of a fish's face with its eyes on each side of its narrow head and a beak-like nose.

At the sight of it, both of my eyes flew open, and I mustered sufficient energy to sit upright and rub my eyes. In that second I had no doubt that when I opened my eyes, the creature would be gone; a simple figment of my imagination, but that wasn't the way it happened. Instead, I opened my eyes,

and it was even closer, staring at me, eyeball to eyeball, as if it had lost something in my eye.

“What do you want?” I bellowed. “Who are you?”

The creature moved back somewhat, appearing genuinely put off by what to me seemed like a perfectly reasonable reaction. “I need nothing from you, but you, my friend, need something from me, and it’s more than a name, though, I’m willing to give you that as well.”

“What?” I said groggily.

“My name,” the creature said, tapping its foot.

“What it is?” I asked trying to sound interested, but mostly I was annoyed at not knowing what was happening to me… again.

The creature was small, perhaps only two feet tall. It looked like a male, but his hair was very long almost to his waist, and was mostly golden-brown with twinges of red near his ears. His ears were quite large, given his slight stature, nearly the entire length of his face. I would have to say he was not unattractive, simply disproportioned, at least by human standards.

“I am known as Canto. I am the protector of this volcano—the very one that you recently passed through as evidenced by the fact that you can see me.”

Canto sat down on a branch opposite my sitting position. My head was still dizzy and as far from coherence as a drunkard from home. “How is it that I can see you… what… what happened to me?”

Canto laughed heartily, flinging his head back and rubbing his belly. “You are a funny one. Big, brown, dressed like pirate, and perfectly childlike. Yes, you are a funny one. I will enjoy this evaluation.”

His tone shifted to a more serious edge. “You have trespassed on the volcano. You have gone through its secret door, and the vines have left their mark on you.” Canto pointed to my arms where there were small trickles of blood.

“The thorns of the vine have a purpose, not simply to scratch you and inflict pain, though that is part of it,” he smiled wickedly. “The better part of

it is that it releases a certain chemical compound in your bloodstream that allows us to meet—in my world." Canto put his arms out. I counted seven fingers on each hand.

"Your world looks the same as mine," I said, looking around and seeing absolutely nothing different—except, of course, a small creature that looked like it belonged somewhere in a shadowy underworld.

"You say you want to evaluate me. For what? I'm no trespasser. I was shipwrecked on this island just yesterday, and in that time I have seen more things than I can speak of. I have met the earth—Zenith, and I have battled demons. I have seen the creators of all of this, and I have spoken with their creator. So tell me, what is it that you—a little creature of the woods—can do to stop me from going to the beach, and searching for anything that might give me a clue as to why I am here!?"

I have to admit that my irritation had risen to a fevered pitch. By the time I finished my last word, my voice was literally cracking with anger. I couldn't help it. I felt like being alone, and the last thing I wanted was to be evaluated by a puny creature that seemed to find me merely an amusing part of his otherwise boring day.

"I must evaluate your intent," Canto said. "So that is precisely what I will do. It is my job, and if you know Zenith, then you know my boss, and if my boss tells me to do a job, then that job I shall do. And do not think that you, simply because of your physical stature, are somehow superior to me. I can stop you in your tracks by means other than physical force. Are you not already in my world?"

"There you go again," I pleaded. "I'm not in your world. You've invaded mine. Look, I don't need your evaluation. I don't care what you think of me or my purpose. I simply want to go to the beach and search it for clues."

I started to get up, signaling that my patience—small as it was—had come to an end, but I quickly noticed that my sense of balance was gone. I fell to my side and struggled to regain an upright sitting position.

"The chemical compound I spoke of earlier," Canto said, "has side effects. The more you move, the more it circulates in your bloodstream. Even your temper tantrum released more of it. You would be wise to compose yourself,

take shallow breaths, and be very, very still."

Canto jumped to his feet and tried his best to help me get upright again, but I was afraid that I might keel over and crush him. Despite his small size, he was strong, and I dare say, helpful.

Once I regained my upright, sitting position, my head began to clear. "What do you want to know?" I asked, deference showing in my voice.

Canto returned to his branch and crossed one leg over the other, and took a long look at me. I could only imagine how I must have looked. I tried my best not to think of it.

"You are a human?"

I groaned. This would be a long evaluation I told myself. "I am."

"And you are a male of the species?"

"I am."

"And your name…?"

"Solomon," I lied, wanting to shorten my story.

"And you came to this island for what purpose, Solomon?"

My idea to shorten my story suddenly looked like a long shot. "I don't know."

Canto sighed. "What are you trying to hide from me? I am here to help you. I am a friend. I serve the one who has no doubt invited you here, so please, speak freely with me. I will do you no harm."

"Why do you believe I was invited?" I asked.

"I'll ask the questions, if you don't mind. If you don't know why you were invited to this island, then you are suffering from amnesia, not uncommon among your kind, I imagine."

"Really?"

"An amnesiac that awakens on an island only to find himself the guest of a beautiful earth goddess, and yet, you seem as one who is intent on leaving the island before you've regained your memory. Where is it you desire to go?"

“I told you, the beach.”

“Yes, to look for clues,” Canto said, shaking his head and looking down at the ground.

Canto was beginning to look shrewder than I had initially thought. He behaved like a miniature Sherlock Holmes. His mind was not instinctual, as one might expect from such a small creature. He wore only a grass tunic that was carefully braided to ensure his modesty. It was quite ornate with flowers poking out of his collar to provide a spectrum of colors that looked quite beautiful, if not a little pretentious.

Canto looked squarely into my eyes. “I think you are hiding something, perhaps from me, perhaps from yourself. You said earlier that you had met demons while you were on this island. I don’t believe you, because demons cannot enter this place.”

“Technically, it wasn’t on this island,” I began. “It was in some other realm, but it happened while my body was on this island. I also saw the great prophet, Dou Xing, who was, to my great horror, killed by this demon.”

“Do you believe in evil, then?” Canto asked.

“Doesn’t everyone?” I answered. I couldn’t imagine where he was going with his evaluation, but as long as the conversation wasn’t about me personally, I was relieved.

“There is no evil,” Canto declared. “There is only a lack of empathy and understanding.”

“Well, you can call it whatever you want,” I said, “but when you see someone killed, right in front of you, you will believe in evil. So, to me, evil does exist, and to parse words about it is not something I’m inclined to do… with you or anyone else.”

Canto sighed, emphasizing his impatience. “This is an important matter, and it is part of my evaluation, therefore you will discuss it with me, or I will not let you pass.”

“Pass? What do you mean?”

“I am in a position to deny you access to the beach or anywhere else on

this island. If you act dismissively of my evaluation, or in any way withhold the truth from me, well, sir, you will be detained in the volcano awaiting a dispositional edict from Zenith. Is that clear?"

"What's clear is that I'm a prisoner."

"You are a guest, but as a guest you still have to abide by the rules of your host, and in this case, Zenith has been very specific that I conduct this evaluation—"

"Who are you exactly?" I interrupted. "What is your role on this island?"

"I explained this already—"

"Not to my satisfaction, I don't know what you're trying to do with me. You've essentially drugged me, held me captive in this place, and now you're threatening me. I want to know what it is you intend to do, and I demand to know now!"

"You're getting all worked up again, Solomon, and you will not like the cost to your sensibilities. Calm down." Canto stood up, and watched me intently. He was like an artist looking up at a mammoth sculpture, trying to decide how to unmask the form he yearned to see.

"Why do you believe in evil?" he asked me.

Canto began pacing back and forth as I deliberated on my response. I didn't want to play this game, but the alternative didn't appeal to me either.

"Because people are cruel," I relented. "They kill, torture, manipulate, and destroy goodness and innocence. How is that not evil?"

"What if there were a cultural exploitation to extinguish or diminish emotional understanding? What if the brain could be affected in such a way that the ability to understand the feelings and position of another was impaired? What if evil—or every act you call evil—were simply a lack of empathy?

"There is no mastermind behind evil acts. There is no demon, as you put it, playing puppeteer to the human race. Good and evil are not locked in a dance of perpetual conflict. That's not the world you live in. Evil doesn't exist. A lack of empathy, for a specific set of reasons, that exists."

“Why do I care about this?” I asked wearily. “How’s it relevant to me?”

“That is for you to discover, and so you shall.”

Canto put his arms out. It seemed to me that he was summoning something from the sky. The leaves from the trees that surrounded us began to slowly pulse in a variety of colors. They were blinking on and off in vivid blues, reds, yellows, oranges, and greens, but slowly started to synchronize to a brilliant violet color. Within a minute or so they were all ablaze in a radiant, ripening violet.

Canto stayed in his position, his eyes closed as if in deep meditation. All I could do was watch. Then the leaves began to fall, gathering, one at a time, on the back of Canto. Within seconds I could see that the leaves were assembling as wings. Canto looked both invulnerable and bejeweled with his violet-colored wings that were forming by an invisible intelligence. The entire scene was thrilling, and I suddenly realized that I had been holding my breath.

“An inheritance was given you,” Canto said, his arms still out. “It was a gift, not a curse. Humanity has learned to adjust itself to separation in such a way that it has forgotten the plight of the weakest of its kind. This separation would be humanity’s undoing if not for you. What you bring forth is the way in which humanity can become human in the highest sense of that word—gods from earth.

“Look at me. I command my world and it responds. I am my world. What you see here—this small creature you call Canto—is simply a symbol of my world condensed into a small, three-dimensional animation that allows you to interact with the island, which is what I truly am.”

Immediately after he finished, Canto’s feet began to grow larger, and soon his entire body expanded, but as it grew larger and larger, it became more like a tree. His legs began to sink into the earth like roots, and his face turned to featureless bark. Canto was shape shifting into a tree, and, absurdly enough, a large tree at that. It towered over me, the sound of hyper-growth, bursting through the canopy, pushing other limbs from nearby trees aside; it was enough to put one in a state of awe.

For me, the state of awe included passing out. I lost consciousness. I

seemed to have found that place where nothing exists: nowhere.

Chapter 19: The Cave

Without knowing our true place, I suppose we're always unknowing of where we are—conscious or not. I don't know how long I was adrift in senselessness, but when I awoke, the day felt the same as when I had walked across the threshold of the vine-covered door. It was as if no time had been lost, and yet I remembered everything that had happened.

My head felt fine. Whatever drug was in those thorns, its effects had withdrawn, as though I had awoken from a restful sleep. No effects from the drugs, no sense of pain, and, to my pleasant surprise, no sense of Canto. Not that I found him annoying, he was just a little too anomalous for my taste. An island elf that turns into a giant tree? I hardly think so. The idea brought a smile to my face.

I stood up and stretched, feeling my energy was good enough to walk. I found my bearings and headed for the beach. There was a hint of a path, so I felt quite certain I was on the right course, but suddenly, and for no reason that I could detect, my heart began to pound frantically. I looked around and saw nothing. I listened with all of my awareness, and only the sound of crashing waves in the distance broke the stillness of the forest. There was no breeze, and no movement that I could see, and yet my heart was beating like a sparrow's wings.

It seemed that my alarm was unwarranted, so I continued down the path. I had this uneasy feeling that a demon was reaching out to me. I began to recall my dream with Dou Xing, and wished I could have saved him. Out of the corner of my eye, a branch moved. I spun around to face it, but whatever it was I couldn't see it. I was beginning to wonder if my contact with Canto was not a simple, drug-induced hallucination; perhaps he was following me, but in my wakened state, he could only reach out like a ghost.

The path, what there was of it, wound its way through a thick wooded area where the footing was soft, even spongy, making it difficult to travel. Each time I came to a large tree, the thought entered my mind that it could be

Canto, but then I would smile and reassure myself that it was an absurd fantasy brought on by… I never quite finished that part of the thought.

I finally discovered the beach. The sound of the waves growing louder was like the needle of a compass, pointing me in the direction of endless churning water. However, when I burst out from the woods, I was above the shoreline, perhaps ninety feet or so, atop limestone bluffs. I would need to climb down, and through my squinting eyes, it was clear that the descent would be a challenge.

It was a warm day, probably mid-morning, and the sun played with a few stray clouds that seemed to be arguing over kingship of the sky. I looked for a trail of some kind, but finding none, I decided to lie down and look over the cliff face and see where the easiest path might be. As I looked below to the shoreline, I could see a cave carved into the limestone cliffs, and an inlet from the sea cutting to the cave. It looked yawning in its depth, so deep I couldn't see how far back it went. The tide was out, and I could glimpse, even from my height, that crabs were foraging on the beach below. They were in their oceanic element, while I peered from above like their god.

I couldn't get rid of the nagging feeling that I was missing something. Something important. I felt a presence that I couldn't explain. It was gnawing at me, following me with an omniscience that pulled me to a place I didn't really want to go; but there was something about that cave that beckoned me, and I knew I had no choice but to explore it, despite Zenith's advice to go left when I arrived at the beach.

The cliff face was sheer, but thankfully, the limestone's softness provided sufficient footholds, and it was an easier climb down than I had expected. The cave was hollowed out from the sea, but I didn't realize that the sea had become a channel that went deep into the island itself. It was as if the cave harbored an underground lagoon. The turquoise water and the reddish-yellow limestone were a spectacular combination of colors as they intermingled in the light, forming new colors of golden amber and brilliant greens. The soothing sound of the water careening in the lagoon was augmented by the natural amphitheater, and I sat on a ledge only a few feet inside the mouth of the cave, taking it all in, immeasurably exceeded by my surroundings.

As I looked, for the first time, into the cave's mouth, the depth of the

watery cave was lost in blackness. Behind me was a beach, sunshine, probably food, and what I had hoped were clues as to my identity, but it was the darkness of the cave that drew me, and for reasons I couldn't explain. Just as I was assuring myself that I would only make a brief exploration, I heard something deep inside the cave.

I wouldn't say it was human voices, or that the voices were speaking in a language I understood, but there was something inside the cave, and it, or they, were talking. Could it be others like me? Perhaps others had been washed ashore from the same boat as me… it seemed a reasonable conclusion. I almost yelled out, but then decided to remain quiet and edge closer to the source of the voices. If I knew one thing about this island, it was to expect the unexpected.

The further I went inside the cave, the sound of waves that were breaking on the distant reef became less noticeable, and the more distinct the voices became. At one point, after a few minutes of shuffling along the ledge I was on, I heard the word, "finished," in a hushed tone. It sounded like it was still deep inside the cave, but the word was distinct and unmistakable. The cave overhung the crystalline water that was no longer rippling from the effects of the sea. It was now perfectly still; like me.

I leaned against the cave wall, looking to the source of the voices and trying to see what could not be seen. If these were fellow travelers, maybe they would know me, or at least be able to tell me what happened to our boat, and how we had become shipwrecked. I decided to approach them and take my chances.

"Hello?" I said, not too loudly, and in my calmest voice.

Silence returned.

"My name is Solomon. I was shipwrecked on this island just yesterday. Can you understand me?"

I thought I heard a gurgling sound and maybe a little movement. Then I heard water rippling against the cave walls. I started to wonder whether to stay or leave. If they were friendly, wouldn't they reply? A minute passed by, and suddenly I saw something rise slowly out of the water. I froze.

Not more than twenty feet away, I could see a human head, floating above the waterline, staring at me. In the dim light I couldn't make out any features, but I was sure there was a head, bobbing in the water, and it was undeniably human. Then, it was gone. I squatted down, hoping that I could get a better perspective on the swimmer, but all I could see were phantoms and shadows.

"I mean no harm," I said. "I simply want to talk. Are you there?"

Somewhere amid the ensuing silence I decided to go deeper into the cave and see if I could find whoever had surfaced in front of me. I stumbled on the ledge a bit and noticed it was thinning to the point of nonexistence. Frustrated, I turned around to leave, and I saw the head again, floating above the water, silhouetted in the faint light of the outside world.

"I am Nammu."

It was a female voice, with a clear, penetrating quality to it.

"Why are you in the water?" I asked.

"Why are you on a narrow ledge that barely allows you any movement?"

I had to admit it was a reasonable question. "I've seen creatures the size of large ships on this island, I'm not sure I want to swim with them."

I paused for a moment, watching her head bob slowly in the water. "Where did you come from?"

She pointed up with one long, slender arm.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I came from out there, where the stars live."

"And how then did you come to this island?"

"If I told you how I came here, you would not believe me."

"Then why did you come to this island, inside a dark cave? Are there others of your kind here?"

"I came to meet you," she replied, her tone softening. "And no, there are none of my kind on this island. It isn't permitted."

"How do you know me?"

“I have known about you for a very long time. I have sought you out in order to speak with you… in secret.”

I was, once again, speechless. Everyone I met on this island knew who I was, what I was supposed to achieve, and yet, I, the achiever, had no single memory of how I could possibly invent a human interface to the soul.

And here I was, talking with a strange woman who was swimming in a channel of the sea under the roof of a dark cave, as if we had met casually on the street. For some reason, my thoughts, gallant as they may seem, turned to her comfort.

“Are you okay in the water,” I asked. “I mean, do you want to get out and talk out on the beach?”

“I’m very comfortable like this. I love the water. It is, in a way, my second home.”

“You said you wanted to speak with me in secret. Why in secret?”

“I have a proposition I wanted to make, and I would prefer that it reaches only your ears. It is not an easy thing to meet you in private, as you are, let’s say, a very guarded property.”

“Why do you refer to me as a guarded property?”

“Are you not the guest of Zenith?”

“I… I guess so, but to be honest, I have no memory of being invited—”

“The same can be said for all who come to this island. They do not remember their invitation. They simply appear. It is the way Zenith works.”

I sat down on the ledge and dangled my feet in the water. Nammu watched me in silence.

“Who exactly are you?” I asked.

“I am Nammu. That is all you need to know. I am an ancient one who has given birth to the greatest leaders of your world, and they, even now, remain in power, though they are unseen and unknown by all but a handful of humans.

“As the mother of power and the creator of human purpose, I am the one

that will free you from your responsibility and enslavement to those who are misguided and have abducted you from your normal life, and are now asking you to become something you are not."

"And what is that?"

"A scientist."

Nammu had a way of speaking that seized my full attention. There was something formidable about her. She held herself—notwithstanding that she was treading water in a dark cave—like royalty. When she spoke there was a weight to her voice, propelled by a dominant will that can only come from a possessive race.

"You say my benefactors are misguided. On what basis do you make this conclusion?"

"Spoken like a scientist, and yet, you are not one. Do not confuse yourself. You are a simple, ordinary man. Those whom you call benefactors are, in fact, your enemies. They build you up, fill your head with lofty missions, and yet, what have they contributed to your welfare? Do you have your memory? Do you know who your wife is? Do you even remember the names of your children?"

The searing authority of her words fell on me like a powerful predator with its teeth bared. I was lost in her persuasions.

"I have children… a wife? How do you know these things?"

"I care about you. I want you to return to your life as you had before, and help you leave this prison that Zenith has created for you."

The shock of hearing that I might have a wife and children was echoing in my mind. "I'm so confused… how do you know I have children… a wife—"

"I told you, I have been watching you for a very long time."

"But if I'm ordinary, why? Why would you, or anyone else, watch me?"

"For only one reason: to spare you the grief of a mission that your enemies conspire to impose on you. The mission that they purport is yours is not real. It is a charade."

"Why?"

“What have they told you so far?”

“I’m supposed to discover an interface to the human soul. They call it the Grand Portal. I guess I’m the one who finds the missing link—the technology that makes the Grand Portal… work.”

“Good, then you know enough of their wicked plans to know that they are mad. How could humans see something they don’t possess?”

“But I have seen these things myself.”

“While you were here, correct?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“It is all manufactured. It is merely a constructed hologram within a dream. There is no human soul. It is a great lie perpetrated on humanity. Humans are opaque, dense water carriers who are given brains by the grace of evolution’s hand. If humanity is to have hope, it is in the venture of transhumanism, which will bring the real intelligence of technology to the human body. If you want to dabble in science, then place your ambitions there, for that is the future of humanity. Those who want to gawk at an imaginary soul can have their religious lens polished a little brighter with faith, but they will never see what does not exist. There is no one who will drag them to a made-up God.”

She spoke with such absolute conviction that I was listening with every atom of my being. A part of me was listening in fear that she was right. I could sense myself shrinking and becoming pliable. Maybe I’ve been denied wisdom for too long to know when falsehoods are proffered before me, but I found myself believing some thread of what she said.

“Tell me about my family.”

“You are married to a woman who is, like you, a simple teacher. Together you have two children and live in a modest home in a town called New Haven. Your children are very beautiful and adore both you and your lovely wife. You live a good life, Solomon. You should have it back, and not be held a prisoner in this fantasy world by an imposter who believes that she is the guardian of this entire planet.

“Have you seen anything else peculiar during your captivity here?” she asked, her voice a mere whisper.

I shook my head in shock. “What are their names?”

“You mean your family?”

I nodded.

“Well, let’s see, your wife’s name is Derya, and your daughter, your oldest child, is named Marisa. Your son, who looks very much like you, is named Jon.”

I tried with all my power to see my wife, my children at the mention of their names, but nothing came through the thick wall of blackness that encompassed by memories. I imagined my memories circled in a small mass amid a gigantic storm like huddled servants awaiting their punishment in exile. I wanted terribly to tear down those walls and reawaken.

“Can you take me from this island and return me to my family? Do you have the power, the means to do this?”

Nammu paused a moment, glancing behind her as if looking for something. In the moment she looked back, I could see her profile. She appeared like a fabled beauty, her silhouette smooth, yet taut, her hair straight and water-pressed to the sides of her face. It was the classical form of beauty that sculptors sought in their marble, but could never quite portray.

“I do.”

“Then do it. I want to return to my family, my home.”

“As you desire, Solomon, but there is one issue that requires a certain resolution…”

“What?”

“My fee.”

“I have no money—”

“I’m not interested in money; I want a favor, just as I am extending a favor to you. These matters always require symmetry and balance.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What favor do you have in mind?”

“I cannot take you from this island in the same manner that I came to it. And I cannot return you in the same manner that you were ripped from your

family and put on this island. I can only return you to your family if you agree to my stipulation."

"And that is?" I asked.

"That you remain who you are."

I frowned in disbelief. "That's it. That's all you want me to do?"

"That's all, but you must promise me that you will continue in the path you have already made as a loving husband and father, and a school teacher to your students. Lead your simple life, and allow it to play out the way it was intended."

"Why? Why do want me to promise this?"

"You have freewill, but once an agreement is reached, you have renounced your freewill in exchange for my gift of freedom. An agreement between us is complete, and you are free to relax and become yourself again. Do we have an agreement?"

"What if I didn't… what if I decided to change my career or divorce my wife, or anything of that nature? What would happen?"

Nammu paddled closer to my position, she was only a few feet away, and I seriously thought about pulling my legs out of the water for fear that she might grab me, but she pulled up and continued treading water effortlessly.

"A commitment is a pact made between you and me. If you dishonor this commitment, if you decide to change your mind, then you will be punished, and the severity of the punishment will depend on only one thing."

"And what is that?"

"If you move an inch towards the insane mission that Zenith has put into your head… if you so much as consider this direction, even as a whim, I will know about it, and I will—"

"How would you know about it?"

"Solomon, I've told you several times already, I have been watching you. I will continue watching you in ways that you will never know. You must be willing to accept these terms; otherwise, I will not return you to your family."

As Nammu finished speaking the last word, she touched my knee, and in that touch I saw my family. My wife, children, home, all of those things that matter in one's core were alive for a brief moment, and then, like the silence of paintings, they faded as Nammu withdrew her hand.

I recognized my wife—slightly. My children… they were strangers to me. I felt such barrenness and desperation. I wanted to call out to Zenith and get her counsel. My confusion was utterly magnetic to me, and my heart was beating in a cage of iron bars and coldness. It was a dreadful place.

"I need time to think about it," I whispered in a sullen manner.

"How much time?"

"A day. I'll return here tomorrow at the same time and give you my answer."

"I agree on one condition: you do not mention our meeting to anyone else. If you do, my offer is withdrawn."

"I won't say anything. You have my word."

"There is one other detail," Nammu said. "You cannot use any of the content of this meeting in your conversation with anyone other than me. Is this also clear?"

I nodded. "It is."

I cleared my throat, signaling a question. "I have one question before I leave. You said that you were alone, and yet I heard you talking when I arrived. Who were you talking with?"

Nammu silently submerged beneath the water. Hardly a ripple betrayed her former position. I watched with curiosity, thinking that my question was an annoyance and she had decided to end our meeting. A minute went by, and I was nearly ready to leave when her head broke the surface of the still water. She was carrying something, and she held it up like a prize. I couldn't see it very well in the faint light, but as she came closer, I noticed it was a small head. It was the head of Canto, wet, his glassy eyes rolled back with the glint of white showing and little else.

I gasped at the recognition, and my heart sunk with such a force that I had

to turn away to hold back my nausea.

Nammu tossed the head behind her like a piece of garbage. I heard the splash. “He wanted to stop you. He wanted to prevent you from leaving. I had no choice but to kill him. I’m sorry if my demonstration was too… explicit, but I want you to understand the extremes to which I will help you. No one must get in the way of your safe reunion with your family.”

I was petrified. I knew her demonstration was calculated to frighten me into obedience. Canto was magical. If she could kill him with such ferocity, what resistance could I possibly offer?

Standing to my feet, my legs wobbled slightly, and I leaned against the wall of the cave to steady myself before trying to walk out to the beach. The light beckoned me, and I walked away without another word uttered between us. I felt Nammu allowed the silence. I also felt her eyes watching me as I left the cave. I even heard her thought enter my mind, I will be watching.

Chapter 20: Storm

I don’t remember how long I had been walking along the beach, maybe ten or fifteen minutes, but I eventually began to notice a storm off on the horizon. I could feel the sun’s warmth diminishing and the light growing darker. The whole island changed in a darkening tone. When I faced the storm clouds, I could see lightning strikes, and a few seconds later their deep rumbling chords found my gut, and struck a resonance that made me even more uneasy.

The storm, however, was not my real concern. Nammu was. In fact, I would have to say I was welcoming the storm. I think I hoped it would cleanse me. Perhaps a good rain was exactly what I needed, and yet, the closer it came, the more menacing the storm looked. Its clouds were gathering to the highest pitch of the sky, as if the heavens were drawing them closer, away from earth, but I knew that the higher the clouds gathered, the more powerfully the storm would strike.

The one thing about the beach was its lack of shelter. I looked around for anything that could provide me a haven from the storm, but there seemed to be nothing but palm trees and scattered bushes.

The winds swiftly came up and the surf was suddenly like an angry mob, rattling swords. I did what no one should do in this circumstance; I sat down and watched the storm ripen. I decided that with nowhere to hide, I might as well enjoy the show. Then a lightning bolt struck about two hundred yards from the beach, and the instantaneous clap of thunder hurt my ears, it was so loud.

I’m not sure if it was the startlingly loud clap of thunder or the sizzling brightness of the lightning, but I found myself unable to move. Then another lightning bolt hit so close to me that I could smell the electrical charge. For some reason, I didn’t feel I could move. I felt a paralysis that I can’t explain, but even odder still, I heard a voice—a man’s voice. It was saying a word that made no sense to me, “Clear!” The sound of panic accompanied the word,

and I believe it was then that I passed out. Almost.

There was one final image as my eyes closed, it was a blinding light, and I had only one hypothesis: a lightning bolt had hit me, and I was dead.

Chapter 21: The Other Side

My very first memory was of someone sobbing. I opened my eyes only for a second, and I felt a consciousness thrust into me—my body—like light that divides from a prism and then enters a black object fully absorbed. It was like this over and over. Sometimes there were dreams or memories that flitted through my mind, but they entered swiftly, and I was unable to chase them down and compel them to reveal their stories.

The second memory I recall was the smell of sterility; that smell of obsessive cleanliness whose sole purpose was to leave no germ alive. I remember wanting to speak, but my body and mind were so fragile and weak I could not summon a single word, or move a muscle. I wondered if I was still lying face up on the beach, and listened to the outside of me—that part of me that seemed to be present—but I only heard my breath, and I lost consciousness again.

The third memory was from the vital source of language. I heard the words fall upon me like a rope to which I clung, but I had no strength to grasp it. I didn't understand the words; they were all jumbled into likenesses and possibilities. I felt something pierce my arm, and a vague sense of pain entered me, but I was powerless, and all I could do was to hope that Nammu had not found me in my vulnerable state.

The fourth memory that came over me was a hand. It touched mine. It held it. I felt its warmth and softness and light pressure. I willed my eyes to open, and I saw the vague outline of a face, and the sound of someone sniffling. It was in a room, a white room. I was on a bed, holding hands with a woman who had a vague resemblance to someone I had seen before, but I knew not her name.

"He's awake!" the woman said.

I wasn't sure if she meant me, or someone else, so I tried to look around the room, but my head weighed a hundred pounds, and I felt a little like Gulliver after the Lilliputians had tied him down, only my ropes were tubes

tethered to medical devices.

The woman's face came closer to mine, and kissed me on the cheek.

"Zenith?" I asked.

As soon as I said the word, I remembered everything from the island in perfect detail, as the memories poured over me like resurrected notes from a tower's carillon played by a feverish hand. It all happened in an instant, and then I heard the one word that jolted me to my new world.

"It's Derya, your wife."

"Derya?" I said, my voice raspy, and to my ears, unrecognizable. I felt like an interloper inside someone else's body.

"Yes, yes, it's me. Oh my God, oh my God! I'll be right back, I just want to get the doctor—"

I grabbed her hand with all my strength. "Where am I?"

"You're in Intensive Care, Sol. You've been here the last two days, and you've just come—"

"What's my name?"

Derya's face contorted a bit as she fell silent for a moment, her enthusiasm draining from her face. "It's Solomon. You don't remember me, do you?"

I closed my eyes and shook my head.

"It'll all come back, honey, now let me get the doctor. I'll be right back."

A few moments later I heard a new voice.

"It's good to see you're awake, Mr. Tonum. I'm Doctor Kendall, do you remember me?"

I looked at his face, but saw nothing that I recognized. My mind was still reeling with the memories of the island, and the events therein prior to waking up on the other side.

"I see," Dr. Kendall remarked. He turned to my wife as if I wasn't there. "Sometimes when patients come out of anesthesia, especially after something as traumatic as heart surgery, they have temporary memory loss. It's nothing

to be too concerned about. We'll monitor it. The good news is that he's back. His vitals are looking better already."

"Heart surgery?" I managed to croak.

"Here," Dr. Kendall said, "here're some ice chips you can suck on, get a little moisture in your mouth."

After feeding me some ice chips, he sat down in a chair next to me, crossed his legs and started writing some notes in a chart on his lap. "Mr. Tonum, you've been through a heart transplant. It happened two days ago. Unfortunately, the new heart was rejected with more vigor than we had expected, and the immunosuppressant we used was unable to fend off the massive rejection. We thought we were going to lose you. You needed two resuscitations, or we wouldn't be talking right now."

I needed a way to sort out all that had happened to me in all of the worlds I had visited, all of the creatures I had interacted with and all of the knowledge I had received. How could I possibly be in two worlds?

I kept my eyes closed for a minute while the doctor finished his notes and my wife made some phone calls in the hallway. I tuned my mind to the island, and wondered which world was true. I did not know, at that time, which world was a dream and which was real. I realize that any of you reading this will doubt me, but it is the truth, nonetheless. The world of the island felt more real than this one, but I could see that a pharmaceutical cocktail was being delivered to my body, no doubt suppressing my normal judgment. I vowed to be patient, but also vigilant, and then, once again, the powerful need to sleep pulled me into unconsciousness.

Someone was poking me. I woke up. It was dark in the room, except for the lights of technology that were faithfully watching over me like silicon-chipped-sentinels, spewing forth their beeps and numbers.

"Didn't mean to wake you up, Mr. Tonum," a voice said. "My name is Marsha, your night nurse. How're you feeling?"

I looked at the blurry picture of Marsha's face and tried to smile. "Confused."

"I understand. It's normal, so you never mind." Marsha said, patting me on

the leg.

She was a large woman, probably in her late fifties, dressed in a sage-colored uniform that was almost certainly too tight for her five years ago.

“Why’d I need a heart transplant?” I moaned.

“Well, that’s a question better left to the doctors, but I can tell you that you only had days to live without a new one. Your old heart was diseased—a rare form of cardiomyopathy—to the point it could have stopped at any time. It was quite a miracle that a donor popped up on our radar screen, and it was a suitable match. You’re one lucky man, Mr. Tonum. One lucky man.

“Now, I need to check your blood pressure, so I’m just going to roll up your sleeve.”

As she rolled up my sleeve, it was the first time I noticed my skin. It was white. I almost gasped, but I lacked the strength. On the island, I was without a doubt, a dark-skinned African.

“Everything okay, Mr. Tonum?”

I nodded and closed my eyes. “What time is it?”

“It’s a little after two in the morning” Marsha replied.

“Is my wife here?”

“No, she left just after my shift started, and that was eleven. Probably went home to be with the children. She’s been sleeping here for the last two days. You picked a good one there, Mr. Tonum. Yes, you did.”

She unsnapped the blood pressure cuff and rolled it up. “Is your memory still a bit foggy?”

Was it my memory, or was it something else altogether? Perhaps sanity was more the question. I wasn’t sure what memory had to do with my state of mind.

“I just want to sleep.”

“Well, you can do that now. I’m all finished here. Your BP’s looking much better now. I’ll be back in an hour to check on you. Do you need anything before I go?”

I managed to shake my head, and within seconds I was asleep.

Chapter 22: Dr. Chardin

It had been a long convalescence—two and a half weeks—but finally I was strong enough to go home. The bigger problem, if it's possible to have a bigger problem than a last-minute heart transplant, was my memory. I remained an amnesiac. I was relearning how to interact with my wife and children, but it was a perplexing struggle. I felt guilty that I couldn't express love to them, and they felt guilty pretending that they understood. But nothing we did could change the fact that I really didn't know them. Without memories I couldn't say the words I love you.

In my hospital stay, especially during the last week, I spent most of my waking time in physical therapy. I preferred the body I had possessed on the island. It was in much better condition than mine. The hospital's physical therapy room had a wall- length mirror, and I found myself more than once looking at my reflection, with a touch of repugnance, as if I were looking at someone else: a man of thirty-five, glasses, about twenty pounds overweight, sandy-colored hair and a complexion that was remarkably pale, even pasty.

All in all, I was a rather average-looking Caucasian man who apparently never went in the sun.

About four days ago I had the recognition that my island incident was not my real world. It had been an imaginative, albeit rapturous experience concocted from the drugs, anesthesia, and the stress contained in that fitful surgery, bursting out against my cinematic mind. Yes, I discovered I taught film and new media at a prestigious university. I was a teacher. A few students had dropped by while I was in the hospital to see how I was doing, but unsurprisingly, none of them looked remotely familiar to me. I think word got out that I was an amnesiac and that was enough to squelch any more visitors.

No one likes to visit amnesiacs, not even strangers. Awkward conversations evolve into silence. It makes them uncomfortable. It reminds them that memories are the only threads that bind, and if they're not

reciprocated or shared, it was an experience of embarrassment, and little more. Anyway, students are too busy and self-absorbed to want to add embarrassment to their list of activities. I didn't blame them.

The doctors at the hospital seemed to have lost interest in me after the first week when my recovery seemed assured. Their disaffection was quite palpable. All of my memory loss was considered a side effect of the rejection, and it was the only thing that remained a mystery to them. Everything else was a plot line that they could map in their sleep. I was predictable.

I had spoken with my surgeon about the rejection issue, and why it had been such a crisis—almost killing me, twice, but he seemed quick to dismiss it as one of those "unknowable happenings" that occur when heart transplants are rushed. Apparently mine was decided in record time. Of course, I had no recollection of the events that preceded my transplant. I was told that I was hanging by a thread. I couldn't do anything for fear of heart failure. I had become, prior to my surgery, a recluse of sorts, staying in a hospital room, waiting for death to take me.

The option of an artificial heart had been considered, but there were issues, and I had apparently refused on grounds that the average recipient's lifespan after an artificial heart transplant ranged from one to eighteen months, and, according to my doctor, I had chosen not to undergo the rigors of an artificial heart transplant surgery for that singular reason.

Then a young woman suddenly died only a few miles from my hospital. I didn't know anything about her in terms of her background, name, age or the nature of her death. The hospital had a strict confidentiality procedure about releasing donor information. All I knew was that the doctors had to move quickly, and I was available and a close enough match. In less than three hours from the time of my donor's death, her heart was beating inside me.

Going home was something I was looking forward to. When we arrived at our home, I was impressed. It was nicer than I had expected for some reason. First of all, it was quite large, and sat prominently on a corner lot that was spacious and possessed beautiful pine trees. Wisps of small gardens dotted the landscape, each rimmed with carefully chosen stones.

I walked with a cane, as a precaution, but had no intention of keeping it

once I got inside. The walkway to our home was relatively flat, but the cobblestone pavement, though beautiful to the eye, was not as easy to navigate for my shuffling feet. “Who did the landscaping for our home?” I asked my wife.

“You did,” she said. “You were always looking for projects in the summer.”

Derya had come from an exotic world that matched her name. Her father was a merchant in Turkey, and had developed a large import business, specifically in wheat. He owned most of the major bakeries in that part of the world, and the Turkish people, almost above any other food, loved their breads and pastries. I learned all about her family by looking at photo albums that she would bring to the hospital. She would spend hours explaining the pictures, hoping one of them might be the tipping point that brought all of my memories and feelings back. It was hard, for both of us, to relive our marriage in photos I didn’t recognize.

Derya’s eyes were her best quality, and though I’m sure they could arouse a mask if she tried, I liked them because they were caring, and sometimes I could see how deeply she felt about me. She was, for the most part, unhidden; her eyes answered her heart’s call or whisper. I liked this about her. It seemed she could hear distant messages, and her eyes, not her mouth, would perform the translation.

As we entered the house, the lights came on, and I could see photographs light up like startled children on the walls.

“You were a photographer before you made films,” she said with a smile.

“I took these?”

“All of them. You developed them as well—the old fashioned way.”

It was a strange feeling to walk up to something that you had created, and admire it, and yet have no recollection of having anything whatsoever to do with its creation.

“You’re sure?” I asked, my eyes roving to the various photographs. They were of people; beautiful, sensitive portraits of everyday people from all over the world, caught in their simple tasks and honorable work, and there were

lots of children playing, dancing, creating, exploring, and almost always outside in places I didn't recognize, but it seemed that I had traveled the world.

I could feel Derya watch me as I studied my own work. "Why didn't you tell me I was a photographer?"

"I wanted to show you."

I could feel her sensitivity to something that I needed to see. She had arranged to have our children stay at one of our friend's house, so I could readjust to our home without distractions. I had initially objected, but now I understood why she had been insistent.

"When did I take these?" I was looking at a picture of Jon and Marisa as they were eating lunch on a boat deck in a place that looked like it could be the Amazon River.

"About three years ago," Derya said.

"How old are our children anyway?"

"Jon's seven, almost eight, and Marisa is twelve."

"We traveled a lot?"

"Before I met you," she said. "You were a famous photographer. At the age of twenty you were already being hailed as the next Eisenstaedt. You were in demand, so the media companies you worked for would fly you everywhere. You took the professor's job so you could spend more time at home. That was two years ago."

My hand reached out to touch one of the photographs of a young child who was sitting on a mountain of garbage as if he were on a hill looking out over a meadow. The child's face looked Indian, messy, and was holding a plastic shopping bag between his knees that had a company logo I didn't recognize. The bag had been re- purposed, and was full of food scraps. The child was beautiful, but his innocence had vanished, and that was the power of the photograph.

I felt a sense of loss, more powerful than ever before since waking up in that hospital room, and I began to weep. Derya comforted me, held me, but I

was unable to hold back the emotional wave that capsized me in that moment. Maybe it was because my kids weren't there, or maybe because I hadn't allowed myself to really feel what I felt when I was in the hospital. In my living room, surrounded by the images I had birthed from my travels, a deep emotion surfaced, and I was exposed to it like a leaf in a swollen river's current.

I sobbed for a long time while Derya held me. She never said a word, and simply stroked the back of my head. I knew I had a long way to climb out of my memory- less hole, and I knew that Derya would help me, and that was the only reason I could find to gradually return to balance and composure.

"Sorry about that," I said sniffling and wiping tears from my eyes.

"It's okay, Sol, it's okay." She took my hand and led me to the kitchen and offered me a box of Kleenex, and then poured a glass of wine for both us while I blew my nose. "I know this won't be an easy adjustment," she offered, "but the whole point of love is that it's not easy. It's not just gliding downhill." She paused, and handed me a glass of red wine, and looked into my watery eyes. "I will love you back to me. Back to us. No matter what. Cheers."

We clinked our glasses together, and it was the first time I can honestly say that I felt a twinge of love rekindled somewhere inside me.

"Just a sip for you," she said with a knowing smile. "You're still on meds. Doctor's orders."

We sipped some wine, and I began to return to something approaching normal.

"Now, let me show you the rest of our home."

With that she grabbed my hand and led me through each room of the house, pointing out items of interest, kid's pictures on the back entry wall, our bedroom overlooking the backyard, the family room with its stone fireplace, and finally she took me to the basement and showed me my study.

There was a wall of blank computer screens floating against a pitch-black divider that seemed to be made from black cork.

"You used to create and edit your films right here."

I opened the drawers to my desk like a detective at a crime scene. Derya had told me about my career as a film maker when I was at the hospital, and had even offered to show me some of my films, but at the time I didn't want to see then, but now, I felt differently.

"What was my most popular film?" I asked.

"It was called Gemeni. It was popular, but Sol, your films were never really popular in terms of being shown at major theaters. They tended to play the college circuit, but Gemeni won critical praise, and because of that, it did well in digital… paid for this home and everything in it."

"Can I watch it?"

"Now?"

My curiosity was strong for some reason. "If you don't mind."

"Let's go to bed, Sol. It's late and there'll be plenty of time for you to watch all your films in the next week. It'll give you something to look forward to. The kids will be in school. I'll need to get back to work myself. You'll have all of this time on your hands. Okay?"

I nodded in agreement. "Okay. It's late and I'm probably too tired anyway. If my films only made the college circuit, they're probably pretty boring anyway."

Derya laughed and tugged on my hand. "Come on, I'll show you the way to our bedroom… or do you think you can remember the way on your own?"

"I'll be right there, just give me a few minutes to look around. Okay?"

Derya smiled and turned to go, and then paused. "Sol, it's good to have you back. Don't be too long."

"I'll be up soon. Promise."

As she stutter-stepped her way up the stairs, I looked around my study, examining every object with interest. I had several orderly piles of papers on my desk, bookshelves from floor to ceiling neatly assembled that were filled with books and black portfolio boxes. The room divider was obviously adlibbed by an amateur builder—probably me—I figured. A black curtain was carefully strewn across a doorway, and I pushed it aside and entered.

Fumbling for a light switch I finally found one and fluorescents lurched on, illuminating a room that was about the same size as my study.

Two long tables separated the room with built-in cabinets underneath that gave it the appearance of a science lab. There was a long sink off to the side, and bottles of chemicals lined a shelf on the far wall. It was my dark room. The place I created photographs. I opened one of the cabinets and saw more bottles and rolls of paper. There was a hint of an odor in the room that was familiar, and given the brown glass bottles in the room, most of them marked with the name, Sodium Thiosulfate, I had a feeling they were the source.

A stack of photographs was under one of the cabinets, and I stooped down and positioned them on top of one of the cabinets. I thought it would be interesting to see some more photos. I recognized my children's faces; there were some of Derya as well, shorter hair and probably two or three years younger. Towards the bottom of the pile a yellow envelope was stashed underneath the photographs that seemed out of place.

Opening the envelope I found printed emails. The one on top was addressed to me, and if it hadn't been for the first line, I probably would have slipped them back into their envelope. As I read, my hands started to tremble.

Sent: Tue 5/25/2021 10:29 A.M.

Subj: Gemeni

Dear Mr. Tonum,

My name is Zenith Chardin. I am an archaeologist working in southern France, in affiliation with the University of Bristol.

Three days ago, and quite by accident, I saw your film, Gemeni. It was an inspiration to me. Nearly two years ago I discovered, with the help of a colleague, a cave system that is filled with images of animals that have never been seen before. The cave is near Dordogne, but it is not part of the Lascaux system. It is much older. We found star paintings inside the cave that are indicative of constellations that would have been in our skies 90,000 years ago. We are confident of those dates.

One of the central animals depicted on the cave walls is extremely similar to one you created in Gemeni. It is not found in any academic literature, and

yet you have created its likeness to near-perfection. The probability of this is astronomical.

Because of pressures from academia, and specifically the University of Bristol, I have not been allowed to release this discovery, as it is presumed to be hoaxed. I would like to send you some images in confidence. Perhaps you can tell me how you came to create the creature you called Gemeni.

Please verify your interest, and I will send you images. I have great respect for your work, and trust you will treat my inquiry as both personal and in confidence.

Sincerely,

Zenith O. Chardin, Ph.D.

Department of Archaeology,

University of Bristol, 43 Woodland Road,

Bristol BS8 1UK

There were more emails. Our correspondence was lengthy, spanning almost four months, and then cut off about three weeks ago, probably because of my health. I counted nine emails back and forth between us. I had printed out the images she had sent, and, glancing at them, it was clear that they were of the Quantusum. There was no doubt. I had created this creature in my mind? How was that possible?

“You’re not lost, are you?” Derya called down. Here voice was muffled and brought me back to my reality.

“Yes, I’ll be right there,” I shouted.

I stuffed the emails back inside the envelope, placing them underneath the stack of photographs as before, and then set them under the cabinet where I’d found them. What was happening to me? It was as if two worlds were in some kind of continuous interchange, and I was in the middle like a switchboard. I thought I was done with the island, and now I could see it was following me into my new life.

I would get a good night’s sleep, no nurses poking and prodding, and tomorrow, when I was all alone, I would watch Gemeni, and perhaps then,

call Dr. Chardin.

Chapter 23: Gemeni

Surprisingly, I woke up the next morning feeling quite good. I had slept the entire night in a deep, dreamless sleep, and when the sun streamed through our bedroom windows, I was ready to get up without a single protestation. The smell of coffee gave me a clue as to where Derya had gone, and I cloaked myself in my bathrobe, and gingerly walked down the stairs to the kitchen.

Derya had left me a handwritten note on the countertop next to the coffeemaker:

Sol,

Didn't want to wake you. I needed to leave early and pick up the kids and drop them off at school and then get to work. I left some coffee cake in the microwave, just heat it up (10 seconds) and add butter. Coffee's on, too.

I'm reminding you to call your dad, and remember, NO DRIVING!

Time to watch your films. I have them queued and ready for you to watch on the TV in the Family Room (the room with the kid's pictures all over the wall). Press the "play" button on the remote, they'll play in order—Gemeni is first up.

I'll call you during my lunch break.

Love,

D

After breakfast, I returned some phone calls, called my father who himself was in the hospital for a hip replacement, and explained that I was home and feeling good after my first night's sleep in my own bed. My father lived in South Africa. He was a retired Colonel in the air force. I had spoken with him on several occasions since my heart transplant, but always found the conversations awkward and full of pauses and stammering. He struck me as a gritty, down-to-earth man with a keen sense of priority, proven by how

quickly our conversations turned to how soon I would return to work, how was my marriage doing, and was I re-building my relationship with my children? By the time I had hung up the phone, I was tired, wondering how I would ever catch up with all the tasks I needed to do.

Finally, I sat down to watch Gemeni. One of the strange things about animated movies was how simple they had become to produce, and yet how few good storytellers existed to take advantage of the technology. Computers had grown so powerful over the last ten years that literally anyone, with the right software, could produce their own animated films.

Twenty years ago these films would be state of the art and cost millions of dollars to produce. According to Derya I was one of the most acclaimed, new-generation, independent animators on the planet, but as I sat down and flicked the “play” button on the remote control, I had no idea of what to expect. Maybe, with my memory gone, I would loathe my own creation. It was my greatest fear at the time. I almost held my breath as the film began.

The first thing I noticed was the music. It was Asian in its melody and choice of instruments. The credits were short, mostly my name and a few others, which of course, I didn’t recognize, but I did feel that the music was familiar, in a haunting sort of way. The first scene after the credits was of a child sitting in the middle of a street in a village that looked mostly deserted. He was a young boy, perhaps ten years old. The camera panned above him, and I could see he was writing symbols in the dirt road with a stick.

The symbols had a beauty to them, and they flowed from his hand as though he were writing musical notes. A group of children walked down the road, and seeing the young boy writing in the middle of the street, began to taunt him, pushing him for no apparent reason. It was clear that the boy was a loner and had some special gift, but was being ridiculed for it.

The scene changed, and this young boy was again outside, but this time by a placid river. He swam into the middle, and floated down the river on his back, staring up at the sky. At first I thought he was going to drown himself, but I watched as he simply let go and allowed the river’s current and buoyancy to take him downstream.

Once again, a group of children spotted him as he floated down the river,

and began throwing stones at him. The young boy didn’t seem to even notice until one hit his arm, and he winced in pain. He saw the kids hide behind the birch trees, but he just kept floating down the river and was soon out of reach of any stones or any other kids.

The boy relaxed and seemed to fall asleep as he floated down the river. The trees and bushes on the banks of the river were changing; the trees thicker and taller, the bushes more exotic. The river became wilder. The camera cut to show the point of view of a bird or cloud, and we could see that the river was forking into two rivers.

The river forking to the left led to a waterfront village about a mile or so downstream; docks with small boats peppered its shoreline, like fingertips of the village trying to grip the river. The river forking to the right was smaller, less visible because of overgrowth; it darted between mammoth trees filled with moss and vines like giant spider webs. It appeared to be a river that no one ever used. The young boy, sleeping blissfully on his watery bed, was pulled to the right.

The camera came lower, and was at the height of the branches looking down on the boy as he floated by underneath. When his eyes finally opened, he saw huge branches arching over him, and he suddenly became aware of his new world. It was as if he had traveled into a primordial earth. His attention suddenly deepened as he saw something on the shoreline that made him quake in fear.

The film then cut to a group of children who were playing soccer on a street, and were asked by a man if they had seen Jacob. At the description of Jacob, it was clear it was the same boy who had floated down the river and was now lost. The children shook their heads and resumed their play, pretending that none of them knew where he was.

The man looked disappointed, but walked to small café down the street. He asked the owner if he had seen a boy of his description, and the café owner acknowledged that he had seen the boy painting pictures on the street the day before. The villagers thought he was possessed of evil spirits, so they stayed away from him. Even his own parents had forsaken him, the café owner asserted, shaking his head. The boy was an outcast and was to be avoided at all costs.

The man asked where he might find the pictures in the street, and the café owner pointed to a dirt road a few blocks away. The man walked to the place, and the camera panned out to show an elaborate design of symbols stretching for a hundred feet or more. They were so elaborate they could only have been a language of some kind—perhaps mathematics, perhaps something so powerfully primordial that its hidden source was lost to time.

It was then that the doorbell rang, startling me from my total absorption in the film. I fumbled for the pause button, and went to the front door. Probably a neighbor wishing me well, I thought. When I opened the door, however, a beautiful woman and a very old man were waiting on my porch. The woman was dressed in jeans and a white pullover sweater, and the man was in frumpy, baggy jeans and a checkered shirt—both of which hung on his bony frame as if they belonged to a different person.

“Mr. Tonum?” the woman asked.

“Yes.”

She reached out her hand. “I’m Zenith Chardin, I’m sorry to intrude like this, but I’m in town attending a conference, and I wanted to take the opportunity to meet you, and my emails seemed to have gone into the ethers of another dimension. Did you get them?”

Chapter 24: Phowa

Zenith stood straight and tall. Her accent was decidedly French. Her hair was shoulder length and mostly brunette in color with subtle tints of red. Her eyes were framed in heavy dark eyeglasses that gave her a scholarly look, and yet, lurking around the edges was this beautiful woman who was warded off by her bookish façade.

“It’s wonderful to meet you,” I managed to stammer, still shaking her hand. “No… no I didn’t get your emails, but I’ve been in the hospital the past month or so—”

Zenith gasped slightly. “They found a new heart?”

“Yes.”

“It’s done?”

“Yes.”

“All went well?”

I shrugged. “There were some complications.”

“But you’re home, so it’s a good sign, yes?”

I glanced at her silent partner, and nodded.

“Forgive my manners,” Zenith said. “This is Lama Tilopa, the one I mentioned in my emails… which you probably never received.”

I shook hands with the small man, surprised by the strength of his grip. “Please, come in.”

I invited them into the living room and pointed to a pair of leather chairs. “Sit and be comfortable. Can I get you anything to drink?”

“Water would be fine, thank you.”

Zenith stole a quick glance at Tilopa, and he nodded slightly with a warm smile.

My new visitors sat down, looking very comfortable. I was still scratching my head in puzzlement as to why they were sitting in my living room. I went into the kitchen and fetched two glasses of water.

“I recognize these photographs from the Web,” Zenith half-yelled. They’re much better in person. You have an amazing eye.”

“Thank you,” I called back. “There is something you need to know about me, though.”

I walked into the living room holding a glass of water in each hand. “The complication I mentioned… there was a strong rejection to my new heart, and it resulted in amnesia. I don’t remember a thing. I don’t remember taking those pictures. In fact, I have no memory of anything about me prior to my surgery.”

I handed the glasses to my guests and sat down. They were both looking at me as though they were watching a ghost.

“Nothing?” Zenith asked, her face crinkled in concern.

I shook my head.

“So you really have no idea who I am or why we’re here?”

“When I came home from the hospital last night, as luck would have it, I stumbled upon some emails I had printed out some months ago. They were from you. I didn’t read them all, but I understand you discovered a cave with primitive drawings—”

“Paintings, actually,” she corrected. “And the star attraction of this 90,000-year-old art gallery is an animal that looks exactly like the animated creature you call Gemeni.”

“Yes, I saw your photographs,” I said.

“In your emails, you said you had no idea how you came to create this unique creature for your film.”

She glanced at Tilopa, who seemed to have fallen asleep. “Which is why I brought Lama Tilopa with me. He’s familiar with this animal, but before we go into that, let me give you a little background on my friend.

“Lama Tilopa is a highly revered master from the Thikse Monastery in

Ladakh. He came from great wealth, but unlike his siblings, he decided to use his wealth to pursue his spiritual studies, and so he traveled extensively throughout northern India and Tibet, meeting with the greatest teachers of those regions, finally settling on the Thikse Monastery, and becoming its head lama after his master passed away twelve years ago."

I nodded in acknowledgement to the strange man, who seemed so unassuming, and though his eyes had opened, I could only see a sliver of them. He had a beard that was gray and long, and his head was completely bald.

"Lama Tilopa is an expert in many areas of psychology and consciousness. He has been an interest of study by several of our psychological anthropologists at Bristol, which is how I met him. Our first meeting was a short session where I showed him some of our photographs from the cave I mentioned in my emails. He immediately said he knew of this animal and called it, Quantusum."

My skin stippled at the mention of the name. How could someone in a secluded monastery know about this animal and call it by the same name as I did in my dream?

"Maybe he saw my film?" I said feebly.

"Your film, unfortunately, was never shown in his part of the world, and they do not have a Web connection in the monastery. I'll let Lama Tilopa tell you himself."

Tilopa cleared his throat. "I am pleased to meet you," he said with a slight bow, his hands clasped together. "I know Quantusum, they are part of our tulpa."

"What is tulpa?" I asked.

He shifted slightly in his chair, and adjusted the collar of his shirt. "We believe mind mediates all interactions of the eye-world. This chair, you, the walls, the trees outside; they are part of eye-world, but there is another world where mind does not mediate, and in this world the Quantusum live as light bearers. We have… through our tulpa, invited them to be a part of our world, for in our lineage we see them as the explorers of the highest knowledge—the

knowledge that is real, the knowledge that births love and extinguishes separation. They are our spiritual forefathers, but we do not tell this to outsiders, for they don't need more reasons to ignore us. I only tell you, because I believe you have met them, too."

I placed my hands on my knees and stretched my back in disbelief. I felt an energy building inside me, and yet I couldn't place the purpose of this energy, nor its source.

"How could I have met them?"

He looked me directly in the eye with an unguarded innocence. "The same way we have; they enter our world."

I felt as if whatever sheath that hid my thoughts and emotions had suddenly become transparent, and Tilopa, with gentle resolve, could, in some self-illuminating way, look inside my internal world.

"You see," Tilopa said, "the mind creates the eye-world, it creates the desired object from the world of nothing. The Quantusum know how to project their consciousness into our world in a way that it appears to be dream, when really it is not dream at all. It is what we call phowa—a projection of consciousness across the sub- dimensions of reality. It is very powerful method to transmit knowledge.

"Because Quantusum selected you, without invitation, you must be of high interest to them. Very high interest. When did you last meet them?"

I looked to Zenith, no doubt, with perplexity on my face. A debate raged inside my mind as to whether I should tell them my experience on the island, part of my experience, or none of it.

Zenith sensed my dilemma. "You didn't just draw this creature from your imagination, did you? You saw it; spoke with it? Yes?"

"You believe all of this?" I asked.

"I do now."

"Why?"

"Because it makes sense."

"And proof?"

“There’s enough proof in him.” She pointed to her Tibetan colleague, who sat stoically in his baggy checkered shirt and jeans. His charisma, if that’s the right word for it, held a sober, yet radiant intelligence that engendered trust.

Sitting forward, I turned my full attention to Tilopa. “As I explained, I have amnesia. I don’t remember having any previous discussions with the Quantusum, though I admit it’s possible, since I have had one recently that I do remember.”

I paused and glanced quickly at Zenith. Her eyes widened noticeably, as if inviting more information.

My voice became quieter like a single path that weaves through dense flora. “When I was in the hospital, for about two days I was in a… a parallel reality, or… or dream world.”

I proceeded to explain my experience on the island in vivid detail, answering their considerable questions along the way. I explained my various adventures on and off the island. I told them about Zenith’s role in introducing me to the Quantusum, and the overarching message that I was to play a pivotal role in the discovery of The Grand Portal.

In all, it took nearly two hours, and it was only Derya’s phone call that stopped it short. As she had promised, she called to see how I was doing. I explained that I had some colleagues visiting: a Dr. Chardin and her friend, who were in town for a conference, and had stopped by for a visit.

Derya was pleased that I was doing well, and not sulking around the house alone. She explained that she’d be home after she picked up the children, around 5 P.M., and we could grill some chicken outside in the backyard. She even invited my guests to dine with us.

After the call, I returned to Zenith and Tilopa who had been talking among themselves.

“Are either of you hungry?”

Tilopa answered first. “Do you have fruit?”

“I’m sure we do,” I responded and then turned to Zenith, “And you?”

“Just more water, thank you.”

When I returned, I placed the food and drinks on the coffee table. The room was silent—uncomfortably silent.

“So what do you think of all this?” I asked.

Zenith looked at Tilopa in clear deference.

“The Quantusum,” Tilopa said, “have recognized you as the one who will make the Soul Portal operable. This portal is not well understood by my people. We believe it is… like training wheels for people to ride a bicycle. But we understand persecution well, and in many ways, you are persecuted by the powerful of your world, and in this persecution, you have forgotten how to ride the bicycle. We understand. There are so many eyelids.

“The Quantusum created this dream world for you so you could receive their message. They chose the timing of this message when you received a new heart. This is no accident, for they wanted new heart to be in you—”

“What do you mean? They provided this heart?” I interrupted.

Tilopa raised his right hand slightly. “I do not pretend to have knowledge of their purpose, but new heart is too significant to be coincidence. No, it is very important. What do you know about this heart that beats in you?”

I sat back in my chair. “Not much, actually. It came from a woman who lived near the hospital I was staying in. That’s about all.”

Tilopa narrowed his eyes to such an extent that I couldn’t tell if he was even able to see. He stood to his feet with remarkable speed. “Where is your darkest room?”

“Downstairs…”

Tilopa walked right up to me. “Let’s go now.”

“Why?”

“I can see better in dark.”

He looked off into the distance as if his mind were made up, and I had no choice but to respect his wishes, even though his comment made no sense to me. There was something about his intensity that compelled me to stand up and lead him to my dark room. I could hear Zenith follow, but my mind was in a mild form of shock. Luckily, I remembered the way.

Chapter 25: Algorithms of Life

The darkroom was my studio—the place where I created images. I may have captured the photograph a thousand miles away in some broken wilderness where an ancient tribe was being replaced by tree-cutting machinery, but the actual creation of the image was birthed here, in the darkest place of my home.

Tilopa stood still for a while when we first entered my darkroom. He surveyed the room and then looked at me. “Can you lie down on this table?”

He pointed to one of the countertops, and I nodded. “Can you tell me what you’re going to do?”

“I will look at your heart.”

“How?”

Tilopa shrugged and smiled. “I will look.”

A part of me wanted to probe further, unsatisfied with his cryptic answer, but another part didn’t really want to know. I got up on the countertop and laid down on my back as if I were at the doctor for a routine exam.

“It’s okay if I watch, yes?” Zenith asked.

“Relax, Mr. Tonum,” Tilopa said, ignoring Zenith’s question. “Turn lights off, please.”

Zenith flicked the overhead safelights off, and the room instantly went from a soft red light to a perfect darkness. I could hear Tilopa’s breath, and his hand startled me a bit.

“I am placing my hand on your heart for only short time. Consider yourself to be my child. Consider me to be your grandfather. I am family. I understand what you feel. I understand what you fear. I understand all of these concerns, but now, right now, just breathe deeply with me.”

I heard him take a deep breath, and I felt a little downward pressure from his hand over my heart, as if to signal I was to take an in-breath as well. It

took me a few times to synchronize my breathing with his, but I did. After a short time, he spoke again, but this time in a whisper.

“When a heart from one person is placed within a body of another, it is like an orphan. It sits in your chest and performs its function, but it is isolated, even lonely. I see this. There is no connection between your new heart and your mind.”

“How do you see this?” I asked.

His voice became even more distant sounding, as he lifted his hand away from my chest. “The heart you have is one I have never seen before. It tells me many things. It comes from a young girl who was sent here for this purpose. She wants you to find her parents and meet them… to reassure them.”

The room turned silent. I heard breathing, but nothing more. Within moments I felt a strange buzzing in my head, a sense of lightness, and something within me seemed to be billowing or reaching out forcefully like a giant’s hand to grasp something it wanted to hold. The part of me called Solomon felt powerless without restraint. No will. No desire.

Then, suddenly, and without any invitation on my part, Tilopa’s consciousness was inside me. I don’t have words to describe this, or how it occurred, but he was inside my body with me. In a way, it was as though he was me.

“Why are you here, inside me?” I asked, the words echoing in my mind like a thousand whispered voices.

“Connecting your new heart with old mind.”

“How?”

“I will strike the heart’s keys, and this chord will harmonize your heart and mind, and they will unite. You must stop this foolish doubt that has seized you for an entire lifetime. With two minds you dither into sleep. You become like an awakened stone. Your eyes will pivot to look within, and you will have no choice but to trust your new heart, as everything around you is re-created. But this, this trust, is what is being born and forged here.

“You are like a string that I have tied between two mountains, taut I have

pulled you. You can look down to the valleys below, or you can look to the cloud-filled heavens, but you are a path unto yourself that fears neither the valley nor the vault of heaven. Love cannot be learned in the throes of polarity, and even less, can it be taught, and while you do not understand my words, you understand my intention, and this is enough, for now."

I felt my body spinning on the table. I knew I was lying on the countertop, but I had the unmistakable impression that I was spinning as though I were on a rotisserie. Faster and faster it spun. I wasn't dizzy, but I was alarmed, because I didn't know how to stop it, or even slow it down.

From this spinning, a column of light arose within me that went from my head to my toes, and this column of light kept expanding in length, and I was spinning around it. I watched as it shattered through the house's foundation, into the earth, and traveled in opposite directions. I was a cord of light that was encircling the entire globe, and within this light were particles of energy that I could actually see, and they were conjuring all sorts of formulas, symbols, codes of some kind that were flowing into me, through me, and past me.

"These are the algorithms of life," Tilopa said. "The secret codes that define what archetypes are passed from the unborn state to the born; what is allowed to survive time and what is destroyed; and what is created that is wholly new. These algorithms have now been adjusted, and you will sense the change from this moment forward."

As Tilopa finished his words, I felt the spinning slow down and my will returned, building a momentum sufficient that I could once again open my eyes. I lifted my head and could see orbs of light swimming in the room.

"Turn lights on, please," Tilopa requested.

I sat up, squinting in the new, bright light. Zenith had turned the fluorescent lights on by accident.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to turn on those lights," Zenith said.

She flicked them off and then turned on the safelights, which were much easier on our eyes.

I looked at Tilopa. "What did you do to me?"

“I brought your heart and mind into harmony. They mesh now. They are connected.”

“Is that a good thing?” I asked.

Tilopa smiled broadly. “Oh yes, very good thing.”

“How will it change me?”

“Too early to tell,” Tilopa replied, “but it will only change for the good.”

Zenith stepped forward and touched my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“I think so. I don’t really feel any different right now, but it was a wild experience. I actually felt Tilopa enter my body as if he were sharing it with me. It was a very weird feeling.”

“It is done.” Tilopa bobbed his head as if punctuating the unalterable nature of whatever it was he did to me.

Zenith turned to Tilopa. “I think we should go. We have a busy afternoon and evening.” She turned to me, her eyes dodging mine. “I’m sure you have many things you need to catch up on, or… or simply to rest. You’ve been very kind to let us come into your home.”

“We have so much more to discuss,” I protested. “Can we meet again before you leave?”

“Tomorrow our sessions end at 4 P.M.… why don’t you come down to our hotel? We can meet you in the lobby bar and have a drink.”

“Which hotel?”

“Sheraton, just off of Fourth and Main Street.”

“Good, I’ll meet you then.”

I showed my guests to the door, and walked them out to their rental car in the driveway. As Tilopa got to the car door, he stopped and looked me in the eye. “Remember what I told you. Find parents. Reassure them.”

“I’m not sure there’s much I can do…” I began to complain, but Tilopa’s eyes narrowed in a silent challenge. “…but I will try. I promise you that.”

He bobbed his head in confirmation, bowed slightly and got into the car.

Zenith waved and the car took off. I put my hand over my chest instinctively and wished I could understand more of what just happened. It seemed that the road I had started on this morning had just vanished—completely withdrew—and now, I had to find the parents of the woman whose heart was inside me.

Something Tilopa had said found its way to me, “with two minds you dither into sleep.” As soon as I considered those words I remembered what Nammu had said, too. Could I take it seriously? Her threats were from a dream, but as I was finding out, not everything from that dream was simply a dream.

I went inside, and called my doctor’s office, leaving a mostly incoherent voicemail— something about needing to contact the donor’s parents. I didn’t give a reason. I was quite sure he wouldn’t believe me if I had.

Chapter 26: Promises

I don’t know if one can be called a narcissist if they watch six animated films they produced—in a row. Given my amnesia, I didn’t feel I was, though I was quite conscious that if someone were observing me, they might disagree. In any case, I watched every film that Derya had put in the play queue, and I found things I liked about the films and, to my surprise, some things I didn’t.

For one thing, my films lacked the human reality of my photographs. I liked the realism of photographs even though their subject matter was thorny or depressing in some instances. They were grounded in the real world of light and shadow, grit and beauty, and they had the stamina of a clear fate. My animated films were whimsical, ambient, and visually striking, but they took place in a parallel earth. They were pleasant and interesting, but relevant? I wasn’t sure.

Notes surrounded me, mostly from Gemeni. I took over eight pages of notes as I watched the film, trying to collect my thoughts and prepare some questions for Zenith for our meeting at her hotel the next day. I also did some research in Paleolithic cosmology and spirituality, so I would have some basis for my questions. Dr. Chardin was a world-renowned expert on the subject, so it was fairly easy to find references to her when the search results came up on my screen.

Her academic background was impressive. She had studied at Oxford for six years, and received her Ph.D. in cosmology. She then pursued another doctorate that was in the opposite direction: archeology—a degree she earned in two years from Bristol University, where she went on to become a full professor. Zenith worked four to five months a year in the field in various places in Europe and Africa, and had made several important discoveries in the area of Paleolithic cosmology.

Her expertise seemed to be centered on the myth-creation stories and the cosmological insights of the Dogon and Sumerian cultures. She had written

several books on obscure topics, like The Intersection of Spiritual Myths in the Dogon and Sumerian Societies, but they had a decidedly academic feel to them, and I wasn't ready to dive into anything quite that esoteric.

As I was compiling my notes and research, the phone rang. According to caller ID, it was my doctor calling back.

"Hi, Doctor Kendall, thanks for returning my call."

"You're welcome, Solomon. Hey, I got your voicemail, but I'm not sure about your request. The best I can do is to reach out to my legal guys and see if they could send a letter to the parents."

"Have you done it before?" I asked.

"With heart donors?"

"Yes."

"Well, I know of a few instances, but it's not common, especially this soon… after surgery."

"I'd really appreciate it if you could do that."

"Can you tell me why you feel so strongly about wanting to meet them? It might help, you know… if there's a specific reason I can give in the letter."

"No, I really just have a feeling that I should. Maybe I want to extend my appreciation, I don't know, I just think it might be the right thing to do."

"I understand. I'll see what I can do on this end. If they agree to your proposal to meet, you'd have to set that up on your own. The hospital doesn't get involved in those things. Okay?"

"I'd prefer it that way, to be honest."

"Good. Then I'll see what I can do. Any other questions?"

"… No, I think that's the only one."

"How're you feeling?"

"I'm feeling pretty normal… physically. Still no memories, though, which is a bit frustrating, but I have hope."

"We have therapists that can help, you know."

“Maybe in a few weeks if I’m still getting nowhere with my memories. Let’s see how it goes. I’ve only been back home for one day.”

“I’m not trying to push it, Solomon, just want you to know we have other resources at our disposal. But there’s no rush… as long as it’s not interfering too much in your relationships or work, a couple weeks won’t matter. I think it’s better to focus on your physical health for now. Remember to get out and walk… take it easy at first, but by this time next week, I want you walking two miles a day minimum. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good.”

“Well, thanks again for calling back, Doctor, let me know if you hear anything from the donor’s parents.”

“Will do.”

“Okay, have a good day.”

“You, too.”

“Bye.”

I hung up the phone, and felt a sense of relief that the process was started. To be honest, if Tilopa hadn’t insisted, I know I wouldn’t have sought the relatives of my donor to meet them. I’d be too fearful that they’d resent me, or at least make me feel guiltier that I was alive because of their daughter’s death, but I had promised Tilopa. Sometimes promises can blind our fears.

My energy was draining from my body so I went to the backyard and found a comfortable lounge chair and sat down. The sun felt good, and the songbirds, weaving their melodies throughout the neighborhood, were enough for me to relax into a deep sleep.

Chapter 27: The Agreement

I thought it was my daughter, Marisa, that woke me. I was in a dream state, flying over some vast farmland when I felt someone poking me on the shoulder.

“Oh, it’s you,” I said groggily. But as my eyes widened it became obvious that I didn’t know who it was.

“Do I know you?”

Sitting beside me was a woman, perhaps my own age; of such a commanding presence I can only say that I was speechless for several seconds. I spun my head around to make sure I wasn’t in a dream, but my backyard appeared as it had before.

She placed her hand on top of my arm. “You know me, Solomon. We met after your memory loss, adrift in the peculiarity of an alternate reality on an island. I believe you only saw me from the neck up; perhaps that’s why you don’t recognize me. Remember me now? Nammu?”

She was wearing a silk gown of golden hues intricately incised with patterns of ancient symbols in deep magenta. It was sheer, and her form underneath was visible in a shadowy, yet seductive sort of way. She was sitting with one leg crossed over the other and her arms lying coyly on the arm rests of a wicker lounge chair only inches from my own.

“Please tell me I’m dreaming right now,” I mumbled to no one in particular.

“You never gave me your answer,” she said. “I’ve been patient, waiting to see how you would adjust to your new life that I generously provided, even before our agreement was consummated.”

I looked at her intently; doubt filled my eyes. “Look, if you’re who you say you are, you would know the name of the creature whose head you tore off. What was his name?”

“You need proof, that’s it?”

I nodded my head and frowned. My new heart was pounding in such a way that I was afraid it would launch itself into my neighbor’s yard.

“Be very careful that one of your own doesn’t suffer the same fate as Canto.”

Her words were doled out with such force that each word fell on me as if it were a monstrous gesture of contempt.

“I’m really not angry at you,” she said, her tone softening. “Perhaps we got off on a bad note, but you did want your proof.”

Nammu turned on her side, facing me. “To more pleasant matters, how do you like my look? Am I pleasing to your eye?”

I looked away, unsure what to do. It was Nammu, and just as she had said in my dream, she would find me. I could run, but what would that accomplish? Where could I go that she would not be able to follow? I decided to play the hand I was dealt and see where it took me.

“You are a very beautiful woman,” I said, glancing cautiously in her direction.

“Thank you for that sincere compliment, Solomon. There, now isn’t that a better way to speak with me? Your most recent observations give me hope. Tell me, what is your decision?”

“On what?”

“Do you feign memory loss with me?”

“No, I just want to be clear about your question.”

Nammu smiled the smile of tolerance. “Do you agree to lead the life of a simple teacher, loving husband, and adoring father unwaveringly? You asked for some time to consider my proposal and, in one of my most charitable deeds, I gave you the evidence, and here you are. Now, I have come to collect your agreement.

“However, you have taken more than two weeks of additional time and, and this is most disconcerting, you’ve become a host as of this day to two people who are pulling you into a dangerous path.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “What dangerous path?”

“As I told you, one atom of movement in the direction of your illusory role in The Grand Portal, and I will send a reminder that what I have given, I can take away,” she snapped her fingers, “like that.”

“And what have you given?”

I didn’t mean to say it; it just sort of blurted itself out instinctually like the tongue of a serpent. I glanced at Nammu to see her reaction, and for a brief moment, the briefest of moments imaginable, her entire countenance flashed into a horrific dark entity. I closed my eyes and opened them slowly, blinking a dozen times, but she had returned to her exotic state of pristine beauty.

Nammu put her left arm up. “I have given you this. This life. You have your life back just as I promised, and I did so without your agreement. As of now, I wish I hadn’t done that, but I can always remedy my good-natured error of judgment. I can transport you back to your desolate island. Is that what you would like? Or would you prefer to stay here with your loved ones? All you need to do is give me your agreement.”

I stared straight ahead, not looking at her or really anything else. My eyes had turned inward, hoping to find a sentence, a string of words that would deliver me from this ever-tightening vise I felt I was in.

Nammu had sat up and put her feet on the ground, straddling her lounge chair and resting her forearms on her thighs. Her hair was shiny black, her skin polished alabaster—muscular and toned. She was, in every way, what men desire, save the venomous personality.

“You ask if I will agree, but you speak of threats if I don’t,” I began, tentative in my voice, knowing I had to be both careful and fawning. “How can I agree to something I’m forced to agree to? Isn’t that simply obedience?”

“Are you teaching semantics now? Did you really think that freewill was your right? Freewill was taken from people, so long ago that they have forgotten what it is. I’ve proposed a solution to your problem. I have asked you to—”

“Other than your threats, what is my problem?” I asked.

“Your problem is that you are one of those who can easily be pulled into a fantasy world of spiritual puffery. You are naive. You are emboldened by your ignorance to such a degree that a mere dream can inspire you to serve a mission far beyond your capacity, and if you were to tell anyone, they would laugh at the preposterous nature of your claim.

“Solomon, I’m just trying to spare you the grief, distractions, and humiliation of your journey into the worlds of spiritual irrelevance. For this, all I ask is your commitment to remain who you are. To do what you already do: to be a responsible citizen and teach. The fact that you resist this, only proves your ignorance, a condition, I’m afraid, I am powerless to change; unless I have your agreement.”

“If I agree,” I said, “but for whatever reason I get pulled back into the spiritual fantasy… what then? You’ll kill me?”

Nammu swung her leg around so she was facing me square on. “Who said anything about killing you?”

“Your threats were clear enough…”

“Were they now? I think I’ve whispered that I would kill your loved ones. I would not start with you—what real pain and anguish would you suffer then?”

My heart rate doubled. I sat up and stood to my feet, my knees wobbling. “Tell me one thing before I decide.”

“One thing,” she answered coolly, with a single nod.

“Who are the Quantusum, and why are they contacting me?”

“That’s two different questions, Solomon. You asked for one, and I granted you that. You need to bring more precision to your words. I will answer one of your questions, as an example of fidelity, something you would do well to emulate.

“The Quantusum are mythological creatures, who perpetrate thought control on the weakest of the human species—that would be you, Solomon. They enjoy pulling the strings of their puppets and filling them with the aspirations of an important life, a life full of purpose and mystery; a life that has meaning beyond the acquisition of things.

“The Quantusum are annoying predators who prey on the gullible, seeking to stultify their progress into the good life. They are to be avoided at all cost, because they are the darkest of all entities as they do not believe in the light, religion, science, or any other pedestal of culture. They believe only in their own explorations of fantasy. They are insane creatures who love—above all other goals—to deny humans their true sense of place in the world, to deny you your gods and even saviors. They, the Quantusum, are themselves their own gods, and anyone who believes in them is their slave.”

It was clear she was lying, and her sarcastic tone, unhesitant and craving to be heard, filled the air around us. “Why don’t you tell me the truth about them?” I demanded.

“More questions?” Nammu stood up, her seductive beauty, for the first time, fully present. “I am done here. Either you agree, or you return to the island. I will give you ten seconds, and no more.”

My mind suddenly slipped from its moorings into a deep and oppressive fog. There was no response I could live with. Either answer seemed wrong.

“I need one condition if I am to agree with you,” I asserted.

“There can be no conditions.”

“Please, just one. At least hear me out before you deny me.”

“What it is?”

“I need a warning.”

“You want me to warn you if you get too interested in the spiritual fantasies of mythological creatures? What kind of warnings would be satisfactory for you?

Perhaps I could make one of your pine trees wither and die? Or perhaps a distant cousin could expire from a brain aneurism? Is that what you had in mind?”

Nammu laughed in contempt. “Give me your answer—now!”

I was desperate for an alternative, but I saw none. A long, drawn out breath escaped me, and in a whispered voice, I said, “I agree.”

“I accept your agreement, and it is now binding for as long as you are

Solomon Tonum.” Nammu looked into my eyes as she spoke the words, and it was impossible for me to look away. I felt her eyes pinning me down through some mute strength that only gods can wield.

There was no way of knowing how I would be helped, or if I would be helped. I only knew at that instant that someone would have to help me, for there was no way I could defend myself from Nammu. Her power was the kind that rules underworlds and moves powerful men like pawns on chessboards.

If freewill was gone, and I was evidence of its departure, there must be someone who interdicts on behalf of one like me. But then who protected Dou Xing, or any number of other saints and spiritual messengers who fell to the axe, knife, rope, rock, and gun of that same power that flashed through Nammu’s body so vividly? I felt like an ant crawling beneath a lion.

In the brief moment I pondered those thoughts, I turned and saw that Nammu had vanished. Not a trace of her presence remained. I walked inside and locked the patio doors behind me. I suddenly wanted a drink of scotch or something to numb my throbbing head. I had to find a way to protect my family and myself. I had to be normal. I had no choice.

It’s a strange thing that when some outside force, as powerful as Nammu, compels you to be normal, the opposite result stirs inside you. I couldn’t explain it, but I could feel it welling up inside me from some depth I hadn’t drawn from before.

I could feel the beating of its wings, and I prayed it would not be the end of my family or life.

Chapter 28: Phone Calls

My follow-up meeting with Zenith and Tilopa never occurred. I cancelled it. I had explained that I was too tired, and I needed to spend time with my family, the latter being true. After my visit with Nammu, all I could think about was the guilt I would feel if anything were to happen to my children or Derya. I decided that my time would be focused on them, trying to rebuild my family bonds by having fun together.

A full week went by after my unexpected visit from Nammu, and the constant worry was beginning to subside. I took long walks in the morning, often with Derya. We were still looking for a memory, something tear-stained from deep feelings that would rattle me awake, but nothing ever arrived. I had changed, and she knew this. It wasn't just my amnesia. There was something more profound. She mentioned it in vague terms, poking around the edges, but whatever it was, it was so contorted that neither of us could recognize it.

I never mentioned any of my dreams to Derya, or my meeting with Nammu, and when I told her about Zenith and Tilopa's visit, I dressed it in broad sweeps of "catching up with old colleagues." I didn't know how to talk about these things. I was afraid Derya would think I had gone insane, and I was already worried about this prospect.

Sometimes the possibility of a new knowledge can come over us like a giant wave from the ocean, carrying us so far away from those we love that we don't know how to have real intimacy anymore. If I were to tell Derya all of the things I had seen, felt, experienced, and now knew, just from the past three weeks of memories, she would have no way to relate to me. I would be even more a stranger—a makeshift husband—surrounded by distances so great that she could not find me.

If ever courage would whisper in my ear and embolden me to such a degree that I could disclose my experiences, then I could find some real peace of mind, but now, I had no choice but to keep everything inside. Maybe I

wasn’t born to discover this soul portal as Tilopa had called it, and maybe Nammu was right that I needed to focus my attention on family and work. My health continued getting stronger, and with each passing hour, I felt a sense of normalcy spread over me. The routines were settling in, and the familiar was beginning to feel comfortable.

Thursday morning, after Derya and the kids had left for work and school, the phone rang, and I put Dr. Kendall on the video display overlooking the kitchen counter. “Good morning, Dr. Kendall.”

“Good morning, Solomon. How’re you feeling?”

“Very well, thank you.”

“I know you’re scheduled to come in for a check-up on Monday, so I’m not calling for medical reasons. We did hear from your donor’s parents, and they seem genuinely excited to meet, on the condition that you would come to their home. Apparently they own a farm in upstate New York, and can’t travel down here.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “Can you send me their contact info, and I’ll set it up?”

“Yup, I can do that. One more thing.”

“Uh huh.”

“The donor had left a will and wanted you to have some things, so her attorney wants to arrange to meet with you separately in the next few days, if that’s okay.”

“Sure,” I said, hesitantly.

“Good. I’ll send over the contact info now, and I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Okay, thanks Doctor.”

“See you Monday, then,” Dr. Kendall said.

“Thanks again for making this happen.”

“No problem. Glad to help.”

“Bye.”

“Bye, bye.”

I was conflicted as I flicked off the video display. I didn’t really want to drive to upstate New York. It was at least a six-hour drive, but more significantly, meeting my donor’s loved ones was Tilopa’s idea. Would Nammu think I had moved an atom closer to my misguided mission? Would she strike out at me, to teach me a lesson?

It was a real dilemma.

The other thing that puzzled me was the will. Why would the donor leave me anything more than her heart? She must have known she was dying well in advance to produce a will and name her recipient as a beneficiary. What did she want me to have?

As I was contemplating these oddities, the contact info from Dr. Kendall appeared in my email, and I opened it. My donor’s parents and her attorney were each listed with their full contact info. I decided to do a search on the names and see what came up. My donor’s name was Vanessa Longley, and her parents were farmers in Lisbon, New York. They had a family farm with a few ponds on it, couldn’t really tell how many acres from my flyovers on Google Earth, but it looked large for a family farm.

I could see some pigs from the satellite images. Not too much livestock, perhaps a side business when the crops were under producing. I found a few photographs, and they looked like a nice couple in their late sixties.

Vanessa, I think, was a student at New York University. I searched for “In Memoriam Vanessa Longley,” but found nothing, which seemed odd to me. I also searched on Facebook, but with the same result. It seemed unusual for a college kid not to show up on the Web. No Web pages, no references. Only one obscure mention that she was attending NYU, and I couldn’t even be sure it was the same Vanessa Longley. There were some images, but of different women, and I couldn’t really say that any of them was of my donor.

Looking at the images was peculiar. I felt with some certainty that the heart that beat inside me would recognize Vanessa’s image, but there was only an obscure expectancy, and it never turned into anything I could say was real or solid; as feelings go, I was operating blind.

The attorney was easy to locate; corporate Web site, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, every imaginable digital reach-out was deployed to locate their next client. His name was Daniel Archer, and he was a partner in a Manhattan law firm that, according to their Web site, catered to corporate acquisitions and business law. It seemed unusual that their Web site had nothing to do with wills or probate.

With a measure of nervousness I dialed Daniel Archer. I decided I didn't want to wait for him to call me. I was too curious. After waiting on hold for nearly five minutes, a soft, but energetic voice answered the phone.

"This is Dan Archer. Sorry to make you wait, Mr. Tonum, but I was just finishing up with a client."

"No problem," I replied.

"I was just thinking about calling you, so you saved me the trouble to dig out your number from a pile on my desk that's starting to look suspiciously like a skyscraper," he chuckled. "Thanks for taking the initiative."

"You're welcome; do you know why I'm calling?" I asked.

"Vanessa's will. I assume the hospital gave you my name and number."

"Yes, but I have to say that it doesn't make any sense to me that I would be in her will. Is it something you can talk about over the phone, or do I need to come to your office?"

"Give me your mailing address, Mr. Tonum, and I'll courier over the materials she left for you. I don't think we need to meet on this matter. I'll need you to sign a release and a few other things—just the usual legal forms, but you can mail those to my office in the next few days, I'll see that those are in the package I send. So, what's your address?"

I gave him my address and waited for him to signal he was done writing it down.

"Okay, got it."

"When will you send it?" I asked.

He paused for a few seconds. "I'm passing your address to my assistant right now, probably be in your hands in about two, maybe three hours."

Dan seemed to be in a sudden hurry. I felt a reticence that made any further conversation seem unlikely. I thanked him for his time, and the conversation ended abruptly and somewhat awkwardly.

While I was in the mood for making calls, I dialed the phone number of Mr. and Mrs. Jason Longley. There was no first name for the mom, but from my research I had already identified her as Corin Longley.

The phone rang about six times, and I was just about to hang up when a women's voice came on… a little out of breath. My heart was beating so fast I took a deep breath, hoping to calm it down. I didn't know why I was so anxious, but my skin crawled with goose bumps at the sound of her voice.

"Hello, this is Corin; sorry it took so long to get to the phone."

"…Mrs. Longley, my name is Solomon Tonum—"

"Oh yes, we've been expecting your call, Mr. Tonum."

I paused a moment and took another deep breath, my heart was still racing. "I hope I didn't bother you."

"Heavens no, every time the phone's rung the past day or two, I think it might be you. I'm very glad you called. I was just outside sweeping the porch."

"Is it a nice day there?" I asked.

"A little cool, but the sun is out and the wind is calm," she said, pausing.

"Mr. Tonum—"

"Please, just call me Solomon."

"Okay, Solomon, and you can call me Corin. We're country folk and don't have many pretenses." She chuckled in amusement.

"I have a thousand questions," Corin said, "that are running through my mind right now, but I suppose I should rein them in so we have something to talk about when you get here. I assume the hospital told you that we weren't able to travel just yet. With our farm, it's so hard to get away, and we just settled all of the affairs of the funeral and her… her personal belongings."

"I understand, and please, if it's too much trouble we can postpone

meeting for a few weeks—”

“Nonsense, we’re not so busy, if you can drive here.”

“Well, actually that’s why I’m calling. I could drive up either Tuesday or Wednesday next week, if that would work?”

“Sure, sure, that would work just fine,” Corin said enthusiastically. “Let’s say Tuesday.”

“Okay,” I replied. “If I left early enough I think I could make it there by noon. Would that be alright?”

“Sure, that would be fine, Solomon,” Corin said. “I’ll have some lunch on for you, so don’t bother to stop for lunch. You can just call us when you’re about ten minutes away. Okay?”

A strange feeling came over me. I wanted to weep in some realm of memory, wishing I were talking with my mother. My mother had passed away ten years earlier, and Corin’s voice had the textures of that motherly care that is the mouth of heaven.

“Yes, that would be great,” I answered.

“Then we’ll see you Tuesday for lunch,” Corin said.

I wanted to bring up how sorry I was for their loss, and how blessed I felt to be able to live on through the grace of their daughter, but I couldn’t find the words. I told myself it would be better to say it to both of them in person. “Okay, um, thanks for your willingness to meet. I really appreciate it.”

“Not at all, your interest in getting together was music to our ears.”

“Okay, great. Well, I’ll see you Tuesday then.”

“Good. We’ll look forward to it, Solomon. Bye now.”

“Goodbye, Corin.”

Somehow I knew it was my duty to meet the Longleys, and the fear I had earlier about the consequences had faded, overcome by a strange impatience I felt to understand my new heart. Whatever edges held us at a distance—my new heart and my mind—they also created an intense desire to mesh. I could feel it strengthen from my phone call to Corin. And now, without a reason to

believe in the scarcely visible signposts that pointed the way, I decided to follow my heart.

Chapter 29: Vanessa

When the doorbell rang, it startled me. My heart skipped a beat or two, but I quickly stabilized as I fixed my eyes on the courier's white van in the driveway. It was the package from the law firm, the one that Vanessa Longley had left for her recipient. I walked briskly to the front door, signed for the package and placed it on the kitchen table, staring at it as if it were the entrance to a labyrinth.

It was a large sealed envelope, light orange in color, sitting on my kitchen table with time stamps crowding the address label—my handwritten name scrawled in permanent black ink. I opened it nervously. I found several legal documents that I quickly perused. I found another envelope marked "Journal" that was sealed with packing tape. Underneath it was an item that drew my attention; it was a DVD case with a note attached. The note, in beautiful calligraphy, simply said:

Start here.

For recipient only.

Vanessa

The disc, curiously, was enclosed in a plastic case with an unbroken, elaborate wax seal. Clearly, Vanessa wanted only her recipient to see this, whatever it was. With a knife I opened the case and broke the seal, grabbed the disc and walked to the family room. My hand started to shake slightly as I placed the disc inside the player. I sat down, clicking the play button, my inquisitiveness spurred on by all of the apparent secrecy.

A homemade video began with an empty chair sitting in a semi-darkened room in front of a large desk. A young woman came from the right side of the frame, but I could only see her back as she carefully walked around the camera tripod with her lapel microphone cord in her left hand. As she sat down in the chair and looked directly at the camera, she looked anything but normal, and didn't, by any stretch of the imagination, conform to what I had imagined she would look like. She was petite, with a brittle shape, short

white hair, thick glasses and a pleasant, but stern face. My first thought was that she was an albino, though the dim light of the video made it hard to say for sure. She fidgeted in her chair for a few moments and adjusted the microphone cord, and then looked into the camera for a few moments without speaking.

It felt so strange to be looking at the person who had given me her heart. I became very emotional, and struggled to find the pause button so I could collect myself, but it was too late. Tears glided down my face as I watched this translucent human begin to speak. I sensed veils of forbearance were lifting as she gathered herself.

Vanessa's expression was gripping. Her eyes seemed to be involuntarily moving, like eyes dreaming beneath eyelids. There was an innocence and self-consciousness in her body language that drew me to her.

She cleared her throat as a final signal of readiness and looked into the camera lens. "If you're watching this, you have my heart, the only part of me that isn't dying." She forced a quick grin at the camera. "Actually, it was the only organ I was allowed to donate.

"I wanted to tell you about myself, so you would understand your new heart. I'm just going to let the video roll, no editing or anything, so if you get tired of my voice, just hit pause." She managed a faint smile.

"As you can tell, I'm an albino. I have a genetic disorder that my friends in the medical community call oculocutaneous albinism—the most severe form of albinism.

The side effects… well, let's just say they're not all medical in nature. Being born on a farm in the middle of nowhere, I was home schooled all my life, never really interacted with anyone except occasionally during doctor's visits.

"I had this vision thing called nystagmus, which freaked out my peers more than any of my other quirks, so making friends was not my area of expertise. The surgeons corrected the worst of it by the time I was eight, but it never really went away entirely, as you can probably see. Whenever I went outside, I had to be bundled up, prescription sun glasses… all that stuff. I understood why kids stayed away from me.

“But like they say, with clouds, there’s always a silver lining, and mine was my imagination. I had a whole crowd of imaginary friends. Don’t get the wrong idea about me, I wasn’t schizophrenic, I was just lonely, and having no friends I made them up—most of them at least. I was very good at it.

“But let’s get started on why this video…” She took a deep breath and seemed to collect her thoughts. “I’ve known I was dying for about twelve years. I just turned twenty-eight, and when I was sixteen, I had this… this premonition. In this vision I was told that the one thing I could develop that would be important, was my heart— that my heart, well, it would be a legacy that would make my existence meaningful, even essential.

“I figured I wouldn’t have children or get married or have an important career or anything like that.” She looked past the camera like someone who peers into the secret places of a wishful life.

“At first, when I was told that I should prepare my heart, I thought it was an instruction to lead a clean, simple life, exercise a lot, pay attention to my diet and so forth, but I was wrong. It was about cultivating the frequencies of love within my heart, and holding it there and releasing it whenever I could.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said, pointing her index finger to her head and looking directly at the camera. “How does someone like me, isolated from everything, know anything about love or how to cultivate it?” She leaned forward slightly and lowered her voice. “You see, it must be that the soul has some secret way of knowing it’s immortal. It… it just comes about, sort of sneaks up on you if you take notice, and because I didn’t have any of the usual distractions, I noticed.

“I wasn’t a particularly spiritual person, and even now, I wouldn’t really consider myself spiritual, just someone who’s invested a lot of my considerable free time on the development of my heart because it was my legacy… my mission.

“I understand if you think this is a little crazy-sounding; maybe you think I’m as odd as I look, and you’re even wondering if the heart inside you is going to infect you in some crazy way. It’s nothing like that. I’m sorry if I seem so weird… it’s just who I am. Try to look past the strange-looking person you see, and just hear my words. I could’ve done this whole thing

with just audio and spared you the full effect of my persona, but I wanted you to know the real me."

Vanessa turned behind her and grabbed a glass of water from the desk she was sitting in front of, and took a sip of water, adjusted her black-rimmed glasses, and then folded her hands on her lap. The lighting in the room was meager, but it looked like she was closing her eyes. Her hair was disheveled, as if she had just gotten up and hadn't bothered to put a brush through it. She was wearing a blue, pullover shirt that was long-sleeved and loose-fitting, and gray sweatpants.

The room she was in was very plain. I couldn't see much beyond her desk, but on the desk she had both a laptop and tablet sitting next to one another. There were a few books stacked up on the back of her desk as well, and in the far right of the camera frame, I think I could make out some photographs that were probably of her parents.

Vanessa looked like she was dying, but clearly she was not in a hospital or even a hospice. I assumed it was her apartment.

She looked into the camera and continued. "Anyway, you see me and know a little bit about me. I, of course, know nothing about you. I don't know your name, where you live, or anything about your personality. You're a complete mystery to me, except for one thing. My heart knows you. What do I mean by that? Imagine if for the past ten years you spent four to six hours every day polishing your heart, and by polishing, I mean training it to be pure, sensitive, coherent, alive, rhythmic, beauty- sensing, courageous, understanding, compassionate, expressive, humble, loving and all those things that make the heart the dwelling place of soul.

"If your heart were conditioned in this way, the soul would enter it fully. It would live in this heart and whisper things. That is what my soul did. After years and years of polishing my heart, at last I could glimpse the soul's true way of seeing, and when I looked, I could see you."

She pointed a finger at the camera, but I felt it was at me. Chills ran up and down my spine as I watched, completely spellbound by her story.

"I don't mean you as a person, a physical body with a name, gender, personality, credentials, and all that stuff. I mean you as an immortal being. It

is to that being I speak, because that's who I now serve, or you would not be watching this video.

"You're the creator of something grand. Something will come from you that will change everything. I saw this. Everything… every thing in this universe will be affected. I don't know how, but I know you will do it—we… we will do it."

Vanessa paused for a moment and looked down at the floor, and then placed her right hand over her heart. "This is not a gift. It is not as simple as a mere life extension. It is an attractor of the highest part of you. The part of you that is blind and dumb in the vanities of life, but will step forward in the prepared heart that I've given you.

"You might be in denial. You might doubt every word I say. I have no proof, but you will have yours, if you read my journal and practice what I've started. None of this is hard. What is hard is that you're the final link in a chain that stretches across a vast spacetime, and you will be distracted, harassed, threatened, and yes, possibly silenced by the forces that want this cosmic event to go awry; to waver in doubt and disillusionment. They will do their best to make it fail. Not because they're evil, not because they see the big picture and don't like the outcome, but because they're powerful forces who are selfish and lack the courage of empathy. Change, the kind that you are bringing, is never desirable to such forces."

She paused again and adjusted her position in the chair. Vanessa looked hauntingly beautiful in a weird sort of way, and as she spoke she became more animated. She held a humble posture, not the kind that is manufactured in popular magazines. Her hands were delicate and feminine, and she used them in her communication like a conductor's baton.

Vanessa glanced behind her as if she were deflecting some intrusion, and then turned to the camera. "There is no harm that will come to you if you trust our heart. There is no one who can stop you if you will listen to the centermost part of your being. I have seen this already. Threats… they will come. Distractions… these will impose. Keep practicing the techniques I have left for you in my journal. Please believe me. It is not craziness. It is sanity of the highest kind."

She tucked her legs underneath her, and I noticed she was barefoot. “If you meet my parents they might tell you that I am not one who is prone to the mystical. I never read the Bible or Quran. I never studied any of the religions of this world… never had an interest. I focused on my heart instead. I studied it. I listened to it. I found all of the frequencies that it resonated to, and I learned how these frequencies could be woven into practices that created connections between the heart and brain and the mind and body.

“Someone with deep emotion—not the sentimental, mushy kind, but the kind that is lucid, fused from a deep and abiding love that’s not moody or predicated on ease— can arouse their missions, even missions as grand as yours. The heart is the fuel that powers the mission.”

She looked away for a moment or two as if she were remembering some event from her past, and when she spoke again, her voice was softer and more deliberate. “One of the things that will occur when you receive my heart is that you will be reset. I don’t know precisely what that means to you or how it will affect you, but I saw this, too. My heart will reboot your system, and the result is unpredictable. All I can tell you is to be patient. It is not rejection at a chemical or biological level, but rather at a quantum energetic level. Your doctors will not understand, and they will likely prescribe medications to ease this. I beg you not to take them.

“I realize that this, once again, sounds crazy, and I do apologize, but candor is the only angle of communication I’ve ever understood, and so here I must tell you what I believe, even though I can’t explain to you why I believe it.

“I’ve created a living organ in which a soul can reside in full grandeur. Your heart is now attracting a higher consciousness into your body, and as this immortal self steps forward, you’ll sense a new empowerment, as though the entire universe was suddenly your ally or partner.

“Look at me; do I look like a successful, well socialized, healthy person?” She shook her head slightly and smiled. “I’m not any of those things as you can see, and yet, the universe is my ally. How is this possible? It’s possible because my heart is now inside the person who will change everything. I am the fuel for your rocket. Do you understand? Without me, you would never be able to leave the gravity of earth. Your mission would never unfold in the

trajectory it was intended for."

Vanessa's voice turned to a whisper. "Sometimes the most powerfully aligned appear to be the weakest of their kind.

"The heartspace shrivels when the personality it serves desires to be powerful and achieve the measures of human success. It is the humble spirit that expands the heart, for it sees the one in all and understands that unity is not an ambition or goal—it is now, and always will be now. The key is to be conscious of it. I believe this is where your mission lies. It's what I've seen. Perhaps, when you see this video, you'll already know about this.

"I realize doubts creep in. I've had them… believe me… I've had them in every flavor. The doubts can be so compelling that they convince you to set aside your practice. The doubt says: nothing happens, why practice? Where's the cause and effect—the rewards of your practice? Their seduction is uncanny. Their voice is everywhere. It's like a chorus of bad singers that drowns out the one talented singer."

Her fingers were long and narrow, and they were always in motion as she spoke. They had an inventive quality as if they held a language all their own. "If you've gotten this far in the video—especially without pause, you're probably already aware of this mission you have, at least at some level. You may have even seen me. I will reach out to you, be assured. I will help you in every way that I can. When you have doubts, distractions, and feel the mission slipping backwards, you can call on me. I've left the procedures in my journal.

"One thing you can always count on, no matter what happens outside of you, I am here," she placed both of her hands over her heart tenderly. "I will not abandon you."

Vanessa looked into the camera as directly as I had seen her do before. Her expression—the language of her body—was one of the most unusual I had ever seen. There was a poetic restraint in her movement, the gentleness of a great sky. My heart felt heavy, knowing that she was gone, and the crown jewel that she had worked so hard to create was now pounding its unknowable yet familiar code within me. The past three weeks had prepared me for this video, and while there were parts of it I felt uneasy with, the

majority of it I understood.

“My journal,” she continued, “is a collection of random thoughts and ideas I’ve learned over the course of the past ten years. Think of it like an owner’s manual for the heart that beats inside you. The heart is not simply a collection of tissue and muscle that operates under the whim of time. It’s the portal to the collective intelligence that unites us—all of us—to the larger purpose and destiny of life.

“Sometimes this larger purpose is lost and someone comes along and rediscovers it, but not simply to point to it and say: our destiny is this or that. They enable its discovery for all people through experience—direct experience… the most powerful kind. It’s the way a species transforms itself. This is what you’re connected to, though I can’t say exactly how.”

Vanessa looked away from the camera for a while and paused. “The doctors tell me I have a few weeks left. I won’t burden you with my medical complications. In reality, my doctors have told me it’s quite a miracle that I’ve lasted this long. They’ve been predicting my demise for many years now, but I know that I’m close to the end… I can feel it. I consider myself a fortunate person, so please don’t feel any pity for me. I’ve lived a rewarding and meaningful life by staying true to my mission.

“I understand the pursuit of happiness and why people seek it through the acquisition of things outside themselves, but happiness, for me, is when I sense alignment to my mission. I can’t explain it any other way. I realize, to some, it appears selfish, but it’s why I came here as a human being, and while others may feel I’m aloof or distant, it’d be more truthful to say that I’m devoted to my mission, and my mission is anything but selfish.

“My final comment to you is that love is a state of consciousness. I know it sounds abstract, and it is, but the substance is there, because love is seen as a feeling and action, but it is a consciousness first. It is an intelligence even before that, and this intelligence is not of the brain or mind, but of the heart-mind, which is to say that the heart and mind are harmonized to express the soul.

“Now that you have my heart, your mind will slowly synchronize with it. How long this will take is an unknown, so be patient. You may feel in the

meantime as though you're rudderless in terms of love. If you have a spouse or children, you may feel a sense of emptiness towards them until this harmonization between my heart and your mind occurs. On page sixty-three of my journal you will see a technique that may help. Practice it as often as you feel it serves you."

She clasped her hands together and bowed slightly. "I love you and will do everything in my power to help you. The consciousness that I am, will always be as near as your heart. I hope you will welcome it, that's all I ask.

"This is Vanessa, signing off."

She got up from her chair with some effort, and I watched her as she disappeared from the camera frame and seconds later, only a black screen remained. I clicked the stop button and silently wept.

The room was suddenly quiet. I could feel tears streaming down my face, but I was not sad. It was some other emotion or feeling that I couldn't place. I felt very fortunate to have received Vanessa's heart, but at the same time I was developing a keener sense of the work that lay ahead of me, and it was daunting in its scope, if Vanessa and Tilopa were at all accurate in their assessments.

A clearer picture was emerging of my future even though my past was held like a prisoner in a windowless, isolated and indecipherable location. I closed my eyes and placed my hand over my heart and felt its soft, rhythmic beat. I could feel the scar from the surgery, but deeper, in some holy chamber, the dull thuds sounded their presence, and I imagined love flowing from my hand down to my new heart, and I welcomed it with an outpouring of gratitude.

Chapter 30: Insignificant Display

The next day was Saturday. Derya and the children were at home, and I debated whether I should share Vanessa's video with Derya. Derya had been raised Muslim and was moderately devout. What I was getting involved in was undeniably at odds with the main precepts of the Islamic religion, but how much out of favor was a big unknown to me.

The other issue was Nammu—the powerful netherworld being who exacted servitude with dire threats. Thus, on one side I had watered-down, Westernized Islam, and on the other I had… I don't know exactly what I had in Nammu, but at that time she seemed to be the opposite of a mosque, church, temple or anything religious. It felt like I was between the proverbial rock and a hard place, and the vise was only tightening.

We had just finished breakfast, and the kids had run outside to the backyard to play, when I heard Jon yell, "Dad! Dad!!"

I ran from the kitchen, my heart in my throat with worry. Jon and Marisa were pointing to something on the ground, and as I opened the patio screen door, I saw one of our pine trees had fallen and somehow shriveled to such a degree that it was about one-third of its normal size. Our tree had not merely fallen to its death; it had been slaughtered by some insane force that could only be Nammu.

Derya was right behind and she gasped in disbelief. "What could cause that!?"

I shook my head, trying to act calm and composed. "I don't know, but I'll clean it up."

"You'll clean it up?" Derya asked in astonishment. "We should have the health inspector… or… or someone from the city look at it. There's something wrong. Trees just don't shrivel up like that overnight."

Derya turned to our children. "Kids, I want you to go inside right now," she ordered.

Marisa and Jon, like scolded puppies, sulked slowly to the patio door and closed it behind them, and then stood by the glass door looking out with sad faces.

Derya grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the tree about twenty feet, and whispered intensely. “Look, I know you have amnesia, but trust me, this is not normal. We need to have someone from the city look into this. There might be a chemical… or… health hazard here that the city needs to know about. We can’t just clean it up and dump it in the garbage. Okay?”

I nodded. “Okay, I understand. Who should we call?”

“It’s Saturday, I’m not sure the public works department will even be open. Let’s try the police and see what they recommend.”

“The police?” I protested.

“Yes, the police. It’s that serious, Sol.”

It was at that point, that single point, that I knew I could pivot and explain everything to Derya, and make her aware of all the dreams, visions, visitations, and threats that I‘d experienced since my heart transplant. For a moment, I opened my mouth, readying my tongue to form the words, but they didn’t come out. They huddled in my mouth, staying silent as if only the universe could disperse them, and it wasn’t ready.

“Okay, I’ll call them right now,” I said, turning toward the house.

I didn’t know how to make her understand. Too many things to explain, the children were watching, a neighbor was cleaning her patio and seemed to be eavesdropping, and it was obvious to me that Nammu, from the dark recesses of her world, was observing us. I could feel her presence, and the last thing I wanted to do was to involve Derya in this. I was angry, and not because a tree had been destroyed, but that Nammu was clearly sending a message—she was getting my family involved. She was going to make me squirm for my indiscretion in reaching out to Vanessa and her parents.

Why did the friction have to be so intense? Every time I leaned in the direction of where I felt I should go, a threat was levied. I felt like a small dog on a short leash.

I grabbed a handset and dialed the local police department. I fumbled for

the words to describe the incident without appearing to be an escapee from the local insane asylum. The emergency operator sounded bored with my story, but she did her job and told me some officers would be by soon.

A police car arrived ten minutes after my call. Two police officers followed Derya and me to the backyard where we pointed in unison to the misshapen tree that was looking stranger by the minute. Its pine needles had fallen off, and its bark was splitting in erratic patterns that were peeling off the trunk, but the strangest aspect was its smell. It smelled foul like death itself. A thick golden-brown sap was flowing from the base of the trunk where it had crumpled over, presumably the cause of the unpleasant odor.

The officers took some pictures, asked a few questions, and wrote up a report that seemed to assume that the destruction was either a prank from neighborhood kids, or a very rare tree disease. I went along with their theories, hoping to minimize their scrutiny, though I sensed that Derya was less convinced.

They agreed with Derya that one of the city's tree inspectors should make an assessment. The police put a tarp over the tree and roped off the area where it fell.

They encouraged us to stay indoors and avoid the area until the tree could be inspected. They also promised Derya that they would ask one of the fire department's chemical spill experts to examine the tree and the ground water around it.

Because of my amnesia, Derya answered their questions as to the original height of the tree, when and where we had bought it, did we have a landscaper, and all the sort of information they needed to file their report. I mostly nodded and looked concerned, and occasionally waved at Jon and Marisa who were patiently watching from the patio door.

Searching for a silver lining, I reminded myself that at least Nammu had warned me exactly in the manner I'd requested, but it left me in a decidedly awkward position. How could I simply drop what I had just learned from Vanessa? How could I abandon my mission? If there were a higher power, a divine being who had orchestrated all of this, wouldn't it protect my family and me? Maybe the tree's demise was all Nammu could really effect.

We spent the rest of the afternoon at the park and local shopping mall, hoping for a bit of normalcy. When we returned home, a message on our answering machine was waiting for us. It was from the fire department. Jerome Higgs was the person's name. He had come out to inspect the tree while we were out, and left his report in voicemail. Derya started the playback and then motioned to me to listen.

"Mr. and Mrs. Tonum, my name is Jerome Higgs from the New Haven Fire Department. I've done a cursory inspection of your pine tree. I didn't see any chemical residue in the immediate vicinity, so I don't think it was caused by a chemical agent. I've never seen anything like it and there's nothing in our database, or for that matter, online, that I can cross-reference and pin down to anything specific. I took samples of the tree sap, needles and bark, and we'll have them tested and get back to you on the results. I also took some ground water samples, which required a small drill site near the base of the tree, which we'll repair at the city's expense.

"In the meantime, after the tree inspector makes his assessment, we'll take care of the disposal. Just stay away from that general area until we dispose of the tree and cover the hole we drilled.

"My number, if you have any questions, is 203-787-6734. Thank you and have a good day."

Derya sighed and turned to me. "Can you call him and get more details while I get some dinner on?"

"More details?" I asked.

"When is the tree inspector coming out? When will we be able to go in our backyard? How far should we stay away from the site? I just want to have more information." She pointed in the general direction of the tree. "That's scary. That doesn't happen. Something's wrong… I can feel it. I want to know every piece of information I can about that tree. Okay?"

"I'll call him right now," I said.

Derya leaned in and kissed me on my cheek. "Thanks, Sol. I'll have a glass of wine waiting for you when you're done. Here's Jerome's number." She handed me a small piece of paper.

I walked downstairs to my office, sat down at my desk, and dialed the number. A cheerful woman's voice answered the phone.

"Good afternoon, Fire Station 13. How may I help you?"

"Could I speak with Jerome Higgs, please?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Higgs has left for the day. Is there anyone else you'd like to speak with?

"Uh… no, he had left us a message about an incident we have in our backyard—"

"Oh yes, the tree people," she interrupted. I could hear the sound of shuffled papers in the background. "Mr. Tonum, is it?"

"Yes."

"I can help you with that," she replied. "Did you have some questions?"

"Great… great, um… do you know when the tree inspector will come to our house?"

"Monday at 8:42 A.M.," she answered without a hitch in her delivery.

My face transformed to a frown. Something was odd… I could suddenly sense it. It was like a shadow passed overhead and time altered itself into a covetous mirror that encircled me.

"Any other questions?" she asked.

"Did Mr. Higgs say when we could use our backyard again?" I asked. My mind was churning through the possibilities of what was happening.

She laughed, and in that moment I knew—though I don't know exactly how—that I was speaking with Nammu. My skin crawled like an army of ants had taken over my body.

"Mr. Tonum," she said. "I wouldn't worry too much about your backyard. It was only one tree, and a small one at that. I don't think any more trees will be lost."

"Do you work with Mr. Higgs?" I asked.

"Not in a meaningful way," she replied. "…Were there any more

questions?”

I was almost ready to hang up, doubting my distrust of this woman. “I didn’t get your name,” I said.

“No, you didn’t, but you know me just the same.” There was a soft chuckle, held in reserve, but distinctively Nammu.

A long silence ensued while I hesitated on my course of action. My natural instinct was to recoil and flick the “off” switch on my phone, but in the privacy of my office, I decided to confront her. Maybe it would be easier over the phone, I told myself.

“Why are you shadowing my every move?” I demanded, careful to keep my voice low. “Why are you deliberately trying to involve my family in this?”

“Come now, Solomon, you know why I’m shadowing you… don’t feign ignorance with me. To your second question, I’m only protecting my interest in our agreement. You wanted a warning… I gave you a warning. You should be grateful.”

“Look, I don’t know how I can agree with you if you harm anything important to me. If you do that one more time, my agreement is canceled.”

My voice was quaking slightly, to my dismay.

“Did you just threaten to not honor our agreement?” Nammu asked, her every word tinged with hostility.

I didn’t want to answer her, but I swallowed hard and opened my mouth, hoping the words would find their way out. “If you involve my family in any way, yes, I will pursue my mission… or whatever it is you don’t want me to do, and I will pursue it with every cell in my body. I will call on every divine power of the universe to help me, and you—”

“And me what? Do you really think you have the power to brush me aside merely because you call upon some imaginary force?” Nammu laughed softly to herself, as if amused by my earnestness.

“For a moment,” she said, “imagine that tree in your backyard was a person, and not to be overly dramatic, but let’s say… one of your family…

perhaps Derya… or Jon.”

My heart was racing. She sounded so calm, as if she were a queen discussing the weather with one of her subjects. I wanted to hang up, but I feared the consequences.

I heard a soft laughter, and then silence for a few seconds, and then her voice distorted into something that sounded like pure, unbridled, sightless evil that was neither female nor male. “I will reach out and destroy what you love, if you dare to violate our agreement. You, at this very moment, are downstairs in your office, while your family is upstairs… alone. Would you like me to show you my powers and relieve you of any doubt? Another warning perhaps?”

“No!” I shouted with pure instinct.

“Then do not pretend to hold any powers over me, for you do not. I am the master here, and you are the servant. I am finished playing nursemaid to a man who is foolish enough to put his own family in jeopardy. The tree was an insignificant display. Doubt my power one more time, and I will deliver a blow that you will regret for the rest of your life.”

I started to speak, but heard only a dial tone. Nammu had ended the call. I was perspiring, shaking, and shrouded in the chill of terror. I got up from my chair and paced back and forth in my office, trying to find a way out of my predicament, but I kept landing on the same course of action: give up. She was right; I was putting my family in jeopardy. I needed to stop everything. I needed to get back to work and resume my family life and put away all my thoughts of a mission that was destined for some other person.

Everything I had believed with such conviction after watching Vanessa’s video was now being systematically erased. I could feel it wavering into nothingness as I resolved to become my normal self. The reins that had controlled me the past month were cast off. I was no longer going to listen to anything other than my rational mind, and do only what was necessary to protect my family. That was my mission— my only mission.

I went into my darkroom, opened the cabinet and found the envelope from Vanessa. I held it for a moment, and then in some symbolic, terror-stained impulse, tossed it into the garbage like a divine decree that my direction had

changed. I was no longer the subject of some grand experiment of the human race. Someone else would have to step up and undertake that role, because I had no help, no protection, and certainly no ability to overcome the God-like power of Nammu.

My world, like a sleeping compass in a still ocean, suddenly came to rest. I walked upstairs feeling a new sense of conviction to re-enter my life, my former life, to once again, be me.

Chapter 31: Doctor

The following Monday was my doctor's appointment. Derya and the children were back to their routines at work and school. I took a cab to my doctor's office, as I was still forbidden to drive. It was a fairly short trip, but still managed to cost $28.

After I signed in I was escorted to one of Dr. Kendall's examination rooms for a routine post-surgical assessment. The nurses were cheerful—for a Monday afternoon—and judging from the hallway chatter outside my room, one of them was getting married. (The walls were thin.)

All of the standard procedures were meticulously performed on me, including blood pressure and blood samples. After my obedient, pin-cushion acceptance of their pokes and probes, I was taken to a larger and more pleasing office that Dr. Kendall used for his consultations. I waited, staring out the window. It was at times like this when my mind would wander to the forbidden mission that called me from some deep expanse, but since my phone conversation with Nammu, I had become vigilant. I didn't entertain such thoughts anymore; I ran from them into some other diversion.

One thing I knew, I was not a hero. I was a feeble heart transplant recipient who had rejected his new heart and was in recovery. I was a sheltered professor in new media and film. I was a husband and a father. If I had one unique quality to my personality, it was my creativity, but that ended with my memory, and now, I didn't know how to go about making a film, let alone teach privileged college students how to do it.

I paced for a while in Dr. Kendall's office trying to divert my thoughts. A short, supple knock on the door, and Dr. Kendall entered. "Good afternoon, Solomon. Sorry to keep you waiting. How are you today?"

"Good, thanks, and yourself?" I replied.

"Busy as always," he said, sitting down in his chair behind his desk. He opened his tablet and looked inside, and then looked back up at me.

“I think I want to run an Allomap XG profile to pinpoint this rejection issue.”

“I still have rejection issues?”

“The ACR is much improved, but it’s not where I’d like to see it at this stage of recovery. I think we need to better understand what’s behind this rejection, and the Allomap XG is the best way for us to know.”

“What’s involved?”

“Nothing, we already have your blood sample from today, we’ll run the tests with that and let you know what we find. Okay with you?”

I shrugged my shoulders a bit. “Sure.”

“Any improvement in the memory recall?” he asked.

“I remain hopeless in that department,” I said bleakly.

“My offer still stands. I can set up a counseling session with Doctor Chayton. He’s a brilliant headpeeper, helped others with various disorders of the brain, including memory loss. Want to try?”

I nodded my head. “Sure, I think I’ve waited long enough to see if I could get somewhere on my own… and that hasn’t worked so well.”

“Let me call his office right now, while you’re here, and we’ll schedule an initial session.”

“Okay.”

Dr. Kendall swiped his tablet. “Doctor Chayton’s office.” He took the remote and then put it to his ear, while humming a tune I didn’t recognize. “Hi, Tyler, this is Doctor Kendall. I’d like to make an appointment for a patient of mine who’s in my office right now. Would Kohana be available later this week?”

“Uh huh, what time?

“Let me check.”

Dr. Kendall put his phone on mute. “He had a cancellation and could see you now, if you wanted.”

I fidgeted in my chair, searching for a reason to put it off, but nothing occurred to me. “Okay, is he in the same office building?”

“Just three floors up. You can take the stairs and get some exercise,” he said with a sparkle in his eyes.

“Okay, I’ll do it.”

Dr. Kendall clicked off the mute button, placing the phone to his ear again. “He’ll be right up, and I’ll forward the records up. He’s taking the stairs, so they’ll arrive before he does.

“Good, I’m sure he will.” Dr. Kendall hung up the phone, clicked a few buttons on his laptop, and stood to his feet. “I think you made the right decision. You’ll like Doctor Chayton.”

“What was his first name again?” I asked.

“Kohana is American Indian… Sioux, I believe. He told me once what it meant… bird… maybe hawk, I don’t remember, but he’s not your typical shrink, as you’re soon to find out.”

Dr. Kendall walked me to the stairwell door and shook my hand, and gave me directions to Dr. Chayton’s office. I walked the stairs slowly, wondering what I had gotten myself into and wishing I had said “no.”

Chapter 32: White Buffalo Woman

A minute later I opened a nondescript office door and came into a waiting room with a deep-brown colored wall and nine masks staring out in an expectant gasp. Track lighting made the colorful masks stand out like jewels floating in a chocolate river. A well-dressed 40s something African American man was sitting at a reception desk and smiled broadly. “Welcome, you must be Solomon Tonum. I’m Tyler, Doctor Chayton’s assistant.” He pointed to a group of chairs. “Make yourself comfortable over there. Can I get you a cup of coffee or bottled water?”

“Water would be great, thank you,” I said as I sat down in a large, red leather chair.

Tyler had a refrigerator behind his desk, and pulled out a Perrier. “Do you want a glass?”

“No, no, don’t bother, I can drink it from the bottle.”

He poured it in a glass that looked fit for champagne, and then brought it to me. “It just tastes better in a glass. It’s no trouble at all.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Have you been Doctor Chayton’s assistant for long?”

“About four years,” Tyler replied, “but I might as well tell you now that I’m his life partner, and the job, it’s just an excuse to be with him as much as I can.”

I smiled, not sure what to say, and decided to change the subject. “You know Doctor Kendall?”

“Oh yes, Doctor Kendall is one our favorite physicians in this building. If you don’t mind me asking, did you have heart surgery?”

“Yes, well, actually, I had a heart transplant—”

“Really? How recently? You look so… normal.”

“Well, almost a month ago now.”

“Wow, that must be an amazing experience. I’m glad it went so well for you.”

The door opened and a large man in a tan leather jacket, crisp white shirt and denim jeans came in the room. “Hi, Solomon, I’m Doctor Chayton, but please call me Kohana.”

I stood up, preparing to shake hands with him. He was easily six and a half feet tall. His hair was straight to his shoulders, as black as a raven with streaks of silver running down the sides. He was large in width as well, probably close to 280 pounds. He looked like a gentle giant. He wore reading glasses that were halfway down his nose, and his walk was slow and deliberate.

“Doctor Kendall speaks very highly of you, thanks for seeing me on such short notice,” I said.

“I’m glad we could arrange it,” Kohana said. “I was just reading your file. Why don’t you follow me into my office, and we’ll get started.”

Kohana turned to Tyler and smiled warmly. “Could you get me a little coffee, please? I think last night has finally caught up with me.”

Tyler nodded with a knowing smile and flashed off to a side room, presumably where the coffeemaker was.

I followed Kohana into his office and was offered a comfortable, well-worn, red mahogany leather chair with intricately carved arms and legs. He went to the window and looked outside for a moment. “I’ll only mention this once, Solomon, but when you’re in my office, you’re in a sacred space. In this space there’s only one way to communicate: openly. You can tell me anything, and I will always tell you the truth, to the best of my abilities. I won’t care if you like what I say, and I won’t care if I like what you say… as long as it’s the truth… that’s all that matters. Do you agree?”

“I… I do,” I said, with a brief nod.

He turned around, still standing, his towering presence silhouetted against the large panoramic window. “Even your answer, the slight hesitation, indicates you’re uncertain. Why?”

My shrink hadn’t even sat down yet, and I was already feeling that I was under the bright light of scrutiny. I waited to respond, deliberating on my choice of words, and while I did so, I took a quick scan of his office. It was large, but cozy. One wall was filled with books and another had beautiful artwork, depicting portraits of Indian chiefs and scenes of the high plains. He had four chairs surrounding a leather coffee table and an immense rug underneath that held complex geometrical patterns in hues of brown, tan, soft blues, and earthy reds and ochre.

I stayed still in my chair and looked him in the eye. “Can we start somewhere else?”

“Where would that be?” he asked.

“Maybe tell me your approach to therapy… or what your background is… I don’t know… that sort of thing.”

There was a short, staccato knock on the door, and Tyler walked in with a silver tray and two coffee cups, a coffee pot, some cookies, and a new Perrier. “I wasn’t sure if you’d want coffee, so I brought an extra cup in case you would. The oatmeal cookies are homemade—a family recipe, so I recommend you have some before that cookie monster over there eats them all.”

“Thanks, Ty, we appreciate it. Can you hold my calls for the next hour, please?”

“No problem,” he said, and then turned to me, as he was pouring coffee. “You want me to pour some for you?”

“No thanks, I’ll stick with water. Thanks, though.”

Tyler picked up the empty coffee cup. “Enjoy,” he said in a hushed tone, and left.

Kohana sat down in a chair, perpendicular to mine, and took a sip of coffee. Personally, I felt uncomfortable. The whole situation was peculiar. I felt like someone wandering a desert with a large, vertiginous bird circling me, and I had no idea which way to go.

“I read your file,” Kohana said, reaching for a cookie, “not all of it, but the parts that dealt with your memory loss. Why don’t we start there? My

background and approach to therapy isn't why you came here. You want to get your memory back. Right?"

I nodded in agreement. "Well, as you know, I had a heart transplant about four weeks ago. From the moment I woke up I had no memories of my life prior to the surgery."

"None whatsoever?" he asked me.

"None."

"Did you know your wife's name?"

I shook my head.

"Your kids?"

"I kept thinking I should, but nothing seemed familiar to me about them… I mean my family. It was so strange." I let out a long sigh. "Still is."

Kohana took another sip of his coffee, and set his cup down on the table so carefully there was no sound. "I feel you're withholding something—"

I started to say something in my defense, but he simply held up his arm as if to say silence.

"Remember my rules," he said, putting his arms out wide. "Sacred space. You must speak openly; it's the only requirement for therapy. Sometimes people need to dangle their toe in the water first, so let's see what makes you comfortable.

He paused. "Have you had any dreams since your surgery?"

I visibly felt my eye twitch. Damn! I glanced to see if he'd been watching my face, but it appeared he was more interested in what was sitting on the coffee table before us.

"Ty was right about the cookies," he said as his eyes met mine. "If you don't eat them, I will, and I'm sure you noticed that I have a healthy appetite. I make no apologies for that."

They did look good. "Just one, I'm not that hungry," I said.

"One for you, three for me, that's a ratio I can live with," he said with a hearty laugh.

“So, have you?” he asked, reaching for his second cookie.

“Oh, dreams, um, I’ve had some.”

“Why don’t you pick one and tell me about it.”

I scrambled for an answer. “Maybe dreams aren’t the equivalent of putting my toe in the water.”

“How’s that?”

I looked around nervously. “My dreams scare the hell out of me.”

Kohana’s eyes narrowed as if he’d found an opening to Shangri-La. “Bad dreams are like frail weapons—like a pea-shooter. They can hurt you at close range, but put enough distance between you and the dream, and they’re harmless.”

“These are not harmless dreams,” I said. “These dreams… I’m not sure they qualify as dreams.”

“What’re you saying?” Kohana asked quietly, sitting back in his chair.

Kohana was powerfully built, yet his voice and mannerisms were composed and calm. There was the unmistakable warrior spark within him. I could sense it entangling me, urging me to open up and speak my reality.

“I don’t know how to explain this,” I mumbled, shaking my head.

“You’re doing fine, just continue, the words will come.”

I took a deep breath. “Where to start… during my surgery I had a dream that I woke up on a deserted island—only it wasn’t deserted. I had amnesia on this island, too—”

“That’s interesting,” Kohana commented.

“I climbed my way to the outer rim of a volcano, which seemed to be the main structure of the island, and noticed a freshwater lake had formed in the center of the island. I went there and saw these large creatures swimming in its depths. I was afraid—”

“Why?”

“I guess because they were… huge, and mostly hidden by the depths of the

water. I couldn’t see them closely; I only knew that they could come out of the water, because all around this lake was a trail of destruction where they had gone to feed on the trees and bushes that surrounded it.”

“But that would make them herbivores; did you have any reason to think they would eat you?”

I took another breath, feeling good that I had found a way to tell my story. “Not exactly, but anything that size, looking up at you from the depths of a lake, would make you uneasy—herbivore or not.”

“I understand,” Kohana said. “Tell me about the feelings you had in this place.”

“I don’t know… I was confused, frustrated, lost, and unsure of my next move. I was searching for a way home, but I didn’t have a memory of home, so how could I find it? I felt very isolated.”

“Go on, tell me what happened next,” Kohana encouraged.

“Protection from the elements and those creatures seemed like a good idea, so I found an entrance to a cavern and went inside. The strange thing about this cavern was that I found some matches, evidence that someone had been on the island before me. I don’t remember how, but I managed to drop the matches. I did strike one of the matches before I lost them, and I could see drawings on the wall—I think those sea creatures were painted there, too.

“Then, in the dark of this cave, I heard a voice. It was like the mythical voice that ancient sailors talked about, the siren’s voice that would guide them—”

“The siren’s song,” Kohana said, “was guiding men to their deaths.”

I looked at him, wondering why he mentioned it.

“I’m just using it as an example,” I replied. “It was a beautiful voice and called me deeper into the cavern.”

“Did the voice actually call you into the cave, or was it simply a song that you heard?”

“No, it invited me inside the cave… it spoke to me first, and then sang so I had something to use to navigate in the darkness. Anyway, I came to a dead-

end, but I could see some tiny specks of light coming through this wall of rock, and I began to strike this wall with some large rocks I had found. Eventually, and with a lot of effort on my part, I broke though the wall, and there… there was this angelic looking woman waiting for me."

"Describe her for me."

"She was light skinned, pale actually, silver hair, but young, very… she was perfect in appearance, but she was clothed like a homeless person. She wore the equivalent of rags. She invited me inside; she lived in this complex of subterranean chambers, and somehow I was a guest, or at least that's how it felt.

"I went diving in a pool of deep water in the first chamber… oh, and by the way, there were inscriptions on the floor and table that showed these same creatures I'd seen in the lake, and a bunch of other strange looking animals, too."

"You said you went swimming in this pool of water. Weren't you scared that you'd see one of those creatures in the lake?"

"I don't know… I felt protected in some way. Zenith, that was the woman's name, invited me to swim and clean myself. I was all sweaty and dirty from my digging through the corridor's wall."

"This woman gave you her name, or is that simply what you called her?"

"No, she told me her name was Zenith."

"That's interesting," he observed. "Then what happened?"

"I was starving, and she offered to feed me, only the food she had… it was like roots of some kind of plant that she was growing in the cave, and though they tasted okay, their effect was like a hallucinogenic drug."

"How so?"

"I had a dream… or vision that I was on a frozen lake with Zenith, and I could see this powerful light in the middle of this frozen lake that was floating above the ice. Zenith explained that this light held my memories, and all I wanted to do was to go to them, but then I heard these thumps deep underwater as if something was coming to get me."

“That’s how you interpreted the sounds—something was coming to get you?”

I nodded. “I felt these creatures were under the ice, and they were trying to break it by smashing their bodies against it, causing me to fall into the water, and then they’d snatch me. Eat me, whatever monsters do. Anyway, I felt extremely vulnerable, and I ran to this pulsing light as if it would save me.

“The creatures were getting closer and causing the ice to break all around me, and I ran as fast as I could to the floating light, but as I got closer, I could see that the light gave off heat, and this heat had melted the ice around it. There was no way to get to it. If I tried I would fall into the lake and the creatures could then eat me.

“Something happened, I don’t remember exactly, but I saw some memories. Somehow I touched into them, and I heard my name said by a woman.”

“Who?”

“I don’t remember … maybe my wife.”

I took a quick glance in Kohana’s direction and could see he was listening carefully to my words. “After that I woke up in the cavern, depleted and woozy. Zenith took care of me—oh, I almost forget to mention that she healed me earlier.”

“How?”

“It was very strange… she took pinches of her own forearm and sprinkled them on my hand—the one that had been torn open from beating against the wall. Moments later, my hand felt fine.”

“This Zenith… was she like a mother to you?”

“No, I would say more like a guide or teacher, but I’ll come back to that.

“When I collected myself after my experience at the frozen lake, Zenith told me that she would help me collect my memories. She put me into a trance of sorts, and I had another vision. This time I was in a forest, and I heard this strange sound that drew me to this huge pedestal made of gold, standing in a field. I went up the stairs of this pedestal, and a demon was

awaiting me—”

“How did you know it was a demon?”

“He was gruesome to look at, though his personality was refined and cordial… at first, but as our conversation progressed, it became obvious that he was not what he appeared to be when I first met him. And then he told me what he wanted me to do, and threatened me if I didn’t do it.”

“And what was that?”

“This will sound strange; he wanted me to be normal.”

“In what way?”

I fidgeted in my chair. How could I tell him this? He’d think I was crazy, but more importantly, there was the issue with Nammu. Would she think I was veering off course and extract some retribution?

“This is about your memory,” Kohana reminded, sensing my concerns, though not knowing their precise nature. “This is all for you and your family. Please, speak freely.”

“I can’t.”

Kohana leaned forward. “You can.”

“Okay, but let’s keep what I tell you in context. This is a dream, and I don’t believe it.”

“I can do that.”

I closed my eyes, collecting the right words. “I was told that I was going to make an important discovery that would enable humans—any human, really—to see their soul through the lens of a new technology, which I would somehow discover. Not the whole technology, but some aspect that was the key to make it function properly. Anyway, the demon, somehow aware of this future event, wanted to dissuade me from going in that direction.”

“And how did he try to dissuade you?”

“The demon manifested Dou Xing right in front of me and used him as an example. We were both what the demon called a Sonverto; apparently they were a lineage of the Creator that incarnated on earth to perform special

missions to awaken people. Dou Xing was killed by the demon as a way to secure my obedience."

As I recalled my experience with Dou Xing, my body started to convulse, and I wept. I couldn't stop the release; as hard as I tried, it broke through in wave after wave. I was completely powerless to the emotions that flooded my body, and after a while, I let them go, for there was no turning away. There was no place to hide. I was grateful for the sacred space. Kohana would add an encouraging word or phrase from time to time, but otherwise he simply allowed me to bare my bruise-colored soul.

As my composure returned, Kohana stood up and got me some tissues. To my surprise, his own eyes were watering as he handed me the tissues, and I could see he was touched in some way by my story.

"Is there more?" he asked.

I nodded. "Much more."

"I'm going to have a quick chat with Ty, how much time do you have?"

"I have no other appointments."

"Good, I'll be right back."

A few minutes later, Kohana returned, closed the door quietly behind him, and took off his jacket, hanging it on a brass hook on the door. "You asked me at the start, and rightly so, what my background is. I think you should know."

He sat down, poured more coffee in his near-empty cup, took a sip and looked at me as if he was checking my readiness for his story. "I was raised on an Indian Reservation in South Dakota. My parents, I never knew—not a single memory. They had been killed in a car accident when I was only two years old. Somehow I managed to survive the crash. I was then raised by an elder—actually my uncle— who was deep rez all the way."

"What does that mean, deep rez?" I asked.

"It means he lived deep in the reservation. Old school. He was a medicine man, but wasn't widely known as a medicine man, because no one on the rez paid much attention to his abilities or knowledge. The rez had flat screen

televisions, cable, the Internet, for Christ's sake. It was a tourist attraction. No one wanted to hangout with an old, crazy-talking medicine man. My generation thought they were kind of spooky, anyway."

"But you were raised by one?"

"Yes, and I was shunned by most of my peers as a result."

"Just because of your uncle's work?"

"No, because I wasn't permitted to follow the white man's culture, and my uncle was considered a wild one by most on the rez. We lived in complete isolation. He was a keeper of our most revered ceremonial site, and only a few within the entire Lakota Nation knew of this site or had ever been allowed near it."

"Where is it?"

"I can't tell you. I'd have to show you," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

I felt better hearing his story. "How did you become a psychiatrist then?"

"I became a medicine man of my people first, and then of the white man. I wanted to be both. The rez is split into the old and the new worlds. Those who follow both are rare. The vast majority follow the new. It's easier. Less is demanded, and it seems that more is given—at least in terms of material things of comfort and convenience.

"I was raised in a manner that my peers couldn't understand—"

My cell phone rang, and I blindly grabbed it and turned it off. "Sorry about that."

"My father's bloodline were medicine men, every generation had one, sometimes two. My uncle fought hard to raise me. I had an aunt that lived off the rez in Fargo, and she wanted to raise me as well. My uncle, just after my parent's funeral, took me to the ceremonial site, and while I was there determined that I was to be the medicine man between worlds… in other words, the one who merged worlds. I was a unifier—a Sonverto."

He let his words hang in the quiet of his office for several seconds. I was, once again, without a word to express, like a dry riverbed bellowing to the gods for rain.

“The term you used in your dream, Sonverto, is an ancient word. My uncle used it only a few times, but always with great reverence. He told me—I was probably only ten at the time—that a Sonverto would cross my path and need my help. He would be the one that unifies a universe. Being only ten at the time, I listened with doubt mostly, but as I grew up and practiced the rites of soul, the same messages came to me.

“I began to watch and wait for this crossing of paths… for the day that I would find this person. I never really knew how this person would find me, who they would be, when they would come, or anything else. I only knew it would happen.”

Kohana looked at me with eyes that had seen Fate’s signs and were unshaken by its arrows. “Who is it that puts fear in you?”

It was a strange question. It came at me undeflected, as if it had been waiting to be spoken for many years. I just sat there and wondered how to respond. My last meeting with Nammu had consumed my courage. I was a shell, opaque and withered of hope. I knew this man was no ordinary man, but what man could possibly match up to Nammu?

“Why do you think someone puts fear into me?” I asked.

“The demon you met in your dream… did you meet him again?”

“No.”

He leaned forward, his weight against the arm of his chair nearest me. “I know how it feels. I understand the threats, the darkness that enters the ones who carry such light. This is a sacred space. No one can enter it unless I invite them. You can speak candidly.”

His voice was different. He was different. Kohana had gathered his old school wisdom and was no longer speaking to me like a white man’s shrink. He was a medicine man of the Red Road.

Sensing my reticence, he spoke. “In the place I grew up, it was like a vast sea of rock and bleached land, but we found bones of creatures that we called the Unktegila. They were known as sea monsters to most of my people, but we knew they were not monsters, and we knew our homeland was their home—we all came from the sea. It was the first birthplace of all creatures.

“The Unktegila, to the medicine men, were the carriers of the sacred knowledge.”

“Why do you believe that?” I asked. “All you had was fossilized bone.”

“Our myths began somewhere. A medicine man of our people, many years ago, long before the white man came to our lands, found the first bones of the Unktegila. He studied them; he read the bones for their medicine. The spirit of the Unktegila was powerful. More powerful than anything he’d ever felt before. I think the sea monster you had in your dream was possibly this creature.”

Our eyes locked as he finished.

“In my dream, they were called the Quantusum.” I whispered.

“You had a name for them?” he asked excitedly.

“In my dream, I talked with one.”

“No way,” he exclaimed.

I nodded, and proceeded to tell him, in detail, my dream experience with Trisiel in the listening chamber. Kohana’s eyes showed his amazement as he heard my story. At one point he sat back, resting his head against the back of his chair and closed his eyes. I kept talking, knowing that he was imagining himself in the story.

I did my best to describe how they looked, how they felt, how they thought, and what Trisiel had told me. When I had finished, Kohana opened his eyes, sat up straight in his chair and looked at me like one might do when they shield their eyes from a bright light.

“My uncle had a vision once that included the Unktegila. He told me they were still here, but they could not be seen. They were orchestrating the union of peoples. They would call people through their dreams and wake them up, activate them like someone might turn on a light bulb. It sounds like they flicked the switch in you.”

Kohana took a bite from his last cookie and washed it down with a swig of coffee. “There’re always interiors to our so-called myths that never make it to the Internet or books. The medicine men never release the sacred information

in a form that can be published or owned by someone. It lives in our veins, and in our hearts. We pass it from one mouth to one ear. It is always whispered. Sometimes, one comes along and they have access to the rites. They innately understand the keeping of the soul or the sky writings."

"I met the woman who gave me her heart," I said. It came out of me like a reflex, but from what stimulus I didn't know.

"You mean before your surgery?"

"No, after. She sent me a video of herself. She said she knew of my mission—the thing I mentioned earlier."

"…How?"

"She had a premonition twelve years before her death. She was albino. She spent her time preparing her heart… for me. She said it was the only organ she could donate, and somehow she knew it would get to me. I have no idea how, but this is what she told me."

"She was an albino?"

I nodded.

"Have you ever heard the story about White Buffalo Woman?"

"No, I don't think so," I answered.

"People—even on the rez—believe different versions of this myth, but despite the variations it remains fundamental to our spiritual culture. Within the lineage of Lakota medicine men, we tell a different story than the one you'd find on the Internet or in some popularized book or movie. White Buffalo Woman was albino. Albinos were, and still are, exceptionally rare in the Lakota Nation—perhaps one in every ten generations—and in those days, if one was born, they were abandoned by their parents. Remember that many of our medicine men foresaw the coming of the white man hundreds of years before they came, and anyone born of white skin was seen as a fulfillment of that prophecy.

"In our account, White Buffalo Woman was one of those outcasts that had managed to survive after she'd been abandoned by her parents. It was believed by some that she was raised by a buffalo herd, but however she did

it, the albino child grew into a woman, and she desired to return to her people.

“White Buffalo Woman spoke first to some of our hunters who were searching for food and stumbled upon her, thinking she was a goddess of the sky. She told them to prepare their village for her visit. She wanted to have a festive gathering and told them that they had four days to prepare. When the hunters returned to the village the tribe became nervous with activity that they might be the host of a sky goddess.

“On the fourth day, as promised, the mysterious woman entered the village, and all of the people gathered in awe of her strange beauty. Many of the people believed she was a ghost, and they ran away. Some believed she was a demon and threw stones at her, and she held her hands up and dismissed them with a simple wave, and they fell down and slept. Those who remained conscious, watched in awe and gathered around her in a giant circle, hoping to understand her intention.

“She spoke of forgiveness and the world of spirit with such authority that even the medicine man accepted her wisdom. She told them that her life was destined to bend in a different direction, and that it was the only way she’d be able to understand what all who had gone before her had missed—even the medicine men.

“As she was talking to the gathered people, an older woman stepped forward as if drawn by a magnet. Her arms were outstretched and under her breath she mumbled a name over and over so quietly that none could hear. White Buffalo Woman stopped talking and addressed the woman, opening her arms to embrace her. The older woman cried tears of joy, for she had been reunited with her daughter after twenty years.

“The mother was alone, her husband had died many years earlier, and they had never tried again to have a child. White Buffalo Woman forgave her mother, listening to her sob at having abandoned her only child in the woods. She held her mother, as though she were the mother comforting her child, and all those gathered could see her actions were from a truth that they held in high regard.

“For the next four weeks, White Buffalo Woman was adopted by the

village, and she shared her wisdom with everyone that would listen. There were some within the village who remained distrustful of her, using the prophecy of the white invaders as their justification. Some of the elders felt her knowledge was at odds with what had been taught by the ancestors. They argued that perhaps she was sowing seeds of doubt in their beliefs.

“This small group commissioned two warriors to abduct White Buffalo Woman and remove her from the village. They woke her up in the middle of the night, bound, gagged, and blindfolded her. For five days and nights they rode to the furthest borders of the Lakota Nation into the neighboring territory of our enemy, now known as the Anishinabe.

“The whole time they rode, the warriors never spoke to her or even looked at her. They had been given strict orders to treat her as a sorcerer and not get too close, lest she place them in some magical spell. When they arrived at their destination, they placed White Buffalo Woman in a huge forest that bordered the short grass plains of their homeland, and left her without food or water.”

Kohana paused to take another sip of coffee, stashing the last of his cookie in his mouth. He rubbed his hands together over the serving tray, and took a furtive glance at his wristwatch.

“She’s the one that entered our world to bestow the new intelligence that would help humanity remember its soul.” He paused for a moment as if recalling something. “Where the shadow is no longer the road; when separation cannot corrode the soul’s light, the union of a universe is begun.

“She visited our lands nearly two thousand years ago, and she foretold the time when she would return, when the time was ripe for humanity to see itself as soul and remember its intelligence as a thing to share, in service to one another. All creatures… all family.”

He looked at me with eyes that were so gentle. A soft light seemed to scatter in my direction and I felt, for the first time, that I’d found someone who could truly help me.

“You see,” he said, “she left behind the rites of soul. These rites we still follow… at least among the serious students of the way.”

He looked directly at me. “Do you see the correlation? Your Zenith was an albino. Your heart donor was an albino. You have met this same consciousness. Call her whatever name you like. We call her White Buffalo Woman—”

There was a sharp knock on the door, and Tyler poked his head in. “Sorry to interrupt,” he said, turning to me. “Your wife has been trying to reach you and tracked you down from Dr. Kendall’s office. She’s on the line right now, and says it’s an emergency.”

My mind lurched into a hundred different directions simultaneously. I began panicking. “Where can I take the call?” I asked, standing to my feet.

Kohana stood up as well, and pointed to the phone on his desk. “Go ahead and use my phone for as long as you like, I’m going to get a refill on my coffee and have a smoke. When you’re done, just let Ty know. Okay?”

I nodded.

“Just hit the blinking button and pick up the phone,” Tyler instructed.

“Okay, thanks.” I rushed over to the phone, behind Kohana’s desk, and watched as Kohana and Tyler walked out, closing the door behind them. I took a deep breath, hoping that I could rearrange my fear into something more akin to courage. The blinking light pulsed at the pace of my heart.

Chapter 33: Come Home

As I put the phone to my ear, I could hear Derya talking to someone. I interrupted. “Honey? What’s wrong?”

“Oh Sol, where’ve you been? I’ve been trying to reach you… hold on.” I heard her say something to someone like she was on another line. Her voice sounded like her energy had been drained out of it, and she was sniffling as though she had been recently crying.

“Where’ve you been?” she repeated.

“I decided to do the therapy thing… you know, what Dr. Kendall was recommending. What’s wrong?”

“Nalan’s dead.” Her voice was solemn. The words just lay there like cut flowers on a table.

“What!?”

“She’s dead.” Her voice was drained of emotion like someone in shock.

“How… when?”

“It just happened… just an hour ago. She had a stroke… they’re not sure… and… and just died at work. Right in her office. She just collapsed and was dead by the time the paramedics could get there… it doesn’t seem possible…”

Nalan was Derya’s older sister, and had lived in Ankara, Turkey, since graduating from law school about ten years ago. She looked similar to Derya, but was more hard-edged and career oriented. She had no children and got divorced about two years ago, and since then seemed to throw her entire life into her law firm and corporate clients.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart. Where are you?”

“I’m home. I came home right away. Her office called me and explained the situation. They were very kind. Can you come home?”

“I’ll leave right away, but I’ll need to get a cab, so it’ll take me an extra five minutes or so. Is there anything I can do?”

“Just come home, Sol. I really need you.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Okay,” she said, with a vacant sound in her voice.

“I’ll be there soon, I promise.”

“Thanks…” Her voice trailed off and the call ended.

I leaned against Kohana’s desk, and placed the phone back down. I was numb and distressed. One name kept repeating in my head: Nammu. Maybe I was paranoid, but I had this unassailable feeling that Nammu was behind this, and she had just delivered her next warning shot… this time, metaphorically speaking, a lot closer to home.

Tyler knocked on the door with his distinctive pattern, and poked his head in through the door. “Do you need anything? I saw the light go off on the phone.”

“A cab?”

“Sure, I’ll call one right now.” He spun around and closed the door behind him.

I prayed right then and there. I put my hands out like Dou Xing had shown, and I prayed. I sent love to Derya, Nalan, and their parents. Then I prayed that it was just a coincidence. That Nammu had nothing to do with it. I prayed as hard as I could, please, God, let this be a coincidence and nothing more.

Then another knock on the door, and Tyler poked his head in. “The cab will be outside the main lobby in about ten minutes. It’s a Blue and White taxi. Do you need anything else?”

I shook my head. “No, that’s all. Thanks for your help.”

“No problem,” Tyler said. He opened the door a little wider. “Kohana will be back in just a minute. He’s on his way up, and wanted to say goodbye.”

“I think I need to go,” I replied.

“Do you want to set up another appointment before you go?”

“I’ll call later.”

“That’s cool. I’ll let Kohana know you were in a hurry.” He backed out of the doorway as I walked to it, giving me room.

“You’re sure you’re okay?” Tyler asked, looking concerned.

“Yes, it’s just that my wife’s sister died suddenly, and I need to get home.”

Tyler put his arm around my shoulder. “My condolences, man. That’s tough news. Let us know if there’s anything we can do to help. Anything.”

I nodded and smiled feebly. “Thanks.”

I walked out of the office feeling stripped of everything that had hidden me, and yet an alarm was sounding in my head, stammering an ancient name of evil. As I glanced back at Tyler to wave goodbye, I felt the presence of Nammu enter the masks on the wall. They looked willing, open and self-deceived, staring out with their blank expressions and wanting only one thing: for me to be a proud shadow on the assembly line of light.

Chapter 34: A Million Pictures

The next 36 hours were hellishly busy. Derya was on the phone discussing funeral arrangements with her parents, talking with family friends, and making travel arrangements spur of the moment for herself and our children. Because I couldn't drive, Derya called on some of our friends to help out, so friends were dropping off travel supplies and last-minute needs like sunglasses for the kids, travel books to keep them occupied, and a hundred little things.

I wasn't able to travel abroad, because my doctors considered my physical condition too unstable, so I would stay in New Haven and manage the homestead, which mostly revolved around my health, diet and exercise regime. Our children seemed unnerved by the whole chain of events. They were excited in some ways to go to Turkey with their mom, but the circumstances dampened their enthusiasm. The main thing was to get out of school, and for that, they were willing to undergo some discomfort.

Amid all of that, the tree inspector disposed of our tree, giving us no indication as to the cause of its peculiar demise, which, in light of the turmoil that Nalan's death had brought to our lives, was just fine with me.

Derya and the children were to leave the next morning, and at Derya's request, I was in Jon's room packing his suitcase while he peppered me with questions about airplanes, airports, Turkey, and his maternal grandparents, none of which, it seemed, he remembered very well from his last trip to Turkey. Of course most of my answers came in the form of "I think so" or "I'm not sure" or "You'll have to ask your mom," but it didn't stop his inquiry.

"Dad, do you remember Nalan?" Jon asked.

"No, to be honest, I have no memory of her."

"Nothing, not even one?"

"Not even one."

“Jeez, but you remember about airplanes and stuff. Why not people, especially family?”

I stopped folding his clothes and sat down next to him on the bed. “I have no memories of our conversations… or how we played together before my surgery. You told me last week that we used to throw the baseball. I have no memory of you and me throwing the baseball, but I know what a baseball is and how to throw it.” I added sheepishly, “Though… not very well.”

Jon smiled. He was a small boy for his age, a little shy, soft-spoken and easy to be around. His brown hair was fairly long like my own, but with more curl. He was bright, I was learning that, but his intellect seemed less concerned with subjects taught in school and more focused on his own reading. He loved to read… it was his one true passion.

“Still, it doesn’t make sense to me,” Jon confided.

“The brain’s a strange organ,” I said, “and in my case, it’s also confused.”

“Why’s it confused? You got a new heart, not a new brain.”

I smiled. “Yes, but the brain and the heart are like friends. They talk to one another, they have a relationship of sorts, and when the heart’s replaced, I suppose the brain sort of misses the old heart.”

“And that’s why you can’t remember us?”

“I don’t know if that’s the reason, but it could be.”

“What about love?” Jon asked quietly. “Do you remember it, or is your brain confused about that, too?”

“It’s not so much a memory, Jon. It’s more like… it’s more like a feeling, an awareness of something in my heart. I feel it, I just don’t remember it.”

“Mom says you love us, but because you don’t remember us, it’s not the same kind of love. Is that true?”

He looked at me like a solitary star in the vastness of space. We were alone in his room. One of the first times we had really talked about feelings, and I could sense his heart—rooted in a different history than mine—was searching for a reunion; a time when he and I were bonded through a thousand vibrant memories. I wanted to feel them, and for a moment, before I found my voice,

I tried. I really tried to bring them under my eye like a scientist with a powerful microscope, but I couldn't find the focus.

I ran my hand through my hair. "Imagine that we were at the park, and there were a million pictures spread out on the ground. Each image represented a point in time that we shared. Some you remember, some you don't—"

"Why wouldn't I remember them all? I don't have amnesia."

"When you were an infant, you had no memories of me, did you?"

"No, I guess not."

"So, some of these images or memories that we shared you've forgotten, too. But unlike me, you remember at least seven years, and I only remember four weeks. In a way, you have more of me than I have of you."

"That's weird," he said. "It's like I'm the dad and you're the kid."

I nodded, smiling. "You got it. So you have to be patient with me."

"But what if you never get those memories back?"

"We'll create new ones. You'll see."

Jon looked away for a second, deep in thought, and then turned to me and raised his arms and embraced me with the tenderness that only a child can really do. "I love you, Dad, no matter how many of those images you remember."

"I love you, too." It was the first time I remember saying those words and meaning them. My heart pounded with love—strong, pure and free of any thought, desire or memory. I felt the thunderclap of my heart, and I imagined Vanessa smiling.

Chapter 35: Journal

Derya and the kids left the next morning at 6 A.M. as the sun was just starting to rise. Kati Whitman, an old friend of ours took them to the airport. I said my goodbyes from our driveway, and then walked into a dark and empty house. I grabbed my phone, and sent a text message to Jon and Marisa, telling them I already missed them. I put on the television for company, and fired up a laptop on our kitchen table to check email.

An email from Kohana Chayton caught my eye. It had come in at 1:34 A.M., and its subject line was simple: Meet?

I opened it and read in a whispered voice, imagining Kohana's deep, resonant tone.

Solomon,

I understand you're busy with funeral arrangements and possibly travel, but I would like to meet again when things calm down for you. I have some things I need to tell you that are important. Also, I would like to see the video you mentioned from your heart donor, if you'd be willing to share it with me.

I will call you and follow up to see when we could next meet.

I hope your family is well and comes through this trying time of grief with new bonds and feelings of love.

Yours,

Kohana

I thought about replying. I even hit "reply to message," but I couldn't find any words or, for that matter, courage. I'm not sure if courage was lacking in me. I think it was more a feeling of protection for my family. I didn't want any more deaths on my hands. Even if it was just a coincidence, I still felt guilty. In that very moment, I stood to my feet, pacing the kitchen and shook my fist at the heavens, yelling at the top of my voice. "You want to mess with me? I'm here, let's go. Come on! I'm waiting. Let's go!"

A text message beep from my phone interrupted my outburst. It was from Jon. “Stuck n traffic. I miss u 2. I’ll send pics. Luv Jon.”

I slumped to a chair and flicked off the television. Morning news was such a clutter of nonsense it made me angry to endure it even in small doses.

My challenge to Nammu apparently went undetected, as there were no visitations or signs of her wicked presence. I poured myself a cup of coffee and wondered what I should do. In the wake of Nalan’s death, I felt I needed therapy now more than ever, but Kohana was not being a therapist. He was something else—a confidant, protector, maybe even a guide of sorts. But where was it he wanted to guide me? More importantly, what would be the consequences if I followed him?

My entire being was caught in this solemn examination. I began to think of Vanessa whose heart beat within me. I had postponed my trip to her parents, though I still wondered if it made sense to go, but when I had called and talked with Vanessa’s mother, Corin, I couldn’t cancel. She sounded so disappointed that I couldn’t come up on Tuesday, so we settled on Thursday —tomorrow—instead.

I decided to get Vanessa’s journal and review it, and see if there was anything interesting. I remembered her suggestion to look on page thirty-two, and use the technique she had written down. Maybe there’d be some references that would be poignant to share with her parents. I wondered how much her mom and dad even knew about Vanessa’s mission, and if they did, whether they thought she was sane.

I had tucked the journal in a cabinet in my dark room. It had a faux leather cover with the word Journal, in gold foil, and underneath it were the handwritten words Explorations of the Heart, in what I presumed was Vanessa’s handwriting. The journal itself was thick, well over two hundred pages, originally blank pages that had, over the years, become filled with various observations, sayings, practices, techniques and diagrams. Some pages were dated, some weren’t.

In the upper, outermost corner of each page was a tiny page number in varying colored inks and sometimes in pencil. I found page thirty-two without much trouble, though it did require me to squint, as I didn’t have my

reading glasses with me. At the top of the page was written: Resetting the Heart.

I began to read with great interest.

Any complex organism, or machine for that matter, requires a period of rest. The rest is a way to reset the build-up of system stressors that result from incoming information overload and physical energy loss or entropy. The heart accumulates these stressors from the perceptual lens of the mind and body throughout the waking period. These stressors add density to the heart region, which, like fog, can obscure the heart's vision of understanding, and thus, its expression of compassion— that most cherished of all qualities.

The heart is a processing center of the mind-body. It absorbs the stressors and densities of human emotion, but over time, it needs to reset itself. It needs to reclaim its clarity, coherence and compassion. The heart both accumulates and stores energies, and it also transmits them through an electromagnetic field that is not bound by linear spacetime.

The best technique to reset the heart is to allow neutrality to flow in all spaces of your presence. This is how you do it:

Close your eyes. Take a few deep, centering breaths and as you breathe imagine that the space that cradles your heart becomes active. You can feel warmth in that region. You can place your hands over your heart. However you are led, feel this warmth as a cleansing energy, and hold it for as long as you can, even if only for a moment in time. If you can, give this warmth the color of a vibrant green—the kind you see in deep, primeval forests.

Now, as you feel this green, warm energy, allow it to drift upwards into your head, and then open your eyes and see the world through your heart. See it as if you were looking with your heart and not merely your eye-brain system. This is the reset. This is how you know when you have been successful, for you will see the exterior of your world as though it were a mirror of compassion.

I decided to try it out. I was able to feel something in terms of the warmth in my heart region. I was able to imagine—albeit sporadically—the green color and even feel it drift upwards into my head, but when I opened my eyes, I didn't feel the mirror of compassion.

Maybe I was too distracted. Maybe it took practice before I could see anything; probably a lot of practice. I thought about how Vanessa had the time to invest, how she was so devoted to this mission, but then she didn't have any of the distractions I had, and I doubt she had Nammu threatening on the sidelines of her life as I did.

I thumbed through the journal, looking at various writings or diagrams that caught my eye, but there was something I felt… I couldn't put my finger on, but it felt like I wasn't ready. I needed to go somewhere first or do something, but where and what?

I went upstairs feeling restless and bored. I wanted to do something. A couple of friends had offered to drive me to the grocery store or mall if I needed anything, but these people were complete strangers to me, and I knew I would never call on them. Derya and the kids would be gone for a whole week, and I was already going stir- crazy in my own house.

A walk around the neighborhood seemed like the only logical thing to do. Maybe it would calm me down, give me some perspective, and satisfy my doctors that I was exercising. There was a coffee shop about two miles away, and I decided to walk there, grab a cup of tea and maybe a croissant, and then read the paper. I grabbed my cell phone and a light jacket and started my trek to the coffee shop, known simply as Java Central.

It was about 8 A.M. when I left the house, and as I was walking down the driveway my cell phone rang. The incoming caller ID was a number I hadn't seen before.

"Hello?" I said, continuing my walk.

"Solomon?"

"Yes, who's calling?"

"It's me, Kohana."

I wasn't sure what to say. The last time I spoke with him, a family member died. The presence of Nammu, like a dark thunderhead, suddenly loomed over me, and its shadow was unmistakable.

"I know you're probably in the throes of funeral arrangements, but I had to follow my instincts on this one. Is there any way you could meet me?"

“Today?” I said.

“The sooner the better,” Kohana replied.

“I’m walking to a coffee shop called Java Central. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Do you know the place?”

“On Second Street?”

“That’s the one,” I said.

“I’ll meet you there in… in about twenty minutes.”

“See you then.”

“Bye.”

That didn’t go exactly as I had planned. I was thinking one thing: don’t upset Nammu, and a totally different outcome occurred. What was I doing? Meeting with Kohana was dangerous. My family was outside of my protection. The only way I could protect them was to stay in my little box and not make any waves. Even looking at the Vanessa’s journal was dangerous. What was wrong with me?

The question ricocheted in my head like a phantom lash that opens wounds that could not be seen, only felt. I rehearsed my confrontation with Kohana, telling him to leave me alone. I rehearsed how I would explain that I wasn’t ready to delve into the dream world that had assailed me. I wasn’t ready for anything that wasn’t normal.

Chapter 36: Java Central

To my surprise, Kohana was already in line at Java Central when I arrived. My heart raced at seeing him. He was dressed casual, underneath a tan leather jacket, sporting boots that added three inches to his already daunting frame.

He reached out his hand as soon as he saw me. “Good morning, Solomon. What’ll you have? It’s on me.”

“Um, just a cup of hot tea… and one of those croissants,” I said, pointing to a display.

“You got it. Find us a table, and I’ll bring the goods.”

I looked around, half afraid I might see Nammu sitting in a darkened corner, piercing me with her eyes, but the place was quiet, only a few single customers huddled over their computer tablets, gobbling up their daily dose of Web news and email.

One of the things I liked about Java Central was its backdoor patio. The wrought iron furniture wasn’t comfortable, but they had a sculpture garden and flower baskets and birds. The cool, crisp morning air was a great contrast to hot tea, and I was warmed up from my walk, so the cool air felt good. And, as I had expected, it was empty—too much glare for computer screens.

A few minutes later, Kohana found me. “For a second there I thought you ducked out,” he said with a laugh. “Didn’t know about the patio, but it’s a great spot.”

I smiled. “I walk here for exercise and then pack on the calories for the walk home. It’s become a ritual of mine the last few weeks.”

He nodded knowingly. I helped him unload his tray of coffee, tea and assorted pastries, and he sat down and took off his jacket, swinging it around the back of his chair.

“I’m glad you chose the patio,” he said. “It feels good to breathe fresh air.” His eyes narrowed. “How’s your wife doing?”

“She’s okay. I think the suddenness of it made it harder for her. Derya was very close to her sister, and they had spoken just the day before.”

“Your sister-in-law… where did she live?”

“Ankara, Turkey.”

“Really? Is that where the funeral is?”

I nodded. “Derya and the kids left this morning.”

“You had to stay?”

“Doctor’s orders.”

“We mean well…” he smiled with a quick shrug of his shoulders.

“How long will they be there?”

“A week,” I said, “maybe a little longer.”

I took a sip of tea and felt its warmth fill me. Luckily, there was no wind, so the cool temperatures felt refreshing. “I saw your email this morning. You said there was something important you wanted to tell me?”

Kohana sat back a little in his chair and leveled his eyes on me. “I need you to meet my uncle.” He took a sip of coffee as if letting me digest his statement.

“Why?”

“He told me many years ago that when I met the Sonverto, if he, my uncle, were still alive, I should bring the Sonverto immediately to him.”

“Why?”

“My uncle has information he wants to share with you.”

“Look, I had a dream. I was under heavy sedation and various drugs. I don’t think I can put that much faith in all of this—”

“It was not a dream,” Kohana whispered with intensity. “It was a vision. You talked with the sacred Unktegila, you met the White Buffalo Woman—shit, you have her heart. What dream? This is real, and because it’s real, you will have all of the pressures a Sonverto has to deal with. My uncle can help you in ways I can’t. He has the old ways… I have the new.”

“And this is the uncle who lives in the middle of nowhere on an Indian reservation in South Dakota. Right?” I tried not to sound too sarcastic, but I probably failed.

Kohana mashed a wince and a smile together as he nodded. “My uncle will help you.”

“Do you even know how he can help me?” I asked leaning forward on the table.

“No, not exactly, but he will. I know it’s a lot to ask you to trust me, but if you’re the Sonverto I believe you are, then you need to meet with my uncle. It’s what he trained for all of his life.”

I suddenly felt numb. I didn’t know what to do. Kohana was trying to help. I understood that. The thought of sitting in my house for the next week or ten days didn’t exactly excite me, but it was the safe thing to do.

“I’m going to have pass,” I said softly.

“Why?”

“I can’t take the risk…”

“Of what?”

“I can’t talk about it.”

“Is someone threatening you?”

I looked at him, my eyes watering beyond my control. I stood up. “It’s not really your problem. Thanks for all your concern… and for tea and all. I really have to go.”

I walked out. I heard Kohana call my name, but only once. I kept walking, my eyes burned a little, but somewhere inside I felt I did the right thing. How could I go to South Dakota? Tomorrow I was supposed to meet Vanessa’s parents. I felt confident I could meet them and keep the conversation focused on gratitude and closure. I wouldn’t mention anything in relation to the mission that Nammu was concerned with. Kohana’s uncle, on the other hand, would be interested in only that. It was the right call.

Fifteen minutes later I got home and noticed a strange car in my driveway. Kohana got out of the car as I came up the walk. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to

make you uncomfortable," he said.

"Look, what do you want? I can't go to South Dakota with you. It's just not going to work."

Kohana sighed and looked down at his boots as he leaned against his car. "I've been where you are, man. I've had threats come at me from every conceivable angle. I know what happens when your mission is left undone. It starts to rot from the inside. You can't function outside your mission, and it will tear you apart if you turn your back on it.

"You might not want to face it, but you were given this mission for a reason… and don't go thinking for a minute that you had nothing to say about it. You were involved every step of the way—from conception to the final breath you draw in this life. No one shoved it down your throat, so don't run away from it just because someone is threatening you. My uncle will help."

I crossed my arms, and stared at him. His words made sense to me even though they scared the shit out of me. "Is it really necessary to see your uncle?"

"It's the only way."

"When?"

"Tomorrow. I can have Ty set it all up. We'll take care of all the arrangements. I'll pick you up… just pack light—shorts, pair of jeans and a few shirts… good shoes, boots if you have them."

I bit my lip and ran my hand through my hair. "I don't know…"

"We'll leave tomorrow, and you'll be back before your wife and kids—"

"When would we be back?" I asked.

"Probably Saturday, Sunday at the latest."

I pulled out my phone. "Give me your number."

After we exchanged numbers I walked up to my front porch and turned around. "Let me know the coordinates when you have them. I'll be ready tomorrow, but I reserve the right to change my mind. Okay?"

“Okay.”

I opened the front door, closed it, and leaned back against it, wondering why I just did what I did. It was against every rational thought I had. I could cite a hundred reasons not to go, and yet, I was going. I had to call Corin and break the bad news that I would need to postpone my trip one more time. Then I thought about how to break the news to Derya that I was going to South Dakota with my new shrink. How on earth do I explain that one?

I contemplated not telling Derya, but I knew that would only complicate things. I’d have to tell her everything eventually, but for now, I would explain my trip as therapeutic on two levels: one, I was spending time with my shrink; and, two: I was producing a film about life on an Indian reservation. The trip was an entryway back into my craft, and as I was thinking about it, it began to make perfect sense. I should bring my video camera.

I almost ran downstairs to start packing the camera. A passion that was once my life, had found a way to resurface. I hung onto it like one would cling to a life preserver in a cruel sea.

Chapter 37: BIA Highway 41 S

Tweed New Haven Regional Airport was busy for a Thursday morning. It was only 6:30 A.M., and the airport was buzzing. Though for me—I had no recollection of this specific airport—it did seem unusually busy for a small regional airport.

After we got through security checkpoints and found some seats at our gate, I noticed that Kohana was dressed a little different. He had a large silver ring on his middle finger and his shirt had silver button and cufflinks. Symbols adorned the ring he had on, but none I understood or recognized, for that matter.

We were going to take a flight to Detroit, and then hop a flight to Rapid City, South Dakota. From there we'd rent a car and drive to a mysterious location somewhere on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. That's as much as I knew. It would be a full day of travel. Kohana didn't expect us to get to his uncle's place until 8 P.M., assuming all of our connections were on time.

"Does your uncle know we're coming?" I asked.

He shook his head. "He doesn't have a phone, computer, even mailbox where he lives. So, no, he doesn't know we're coming, but then again, you never know with him." Kohana smiled and then pointed to my backpack.

"Don't get your hopes too high on filming him."

"He doesn't like cameras?"

"If the White Man invented it, he's probably not a fan. I'll just put it that way. Just ask permission first."

"I will."

The rest of the trip was uneventful. Our connections were more or less on schedule. We landed in Rapid City around 6 P.M. and rented a Jeep, and drove off to Pine Ridge.

"How big is the reservation?" I asked.

“The Sioux Nation has about two hundred thousand acres in South Dakota —”

“I meant in terms of population?”

“At Pine Ridge?”

“Uh huh.”

“It’s a little over twenty thousand.”

“Casinos?”

“Sure.”

“Have you been?”

“Nope, not a gambler, and not a fan of them.”

The landscape grew eerier the further we drove. We were somewhere between Rapid City and Pine Ridge, and apart from billboard signs and highway markers, and an occasional car or truck, it felt empty.

“What do the Indians do on the reservation?” I asked.

“Nothing really. There’s nothing to do. Either you’re part of the casino, deal drugs, or you’re trying to get off the rez. There’s nothing else to do. We have a Pizza Hut and a few other fast food venues, but the casino is where all the action is. It’s owned by Indians who’ve been off the rez so long that they’re lost in the White Man’s world. Some of them try to give back to the community, schools and that sort of thing, but it’s tokens here and tokens there… like a gardener who waters his plants by spitting on them.”

I could sense his frustration. The closer we got to Pine Ridge, the more I could feel him change. “When’s the last time you saw your uncle?” I asked.

“About nine months ago. I bring him things. He’s all alone out there.”

“How old is he?”

“Sixty-eight, but he looks older… until you work with him. Then he seems like a thirty-year-old.” Kohana smiled broadly as if he were recalling a specific memory. “He’s old school. He might not take to you immediately, so don’t get defensive. He’s just suspicious of White Men and their motives.”

“Well, for now, I have one motive, to meet him and see how he can help me figure out how to live so I don’t cause any problems.”

Kohana burst out laughing.

“What’s funny about that?” I asked indignantly.

“You’re a Sonverto. By definition you’re going to cause problems.”

“It remains to be seen if I’m a Sonverto… whatever that means.”

“Oh, you’re a Sonverto,” Kohana replied with a chuckle.

I glanced at the speedometer, noting we were hurtling down a narrow lane highway both sides. I moved the visor over to my side window to block the sun’s rays, as they were slanting more sideways than downward.

“Is your uncle from your dad’s or mom’s side?”

“Neither.”

“But you said he was your uncle?”

“It’s just a title of affection. A medicine man like my uncle doesn’t want to be called by any other name. You’ll call him uncle, too.”

“What’s his real name?”

“Lives Above the Clouds.”

I thought about it for a while and liked the name. “Your names always seem like they hold a story.”

“They do.”

“What’s the story behind that name?”

“He comes from the same blood that Black Elk and Crazy Horse had. His ancestors are powerful. The spirits that work through him, they’re even more powerful. When he was a boy, only six or seven, he had a vision that Wakan Tanka appeared to him and took him high above the clouds where he could see the earth from a very great distance. He could see the energy of earth flowing like a great wind that danced across her surface, coming from the sun, the moon, and even other stars. In this wind he could see great calamities, hurricanes, floods, fires, earthquakes all coming at once. They

were the response of Wakan Tanka to the self-possessed conquerors who were trying to saddle earth with their greed.

“My uncle could commune with Wakan Tanka… that was his gift—his medicine to our people. They told him about the Sonverto. About you.”

“What’s Wakan Tanka?”

“The closest we come to naming the Great Mystery.”

“And what’s that?” I asked.

Kohana kept his eyes on the road, but narrowed his gaze. “Before the Christian missionaries tried to convert us, our people were led by a group of sacred entities, invisible but always present. We called them the Great Mystery—to us they could appear in all life forms even as small as an ant or as large as a mountain.”

“Your uncle talked with these… entities?”

“Yeah. Like I said, powerful spirits work with him.”

I spied the digital clock on the dashboard—a touchstone of a reality I was familiar with. It was 6:57 P.M. local time. I thought of Derya and the children, and checked my phone for any messages. There was only one. Marisa had sent a short text that she missed me and had gone to the sea with her cousins. I sent a reply, unsure if there’d be a connection this far out, but my text reply was sent without problem.

“We’re still on schedule for eight?” I asked.

“We’re on Indian time now,” Kohana said, turning to me with a smile. “You can put away your watch. We don’t use them here.”

He was definitely different. I began to wonder if I really knew who this man was. I could see him as a footloose Indian youth driving some old rickety Ford truck with a rifle mounted on the back window, pulling it out from time-to-time to add another hole to the feeble road signs.

I had last talked with Derya about twenty-four hours ago, and she had actually encouraged my trip to South Dakota with Kohana, somewhat to my surprise. I think she was just glad to hear I was interested in producing a film again—creating something—the idea of an Indian reservation probably didn’t

sound too exciting to her, but she took my interest as a positive sign.

The funeral was today, but was already over. Checking my time zone app, I could see it was about 3 A.M. in Ankara. Derya's family were very gregarious people, and well loved by the community. I'm sure it was a large funeral and reception afterwards, but even her family would be in bed by now. I decided to send her a text to let her know we had almost arrived and everything was good.

"I'm not sure you'll have cell phone service at my uncle's place, so you might want to let them know you'll be hard to reach for the next few days… so they don't worry."

"I'm getting three bars out here in the middle of nowhere, are you sure?"

"All I can tell you is that I've never been able to catch a cell tower at his place—even within twenty miles of his place."

I took him at his word, though I still had my doubts. I sent everyone a final text message, telling them I'd do my best to check in whenever I could, but not to worry if they couldn't reach me for a day or two.

My eyes were getting heavy, possibly the monotonous drone of the road, so I closed them and leaned against the back of my car seat, but sleep wouldn't come. Still, it felt good to rest my eyes and listen to the crickets as we rocketed down the road.

I thought about Kohana's uncle I'd heard so much about. I imagined how he must live, what his place would be like. Suddenly, as if all of the sound in the world had been sucked out by a giant vacuum, I heard absolute silence. I opened my eyes, but I wasn't in the car anymore. I was somewhere else, outside, on top of a mesa, it was twilight, and I was tired. So tired I was flat on my back. I could feel the heaving of my chest and the strong beating of my heart.

I looked up and could see stars emerging out of the deep blue violet sky. My senses returned, and I could smell the pungent aroma of sage floating over me. Soft, mysterious voices were chanting somewhere in the crystalline distance, and with them, the deep thud of a drum beat that sought entrance to my heart's temple. I smiled and fell asleep.

Chapter 38: Three Missions

A sudden stop jolted me awake.

“We’re here,” a voice said.

My eyes must’ve blinked a hundred times. Our Jeep was parked, engine off, looking right into the final rays of a setting sun.

“Good timing, huh?” Kohana smiled. He got out of the Jeep and spoke some strange words and then bent down. I looked around for anything that looked remotely like a home suitable for a human being, but nothing showed itself.

I got out and stretched my legs, admiring the sunset. The air was crisp, but comfortable enough, with a hint of jasmine. “Where’s his home?”

“Oh, we’re not there yet. This is as far as the Jeep will go. We still have a mile hike, and yes, I brought a flashlight for you.”

“Why does he live out here? How does he live out here?”

“You can ask him if you want. We’ll be there soon enough.”

He pointed to the shadowy outline of ridge. “Now you see why I told you to pack light. How heavy is the camera bag?”

“Not that heavy.”

“Okay, you can bring it then, if you think Uncle will let you use it, but I have five dollars that says he won’t.”

“I’ll risk five dollars,” I said. “A mile shouldn’t be too bad.”

“It’s a long mile. Trust me.”

He laughed and put his hand on my shoulder. “Keep hydrated. The air around here is dry. I’m going to go pee.”

He lumbered off into the near darkness. Only the last rays of the sun were beaming their way across the landscape, touching the solemn tops of the distant mesa.

“How far are we from a road?” I shouted.

“About fifteen miles.”

“How about Pine Ridge?”

“About thirty miles to the southeast… mostly south.”

He came back from the brush pulling his zipper up. “You got some shuteye I noticed.”

“Yeah… it was weird. I couldn’t sleep, and then I was swallowed up in this absolute silence. It was so strange… I was lying on my back on top of some hill looking up at the stars. I felt exhausted. I could hear this chanting and a drum… I don’t know… it was like I traveled to this place and then I fell asleep. I was content. Happy… very strange.”

Kohana glanced at me and remained silent. Whatever he felt—resentment or frustration—remained unvoiced.

A few minutes later we gathered up our packs and began the hike. I followed Kohana using my flashlight to illuminate the side view, while Kohana kept his light on the trail ahead, which was narrow and, in some places, steep. The land was eerie looking, especially at night. Occasionally my light beam would find a pair of red, glassy eyes staring back at me.

“Just jack rabbits,” Kohana would say, but I wondered if they couldn’t be larger animals.

“Do they have snakes out here?”

“You mean rattlers?”

“Anything that could bite.”

“A few, but they warn you. Animals always warn first.”

My ears perked up after that. I listened very carefully for any rattles or growls.

We had been climbing after we had left the Jeep, and then we started a descent. We were definitely coming down a ridge of some kind. More pine trees were showing up in my light beam. The sky retained a deep red hue, and a few contrails were lit up some 35,000 feet above us, a reminder that we

weren’t the only humans left on the planet.

“We’re almost there. See the light?”

He clicked off his flashlight and pointed ahead. I turned mine off as well and focused on the direction he was pointing, and sure enough I could see a faint light a few hundred yards away.

“That’s him. It looks like he’s still up.”

As we got closer I thought I could see the outline of a man. When we were within shouting distance, Kohana stopped and shouted a greeting in what I presumed was Lakota. His uncle shouted back. As faint as it was, I could still hear a tone of joy.

Kohana turned back to me. “He said he was expecting us an hour ago.”

I wondered how he would have known, but didn’t bother to show my surprise. I needed my full attention on keeping up with Kohana, because he had picked up his pace and clearly knew this trail with his eyes closed.

His uncle’s home was a rough-hewn log cabin that looked like it was one room with a simple black metal chimney jutting out from the roof. A thin porch surrounded the front of the cabin with peeled pine beams supporting the roof. It looked frail, but cozy.

Kohana turned to me, about a hundred feet from his uncle’s cabin. “His English is a little rough, but it’s all an act, I assure you. It just depends on his mood.”

“…Okay.”

Kohana almost ran the last fifty feet, and I watched as he engulfed his uncle like a bear would hug a child. They spoke in a language I could only describe as beautiful. The tones were soft with a cadence to them. The intonations were so delicate. I waited some fifteen feet away watching their reunion, smiling to myself. I glanced to the stars and almost gasped at how dramatic the starlit sky had become in the short time we had hiked.

“Solomon, come here,” Kohana said.

I stepped forward and bowed slightly to Kohana’s uncle. I wasn’t sure if I should shake hands, so I simply stood in front of him. His uncle was small in

stature, lean and wearing baggy jeans and a dark blue T-shirt that was long sleeved. He had three beaded bracelets on his right wrist and a plain rawhide bracelet on his left wrist. His hair was long, straight and mostly black, and he wore a headband that was also beaded in intricate patterns.

He looked me in the eye, his face expressionless, but not unpleasant. He turned to Kohana, and spoke in Lakota for quite a while. Kohana listened and nodded his head occasionally.

“He says he knows you. He wants to show you something and asks you to follow him. He wants me to stay here and prepare our tent.”

My heart beat faster as the words registered in my mind. Where would we go? It was almost pitch dark out, and the moon hadn’t risen yet. The crickets were playing their instruments, but otherwise the land was quiet and mysterious. I nodded, though my mind was wishing we could simply go to sleep.

Uncle grabbed a plaid coat that was patched in various places, and motioned to me to do the same, which I dutifully did by pulling out a sweatshirt from my backpack and tying it around my waist. I started to bring my flashlight, but he waved it off saying, “not necessary.”

I smiled, impressed that he spoke English to me, and tried, unsuccessfully, to catch Kohana’s eyes in recognition, but he was staring into his backpack.

In a minute, we were off, walking along a trail that was rocky, and once again, a steep, uphill climb. Uncle walked at a brisk, but comfortable pace. I looked back a few times and could see his cabin was getting smaller as we climbed through the pine trees on the way up the ridge.

We got to high ground after fifteen minutes, and he rested, sitting on a large boulder. I stopped next to him and looked in the same direction as he, but remained standing and silent, wondering if we had reached our destination.

“Too much friction and I become old wood tick.” He stood up, and patted me on the back. “More to go. Come.”

Uncle was strong. I could sense that. His presence was something I was still warming up to, but there was something that felt good about him. He was

a mix of things that I hadn't met before, or if I had, I had no recollection. I remembered the photographs I had taken in my youth, and I knew I had hung out with people similar to him. People that had been marginalized—placed on the borders of corporate-run worlds, who were casualties of the profiteering motive. But what was different about Kohana's uncle was that he seemed to be where he was by choice.

We walked another few minutes in silence. No flashlights, but my eyes had adjusted to the low light, and I actually didn't have that much trouble following him. The moon was starting to rise as well, and it was nearly full. We came to a ledge and he went over the side and disappeared. I came up to the ledge and looked down.

"It's okay. Just drop down easy."

The edge of the cliff went straight down long enough to kill a man if he fell. That was my calculation. Uncle seemed to think it was easy, but for me, heights were anything but easy, especially at night and in unfamiliar settings. I hesitated.

"Old men visit me here—even women. You can do it."

"At night?" I asked.

He put his arm up. "Take my arm."

I grabbed it and could feel its muscular tone. I slowly maneuvered my left leg down the ledge searching for a toehold or anything solid, but it just slid down. My right leg was still on the top of the ledge as was my right hand, while the rest of me was edging down a cliff. I felt him tug on my arm, and I fell, but fortunately only a few feet. There was a ledge that jutted out a foot or so, and I stayed there, petrified.

"Follow me, but be careful."

My mind, in its current state, could only form three words: "Please go slow."

He made an unusual grunting sound, and we inched along the narrow ledge with the moon following us. The one thing I could say was that I was no longer even remotely tired. My eyes were like saucers, and every tendon, every muscle, every atom of awareness was focused on living another few

seconds. Eventually the ledge widened a bit, and I could see tree roots sticking out from the cliff face. These were useful to hang onto for support. When I looked up I could see trees towering above us, below were more trees, but their tops were like mushroom caps.

A cavernous opening caught my eye, and I watched as Uncle went inside, into the deep darkness. Suddenly there was a flash of light and I saw Uncle light a small bundle of sticks that were tightly wrapped in what looked like moss or possibly small roots of some kind. The bundle immediately burst into flames, and he placed it on the floor of the cavern's ledge among a circle of large stones. "You can sit. We can talk."

From his jacket he pulled out something that he handed me. "It's venison —black- tailed deer. Good snack."

He took a bite from a piece that he had kept and started chewing. "This'll make you thirsty. I'll get some water."

I sat down next to the fire pit and took a bite of venison. It was a little tough, very salty and had a spice I wasn't familiar with. In a moment he returned with a canteen of water, and dropped it on the ground between us. He then sat down himself with his legs crossed underneath him.

"I am Lives Above the Clouds, but you, you call me Uncle. I am educated in your ways. I know your world. I even know about your government and society. I know your music. I know your Internet. I know your films, books, and culture."

"How do you know about these things living out here?" I asked.

"Television," he grinned. "I get one fuzzy channel. For me, it's enough."

He took another bite from his venison, and put the remainder in his coat pocket, and then added some small branches to the fire.

"Your world is complicated. So many distractions to entertain you and responsibilities to solve, the wild places of earth, unbranded and abandoned have lost their voice. Even when you visit them—the wild places—you go to the tourist centers and buy food, drink and souvenirs. The lessons of earth are never really seen or heard.

"I've listened and observed these lessons all my life. My channel to earth

is not fuzzy, nor do I have only one channel."

Uncle lifted his arms up and turned behind him, sweeping his arms around in a flowing motion. "This is my favorite channel. This cavern represents the mouth of earth. I have sat here for more time than I can say, and I always hear new messages. On your television I hear only one message over and over again: You are weak. That is what it says with very few exceptions."

He grunted softly as if he were remembering a specific incident that had amused him. "Yes, you are vulnerable to death as a physical body. Yes, you are vulnerable to disease of the physical body. So what? It's life. It does not mean you are weak and should live in fear.

"What is here," he said pointing to his head. "What is here," he said pointing to his heart. "These are not weak or vulnerable. Even to time. The channels of earth teach this. Their message is that you are not helpless in substance—only the shadow of the substance is vulnerable, just like the shadow of a tree dies at dusk, but the tree remains. People say that nature shows us our weakness, too, but this is only when we live away from it. Nature teaches resilience and adaptation—the way of bending and springing back with new intelligence.

"Messages are what we are sent when we live in physical bodies. We're taught this way either by man or by earth. If it's man, then generally it's of the body. If it's earth, it's of the heart and soul.

"This is all I know," he said with a short laugh. "I am called a medicine man, but my medicine is not for the body, and yet those who come to me want to be healed. I look at them and see the fear they live in, the pain and injustice of their state, and I remind them they are not their body, anymore than the shadow of the tree is the tree. They nod, they listen because of who I am, and then they return to their televisions and relearn the messages of man."

He chanted for a few minutes, stirring the fire with a stick, making sparks fly upward like hopeful stars being released to the heavens. "A new channel is being built. It has been Wakan Tanka who has designed it, though it will be human hands that complete it. You are one whose hands will build this new channel."

He nodded to no one in particular and spoke under his breath in Lakota. “I speak for more than my heart. I am speaking for Wakan Tanka, and they whisper of your future as one who will bring this channel to humanity and take away this helplessness that people feel, so they can live as stewards of one another and of earth.” He looked at me and tilted his head slightly. “They tell me that you feel this vulnerability, too. That you are in the body that is made by the messages of man.”

He shook his head, closed his eyes and began to chant again with a simple melody. The cavern behind him unleashed a resonance to his chant that carried it into the night air, into the starry heights whose silver hieroglyphics reached down with such ease. I watched him, wondering how he could open up to me so quickly, when I hadn’t even spoken a word. I closed my eyes and wanted to sing with him, but my voice did not know the sounds or the ways of his world. I listened and watched the fire’s sparks float high into the sky and disappear into the waiting darkness.

It felt perfect. On that ledge I could have stayed a very long time indeed. I was in the presence of something that I didn’t know existed on this planet. It was authentic, simple, natural; it was both ancient and of the future. It was the essence of a human soul. That was it. It was the essence of a human soul that was free of the body. It was as if his soul had no mask or cover; no fortification behind which it lived.

When he had finished his chant, he let the silence of the space around us return like a noble presence that carries on after an interruption. “There is no way to improve nature,” Uncle whispered. “I have tried with my chants, but when I stop, I notice the silence comes back, the stars pour their energy out and create this music that fills the heavens, and sometimes I hear its melody, and I can only weep.” His eyes glistened as he spoke.

I let his words rest quietly for a minute or two, but I had questions that were bubbling to the surface of my mind, and I couldn’t suppress them. “Tell me about Wakan Tanka,” I said. “Kohana told me only a little bit.”

“Ah… I just did,” he replied. “Wakan Tanka is many things, and some would say it is everything. The Great Mystery reveals itself differently to those in the body. This is part of its mystery. For me, possibly you, the Wakan Tanka are an ancient tribe of spiritual entities whose roots extend well

beyond this tiny solar system we call home. They are the winged powers.

“They’re invested in the spiritual preparations of earth and all upon her. They work quietly, without a light on them, yet they bring the light. They are the ones who bring the spirit medicine to any who become transparent.”

“What do you mean by transparent?”

He continued to poke the fire while he thought about my question. “In this world, in this time, some hide their motives and ambitions. They are dense like this dirt.” He held up a handful of dirt and let it sift through his fingers to the floor. “They cover things with their density, because they believe in a false power of greed and ambition. It is this density that is behind corruption, injustice, hostility, and the heart of darkness.

“Transparency is like the air. It conducts the light. Those who are transparent have only one motive: to conduct light. They bring light—their own light—in their own way to the collective light. They’re an add-on. While those who act like dirt, they seek to take away and cover up.

“When people decide to be transparent, Wakan Tanka sees this. They find these people in mysterious ways, nurture them, and make them aware of the missions they came to complete. Sometimes, this transparency must come first before the mission can come, and sometimes the mission comes first and then the transparency.”

He stood up with some effort. “I’ll be right back.” He nodded to the canteen. “I have some warm beer, if you’d like.”

“No, water’s fine, thank you.”

He walked into the cave, humming a song. I had no idea how he could see anything in there, but about two minutes later he re- emerged, still humming. As he sat down, I opened my mouth to ask another question, and he held up his arm.

“Life flows. Something goes out, something comes back. You asked a question, and you received a response. Now, I ask a question. Okay?”

I nodded, feeling just a little guilty. “Sure.”

“Why are you here?”

I was anticipating a hundred different questions, and when this one arrived to my ears, I was taken back momentarily, not sure how to respond. “I… I’m not sure how to answer you; I’m not sure if I even know why I’m here.”

Uncle remained quiet. I sensed he was waiting for me to find the right words. Somehow his silence gave me confidence.

“I want to know if this mission is real,” I blurted out.

“Why?”

“It requires so much of me… and my family. I don’t want to make any missteps and create problems for those I love. I guess that’s the main reason I’m here.”

He made a sound somewhere between a grunt and a sigh, and nodded once with his head.

“Look at the sky,” Uncle said. “I will make a star fall for you.”

I looked up where he was pointing, and within a few seconds I saw exactly what he’d foretold. I looked at him with wide eyes. “How’d you do that?”

“I noticed ten minutes ago that there was a meteor shower. I knew more would fall, I said I would make them fall, and you believed for a moment that I had caused it. I had great powers, but my only powers were here.” He pointed to his eyes.

“People believe their missions have great powers. They believe they carry great risks sometimes because of those powers. But the universe reminds us to be humble. You need to spend time beneath the stars. They give perspective.”

“Are you saying my mission isn’t that important or necessary?”

He slowly shook his head and smiled as he did so. “The way of the Wakan Tanka is one of commitment. Nothing discourages them, for if they were weak in their commitment, the dark forces would rush in and pull them into doubt, and once doubt creeps in, they continue to throw dirt over you and hope you will join them in the darkness.

“It’s commitment, tempered by the elementary things that live in your heart. No matter what or who gnaws at your sense of security, your

commitment is the horse you ride upon. It's through this commitment that Wakan Tanka supports you. It's all you need.

"The scope of your mission isn't important. You are part of the capstone to a project that has been in the making since humanity first walked on this planet. The project is to create the bridge between the body and soul. It is when the forces of science and the forces of spirit collide, and no one can turn away. No one can say it is a thing of faith, or sorcery, or supernatural mumbo jumbo. No one can quarrel with it, and this includes priests, politicians, scientists, intellectuals, business leaders… everyone.

"The universe doesn't rely on one person or one thing. The universe is a mosaic of all. No one mission is heralded above another. It is the mission, of which we are all a part. We are all working on this mission, some more consciously than others, but even those who sleep are part of the mission, for they motivate those who are awake. You see? Everything is connected in this singular mission.

"Now, some would say there are three missions that overlay in everyone's life. The first is the one I just said. The second is the one that tries to delay or stop the first mission. The third is the personal mission to survive, get educated and prosper. These are the three missions, and everyone moves between them, some with grace, some with clumsiness.

"You can't be of three minds—three missions. You must choose. This is what your life is telling you. Look at me, some would say I am a pitiful Indian in a White Man's world, living in the harsh and lonely world of nature, but I am committed to being a part of mother earth, to learn from her, and pass on what I have learned to those who seek it. When I chose to live in the first mission, the other two missions circled me like vultures, waiting for me to meet suffering and throw up my hands in defeat, but it never came, because I made myself transparent and steeled my commitment.

"You're a fresh hire. They will take a strong interest in you—the vultures who throw dirt. They're not happy you're talking with me."

He grinned broadly.

"Have you ever heard of a person named Nammu?" I asked.

He shook his head and waved his hands in an odd formation. “Names aren’t important,” he said. “I know the vibration of such an entity, and they are heartless tricksters. Let’s not discuss them now, we’ll have time tomorrow. I’ve made a bed for you near the back of the cave. I would like you to sleep here tonight. We’ll come and get you in the morning.”

Uncle stood to his feet, looked sideways at the night sky and whispered something too hushed for me to hear. He grabbed a branch and lit it on fire. “Come with me.”

I followed him inside the cave. The mouth of the cave was about twenty feet across, but it was only about six feet tall at its highest point, so I had to stoop down to go inside.

“You can sleep here, or if you prefer by the fire under the stars, you can take a sleeping bag out there.” He pointed to three sleeping bags that were lying on the floor of the cave. “There’s more wood over there for the fire, and if you need any food, there’s some dried fruit and a little more venison in there.” He pointed to a wood crate against the wall of the cave.

I nodded. “Okay, thanks. When will you stop by in the morning?”

He pulled my arm, and we walked out to the lip of the cave, he pointed to a place in the sky. “When the sun is about there, we’ll come for you. It’s good to see you again,” he said, smiling. Uncle handed me the branch of fire, then turned around with a wave over his shoulder and walked down the narrow ridge, humming. I scratched the back of my neck and pondered how a man his size and age could possibly get up that cliff face in the dark.

I turned around to look back at the fire, wondering what I had just gotten myself into. I was left alone on a ledge overlooking a shadowy blackness far below. No cell phone; barely any food. I had a fire, sleeping bag, and some dried fruit and a canteen of water. I sat down by the fire again and made my first decision. I would sleep under the stars next to the fire, but I’d have to put some large stones between me and the ledge just to make sure I wouldn’t accidentally roll off in my sleep. Assuming I got any.

What did Uncle mean it was good to see me again? Had I met him before, and I didn’t remember?

Chapter 39: Bear

The rumbling in my stomach was not a good sign. The night air was growing colder by the minute, too. The whole decision to stay out on this deserted ledge by myself came upon me so quickly I hadn't even had a chance to object. It just happened too fast, and now, now I had to endure the isolation, cold, hunger, and fear of being in a totally strange place. I liked Uncle, he was very easy to like, but within two minutes of his departure I was wondering if I could trust him.

Why would he lead me here, and then leave me?

No instructions, just a simple, I would like you to sleep here tonight.

Why? It would be good to know. Did I offend him? Did he want some private time with Kohana? Is he testing me? Questions rattled through my mind, and then I heard a light scraping sound patter across the ledge. A small lizard was darting across the floor of the ledge toward the fire. Maybe it was trying to keep warm, I thought. In the depth of silence I was in, I think I could have heard a flower open—it was that quiet.

The lizard had distracted me. I sat in front of the fire looking out over the deep chasm of darkness that spread before me. Not a single light could be seen, not a single evidence of man's presence. Only above, in the heaven's mantle, could I find any light, a light that surrounded me in its quiet oblivion and had no real bearing on my life. I looked back at the lizard, but it was gone. An ancient tribe not of this earth. Why me? Why was I getting involved in all of this spiritual hocus-pocus? How could it possibly be practical? I stood up and gathered myself. Whatever it all meant, I wasn't likely to figure it out tonight. I was tired, hungry, my mood was deflated at having to sleep out on some deserted ledge, this was not a good time to try to figure anything out—except to make oneself as comfortable as possible and endure the night. I grabbed a sleeping bag from inside the cavern and put it next to the fire. I took another sleeping bag and rolled it up for a pillow, and the last sleeping bag I put on top of the first one for added cushion.

Then I took three armfuls of wood to the fire pit and stacked them up. I wasn't sure I'd need it all, but I figured it'd be better to have too much than too little, especially if it got much colder. The dried fruit looked god-awful with a smell so strong that I think it may have fermented. I wasn't sure what kind of fruit it was, and with the available light, it was impossible to say if it was even fruit, as other things came to mind, and none of them was edible.

After a few more minutes of feeling sorry for myself, I made my way back to the fire pit, my temporary home. The night air was cool, and the warmth of the fire felt good. I added a few small logs, resigned to my situation and feeling better now that I'd worked out my plan for the night. Then I heard something above me. A few pebbles fell, landing a short distance away. Something was there, but when I looked, the glow of the fire made it difficult to see anything. I got up and moved away from the fire, huddled against the cliff wall peering up, trying to find the source of the sound.

A pair of red eyes shone briefly some thirty feet above. The light from the fire caught the gleaming orbs. These were not the eyes of a rabbit (unless that rabbit was six feet tall), and these were not the eyes of a human—too round, too large. The next thing I heard was a muffled snort, and then a deep growl. I felt there was something pacing above me, planning its descent, presumably to have me for its dinner.

On the one hand, I felt pretty safe, since the only way anything from up there could come down to the ledge I was on was to fall thirty feet, and I was pretty sure that no bear would be that stupid, especially as narrow as the ledge was. If the bear didn't stop on my ledge, the fall to the ground was at least another seventy or eighty feet straight down. There was no room for error. On the other hand, it was a hungry, irritable bear, and it probably knew these parts a lot better than I did. I prayed there was no other way to my cave.

My logical side started to assert itself: the bear saw a campfire, which probably meant, to a reasonably intelligent bear, that food was close at hand, and the bear— being hungry—wanted to check it out. It was grunting and growling, because it knew there was no way down. It was frustrated. I decided to end its irritation and instinctively ran to the fire, grabbed a large stick and waved it over my head growling with all my ferocity. After a long, bone-chilling scream, I stopped waving my stick and listened.

Silence. Pure, beautiful silence. I had won. The bear had given up. It knew a crazy man was guarding whatever food was down there, and the risks outweighed the rewards. It had moved on.

The fire pit beckoned me again, and I sat back down, thrilled at the conclusive victory of defending my turf. My adrenalin had kicked in, and I was wide-awake. I felt, for the first time since arriving, that maybe this was a good decision to visit Uncle. The sound of scampering feet again brought my eyes to a small gray lizard that looked completely harmless. I was actually glad for the company. “Are you lost, little guy?”

I knew it would be a one-way conversation, but it actually felt good to hear my voice against the deep silence. Due to the mouth of the cave, there was a different sound to it, a new tone, deeper, more resonant. I began to chant a little, like I had heard Uncle do earlier. It felt good, and of course, I had no idea as to what I was saying, but there was a reverence that came over me, an encompassing sense—spacious, certain, but then the world around me began to lose its shape. It was fading into a calm void, and again I heard this sound of absolute silence, and I was suddenly lying down on a mesa somewhere, breathless, staring up at the stars. I could hear chanting and a drumbeat way in the distance.

Then a snorting sound near my left ear frightened me. I tried to sit up, but I was too exhausted. One moment I could see stars, and the next they were gone, blocked from view by a huge bear that was standing on its haunches looking down at me, its giant body seemed as dense as lead. I felt completely vulnerable, and had no choice but to speak to the bear and ask for its mercy. When I opened my mouth to speak, a language came out unfamiliar to me. The bear remained on its haunches looking down at me, and then it put its front paw over my chest. I waited for it to rake its claws across my body. One quick tear and death would take me in a minute. It was a good way to die.

Instead of ripping my flesh open, the bear left its enormous paw on my chest as if it were claiming me. I’m quite sure it would have felt my heart beating beneath its paw—even a calloused bear paw—and I wondered if it would have been curious about my internal drum that beat so fast.

I stayed like this, feeling like a rag doll beneath the awkward hand of a giant, but my voice continued speaking, and the bear was simply watching

me. A part of me knew I was being initiated into something extraordinary, for I was still alive. At one point, the bear lifted it paw, with great delicacy, from my chest, and licked his paw. I had the distinct sense that the bear was trying to taste me, though that isn't quite accurate. It was more that the bear was trying to sense me; to understand my nature.

I heard whispered voices growing behind me. I tried to turn my head, but as soon as I started to move, the bear's paw came down on me, reminding me to stay still, which I did. I heard someone's voice call out. "Are you okay?"

I was afraid to speak too loudly. I drew a deep breath, composed myself, as well as a man can do when a huge bear is half-sitting on him, and spoke in a calm tone of voice, not sure if my friends would hear me. "Yes. The bear is a friend." I nodded ever so slightly to the bear that seemed to be listening to me.

The bear lowered his head and came within a few inches of my face. I could smell his breath, which smelled of prairie grass. He sniffed me, and I could sense the warmth of his body radiate to me. A moment later our eyes met. I sensed an intelligence enter me. I don't know how else to explain it. I felt it overwhelm my puny spirit, and as small as I was, I entered that bear. I felt as it did. I saw as it did. I looked through the bear's eyes, and I could see the dark shelter of a rock outcropping where my friends huddled behind, some with bows pointed at me, some too afraid to look.

I went back inside my body and spoke with intensity. "Do not shoot!" Do not shoot!"

The bear lurched back slightly, sitting upright, its paw still on top of me, and then slowly, and with surprising grace, stood on all four legs. It looked one more time at me, and then sauntered off as only an eight-hundred-pound bear can.

I felt my friends running to me, their excitement palpable. A part of me was still inside that bear, and a part of that bear remained inside me. I could feel this holy bond, and a great peace came over me. I remember seeing feathered headdresses peering down, faces too indistinct to remember, but the feathers—opalescent in the starlight—waved at me like chimes floating in a breeze. The last thing I remember was a name. "From now on he will be

called Afraid to Speak Loudly.”

Chapter 40: Spiral

A glint of sun touched my eye and I literally jumped into my body—at least that's the way it felt. Startled, I sat up. What had happened? I couldn't believe I had slept the entire night. The fire was out, the air was cold, and the sleeping bags were disheveled. The sun was just waking up on the far horizon.

What happened to me? One moment I remember sitting by the fire and the next, I was passed out. How? I remembered a bear was looking down at me last night; I glanced up to the tree line of the butte above me. It was quiet and still.

Now I could actually see the world I inhabited. The cliff face was mostly hard-packed dirt or clay, kind of cream-colored with hints of copper-orange in pockets. Small, twisted pine trees seemed to punctuate the land like dark green blots on an otherwise creamy canvas. There was sagebrush, too, lots of sagebrush, and out in the lowlands or prairie below, I could see a treeless green land. Prairie grass surrounded by a white shoreline of dried out clay.

After I let my eyes take in the stark beauty of my world, my thoughts turned back to the bear. I had sat down after I had scared the bear away and… started chanting… and then I felt this deep silence… and then, suddenly, all in one continuous flashback I saw it all. The whole dream experience with the bear—though, to be honest, I wasn't sure if it was a dream, but then what else could it be?

The weird thing was that I had experienced this dream before, or at least a part of it. When I had been in the Jeep with Kohana driving to Pine Ridge, I had a similar experience of being pulled out of my body, lying on top of a mesa somewhere, but I had woken up before any bear had found me. Why the bear? What did it mean? Had Nammu shape-shifted into a bear to terrorize me? The problem with that theory, in light of my history with Nammu, was that the bear hadn't terrorized me. It was more of an ally, dare I say… teacher?

The breeze was starting to feel cold, and I pulled one of the sleeping bags around me, and started to fiddle with the fire hoping to find a spark, but the fire was plainly dead. I stood to my feet and went inside the gaping mouth of the cave, looking for a match or lighter. I started by the woodpile.

The light was better, and I could now see inside the cave with better clarity as the sun's rays were at just the right angle to illuminate the depths of the cave. My shadow was my first distraction, because it appeared on the sides of the cave, but as I came to the middle, it disappeared into a larger shadow, as the cave appeared to go much further back.

The woodpile held no matches, and I continued my search to the box of provisions— what Uncle had called dried fruit and venison. Again, no matches. I remembered my dream when I was first on the island; I was in the same position, trying to find matches inside a dark cavern. The parallels were not lost on me. I decided to give up on the idea of a fire. I'd just huddle up against the inside wall of the cave with a bunch of sleeping bags. It'd keep me out of the breeze, and I'd be warm enough, especially as the sun began to climb.

About five minutes later, I was in my position. Two sleeping bags gathered around me, I was sitting on the third for cushion, with my almost empty canteen of water next to me. God, I missed hygiene. I wanted to brush my teeth, shave, wash my face, or, better yet, take a long hot shower. Those were the kind of thoughts that were flowing through my mind as I sat on a dusty hard-packed dirt floor leaning against a stone wall with a peculiar flair for bumpiness.

I noticed footprints inside the mouth of the cave. They were everywhere. I imagined that some were moccasins as they were smooth, but a few treads I recognized as sneakers, and a few were simply bare feet. To my relief, there were no bear tracks or any other animals that I could see. The floor of the cave was a fine powder and left imprints with uncanny accuracy.

The sun's rays were beginning to reach my position, and though their warming effects were negligible, it felt good to be in their path. It was about then that I heard a rattling noise that sounded like it was emanating from deep inside the cave. It abruptly stopped. A few seconds later, I heard the soft padding of footsteps. I squinted, hoping to see better, and from the depths of

the cave I saw a figure walking towards me. My heart quickened as I instantly recognized the swaying hips of Nammu.

“You really have a thing for caves,” she announced as she came into view.

From about twenty feet away, she tossed a large rattlesnake at my feet. I cringed and stood up immediately in a defensive posture, but the snake was dead—its head missing. It seemed a habit of hers.

Nammu stopped and looked at me. “What in hell’s name are you doing, Solomon? I leave you for a few days, and you turn up inside a cave in nowhere land, huddled in sleeping blankets that look like they haven’t been washed in years. What’s going on?”

Nammu was different. She had a more causal tone, and if it hadn’t been for the headless rattlesnake she’d flung at me, I might even say, friendlier. I reminded myself that she often started out pleasant, and by the end of our talk, her venomous ways, repressible for only short bursts of time, found their way back to the driver’s seat of her mouth.

She was dressed in a buckskin vest with intricate beadwork. Around her neck she wore a porcupine quill necklace. Her pants were simply black and tightly fitted, and she was barefoot. Her hair was tied back in a tight braid, and she wore a simple headband of red beads with one gold bead in the middle.

She walked past me to the ledge overlooking the valley below. “It’s a beautiful landscape if you’re into desolation.” She turned back to me. “Why, Solomon? Tell me why you care so little for your loved ones?”

I dropped the sleeping bag from my shoulder and ran as fast as I could directly at Nammu. I was desperate. My only thought was to push her off the ledge and secure her death—if she was even capable of death.

As I came upon her she held out her left hand, deflecting my mad rush to push her, and dropped me to my stomach. She kicked my ribs hard with her heel, taking my breath away. She bent down, grabbed my hair, and with it, yanked my head back. “I could snap you like a rotting branch, peel your skin back and throw you down to that ugly, barren prairie where you’d quickly become the excrement of maggots. Is that what you want, Solomon?”

“No.” I croaked, swallowing hard and gasping for breath.

She slammed my head down into the hard-baked dirt and stood up. I could feel her anger boiling, and I knew I had made a huge mistake. She kicked me again in the ribs, but with less conviction, backed up and sat down on the ground about eight feet away from me. “I’ve given you a straight path, and yet you stumble again and again. I’ve provided you evidence of what happens when you stray, and yet your bull- headedness disposes of your common sense as if you lived in some parallel reality.”

She took a slow breath and collected herself. “So, now you’re an Indian? Is that it? I have great sympathy for these people, I really do, but please, these medicine men are just regular folk with no way to make money, so they pretend to know something that others lack, and for that, they extort payment. They wouldn’t know a spiritual thought if it bit them on their scrawny back-ends. Please, do yourself a favor and leave this place now.”

My head ached and my nose was bleeding. I heard some of what she said, but most of it was lost on me, as I was still reeling from the concussion to my head. “Where… how would I go?”

“I don’t know, use your legs. I’m not a genie. Walk away. I’ll send some unsuspecting motorist, and all you have to do is to stick your thumb out and look miserable—something that comes quite natural to you.”

She tilted her head and looked closely at me, as if she were examining a piece of art she was soon to bid on. “Have you no honor? Do you not care about your wife and children? Speak!”

I sat up slowly and ripped off a piece of my shirt and used it to plug my right nostril from which a profuse amount of blood was draining. I could taste it in my mouth. I stole a quick glance at Nammu who seemed indifferent in every way about my condition.

“What you don’t seem to understand,” I said, “is that I don’t believe you. You are evil. You are everything that is wrong with this world, and if I listen to you, then I might as well be dead.”

“Really? You might as well be dead. Is that what you truly believe?”

I nodded.

“Then perhaps I should oblige you. Make it easier on you.”

“Maybe you should,” I said. “If you had been able to kill me, you would have done it by now. There’s something that prevents you, isn’t there—?”

“You’re interesting. I’ve never met a human so intent to die. I guess old Sigmund had it right, humans have a death wish, particularly when they’re delusional.”

“I dare you to kill me. Do it!” I shouted. I stood to my feet. “Either you kill me, or I’ll kill you. I’m done with your threats!”

Nammu stood tentatively to her feet and backed away slowly. “You need to calm down before you force me to do something I would rather avoid.”

“And what is that?” I asked, disdain dripping from my words. “Face it, you can’t kill me. You can’t kill anything, except maybe that poor pine tree in my backyard.”

“Then what about your sister-in-law?” Nammu replied, backing inside the cavern with me following her like a deranged shadow.

I kept the pressure on my nose and I could feel warm blood running down my arm, but I felt strong. Nammu stopped at the lip of the cavern, and put out her arm. “You need proof. I understand. I’ll grant you the proof. I will not end your life—”

“Why?”

“It’s not required to achieve my goal.”

“And what is your goal with me and my family?” I asked.

“Solomon, I thought that was perfectly clear: to prevent you from starting anarchy on earth.”

I stepped back a half step, my head was suddenly woozy. “What?”

“The project you will become involved in will create anarchy. Imagine people all over the world being able to see a spiritual spark within them. What do you think they’ll do? Pay their taxes? Go to church on Sundays? Campaign for their favorite politicians?”

She laughed. “Hardly. They’ll become spiritual hounds of heaven. They’ll

seek out the spiritual works before they achieve their mortal duties. The whole world will come to a crumbling stop. Economies will be upended. Governments will be ransacked by the newly empowered spiritual savants that roam the streets like packs of dogs, looking for a higher purpose in what was once called survival and civic duty.

“This is the future that unfolds from your discovery, and it will—”

“I don’t believe you,” I interrupted. “Remember, you’re the one that threatened me, killed Canto, possibly my sister-in-law, and then conjured a story to justify your murderous ways. I’ll say it again, if you haven’t killed me by now, it’s only because you can’t—”

She raised her arm again. “Proof? Do you want proof, or do you want to make the biggest mistake you could possibly imagine?”

A deep silence filled the space around us while I looked into her eyes. “What kind of proof could you possibly offer me that I’d believe?”

“I can take you to God. Would that be sufficient?”

“Right… you know God.”

“I do.”

“Well, I don’t believe you.”

“That’s why it’s called proof. Once you meet him, you will have your proof. You can ask him anything you desire. You can ask him to perform any miracle you want, and he will… if he thinks you believe in him.”

“If this God is anyone who would grant you a wish, then he is not God. Don’t try to ply me with your seductions. The God you speak of is probably your son… or some fabricated being. If you had offered me the chance to meet Satan, I would have believed that.”

“I misjudged you. If it’s Satan you want, I can arrange that meeting as well. You see, I don’t play favorites when cosmic forces are at play. It’s bad for business.”

I looked everywhere for a nearby weapon, and the only thing that looked like a candidate was a large pine branch about ten inches in diameter and three feet long.

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” I asked.

“Don’t try to hurt me. I will defend myself, and once I get angry, I can’t control my power. You humans are so delicate, and sometimes I forget that.” She smiled. “Besides, there’s nothing you can do against me. My power is not of your world.”

Nammu turned her back on me as she went to the cavern wall. “Do you see this? This is an ancient symbol of the Lakota. The medicine men will tell you it is to protect a space, and no one can violate that space once it is present. Ancient symbol, however, is grossly overstated. It originated in 1348 by an Indian artist who offered his art to a shaman for payment. The shaman took the art and bestowed all of these protective qualities to it. No one had ever seen this symbol before.

“In my world, ancient has true meaning. Our symbols go back millions of years, and they are not the product of an artist seeking to remedy his debts. They are the province of our highest priests and priestesses who work with our God to co-create, in great humility, the visual codes of secret concepts.

She looked at me with the expression of a plea. “If this symbol worked so well, why am I here?”

“These people are so simple, uneducated—for God’s sake, Solomon, most of their spiritual leaders are drunkards, killers, and infected with a belief in nature spirits. They believe in the Wakan Tanka who fly around in the spirit world and lift the broken spirits of people who can’t cope with the realities of this world. Well, too bad.

There’re no tooth fairies, and there aren’t any Winged Powers. People need to grow up.”

She paused, as if assessing her words effect on me. “I’ve offered you proof, and you turned it down. I haven’t made any threats. I only defended myself, and solemnly explained I would do it again if you tried to club me with that piece of wood.” She nodded at the pine branch. “I have been patient with you, while you tried to kill me. I’ve explained my goals and you’ve chosen disbelief as your protection.”

Nammu sighed and looked off into the distance, squinting against the sun's rays. "You have my advice, walk away from this. Return to your life as a teacher. Regain your memory. Live with your family as a father and husband. Bring stability to your life and those you love. These are my admonitions that you seem so intent to avoid."

She walked up to me, within inches of my face. I switched hands to cover my nostril with a fresh swath of my shirt.

"Your smell is alarming. Your look is savage. Do you not see how you've degenerated? You're becoming a wild man caught in the headlights of a bright illusion—an illusion that will hold you spellbound in the image of the cosmic man. Man is not cosmic! He is a mortal machine with an expiration date of less than one hundred years. This is universal law, and nothing you do will change that. The only thing you will do is to create anarchy on earth, and millions will die as a result, and their blood—just as your own is now—will be on your hands."

She gave one last look of disgust, turned away and walked back into the cave's belly where she had come. I sat down, and then lay back on the floor of the cave, my mind repeating her words as if I were a voice recorder. I hated her, but this meeting was different from any of my previous encounters with Nammu. Somehow her words twisted and fought their way into a part of my mind that listened and measured their meaning.

My confusion was utterly complete.

Now that I had no distractions, my head throbbed in pain, but in that moment, as I was staring up at the cavern's ceiling, I noticed a symbol I hadn't seen before. It was a spiral that wound to a tight center and then, as if the artist's hand had slipped, the line bisected every other line and catapulted from the center, arcing to a new world. Maybe that symbol was me.

Chapter 41: The Seventh Door

I was groggy when I heard the voices. It was Uncle and Kohana talking to one another. I felt a hand underneath my neck, lifting up. Then cool water splashed against my face, and someone lightly slapped me on the cheek.

I heard a voice that sounded like Kohana. “Bear attack?”

“He’d be dead if it was a bear, and there’re no tracks. No claw marks either.”

As I regained consciousness I was offered some water, which I drank greedily.

“What happened?” Kohana asked, helping me to sit up.

I glanced towards the back of the cave, wondering if Nammu were still here, watching us from the shadows. Kohana looked back as well, probably thinking I had seen something.

“Help me stand, okay?” My voice cracked like a centenarian. My body felt like one, too. I just wanted to get out of the cave and be outside near the fire pit. Ironically, it felt safer on the ledge.

Uncle and Kohana both helped me to the fire pit, and I sat down again. My ribs were throbbing in pain, but my head was better.

Kohana examined my face. “You look like you were in a bar fight… might even have a broken nose. Uncle, what do you think?”

Uncle ignored the question and looked at my side. “Nose mends.” He pointed to my left side. “Owa sicha. Help him take his shirt off.”

Kohana stood behind me and helped me to slowly and gingerly take my shirt off. A purple, variegated bruise, about five inches long and three inches wide, stretched across my left side. There was no bleeding, but the whole area was extremely sore.

“What did this?” Uncle asked.

“Nammu.”

“Ah…” he replied with surprise, “the dark entity you asked about last night. She came to this cave?”

I nodded, wishing I had not been the reason for Uncle’s favorite channel to be desecrated by Nammu’s presence.

Uncle examined my bruise, placing his fingers just above the bruise, and began talking as if to distract me. “There are many different types of medicine men. To be blunt, I don’t even like the term. It was invented by the White Man, and that’s reason enough to never use it, but the idea that we use medicine is false. We use herbs and energy—sometimes both.”

He very lightly touched a section of the bruise. “You might have a cracked rib, but I don’t think so. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Kohana asked me to do some motions with my arm, and to take a few deep breaths, checking for my pain response. “You have some good abrasions to your forehead, and I do think your nose is broken, but that can be fixed easily enough. The bruise on your side, that’s a little trickier. I’m sure Uncle will find something to ease your pain.”

Uncle walked back out from the cave, as if on cue. “Sometimes we drink so much that one of us gets a good hangover, and we keep some Bayer aspirin in the mouth of earth so she can heal, too. It’s just synthetic willow bark anyway, just easier to dispense. Here, take these.”

Uncle handed me three white pills and a fresh canteen of water. The water tasted so good I could only stop drinking with the pang of guilt. “I’d give you the real thing if I had some with me,” he said apologetically.

Uncle sat down. “So, spill the beans… what happened?”

For the next thirty minutes I explained my eventful night and morning. They both asked a few questions, mostly, to my surprise, about the bear dream. Nammu seemed less interesting to them, especially Uncle who mostly frowned when I told that part of my story. When I explained the part about the protection symbol they both laughed, finding it funny.

“It’s not a symbol for protection,” Uncle corrected. “She’s wrong about that. It’s a symbol for power, but not as you might think about power, as in

man over man or man over beast. No, this power is concentrated on accessing the Creator's messages." He paused a moment. "Now that I think about it, it's probably the reason you're still alive."

I stared at him in such a way that he knew perfectly what question was bursting out of me.

"All people veil evil," Uncle said, "some better than others. But there are some entities that have no veils. These we know as the Controllers. The Controllers designed the White Man's world, but I'm not distinguishing between skin colors when I say that. White Man's world is just a slang-tag we medicine men use to label the world of the Controllers. Controllers want to control—earth, men, animals, plants, oil, water, health, gold, rare minerals, and anything else that's rare, and by consequence, in demand.

"For reasons that aren't clear to us, the Controllers, or at least certain of their kind, are allowed to enter our world—"

"Do you mean they're not from our world—earth?"

"No, they're not from earth, but more to the point, they're not even from the physical universe. They operate in a different dimension, not one that we can see or touch."

"You said certain of their kind can do this. You think Nammu is one of these?"

He nodded. "From your description, she's one of these, because she can move between your dreams and your waking world. Only Controllers or Wakan Tanka can do this. She would need to be a powerful entity to confront you in the manner she did."

"Why?"

"Because Sonvertos are Wakan Tanka incarnate on earth. They're human, yes, but they carry an innate ability to access the Creator's subtle wisdom. Nammu won't kill you because she knows the penalty for doing so. She can only hope to persuade you, which is a nice way of saying to trick you, into becoming her puppet."

"Can I kill her?" I asked.

“I don’t know. Perhaps…. let’s hope you don’t need to find out.”

“What did you mean earlier when you said Sonvertos have an innate access to the Creator’s subtle wisdom?”

Uncle looked away for a short time, glancing at the prairie in the far distance. “Sonvertos are human, as I said, and all humans have the power to communicate with their Creator—and I mean the Creator of their spiritual natures… their immortal souls. Sonvertos incarnate to this world for only that reason. They’re structured to communicate the simplest truths which can then be embodied in behaviors that are aligned with the Creator. They’re not interested in intellectual complexities. They’re not interested in impressing anyone. They simply know, usually at an early age, that they’re in a human body for the purpose of sharing a simple, but vital message.

“The message can come in various forms, but one element that’s consistent is that it’s not owned by anyone. No clubs, fraternities, organizations, none of the usual trappings of a hierarchical system. If you see such a thing, it’s not from the Sonverto, maybe a misguided follower wanting to grab some ego gratification or power, but not a Sonverto. This is how you can tell them apart from the Controllers.

“In my world, we know a good medicine man if he lives in a simple shack, has a good family, is generous with his belongings, and dresses without any pretense even when he performs ceremonies. He never takes credit for his healings or good work, because he knows that he’s a conduit of the Creator, the Wakan Tanka and nothing more.

“Sonvertos contemplate the Great Mystery, but more than this, they don’t simply read books and acquire their knowledge from others. They read nature, they read energy… they read the seventh direction.”

“What’s the seventh direction?”

“You have your usual directions: east, west, south and north. And you have your sky, which is up, and your earth, which is down. That’s six directions. The seventh direction is within. It is the most important. The Controllers focus on controlling the six directions, while the Sonvertos focus on opening humanity to the seventh direction.”

“Why?”

Uncle smiled. “Because it’s the one place the Controllers can’t control.”

“Why can’t they control the seventh direction, if they can control the other six?”

“Because the seventh direction is the sacred way in which the Creator—the Great Mystery moves into the physical universe. The movement is always one-to-one. Creator to individual. Some people have allowed the Controllers to substitute their own image of a God, in effect, replacing the Great Mystery with the small faith. It’s not so much control as it is a form of magic like a shell game. It’s all about distraction.

“Controllers are very good at two things: one, forming distractions so people grow to be predictable and easy to manage; and two, providing substitutions for the Real that, over time, become real to most people.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, “why don’t people stop them, or boot them off our planet, or seal the passages they use to get into our world?”

Kohana touched my arm gently. “One thing Nammu told you is true; they are a very ancient race. They operate in a different spacetime, and the oldest of our records show them to be our gods… they know all about us, because they’ve created the game in which we play, and they’ve been observing us since we began on this planet. We can’t simply put the genie back into its bottle and toss it into space and wipe our hands of them.

“The Controllers may have created the game that humanity plays, but there is a bigger game being played out than one planet and a collection of races we call humanity. In this bigger game there’re larger players, more at stake, and this is where we focus. We don’t try to battle the Controllers, we honor them and their role, we avoid their distractions, and we withdraw our energy from them.”

“How can you honor them? If they’re anything like Nammu, they’re a bunch of sophisticated thugs and nothing more.”

Uncle cleared his throat as if attracting my attention. “Honor is our word for accept. If we battle them, then we’re trying to control the Controllers. We become like them. We don’t want to control anything, even the seventh

direction."

"But if they've created the game," I asked, "and that game includes war, the destruction of earth's resources, genocide… is the only option to roll over and let them continue with their evil?"

"It's not the only option," Uncle replied, "some will battle the pawns of the Controllers—the human face, but these are not the real Controllers. The real manipulators can't be battled. They're invisible. They live out of our reach, so why would we battle their pawns? We can only teach about the seventh direction. That is why we're here."

"It sounds so passive…" I whispered.

"It's passive only when you think in terms of battle," Kohana said. His tone slightly irritated. "We actively teach. We actively show people how to live aligned to nature. We actively demonstrate how to connect with our Creator. People must have the desire to awaken; we can't force them to wake up."

"And where do they get this desire?" I asked. "Everything you've said about the Controllers is that they've deceived us and kept us distracted. So where do people get the desire to even consider the seventh direction?"

Kohana looked to Uncle with a face of quiet frustration.

"The Creator of our universe is wise, do you agree?" Uncle asked.

"If some intelligence created the universe," I replied, "it would have to be intelligent on a whole different scale. So, yes, if there's a Creator of our universe, it would have to be wise."

"If our Creator is wise," Uncle said, "does it also make sense that its intelligence would create attractions for the seventh direction?"

"Yes…" I said tentatively.

"These attractions are in mythology, religion, philosophy, poetry, art, nature, even science and technology. The attractions are everywhere, just as the distractions of the Controllers are everywhere. They are competing forces for the attention of a human mind and heart."

"What about the soul?"

“The soul is not distracted. The soul waits.”

“For what?”

“To see what the mind and heart choose.”

“And if they choose the attractions?” I asked.

“Then the soul engages in the mind and heart of the individual and becomes an active partner of the individual.”

“And if they choose distractions?”

“The soul waits for the opportunity to show itself. It’s like a man and a mirror in the forest. The man walks a hundred different paths in the forest, and one day he notices some movement in his side vision, and he turns to see a reflection of himself. If he walks a single step one way or the other, his reflection is gone. It is only when the man is in a precise place that he notices his reflection in the mirror.

“This is the way of the seventh door.”

“You changed to door instead of direction,” I pointed out.

Uncle nodded, but remained silent.

“What is this precise place?”

“For everyone it’s different. It’s part of the Great Mystery how the Creator attracts each individual. It can be a dream, a night sky, a person’s story…” I felt Uncle look deep into my eyes. “It can be a bear… but how it’s done is without formula or a crystallized process. It’s organic, evolving moment to moment, lightly guided, and each step is a preparation.

“The man in the forest walked by that mirror a thousand times but didn’t notice his reflection—maybe he saw glimpses and wondered what it was, and then walked on. So strong was his belief that he was alone in the forest that whatever movement he may have seen, he ignored as a phantom of his overactive imagination.” Uncle paused and shook his head slowly. “The mind can so quickly pave over the attractions of the seventh door.”

“The Sonvertos, they’re here as attractors?”

“As we all are,” Uncle said. “As I said, it’s different for everyone. The

attractions of the Great Mystery clear the bleary eyes of the mind, and open the eye of the heart. When this happens, however it happens, the soul is engaged just like the man in the forest when he finally stopped and noticed his reflection. He's engaged and walks closer, never turning away until he is looking face to face at his reflection. He might even pick up the mirror and take it with him, so he can see himself wherever he goes, and even show others their reflections as well."

"But where's the Sonverto in all of this?" I asked. "I understand that the man in the forest represents the individual, the forest represents the distractions of the Controllers, and the mirror is the attraction of the Great Mystery. But where's the Sonverto?

"The size of the mirror is the Sonverto. If the mirror is the size of a postage stamp, the man in the forest must be inches from it to notice. If the mirror is the size of a house, the angles from which it can be noticed are a million times more numerous. The forest grows in size and complexity with each generation—if the mirror doesn't, the seventh door effectively shrinks and disappears for all but the most serious of seekers."

"How do the Sonvertos enlarge the size of the mirror?" I asked, leaning forward.

"They bring the Creator's channel to the people."

I shrugged my shoulders and glanced at Kohana, and then to Uncle. "I don't understand."

"Would you seek the sun with a candle?" Uncle asked.

I shook my head. "No…"

"Would you seek the Creator with the mind's logic?"

I shook my head again, believing it was probably the right answer.

Uncle grunted slightly at my lack of conviction. "These are the methods that the Controllers provide to seek our Creator. Use the mind. Use the logical side of your being for that is reliable, that is real, that is… practical. The only problem is that in the search for one's Creator, it does not work, and so the Controllers allowed faith to join the search. Faith filled the vacuum of logic.

“Faith and logic are not tools to find the seventh door… they are tools to ignore it.”

Uncle paused and rubbed his hands together. “Sonvertos are a long line of spiritual architects who build channels from the individual to the Creator. They enlarge the mirror by example, through words, through images, through stories, through the beat of a drum called the human heart. They show the delusion of logic and faith, and in their place, they encourage the simple virtues of the heart, the imagination of the heart and mind in union. They bring the concept of the Sovereign Integral to the surface where the mind can see it and the heart can touch it.

“The Sovereign Integral consciousness is our destiny—where we will return when we have no density to cover us. No skins… no masks. It’s not a state of consciousness that can be easily achieved—the Controllers see to that.

“However, the Sonvertos show how it can be achieved, even for glimpses and the thinnest of moments.”

“How? How do they show it?” I asked.

“They provide tools that help people to activate their intuitive and contemplative imaginations. This is how people touch into the Sovereign Integral state. There’s no other way to produce the power necessary to move into this high state of consciousness without the imagination. It is the key. But imagination is like a newborn foal that doesn’t know which way to run with its wobbly legs. The Sonvertos provide the tools to assist with the directions to the mirror or seventh door, and then work with the individual to enlarge the mirror, so it doesn’t dissolve into the distractions of the Controller’s forest.”

“What tools do they provide and where does one find them?”

Uncle pulled out a piece of paper from his shirt pocket. It was folded and was clearly old from age and use. “This is an example of such a tool.”

He laid it out on the ground flattening the edges out. On the paper was a drawing that showed a single, large dot in the middle, around it was six other dots, and around each of those dots were six dots and so on, until the dots

became so numerous they became impossible to see or count.

“Each of these dots is a behavior. We call these the six heart virtues, and they’re made up of the qualities commonly known as appreciation, compassion, forgiveness, humility…” Uncle looked at Kohana. “Taku dah-kue?”

“…Understanding… .”

“Ha, yes, and valor.” Uncle looked at me with a smile. “You see what an old deer tick I am? But who cares about the names or memorization? It’s enough to simply practice them.”

He pointed to the centermost dot. “This is the Creator. You see the Creator is the original source of these frequencies we call the six heart virtues. They go out from this centermost source and then connect as the Presence.”

“The Presence?”

Uncle nodded. “This is how the Creator extends throughout the universe. The Presence manifests in physical qualities like light, gravity, space, vibration, and so on, and these are like our human presence—they’re physical. There is also a spiritual presence, one that can’t be seen, but is the cause of the physical. The Presence is both the spiritual and the physical qualities.”

“How does anyone sense this Presence or make use of it?” I asked.

“The same way you sense anything non-physical, you feel it.”

“How?”

“By practicing and raising your awareness until you can feel that a heart virtue you are practicing, like forgiveness, is felt as one continuous behavior.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you practice forgiveness to others, even when it’s not returned, it will return to you from the Creator, and you will feel this in subtle ways, and to feel the subtle, you must seek it. You must open yourself to its expression in your life. You must use your imagination.”

“All of this imagination feels like a made-up experience… like I’m

creating the experience… it's not really happening—"

"What you experience is yours," Uncle said firmly. "If you choose to create through your imagination, and your world reflects this, you have created your world differently from those who allow the Controllers to create their world. Your imagination is your antenna to the Presence. The Presence is your connection to your Creator. The connection is what enables the Sovereign Integral state to exist within the human state."

Uncle shifted his position to find a more comfortable posture, and pointed to a dot on the paper in front of him. "This is just a picture with pencil markings, but as I've talked to you about it, it leapt off the paper and began to hover in your imagination. It's being examined there. Your mind and heart are processing this image. They are wondering how it can be useful; what practical value it holds. These are all reasonable considerations, but do you know why you are looking at this paper in this way?"

I shook my head. "…No."

"Because it's easier to allow the Controllers to control, than to allow yourself to create."

Uncle let the words hang in the cool, quiet air of the cavern's ledge.

"Sonvertos teach how to use the imagination, which is the same thing as expanding the size of the mirror?" I asked.

"In part, yes, but it's all about creation, and the source from which the creation arises. If the source is of the Presence, the creation reflects this and enlarges the mirror or widens the opening of the seventh door. If it is of the Controller's worldview, unconnected to the Presence, then it enlarges the forest, making the seventh door a little more difficult to find.

"The creations of the Presence are not merely contained in drawings or words, more importantly, they are expressible. They come through our actions—not just physical actions, but the actions of our hearts and mind. Millions of people on the planet know this and practice this, despite the example set forth by the Controllers and their downstream puppets."

"What do you mean by the actions of our hearts and minds?" I asked.

"Just as I pointed out to you, this drawing became a constellation in your

mind, and when it did, it was also in your heart, because they're one sensory system. This is an action, and this action goes out to the universe. Contemplation, imagination… these are actions… vital actions. What you can generate in your heart-mind system is without limit. It moves out, connects with others, forms new circuitry, and opens the seventh door where all people can feel the liberation of their spirit self and the connection to the Presence they so richly earn by being a human being."

Uncle's eyes were jeweled in the clear liquid of tears, but he didn't turn away, even as one tear fell down his cheek, a willing victim of the sky's weight. He was a man that seemed so full of love for humanity that I could only wonder how he came to feel this way. I loved humanity, but as an abstraction. I could just as easily say I tolerated humanity or, worse yet, disowned it at times.

"How do you generate these heart virtues as deeply as you've done?" I asked.

Kohana smirked a little and caught my attention. "He's not going to tell you that. One of those virtues will hold him back, but I won't be so easily silenced." Kohana grinned. "I'll tell you a story, with Uncle's permission." He paused and looked at Uncle, who casually raised his right hand and nodded slightly.

"There was an anthropologist who came to our rez about ten years ago. She was interested in our sacred sites and ceremonies. She wanted to write a book about our spiritual beliefs. She approached me first, because of my leanings into the White Man's world. I agreed to let her come to the rez, and I offered to introduce her to the right people—Uncle being one them.

"She and I came on a cold night, and Uncle was not feeling well that night, but I didn't know that. The anthropologist I could sense was kind of scared, driving out in the middle of nowhere with a big Indian, and she knew I was taking her to meet a real authentic medicine man. Not something most White People do comfortably, because they expect to see a wild-eyed, rattle-shaking, smoke-blowing, deerskin- clad crazy man." He glanced at Uncle. "No offense."

"There are times that description isn't too far off," Uncle said.

Kohana began to roll up his sleeves on his shirt. “When we arrived at Uncle’s place, I could sense that Uncle was not his usual self, but he never complained, and offered us warm pillows to sit on next to his woodstove. The anthropologist started with her questions, and they were all over the map, and I could tell Uncle was having a hard time navigating her questions—probably not helped by his physical state.

“Any rate, he held up his hand at one point, in the middle of one of her questions, and a hush fell over the room for several seconds. Even the fire was quiet. And then we heard this sound of a wolf howling in the distance. It was this beautiful, plaintive cry that just spilled out and found its way to our ears. We were all transfixed listening to it. Uncle kept his arm raised the whole time as if a reminder to remain silent.

“When he put his arm down, the anthropologist gushed about how Uncle had known the wolf was going to howl, and Uncle held up his arm again, and the anthropologist stopped talking, and we all listened, but there was no sound. A full minute passed in complete and somewhat uncomfortable silence. When Uncle put his arm down he spoke. He told the anthropologist that he had listened to her spirit. It had told him the same story that the wolf had.

“She was lonely. She lived in fear. She was tired of being depressed. Her spirit was waiting to be seen. To be rediscovered. To be allowed the chance to love again, but there was a blockage. The anthropologist was not able to release something. It was something related to a man who had mistreated her …a relationship that had begun with such perfect hopes and then slowly descended into mistrust and fear.

“Uncle stood up and gathered the woman’s hands and pulled her to her feet. By this time, the anthropologist was awestruck at what Uncle had said and confirmed in her expression that he was correct. He had taken her hands and folded them over her heart, and told her to close her eyes, and imagine one thing, one simple thing when she was a child: her mother’s touch when she had forgiven her as a child. The anthropologist did as she was instructed, and soon I could see her body trembling. Uncle told her to take this feeling and give it to the man that had wronged her, and to feel as if the wrong, no matter how cruel it had felt at the time, had been resolved.

“After about three minutes, she opened her eyes and she gave Uncle a huge hug. She laughed nonstop that night as we talked unscripted from that point forward. She wrote her book, but the book wasn’t about Lakota spirituality. It was all about the importance of forgiveness in relationships. She had asked Uncle for permission to write about him and what he’d done that night, but Uncle politely declined.

“The book, last time I checked, had sold hundreds of thousands of copies, was translated into about twelve languages, and our anthropologist was writing more books on the subject of the heart virtues.

“About three years later she called me to ask if she could visit Uncle again… as a friend. I told her I was going out there in a few months, and she could come along if she wanted. During that visit she explained to Uncle what had happened to her from that one experience and asked if he knew. Uncle nodded. She asked if he understood how many people her book had touched. He nodded again. She was trying to say how huge the ripple effect had been from her one meeting, and Uncle was downplaying it like it was no big thing, and I think it was kind of bothering the anthropologist. I could sense it, and I knew that Uncle could, too.

“At the end of our meeting, I was getting ready to go, and Uncle took her outside, and they went on a little walk. They were only gone for about thirty minutes, and when she came back she was all different. When we got to the car and started to drive away, I asked her where Uncle had taken her, and she told me that they had gone to a sacred site to thank the Creator for sharing.

“She explained that the whole trip to visit Uncle was designed to show her gratitude to Uncle. To thank him and show how much his actions had meant to her. He had taken her life and put her on a whole new trajectory, but when she had come out to deliver the message, she had felt snubbed by Uncle—not that he was rude; he just didn’t make a big thing about it.

“She told me he had taken her to a site where the wolves gather some nights to howl. He told her that the wolves deserved her gratitude, because they carried the initial message, he’d simply elaborated on it, just as she had done in writing her book. It was the wolves that had brought her story to him.

“She said that Uncle had shown her how to contact them and to send them

a prayer of thanks. They, the wolves, were connected to her, and she would understand in time.

“About a year later I got a call from her, and she had told me that she’d used some of her book proceeds to help fund two animal shelters in her city—she lived in Philadelphia at the time, and that these shelters were the way she felt the wolves wanted her to show her gratitude.

“Only a few weeks after her first shelter had opened, someone had turned in a mangy half-wolf street dog, and when she heard of it, she immediately went to the animal shelter and adopted him.

“She loved that half-wolf like no other person probably could, and the wolf was her constant companion. She sent me pictures—beautiful animal, but the reason I tell you this story is so you can see why Uncle cares so deeply… it’s because the universe cares, because the Creator cares. When the universe and the Creator care so deeply, and you see this care, this expression of the Creator’s heart, you’re happy to be a part of it, knowing you’re only that—a part of it.

“People are just too busy, too distracted by the Controller’s world to take notice of how the Creator works through all channels to bring the virtues of the heart to all people, but people need to be focused on the seventh door to see this. That’s all Uncle was saying. It’s easy to care deeply when you see the Creator caring deeply through all things. You have to be able to interpret the behaviors of people through understanding and compassion in order to see this care of the Creator, and then expand it, adding your human touch.”

I had been absorbed in the story. I had even forgotten my thirst and pain.

Uncle touched my knee gently. “You see, Sonvertos must view the world not as a tangled forest owned and operated by the Controllers, but as a place of mirrors that awaken those who pass by. The circumstance that brings people into your world may seem to be one thing, when it is another.”

“What do you mean?”

“The anthropologist came to write a book on Lakota spirituality, and what she really came to do is to help people learn to forgive and build better relationships as a result. I understood this, because her spirit told me. It was

like two different people were meeting with me, one, an academic, hoping to make a name for herself, and the other, a deeply spiritual person who wanted to share her heart with humanity and improve our understanding of forgiveness in the world. This is the case with almost everyone you will meet. They are two different people. There's the one who is dimensional, conditioned by the Controller's world and seeking to achieve something.

And there is another one, spiritual in nature that is seeking to live their life as an add-on to the Creator's world of love, understanding, compassion, forgiveness and all of the bounty that lives in the heart-mind system.

"It requires that you look past the surface dimensional to see—"

"Excuse me…" I interrupted, "but what's a surface dimensional?"

"I call humans who are attentive to the forest… dimensionals. Surface dimensionals being the first layer—the masks people wear. It's this mask that prevents them from seeing the mirror. Surface dimensionals believe they have freedom and knowledge and success and that this will carry them. These things are enough, and all they need to do is to achieve more of these things and live a good life. For some, this is enough, but most, when they come to me, their spirits want more."

"More what?" I asked.

"More meaning. More profound feelings. A greater sense of connection. More love. More intimacy. More insight into what is happening in their lives —at the deepest levels. They want to yield to the soul that lives inside them, to get out of its way. To let this soul assert itself in their life."

"And how do they do that?"

Uncle grabbed a small stick and drew a square in the dirt. "This is the surface dimensional—Kohana calls it ego-personality, and I'm sure it has a thousand different names, but it lives as a result of the Controller's world design. It is a reflection of this." Uncle drew a larger square around the first square.

"These are dimensional distortions. These are coverings. These obstruct the light." He pointed to the two squares with the stick. Then he drew a small circle inside the smaller square. "This is the heart." Then he drew another

circle outside of the two squares. “This is the soul.” Uncle then drew a line between the two circles. “This is the imagination. The heart must imagine the soul!”

I don’t how it happened, but when Uncle spoke those words, I suddenly got light- headed and felt as if I were floating out of my body. I had this distinct feeling that my body was crowned by me. I was the thing that made the body move, breathe, animate, live, wonder, look, hear, feel, touch, hope, love. The walls of my body were not so final, and I, I could feel myself veering off to a wider expanse. I looked down and could see Uncle and Kohana gathered around my body. It may even be that I had passed out, but I didn’t care, because whatever carnivorous shadows had been stalking me in the form of Nammu, they were released in this new place. I went higher and wider, deeper and further inside. I felt like I was the same size as the universe. No dense limits to contain me, I was liberated of all things including freedom, for I could sense the will of something so keenly intelligent that it was alive in all things.

There was no way to hold it, yet it was the only thing I desired to hold.

Chapter 42: Mirror

I fully realize that in all of my faithful explanations of what occurred since my heart transplant, it seems that I am forever fainting or losing consciousness. I realize this must seem like a weakness of mine, and I suppose it may be, but I truly found myself in this situation, and mostly, though not always, when I needed to avail myself of oblivion—the kind that is the result of sensory and information overload. To use a crude example, I was like the computer that had not been rebooted for three weeks and then asked to suddenly render a hi-definition feature-length film. That computer, more times than not, will pass into the abyss, just as I did.

The abyss is a strange place to spend any time in. If any of you have fainted and lost consciousness, you know what I mean, but when you pass into it from the euphoric heights instead of physical exhaustion, lack of air or a rampant fever, it's different. First, you notice upon waking up that the world—the physical world—feels unusual. It's more removed as if you had entered a movie stage and someone had just called "action." Second, and this is a more critical distinction, the thing that had caused you to enter the abyss, the thing that caused the information and sensory overload, that thing is all you can think about.

Thus, when I came to my five senses, with the help of Uncle and Kohana splashing water on my face, I immediately felt a loss, and then a sense of smallness. I had this awkward feeling of being bottled up inside something that was far too small to be me. I immediately wondered how I would survive the tiny, compressed quarters of a human body. When I looked at Uncle, I think he understood, he simply nodded with his empathic eyes, and helped me to my feet, as if walking would somehow reconnect me to my body and earth.

"Stand up, we'll help you," Kohana said.

At first I resisted. I was returning to my body, I knew these humans, but in comparison to what I had just experienced, they held no magnetism, or at

least very little that I could sense. I looked around and saw the parched white-clad rocks, mingling with the dried yellow clay, and it felt like a desert, void of life, except for three human beings that were like astronauts plodding through the harsh environment.

“Where are we going?” I asked in a daze.

“Back to my cabin,” Uncle replied. “Stay focused on your steps. “ He pointed ahead of him. “Narrow ledge, you need to be focused.”

I heard his words, but the word “focused” seemed alien to me. Why would anyone focus on this world? I began to wonder about this, feeling the expanse reawaken inside me, and I stumbled a bit on some loose rocks. A pair of hands grabbed me with a powerful grip, and I felt myself sway. A part of me knew I was dangling over a perilous cliff, and another part of me was still imagining the unbelievable scale of my other self.

Someone, I assume Kohana, pulled me to the safe side of the narrow path, leaning me against the wall of the cliff. Then I felt a hard slap on my cheek, and out of instinct I shrieked in pain.

“Focus!” Kohana shouted. “You almost killed yourself! Focus! Do you understand?”

His face was inches from mine. I could feel his breath on my cheek, and the subtle smell of tobacco. My cheek stung. More pain, I thought, great, but it did bring me into my body and the world around me.

“Let’s just wait here for awhile,” Uncle offered with a casual sigh. “There’s nothing more we can do.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I can walk now. I feel better.”

“Are you sure?” Kohana asked.

I nodded, feeling reacquainted with my body. An old, familiar awareness returned that had the appropriate timidity for the task at hand. I looked down the ledge’s narrowing path. Uncle was in front of me, and Kohana was behind. I could barely believe I had walked this ledge at night. Maybe it was helpful that I couldn’t see the perilous drop, but now that I could, in the full light of day, it was like another blow to the face.

I felt Kohana's hand on my shoulder. "Sorry I slapped you, I just wanted you to get inside your body, and sometimes it's the best way to do it."

I forced a smile. "I don't know what got into me. I should be apologizing to you. Thanks for saving me there."

"That's what shrinks do… at least when they're my size," he said with an unassuming grin.

Uncle was already moving forward, picking his way with care. "Follow me," he commanded.

We made our way slowly, but safely, to the place where we needed to go up the wall to the next ledge that waited ten feet above us. It was only a short climb, but any fall would be disastrous, as the ledge at that point was only about a foot wide. The good news was that the footholds and handholds were clear in the light.

"Watch what I do, and mimic me," Uncle said. "I'll go slowly."

A few moments later all three of us were on the top, sitting down and admiring the view.

"Are all of your sacred sites this dangerous to get to?" I asked, looking first at Uncle and then Kohana.

"In one way or another… yes." Uncle bobbed his head sharply as if emphasizing his affirmation. "Let's get some food and water, and we'll dress that wound properly. Those aspirins will wear off in about thirty minutes."

We all got to our feet and walked in the same order, single file, on the narrow path that wound its way through huge boulders, scraggily old pine trees and sagebrush dusted in white chalk.

I was, at that point, feeling normal again, apart from some pain in my ribs. My experience of being the universe was falling away like a skin I had shed back at the mouth of earth, as Uncle called it. I sensed it was already being lost, piece by piece, with each step I took. Somewhere, deep inside me, I heard a memory or voice speak out to me. "No one is the universe. It is all of us."

The voice startled me. I stopped in my tracks and looked back at Kohana,

who also stopped, watching me with a curious stare.

“Did you just say something?” I asked.

“No,” Kohana said. “What did you hear?”

“Ah… nothing… nothing,” I managed to say, shaking my head. I began walking again, trying to keep up with Uncle who sped into the distance with the stamina of a wolf.

The remainder of the walk to Uncle’s cabin was quiet. I felt like a man who had seen an image of himself in a mirror for the last time. I was no longer who I had been an hour ago. I was walking in the middle of God-knows-where, wounded and hungry, my family halfway around the world, but I was trying to recall a secret source that had reached out and touched me. I was without words to describe its potency that surged beneath my skin, but I knew change was forming within me. I could feel it. A shimmer of its quick-turned face had already seen the part of me that would outlive time. It was the mirror I had waited to find.

Chapter 43: Temptation

Every word that had found me to that point in time had lost some of its meaning. Where this meaning had gone, I can't say, I only knew that the meaning of words had changed—maybe the meaning of everything had changed. If this was a good thing or a bad thing, I didn't know. I know it felt good, mostly, but there were times when it also felt like I was moving into a place of loneliness, a place that was forbidden to others, and I was allowed in, not because I was a better person, but because there was a reason I needed the experience.

Sometimes we're called into a place by a voice we don't know, and yet we come to that voice, believing or hoping that it will show us something that no one else has been able to reveal. We want to see a light flash before us in a clear sky, or hear music resound within us that moves us to tears. Whatever that is, whoever does the calling, we follow it. I did. I was constantly following something into my future that beckoned me and pulled me forward. Some force, acting through Kohana and Uncle—even Nammu—was tempering me, shaping me into something useful to it. I felt like an arrow in the hands of an ancient intelligence that spread across a vast spectrum of light and darkness, whittling me into something that would fly straight and true to a destination only those hands knew.

I wondered about freewill. I wondered if I had truly come to this world with this purpose in mind—a Sonverto that enlarged mirrors. Did I create such a blueprint, or did someone else? If someone else, then who? More to the point, why would they choose me of all the billions of people on the planet? Why me?

There was a song I heard my daughter sing in the shower one morning about a week ago. "I remember remembering you, I remember what you wrote, I remember all the things you did, for I was holding the remote. If you thought you were gone from me, if you dared to turn away, I could push a button faithfully, and you'd come back to stay."

I was surprised that I could recall the words, but they felt appropriate somehow to my circumstances. I felt that there was someone who had a remote control, and they were pushing buttons, and with each push a new channel flashed before me calling me to this place. The place wasn't an Indian reservation called Pine Ridge. It wasn't of this earth. It wasn't even of this time. I wasn't sure if it was even a place fashioned from space. Maybe it was not defined by dimensions as humans know them—where lines intersect, and we call it a place, because it is unique from another place. Maybe it was so ancient it was yet unborn to my body and mind.

I was sitting in a place of alien quality. Pine trees, seemingly stunted by gravity, wandered the area like twisted soldiers weary from fighting. I was outside on a wooden table about fifty feet from Uncle's cabin. Uncle had bandaged my wound and applied a poultice, a cocktail of herbs, as Kohana had called it. Uncle had started to tell me their names, and Kohana interrupted him politely and said: "The short of it… it's a cocktail of herbs." Uncle had grunted, feigning disappointment, but I saw he was amused by Kohana's comment.

Uncle finished putting his medicine bag away, and came back with dried fruits and coffee, and what I would call brick-bread. I was so hungry it tasted above average, and certainly better than it looked. Kohana had brought some of his own energy bars and shared those for dessert.

After we'd finished our food, Uncle looked to the sky. "It's almost noon. Are you feeling well enough to walk?"

I glanced at Kohana, wondering if he'd be coming this time. "More cliffs?"

Uncle shook his head, and Kohana laughed. "No cliffs, but long walk."

"Let's go," I said. "Are we all going?"

Uncle nodded. He wore a new red T-shirt with a peace symbol on the front made of white feathers, and he had a swing pack over his shoulder that had long tassels with beads. He wore old, beat-up deer moccasins, and I couldn't help but wonder if they'd be comfortable on the hard rocks.

Kohana grabbed a backpack, and I took my regular position between Uncle and Kohana, with Uncle leading the way. We walked through a pine grove

for nearly twenty minutes, and I heard only a few birds the entire way.

“Where’re all the animals?” I asked. “This is wilderness… I’d expect to see some deer, or at least a rabbit or coyote running around.”

“This area’s like an amphitheater,” Kohana said, “sound travels very easily. The animals could hear us fifteen minutes ago, and they scattered away. Look there.” He pointed to a pine tree whose bark was rubbed off, revealing a whitish-yellow skin that was still moist. “Deer antler did that, and you can see all the tracks. There’re plenty of animals in here. They’re just wary of humans.”

Ten minutes later we arrived at a huge rock outcropping consisting of gray-colored boulders dabbed with an occasional bush that had, by some uncanny means, figured out a way to survive on solid rock.

“We’re going back there,” Uncle said, pointing past the huge monolithic boulders. It’s easy to get lost in here, so stay close. If you get distracted, make sure one of us knows.”

I nodded. “Okay, I understand.”

We trudged into the huge boulders, walking around them, as they were stacked on the ground in different angles like huge dominos that had fallen in chaos.

“Where’re we going?” I asked.

“To our most sacred site,” Kohana said. “Only Sonvertos can visit this site.”

“Why only Sonvertos?”

“You’ll see,” Kohana answered. “Consider yourself fortunate to be able to visit. You’ll be the first White Man.”

“I don’t know why, but I don’t like the expression.”

“I know why you don’t like it, that’s why I use it.” Kohana said with laughter in his voice.

We stopped for water. The day was getting hot, and we were all thirsty. It was a strange place surrounded with large rocks on all sides and a thin, winding path snaked through it like a piece of white thread.

I looked at Uncle who was sitting on the ground in the shade of the boulders. “What makes this site so special?”

“The Unktegila,” Uncle said quietly. “What you saw in your vision.”

“You called them the Quantusum,” Kohana offered. “Different name, but we believe the spirit is the same.”

“You have bones?”

Uncle nodded.

“So this whole area was once an ocean?”

Uncle nodded again.

“How long ago?”

Uncle shrugged. “No one really knows.”

“Has anyone seen these bones?”

Kohana sat down next to Uncle as if he’d concluded that the water stop was going to take a while, now that I was asking questions. “Bones and shells have been found of underwater creatures, but not these bones. These are special. No archeologist would believe us if we showed them these.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see soon enough,” Kohana replied.

I stayed standing, but leaned against one of the stones. “Why do the Unktegila hold such an interest to you?”

“Because we have a connection. Our lineage of medicine men, the Sonvertos, has a communication with the Wakan Tanka that allows us to see the spirits of the Unktegila and understand their purpose.”

“But they’re long gone… bones in the high plains… what connection do you have?”

“We have,” Uncle corrected, standing slowly to his feet. “Let’s go, we still have a journey ahead of us.”

For the next forty minutes we walked with only an occasional comment about the heat, a vulture flying high in the sky, or Uncle would point out an

herb. We stopped again for water and rested our legs in the shade, sharing some venison that Uncle pulled from his small sling pack. The air was fragrant from the sage and pine trees, and the ground was cushioned by pine needles that had accumulated over the centuries, and held in by the rocks, so the winds couldn't disperse them. I watched as Uncle gathered the needles into a pile and sat on them as one would sit on a pillow. I did the same.

Uncle cleared his throat after taking a sip of water from our shared canteen. "The creature you talked with that you call Quantusum, what did it tell you?

I thought for a few seconds. My mind went blank as I tried to recall a thread of our conversation—there were so many, and they were all braided together, that I couldn't find a word.

"You visited the First Born," Uncle said quietly. "What did he tell you?"

"How… how do you know?" I asked in disbelief.

"A bear told me this," Uncle said.

I stared at him for a second, and then looked at Kohana who shrugged his broad shoulders. I wasn't sure what to do. I started to feel the lightness return to my consciousness, and I fought it this time. I didn't want to go anywhere. I wanted to stay seated on my pine needles and have some water. Maybe talk about baseball or politics or the weather. I didn't want to talk about bears and blue men and things like that. It felt absurd. It was unreal.

I decided to stand up for some reason, but I had nowhere to go, I'd be lost in fifty paces. I had no power to even pick a direction. Strange emotions were flooding through me, and I couldn't apply names to any of them, they were too fleeting.

Uncle and Kohana stood to their feet as well, and started walking again in silence. I followed like a puppy. We walked another twenty minutes in perfect silence. I had lost my will to speak. I felt my mind had a strange sense of vacancy about it, as if someone had come along and emptied it of desire, even to speak a single word.

Uncle was an eccentric man; there was no doubt about that. He knew things about me that I didn't know. I could sense it. I think he was trying to unnerve me a bit. Make me feel like he was inside my mind, reading the news

flashes as they strolled by. A bear told me this! Rubbish. The statement had crossed some line I had made in the sand a long time ago. My sense of rational thought was not completely gone. I still believed in physics—rational explanations for things that look, at the surface level, supernatural, but then, under the examination of science, are proven to have a rational basis, usually in the brain.

Maybe these Sonvertos disregarded the brain too much. They were trapped inside the old world view that supernatural forces shaped the world, carving out the mutations of human experience and setting them aside as the purview of the holy— of the Sonvertos.

Maybe I didn't want to lose my sense of the rational. I had a doctorate! Granted, it was in cinema and media studies, but still I was an academic. I had a thousand books in my library that proved it. I had studied liberal arts, journalism, science, semantics, anthropology… I had traveled the world and lived with all the marginalized peoples, and documented their way of life. I had lived where they lived, and I knew their stories were buried somewhere inside my DNA, even if I couldn't remember them.

The more I thought about this, the more I felt a sense of anger at Uncle and Kohana. They were assuming something of me that was wrong: that I wanted to be a Sonverto. That I wanted to know all of this supernatural stuff. Maybe a part of me did, but what about the other parts of me? Should they be ignored? I needed to listen impartially to all of my thoughts and opinions, and then form my own conclusions. If I allowed these Native Americans to sway me, maybe I'd have to leave my family and live here in this deserted world of white rocks and tumbleweeds. No, thank you!

The world of the supernatural felt like something unlived-through, and before it came further into my life, I wanted it to go away. I began to walk slower, muddled in my thoughts, and feeling these strange emotions of anger and resentment. I almost stopped Kohana and Uncle, and asked them to return me to Sioux Falls airport, but when I looked ahead to call them, they were gone. They had walked ahead of me, and left me alone. I became angrier.

"Congratulations," a voice said. "You've finally come to your senses."

Nammu appeared from behind a boulder, clapping her hands together in mock praise. She wore a silver and gold tunic with a thin veil over her face. She looked beautiful and alluring. Every finger held a ring with different colored stones, even her toes hurtled the bright flash of jewels. She walked up to me and pulled the veil from her face, kissing me on the cheek, and lingering a little longer than I was comfortable with.

In the brief moment she opened her veil I felt a certain kind of attraction. For the life of me, I don't know why I could feel any attraction to her, especially because the last time I'd seen her, I had wanted to kill her. Now, however, I felt drawn to her in the pure contradiction of man and woman. She was, in my defense, the perfect woman in form and beauty. In every physical way—she was faultless.

When she touched my arm, pleasure flowed. It was indescribable. I wanted more. I wanted to explore her. She placed her hands on my upper arms and faced me. "You should be rewarded for your brilliant deductions." She withdrew her left hand and unfastened a tie on her right shoulder and the tunic dropped open, exposing the ample cleavage of her breasts. She withdrew her right hand and pulled the tie that held her tunic on the left shoulder, and it dropped open even further. She stepped back slightly and began to sway provocatively, and then came closer to me and touched me softly on my left side "I came to apologize for hurting your ribs… ."

Then she touched my nose tenderly. "And nose… ."

And then she swept her fingers across my forehead. "And your handsome face."

She was amazingly gentle and seductive at the same time. I took a deep breath just to remind myself that I was still breathing. "What are you doing?" I managed to ask.

"You don't know? Maybe this will help," she said coyly. She pulled her tunic down just above her hips, and then came close to me again and pressed herself against me.

I didn't want to go any further and pushed her away. Guilt started to flood my mind, and I was compelled to act on it. "I can't… do this! What do you take me for?"

Nammu pulled up her tunic and held it up with her hands crossed over her chest. “A man, but perhaps I gave you too much credit.”

She began fastening her ties again, and a part of me wished she would stop (I have to be honest).

Her eyes met mine. “You are confused by these heathens, because you allow them to sway you with their talk of Sonvertos and high missions and altruistic favors to humanity. This talk always excites the weak.”

“I’m weak? How many humans have stood up to you?”

She paused, weighing my question with suspicious eyes. “You’re not weak, I agree. Forgive me.”

She left one of her ties unfastened and touched my arm again. “Is the poultice working for you, or would you prefer that I mend it now?”

“The poultice is fine,” I said. “What do you want? Why are you following me? Everywhere I go, you’re there. Is this how it’s going to be for the rest of my life?”

“My presence displeases you, my lord?” She said in a mocking tone.

“Your presence …is confusing me,” I said, glaring at her.

She turned around to show me her back. The tunic was, of course, backless to her waist and the beauty of her shoulders and back held my attention. “Your wife is a good woman, is she not?”

“Why do you ask me this?” I demanded. “Leave my family out of any conversation we have, or I will leave.”

She spun around. “And where will you go, Solomon?”

“I’ll find Uncle and Kohana.”

“Look around you,” she said.

My heart sank as I followed her instruction. I had been so focused on her that I hadn’t noticed that we were in a different place. The rocks and trees were still there, but the lighting was different, the sky was a cloudy gray. “Where are we? What happened?”

She came right up to my face and kissed me again, this time on the lips.

“We’re alone, that’s all you need to know. There’s no one around to control you. You can do whatever you desire and no one will know or care. Come with me.”

She took my hand and led me to a hollow behind a large collection of boulders. I followed her without my senses engaged. I knew what she wanted, and I knew it was wrong, especially with her. She was an enemy of the highest degree. She was the definition of devious, and yet I followed her, because I was—as she had pointed out—weak. I felt weak as she took my clothes off and set them aside. I felt weak as she removed her tunic and kissed me with a passion I had never imagined. I felt weak as we became entwined, and I could not say the simplest of words: “stop.”

She looked deep within my eyes the whole time we made love. As lovers go, she was exquisite in every way, not that I’m an expert in such things, but I had no doubt that she was highly skilled in the art of lovemaking, and her unrestrained movements, sounds and ever-present mouth were like a single vessel that greedily waited until I was all poured out. It was pleasurable to be sure, but there was a sense of emptiness at the same time. Her ulterior motives were always present and, like the elephant in the room, could crush me with one misstep.

Chapter 44: Annihilation

When I woke up, I was startled. Uncle was chanting and my head ached like a bad hangover. It was dusk. “What happened?” I asked Uncle.

He didn’t stop his chant, and ignored me completely. I looked around for Kohana, but he was gone. I stood up, still naked, glanced around for my clothes, but like Kohana, they had vanished.

Suddenly I felt my body rise up into the sky as if I were an eagle, except I had no wings. I looked down, watching Uncle who seemed focused on his chanting. I yelled at him, “Uncle! Uncle! What’s happening?” He remained oblivious to me, as though I didn’t exist. As I rose up into the sky I could see a silver light following me like an umbilical cord. My body floated through the air leaving this silver trail of light behind me, and I looked in the direction of where I was going, and I saw the flicker of a yellow light bouncing below me. It was someone holding a flashlight, and they were running. I even thought I could hear my name being called, and then it suddenly hit me that it was Kohana searching for me.

Then I heard a scream, and I was instantly in my body, but it was not with Uncle. I entered my body and took a long gasp. Nammu was screaming as my eyes fluttered open, trying to take in what I saw. Nammu was naked, standing in front of me being held by something large… it was not human; it was something else for which I had no words. In the dusky light I couldn’t see much of it, but it was clear to me that anyone would call it a monster, and so I will refer to it in this way.

The monster was holding Nammu with anger in its eyes, staring down at me as one does when they examine a small bug before the violent force of a boot comes crashing down.

“What’s going on?” I asked reflexively.

“Your death is what’s going on,” the monster replied in a commanding tone. It was a thoroughly convincing threat, as I could see his power was sufficient to hold Nammu with only one hand.

“Leave him alone,” Nammu said. “It was my fault. If you want to punish someone, it should be me.”

“Who are you?” I asked.

The monster shoved Nammu down to the ground, laughing. “Punish him? I won’t punish him; I will bring his death about. I will take his decadent soul and crush it into such oblivion that no one will even remember his name. His lineage will end between my fingers.”

The monster came towards me. I could see long-pointed, yellowish nails on his hands, and leathery—no, scaly—skin that was like a lizard of some kind, but with human intelligence. He suddenly stopped and looked down at me. “You think I possess human intelligence?” He roared in a deep, profound laughter. “I have killed many of your kind before, but you, I think I will particularly enjoy the bringing of your death.”

“Wait!” I said. “Why? Why do you want to kill me? At least tell me what I did wrong.”

He came so close to me I could feel his presence. It was so anciently evil that its outspread power literally made me sick to my stomach, and then, a strange reaction bolted from deep inside me, I felt angry that one so repugnant as he should have any power or even exist. I wanted to destroy him.

He loomed over me like a giant bipedal alligator that was ten feet tall. I know the description sounds implausible, but it’s the closest I can come to describe his otherworldly appearance.

“I will grant you your request, for it will do well that your accomplice hears my explanation, too.”

“There’s no conspiracy here, Anu,” Nammu said.

“Silence! You will fill your mind with my words and listen. If you dare speak again, your fate will only worsen, I assure you.” Then he spoke in some language I couldn’t understand, but I knew it was not human. The vibration of this language was rumbling in my gut, making me progressively more nauseous with each word.

He turned back to me and, to my regret, leaned in even closer. “Are you

sure you want to know? It will be the last words before your annihilation."

"I need to know," I said, my voice cracking from fear.

He turned and picked something up, and threw it at me. "Then put your clothes on before my stomach loses its will to retain food."

I quickly put on my trousers and shirt, realizing as I did, that my side was no longer in pain. I touched my nose, and it also felt normal. Was I in the same time period, or had Nammu healed me without my knowing? Everything felt surreal… was I dreaming?

Let me make one thing abundantly clear, I had already accepted that I was going to die. Not simply because this monster, by its sheer size and power, had every tool required to extinguish me, but because I could sense that this form of evil delivered on its promises. I had no doubts. Not one. I mention this, because it will explain why I was so bold with this monster. I felt I had nothing to lose.

While I had been dressing, the monster grabbed Nammu's clothes and threw them at her as well with the same instructions. He seemed to me to be calming down slightly as we both dressed and composed ourselves.

"Nammu is my concubine," he pointed to me with a long outstretched claw. "And you have defiled her… a… a human, no less." He shook his massive head from side to side, and I could sense the rage boiling to find his tongue. "I know who you are, and I know that you feel yourself untouchable, but I am here to repeal that sense of authority you so glibly attach yourself to. Sonverto or not, I will destroy you. You have defiled the House of Anu, and when you cross this line, you leave me no choice but to dispatch you to the gates of hell where you will rot out your immortal life like a piece of dung that will petrify in my wrath."

"That's why you want to kill me? Because your concubine seduced me into—"

"If you are suggesting my reason is weak, save your breath," the monster said. "My reason is perfect. My duty to dispatch you to hell is perfect. Everything I do is coded in this perfection. Do you not know who you are dealing with? I am your master. I am the personage you have called God in

your holy books. I am the one who made the weaknesses of your kind my appendage for production. For securing the bounty of my planet, so I can extend my throne and encompass other weak races that yearn for a God that saves them from their weaknesses. It is perfection that allows me to rule."

"And what is perfect about murder or exploitation?" I asked.

"When it is justified, it is… perfect."

"This justification, it's just yours to make? You're the only judge?"

"There is only one God; didn't they teach you this in Sunday school?"

"You're not God. You're a monster who believes he is, and nothing more. You're the antithesis of God!"

I could see that the monster was enjoying my words, as if he were ingesting them like fuel to kill me.

"Is that so, my scrawny little human," the monster said, his lips twitching with anger. He walked closer to me, tilting his head, examining me. "I see you have friends."

"What do you mean?"

He turned around and held his hand out as if he were clutching something, and I saw Kohana dragged by some invisible force to our small encampment. The monster placed his foot over his neck and looked back at me. "Shall I snap his neck, or will you concede that I am your God?"

"I concede! I concede… you are my God!" I blurted out. I started to run to Kohana's aid, but the monster sent me a powerful thought command to stay, and my body slumped over like a puppet that was suddenly without its puppeteer. I could barely summon the will to lift my head up to watch the ensuing spectacle.

Kohana started to rise, lying on his back, as if he were levitating into the air. He looked at me with such panic, and for a brief moment I saw him mouth the words Dou Xing. I spoke his name aloud. "Dou Xing."

I stood up, feeling a new power enter me. I turned my back to the monster and put out my hands and prayed. I prayed from somewhere that was unknown to me, in words that felt like clay to the diamonds underneath. I

could hear the monster behind, shouting words of anger, but they fell short of me. I prayed for more love. I prayed that love would find this self-proclaimed God and wither his evil into leafless branches that would crumble in decay. I saw this very image of the monster.

Suddenly I could feel breath on the back of my neck. I could hear words—loud, tumbling words, full of hate and anger. They were breaking on the back of my neck and head, and I felt the attack of an unholy army. I turned around and faced it with nothing but love. Love, I didn't even know how to define, but I knew it was more than one thing. I understood this monster. I felt compassion for him. I had no fear of him. I knew I was not the source of the love, but simply the riverbed through which it flowed. I watched the monster lift his hand to the sky, ready to deliver a crushing blow, and then blackness.

A blackness that was so thick it was like liquid coal had been poured over me. I relaxed, still feeling the sense of love flow through me. Everything around me turned to stillness. No sounds. No feelings. No lights. No images of any kind. Even my thoughts were slowing down, and I had this question swell to my attention: "Is this the end? Am I annihilated?"

Chapter 45: The Orb

The very fact that you are reading these words is proof that I was not annihilated. So you may relax on that account. When I regained consciousness, the first thing I became aware of was a man's voice. It was singing a beautiful melody, something that instantly transforms your mood for the better. I opened my eyes and saw a beautiful sky patterned of blues and white clouds. I sat up to see a small campfire and a man who was the source of the singing that had woken me.

Dou Xing looked striking in a light blue shirt and gray, loose-fitting pants. His long black hair was gathered in a simple headband. He looked as if he was in his mid- thirties and was in perfect health. He was sitting directly across from me, barefoot with his legs crossed underneath him. A small fire pit with a pleasant and warming fire was the only thing between us. It felt like early morning, the air was cool and crisp, and the sun was yet to shine directly on us.

"Is it really you?" I asked. My enthusiasm was unrestrained at seeing him so healthy, free and composed.

He stopped singing and smiled at me. "It is."

"I thought you were killed by that demon."

"Many times, what appears to be one thing, is truly another, especially where demons are concerned."

"What do you mean?"

"They are illusionists. They employ their illusions to provoke fear, and in fear, love cannot abide. Without love, people resort to baser instincts where demons can become gods."

I rubbed my eyes to be sure that I was not dreaming. "Where am I?"

"You are in my reality."

"Does it have a name?"

He spoke very slowly. “My… reality.”

“How did I arrive here?”

“You called me, and I came to your aid. I brought your spirit here, for that is all you are in my reality.”

“What of my body?”

“Your body is cared for by others. My concern is your spirit.”

“Am I dead, then?”

He shook his head and smiled softly. “No, simply a change of worlds.”

I was so happy to see Dou Xing alive. I had such admiration for this man, and yet I knew so little about his actual deeds. There were many myths about him, but I suppose that’s true of anyone who lived 3,000 years ago and wrote the definitive text on spiritual living. I had studied his life when I had returned home from the hospital, but in my vision, he was a different being altogether from what I had read. Here, in his own reality, he seemed more like the myth. I liked that.

“Why am I here?” I asked.

“Would you like some tea?” Dou Xing asked, ignoring my question.

“Yes, please, that sounds good.”

Above his fire was a metal pot, silver colored and very old. I watched as he placed some cut herbs in the water and let them steep. He seemed to measure them with care, deciding which ones to place in the pot, and which ones to discard in a basket behind him.

Dou Xing was quiet and poised as he went about his tea preparations, pouring the rich, golden brown liquid into white porcelain cups with both care and skill, without losing a single drop to the ground.

He handed me a cup with its handle facing me like a proper host would, and then raised his teacup high in the sky. “I offer a humble toast… to those who can turn away.”

I smiled at his comment, remembering what I had done with the monster. The whole experience with Nammu started to return in vivid detail, and I

wondered if his toast might have a double meaning. I took a sip of the best-tasting tea I could remember ever drinking, hoping to transfer my recall of Nammu to the tea, which was brilliant in its complexity and smoothness.

“The tea is delicious, thank you.”

Dou Xing nodded in recognition.

“You are here,” he began, “because I have something to give you. You have learned well to read your world from the mind, but it is now time to read from the heart.”

“Why the heart?” I asked. “The heart is soft, sentimental and vulnerable. Why would I choose to read my world from my heart?”

“The heart, while it is true that it is yielding, is strong because of its flexibility; and while it may be vulnerable, its vulnerability is what preserves its humility and compassion.”

“How does one read from the heart?”

“The heart is like a lens of the soul that the soul uses to look into the world of appearances and correctly observe the intentionality of those around it. The soul reads the world through this lens in order to define the appropriate expression to bring into the world of appearances. If the heart is clear and adept at reading the world around it, the soul will be able to bring the precise remedy to uplift and expand any situation.”

“How exactly does this work—reading from the heart?”

“It is a relationship to alignment,” Dou Xing said, taking a sip of tea.

“Alignment to what?” I asked.

“To the culture of First Source.”

“How do I gain alignment to something I can’t even fathom?” My voice quivered its query.

“The culture of First Source is not so distant or unknowable. It is found in the heart. The culture of our Creator is one of connection—interconnection to individuals, nature and groups in the form of understanding, always trying to identify with the next and deeper layer of connection. It is this culture of understanding that builds compassion and love. The heart is the lens that

helps the soul to understand, and the mind and body are the tools that are used to convey this understanding into the world of appearances. Thus, the mind-body does not read the world, but rather it is a tool of the soul to express its wisdom."

"You said that this works if the heart is clear and adept at reading the world, how does one ensure that the heart is clear?"

"How do you ensure a window is clear?"

I looked at him to make sure he wasn't being sarcastic, but he looked at me with penetrating eyes that confirmed his sincerity.

"I look through it and see. If I see dirt or dust, I clean it."

Dou Xing nodded.

"So I… clean my heart?"

"If you want a clear heart, yes."

"How?"

"It doesn't matter how, what matters is that you intend to do it, and you do what your intentions lead you to do."

"So one technique is as good as the next? Is that really true?"

"It is never about the technique," Dou Xing said, his eyes were perfectly still and focused on mine. "It is the intention behind the technique."

"So if intention is the key, what's the best way to produce the greatest intention?"

"You are always searching for the best way, the strongest solution, the quickest path, the most efficient use of resources. None of these matters to the soul or the lens of the heart. It is the intention. Why do you want to see, with more clarity, the intentionality of the world around you? If you can see this more clearly, what do you intend to do with this added clarity? The answers to these two questions are the only technique, if you can call a question a technique."

I listened to the subtle distinctions he was making and felt my way to another question. "When you think of these questions, what are your

answers?”

The moment I spoke those words, I had this feeling that Dou Xing would not answer such a personal question, and indeed, had it been in my powers, I would have withdrawn the question altogether, but the words were out.

Dou Xing looked up at the sky as if he were considering my question or, perhaps, offering me hope. He then took a long sip of tea, his teacup cupped between his hands. “You see, the answer for me will influence the answer for you. If I share my answers, you might make them your own because I am Dou Xing. This is a personal discovery, and it is ongoing, it is never static. The answers change over time. They become more resolved and nuanced and situational. This is the maturing process. To start anywhere that is not your own absolves the journey, and it is the journey, after all, that defines you.

“There is no one answer. There is no correct answer or wrong answer. There is only an answer or a question. For those who do not ask these two questions regularly, they are missing the essence of spiritual living in the world of appearances. They are taking for granted what others have fought for, staked their lives upon, been tortured to deny, and killed to cover up. All of the secrets, all of the greatest conjurers, every technique or mantra ever devised, pales in comparison to these simple answers that continue to define the individual, even when the individual believes they are whole and perfected.”

“Why? Why does this hold so much power to shape one’s life?”

“Because to keep one’s heart clear depends on clarity of intention, and the conviction one feels towards that intention. If you want to see the world as an interconnected flow of energy—a dance of light that creates shadows—you also want to understand that the shadows lure you into caring and compassion, releasing what the soul has brought to the dance of light. The shadows do not dampen your intention, they illuminate it. They strengthen it.

“Some people believe that the shadows are sinful, evil, composed to constrain and manipulate people, and yet I would tell you that, without the shadows, the heart is purposeless. And without purpose, then spiritual living is simply impossible within the world of appearances.

“There are people who want to build an ideal world of fairness and mutual

respect. They want everyone to be just, kind, loving and generous. They want the order and balance of the perfected world to be in the world of appearances, and this will never happen, nor is it desirable."

"Why not?" I asked. "If the alternative is war and hate and injustice, why isn't it desirable?"

"Because the world of appearances is not real. It is the sandbox of souls. Souls can enter and build things that live for a minute and then dissolve in someone else's footprint. The sandbox, as big as it seems, is contained in a single atom of an infinite world, and this world cannot fit inside the sandbox, and yet some believe the sandbox should be just like this infinite world.

"The world of appearances was created to encompass both light and shadows. It was to allow souls a chance to activate deeper levels of empathy and understanding and to fully appreciate the inter-connection of one life to another in an endless chain."

"But if the world of appearances isn't real," I asked, "then why bother to change it, to improve it, to make it more just and fair for all? Isn't that purposeless, too?"

"This is the paradox of living in the world of appearances," Dou Xing whispered. "On the one hand you have a sandbox of souls that is temporal and always changing. This sandbox evolves. Its dynamism is entrained by its source—its ultimate creator— and it is slowly brought to its source over the measures of space and time.

"As the shadows lessen, then so does the light. The way of reading with the heart is to understand this duality as an ally and not a diminishment of your spirituality.

"It all begins in the heart for that is how the soul sees, and as the soul sees, it is expressed through the mind-body. If the mind-body is inspired to express love, it is because the heart made it possible. Expressing love into the world of appearances is the purpose of spiritual living. What comes of this love is left to the mystery of First Source's larger design. It is not delivered to the world in order to make the world perfect, without shadows, or to vanquish duality."

Under normal circumstances I would hear these words, nod my head and feel my eyes glaze over in sullen confusion. However, I understood what Dou Xing told me. It was as if my world became clear for perhaps the first time since waking up from my heart transplant. But still, there was something programmed in me that wanted to have a technique or some method to practice that would lead me to the correct outcome.

“You used the term spiritual living,” I said, “what does it mean?”

“It means to love,” Dou Xing replied. “It is that simple. What isn’t so simple is the dynamic process of how one produces love.”

“What do you mean, produces love? How do I produce love?”

“As I just said, your heart must be clear to allow your spirit to see the intentionality of the world around you in whatever form it presents itself. The world of appearances arises in multiplicity from singularity. It appears to your senses. It could be an animal, a tree, an insect, a weather system, a human, or an entity from another world. It could be all of the above simultaneously. In whatever way the world presents itself to you in the moment, you can allow your spirit to decode the intention behind the world at your doorstep.”

“Okay,” I nodded, “but how do I decode it, and why is it important in the production of love?”

Dou Xing sighed ever so slightly. “If you grab for the ideas, they can slip away. If you allow them to come to you, they can slip in and bring clarity. Try to be patient with your desire for more understanding. It is a delicate balance—to want to go deeper, higher, broader in your understanding, but at the same time allowing this understanding to enter you at its own pace.

“Love is the culmination. It is woven from many qualities like gratitude, courage, compassion, humility and so on, but the different faces of love remain rooted in love’s native state, which is unconditioned and timeless, and this quality is the understanding of how and why all is connected.

“If you look just below the surface of the world of appearances, you can see glimmers of this connection, but to penetrate the surface—to crack the egg that surrounds you—you must first jettison the world view you have been

taught by your parents, your society, your media, your teachers, your books. You must become empty of the bias and judgment that swirl in these circles of education, religion and social programming. You must become independent… independent in your interpretation of the world of appearances.

“Once you achieve this independence, you can begin reading from your heart. You are then sensing your world through your heart’s innate sense of connection to the culture of First Source. You will see the virtues of the heart finding expression in your life, and you will observe how these virtues expand your world.”

I began to ask another question, and Dou Xing raised his arm, and then closed his eyes. “What I wanted to give you…”

I started to see my world shifting as his voice quickly wavered into silence. Dou Xing and everything around him, the trees, the sky and ground were all moving and shifting into new shapes and colors. I was transported to a new world, and my eyes initially fluttered in confusion at the sudden and unexplained darkness. I was alone. I called out to Dou Xing, but my voice echoed off into a profound wilderness. The place looked familiar to me. I was standing on the shoreline of a lake. The stars were out in their full glory, burning their wild flames of silver light against a pitch-black sky.

Then I saw it. An orb, in the middle of the lake, began to flicker its light with seeming reluctance. I instantly remembered my vision with Zenith and suspected it was the very same lake and orb, except this time there was no ice —and hopefully— no monsters. The orb hovered above the water, growing brighter by the second, piercing the blind night. I couldn’t take my eyes from it, and I felt it was watching me, too.

It was like a miniature sun, spreading its light to the entire forest until it was nearly as bright as day. Then I heard a voice in my mind. “Go, and you will be changed.”

I looked around to make sure no one had said this. There was no one I could see. Who was urging me to swim out to the orb, and why? I had clothes on, the water might be cold. Could I even swim that far, would there be monsters underneath the water? All of these thoughts wandered in my mind,

and then I heard the voice again. “Go!”

This time, the voice had a more commanding tone, and I began to undress. I wanted to go to the orb. I saw this light as a key to my memory, wasn’t that what Zenith had told me? I stripped down to my underwear and put my foot gingerly into the water. To my surprise, it was comfortable, even soothing to my body. I waded out from the shore to my waist, feeling the sand squish between my toes.

I looked around for the first time, gauging the size and shape of the lake. With the orb’s radiance I could see that the lake was crystal clear, surrounded by huge pines that peppered the shoreline like stoic guardians. The lake was circular and the orb appeared to be directly in the center. If I were to hazard a guess, the lake was about two miles across; to swim out to the orb would not be an easy swim.

I was just about to dive into the water and begin swimming when the orb slowly began to descend. How strange, I thought. Surely it can’t go below the water, but as I watched, that is precisely what the orb did. It made a controlled and deliberate descent into the water and suddenly the forest darkened into a mysterious silhouette. The lake glowed in deep turquoise and aquamarine blues, and something compelled me to hold my breath and plunge into the water and open my eyes.

What I saw next was the most amazing thing I had ever seen. The orb’s light illuminated the entire lake, and I could see the whole lake below the surface, the water was almost as transparent as air. The orb began to spin very slowly, and as it did, it sent out these glyphs of golden light that traveled the distance to the shoreline in about ten seconds. I watched as some of these glyphs came near to my position underwater—they seemed alive, changing shape as they flowed through the water.

I had to take another gulp of air in order to continue to watch, and I made sure, before I went up for air, that there were no glyphs that were on a trajectory to hit me. I raised my head above the water, took a quick look around, a deep breath, and returned below the surface.

The orb was rotating faster and faster, and as it sped up, the number of glyphs it released increased exponentially. They were coming at me in larger

numbers and my efforts to dodge them became increasingly futile. One of them whizzed by me, missing me by a mere inch or two, and I could both feel and hear a slight electrical charge that it released.

Then I noticed one hit my left leg in the ankle, and I felt a jolt of energy run up my spine and enter my head, and as it did, I heard a sound like a slow-motion groan or inarticulate utterance.

The orb continued to speed up and the glyphs were zooming past me, a few were hitting my body. I wanted to leave the lake and get to the safety of the shoreline, but I wasn't able to move. More impacts were felt, and each time I experienced the electrical jolt and heard a sound that felt like a word was trying to be spoken.

After being touched by more than a dozen of these glyphs, I started to hear sounds that I could understand as words.

"Sovereign… Integral… format… expansion… activated… source… intelligence… interface…"

I heard these words resounding in my head, coming from the inside, and with each word they reverberated like a giant gong being struck by a powerful mallet. It was as if the glyphs, when they hit my body, transferred a word sound to my head, saturating my brain and nervous system. I heard these words like individual notes; their meaning lost on me.

My body became numb, and I felt myself slip deeper into the lake. I began to panic as I felt my body was going to drown, but somehow, and I have no idea how this could be possible, I was able to breathe underwater. As I slowly sunk to the depths of the lake, I watched the orb descend at the same pace, as though it were tracking or monitoring me. Its light was diminishing, its rotation slowed, and I couldn't see any more glyphs flowing out of it. It looked as tired as I felt.

As my body floated to the bottom of the lake, I noticed a large vertical shaft, in the center of the lakebed. The shaft was at least fifty feet in diameter, and I watched as the orb descended inside. Immediately the light dimmed, and a beam of light was sent to the lake's surface about eighty feet above. As the orb disappeared inside the shaft I felt a twinge of panic and forced my body to respond by following it. Surprisingly, some of my energy returned as

I swam, and I dove deeper into the shaft. The orb was still radiant, but its light was shifting to a blue color, and it illuminated the sides of the shaft which were covered in glyphs and symbols of a language I knew nothing about. When I looked at the sides of the shaft, the glyphs were moving and shifting form. I felt I could hear a muffled collection of voices, but nothing I could interpret as a language.

The orb continued to descend deeper and deeper inside the water-filled shaft, and I followed. I stayed about thirty feet above it, which I reasoned was a prudent distance. I couldn't detect any bottom to the shaft, and even as I write this, I'm still amazed that I felt no fear. All I had were my instincts, and they told me that it was vital to stay close to the orb.

The mumbling voices continued as we descended. I sensed, with some certainty, that the voices were coming from the sides of the shaft—more specifically, the glyphs. The light from the orb became more of a violet color the deeper we went, and its light was much more subtle. I swam a little closer as the light dimmed.

We continued to descend, though I have no idea how far we had gone when I noticed the orb had stopped. The light it was emanating was so subtle that I could barely detect any light coming from it. I looked upwards and saw only a dark abyss. The lip of the shaft was gone. I was hundreds of feet below the lake's surface. Then the orb went dark. No light anywhere.

The voices were still mumbling, but even they had become quieter in the total blackness, and slowly came to a total silence. For several seconds I was alone in an absolute void. Then, a tiny spark of light in the centermost part of the orb lit up, and I could see inside it. It was a complex stratum of shifting plates that looked semi- transparent and maze-like. These plates interlocked in an exceptionally intricate manner.

The orb seemed like it was rebooting itself. One spark ignited another, and then another, and soon the light in the orb became bright again. This time, however, it was focusing its light on the floor of the shaft. We had found the bottom, and it was made of sand that sparkled with colors of golden amber and tinges of pale red. As the light intensified, the sand shifted noticeably. I wondered at first if there were something underneath the sand. Perhaps the light had awoken some sort of a creature, causing the sand to stir, but the

sand seemed to be orchestrated by the light, and it was beginning to coalesce into a moving form that soon engulfed the orb itself.

The form began to develop appendages, first arms and then legs. A head began to form on top, and soon I was looking at an array of sand that looked vaguely human, though mostly featureless. The orb was in the chest area of this sand creature, and its animated form continued to evolve more features like ears and fingers. Throughout this transformation, I watched in silent awe. The orb remained in the center, and gradually dimmed its light as the sand slowly turned to a transparent flesh, covering this nearly human form.

It felt like this half-human form was the orb itself, trying to be like me. The orb was reaching out to me through this form it had created in my likeness. In fact, the more I looked at this… this…thing, the more it looked like me. It continued to evolve, its eyes blinked open, fingernails adorned the tips of its fingers, hair began growing on its head, and all of the features that were mine came into being on this incredible facsimile. It was like watching a time-elapse film of a flower bud opening up, only this was no flower. This was a replica of me!

I was still hovering above the creature, looking down on it and wondering if it had any consciousness. Did it know I was there? It never looked in my direction. It seemed preoccupied, as if the power to transform into a human being in the depths of a lake required all of its energy and attention. I saw it looking at its hands, touching its chest, then its head. It was a clone of me becoming aware of itself before my very eyes. I have no way to describe the feelings I felt watching the awakening of another me.

Then I heard the voices again, and I looked around at the sides of the shaft. They were moving—more precisely, they were compressing. The shaft was squeezing inward like a vise, and I and my clone (if that's what it truly was), were soon to be crushed. I saw my clone look up and see me. Our eyes locked, and I could sense his confusion, and I assume he could sense mine. The walls of the shaft continued to shrink and very soon the diameter of the shaft was less than ten feet and closing.

There was no time to swim up, and there was nowhere to go. I looked at my clone and saw fear, and I decided I would go to him, so we could at least die together. I swam down and put my feet on the bottom of the shaft and

opened my mouth. I don't know how I could do any of this, let alone speak, but words did come out. "Are you me?"

The clone's forehead furrowed sharply. "I am me, and only me. Who are you?"

"I am…" and then it hit me. All of my memories came rushing in. All of them. I remembered my wedding day, the first kiss from my children, my office at the university, my mother's eyes, everything came in like a supernova of memories, and I was weeping and laughing and utterly stunned at the clarity of this collection of poignant and powerful memories.

At the same time, I was aware that the walls of the shaft were so close that I could put both arms out and touch them. I looked into my clone's eyes and saw they had withered. They were slowly becoming blank as if the life force had left them. I felt a sense of panic as if the death of my clone might portend my own. I shook his shoulders, but his flesh had turned back to sand, and he slowly dissolved before my eyes, dispersing to the floor in a million particles.

Only the orb remained; its light dim and struggling to stay lit. The walls had stopped, but the shaft was only about four feet in diameter. I hadn't noticed before, but the voices had stopped, too, and I was in a murky silence. I looked up and as far as I could see, I saw the glyphs on the side of the shaft begin to light up, and then they started to fall from the top of the shaft. I could see them raining down on me, thousands of glyphs floating down, like undulating snowflakes the size of a child's hand.

Starting at the top of the shaft the glyphs peeled off the shaft's walls in procession, and when I looked up I could only see phosphorescent patterns of golden light floating down on me, and I felt a sense of bliss as they tumbled downward. My body was in no pain or discomfort, but I did begin to feel a sense of claustrophobia as the glyphs started to pile up around me, and I realized the shaft was once again constricting—getting smaller and smaller. I could feel it pressing on me, and I held out my arms to stop it, but to no avail. My strength was no match, and so I surrendered to my fate. I had one final thought: where is the orb?

I looked down and it was burrowing into the floor as if it were running away from the glyphs and the narrowing shaft. It was digging a tunnel in the

sand, and suddenly the bottom of the shaft broke open, and I looked into a pit of blackness watching the orb float away below me like a glowing stone that had fallen into a deep well. I had one choice as I felt the grip of the shaft tighten around my shoulders: “Jump!”

Chapter 46: Aftermath

The void is a place I would not want to enter except in my dreams. I don't remember much of what happened after I jumped, but the next memory was looking up at Kohana, who was smiling down at me with an expression of joy. His hands were on my chest, and he was straddling me. I looked left and right, seeing boulders in the dim light on both sides, a deep fog filled my entire body as I lay exhausted on the ground.

"How do you feel?" Kohana asked excitedly.

I was groggy and confused, but with Kohana straddling me, my confusion was multiplied many times over. "What are you doing?"

"You lost consciousness, and your heart stopped. I thought I had lost you. You were out for over five minutes." Kohana opened one of my eyes wider with his fingers and looked intently with his flashlight, and I instantly remembered the orb.

"What happened… what do you mean I was out?" I demanded.

Kohana stood to his feet and looked down at me. "Man, you don't remember? This amnesia thing really comes in handy… I know I'd like to forget what I just saw."

He stepped to the side of me and put his hand out. "Do you feel good enough to sit up?"

I shook my head. I really didn't feel like I could move. My body was tingling, and I felt like I was in some kind of suspended animation.

"Let me see you move your fingers," Kohana ordered. "Now your toes."

His flashlight beam went to my toes, and I could feel my toes move slightly, but it was a struggle for me.

"Why am I barefoot?" I asked.

"I'll tell you what I saw, but you have to promise me that you'll believe me. Okay?"

“Why wouldn’t I believe you?”

“Just promise me,” Kohana said sternly.

“I… I promise.”

Kohana sat down next to me, leaning his back against a boulder.

“Where’s Uncle?” I asked.

“I’ll get to that,” Kohana replied, and then cleared his throat. “You were lagging behind us as we were walking the last leg to the site. We figured you were in a bad mood, so we let you have your space, but when we got to the site, and waited, we realized you’d gotten lost, or at least that’s what we assumed. We weren’t too alarmed, you’re a resourceful person, the path was fairly clear, you’d figure out your way, so instead of us going out looking for you, we held a ceremony, ate some food and waited.”

“How long was I missing?” I half-whispered.

“A long time.... when it started getting dark, we became more worried and Uncle used his medicine to see you—”

“How?”

“He just does. He can call a hawk and paint your picture inside the bird’s head and tell the bird to find you, and the bird will look. If the hawk finds you, the bird will return and paint the location to Uncle. I don’t know all the specifics, but it works.”

“And this is how you found me?”

“No. I was just searching, shouting your name, and then I heard a scream —a woman’s scream far in the distance.”

It was beginning to come back now. I had met Nammu. We had… oh my God. It was real! It was not a dream! “It was Nammu!” I whispered aloud, mostly to myself.

“Whoever it was, you seemed to be in the middle of a domestic dispute, except the disputers weren’t from around here. These were powerful entities. I’ve never experienced such power before. The big one—”

“He looked like a…”

“Giant lizard,” Kohana said.

I put my hands over my face. “Oh god, oh god, it wasn’t a dream. What am I going to do? What am I going to do? Shit!”

“Look, I don’t know what happened before I got here, all I heard were angry threats. As I got closer I stopped to listen behind some boulders. I couldn’t see the beast yet, but I could tell by the sound of his voice that he was not someone I wanted to confront without a weapon, and I had nothing. So I tried to get closer, so I could see what the situation was, you know, how I could help. And then suddenly I felt this… I don’t know how to describe it… it was like total paralysis, and I felt my body being dragged to this beast, and the next thing I knew I was looking up in the face of this utterly evil creature who seemed to relish my fear.

“Then I looked at you and the only thing I could think of was the story you’d told me about what Dou Xing, how in the midst of that demon, he’d told you—to turn away, which is exactly what I said to you, and you did it. You turned away, and when you did, the creature got incensed and came at you. I was sure he was going to kill you, but as he lifted his arm to strike, Nammu moved in and did something with her arm… and… and there was this flash of brilliant light, and both of them just disappeared. There was a heavy, metallic smell of ions in the air, but no other trace of them.

“You were lying face down on the ground, unconscious, and when I checked your pulse, there wasn’t one. I turned you over and started doing chest compressions… for about five minutes, nonstop… I was only seconds away from giving up…”

Kohana sat there shaking his head. “Look at my hands, they’re still trembling. I can’t believe what just happened. You have to tell me why this beast was so angry at you, and what you were doing with Nammu. Tell me. You have to tell me.”

I stared up at the sky, feeling a little like a mummy unsheathed of his cloth. I was embarrassed and humiliated. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You have to.”

“I know you think I’m your patient, and you’re my shrink, but I need some

time before I can talk about this stuff. All I'm asking for is some time. Okay?"

Kohana kicked his boots together, showing his frustration, but he could sense my resoluteness. I was not about to speak of my encounter with Nammu.

"It happened," I said.

He looked at me quizzically. "Huh?"

A broad smile spread across my face. "I have my memory back."

"Seriously?"

I nodded.

"All of it?" Kohana asked in astonishment. "…childhood, work, family?"

I nodded again, still smiling as I recalled some of them even as I stared into the bright darkness of the starlit sky.

"That's great, Solomon! Okay, I feel much better now."

There was something inside me that wanted to leave that place. I felt a presence swaying over me full of hindrance and hate.

"So where's this site you were taking me to?" I asked.

"About three miles north. Not an easy walk, especially at night. I'm not sure it makes sense for you to try it—"

"I'm feeling better," I said, sitting up, my head suddenly dizzy. For the first time since Kohana had sat down I could look at him. He looked tired. "Thank you for saving my life."

"You're welcome, but if Nammu hadn't come along, I wouldn't have even had a chance to save you. So, I'd give some gratitude to your lady friend."

The whole concept of Nammu saving me seemed so absurd that I almost laughed at Kohana's comment, but I managed to hold it in. I was in no position to argue about improbabilities after what I had just experienced.

I looked at my watch. "Let's make the walk tonight. We should get there by eleven, and we can make camp and sleep there."

“Uncle’s already made camp,” Kohana said. “But if you think you’re up for the journey, let’s go. The quicker we get out of here the better, as far as I’m concerned.”

“You think they could return?”

Kohana stood up and offered me his hand. “Let’s not wait to find out.”

The walk to Uncle was difficult. I didn’t feel any chest pain, something that Kohana was surprised to hear, but I had a nagging suspicion that my heart hadn’t stopped from myocardial infarction, but something related to my vision. I don’t know what that would be, but I kept it to myself. The journey to Uncle’s camp was slightly less than an hour of cautious walking, most of which I spent exploring my memories of Derya, my childhood and my children.

I wanted those memories to persist, and somewhere, deep in the back of my mind, I feared that they could slip away again. The one memory I wanted to slip away, to extinguish, was Nammu—anything related to her, and yet there was now a dark cloud that would forever hang over me: I had sex with the very definition of a cunning, evil, murderous female from another dimension.

I was so vulnerable. I hated myself.

Every memory that I uncoiled and viewed during that walk was projected on the backdrop of Nammu lying underneath me. I was not a Sonverto. If proof were required, I had mine. It was contained in that very disturbing image, and my affliction would forever be hunched over, staring down, casting its bruised shadow on every corner of my life… past and future.

I hated myself. I hated being human. I hated being weak. I hated those who were strong, for they made me even weaker.

There must be a reserved space somewhere in my mind where I could sweep these dark events into a storeroom of sorts and keep them in quarantine like radioactive material. Maybe uncle knew of such a place. It was the only spark of hope I had, and I clung to it.

Chapter 47: Apple of Temptation

Kohana and I found the campsite. Uncle was there, asleep. The fire was reduced to a glow of embers, still warm, but quickly fading. We put on some firewood, and it came up almost immediately, and the crackling of the burning wood and the light of the fire stirred Uncle from his sleep.

“You’re back,” he said, blinking his eyes. “You both look tired… probably hungry, too. Yes?”

“I could definitely eat something if there’s any food left,” Kohana joked, and turned his attention to foraging for food in the backpacks.

The campsite was notable in a mysterious way. It was in a small hollow situated between two converging rock outcroppings that seemed to be vying for supremacy. There were pine and spruce trees, along with sagebrush, all of which seemed strategically positioned to create an intimate effect. Though it was almost midnight, between the moon, fire and white-colored rocks, I could see the surroundings quite well.

“How often do you come here?” I asked Uncle, sitting down by the campfire to rest my legs.

He looked at me unemotionally. “You feel gloomy.”

“Maybe I am a little,” I admitted softly.

Uncle looked at me. “I’m glad to see you survived your test.”

“My test? If it was a test, I may have survived it, but I sure as hell didn’t pass it.”

“Some tests… it’s enough to survive,” Uncle said with a quick smile and bob of his head.

“It doesn’t feel that way to me.” I answered.

“Give it some time.”

“Why do you call it a test?” I asked.

Uncle cleared his throat, and took off a necklace hidden underneath his shirt. He passed it to me with care. “The pendant is the tooth of a mountain lion. I didn’t find it lying on the ground one day. I didn’t buy it. I extracted it from my thigh, right here.” He pointed to his right thigh a few inches above his knee.

“I was walking the same path to visit this site, and I was alone. This was about twenty years ago, and I was in better shape than I am now, but I didn’t notice that a mountain lion was stalking me. He probably thought I was lost and weak.

“He was big, about five feet long—just the body portion, I’m not counting the tail. He jumped me from behind and dragged me down with his powerful front legs. His first bite was right there, and I swept my elbow across so hard, it dislodged one of his incisors in my leg. The adrenalin was pumping so hard and fast, I didn’t feel a thing, all I knew was that he was knocked out cold, but he was still breathing, and I had a tooth—that tooth—lodged in my leg.

“I had no weapon, but I noticed a large rock a few feet away and all I could think was: ‘kill this beast before he regains his wits and decides to finish me off.’ This was no ordinary mountain lion, he was huge, and they don’t grow to that size because they’re bad hunters. So I picked up the rock—it probably weighed twenty pounds— and was just about to swing it down on his head, when his eyes blinked open and his legs started to twitch. I said aloud ‘do it now,’ but I knew that killing this majestic cat wasn’t the answer. It was a test, and I would fail it by killing him.

“The path to the Unktegila site is always a test. I’ve walked it a hundred times, and every time there’s a test—if not for me personally, then the one who accompanies me.”

“You mean animals try to kill you every time you come here?”

He laughed. “No, the tests come in different ways. But my point is that they come. This is our holiest of all sites. One doesn’t come to this site without a serious test.”

“And if you fail your test, then what?” I asked.

“When I made the decision not to kill that cat, I knew I had passed my test.

I watched as the cat got up a little woozy, and he looked at me with a sort of ‘I gave you my best shot, you gave me your best shot, let’s call it even’ look. He just walked away.”

“And he didn’t bother you again?”

“Nope, but several times after that experience I saw him, and he recognized me. We respected one another and kept our distance.”

I ran my fingers over the tooth, which was about two inches long and polished as smooth as an agate.

“About three years later” Uncle said, “I was coming to this site, again by myself, and this same mountain lion was standing… right there.” Uncle pointed to a spot about fifty feet away. “This cat was a guardian of the site. When I saw him, I didn’t know what to expect. He looked healthy, still had one tooth missing, the one I was wearing around my neck.” Uncle smiled. “He just looked at me, sniffed the air, and strode away as if he approved my presence.

“That was the last time I ever saw him.”

I handed the necklace back to Uncle. “These tests you had, did you always pass them?”

“Not always, but more times passed than failed. Good ratio.”

“And the times you failed, what happened? Was your visit to the site different?”

“I was gloomy like you. I knew I had failed the test and felt bad, but I still came to the site, I still did my ceremonies. I went on.”

Uncle looked around, his head spun in a full arc, looking up at the sky. “This is a magical world and we are magical beings within it. You can think your failures will haunt you, but they won’t. They will change you, and always for the better, if you learn from them. There’s a craft in seeing the fleeting things of this world, and frequently our lessons are the most fleeting of all.”

I grabbed a branch from the fire and repositioned it so it would burn better. “Do you know what happened with me… my test?”

Uncle was quiet for a while, taking his time with my question. “I know enough. Your test was different from mine. I never had a beautiful woman seduce me while I traveled this path, so I can’t judge you or offer any real help, but I can tell you this, as weak as you might feel yourself to be, you’re dealing with nonhuman powers. Nammu isn’t human or animal. She’s a powerful entity, and these entities can manipulate you in ways that you’re not even aware of.

“When they have such an interest in you, as Nammu has with you, they will find your weakness and use it. They will come at you from different angles, trying one thing and then another. They will keep on trying until they find what works, and then they will do that until they wear you down. This is their power… in part.”

“So what do I do? Right now I should be overjoyed that my amnesia’s gone, but I can’t even enjoy the memories, because I see Nammu behind every image. She’s haunting me and I feel incapable to change it.”

“There are always scars with tests. Even the ones you pass can leave scars, as you can see with my story. The scars never go away completely. But so what; are you supposed to be a perfect man? By who’s definition? Who’s so bold to think that they’re perfect? That they should pass every test!”

His tone was intense, and he realized it, quieting his voice to a mere whisper. “Life for Sonvertos can be a labyrinth that leads from one test to another. It seems unfair, I know, but this is the realm of good and evil, and in this realm a Sonverto will be tested by the dark forces who hope to unleash the Sonverto’s dark side. This is in part to humanize them—to remind them that they are human—”

“I don’t need anyone to remind me of that.”

“Ah… is that so,” Uncle said. “Sometimes we judge ourselves so severely that we miss the lesson contained in the test.”

I composed myself. “And what lesson am I missing?”

“That your tests will be complex and thorny, because you’ve been identified as the Sonverto that will complete the Grand Portal. You will be the one who will reconnect humanity to its true creators. Those like Nammu

who've operated as if they were the gods of earth and humanity will not want this to occur. It's a matter of focus. They have you to focus on. So you'll be their point of concern and interest.

"They will try to manipulate you to no end. You must learn this lesson and see that every interaction with them, no matter how civil or human it may appear, is trickery and nothing more. They care nothing for you as a human being, they only care that you do not succeed in your mission."

"That's it? That's my lesson?"

Uncle nodded. "Nammu knows exactly what she needs to do to make you entangled in her world. She's done that. Now, you must be watchful in such a way that you'll never allow it to happen again. That's the only way, not only to lessen the failure, but to pass the test."

"So you mean she's going to continue to seduce me?"

Uncle sighed wearily. "That's not the point I was trying to make. I'm saying you can pass this test if you learn from it. If you can do that, the haunting that you referred to, will be no more."

"How do I make sure it'll never happen again?"

"You know what she will try—what angle she will come at you… turn away." Uncle smiled in a knowing way and looked into the fire, as if underlining his point.

Kohana took our momentary pause as his entrance, and sat down next to the fire and handed us a plate of food. It was more of the brick bread, venison jerky, dried fruits, and to my surprise, apples.

"You brought apples?" I asked, looking at Kohana.

"Yup."

"I think I'll start there."

"Didn't you already?" Kohana grinned.

I was about to ask what he meant, and then I got it, the joke, the not-so-subtle reference to the serpent and the apple of temptation as depicted in the Bible. "I'm going to forgive you for that, since you saved my life earlier."

We laughed that night during our dinner, mostly because we had survived the journey, so far, to the Unktegila site and from Uncle's description, it was no small feat. Yes, there was a gnawing in the back of my mind that I was still vulnerable, and an easy mark for the powers of Nammu, but I was also better prepared now. And I had Uncle and Kohana with me—two bodies I would not part from the rest of the trip.

We talked a lot about my memories that night. My life had been rich and varied, and the tests that had shaped me before my heart transplant, were now known to me. They gave me a greater power, too.

That night, after dinner, while I was trying to fall asleep, a distant memory flickered for a brief moment concerning a Sunday school lesson about Adam and Eve. I remembered reading how they were translucent—barely human, seeking only the knowledge of their divinity. The apple of temptation was really the knowledge of good and evil and how to transcend it. The tree of knowledge was what I sought to make available to all. In a way, I was the serpent.

Chapter 48: Burkhan

The fragrance of pine, sage and wood smoke wafted in the air, creating a medley of scents that were a wonderful entry into the world of appearances, as Dou Xing liked to call it. I woke refreshed, hungry and eager to explore the sacred site of the Unktegila. When I looked around, Kohana and Uncle were conspicuously absent. I thought I'd heard some movement earlier, but I was too tired to open my eyes. Perhaps they went to find some water or food.

I stood up, dusted off my clothes and grabbed my canteen and took a long drink of water. I poured some out on my left hand and doused it over my face. It felt good. I used my shirtsleeve to dry my face, and when I opened my eyes, a stranger was sitting on a large boulder about forty feet away. "Who are you?" I asked, startled and suddenly on guard.

"Who are you?" came the reply.

This person was very odd looking. I wasn't sure what to call him—human, I don't think so. Elfin, maybe. He was about four feet tall, very petite, with a hunched back.

"I'm Solomon," I said, "I'm here with two other friends."

"Really? …and where are your friends?"

I decided to ignore his question, since his response seemed a little impertinent for my tastes. "You never introduced yourself."

He stepped down from his perch on the boulder and walked towards me, sizing me up as he strolled confidently in my general direction without any sense of urgency.

"My name is Burkhan. I know who you are, Solomon, and I know who your enemies are, too. To look at you, though, I have no idea how you made the enemies you have—"

"Who sent you here?"

"It isn't important," he said, waving his hand dismissively. "You said you

were with friends…”

“Yes.”

“And these friends are…” he looked around with a complete spin of his small body. “…gone?”

“I just woke up. They must have left to get some water or food.

“What do you want?” I asked, watching as he drifted nearer to my position by the fire. I watched him stroll to the backpacks, looking them over. He held a stick of some kind that looked like it had been whittled by a knife, and he used it like a probe, not a cane.

“What do I want?” he said quietly to himself, over and over again.

“I am what you call in your world a messenger, though not in the angelic sense of the word. N-no, I’m certainly not an angel.” He smiled, showing sharp, pointed, yellowish teeth.

He was now within ten feet of me. I could see his eyes better, and they were silver, metallic looking, and yet they were expressive and full of energy. His hair was black, straight and long down to his shoulders. He had a hooked nose that was quite bulbous, but proportional to his head. His clothing was a simple gray robe with a black hood and a thin red belt of velvet.

“Did you have a message for me?” I asked.

“I’ll get to that in a minute. Patience.” He exhaled the last word slowly.

I didn’t like him—any part of him. I began to mentally prepare my options to run. Judging from his stature I felt that I could either outrun him or beat him in a fight, if it came to it. His only weapon, that was obvious to me, was his stick, which didn’t look that menacing to me. He continued to casually inspect our camp as if he were seeking something.

“Are you looking for anything in particular, perhaps a way home?” I asked in a mocking tone.

He immediately stopped and looked at me with disdain. “Don’t get uppity with me. My bite is much worse than my bark, I assure you. But as luck would have it, at least in your case, I’m not here as an assassin, just a messenger.”

“Get to the point, what do you want?” My frustration was mounting.

“It seems that a certain being, a very powerful being… no… no, that wouldn’t do…” his hand—the one without the stick—went straight into the air in dramatic fashion, “…the most powerful being known to humankind, has asked me, Burkhan, to find you and to tell you that he will hunt you down and destroy you in his own time.

“He would like you to know that you’re only alive because you are insignificant to him, and when his more important matters are concluded, he will… and I want to use his exact words here… tear you into oblivion.”

As he delivered the message I could see he was concentrated to observe my reaction. I tried to look composed and unafraid, but my acting, I’m sure, was horrible.

“You said you were a messenger, right?”

Burkhan nodded.

“Then give your client the following message. I will pray for him to learn forgiveness, and I will call upon the First Born, the Blue Angel that rules the highest arc of our worlds, and I—”

“I can’t give my client this message! Are you crazy? My head would be a hundred miles from my body.”

“Then send him a letter.” I took a step in his direction. “It’s time for you to leave.”

Burkhan didn’t move an inch. He just stared at me as one might do when they witnessed a colossal stupidity. “If you think for a moment that you can intimidate me,” he said, barely moving his mouth, boring his silver eyes into mine, “you are indeed the definition of crazy stupid.”

He stepped closer to me, peering up at me with calculating eyes. “I will explain to my client that you wept in fear when I delivered his message. You shook so badly that you couldn’t stand. You begged with all your breath for his forgiveness. That is the only message I will deliver. My client will smile at my report, perhaps even chuckle. Think about that over the weeks ahead. I’m sure you won’t have to wait much longer than that.”

I looked down at him, sensing his energy. He was parasitic. Self interest was all I could sense in him, and he felt ensnared and distressed by its own disorder, like a reflection of evil that had become frightened of itself. I knelt down on one knee so I could be at his level. I took hold of his arm, which at first he resisted, but there was a curiosity that took hold in him that caused him to submit. “Why do you take such pleasure from another’s misfortune and pain?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” He replied flippantly.

I shook my head. “No. There are many who feel the pain of another, who understand their misfortunes and want to ease their burdens. Some feel this so strongly that they share the pain and misfortune, and in doing this they bring love to this world.”

“Love! You’re going to talk to me about love? Save your breath. Fairy tales don’t put food and drink on my table or gold in my vault. You can have all the love you want, I’ll take mine in gold and silver.”

“And what does your vault bring you?”

“Security… protection.”

“Do you ever desire that someone understands you? Really understands you?”

He looked at me for a moment, and I could see he was considering my question, but in the next instant I could see a mechanical reaction lurch over him like a drought that calls a fire. “Don’t pretend to understand me,” he said with anger fuming from his mouth. I could smell the anger, it was that visceral. He shook his arm free from my grip, and I let go without resistance.

I opened my mouth, and yet I don’t know from where my voice came. “This is the way of all beings; we want to be understood, because we walk the path between good and evil. Sometimes we fall to the evil side, but we want others to understand why we did so. What compelled us. When we receive this understanding, even if it’s only a thimble full, we’re drawn a little closer to the middle path.

“Even you, Burkhan, you say that you don’t want my understanding, and yet I have some for you, whether you want it or not. It’s here. I didn’t ask for

it, or call it into being, or pretend that I know your darkness, I have none of those things at my disposal, but I know one thing, we are all children of the First Born, and what more is required to invoke understanding than to know this?”

Burkhan stepped back a few paces. He was quiet for several seconds. He looked around as if making sure we were still alone, and then took a step closer to me and held out his stick. “Do you see this?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Look at it carefully,” he said intensely.

I followed his instructions. It was soiled with blood stains everywhere, pieces of hair and skin were attached near its pointed, narrow end.

“Where I come from,” he whispered, “everyone must carry a stick like this so those who watch us can beat us with our own stick. Most are beaten every day, sometimes for doing nothing at all. If our stick breaks during a beating, we are beaten harder the next time, and we’re told to make a thicker stick. We are told never to clean it. Those who walk with a clean stick are beaten severely. Some of my kind, their sticks are so dirty that they’re infested with disease and they perish from simply holding it.

“In this kind of world, where does one find love or even care about understanding?”

“Why do the watchers abuse you?” I asked.

“Because we break rules.”

“And who made the rules?”

“The one you called my client.”

It was a strange thing, but as I was talking with Burkhan, from the time I had knelt down, I felt a gathering force in my heart area, and as it grew I could sense its release was imminent. “Rules that reduce your kind to fearful and vengeful beings are not rules,” I said. “They’re manipulations that serve another purpose.”

“And what purpose would that be?” Burkhan asked.

“To reduce you to slavery.”

“Even if what you say is true, what can I do about it? All I can hope for is to be a useful servant to the one that is all powerful, and be rewarded with gold or silver. I know of no other way. My only real skill is tracking people in your world. It’s what I’ve always been good at. I have a sense for these things… a knowing, and I’m lucky because of it.”

“Perhaps you’re right, that you’re powerless to change your world. But you can still bring understanding to those around you. You can offer them this even if they reject it.”

“To what end?”

“I don’t know the end,” I said. “I only know that there’s a source higher than your client, and this source is not about rules that diminish or punish or sow seeds of fear, and those who do, regardless of their claim to divinity, are not divine. They mimic what they think is power over others, but real power is the vibration of equality.”

“Real power? The watchers have the power to kill us. My client has the power to kill all of my kind in a single word. Can love trump that? Can love protect me from that?”

Burkhan took his stick and leveled it between his outstretched hands. “Look at this and tell me, where does love reside? Where does love influence a single atom of the history that is contained on this stick?”

I looked at the stick and felt my hand move to feel it. Burkhan pulled it back. “You mustn’t touch it.”

I moved my hand forward, ignoring him, and I put my finger on a part of the stick that was soiled with blood, and from my hand I poured out the feeling of love that I had felt gathering inside me. I looked at him, and saw his eyes riveted on my hand. “You are not what I expected,” he whispered, his head faintly shaking back and forth.

I felt tears dazzle in my eyes, and then I heard voices in the distance, one sounded like Kohana. Burkhan looked at me with a sudden urgency. “I don’t know what will happen from this, but you showed me something that no one else has, and I will not forget it. I will not forget it.”

With that, Burkhan slowly disappeared, and behind him I could see Uncle

and Kohana slowly walking their way up the path that snaked to our campsite. They had canteens slung over their shoulder and were waving at me, oblivious of my encounter with Burkhan. I waved back, but my heart was somewhere else in that moment. Whatever shackles Burkhan submitted to, whatever bitter-edged path he walked, whatever master he resented and feared, a portion of my heart was now in his.

Chapter 49: Deep Ravine

In ancient times they borrowed from their sense of oneness to produce something that felt separate, individualized, owned and operated by a single entity whose identity was formed at birth, and over the ensuing years learned but one thing: to survive.

I don’t know where this thought came from, but I was getting thoughts like this in a constant stream. Something had shifted during my experience with Burkhan; I felt a new presence enter me the moment I knelt down in front of him.

In the short time it took Kohana and Uncle to complete their walk to my position, I felt as though a thousand answers had found their way inside of me, and they were now waiting to be sorted and organized into a relationship —a mosaic of meaning. I realized for the first time that I was not a human being with my own will and self interests, but I was, in fact, a repository of feelings, insights and ideas that were not mine, yet they were mine to share.

I was a hub in a network of Sonvertos. The thought, as strange as it may seem, to you, the reader, actually made sense to me.

As a hub, I had opened up and availed myself for the connection, and somehow, Burkhan had provided me a key. Why? What had transpired since my failure with Nammu to catapult me into my apparent success with Burkhan? And when I say “success” I simply mean my newfound ability to access this network of information that seemingly floats among us, but so few can touch, or more importantly, pull inside themselves and consciously make use of.

Kohana greeted me with a fresh canteen of water. “Drink up. Your body dehydrates pretty fast in this place.”

“Thanks,” I said. I took a few deep gulps, and handed it back to him. The water was ice cold and tasted wonderful.

“Keep it,” he said, “you’ll need more. Besides, I’m not carrying it.”

Uncle stood back a short distance and was watching me. “Are you ready?”

“Will we eat first?” I asked, forming a hopeful expression on my face.

Uncle swung his right arm, palm down, like a scythe parallel to the ground. “No food this morning, just water.”

I couldn’t hide my disappointment.

Kohana nudged me with his elbow. “Fill up on water,” he said with a smile. “It’ll hold you fine.”

“In that case, I guess I’m ready,” I announced, picking up my pack and slinging the canteen over my shoulder.

“Then follow me,” Kohana said, “it’s just a few more miles.”

“I thought the site was here?”

Kohana grinned. “This is base camp, we still have a short hike, and this one is tricky, so stay close.” Kohana chuckled. “I’ll go slowly… I still remember my first time.”

“Why do I get the impression we’re going to walk over hot coals?”

“If only it was that easy,” Kohana mused, grabbing his pack, and marching up the rock outcropping that had been shielding us.

Uncle waited for me to follow behind Kohana. “I’ll go behind you this time. I like to move a little slower in this part.”

“You guys are definitely making me nervous,” I said. “There won’t be any dragons or moats of lava, right?”

I think I could hear a smile on their faces, but neither of them said a word.

A few minutes later we were standing on top of the rock outcropping that formed a protective barrier for our base camp, and I could see a vast array of swirling gullies and miniature canyons that snaked before us like a vast labyrinth.

“I don’t see any signs,” I remarked casually.

Kohana looked at me calmly. “Oh, they’re there, just written in Lakota. Follow me, and stay within thirty feet of my position. If you start to lag, just

call out… and keep an eye on Uncle, too."

We walked to the edge of the steep decline, and Kohana lifted his hand. "We'll stagger our descent. I'll go first, Solomon, you go second, but start over there. Uncle… you know what to do."

We'd only started our descent when a large rock, about the size of a basketball, slid down as Kohana had put his weight on it. He almost fell. Some of the rocks were wobbly, so Kohana instructed me to test them before putting too much pressure on them. "If they give way, fall backwards on your pack, keep your head up, and find something solid to hang onto." Those were his final words as he continued down the steep descent, in stern concentration.

With ample struggle and a few nervous laughs, all three of us made it to the floor of the canyon. Stretching before us were ravines and gullies that snaked away from our position like forks in a road, except here, there were nine of them. Kohana went forward into one without hesitation and I followed, immediately feeling the closed-in space of a deep ravine that seemed well suited to channel floodwaters. Twisted roots of dead trees cluttered the ravine on both sides of its steep walls, and large white stones, caked in dried mud loomed above. A few of these were the size of a small car and looked precariously positioned as if they could drop from their heights with the slightest disturbance.

I walked as carefully as I could.

Occasionally, we would come upon one of these huge boulders that were lying in the middle of the ravine, clear evidence that disturbances did happen.

Kohana held up, looking at one of the large boulders that blocked out path. "This is a new one, isn't it, Uncle?"

Uncle looked up to the left and then the right. "It came from there." His finger was pointing to a gash in the side of ravine. "You can see the trail."

"Let's check it out," Kohana said.

I followed silently. I wasn't sure why there was such an interest in where the boulder had fallen.

"This is how we found the first one," Uncle said.

“The first what?” I asked.

“Unktegila bone—it was a vertebra.”

Kohana reached the gash in the side of the ravine first and was hunched over it examining it carefully. “Nothing here that I can see.” He beat his hand against the dirt. “The ground seems solid.”

Uncle crouched down and examined some of the shattered vegetation. “Probably fell a few weeks ago.”

“When was the last time you were here… at the site?” I asked.

“Almost a month ago,” Uncle said. “Let’s be on our way.”

We walked through the ravine for another few minutes and then came to a steep and narrow gully that simply dropped down for about a hundred feet. I could see no path through it. Kohana had already stopped and was taking a drink from his canteen.

“How… where do you go from here?” I asked, looking in amazement at the impassible trail that stood in front of us.

“This is where it gets tricky,” Kohana grinned, wiping his chin.

Uncle caught up with us and took a swig of water that Kohana offered him. He turned to me with a strange smile. “If an old wood tick like me can do this, so can you. Just follow Kohana and do exactly as he does. I’ll be right behind you, watching you.”

“I just don’t see how you can get through this underbrush. Where’s the path?”

Kohana pointed up. “The trees.”

I looked up and saw a tangled web of branches and nothing more. “The trees?”

“Just follow me, you’ll see.”

Now, as I said before, Kohana is a big man. The thought of him climbing trees— especially trees that were this messed up—was almost impossible for me to imagine.

Kohana dropped his pack to the ground. “We leave our packs here,

including the canteens. Any loose-fitting clothes, remove them."

Kohana removed his shirt as did Uncle. I looked around as if there should be an arbiter somewhere in these woods that should step forward and inject a rational thought related to the subject of self preservation. Not only did I have a fear of heights, but I remembered the last time I climbed a tree—some thirty years ago. I had fallen to the ground with such a force that I was knocked out stone cold for almost twenty minutes. My fear, in other words, was well founded; this was not simply an instinctual fear. My memories, unfortunately, served me well in that moment.

"I'm not sure I can do this," I whispered.

Kohana looked at me calmly. "Take your shirt off; it'll catch on these branches."

Like a mindless automaton I removed my shirt.

Kohana looked at my side. "Your bruise is gone. How does it feel?"

"Fine," I replied.

So there we were, three shirtless men, staring into a deep drop-off that seemed to be guarded by the utter chaos of branches and fallen trees. It was like staring into a chasm of danger that was begging you to enter in order to humble you.

Kohana took a deep breath and exhaled, then looked at me. "You ready?"

"No."

He glanced at me with a quick smile. "Let's go anyway."

Kohana walked to a large tree and started to climb it. I was surprised that for a large man he glided over the branches with ease. "You know humans are nearly identical to chimps… in terms of their DNA. Just keep that thought in your mind as you follow me."

I felt Uncle's hand on my shoulder. He had been standing behind me in silence. "The key is to never make a new move until you feel your present position is solid. Okay?"

"Okay…"

Uncle pointed up at Kohana. “Follow him to your best ability. If he goes too fast, tell him so.”

I climbed the tree. My heart was beating—I imagined—just like a monkey’s. I took Uncle’s advice and made sure every move was preceded by a sense of solidness. I climbed the tree to about twenty feet from the ground. Some of the branches poked my skin and I had this feeling that I would be a bloody mess by the time we finished.

“Avoid this branch,” Kohana said, pointing to a thick branch.

I nodded, trying to conserve my energy.

“I’m going from this branch to that one,” Kohana said. “When we switch trees, that’s when it gets dicey. You have to use your balance and instinct on this. The branch I’m on is strong to about this distance, but don’t go much beyond it, even though you weigh less than me. Grab that branch above and put some of your weight on it. Not all of it though, only about half. That’s how we get far enough out to move from one tree to the next. Understood?”

I nodded. “Yes, I understand.”

I was already thirsty. I had forgotten to drink any water before I dropped my canteen on the ground. Then, to make matters worse, it suddenly occurred to me that we’d have to do this whole procedure again on the way back. It was hard to keep any optimism alive.

“It gets easier once we get past this first section,” Kohana said. “Watch me carefully and then do exactly the same.”

Kohana grabbed a branch above him and tugged on it. He walked out on the tree limb with his arms holding the parallel branch above him. “When you get this far out, you have to go very slow. Listen carefully. The branch will tell you if you need to move back a few inches. If you don’t hear anything, keep inching out.”

He got out further than I expected and then he looked back at me. “Now, reach out on the top branch as far as you can… get on your tippy toes and then swing as gently as you can to the next branch. Your body weight will bring the branch down a bit, and you should be able to glide onto the other tree with ease… like this.”

He showed his technique, and it worked flawlessly. After catching his balance, he landed on the next tree's branch and quickly grabbed a new upper branch to steady himself. "Feet first, feel the branch under you, then shift upper branch. I'll stay here to grab you if you need any help. Ready?"

"I have no idea."

"Good, at least you're being honest," Kohana said encouragingly.

Uncle chuckled. "Be confident, even if you have no reason."

I glanced behind me to see Uncle's smiling face. I didn't know what to say. I grabbed the branch above just as Kohana had done and began to walk out towards Kohana's position in the next tree. As I got closer to the point of the jump, I slowed down. My hands were perspiring, even shaking a little. I tried not to look down too much, but I could see that a fall, though not necessarily fatal, would be painful and make it near impossible to get to me.

Then I heard the branch below my feet creak, and I instantly stopped.

"Go back a few inches, and put more weight on your arms," Kohana advised.

I followed his directions and backed up.

"Okay, you're ready, now move forward about two feet, but do so slowly —about an inch at a time. Okay, stop there. On your tip toes, lean forward… swing, go!"

My body, for whatever reason, listened to Kohana's direction and executed his commands like a fine-tuned machine. My mind, on the other hand, was screaming, "You can't do that!"

I had a few jitters on my landing, but I relaxed finally as I felt Kohana's powerful grip on my arm, and I knew I was safely across to the next tree. We both shuffled quickly towards the trunk of the tree. Uncle followed about a minute later.

We kept repeating this basic procedure for about thirty minutes, edging our way down the tangled morass of tree limbs that cluttered the ravine. Each step we took was accompanied by a drop in elevation as we entered the deeper sections like miners entering a shaft. The sun was blocked from our

view even though it was late morning. I'd never seen such a clutter of vegetation so tightly packed together. We were between two steep cliffs that each stood about two hundred feet tall. Though I was shirtless and the air was cold, the effort of the climb kept me comfortably warm.

About ten minutes into the tree climbing I was beginning to calm down and feel the exhilaration of what I was doing. There was something very primal about journeying over land using tree branches as your path. There was a blissful, lucid clarity that comes to you when you mesh all of your humanity and fate with trees.

We came to a point in our journey where the trees were too small to safely walk on their branches, so Kohana climbed down onto a spot that had been cleared of the brush, driftwood, and tree branches.

"When the storms are really bad," Kohana said, "the rains create these flash floods that wash all of this debris into these gullies. This one, because of its depth, has accumulated so much debris that it actually acts like a barrier to our most sacred site."

"How did you find this site originally?" I asked.

Kohana looked up at Uncle. "Ask him."

I turned around looking expectantly at Uncle.

"When I was about twelve, I saw this place in a vision. I had the vision several times, but each time I saw it, I couldn't figure out the location. I saw these trees. I saw all of the debris. I knew it would be impassable, but my vision was clear… I needed to find a way.

"When I told others of my vision they thought I was crazy. They knew of the place. No one ever came here. It was considered the cesspool of our lands. The gathering of nature's garbage. It was the place of evil spirits."

Uncle and I were still about fifteen feet above the ground, each standing on different branches of the same tree, looking down on Kohana.

Uncle's voice became introspective. "But I persisted because I had seen it __"

"Seen what?" I asked.

“The bones of a distant relative… the Unktegila. I told the medicine men, those who’d listen to me, that the rains had washed the rock from the bones, and they would find the bones of giant fish, if they would only listen to me and explore this place. About a year of pestering them, one finally broke down and came out here with me. He was called Lame Deer, one of our greatest medicine men. He looked at this place and said it was too hard to travel into. I told him, it was this way by design. We spent the next year coming out here and looking around for entrances or ways to get down here. We were here one day, frustrated and hungry—god, we were hungry.

“I had a slingshot with me, and Lame Deer saw a squirrel jumping from tree to tree and the thought came to him that we could use the trees. I was all set to shoot that squirrel and Lame Deer pushed my arm down, saying we couldn’t shoot the squirrel as it had taught us a way into the depths of the ravine, so we needed to just ignore our hunger.

“We took a similar path to the one we just completed… our technique was a little less polished, but we figured out the technique together. It was much harder though, but because I was small, it was not too bad. I only fell once —”

“You fell in there?” I pointed to the section we’d just gone through.

“I’ve fallen many times,” Uncle replied. “And so has my blood…”

Kohana grunted with a smile. “Probably a few gallons worth over the years, huh, Uncle?

“Probably.”

Let’s go,” Kohana said, looking into my eyes. “We’re almost there.”

He stepped back from the base of the tree. “Just hang from that branch and drop down, but before you jump, slide out about six feet from the trunk so you miss these roots.” He pointed to the tree’s tangled roots that looked like writhing serpents frozen in time. “We don’t want any sprained ankles.”

I jumped down, as did Uncle, without incidence, and the three of us walked a very narrow path that was hacked out by knives. I noticed that Kohana’s khaki pants had blood stains, and I wondered if that ticklish trail of liquid I felt on my calf was sweat or blood. Thank God for adrenalin, I mused

to myself. I didn’t feel a thing.

“Don’t follow too close,” Kohana instructed, “or you might get the backlash of a branch.”

For the next five minutes we walked silently in single file, about ten feet between us. The ravine was becoming a little less chaotic, a little cooler, and a little darker. I could sense dampness in the air, and even the soil beneath our feet seemed a little spongy from water. I also noticed green moss was gathered in abundance along our makeshift path.

When I came around a curve in the path, I saw Kohana was kneeling down on the ground with a knife in his hand. “We can eat these.”

He handed me about six mushrooms. The irony of having your memory restored is that you remember things that you don’t really want to. For example, I had the distinct recollection of hating the taste of mushrooms, particularly raw mushrooms, but now I had six of them in my hand with dirt attached no less.

“I’m supposed to eat these?” I asked.

Kohana laughed, handing some to Uncle who was behind me. “You’re not hungry?”

“I’m hungry… but mushrooms?”

Uncle put his hand on my shoulder and took one the mushrooms from my open hand and brushed off some of the dirt, and then looked at me. “Whatever you might hold against mushrooms, these are good for you. Eat them.”

He literally plopped the mushroom in my open mouth. It was only out of respect to Uncle that I allowed that mushroom to enter my mouth, but once I did, I really liked it. It had a smoky taste. The texture was crunchier than I had expected, too.

“Good?” Uncle asked.

I nodded. “Surprisingly… yes.”

“Mushrooms live in the shadows, but they’re connected. That’s why Kohana cut them the way he did. Those will grow back. They’re part of a

much larger organism that we can’t see.” He leaned toward me. “And they’re ancient, we don’t even know how long they’ve been here, but since I was a boy, I’ve eaten the fruit of that mushroom.”

I looked down at the mushrooms in my hand, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t see them as fruit, but I understood Uncle’s metaphor. I put the rest in my mouth and followed Kohana. For some reason, the idea of eating raw food from the hole we were in seemed appropriate—almost initiatory.

The place we were in had a magical presence, though I couldn’t say what it was. All I knew was how it made me feel, and I was feeling physically and mentally renewed. My energy felt inexhaustible. The only thing I needed was water.

Chapter 50: The Bones

When we arrived near the site, Uncle shouted, “Inaji.”

Kohana stopped abruptly ahead of me and turned around. “What?”

Uncle caught up with us. “I’d like Solomon to go first. We can wait here.”

Uncle turned to me a little out of breath. “Just follow the trail… it’s only another hundred yards or so. We’ll stay here for… ten minutes or so. Okay?”

I nodded, not sure why he wanted me to enter the site alone, but I didn’t ask any questions. I started to walk, edging past Kohana on the narrow trail. The brush was still thick and tangled, and I was beginning to feel a slight apprehension of approaching the site alone. The thought occurred to me that I might not even recognize the site. As strange as it may seem, I’d never asked Kohana or Uncle what the Unktegila site looked like.

As I walked past Kohana I started to concentrate on distance. Uncle had said about a hundred yards, so I became very attentive to the distance I was walking, counting my steps in feet and then multiplying by three. When I got to one hundred yards, I stopped and looked around. More tangled underbrush and some large tree trunks, that was it. Maybe Uncle was optimistic on the distance. I kept walking.

Another fifty yards or so I came upon a clearing where the canyon walls met. The walls went straight up about two hundred feet with nothing but an occasional and determined pine tree jutting out. At the base were large rocks that had presumably fallen over the eons and now looked like chairs that had dropped from the heavens. The cliff’s walls were nearly vertical and were the color of ivory with dabs of ochre here and there. Tufts of pale green sagebrush dotted the upper sections of the wall, but as the cliff plunged to the floor, it was sheer limestone folded into magnificent patterns.

One of these patterns opened into a cleft that looked like the cliff had fractured. It was a thin, vertical crevice, and I was drawn to it. I walked to the opening, glancing around nervously. I kept wondering why Uncle would

have wanted me to come to the site alone. My mind was anxious, but something about the scale of the site, its absolute solitude, gave it a sacred stature.

As I went inside the crevice I noticed it was less a cave than a hollowed-out vestibule that was largely vertical in nature. Maybe rains, over thousands of centuries, had carved it out, I didn't know, but the feeling was one of crystalline beauty as if I were entering a small temple built by Nature. There were several holes at the very top where beams of sunlight poured down into the waiting cavity, like waterfalls of radiant photons.

The chamber was only about twelve feet across, but its height soared more than a hundred feet, and as I looked up I could see bones protruding from the inner wall— huge bones. Suddenly, I felt small. Suspended above me, a spinal cord, perhaps forty feet long, drenched in silence had—at least partially—freed itself from the stone. It was gigantic, and I strained my neck to look upwards to observe the spectacular sight. The bones were crusted in limestone and seemed as if they were welded to the rock face. Most of the skeleton was buried underneath the wall of rock, but the spinal cord was clear as it arced above me like a massive, reticulated serpent.

I spun around to look at the other side of the inner wall and noticed another set of bones, smaller and less distinct, a mosaic splintered and encrusted in the rock, like messengers that stay quiet after they have spoken. As I looked closer, more skeletons could be seen. It was as if they were rising in unison amid their stone fortress. I was in awe of their preserved presence. Now I understood why Uncle had wanted me to see this alone. It was a powerful reminder of my dream with Trisiel.

As I was looking upward, I stumbled on a protrusion from the floor and noticed more bones. They were everywhere. The closer I looked I saw more bones; sometimes they were as small as a child's finger.

As soon as I felt that connection, I thought of my children. My heart suddenly ached for them. Here I was, deep in the secret recesses of an Indian reservation, among ancient bones of a species that science knew nothing about. I really didn't understand why I was even there. My sense of isolation and sadness came at me with such intensity that I had no choice but to sit down and close my eyes, and when I did, I wept. It wasn't what I had

expected I would do in this sacred place.

I said a few choice inward curses mostly directed at my all too numerous weaknesses—one of which was my penchant for weeping, and then I heard the shuffle of approaching feet.

“It’s hard to miss isn’t it,” Uncle announced as he entered the limestone vestibule ahead of Kohana. He looked at me and lowered his voice. “How do you feel?”

In that moment, I felt shackled to an array of awkward human emotions. All I could do was to wipe my tears away, and try to look calm and collected, but before I could compose my response, Uncle raised his hand.

“Hold your words, there’s more to see.”

Both Kohana and Uncle sat down. Kohana leaned back on the wall behind me with a loud, tired sigh, and then began fidgeting to get comfortable. Uncle sat across from me, and seemed to be examining my mood with great interest.

In my sudden exposure, a question came out of me. “What is this place? I mean, why are we really here?”

“Some places have a special presence. This is one of them. The presence in this place is potent. It can shift energies in profound ways. It can cause visions.” Uncle turned his sharp eyes onto me, paused, and then rubbed his palms together in a single brush. “It can pull deep emotions to the surface and cleanse them.”

I knew he was speaking directly about me, but I pretended to ignore the reference. “How can this place exist and no one knows about it?”

Kohana cleared his throat. “I’ve never been there, but the largest cave system in the world was first explored only twelve years ago. It’s called the Hang Son Doong cavern in Vietnam. Even the largest cave in the world sat unexplored for tens of thousands of years.”

Uncle cleared his throat. “These places can go undetected because our elders know what will happen if we bring the archeologists here. This part of our reservation would be set aside for scientific study. We’d be prevented from coming to this site. The bones would be taken from us and the special energy of this place would be gone.”

“Who knows of this place?” I asked.

“Only a handful.”

“Even amongst your people only a handful knows about this place?”

Uncle nodded patiently. “There are many within the reservation that would sell this place out in a minute, if they thought it would bring them fortune or prestige. We brought you here for only two reasons: you have seen the Quantusum, and you are a Sonverto.

“You’ve told me that I’m a Sonverto many times, but what does it mean, because most of the time I feel like an average man—perhaps a bit more educated than most, but average in every important way. What makes me so special that you’d bring me here, but not those of your own tribe? It doesn’t make sense.”

Uncle smiled broadly, his white teeth shimmering in the elusive light. “Just because you’re a Sonverto doesn’t mean you’re not average. Look at Kohana. He’s average, too. In some ways, below average.”

“Watch it,” Kohana muttered behind me.

“Sonvertos are not held to a different standard; they still live and die as humans. They have their weaknesses and follies. They just know how to navigate the tempest better than most, but a tempest will find them and humanize them.”

As Uncle’s final word entered my mind, I suddenly felt as though I had gone deaf. My ears literally popped. I glanced behind me and saw that Kohana had his eyes closed. When I looked at Uncle his mouth was half open, and he was frozen in time. I realized that something had shifted. Time had stopped. I was alone in a fragment of time that Kohana and Uncle weren’t in, even though they shared my space. I was confused, and a strange fear gripped me, as if a nightmare were about to begin.

Why was I able to move and see in this space, but they could not? Then I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I spun around with fear pounding in my chest.

“It was necessary to meet in this way,” the stranger said.

Standing to my right side, was a figure of an old woman, perhaps seventy years old. She had kind eyes and a narrow face. She was human, but not quite human at the same time. Something about her felt familiar to me, but her appearance was entirely foreign to my mind. I breathed a sigh of relief that it was not Nammu.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I’m you.”

“I am me, who are you?”

“I’m truly you, but I’m in a different body, and presently I’m on a different planet, well, technically, it’s an asteroid, but it’s similar to this place you call earth.”

“How can you be me when I am me?”

She reached out and touched my shoulder again. “I could ask you the same question.”

She waved her hand in the air dismissively as if she had erased her comment. “May I sit with you for a moment?”

I looked around and confirmed that Kohana and Uncle were still frozen in their time. I must have nodded, because she sat down next to me and grabbed my right hand, turning it over in her own and examining it with interest. “You’ve had an interesting life…”

“I don’t know what you want or why you think you are me, but can you explain what is going on here?”

I pulled my hand away from her and turned my body to face her more directly, and as I did, I took a quick glance at Uncle, noticing that his mouth was now closed. He wasn’t actually frozen in time, rather it appeared that he and Kohana were suspended in ultra slow-motion.

This woman, whoever she was, didn’t seem threatening, and even though Uncle and Kohana were lost in their own perception of time, I felt reassured knowing that they were only a few feet away.

The old woman squirmed with a degree of discomfort and awkwardness, and looked at me, resting her elbows on her knees. “You look nothing like I

expected.”

“Why did you have any expectations?” I asked in genuine wonder.

She shook her head briefly as if she were trying to clear cobwebs from her mind. Her hair was pure white and reached almost to her shoulders in straight lines with only a subtle, outward curl at the very end. Around her head she wore a headband that was made of a simple red cloth. She was dressed in a threadbare gray robe that had patterns that reminded me of crude, yet beautiful cave paintings. Her ringless fingers etched graceful expressions in the air when she spoke. Her skin was dark and weathered, and her frame seemed thin, but not frail.

“My name is Dhaleeb,” she said, holding up her hand. “I know who you are, Solomon, you needn’t respond in pleasantries. We’re of the same soul that animates these bodies, and a few hundred others that are scattered in the winds.” Her hand pointed between the two of us as if it were a separate entity.

“I’m a humble woman. On my world I’m one of about a hundred thousand who are known as the Samiton. We live on a small asteroid about one-tenth the size of earth. Our world is quite strange when compared to this one…” She paused and looked around the chamber with a measured eye.

“On my world, I’m a nomad. I have no permanent home. We roam like a herd of animals. We prefer to live this way. Permanence is not the way of the universe. We embrace change for that’s the way of all things and it’s the way we stay young— even though I appear anything but young.”

Dahleeb looked past me and seemed to be examining Uncle. “He looks like one of my kind more than you. Are you sure you’re Solomon?”

“Look, I don’t know what’s happening here… how you came here… how I can talk to you when you claim to be from another world… why… why they can’t move—”

“They can’t move, because I’ve activated a part of you—the soul part—so we could have a conversation. This soul part operates on a different frequency of time. It still has time, but it is not the same time as a human would experience. I’ve simply borrowed a part of you. I’m sure you’ll

forgive me once we're done here."

She looked up at the Quantusum skeletons and then back at me. "Look at yourself, if you don't believe me."

I didn't know what she meant, but I looked down at myself and saw I was actually two beings. One of me was animated; the other was frozen in time looking at Uncle with unblinking eyes. I was split, divided into two beings: one a phantom that was conscious, the other a stone sculpture. I suddenly felt sick to my stomach. "What did you do?" I demanded.

"I told you, I activated a part of you that would enable us to speak. If I appeared to you in my real form your planet's gravity would crush me. You wouldn't understand my language, nor would I understand yours. Not a good way to converse, wouldn't you admit?"

As you, the patient reader well knows from reading the implausible descriptions of my life, whether you believe them or not, I've encountered some strange things. But this, this was the most confounding of them all. It was exactly then, to the absolute second, that I declared myself insane. If there'd been an asylum for the insane anywhere nearby, I would have checked myself in and pleaded with them to hold me in solitary confinement. I didn't wish my curse on anyone else.

Dahleeb looked at me with interest. "You're not insane. You're me, and we're definitely not insane." She smiled at me like one would a small child who just caught her first butterfly. "The ones who're insane are the ones who sleep while the drums of greed and exploitation beat loud and clear. Now that's insanity."

"How'd you find me?" I managed to whisper.

"The soul that is us is like the hub of a wheel. We're out here at the rim of the wheel where the spokes go outward, but I can travel to the hub, and when I do, I can enter the reality of other bodies who share the same soul… so can you if you tried. It's an eye-opening experience, I'll tell you that."

I listened, I heard, but I had no idea of what she was saying. "Why did you want to visit me, and why now?"

"Ah, a very good question," she said, pointing upwards. "They sort of

invited me."

"The Quantusum?"

"Is that what you call them?"

"Yes, do you have a different name for them?"

"We call them the Unplanners—though our official name is the Faroukhanad."

"The Unplanners?"

"These are the beings that flow. They're the beings that created our sacred beliefs. They're the ones who operate across realms and dimensions."

"What do you mean?"

"What part don't you understand?"

"…Across realms and dimensions?"

"Ah. Well, in space, galaxies cluster together. They're bound to one another and they're never completed. These star systems are complex and sparsely filled with life forms, but even in this sparseness, trillions upon trillions of sentient beings live in these star systems that flow through expanding space, and there are an unimaginable number of these realms. No one really knows the number.

"Within these star systems are galaxies, and within the galaxies are solar systems and within the solar systems are asteroids and planets. Upon these smallest units of real estate, are the sentient beings like us. The sentient beings are guided by freewill, and exploited by greed and power. The Unplanners are the ones who brought freewill to our realm, but more than this, they brought freewill to all the realms. They are the ones—the only ones we know of—that can travel from realm to realm."

"They're basically sea serpents—extinct sea serpents," I said with disbelief.

Dahleeb looked up at the bones again and then to me. "They're whatever you need them to be. The Unplanners operate beyond time. They can appear when they need to. If you know them as sea serpents, consider yourself lucky. Very few in my world know of them at all."

“But how can a sea serpent travel from one realm to another?”

“They incarnate differently in different worlds. In our world they looked like large birds. They’re extinct on my world as well, but it’s only because they install something on the planet—at the collective level—that enables the sentient beings on the planet to have freewill, and then they leave.”

“Why do they leave?”

“Freewill is freewill,” said Dahleeb with a subtle wave of her hand. “You can’t bring this kind of a doctrine to a species and then dictate how it’s implemented or even protect it. It’s freewill. The Unplanners are called this, because they know that what is real, what is true, what is eternal is unknowable. If the Creator of all that is, is unknowable, then how can one plan anything that achieves more reality, more truth or more of the eternal? And that is why we call them the Unplanners.”

“So they bring freewill and that’s enough?”

Dahleeb nodded. “It’s enough.”

“And those who exploit, they get away with it all—that’s freewill, too?”

“Freewill is not about doing whatever you want without consequence, it’s about choice. It’s about the power of choice. In my world we have a ritual called the Way of Being. Being to us is not about our achievements in life or how many friends we possess or how happy our family is. Being is clarity.”

“And how do you define clarity?”

“It’s the choices we make to be of the soul, to honor the Unknowable Creative Source that fuels our soul and connects us to one another through this force.”

“How do you honor this force?”

“By being genuine in how you give freewill to those around you.”

“I don’t understand. How do you give freewill?”

“Our Way of Being states that you can only live consciously in the present, and to do this, you must trust the unpredictable flow of the forces of the Unknowable Creative Source wherever and however these shifts occur inside or outside of us.

“You give freewill by practicing this in your life. You learn to flow, and adapt to the forces of change. You learn to find compassion in your world and you follow it and support it, and in the same way, you learn to find exploitation, and you reject it and withdraw from it. This is freewill in its essence. It’s quite simple, isn’t it?”

I nodded my phantom head. I looked again to Uncle, and I could see his body had moved since I last looked—small, almost imperceptible changes. My own body had moved, too, the one I increasingly felt was my estranged shell.

“On my world,” I said with a quiet, deliberate voice, “we understand freewill, but we’re still exploited by those in power and—”

“Then you don’t understand freewill… at least not enough of you. Freewill is not the same as freedom. Freewill is what allows you to make a choice to believe nothing but what beats inside your heart. Freewill is what allows all tribes to unite. Freewill is the force that connects people in nonjudgment. Freewill is what allows people to learn how to live in harmony even when there’s been a history of disharmony. It’s all a matter of choice.”

“What are you on your planet—a leader, a priestess?”

Dahleeb giggled like a school girl. “I’m nobody. I have no big mission. I exist to learn and share and that’s enough. That’s enough.”

I looked into her eyes for the first time. I looked deeply. There was love and humility in her words, her mannerisms, even her eyes. I wanted to be more like her.

“There are many more like me,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

She leaned inward and touched my hand. “Our soul’s sparks are everywhere in this realm, living and dying, flowing like schools of fish in the ocean’s currents. You’re not alone in your endeavors. I know what you have to do in this lifetime, and I’m honored to be of service if I can.”

“Why now? I mean why did you appear now?”

She leaned back and looked around the chamber. “This spacetime made it

possible. I felt the nudge to go inside to the soul's hub and see where it took me. It took me here… to you, another me, us. I know it seems impossible, but that's your mind judging what it cannot possibly imagine.

"The thing is, Solomon, everything that matters, that really matters, is outside of the mind's grasp. Even the invention that you'll help discover, it will not shine the light on the mind, it'll shine the light from the mind, and finally those of your world will see a new thing illuminated, and when you do this, people will learn that they're not one being living inside one body. They are vast entities, sovereign and integral to the Unknowable Creative Source, and that they encompass an entire realm. An entire realm!"

Dahleeb stood slowly to her feet, pointing to Uncle. "I like this man, who is he?"

"He's the keeper of this sacred site, his name is Lives Above the Clouds, but we call him Uncle."

"Stay with him, Solomon. He's… connected to this in some powerful way."

"Are you leaving?" I asked.

"Yes," she nodded gently, and then took a final look around. "The frequency here is powerful. The Unplanners are here you can be sure of that. I feel their soft eyes on us even now." She paused and closed her eyes with a deepening smile. "We come from silence, and when we leave, we return to this silence. But when we're here, on this patch of lowly dirt, we can dance, talk, yell, flirt, laugh, and a thousand other things. Always take your next step in love, Solomon, that way you'll never be lost in the noise."

She vanished into a sheet of light, and the next thing I knew I was looking into Uncle's eyes, hearing a slow-motion voice revving up as if I were editing a movie soundtrack. In the span of a few seconds I returned to my world, but I was not the same person. Now I knew that I had another me in the storeroom of my soul— perhaps many more as Dahleeb had suggested.

It suddenly dawned on me that I had a deeper case of amnesia than I had originally thought. I smiled at the notion, and Uncle smiled back, his eyes probing. Could he have known that I had left this reality? I smiled again,

adding to the pattern, for one smile begets another.

Chapter 51: Skull

Uncle stood to his feet, signaling with his hand that he wanted me to follow him. “I want to show you something.”

I shadowed him as we went outside, walking along the cliff wall about thirty feet to another entrance—this one much better hidden. Inside was a similar room, though its ceiling was only about twelve feet high. Uncle kept walking while I glanced around, wishing I had more time to explore the chamber.

“Don’t worry you’ll have time to explore later,” Uncle said over his shoulder. I heard a click and saw he had a pen-sized flashlight in his hand. “It gets dark as we move deeper into the cave.” He looked down at his small flashlight. “It doesn’t provide much light, but I know the way. Just stay close to me.”

“How far does it go?” I asked.

“Only a few hundred feet, but where we’re going is about half that distance.”

Uncle walked along a narrow corridor of eroded rock that looked like water had carved it out. There was a metallic smell in the air, but it was not unpleasant. The corridor was banded in layers of rock each about ten inches thick. We picked our way through the narrow corridors in silence, and then Uncle stopped and turned around to face me. “Something happened when we were talking earlier. What was it?”

I stuttered miserably. “I… I was… in a… a… I don’t know… how to… I left… it… it’s really—”

“It’s okay,” Uncle said, putting his hand on my shoulder. “Sometimes the tongue trips on the worlds outside the body.” He turned around and continued without another word.

A minute later the corridor opened up into a circular-shaped chamber. On the right side, Uncle stooped over something that was protruding from the

wall. It was a massive skull about eight feet long, perhaps three feet high at its highest point. It was broken in a few pieces, but otherwise it was perfectly preserved. It was the same color of limestone-encrusted bone as the skeletons of the Quantusum I saw in the previous chamber.

“It’s huge!” I exclaimed.

“Do you recognize it?”

“Of course, how did you find it?”

Uncle pointed to the entrance to the chamber. “When I first found this site, Lame Deer and I were exploring this area… maybe for the second or third time, and I noticed this little protrusion, right here.” He pointed to the front of the skull. “It stuck out only a few inches, and at first I thought it might be a shell, but we chipped away at it with our knives, and we realized it was something much bigger than a shell.

“Over the years, we kept chipping away.”

“How did you dig it out?”

“We know a bit about archaeology. Kohana studied it in school for just that purpose. We bought the tools.” He pointed to the far wall and let his flashlight beam make a faint sweep to reveal a makeshift table with various tools resting on its surface, including lanterns.

“It’s been almost twenty years in the making. We’d come here for three, sometimes five day trips, and work twelve-hour days. It required more patience than I have, but it’s been a good teacher.”

“It’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen.”

Uncle nodded with a smile.

“And no one’s seen them?”

Uncle shook his head. “Only Kohana, Lame Deer and now you have seen this.”

Uncle handed me his flashlight. “Take a closer look.”

I knelt down and looked inside the skull. Its haunting presence almost took my breath away as I looked deep within the huge cavity that once held a brain

the size of a large man.

“One thing puzzles me—” I said, “if this is your most sacred site, how come no one knows of it?”

“In every culture there are those who know what’s happening—what’s truly happening, and there’re those who don’t. The Unktegila are feared in our Nation to the extent they’re even known anymore. They’re believed to be evil water reptilians that were ultimately destroyed by the thunderbirds.”

“How did they get maligned like that?”

“The same way the snake in the Garden of Eden was made out to be Satan.”

Uncle paused and gently patted the head of the giant Quantusum skull in front of us. “It happens because those in power shape perception; they take the liberators and make them appear evil, immoral and self-serving. This is why we’ve had no choice but to keep the site hidden.”

“What about Lame Deer?”

“He died many years ago.” Uncle’s voice turned suddenly distant. “He spoke only once of this site to elders of our Nation, but kept his words vague. He told them I was in charge, because I had discovered it. His influence as a Holy Man was unmatched at that time, so the elders put me in charge of the site, but only because they assumed it was just a few bones of the Unktegila, and none of them had any interest in visiting such a remote site.”

“So what makes it so sacred then? Isn’t it a waste of its sacredness if it isn’t shared?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s a waste in one way,” Uncle said. “But the power of this site, like anything that’s truly powerful, isn’t contained in the number of people who touch it. The power of this place isn’t about place.”

“What do you mean?”

“The field of the Quantusum is everywhere. Its presence is the very reason that so few know anything about them.”

“Freewill?”

Uncle looked at me with eyes that signaled surprise, but he simply nodded,

and brought his finger slowly to my forehead, touching the place between my eyes, just above the bridge of my nose. “Sit down comfortably—I’ll show you something.”

I sat down, unsure of what he was doing, but trusting him completely. “Close your eyes,” Uncle said. “Breathe as shallow as you can. Concentrate on slowing down your breath… imagine that you’re self-contained without any attachment to this world… even breathing the air is unnecessary…”

As I listened to his voice I began to feel my body dip into drowsiness. Somewhere inside me, I was already seeing a whole new world appear, and even Uncle’s voice bent down to this new reality.

A forest of ancient trees surrounded me. I was held tight in the thick tree trunks that bounded me. I looked behind me as I heard Uncle’s voice. “This is where many people live, in the tight constraints of a dense forest.”

“A forest… I don’t understand?” I said.

“It’s a metaphor,” Uncle chuckled. He looked noticeably younger and wore a beige- colored tunic, but his presence felt the same. Uncle raised his hand and touched my forehead. “Look now.”

I felt no movement, but I was now in a meadow with high grass rolling to the light breeze that swept across a vast plain beneath the light of a golden sun. In the far expanse I could see a beautiful mountain awash in the atmospheric haze of a blue- gray vastness.

Uncle remained at my side, and I noticed his arm was pointing to the distant mountain. “That is known in this land as the mountain of consciousness. Look around you.”

To my surprise there were other people in the field with us. Some were painting pictures of the mountain, some were composing music, and others had turned their backs and were looking to the forest behind us.

Uncle shrugged, anticipating my thoughts. “They admire the mountain, but they prefer to paint pictures of it or write melodies and poems, than to climb it.” He pointed behind us. “Those people… they don’t like the open spaces… too much vision. They feel naked out here.”

Uncle placed his finger on my forehead again. “Now look.”

We were at the base of the mountain; in the shadows of a deep valley. The mountain was enormous. I had never seen anything so magnificent… so massive. The mountain's presence was awe-inspiring, and all I could do was crane my head and admire its soaring reaches. Its summit appeared unattainably high.

"Does anyone ever climb it?" I asked, turning to Uncle.

"Some. Some try and give up. Most never even get this close. The presence of the mountain scares them."

"Why?"

"Don't you feel it? The presence of its consciousness?"

I nodded my head slowly. "Yes, but I want to see more… higher."

Uncle smiled. "It's in your nature. When you're at the base of something as enormous as this, you either fear it or you want to climb it and know the view at the top. What do you see now?"

I looked suspiciously at Uncle, wondering as to the nature of his question. Wasn't it obvious? "There's only one thing to see—the mountain."

Uncle touched my forehead again, and again I felt no sense of movement, but an instant later we were on a thin ledge midway up the mountain.

"Beautiful views, wouldn't you say?" Uncle asked with a rhetorical tone.

I looked up and down the mountain. The thin ledge we were on felt vulnerable. We were thousands of feet above the floor of the valley. We were in a place uninhabitable by any but the bravest of animals. I was nearly afraid to move for fear I would fall to my certain death. "It's hard to enjoy the view when I'm afraid I might fall."

"Exactly," Uncle said quietly—almost a whispered construction. "When you climb the mountain of consciousness you encounter sheer cliffs like this one—tiny ledge, big view. The question is whether to look out or keep the focus on the climb. Certainly you don't want to look down."

"You're saying that people who climb this mountain don't care about those below?"

"I'm saying it's a natural tendency. Focus on the climb, don't look down.

Feed your soul. Feed your mind. Keep moving. Learn, learn… and learn."

"Isn't it necessary to do that?" I said. "If I looked down all the time, caring about those in the forest, the fields… in the valley below, I'd probably fall. I'd never complete my climb. Right?"

Uncle looked at me with sudden aloofness, and pushed me. I felt my heart suddenly sink, as my body struggled to regain its balance and stay on the ledge. Then I felt another push, this one harder, and I knew I would fall. I fell in complete and utter terror, screaming as loud as my voice would go. I fell like a piece of iron seeking the firmness of earth.

A mere ten feet from meeting the grassy, blood-smeared end that burst into my imagination, I stopped and floated quietly to the ground. Uncle was already there, his arms folded across his chest.

"That's done," he announced.

My terror-stricken face felt permanent as I looked around my surroundings, wondering if I was really alive.

"You're okay," Uncle said. "You needed that."

"I needed that?"

"Get it out of your system, and reset your mind."

"Next time you need to reset my system, can you ask permission first?" My glaring eyes were no doubt difficult to look at, because Uncle turned away and pointed to a group of people who'd gathered to make prayers to the mountain.

"They praise and worship this mountain. They never really climb it, but they sure love to talk about it."

"What was that about?"

"What?"

"Pushing me off a cliff?"

"You needed to experience the fear of these people. See it through their eyes."

"This is all metaphors… can you speak plainly?"

“In this place, metaphor and reality are the same thing.”

I was perplexed. I half understood what he was saying, but the other half was like a black hole sucking the half I understood into its gravitational field. I looked at him, a scowl still in control of my face. “What is it you want me to learn?”

“I want you to see. Learning will come after.”

Uncle suddenly scooped down with his hand and brought up a closed hand. He then brought it to a glass box that stood on a pedestal I hadn’t noticed. He slid one of the box’s glass planes open and placed an insect inside. It looked like a grasshopper. “This creature lives its entire life in these fields without limitation. I just ended that.”

I watched as the grasshopper jumped inside the glass box hitting against the top and some of the sides. The grasshopper stopped as if he was stunned by the new circumstance of his environment.

“To the grasshopper,” Uncle said, “all is well. He is alive after all. He sees his normal environment all around him. He can’t see the glass. If I keep him in here for a few days he will stop his jumping and become acclimated to the dimensions of his new home. All he needs is food and water, and he can survive.”

“So you’re saying these people are acclimated to simply survive?”

Uncle slide one of the side panels of the glass box open. “If you were a grasshopper, what would you do?”

“I would jump through the open panel.”

“But how would you know it was open? It’s perfectly clear glass.”

I thought about it for a moment. “I’d jump in every direction… I’d experiment.”

Uncle took a stick and pointed it at the grasshopper through the open side panel, and the grasshopper jumped into the opposite wall, hitting his head and falling to his side. “Do you see that I offered him an exit and he fled? He could’ve climbed on the stick, and I would have freed him.”

“Yes, but he doesn’t know that.”

“True.”

Uncle opened another side panel. “What you said is right. You experiment. You try different ways to climb the mountain of consciousness. You don’t settle on one way… one method… one teacher. If you devote your entire life to the worship of one thing, what if you find out when you take your last breath that the one thing was not real.

“You find that you lived inside a cage all your life. You never tried to jump out by experimenting, by testing the walls. The people who never bother to climb this mountain are inside a cage, and they don’t know it. Fear is the glass wall. Wakan Tanka comes and opens one of the glass panels, perhaps offers a stick for them to climb out, but they jump away, going further inside their soul-draining boundaries.”

Uncle brought the stick out again and lightly jabbed it in the direction of the grasshopper, who hopped through the open side panel, and was instantly lost in the thick underbrush that surrounded us.

Uncle turned his eyes to me. “Are you ready to do the same?”

“Jump out of the cage?”

Uncle nodded.

“Why not,” I said, trying to sound brave. “This is the equivalent of your seeking my permission, isn’t it?”

Uncle walked up to me, and as he’d done before, placed his finger on my forehead. “This is the equivalent of having no equivalent.”

In a flash we were both standing high above the valley, looking down from the mountain at the curved earth below. The height was staggering. I looked up and could see the summit was just a short climb, but already the view was mesmerizing. Uncle’s final words were still echoing in my mind.

“Amazing,” I said, feeling the wind curl around the narrow summit. I knew I should be cold, but I felt comfortable. I knew the oxygen levels should be all but depleted, but I could breathe fine.

“Follow me,” Uncle said.

We walked quietly to the very top of the great mountain, hearing the

winds, but nothing else. When we arrived at the very top, the panorama took my breath away. Uncle and I stood awestruck, looking out to the far horizons.

“Do you see that?” Uncle asked, pointing.

There was a sea glistening in the far horizon line. “I didn’t know there was a sea,” I said.

“Do you see that?”

I followed Uncle’s pointing arm to a city in the far distance with glass buildings that reflected the sky. “Millions of people live in that city.

“Look there.”

Again, I followed Uncle’s finger and saw another mountain range, way in the distance. None of the mountains looked as high as the one we were sitting on, but it felt good to see more.

“None of these places you knew existed until you arrived right here.” Uncle punctuated his statement by pointing down to the gray, lichen-covered rocks we stood on.

“Have you thought about the mountain?” Uncle asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Since we came upon the summit, have you thought about the mountain?”

I shook my head. “To be honest, I’ve only thought about what’s out there.” I pointed to the various sights we had just looked at.

Uncle squinted; his eyes told me his soul had been summoned elsewhere. “You climb this mountain of consciousness for the vision from its summit, but when you arrive, you no longer think about the mountain. It’s the view… the vision. You can see how everything is part of the tapestry that weaves all life forms, all matter, even time and space into a single fabric. We call that fabric by many names—those who’ve climbed this mountain, but we all see the same thing. We all experience the one force that connects all.

“Those who stay in the forests, the fields, the valleys, they like their sense of separation. They feel comfortable there. The effort to see this… requires too much adjustment. What is coming will change that. The Grand Portal will remove the sense of separation.”

He paused and looked at me, his eyes open again. “The glass box… it will become visible. People will see the box they live in, and they will jump out of it.”

“To what?”

Uncle held out his arms in an all-encompassing gesture. “The world of vision.”

I began to feel light-headed, and wondered if the oxygen levels were indeed having an effect on me. I crouched down, hoping to avert a painful collapse on the jagged rocks underfoot.

“Look here,” Uncle said.

I struggled to raise my head in his direction, and for one last time I felt his finger touch my forehead.

The next thing I remember was the smell of the cave, the relative darkness, the deep quiet, and Uncle’s hand on my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“I think so,” I managed to say. “Where did you take me? What was that place?’

“It was a place I created from my imagination.”

“How could I be in it?”

“I invited you.”

“But how? I don’t remember your invitation.”

Uncle crouched down beside me and put his arm around my shoulder. “Let’s go outside, walk awhile, maybe get some water. We should check on Kohana, too.”

He helped me to my feet as I wobbled a bit standing up. I caught a glimpse of him in the dim light of the cave and felt such a powerful sense of his caring. Sometimes you meet people whose sense of mission is so clearly etched on their persona that you try to rise to their heights, to become entangled in their passion. I felt this entanglement, and even though I was weakened physically, another kind of strength was entering me.

Chapter 52: QuantaSeer

My vision was slightly blurred as we walked outside into the relative brightness of the deep canyon. Uncle pointed to a large rock. “Sit there a while. I’ll find Kohana and get us water and some eats.”

Before I could ask where he’d be getting water and food in this fortress of debris and trees, he’d turned and walked away. I was left alone with my thoughts, listening to his footsteps trail into stillness. A few minutes later I heard Kohana and Uncle talking as they walked up to me.

“We’re going to a well we dug some years ago,” Uncle announced. “You can stay here and rest. We’ll bring some food, too.”

“Food?”

Kohana chuckled. “You didn’t really think I’d come to this place without having food nearby?”

“You mean there’s a MacDonald’s around here?” I asked.

Kohana feigned a momentary scowl. “We planted a garden nearby. Has some pretty good veggies, and the raspberries should be in season.”

“As long as it’s not more mushrooms,” I said smiling.

Uncle bobbed his head. “We’ll be back soon.”

The two turned and walked down the same path we had used earlier. I listened as their footsteps and voices blurred into the calm that enveloped my space. The sunlight was filtered through the high branches, spears of light sparkled to the ground beside me, flicking on and off from the unfelt breeze high above. The beauty of this place was undeniable, despite the tangle of driftwood and debris that had accumulated over centuries of flash floods.

Suddenly, there was an undeniable presence that moved behind me like a dwarfing shadow. I could sense its approach, but none of my five senses could confirm it. I looked and listened as carefully as I could, but I could neither see nor hear anything. My heart was pounding its signal to me that

something wasn’t right, and then I heard it.

“Finally, they’re gone.”

It was Nammu. I spun around, and she was walking out of the cave I had been in with Uncle only minutes earlier. She was dressed modestly (to my relief), wearing a golden robe that was relatively shapeless and even covered her feet. “Go away,” I said, turning away from her.

“I think not,” she replied coldly. “Besides, I’m quite sure you’ll find my information useful.”

She walked up behind me, and I could feel her staring at me. I could sense her arms were moving in some odd pattern, as I could feel the faint breeze on my neck, but I resisted turning around. I wanted only to ignore her.

“Do you think it’s that easy to dismiss him?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, continuing to stare ahead.

“God.”

“Look, maybe he’s your God, but he’s not mine.”

“Oh, he is. He’s the one with the power. Did you think God was a feeble man… like your little Indian friends?”

I ignored her. I did my best to pretend she wasn’t behind me. I concentrated on my discomfort. The boulder I was sitting on was putting my posterior to sleep. I squirmed to find a more comfortable position, and when I looked up, Nammu was directly in front of me, and behind her, looming like an unruly skyscraper, was the monster that had nearly killed me the night before. I froze. My heart jumped from my chest.

The face of this monster was looking down at me like a bully looking down on an ant before his boot smashed it into the ground. His face was ancient when I looked at it, wrinkles abounded—it was ugly in every aspect, and yet, when I blinked, it was suddenly tolerable—even somewhat handsome. I was mesmerized and frightened to my core at the very same instant. I tried to speak, but I learned I was also speechless.

“I brought him so you can have an exchange of sorts,” Nammu smiled curtly, and then the monster touched her neck, and she froze as if in

suspended animation.

The monster moved her to the side as if he were positioning a piece on a chessboard, and then looked at me with glaring eyes. I moved back on the boulder as far as it would support me. I assumed my end was very near—measured in minutes if not seconds.

“You have defiled your God, and your punishment is of considerable amusement to me.” He leaned in closer as if he wanted to get a better sense of my fear. His skin was lightly scaled, greenish-gold in color with hints of red at his neck and cheeks. He also wore a golden robe with intricate, geometric designs embossed in burgundy and olive green.

“Why?” I asked, finding my cracked and utterly dry voice. I swallowed hard, trying to find more words. “If you’re God, why do you even need to punish me? Shouldn’t you be worried about more cosmic issues?”

“You should be honored that I take notice of your deeds,” the monster said with a smirk.

I stared at him, and for some reason I felt bold. Perhaps I had a death wish. Perhaps I was a complete fool. Whatever the case, I stared into his eyes and realized one thing with certainty: here was a creature that was powerful beyond my measures of power, ancient in every way, and yet I loathed him. I felt my heart revolt at his clawed fingers, scaled skin, bold eyes, beaked nose, and towering frame. If it had been possible, I would have liked to punch him in the face and lower him in some manner—to the status of an earthworm.

It wasn’t because he was ostensibly the lover of Nammu, or that his ego was so off the charts as to call himself God. It had more to do with his combative ways, and the powerful manipulation I could sense from him. I knew he was manipulating me on multiple levels. I could sense his influence in his eyes, his posture and sheer presence, but most notably his mind.

There was a tempting, magnetic charisma that lured me to be cowardly, obsequious and compliant to his demands. This was working on me in a way that I felt nearly powerless to resist, and only by being bold and angry could I hope to repel him. And so anger became my ally, though, at the time, I thought of it as courage, but now, looking back on it in sober recollection, I would admit it was simply anger.

“You can’t touch me, and I have no interest whatsoever in what you might have to say,” I glared back at him. My heart was pounding so fast, and my mind was whirling like a censor who’d gone mad strolling through hell.

“Your impudence is merely your ego,” the monster replied. “Do not let it be the source of your destruction.”

“I don’t need your advice. Leave me alone, and take her with you.” I glanced in Nammu’s direction.

The monster laughed with delight. I actually thought he was starting to like me a little, but then his hands curled into powerful fists, and I could sense his patience was vaporizing before my eyes. I had to say something to save my life. “Why are you so angry with me?”

The monster seemed annoyed at my question, but his fists relaxed a bit as he considered his response. “You have defiled my relationship with Nammu,” he said, pointing a leering, opaque, and sharp claw in my direction.

I relaxed a tiny bit, and shifted positions on the hard rock that had become my chair. “If I apologize, will you forgive me?”

“No.”

“You just said you were God, isn’t that what God does?” I tilted my head slightly. “Forgive?”

“Being God, I decide what God does and doesn’t do.”

“But you want to set a good example—”

“Silence!” the monster shouted in a deep, booming voice.

Again, and I can’t stress this enough, I was bold. I don’t know why. I just was. “Why does God need a lover? God is above all of that.”

“You have been terribly misinformed. God must be like those he rules, otherwise, how would I understand the predicaments my creations acquire for themselves?”

“There… you just said that God understands. If he understands, then he can forgive.”

The monster looked down at me with such a superior gaze that for a

moment I forgot that I was human. I felt more like a creature of the forest floor—the kind that crawls in blindness. The next moment I was sensing movement. It was as if I had been swallowed by a black hole and ripped from my world to another side of the universe.

So this is death, I thought to myself.

A strong sense of remorse flooded my soul or whatever was left of me. I couldn't open my eyes. I tried to remember if I had heard a loud sound like a gunshot, or if I could remember the feeling of pain or some proof of how I had been killed, but no memory could be found… a condition I was all too familiar with.

I felt as though I was traveling, but I had lost my sight. Everything around me was a blur of motion, sound, color, and a sickening presence of remorse. I didn't understand why I was feeling the way I did or what was happening to me. There was suddenly a great, spacious silence and I felt the motion slow to a halt. I opened my eyes to a blurry world of artificial lights and no windows. Then I felt something on my shoulder, and I turned to see a clawed hand of the self-proclaimed god-monster.

"Where are we?" I asked, struggling to speak. My voice seemed different as if the room we were in had no resonance or reflective space.

"You are in a new time and space. You are very near the scientific quarters where your fabled Grand Portal will be discovered. I wanted you to see this grand invention you have been told you will sire. I want you to see the results of how it will confuse and confound your fellow humans. Are you ready to see the truth?"

I squared my eyes on the monster and steeled my voice. "Where are we?"

The monster looked at me with disdain. "There is only one purpose to show you this place… this time… so you can see what a terrible idea it is to reveal to people that they are immortal and that they are without a God to guide them."

"What?" I exclaimed in obvious bewilderment. "Just tell me what you want from me."

"Simply observe," he said dismissively.

With a wave of his hand a long line appeared below us. It zoomed to a distant horizon so far out I couldn't see the end, but I presumed it went on forever, or at least that was the impression I had. Affixed to the line were small, thin screens that looked like playing cards that were set into the line and were standing up. There must have been millions of them. There was movement in each of them as if a movie were playing—I could see faint motion, but I couldn't make out any of the details.

One of the screens lit up and I glanced at the monster. He was focused on it. He grabbed my hand and pulled me. "We'll go there."

The next thing I remember was swooping down like a bird of prey and diving headlong into the screen like Alice through the looking glass—only we were flying at breakneck speeds. As we came closer to the screen I could feel time slow down. It was a visceral feeling of decelerating to synchronize to the motion of the screen—or more precisely what was on the other side of the screen.

I was like a bug ready to splat into the windshield of a fast moving car, but as we passed through the screen I was surprised at how easy my entry was. We continued to fly for a while like vaporous beings until the monster—still holding my hand— pointed to a huge building, indicating our destination. We glided right up to a window in a high office and passed through it without any difficulty at all. There were many people inside the large room, which looked like a United Nations assembly, given the different ethnicities of color, dress, and accents that I heard.

There were about forty people sitting in a small auditorium and on the stage were twelve chairs facing the audience. The audience was laughing and chatting and seemed to be in good spirits. The monster turned to me and let go of my hand as our feet touched the floor near the back of the auditorium. "They can't see us. We're completely off their sensory radar… for now."

"Where are we? Who are these people?"

"Patience. This is your grand entrance."

I looked at him and saw a gleam in his eye, but he remained silent, ignoring my question.

In a moment a group of people walked on stage and took their seats—none of them spoke, but most smiled and looked irrepressibly pleased with themselves. A middle- aged man with long silver hair and wearing a white shirt and gray slacks walked to the podium. The man followed a cart that moved silently under its own propulsion and floated into the room, hovering four feet above the floor of the stage. Some of the guests in the audience strained to see what was on top of the cart. I could see small gadgets that looked like gold rings of sorts and several pairs of glasses.

The older man greeted the people in the room. “Thank you for your patience. Our delays are entirely my fault and for that I do apologize. You see, I am chronically late… ever since our discovery some years ago that time was an invention of our minds, I find myself incorrigibly indifferent to schedules. Do forgive me.” He bowed slightly in an elegant fashion, and then turned his attention to the gadgets on his cart.

“Who is he?” I whispered to the monster.

He ignored me, staring straight ahead as though he had left his body.

There was a thickness in the air that made me uncomfortable. It wasn’t a lack of oxygen, but felt more like the air was incredibly thick and dense and I could see, if I looked closely enough, that when people moved there was a smear of light that gave them a ghostly appearance that only lasted a few moments.

The man at the podium cleared his throat in a manner to quiet the murmurs in the room. “I know you have been told that our institute has discovered something that will change the world as we know it. I also know that most of you doubt this, even though we’ve discovered other things that have turned physics on its head.” He paused and smiled in what seemed like a private recollection.

“We have leaders from government and business—global leaders. Each of you has millions of people who follow your judgment. Who look to you as shining examples of what is right and good in humanity. What I am about to show you will shock some of you, for others it will validate their long-held beliefs, and some… they might see it as a threat.

“Now, those of you who see this invention as a threat, let me be the first to

tell you that we did not really invent anything, we merely repositioned the tools of science to see what has heretofore been invisible. We have found the spark among the fires we call humanity. We have been searching for this most elusive of all substances—if one can call it a substance at all."

The man waved his hand slightly and paused. "I know you're impatient, and truly, I could stand here and talk for hours about this topic of the human soul, and how our institute found its subtle outlines and energies, but not all of you share my passion, and so I will, as they say, cut to the chase."

He leaned forward and took one of the gold rings from the cart and held it in his hand for an admiring moment. "Looks simple enough," he said quietly. "And it is, in many ways, but it is an outcome of thousands of great minds and hearts, and me, I'm just the lucky one who gets to show it off to you, the world's elite leaders, but believe me, I had only a fractional influence in this discovery." He set the ring on his right hand on his middle finger, and put on the special glasses and looked out to the room as if he were studying his assembled guests.

"It appears everyone here possesses a soul," he announced wryly. The auditorium reverberated in soft, polite chuckles. "I first wanted to show you a demonstration of this technology, and then I'll let you experience it in your own way." A woman, in her fifties, in a white blouse and gray slacks rose from her seat on the stage and walked dutifully to the man at the podium.

"The glasses that Jaylee wears are equipped to broadcast the image she sees, and what she'll be seeing is your collective soul. We call this technology QuantaSeer." The auditorium lights dimmed as the woman donned the ring and steadied the glasses on the bridge of her nose. Behind the stage a screen that had been unused suddenly lit up with brilliant colors that danced and moved like an aurora borealis. The audience let out a collective breath of awe as they watched, spellbound, the shimmering lights of another world reveal themselves.

I turned to the monster next to me, but he was gone. I felt a certain release, but at the same time, I was completely lost without him. There was no chance I could find my way back. I was even having a hard time remembering where I had been—my last memory. My past was burning in a chaotically heaped bonfire, and a strange sort of fear engulfed me. The prospects of being exiled

in some undetected, future-based nether realm scared me to my core.

The voice of someone in the audience interrupted my absorption of terror.

“Does everyone look the same through this technology?” The question came from a tall man who was standing in the front section of the auditorium. He was dressed in a long flowing thawb. His voice was distinctly Middle Eastern.

“No,” the presenter said. “But everyone is changing. No one remains exactly the same for even an instant.”

“So there’s no fixed identity? We couldn’t remember someone by their appearance?” The tall man asked, surprise showing in his voice.

“No,” the man at the podium said. “The human soul is not fixed in a form like we, its human counterparts, are. We are, at the level of the soul, constantly changing or evolving into a new expression.”

“This is not how we are taught,” the tall man said, shaking his head slightly. “How do you know that you are peering into the soul and not something else?”

“I will show you.”

The presenter walked to the podium and gestured to the screen behind him. The screen changed to a menu and he instantly selected something with another gesture of his hand. Suddenly, the screen showed a man lying on a bed. Next to him was another man sitting in a chair, watching him.

The presenter pointed to the large screen. “The man lying on the bed was an associate of ours who agreed to let us film his passing, using the very same technology you just witnessed.” The presenter turned to look at the screen. “In a few moments the film cuts to the QuantaSeer video feed of the man sitting there—which is our lead scientist on the project.”

There were some soft murmurs in the audience as the lights in the room dimmed a little lower. I looked at this dying man carefully. He was old. Well into his eighties, possibly his nineties. He looked familiar to me. Unconsciously, I moved closer to the screen mesmerized by what I was watching.

The man lying on the bed suddenly clutched his chest and winced slightly as if he were undergoing some discomfort. Behind him was a screen of colorful forms that seemed to dance slowly above him. He took several deep breaths, and with each breath the lights above him grew more vivid. Then he became very still and the lights above him stopped swirling and moved inside the body, as if they were being sucked in by some invisible force.

Suddenly a lone phosphorescent light the size of a gnat appeared from his heart region, then another, and another and then there were thousands—tens of thousands—of tiny lights that seemed to collect above the now limp body. The lights were like stars in a heavenly mantle, softly undulating and joining one another as if they were forming a larger structure.

Slowly the light form coalesced into what could only be termed a human form. It was roughly the same shape and size as the man lying on the bed, except the light particles were constantly in motion, like restless moths in search of light. I continued my movement to get closer to the man on the bed. The steps to the stage were directly before me, and I looked at the man as closely as I could. Could it be me? It looked like me. I felt a familiarity that I couldn't repress. It was me. It had to be me. How could this be? It was at that moment I heard a shriek of excitement.

"I see him!"

I looked and saw Jaylee pointing directly at me. I wasn't supposed to be visible, but she had the QuantaSeer glasses on and was looking directly at me.

"What… who's here?" the presenter demanded.

"…Sol…o…mon…" she said, as if in a deep trance.

There was a confused buzz that spread through the audience.

"Where?" the presenter asked as he put on a ring and pair of glasses. "Where do you see him?"

She pointed directly at me. If there were words to explain how I felt in that moment I would surely write them, but there are none. All I can say, and it is a shadow of a description at best, is that I wanted to disappear in one instant, and I wanted to rejoin my team and live with them in the next. I was

petrified. I didn't want to be a freakish anomaly in front of the world's elite, and I surely didn't want to be exposed in this way.

"He's here!" the presenter exclaimed. "This is incredible! Solomon, can you see me?"

I nodded, and then closed my eyes, wondering where this could possibly go.

"Can you hear me?"

Again I nodded.

"Can you speak?"

I looked directly at him; I didn't remember him, if it's even possible to remember the future. "I can speak. Can you hear me?"

The presenter looked to the audience for a moment. "This is an unexpected and amazing development. Please indulge me for a moment. I can assure you this was not planned, so you're seeing a new side of science. We all are."

Everyone in the audience was on the edge of their seat. One gentleman stood up and cleared his throat. He was dressed in a midnight blue silk tunic and black slacks, and looked Asian. He was not a big man, but seeing that he was in the front row, he was important.

"Doctor Onessa, I think I speak for everyone here, you have frightened and confused us with this technology. Too many unknowns… like opening Pandora's Box. You're able to see a dead man's soul. Perhaps even talk. We can all see that the walls of this world will crumble if this technology ever gets out."

"What part frightens and confuses you?" Dr. Onessa asked, putting both hands on the podium, and looking down at the Asian man.

"It confuses me that you say that you cannot see the identity of a soul, and yet you recognize this man… Solomon… this man who died—"

"Forgive me for interrupting, Vice Premier, but this… this appearance of Solomon is a black swan event. We have no idea what it means, how it happened, nothing! You have a front row seat to science in the making. You shouldn't be confused… you should be… you should be awestruck." Dr.

Onessa clinched his fist and waved it in the air for emphasis.

The Vice Premier put his hands behind his back and walked within a few feet of my exact place. I could see him very clearly. He was a handsome man, mid-forties, black shiny hair and very fair skin. His eyes looked past me, but I could tell he was trying to sense my presence.

The Vice Premier put his hand out. “I would like to try this QuantaSeer now.”

I moved to the side, away from the Vice Premier, unsure of what I should do. I glanced at Jaylee and saw that she was riveted on me. I backed away as I watched the Vice Premier slip the ring over his finger and carefully position the glasses on his face. “Where is he?” he asked, turning to Dr. Onessa.

Dr. Onessa pointed to me, his finger precise. The Vice Premier turned to me, and I watched his face crinkle in a squint. His right arm reached out to me, and I could sense an interaction, but it was as subtle as a light breeze. “Who are you?”

I glanced at Dr. Onessa, not sure of what I should do. “I am Solomon,” I said.

“I can see him speaking,” the Vice Premier said, “but I cannot hear him. This is miraculous.”

Dr. Onessa smiled. “See, there’s nothing to be frightened of. Solomon was the one who designed the way we capture and process the real-time images. The irony is that he’s the one who made it possible to be seen by our technology. We had only data… lots of data, but without being able to see it, sense it, we knew it would never be the same technology. His idea transformed this technology. Unfortunately, we don’t have the same interface for audio. So I’m afraid we won’t be able to communicate with him—”

Many voices from the audience began to stir and a choir formed. “I want to see this, too.”

“Please, please,” Dr. Onessa replied in a soothing tone, “Everyone will get a chance. We have three sizes: small, medium, large… the ring needs to be reasonably snug to your finger… the glasses are one-size-fits-all.”

I’ve been in many strange circumstances, as you have no doubt read, but

this one, this one felt the strangest. I was about to be the voyeuristic subject of fascination by the world's elite. Their arms, wearing the finest garments our planet could produce, were reaching out to touch rarified atoms of my soul that hovered in a different dimension. I was part of a petting zoo of exotic ghosts. I shuddered. I wanted to leave. This was becoming something different than what I thought it would be, and I suddenly had a visceral repulsion.

About twenty people were huddled around me, staring at me and one another. I was more fascinating, because without the QuantaSeer, I was invisible.

Suddenly I heard loud screams and people were backing away from me in sheer horror.

"Your fearless leaders of the world! Look at them, a bunch of mice."

I turned and saw the god-monster behind me, glaring down on the frightened audience. His arms outstretched in a menacing gesture. "It's time to go."

I took one last look at the room. Jaylee was staring at me, her eyes glistening, and I could see her lips quiver, and they began to form words that I could read. "I love you."

I think I replied, at least I tried to form the words, but then the room began to shift into a murky kaleidoscope of color and shapes and I, as usual, lost consciousness.

Chapter 53: Resistance

Why did demons convene so easily in my head? I asked this question for a reason, but no answers echoed back. I was a magnet for them, and I was getting tired of their relentless zest to confuse and threaten me. It was working. I was confused and vulnerable.

When I came back to my body, lying on the ground next to the large boulder I had been on earlier, these were the thoughts that flooded my mind. I wanted to open my eyes and see my children's faces. I wanted to lie in bed with my wife on a sun- drenched morning. I wanted to sit outside on my patio and simply relax without a care in the world. Other people do it. Why not me?

The images in my mind were squeezed out as I heard voices in the distance. Kohana's voice was easy to recognize. Uncle's was more reserved. It was so odd to be back in my body. It felt so heavy, so awkward. I managed to move my arm, but I had no strength to stand or even sit up. I lay there for a few minutes listening to the approaching voices, hoping there would be no ambush from the monster or Nammu. I tried my best to look up and survey my site, but my head was too heavy, and I was forced to watch an oblivious ant crawl across the ground I was lying on.

Suddenly I heard rushing footsteps. "What's wrong?" Kohana asked. "Did you fall?"

In a moment he was bent over me, and I could hear Uncle padding behind him slightly, out of breath. "What happened? Uncle asked.

I tried to speak, but it was as if my tongue was paralyzed. I couldn't form the words. I struggled, but nothing came out.

"It could be a stroke," Kohana said, turning to look back to Uncle.

Uncle turned and walked away. A moment later I could feel a splash of ice cold water over my face. It was numbing cold. I struggled again to speak, this time with a little more control, though now I was shivering uncontrollably

from the cold water.

“I… I’m okay… just… just give me a little time…”

“Nammu did this?” Uncle asked.

I managed to nod my head.

“Get him a blanket,” Uncle said, “I’ll stay with him.”

Kohana stood up and ran to one of the caves behind me. Uncle sat down next to me. I remained on my side, inwardly cursing my feeble condition. I’d had enough of this. If all my efforts to create this brilliant invention would become what I saw—a freak show for the elite, I wanted no part of it. The Grand Portal, the QuantaSeer, whatever it was called, was a goddamn parlor game. That’s all it was.

It was at that very instant that I lost my resolve. Some of you might think it odd that I would give up on something as spectacular and ostensibly as vital as The Grand Portal, but it was a war of attrition, and Nammu and her god-monster had finally worn me down. I was done.

All I wanted to do was to go home. I didn’t want to talk anymore. I didn’t want to discuss anything spiritual or important. I wanted to sit in front of my media screen and watch a sitcom and bury myself in normalcy.

It only took me a minute to construct my plan. By the time Kohana returned with a musty-smelling blanket, my plan was crystallized: get home as soon as possible with as little talk as possible. That’s how simple my plan was. I knew I would meet resistance from Uncle and Kohana, but the easy part was that they wouldn’t smite me, threaten me, hurt me, or try to herd me into servitude. It would, by comparison, be easy to resist them.

That was my plan.

Resistance.

Chapter 54: Stream

Uncle grabbed me by the shoulder and motioned with his head to follow him. Yesterday, we had made it back to his rustic cabin late in the evening. It was now morning, and Kohana and I were packing to leave.

I had been true to my plan, though I was badgered with guilt at not answering their questions. I had made it clear that I was in no mood to discuss it. Now that Uncle had pulled me away from packing to follow him somewhere in privacy, I had a strong feeling that he would pressure me one last time.

We walked a few hundred feet to a clearing next to a small stream of water. We walked entirely in silence, and the water's music, as soft as it was, was omnipresent in the otherwise still woods. Uncle walked right to the edge of the stream and sat down on the grassy bank, folding his legs underneath him. He patted the ground beside him. "Join me if you like. The grass is warm from the sun. The dew is gone."

Uncle was a good salesman. He had a way of softly convincing the future to become his present.

I sat beside him, my body still recovering from the physical exertion and various injuries I'd absorbed. My general state was hopeful, mostly because I was eager to reconnect with my family, and with my newly restored memories, I could once again work. I was excited to return to work. The idea of diving back into my regular life beckoned me like a dazzling crown of jewels.

"The sky's a strange place," Uncle said. "You only notice its immense scale when it's dark. During the day, it seems friendlier… more caring. At night, the starry emptiness looms and you can feel so small and lost."

I listened to his wizened voice and understood exactly what he meant, but wasn't sure of its relevancy.

"Spread your ways to all you meet, Solomon. It's all you can do. You've

seen the darkness. You've felt how small and lost a man can be. This is how all people feel. You've only felt it more intensely, but that's the way of a Sonverto. Don't hide. You are past that time. This is the time when you let it flow."

Uncle looked down at the stream. "This stream looks a bit tired, doesn't it?"

"A little." I nodded.

"It comes from an underground spring. It never really stops flowing. Its music fills the woods, its nutrients make the grass and trees grow, it supports life tirelessly even when the rain doesn't fall, even when the sun bakes the earth. It even provides an old man like me with life." Uncle turned to me and smiled.

"It's my lifeline in many ways, and yet I've never seen its source, but it still finds me. Every day I come here to get water, and every day a new part of this source greets me. It's always flowing. Some days more than others, but it never stops.

"Twelve years ago we had a drought… a terrible drought. Rained only two days all summer. This stream kept me alive. No matter how feeble it might look, it's enough, at least for me."

Uncle paused for a moment and looked straight ahead. "I understand your situation. I really do." He glanced at me, as if to make sure I was listening. "You have your memory back. You have work and family calling you. You have a thousand reasons to abandon your mission, and you need only one: fear."

"You can call it fear if you want," I replied. "I saw what I was involved in… I saw it… I saw it, okay? I know what this technology looks like, what it will be called, how it will work, all of that. I saw it, Uncle. I saw it as clear as I see you here and now."

"How did you see it?"

I shook my head. "I really don't want to talk about it. I'm sorry."

Uncle pulled a few blades of grass and stuck them in his mouth, casually chewing them. "A few miles down, this stream splits in two. Further down

than that, one of the streams empties into a large, muddy river. The other stream empties into a small pond, thanks to some hard-working beavers. This pond is crystal clear. If I took you to the river, you would say the water is no good." He turned to look at me, and I could feel his eyes penetrating me. "Who took you to your future?"

I pulled my legs up and wrapped my arms around them. "As I said, I don't want to talk about it—"

"There are multiple futures," Uncle explained. "They can change. They can always change. I can show you brown, dirty water, or I can show you crystal clear water. The guide decides. Consider who your guide was, what their motives were, why did they show you what they showed you?"

Uncle stood up, a bit wobbly, and I immediately lurched into action to help him up. As I was steadying him, and myself, he grabbed my shoulders and looked me in the eye with an unmistakable intensity that I will never forget. "You are what you are. If you choose to change that, hide that, sabotage your mission, you will suffer more. The normal life you seek… it's gone. It's the same for everyone who goes where you've gone." He placed his hand over my heart. "What beats there will make sure of that."

He backed up one step and looked upwards for a moment as if he saw something move. In that tiny space of time, I saw him for what he was. I don't know how, but I saw his essence, and it was clarity—a clarity of commitment. The very thing I lacked.

"Where do you find it?" I asked him, almost without thinking.

"What?"

"Your faith… your absolute commitment."

He put his hands in his jean pockets and looked at me with a thin, modest smile. "I don't know. It just shows up. It's all around me. They're all around me—"

"Who's they?"

"The Wakan Tanka… the winged ones. They're always around us."

I pointed to my chest. "They're not around me. Because all I ever see are

the evil guys. Maybe I'd be surer of myself if they'd show themselves to me like they do you."

"If you're expecting them to manifest like Nammu, don't. They're subtle. They might be talking to you right now."

"Where? How?"

"They can come through anything. A flower, an insect, a bird, a child, even an old man like me."

He stared at me for a second or two, and I felt something in my heart rise that was solemn, firm, and immensely pure. It seemed like a fire blazed up inside of me, and, in a sudden flash, burned away all of my hate, anger, frustration and hopelessness that had slowly conquered me ever since I first met Nammu. How this happened is a mystery. I only know that in that one tiny look that Uncle gave me, everything shifted.

I don't pretend to know how these shifts can occur from a simple look or gesture or some magical symphony of a thousand little events conspiring to change what is inside us, but I knew in that moment that Uncle was right. Maybe right isn't the word I'm looking for. It was more that he was authentic.

There's power in authenticity. It can't be manufactured from the superficial realms that most people live in. It can't be produced by will or affirmation. It's not something that is created from one's beliefs or the power of their thoughts. It's not visualization. It's a behavior of love multiplied a million times; a consistent chiseling of one's mission into the ultimate sculpture of transformation.

This is how it dawned on me, though it was more of a hammer strike than a dawning, to be sure. Uncle's love didn't have a single mushy sentiment to it. It was contained in something of a higher dimension that triggered the shift I felt. It cascaded down from some lofty place and found me standing beneath a spear of sunlight in a deserted wood.

A few seconds. That's all it took. Yet, when I write about it now, it was so much more than time, or the accumulation of experiences. It was the interfacing of souls who knew how to pierce illusions to see what is real: that

indefinable thing that lives without an atom of fear.

“He’s waiting,” Uncle announced, pointing in the direction of the cabin, breaking my trance. He walked up to me and gave me a hug. “I’m going to take a walk. I’ve already said my goodbyes to Kohana. I’ll be here if you ever need me… not that you will.”

Uncle walked away as I tried to gather my thoughts into words. “Thanks… thanks for everything, Uncle.” It was awkward. Now, writing it, I’m embarrassed I couldn’t have said something more eloquent, meaningful, from my deepest heart, but I was tongue-tied in my realizations of that time.

I felt blessed to have touched the heart of a master. A master of what, I couldn’t exactly put into words. I only knew that if there were masters that walked the earth, wearing human clothes, Uncle was one.

I wanted to be more like him.

I watched as he picked his way across the stream and crossed to the other side. He raised his hand and glanced back, acknowledging my final words with a simple bob of his head, and then walked away, blending into the woods.

Love had triumphed. I knew this, and in that same instant I knew it could slip away. I vowed to be like Uncle. I prayed to the Winged Ones to help me, to help me be like him. To have that commitment to serve the mission I came to perform. After all, what alternative was there? To be under the thumb of a manipulative demon is no alternative, no matter what the consequence.

I stood there, anchored to the ground. The sun warming my body, and a light breeze cooling the fires that still burned inside me. My thoughts returned to the auditorium and the face of Jaylee as she mimed those three powerful words.

Who was she?

Chapter 55: One Hundred Feet

On the trip home we were only twenty minutes into our dusty travels from Uncle's cabin when Kohana cleared his throat and finally spoke. "You can try your connection now."

"Huh?"

"You can try calling your wife," he said. "I can usually get a signal here… enough for voice. Might not be a great one, but it's worth a try."

"Do you mind if we stop? Maybe a better connection… less noise?"

Kohana smiled and slowed the Jeep to a stop. I opened my door and walked away, behind the vehicle, powering up my mobile device. "Derya."

I waited while the signals connected. I kept walking.

"Solomon, is it you?" Derya's voice came over the phone accompanied by a blanket of restless static.

"Yes, it's me. Where are you?"

"Still at my folk's house. Where are you?"

"On my way to the airport. I'll be home tonight."

"How was your trip?"

"Interesting—"

"How'd your filming go?"

"The trip turned out to be a little different than I expected…"

"Are you feeling okay? I've been worried since we hadn't heard anything from you."

"Yah, no, I'm fine, but I do have a question for you…"

"Okay, what?" she asked. I could feel the smile on her face.

"Do you remember that little café at the Green Mountain Film Festival

where we ate that wicked sushi—”

“Oh my God! Oh my God! You have your memory back! You have your memory! Oh my God!”

I listened with tears in my eyes as Derya began gushing about all of our shared memories. We talked for ten minutes, exploring one memory and then another and then another. It was like dancing from one star to the next in a constellation so perfectly placed.

We laughed and cried and my heart swelled in love and I kept repeating, in a whispered voice to myself as she spoke, “I love you.”

“What did you say?” she said, finally interrupting herself.

“I said the only thing a man in my condition can say… I love you.”

There was a pause, and I heard her voice shake, trying its best to hold back tears. “I will see if I can come home tomorrow. I want to see you… I need to feel you. I love you, too… God, I almost forgot to say that. How did it happen? Your memory… how’d it happen?”

I ran my free hand through my hair. How could I explain? “It’s very complicated. I’ll… I’ll try and explain it when you get home.”

“You remember everything?”

“I think so,” I said, “but that’s the thing about memory. You don’t know what’s missing.”

“I miss you so much,” she said. “The kids miss you, too. Jon’s a little lonely, because his cousins are all girls.”

“Do you want me to try and change your reservations when I get to the airport? I’ll be there in about an hour.”

“I’ll do it myself, the instant I hang up. My father’s connections will prove useful.”

“Come as soon as you can,” I said.

“I will. I will.”

I could hear her voice drifting away as if she were fading into the static, and then I lost the signal.

“Damn!” I shouted.

I called back, but the signal was lost.

My frustration at the dropped call was lost in the joy of my reconnection to Derya. It was a beautiful feeling, and my heart’s depths were reconstructing something that had been lost to me in all of my searching these past weeks. I thought I was looking for memories, but I was really looking for feelings. These feelings. The ones I felt right now.

I had Derya’s photograph on my mobile device, and I swept a finger to expand it. It opened in front of me almost life-size, suspended in the air. In the morning light, it was faded, but I could still see that essence I loved.

I remembered taking the photo. We were walking together in a small, nondescript mountain in the backcountry of Tennessee, following a trail we had found that we couldn’t bear to turn around and follow back. We were convinced that it would loop around back to our car, but as the sun began to fall behind the trees, I began to have my doubts. Derya kept urging me to continue on the path, and her confidence was so insistent that I really had no choice but to give in.

At one point we came to a place where I stopped and my stubborn nature got the best of me. I pleaded that we needed to turn back or we risked having to stay overnight in the forest without supplies. A prospect I wasn’t fond of. Derya convinced me, against all common sense, to continue down the path. We argued intensely for a few minutes, but I gave in on the condition we would turn back if we didn’t find our car in the next ten minutes. After ten minutes I stopped again and announced it was time to turn around. We had no choice.

She grabbed my hand and had started to walk down that path as if she hadn’t heard me. She kept saying, “Just a hundred more feet, come on.”

After a hundred feet, by my measures, I would slow down and resist, and she would repeat herself, laughing. “Just a hundred more feet, come on. Let’s go.”

At one point, I pulled my hand from hers and told her in no uncertain terms that I was going to walk back. She had looked at me with her soulful eyes.

“Alone?”

She grabbed my hand again. I could see her clearly in my memory, rich with the details of the light, wind, fading colors of the woods, even the scent of the leaves and grasses. I followed her without another ultimatum.

Maybe it was more like eight hundred feet, but after a few more minutes we saw the glint of metal through the trees, signaling our car. Derya was so excited—we both were—and she demanded that that I take a picture of her at the very place we saw the car, and I did. Her eyes showed her triumph. The picture meant so much more to me now.

The scuffing sound of boots against the dirt trail drew my attention. “We better get going if we want to make our flight,” Kohana announced gently. “You okay?”

I flicked the screen, and the picture zoomed back inside the device in my hand. “Yeah, I’m fine. Let’s go.”

I walked back to the car with Kohana and slammed the door a little louder than I meant to.

“Have a nice chat?” he asked.

“Thanks for your patience,” I said, nodding. “It’s the first time since my surgery that Derya… that I actually remember her while I was talking with her.”

Kohana nodded slightly and smiled. He started up the Jeep, and we drove in silence. The kind of silence that colonizes.

Chapter 56: Vision

For another ten minutes I closed my eyes, trying to remember more of the memories of my trips with Derya. We had graduated from a two-rut dirt road to a gravel road still within the Pine Ridge Reservation, but that was as much detail as I knew. I could have asked Kohana for details, I'm sure he knew, but, to be perfectly honest, I didn't care.

I felt the Jeep slow down and opened my eyes to see a man walking along the road ahead of us. He was walking with his back towards us, his left arm extended casually in a half-hearted hitchhiker style.

"I'm going to offer him a lift." Kohana said as he leaned over to me, eying the man. "You okay with that?"

"Sure," I said. "Do you know him?"

"…I don't think so."

We slowed the Jeep to a stop, and the young man walked up to the backseat window. "Thanks, man. Where're you headed?"

"Airport," Kohana said, "and you?"

"That'll do fine. My name's Jonas."

"I'm Kohana, and this is Solomon. Climb in, we'll give you a lift."

Jonas tossed a small duffle bag through the open window and got in the backseat. He was in his early twenties, long black hair rested on broad shoulders. He wore a dusty cowboy hat, blue jeans and a red flannel shirt. There was a smoothness to him, though I couldn't say what it was that made this impression on me.

"Kohana Chayton?" he asked. "The Kohana Chayton?"

"Well, that depends," Kohana answered.

"I know about you. You're a shrink in Boston, right?"

"Close enough."

“You’re shaman.”

“I’ve been called that, too.”

“I need your help, then.”

Kohana kept his eyes on the road, but I could tell he was eyeballing his new guest in the rearview mirror regularly. “You mean more than driving you to the airport?”

Jonas turned to me for a moment. “You a shrink, too?”

“No, I teach film out east.”

Jonas turned back to Kohana and sat forward. I could feel one of his knees poking through the back of my seat. “I had a dream last night… possibly a vision.” He paused, and sat back in his seat and folded his arms on his chest and looked outside. “Not sure I can talk about it with him here,” Jonas said, looking in my direction with a neutral expression on his face.

“He’s cool,” Kohana remarked.

“Eháŋni héčheš oyáte waŋ igláka áyiŋ na waná éthipi—”

“Like I said,” Kohana interrupted, “Solomon’s cool.”

Jonas paused, gathering his thoughts. I was curious about his dream, but was okay if he wanted to keep me out of it. “It’s okay, you can talk in Lakota if you want,” I said.

“Speak English,” Kohana said, “or talk about the weather.”

Jonas took a deep breath. “This is about ptesán-wi.” His voice was intense and the hum of the engine was all I heard for several seconds. I could sense Kohana’s patience—thick and obstinate.

“Okay,” Jonas relented, “I’ll speak this dream in English, but if I begin to speak of things this wasichu shouldn’t hear… it’s on you, man.”

“Fair enough,” Kohana replied calmly.

“This dream took place in an olden time,” Jonas began. “Our people lived in the old ways, with teepees and deer-skin clothes. We were gathered in a valley of great mountains that surrounded us on all sides, and in the middle of this valley was a huge lake. Our village was near the shores of this great lake.

“I’d been sleeping when I heard an eerie sound, and I woke up and looked out of my teepee and saw the entire village, hundreds of men, women and children walking quickly to the lake. Some were even running. I decided to go with them and see what it was that was shrieking. Man, this sound was weird. Flat out the eeriest sound I’ve ever heard.

“When I got to the lake I could see something under the water, but it was blurry… I couldn’t really see it clearly. I only knew that everyone was there because of this… this thing in the water.”

“Was this creature making the sound that woke you?” Kohana asked.

“I think so, but when I got to the lake I didn’t hear it shriek again. Instead, the water surface started to rumble like it was boiling. Something under the surface was causing the commotion. And then I saw a white woman rise from the water, and she began to calmly walk to the shore… on top of the rumbling water.”

Jonas paused and took a deep breath. “There’s no doubt that she was the White Buffalo Woman. She came to the shore and all the people from our village began to form a line, and each person would come to her individually and she would touch them… here,” he pointed to his upper chest, “and then blow on their faces, and they would just slowly disappear.”

“One by one all of the villagers stood in line and allowed this to happen. It was as if it was expected and they wanted it. There wasn’t anyone forcing them to disappear. They wanted it.

“After what seemed to be about twenty minutes, I watched the last person stand before the White Buffalo Woman and disappear, and now, I was alone with her. She was on the shores of the lake. White, long hair, eyes that were clear—not like ours. She motioned for me to come to her, but I… I didn’t want to disappear… into some unknown world, even if all my people were there. So I shook my head and staggered backwards from her.

“The next thing I knew she was standing right in front of me, smiling at me. I could sense her… her power. It was amazing. But I was still afraid of what she would do to me. She spoke words that I don’t understand so this is where I need your help.”

“I’m listening,” Kohana said.

“She said that the heart inside and the breath that’s shared are the only tools I needed to move to the next world.

“But I explained that I wasn’t looking to go to the next world. I wanted to stay in this one.

“She smiled at me and said that the good were leaving. They were going to another world, another place where we wouldn’t have to be in the shadows of evil and its intended conflict.”

“Those were her exact words?” Kohana asked.

“I think so.”

“Keep going.” Kohana encouraged.

“And then she showed me something that was like a movie or something. Out over the mountains I saw great birds—thunderbirds. I swear to you, they were thunderbirds, man, and there were lots of them… maybe thousands. Even the sky began to darken, there were so many of them, and they began to circle over the lake, and a few would dive down as if they were inspecting it. I turned to the White Buffalo Woman, and she looked unconcerned as if the thunderbirds weren’t interested in us.

“Then I saw some of them dive into the lake, and they were wrestling with these… these sea creatures. There was a great battle, and I was watching it from the shore with the White Buffalo Woman by my side. The entire lake was… this… this battlefield.

“I was terrified by what I saw. It was a battle of good versus evil, but I couldn’t tell who the good were and who the evil were. It was so intense, man, but I didn’t really fear for my life. It was like I was a nobody.

“After about a minute or two of watching this whole thing, the White Buffalo Woman turned to me and said that it was my time.

“The battle suddenly faded away and it was just her and me again, but this time we were in a misty place. She was all I could see, it was like being inside a cloud. I felt completely comfortable… safe. Then she took me to a window that suddenly appeared. We were looking down on the planet…

earth… spinning in slow motion beneath me, and she said it was her, and then she pointed to me and said it was me, too. It was everyone and that we were meant to be free, but we were not free yet. We were meant to love one another, but we didn't yet. We were meant to live without fear, but we were in its grip.

"I asked her why? Why'd it all gone wrong?

"She smiled like my mother did when I asked a silly question. She said it was the way of the school… the whole planet was a school. The whole planet, man. She said it was one of the best in the entire universe. We were lucky to be there… here. It was a privilege to be part of the earth school. The school was the collective of all; everyone played their part in the story of earth. It was all one massive school room without a teacher or textbook. Everyone was the teacher… everyone the textbook…"

I glanced around to look at Jonas' face. His eyes were dimmed in the caverns of recollection. I knew the look well.

"Then, suddenly," he continued, closing his eyes, "we were flying above cities, farms, jungles and mud villages, and she would point to a building or home and say that the people there were struggling, feeling sad, feeling angry, feeling abandoned, and so on. I asked her everyone is this way?

"She nodded and said everyone. Everyone, even plants and animals. Even stones. Even air and water. Everyone and everything feels this. It isn't the thing to run from… it isn't the thing to hate or fear. It's the school. It's us. It is us. Flow with it. Learn compassion from it. That's what she told me."

"That was the end of the dream?" Kohana asked.

"Not quite," Jonas said. "We ended up back at the shoreline somehow, and she asked me if I was ready."

"For what?" Kohana asked.

"To move on to the next world. I said I was. I'd seen enough. She said that I was still in earth's school, but it would be a place of resonance. Then she touched my chest, and I felt my body begin to hum—it was a strange feeling I was vibrating, kind of like the lake had been earlier, and I then I could feel her breath on my face, and it was like the sweetest breath you can imagine…

it was the only thing I wanted… to move on. Then I woke up."

I had listened to his dream silently, wondering if I was in a film. I felt like an actor. Jonas felt like an actor. Kohana felt like an actor. Everything seemed scripted. How could this be? How could this young man suddenly show up in our Jeep and relate this dream that was so closely related to my own dreams, if that's what I can call them. I was half angry and half elated; a strange state to be in, I can assure you.

I had heard all about this wonderful certainty called freewill that each of us were privileged to share, and yet I felt like I was a hand puppet of God, or perhaps the lower-case god. Whichever it was, I was bequeathed a freewill that some part of me, somewhere in that most privileged position, was orchestrating the corridors I walked, the people I met, even the air particles I breathed and the photons that flowed through me. Everything.

Jonas' dream was so similar to mine that I found my own memories stirred up. I had been hoping for a quiet trip home where I could reflect on my memories of Derya and our children and perhaps even my recent experiences with Uncle, but now Jonas' dream was like veins of lightning, revealing the very images I wanted to stay dark.

What was the battle? Why were the Quantusum being attacked by giant birds? Was the White Buffalo Woman really Zenith, or perhaps Vanessa? What was happening here that could allow two random people to collide in such a way? My mind was reeling at the odds.

"What do you think?" Jonas asked Kohana.

"It's a powerful vision," Kohana replied.

"I knew it!" Jonas slapped his knee.

I looked at Kohana, and he was smiling to himself. I looked back out the window, at the scrub brush terrain so alien to my eyes, and yet, everything in my world, when I really considered it, was alien. It was unreal, that's truly how it felt. I knew I loved a woman and two children. I knew those memories were strong and the bonds real. Outside of that, I wasn't sure what else was real. What else mattered.

A vision. What is that? I wanted to ask Kohana, just blurt it out, "What the

hell is a vision?" and more importantly, "What difference does it make?" I had these kinds of visions, and look where they've taken me—the middle of nowhere listening to more visions. Every atom in my body wanted to simply feel the love of my family and leave all of these supernatural visions to the doleful ones who pursue an ever-closer connection to their creator. I didn't need that. I needed love.

I don't really know why my mood was so dark; maybe Jonas had inadvertently stolen my uniqueness. Maybe I was just tired of the sprawling narrative about the mysterious Quantusum. Perhaps Jonas was another variable in the mix that felt destabilizing. There was something incubating inside me that was trying to fly free, trying to look upward and be positive, but it was still too weak, too absorbed in the shadow tethered above it—like a kite in an angry wind. The part of me that was properly trained to be programmed was being pulled in every direction: family, work, Nammu, First Born, soul, The Grand Portal, Vanessa, Uncle, and the ever-present fear I felt for the monster-god. They were all circling me, and like wary accomplices, they didn't seem to realize or even care how I felt.

That was probably it, I felt uncared for. I was a Sonverto! I was supposed to produce the vital link that made possible the greatest discovery of humankind—that led humanity to the realm of soul! Did anyone consider what I needed? Instead of cramming all of this spiritual instruction in my head, instead of forcing me to see the future, instead of flying around to realms I didn't even have a name for… let me be with my family and feel their love.

There, that was it. That was how I felt, and I was justified. I could hear Kohana and Jonas discussing the dream in more depth, but I wasn't listening. I pretended, nodding my head occasionally, glancing into their eyes at shallow depths like an automaton, but all the time that methodical part of me was lamenting my treatment. A Sonverto shouldn't have to endure temptation, demonic bullying, and constant threats. The universe should protect him. Shelter him. Provide a sense of safety so he can undertake his mission.

I could almost hear Uncle talking about empathy and how one needs to live in this anxiety to understand how others live. Well, I was done with fear. It

was then and there, with dream interpretations atomized and drifting through the Jeep, that I made the commitment to place fear behind me. It would never rule me again. It would never tempt me away from my family—the one thing I knew was real and good; that nucleus of all that was important to me.

Jonas proved to be an interesting companion during our trip. He was a gifted conversationalist, and for all of his youthful exuberance about having a vision, a part of me felt sorry for him. The time would come when the universe would pull him back down to earth with its tenacious grip until he was once again engulfed in darkness appropriate for his human condition.

I was walking down the telescoping stairs of cynicism. I could sense that much, but at the same time I was edging away from the word, selfish. A cynic could be selfless I told myself. They could still be a spiritual person. They just needed some shelter from the mechanized torture of temptation and doubt.

I closed my eyes, satisfied that I could find my way out. There was always a way out. The darkest shadow that circled me was my guilt with Nammu. It was like an imprisoned vine pushing against the cover I kept over it. Growing its pressure by some invisible force of nature that I knew was impossible to keep hidden. It would find a way to expose itself. It would humiliate me and once again, the Sonverto would look subhuman, berated by the ferocity of his temptations colliding with the weakness of his human shell.

I wanted to sleep. I wanted that warm oblivion that sleep provides, but words— Lakota words—were now flowing in the Jeep, and I knew Kohana had left me to my worries. I turned my head and looked outside at the dusty terrain of South Dakota. A flock of starlings burst out of a lonesome tree as we drove by, forming clusters of black blurs that shifted like time-elapsed clouds. I thought about my filming, my craft. It felt so far away. My camera equipment was in the back, and I’d never even opened the case. I never even thought of it until then.

Welcome to a new layer of indifference, I told myself, and then closed my eyes and slept.

Chapter 57: Home

As I opened the front door, the sights of home were sharp reminders that my memory was restored. All of the photographs that hung in ordered patterns on the walls now whispered their stories to me. In many ways, I had lived a charmed life, especially as a young man, traveling throughout the world to produce my film documentaries and photographic studies of marginalized cultures. Each photograph my eye took in held a song, but its singing started haltingly when I first looked at it as if my brain, still learning to connect the dots, had suddenly learned to stutter.

My optimism had rebounded. It was a beautiful evening when I arrived. The sun was setting, casting a pinkish glow on everything. The living room was saturated in this pinkish light, and I resisted turning on the lights in order to preserve it.

The blinking message light took me into the kitchen. I touched the panel, and an automated attendant announced that I had three messages and nine that had found their way into my spam folder. I waited a moment and the message came up, it was Vanessa's mom.

"Mr. Tonum… Solomon, this is Corin, Vanessa's mother. I just wanted to know if you were still planning to visit, and when that might be. We're excited to meet you… anyway, if you could call me back it would be appreciated.

"Have a good day, Solomon."

I began to weep. My entire body tingled like a trillion atoms vibrating from a single sound—a single resonance. Corin's voice, floating in the kitchen in the pink, hazy light, held a tone of familiarity that the central most part of me knew, and I was powerless to hold back the tears. So I didn't try.

I stayed like this for a few minutes. I wanted to listen to the message again, but I couldn't. I couldn't will my fingers to sweep the surface of my phone attendant. I waited instead, watching the shadows of leaves dance against the kitchen walls. My thoughts turned to Vanessa and what she'd given me. And

then I picked up the phone and listened.

“Hello… Solomon?”

“Hello, Corin.”

“Thanks for calling back.”

“I would’ve called sooner, but I literally just returned from a trip.”

“That’s okay. I knew you had lots of distractions… actually, I apologize for calling, it’s just one those things that comes with age, you get impatient.”

“No problem, I’m glad you called. Say, my wife and kids are still in Turkey, so I could come up tomorrow for a visit, because they won’t be back until Wednesday. Would that work?”

“Tomorrow afternoon then?”

“Yes, would that be okay?”

“Let me ask Jason, just a moment.”

The line went quiet and a few seconds later she returned, her voice bright and strong. “Yes, that will work just fine, Solomon.”

“Great, then I’ll see you around one.”

“Wonderful. We’ll see you then.”

“Bye…”

“Yes, goodbye.”

The room was suddenly plunged into a deep silence as I wondered how the last ten minutes had worked itself out in such a way that in the morning I would now take on this new adventure. I didn’t really want to go. Did I?

My plans were to have a quiet, peaceful time waiting for my family to return. Unfortunately, Derya couldn’t arrange a quicker flight, so she had to use their original tickets. It was one of those hard realities to wait, but in a sense it did provide me an opportunity to go and visit Vanessa’s parents. Maybe it would be a good distraction from all of the supernatural experiences I’d encountered under Uncle’s tutelage.

Jason and Corin were salt of the earth people. I very much doubt that

anything too exciting would come from a visit there.

I spent the rest of the evening reviewing Vanessa's journal. I had brought it with me to South Dakota, but never once had I opened it. One journal entry in particular stood out to me. I read it several times, and each time I felt lost.

Love withers in fear. Fear is complexity. Fear is the encroachment of the program that the mind senses. The program is the dysfunction of the system. The system is the creation of the few who want control over the planet, who believe that they can actually control the planet and hold its power in their hands.

All humans feel the encroachment of this program, even those who created the program. Yes, it varies… both the fear and the rational understanding of its causes. The program modulates. It moves in rhythms that are both planetary and highly personalized, and they interact. It is this time-honored interaction that creates the flywheel effect of the program, lubricating the human nodes on the network so the program can both submerge stealthily into the culture and propagate from generation to generation.

There is no end to the program. It is eternal. It always exists in the dimensions of embodiment, it is only a question of degree, but the larger and more compelling question, is how one responds to the program.

Tune out to tune in is one strategy. Keep your head down and work hard is another. There are a hundred more, in some ways, there are as many different ways to respond as there are human incarnations. The response of the heart to this program is to modulate in sympathy. It is to allow the program to saturate the body and mind systems. The heart is soft, malleable, opening, accepting, forgiving, compassionate, understanding… it is all of these things and more.

The program doesn't care. The program is heartless.

To respond to this program with sympathy is natural, but unwise. This is why discernment is so important. The heart is the eye of the soul and its mouthpiece. The soul sees the program and understands its purpose. It dances with the program but never becomes it. It learns from the program but never attempts to teach it, to change it, or even to alter it in a subtle way.

The program is freewill.

The program is evolving.

The program serves the greater destiny of the human family.

Some will say that the program is inside each of us. It is an artifact of the human mind system. The program is not inside us, like a third-party as if we were its host. We are the program, or, more accurately, we are the program's outpicturing. Each human is the outpicturing of freewill, and freewill is the nucleus of the program, but even underneath this nucleus' core essence, is something more expansive and utterly undefinable.

This undefinable subject has but one purpose: to be defined by the program. Each of us is a photon of light and collectively we are giving our light to a subject that has lived in anonymity since time began. We are becoming the light that will finally resolve the undefinable presence that is beneath the program—presumably, the creator of the program.

So in all of your resistance to the program, in all of your soft resonances to its urgings and modulations into fear, will you dance with it? Will you learn from it? Or will you curse it, hate it, wish it into nonexistence, push it away, and most of all, fear it? For if you do this, your light will dim. Your love will wither. The face of the undefinable will remain true to its name.

The heart is the connection from the "I" to the 'We," and from the "We" to the "Undefinable." If you want to shed your light on the undefinable, then allow your heart to see and speak. How do you do this? You listen to your imagination, but not the one of the human brain, not the one of the mind, you listen to the imagination of your feelings. Which feelings? The ones that allow you to dance with the program. The ones that allow you to learn from the program.

The program is neutral. It is this because it encompasses all. That which holds everything is by definition neutral. This is the nature of the native heart as well. It is neutral because it encompasses all. It lives for all. It beats in all. It interacts with all. It flows with all. It loves all.

The program doesn't love. The program doesn't hate. The program doesn't produce good or evil. The program lights us up, so we can light up the undefinable and journey in its direction. What direction is that? It is the only thing that matters. That you discern the direction through your own heart.

Everything you have learned, all the dramas that define you, every action you have taken, can be modified by these seven words. If you do it enough times, you will see that the direction is stillness and allowance and acceptance and love.

It is not a direction of space or time. It is not really a direction at all. It is the persistent attitude of forgiveness; the wisdom of opening yourself to what finds you; the allowance of Life in your life. It is the outflow of love as the defining principle of your life. This is why the heart, when activated, does not seek. It absorbs. It expresses. It heals even when it cannot heal the body or mind. It heals because it raises its light in symphony to the one presence that wrote the program. And the agglomeration of all other ills, densities, injustices is seen in this same light as the program. The heart is the light that activates the picture of what we are— collectively.

And this picture is what we call love, and yet when people sling this word around in their everyday life, it is absent this meaning. It is another thing altogether, and so the first thing one learns on the heart's path, is to redefine love as the nectar of the undefinable.

I rubbed my eyes. I understood some of it. Some of it seemed contradictory. Some of it moved me. All I know is that I was too tired to understand it all, and I closed the journal, but as I went to do so, I noticed a small doodle in a corner of one the pages. It was a drawing of a child. Whimsical, beautiful flowing lines gave it life. Vanessa was an artist—a very good one. Despite its miniature size, the detail was incredible. The only way she could have possibly drawn it was if she had a magnifying glass, the sharpest of pencils, and patience. Lots of patience.

I went to a kitchen drawer and pulled out a magnifying glass. I had to see it in more detail. The entire portrait was the size of a small postage stamp, and it drew my curiosity in ways that surprised my tired state. As I swept the powerful lens over the page, I could see the great care that had been given to each line. These were the lines of a Leonardo, except they were contained in a space where free-flowing arm movement would be impossible. How did she do it?

As I looked over the portrait the eyes had a glistened expression of love. The eye lashes were like delicate curtains for the soul's window, and when I

looked even further there was a familiarity to this face. Could this be a self-portrait of Vanessa as a child?

There were none of the characteristics of albinism, though it did look a little like her, but then artists often intermix their own features with their subjects. I went through the journal looking in the margins of the pages and found six more drawings, all miniatures, all beautifully rendered, and all of them were of the same girl, ranging in age from one to perhaps three years old. There was never a name beside the drawing or any indication of relationship.

I closed the journal and decided to leave it in the mystery. I needed to get some rest as I had a long drive in the morning. I wanted to call Derya one last time and explain my trip to see Vanessa's parents, but I knew she'd be sleeping—it was almost 3 A.M. in her part of the world. I sent her a quick v-message instead:

"Hi sweetheart, it's me. I got back a few minutes ago, checked messages on the home phone, and found one from Vanessa's mom, Corin. I called her back and arranged to go up there—Lisbon—tomorrow morning. I'll pretty much be on the road all day tomorrow. Anyway… just wanted you to know where I'll be tomorrow. I miss you. Can't wait to see you and the kids again. Two more days… ugh! I'll manage somehow. Love you, and give the kids big hugs from me. Bye."

Then I said, "send," paused a moment and then, "phone off." I imagined Derya waking up in the morning and getting my message and leaving me a v-message in response. No doubt once she heard my plans, she'd dutifully remind me to drive carefully and have a good time… maybe take pictures so she and the kids could see what the farm was like. I could almost hear her voice in my head.

I thought to myself, I'm off to visit the Longleys in Lisbon tomorrow. I liked the alliteration and repeated it aloud, several times, the Longleys in Lisbon, as I climbed the stairs to the bedroom.

Chapter 58: Corin

It was a beautiful morning as I cruised the interstate on my way to a small farm on the outskirts of Lisbon, New York. Small farms were rare. I had researched them, and in the state of New York there were less than two hundred. Small equated to independent. Somehow the Longleys had managed to secure a large parcel of land that bordered the St. Lawrence River. It was prime farming land.

When County Road 11 came up I knew I was getting close. It was just past noon and I'd opened the windows, hoping the fresh air would keep me alert. For some reason I was tired. Perhaps the hum of the engine, or my travels to South Dakota had caught up with me.

My mind was rehearsing how to approach my visit. What was the proper tone? I have your daughter's heart, thank you so much. Could I really be appreciative? Wasn't it appropriate to offer my gratitude to Vanessa, but not them? And what of the father, Jason? I hadn't talked with him. He seemed to be in the background. Probably a silent type. Old world, independent farmer. No sons and an albino for a daughter must have made for a hard, solitary life as a farmer.

I decided to stop my mental rehearsals and just react to their approach. That way I didn't need one of my own.

The road was pretty straight and the countryside alternated between flat farmland, and forests. There was the occasional lake that often held white egrets stalking the shores. I still couldn't see the St. Lawrence River, but I knew it was on my left side, a few miles away, cutting a path between the U.S. and Canada.

Derya and the kids were packing for their trip home tomorrow. I could sense them getting ready. I had brought my camera equipment along, hoping that I could get some pictures of farm animals that Jon and Marisa would enjoy. They'd never been to a farm. I also hoped that the Longleys would allow me to take some pictures of them.

As I got on County Road 28, I kept a close watch for Ross Road, my signal that I'd almost arrived. I knew they'd be expecting me, probably with lunch waiting. A few minutes later my "signal" appeared, and I followed it to their farm.

Their driveway was a gravel road that wound its way around a small hill that sported thick trees. On the other side of the hill a farmhouse came into view. It was painted white with red shutters. The house was slightly dilapidated in its condition, but its manicured lawn, freshly mowed, balanced any sense of untidiness. It looked… comfortable.

I was nervous as I pulled up. My heart was beating loudly, and I felt a sense of anticipation, knowing full well that the heart that beat inside me was a huge part of this home and the people inside. Would I recognize any of this? I asked myself. I grabbed my bag and opened the car door.

"Welcome, Solomon!"

It was Corin standing on the porch with a white apron tied around her pastel-colored paisley dress. I stopped for a moment and took it all in. I reminded myself I was here for Vanessa as much as anyone, and I could sense what filled my eyes went to my heart where it was somehow forwarded to Vanessa.

"Hi, Corin, it's so good to meet you." I walked up the stairs a little uneasy as to whether I should shake hands or give her a polite hug, but Corin simply stepped back a few feet and opened the screen door with a nervous smile.

"Let's go inside… did you have a good trip?"

"Yes, traffic wasn't too bad," I remarked.

"Jason's still out in the field," she said "or one of the barns, I'm not sure which. I told him I'd call him when you arrived…"

Corin fumbled in her apron pocket and pulled out a mobile device. "Excuse me a moment."

She turned away and walked into the house, motioning me to follow with her free hand. "He's here, come when you can."

She sat down absentmindedly at the kitchen table looking me over. "Your

pictures don’t show you as clearly as I can see you.” Corin smiled brightly with her eyes as if she had finally realized who I was, or perhaps her initial nervousness had simply passed.

“I like taking pictures a lot more than giving them,” I said, “that could explain why.”

“Yes, I’ve seen some of your photographs. I liked them very much.”

I smiled, but stayed silent, ushering in an uncomfortable pause that descended upon the room.

It was a smaller house than I had expected, but very well kept. “Plain” would be the best word to describe it. It felt sparse. A single couch and recliner occupied the living room, focused on a coffee table with various books and magazines stacked neatly on top of one another, crowding a small vase with freshly cut flowers. The kitchen was bright and sunny and overlooked the backyard where there was a small pond and a red-painted barn on the far side.

“Are you hungry?” Corin asked.

I smelled something like baked bread the moment I entered their home, and it had stirred my hunger. I nodded modestly. “Yes, a little bit.”

“What’s that?” Corin asked, eyeing my bag.

“Two things, actually. I brought my camera to take a few pictures, and I brought this.” I pulled out Vanessa’s journal and handed it to Corin. “I thought you might want to see it.”

Corin started to visibly shake as she opened the journal. “How did you get this?”

“Vanessa sent it to me through her attorney after I was released from the hospital.”

“I didn’t know she had an attorney,” Corin said quietly to herself, staring at the pages of the journal as she leafed through it. I watched her read a few lines with trembling lips. Her fingers traced the handwritten curves.

“She was not your everyday person,” Corin remarked, staring at the page, but her eyes were leaping into memories that I couldn’t see.

“She was always different… right from the very start.” Corin closed the journal and her eyes at the very same moment. “She was born late in the evening. We weren’t prepared. She arrived early… and fast. Oh my goodness, I remember that birth so vividly.

“I was only twenty-seven, a simple woman who had no reason to think that my genes could possibly produce something as amazing as Vanessa.” Corin smiled and opened her eyes. “I imagine you have lots of questions. It’s okay, you can ask me anything.”

I sat down at the kitchen table; it was cool to the touch. “I don’t quite know how to go about this, I feel a little awkward about this whole thing—”

“Don’t be,” Corin said, touching my arm lightly. “We’re all stumbling a bit here. We’ll keep our judgments… somewhere out there.” She glanced out the window to the backyard, and then her hazel-colored eyes darted back to mine expectantly.

“What was she like?” I asked.

Corin sat back in her chair and took a long breath, her eyes glazing over a bit. “She was a loner. All her life she was a loner, but she wasn’t bitter about it. She accepted it. It was what she was. What she chose.

“She loved to write. Even as a child she would write stories, and I would catch her reading them aloud outside on the porch sometimes. She had a variety of imaginary friends—had names for all of them, too. She was never short on imagination, that girl.

“I didn’t know she was writing this,” Corin glanced at the journal. “She moved out some five years ago. Wanted to be independent…”

“How old was she when she died,” I asked cautiously.

“Twenty-nine.”

“How’d she die?”

“Cancer… skin cancer.”

“How long did she live with it?”

“In some ways, all her life. But Solomon, there was something about her… she knew her future, and there were times I felt she knew our future—I mean

all of us. She'd go on about it sometimes in great detail like someone explaining a bright dream. And I'd listen quietly, but the whole time I was thinking to myself, is it real or is she just imagining this?"

Corin reached out and touched my arm again. "You're a very lucky man to have a heart as good as hers."

Corin stood up. "Can I ask you a favor?"

I stood to my feet, expecting she needed me to fetch something. "Yes, of course."

"It'll sound kind of strange," she said, pointing to my chest, "but can I listen for just a few seconds?"

I'd actually had the premonition that she would ask this, but her request still sounded odd to me, though there was no way I could refuse it. "Sure." I nodded.

She was tentative at first, placing her hands just above her knees and bending over slightly. She placed her ear over my chest—not quite touching, as if she was trying to hone in on the sound. I stared out the kitchen window, trying to act natural, but wondering how I could possibly be natural in this circumstance. Then her ear was directly on my chest, pressing in to hear the sound that had once signaled her daughter's arrival in this world.

The house, except for an occasional creak, was soundless. Corin stayed tucked down with her ear on my chest for what seemed like fifteen seconds, and then slowly rose to her normal posture. I could see her eyes glistening as she sat back down at the table.

"I never really knew her father."

The words fell out like boulders dropping into a room filled with fine crystal. "Huh?" was all I managed to say.

"Jason's her stepfather. Her biological father was a drifter I met in an empty bar one night when I was lonely."

"I thought you… I mean I assumed Jason was—"

"I know," Corin said. "That's why I mention it. If Jason seems a little distant… well, that's why."

“Okay, I understand,” I said. “Does your husband know about Vanessa’s work?”

“Not really. Has neither the interest nor the time I suppose. But he’s a good man. Just a little preoccupied with the farm.” She smiled and stood to her feet, looking out the window as if she were searching for Jason. “He’s taking his sweet time.”

“Is he okay that I’m here?” I asked.

“He’s okay… he’s just not in love with the idea.” She turned and looked at me with sad eyes. “He knew Vanessa was different, but I think he was a little spooked by her.”

Corin coughed a few times, cleared her throat, and looked down at the journal. “Why do you think Vanessa sent it to you?”

There’s one thing I’ve never liked about meeting people for the first time. It was the dance. How much do you open up? How quickly? Corin had opened up to me; she had been listening to my heart through a thin cotton shirt. But did she really understand Vanessa’s perspective, and could I tell her what Vanessa had told me in the video?

I decided to keep the dance at arm’s length. “I think she wanted to let me see a part of her spirit. Maybe it would help me understand her… and her heart.”

Corin nodded her satisfaction at my answer.

“Do you want to see some pictures of her?”

“Yes, very much.”

She walked off with a sudden spurt of energy, and I sat down at the table again, eyeing the journal as it sat quietly on the table. In a minute Corin returned and placed a tablet on the table in front of me. “Here you go.” She pointed to a folder on the desktop. “That’s the one. I’ll get lunch on… and, oh, by the way, Jason’ll be here in ten minutes. Just got caught up in a repair.”

Corin watched while I opened the folder, as if she wanted to see my reaction to the pictures.

“When did you know she had albinism?” I asked.

“Did she talk about it in her journal—her albinism?”

“I haven’t read it completely, but, no, I haven’t seen any references.”

“Then how did you know she was an albino?”

I felt the heat of a blush rise in my face, and I tried my best to compose my voice. “She had sent me a video along with the journal.”

“A video… of what?”

“It was of her. She was talking about things.”

Corin walked to her chair and sat down, looking at me with a new intensity. “What kind of things, Solomon?” she asked, sweeping an errant strand of hair from her furrowed forehead.

The arms-length dance had suddenly become cheek to cheek.

Chapter 59: It

I had debated about bringing Vanessa's video with me, but in the end decided not to. Part of me felt it was private, just for my eyes, but to be fair, had I been Vanessa's mother or father, I would have wanted to see it. I did my best to describe the video to Corin, but without the more personal aspects, which included my role in the discovery of The Grand Portal.

"Did she mention the future?" Corin asked after I finished my explanation.

"In what sense?"

"That humanity would discover its soul?"

There it was. The proverbial cat, as they say, was out of the bag. I nodded. "She mentioned it."

"How?"

I shifted uneasily in my wooden chair, and then I watched a creeping darkness surround me. My world was suddenly contracting like a tunnel of blackness, and all that formerly constituted my world was being drawn inside this whirling vortex. It was as if the Grim Reaper had finally found me and was extending his bony hand to gather me in. I resisted with all my strength, but the relentless pull was impossible to resist.

As I entered the tunnel I felt a cold chill, then a sense of terror as a strange being began to materialize in front of me. I couldn't tell if it was a male or female. Its face was deformed, ancient, and without any sense of ethnicity, though it was human… I think.

Suddenly I was thrust to my knees by some inscrutable force. My hands were ripped behind me and tied. I couldn't even imagine looking back at what or who was doing this, as my eyes were riveted on only one thing: the pale-yellow eyes attached to the hideous face that watched me with such strange curiosity.

The being stood in an awkward pose, shifting frequently as if there was

never a posture in which comfort could be secured, and yet, amid this near-constant shifting there was a deft superiority that expressed itself in its every movement. “Do you recognize me?” it asked. Its voice was calculating and androgynous.

I narrowed my eyes to tiny slits and looked at it. There was nothing familiar about this creature. I shook my head.

The being laughed. For the first time I was able to unleash my gaze from its unpleasant face. It was wearing regular clothes—though I cannot remember what they were as I write this. It seemed both surprised and amused by my presence, and walked a little closer, perhaps within five feet of me.

“I am what you are, but in the lowest dimension. I am the fossil record of your existence. I am the shadow. I am what you have ignored, feared, denied, and lavishly repudiated.”

“Is this hell?” I managed to ask, looking around for the first time. We appeared to be in a room with a fireplace, and there were other people around who seemed not to notice us. They were talking to one another, but I couldn’t hear them.

The creature came closer to my face, peering down. It was rather petite and effeminate in physical stature. Its hair was matted back in thin wisps that seemed unable to find a straight line. Its skin was that of a cadaver, not that I’ve seen any cadavers, but the description is apt, I’m sure.

“Do you see it?” the creature asked.

“Hell?”

It put its thin, scarecrow arms out in front of it. “This!”

I stared back panicked and confused. “See what?”

It stepped back and continued to appraise me, looking at me with intense interest. “Look again.”

I looked at it. I mean I really looked at the creature, trying to find something that could possibly be stranger than what I already saw, but I saw nothing. “I’m sorry, but I don’t recognize you. What do you want me to see?”

The being looked frustrated and closed its eyes. “Look again.”

I could see it was trying to concentrate, and I was equally perplexed, believe me. But then I saw it, a faint cord or tube was materializing between us. It was like an umbilical cord that was undulating between us like a piece of string floating on the wind. It went from my stomach area to the creature, and inside this cord I could see something moving between us. It was subtle, like tiny packets of colored light. Whatever it was, I saw it as clearly as any physical object.

“What is it?” I asked, still on my knees with my hands tied behind me in a painful, constricting manner.

The being opened its eyes and smiled. “It’s what connects us. It’s the tether that runs between us, nourishing me, providing me with what I need to live.”

“Why would I want to nourish you?”

The being shrugged his shoulders. “Why indeed?”

I struggled with my bindings. “If I nourish you, give you life, how is it that you have power over me?”

It smiled again. “You gave it to me every time you experienced fear, guilt, anger, greed, selfishness, hatred, and a few other vices I will not mention, to spare you the embarrassment.” The creature winked one of its pale eyes and glanced around the room at the other people who seemed like phantoms moving in another reality.

“What do you want? Why did you bring me here?”

“I brought you here? No, that is incorrect. You brought yourself. You intruded. You alone bear responsibility for entering my world. That is why I immediately bound you. You are definitely not supposed to be here.”

I felt the creature walk behind me, continuing to assess me, perhaps wondering if I had a weapon. “If you enter my world, it is done through a dream—sometimes a drug, usually a dream. But I know you were not dreaming…”

“Perhaps I died,” I offered.

The creature stood before me again. “This is very peculiar. Do you have

any weapons?”

“Weapons?” I shouted. “I’m the one who’s bound!”

The creature folded its arms and seemed to be considering its options. It continued to move. I don’t think it ever stopped moving for more than a few seconds.

“You said that you knew I wasn’t dreaming… how do you know that?” I asked. “Are you watching me?”

“This tells me,” it said, pointing to the cord that connected us. “Every feeling that emanates from you that is of anger and fear comes to me—through this cord. I can detect when you are awake or dreaming. The energy is very different. Just as you can tell when you’re eating fruit or a chocolate bar.”

“Why did I come here then? I didn’t wish it. I didn’t even know you existed.”

“Yes, well, that is the puzzle.” The creature walked within a few inches of me. Its eyes were covered with a thick viscous film of some kind that gave it a vacant stare. Suddenly, it raised its hands and shrieked at me in utter terror. Fear flooded my body, and I closed my eyes fearing that the creature would kill me. Instead, the creature smiled as if it was caught in a holy rapture. I could see lights moving from me to it in the translucent casing of the cord that connected us. Then I realized what it was doing. It was testing a mechanism for his attainment of nourishment.

“By whatever means you arrived here, it matters little to me. I do believe I will keep you.”

“What do you mean, keep me…”

“You will serve me well—”

“I will not serve you,” I growled. “Release me, now!”

“Or what?”

“Do you really think I will feel fear the next time you scream at me like that?” I implored.

“Perhaps, perhaps not, but I’m very inventive. I’ll find new ways to incite

you.”

“Where did you come from?” I asked.

“From you.” He nodded in my direction.

“I’m your creator, then, correct?”

“Yes. You created me.”

“How can you imprison and torture the one that created you?”

The creature looked puzzled. “You created me, perhaps you should tell me.”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. I needed to gather my composure. I didn’t know if it would be possible for this creature to hold me indefinitely, but it sounded like hell. It was a parasite and nothing more, and somehow I’d created it. That was the part that didn’t make sense to me.

“How exactly did I create you?”

“When you were two years old, you went through an illness… I forget its name, but you were crying constantly. Your crying was the music of my creation.”

The creature kept pacing in front of me. Just watching it made me uneasy. It looked unpredictable, but I was ready if it tried to invoke fear or any other emotional response. I was committed to being neutral, but I saw no reason not to keep asking questions.

“So ever since I was two years old, you’ve been feeding off of my emotions—”

“Oh, not just your emotions. Your mind provides me nourishment, too, though in smaller quantities.”

“And how do I do that?”

The creature tilted his head slightly. It looked annoyed at my questions. I decided to insist on an answer; after all I was its creator. “How do I do that?”

It looked at me cautiously. “The mind holds the imagination. It is the creative center of the human being. It is the place of ideas. When the mind is flexible, open, and curious, it creates a form of emotional flow that I cannot

process. When the mind becomes rigid, crystallized, sure in its ways, it creates an emotional flow that produces exquisite nourishment." The creature's face lurched into an orgasmic expression for a few moments and then returned to its normal pose, and began circling me like a vulture.

The cord between us never got tangled. As the creature walked around me, the cord's connection to my body adjusted to maintain a direct link to the creature.

I was beginning to see why this creature needed so much nourishment. It never rested.

"What weapon did you bring?" the creature asked.

"I have no weapons. Why do you think I have a weapon?"

"Why else would you come to my world? You want to kill me."

"Even if that was my intent, you seem to have the power."

"No, you have the power! You just do not know how to wield it."

"That may be, but I am not intent on killing you or anyone else. I simply want to go back… to my home. I don't belong here, you said it yourself. Let me go, and I promise I'll leave and never return—"

"Ah, but you are not apparently in control of what you do, since you said you had no intention of coming here in the first place, and yet, here you are."

The creature leaned against the fireplace mantle, pondering my dilemma. "No, I cannot let you go. You must serve me lest I perish."

"But I will surely die here, and if I die, you die."

The creature shook his finger from side to side and approached me. "Not true, I will continue to live after you die. I will simply move on. What you have brought to life lives on."

"How is that possible?"

"You live on, so I live on. It is a simple proposition. What part are you confused about?"

"So you are indestructible?"

“I believe so…”

I looked at the creature that I had apparently created. I couldn’t believe it was from me or that I had any hand in its creation. I created beautiful films and photographs and children—not this. Surely not this!

“Does everyone in my world have a counterpart like you?”

“I cannot say. Perhaps. It is very crowded here, I can tell you that.”

I decided I needed to do something, so I tried to stand to my feet. I watched as the creature watched me, waiting for it to inflict some brutal force on me, but nothing happened. I stood, but was still bound. “Release me!” I commanded.

The creature laughed. “Good, feel angry, frustrated, even infuriated, yes, I believe that is my favorite flavor of all.”

I regained my composure, but slowly. “Thank you for allowing me to stand.”

The creature merely bowed its head slightly.

“So now what? Do we just stay like this forever? Trapped in this room, staring at each other until one of us dies… oh, I almost forgot, no one dies here.” I let out a long breath. “This is hell…”

“I have a life,” the creature said. “I’ll take you to my home, and you will live there.”

“Really? Like a pet?”

“I sense your indignation, and I must say it is good. Very good, indeed.” It rubbed its belly and laughed.

I realized that every emotion was finding its way to the creature through the cord that connected us. I wanted to rip it apart, but my hands were bound. I walked to the creature, staring at it with contempt. I knew I was angry, I couldn’t help it. As I got within a few feet, I stopped and turned around. “Untie me… please.”

“I cannot do that. It is against my self-interest.”

From the corner of my eye I saw a form approaching. It was small, like a

child, and as it came closer I could see that it was Burkhan. He had on the same cloak and was carrying his stick, though it looked like a new one.

“I see you have found the part of you that is broken,” he announced, striding right up to us.

I stared at Burkhan baffled, openmouthed.

The creature stepped back. “This is most unusual. How can he see you? Who are you?”

Burkhan barely glanced at the creature, and turned to me. “You can leave if you want.”

“No, he cannot, and if you persist in your contempt, I will destroy you with relish.” The creature suddenly altered into the most despicable form you can imagine (assuming your imagination is really, really good). Its blood-spotted face was gnarled like an old tree that grows out of boulders. Its eyes—watery and soulless— looked predatory, awaiting a feast of flesh. I did my best to keep my eyes on Burkhan.

“It’s good to see you,” I said.

“If that’s your company, I can see why.” Burkhan grinned. “Now, as for you,” he said, turning to face the creature, “do you know who I am?”

The creature’s face grew even uglier. “You are an intruder of no consequence, and I will destroy you.”

“Talk…” Burkhan glanced at me, shaking his head. “If you could destroy me, you would have already done so. I am the emissary of God, the one who makes all of this possible. Now, I would ask that you step back, compose yourself, and close your mouth lest I lose my patience. And for God’s sake, stop with the foul smell.”

The creature backed away and began to return to its former self.

“How do I leave?” I asked as Burkhan turned back to me.

“The same way you left me. You forgive. You love.”

I pointed to the creature. “That?”

“It’s you! Don’t look at it. That’s just a mirage. It’s really you. All the

darkness, all the spite, misery, misdirected energy that you've put out in the time you've been incarnate on this planet, it had to go somewhere." Burkhan pointed to the creature. "It went there."

"So what do I do?"

"You already know."

As Burkhan spoke his form began to vanish. "Can't stay… not suited for my constitution."

"Don't leave me here," I pleaded. "I'm not sure what to do."

"Actually, you do," Burkhan said, as his form disappeared before my anxious eyes.

"Good riddance," the creature said, shaking its head in revulsion. "He was a friend of yours?"

I looked at the creature again. Burkhan was right. It was me, no matter how much I hated to admit it. I know I wanted to leave, but there was something that brought me here. Why had I been so sickened by this creature? If it was truly me, or some part of me, there must be a way to reconcile.

"Why do you want to live like a parasite?" I asked.

"Why did you create a parasite?" It countered, its eyes blinking the code of patient intelligence.

I paused. Erase. I needed to go deeper. I needed to feel my way to my heart. I needed its counsel. This was not a solution of the mind.

I was lost in my contemplations. "I don't know why I created a parasite. I didn't realize I had," I whispered.

"Where did you think all of your emotions went?" the creature demanded. "They are energy. Energy is conserved. It simply transforms to a new state, and that state is me. I am its refuge… its home."

"So what do I do?"

"You already know."

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“Where did you think all of your emotions went?” the creature demanded. “They are energy. Energy is conserved. It simply transforms to a new state, and that state is me. I am its refuge… its home.”

“What if I could liberate you?”

“From what? This?” The creature extended its bony arms.

“Yes.”

“And what would I do in this liberated state?”

“I don’t know, but you could be free.”

“If I were free, but lived without nourishment, I would rather stay here. I do not wish to die free.”

I looked at the creature and suddenly felt something moving in my gut. I looked at the translucent cord that connected us, and I could see the flow had shifted. Packets of light were flowing out of the creature to me. I was beginning to feel what the creature felt, and it was complete loneliness,

separation, a feeling of abandonment. They were powerful feelings, and I was trying my best to interpret them, but they were overpowering me.

“I’m so lonely.” I said aloud to no one. It was as if some other entity had taken over my mouth and was speaking on my behalf. “I have lived here in this darkened place, one of the scorned. I watch the darkness. It is all there is. Nothing passes between us that can ease my hurt and sense of loneliness. Nothing.

“If you want to liberate me,” my voice said, “then you must become me.”

I shook my head. No, I screamed inside myself.

“Then you will never be free of me, nor I you.”

It was my voice, but the words were not mine. I did not choose them, they chose me. I looked down at the cord, glistening with the internal traffic of light packets traveling like cars inside a tunnel. They were all coming to me, ten, twenty, a hundred, a thousand packets of energy zooming to my stomach. And then I could feel a voice… so ancient that I knew it was not of my reality or any I had ever experienced before. This was a voice from the beginning, though I can’t say if it was my beginning or that of the universe.

My mind was mute. I was possessed by some force that even the creature, judging from its look, was in awe of. My mouth opened while something eternal held me. “You have chosen to feel and understand that part of you that is lost in darkness. All humans have this aspect, and it is precisely this part of you that will instruct you in the ways of forgiveness, compassion, understanding, and love. It is the gift of demons to create angels.

“Take the cord in your hand.”

Without thinking I moved my hands to the cord. My hands were now free from any bindings. I could feel the cord’s energy, and its weight and substance were almost imperceptible. The creature did the same as I. “Now, watch the cord,” my voice ordered.

I looked down, as did the creature. We were suddenly operating like twins, holding the cord between us and inexplicably following the orders of some higher consciousness or power. At first, nothing happened. I waited, looking with every muscle in my body at the cord. The flow of light packets started to

slow and then finally stop. There was no movement inside the cord. I looked up at the creature, and it was as if I were looking in a mirror. He was me, or I was him, I'm not sure which. When I looked down at the cord it was gone. When I looked back to the creature, he was gone. And then I saw a movement, very vague in the background. Could it be Burkhan again?

Then I saw a light pierce through the darkness and an eye the size of the fireplace appeared, and I realized my head was lying on a table. The huge eye was of a young girl who was only inches away from my face, examining me.

I heard the girl's voice. "I like him." I could feel her small hand patting me on the shoulder.

My consciousness was still half in the dream and half in the kitchen. I don't know what had happened, but I was able to sit upright and blink at the blurry faces around me. I recognized Corin. The man with short-cropped, gray hair must have been Jason.

"Who are you?" I asked looking at the girl who stood beside me.

"I'm Jaylee."

Chapter 60: The Mural

Perhaps I missed my children. Perhaps I was just weak. For whatever reason I drew Jaylee to my arms and hugged her, and she hugged me back. I began to cry, and my embarrassment was made worse when I saw the look on Jason's face.

He was annoyed, and made no attempt to hide it. I was in some altered state and couldn't hide it.

After a long hug, Jaylee stepped back. "You have my mommy's heart."

I nodded through the tears, and looked at Corin. "I didn't know she had a daughter…"

Corin's bottom lip was quivering. "I know. I was going to tell you through the pictures, but we never got that far. You passed out… and then Jason and Jaylee came in, and… well… here you are."

"How long?" I asked.

"It was only a minute or two, we were going to call the hospital, but then you started to say something… we couldn't make it out, but it was like you were talking with someone…"

I looked at them. All three were standing, facing me. Jaylee was about six years old, blond hair past her shoulders, blue eyes, a few freckles spotted her cheeks, and a missing front tooth that stood out from her widespread smile. "How old are you?" I asked.

"I'm seven," she said, holding up her hands with the appropriate number of fingers. "Why did you faint?"

"I don't know," I said, shaking my head. "I'm very sorry… I don't know how to explain it…"

"Don't worry about it," Corin offered. "We're just glad you're okay."

Corin took Jaylee by the shoulder and gently guided her out of the kitchen, "Go change your clothes, and we'll eat in a few minutes, okay?"

“Okay,” Jaylee said.

“And don’t forget to wash your hands.”

“I won’t,” Jaylee answered over her shoulder.

Jason stepped forward and offered his hand. “I’m Jason. You gave us a good shock, young man. Are you sure you’re okay?”

I raised my head to meet Jason’s eyes. I was still sitting, afraid that I might fall if I tried to stand. Jason was a strong-looking man, late sixties, graying hair. His body was stout and bullish, with fingers as thick as sausages. He wore jeans and a yellow and white cowboy shirt that was tucked away except for one flap of his shirt that stubbornly resisted neatness.

“Sorry about that,” I said. “I’ve been having this problem for a while… not sure what to make of it.”

“Have you seen your doctor about it?” Corin asked.

“It’s complicated…”

“He doesn’t want to talk about it,” Jason said softly. “Maybe some fresh air would help. I can give you a short tour if you’re up for that.”

“Let’s give it a try,” I said. “Assuming there’s time before lunch.”

“There’s time, go ahead,” Corin said.

Jason glanced at his watch. “Fifteen minutes should do… I’ll take the Rover.”

He turned to me, putting out his hand. “Do you need any help getting up?”

“No, I can manage.” With that said, I stood up on wobbly legs, and I must say, verticality in my real body felt very odd. The blood rushed from my head, and I was suddenly light headed, but it passed and I followed Jason outside to the Rover—an electric cart that looked like a military grade vehicle.

“Nice wheels,” I said.

“It’s impartial to any weather, and up here, that’s essential.”

“Solomon, wait!” It was Corin rushing to my door, handing me my bag.

“Thought you might want your camera.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I know my kids will want to see what a real farm looks like.”

She patted my arm and smiled. “Have fun.”

We drove off with hardly a sound. The Rover was completely silent other than the sound of the tires on gravel.

Jason pointed to a barn off in the distance. “We have about thirty pigs at any one time, more chickens than I can keep track of, and they all stay there. The distance is good to keep the noise and smell down, but it’s a chore to go back and forth all day, especially in the winter, so that’s why I got this contraption… at least that’s what I told Corin.” He winked to emphasize that his real reason had more to do with the stylish engineering of the Rover.

“Tell me about Jaylee? Does she live here?”

“Yup. She’s the best. She followed me around all summer and learned all my tricks. Has some of her own, too. She’s very good with the animals. Jaylee says she talks to them… her mother said the same…”

“Is she like her mom?”

“Too early to tell, I suppose. She has some of Vanessa’s personality, no doubt of that, but we never met the father, so I don’t know that end of the gene pool.” He paused and smiled. “She looks a lot like Vanessa did at that age. Sometimes I call her Nessie, which was my pet name for Vanessa…”

He glanced at me with a thin smile encoded with regret.

“She’s as smart as anything I’ve ever seen; learns things fast, and I mean fast, and like her mother, seems to just understand people.”

“How do you mean?”

We were almost at the barn. The conversation was easy with Jason. I liked him more than I’d expected, and it seemed that he liked me as well, despite my humiliating first impression.

He kept his eyes on the hard-packed gravel road, pulling the Rover into a small circle that passed within a few feet of the barn. “We’ve got plenty of stories I could tell,” Jason said as he opened his door. “I’ll show you one.

Follow me."

He went inside the barn. The smell of animals and hay hit me the instant I stepped from the vehicle. I quickly grabbed my camera from my bag and walked briskly to keep up with Jason. As I entered the barn I saw a few horses and on the far side a pen with huge pigs. They seemed disinterested in us.

"They have their food on demand, so they don't really pay too much attention to me, but when Jaylee comes in, they'll all—every last one of them—press against this gate and nuzzle to get close to her. Never seen anything like it. Crazy pigs…"

"About three months ago, when we thought Vanessa had only weeks to live, we brought Vanessa here. Jaylee had already moved in since late spring, just to keep the strain a little easier on Vanessa. Anyway, Vanessa had a nurse from the hospital that had taken a real liking to her and asked to come and visit her all the way from Buffalo. Her name was Luella, nice girl.

"This girl was terribly upset at losing Vanessa, somehow they'd become very close. Luella stayed with us for the weekend, but the day she left, Vanessa was not doing well. She'd have days like that when her entire body and mind seemed to withdraw, even from Jaylee. Luella offered to take Jaylee out to an ice cream shop we have in town, but Jaylee convinced her to go look at the pigs instead.

"Now, this Luella was a vegetarian, and I think she felt that going to see pigs was a little like a Christian going to the Mosque I suppose, but Jaylee had insisted.

"When they got here, the pigs did their normal thing, they scrambled to see Jaylee, and somehow, on this occasion, they pushed hard enough that one of the hinges on the gate busted, and out came two dozen hogs." Jason chuckled to himself.

"Luella was petrified. She'd been a city girl, never probably seen anything as hideous as these things, so she ran up this ladder, while Jaylee stayed down here with the pigs. Now, most of these were finishing pigs, all about two hundred and thirty pounds, some probably stretching to two-fifty… like that one there." He pointed to a hog that was as large as Jason had he been

down on all fours.

I snapped a few photos of the pigs as he spoke.

“Maybe because of all the stress, Luella told Jaylee about her fears of leaving Vanessa, that she’d been a nurse for only a year and had lost so many budding friendships. It was really bothering her. I don’t know how Jaylee can pull this stuff out of a person she just met, but she does. After Luella told her about her problems, Jaylee showed her this wall… follow me.”

Jason ducked underneath a low stall, and I followed him to an interior wall that was covered with white paint, and in the middle of the wall was a painting or mural. It was about six feet wide and four feet high. “I let her paint here while I tended the hogs and chickens. I never really bothered to look at it until a week or so after she’d started. I figured I’d find some colorful shapes, maybe a horse or two, but never expected to see this.”

As I came closer to the painting I could see the forms begin to take shape. The light in the room was a little dimmer than I would have liked, but the undulating curves were like lures to my eyes. They were so gracefully rendered, and in a style that was slender, rhythmic, and childlike. It was absolutely magical.

A woman was lying in a field of beautiful flowers that arched downward to her body as though they were trying to touch her. Above her was a galaxy swirling overhead like the spirals of a whirlpool, and each starry arm also seemed to be reaching down to the woman. The trees in the background, the clouds, everything seemed to be pulled into this woman.

In the outermost margins of the painting there were dozens of tiny human skeletons that seemed to be running away. In the very center of the painting was a radiant glow in the chest area of the woman who was lying in the meadow. This glowing, yellow-white shapeless shape had subtle ripples edging outward, covering the entire painting, even the skeletons. These ripples, I noticed, extended beyond the borders of the mural, but it was hard to see how far because of the soft light in the room.

“It’s amazing…” I finally managed to say. “Do you mind if I take some pictures of it?”

Jason stepped aside. “Long as I’m not in it, be my guest.”

I took seven or eight pictures with different exposures and slight variations on the capture angle.

“What does it mean?” I asked.

“Well, that’s just it, Jaylee had painted it only a few days before Luella arrived. That’s her. That’s Luella.” He pointed to the woman lying in the field.

“You mean it looks like her?”

“I mean it looks exactly like her, right down to the clothing she was wearing.”

I stopped photographing for a moment and looked at Jason, disbelief growing on my face as I narrowed my eyes.

I looked at the young woman who was the centerpiece of the painting, she was slightly overweight with curly, dark brown hair, wore a blue checkered shirt and jean skirt, and seemed to be in her mid-twenties.

“I know it sounds weird,” Jason said, “but that’s our normal around here, at least for Jaylee and her mom. Believe me, I’ve seen plenty of it… don’t even question it anymore. If I did, I’d have no time for work, and as you can see, I have plenty of that.”

“What did Jaylee say when you asked her about it?”

“Never did,” he answered. “It was Luella who told us about it. We had walked her out to her car when she leaving, and she told us that Jaylee had changed her life. We asked her how or in what way, and she pointed to this barn, and said that Jaylee had told her about her future. How she was guiding people to higher places or something like that… it doesn’t matter. The point is that this girl, Luella, was completely different after that. Still keeps up with Corin on email, and wants to visit Jaylee again next weekend.”

A chirp from Jason’s pocket interrupted us. “If you boys can find your way back, food’s ready.” It was Corin’s voice trying to sound patient.

“We’re on our way,” Jason replied, and then turned to me. “Sorry we didn’t get more time for the tour, but I’m sure you’ve seen plenty of grass,

and that’s our only crop here. We should get back. You hungry?”

I nodded, but my mind was elsewhere, tracing the painting’s meaning in my mind.

“They’d never met before?” I asked as we were walking to the Rover.

“Luella and Jaylee?”

I nodded. “Uh, uh.”

“No, when Vanessa was in the hospice, Jaylee was with us. I don’t think she visited the hospice but once, and we were there with her. No sign of Luella.”

“Vanessa never mentioned her?”

“No, I don’t believe so.”

I decided to let it rest.

On the ride back to the farmhouse, I was quiet, processing what I’d seen and heard. I closed my eyes for a moment and brought my entire focus on that hazy moment when I left the auditorium of the institute and saw the face of Jaylee mouthing those three words some fifty years in my future. How was it possible? How could the god- monster know enough about Jaylee to fabricate that experience of my future?

Now there’s an oxymoron—experience the future? How? Once it’s experienced it’s not the future. My head began to ache at the thought. But I knew that Jaylee was to be a part of my life, and I needed to talk with her. Alone.

Chapter 61: Eagle

It was a very pleasant lunch. We talked about farm life, the coming winter, the St. Lawrence River, and a variety of more personal elements related to my work and family. The one thing we didn't talk about was Vanessa. I felt that she was excluded in deference to Jaylee, and several times I caught myself just in time, as I was about to ask a question like: what was Vanessa like when she Jaylee's age? Or, when did Vanessa know she was different from the other kids?

I used the bathroom after lunch to freshen up and splash some cold water on my face. I needed to figure out a way to have some private time with Jaylee, though I had no idea what I would ask her. As I came out of the bathroom, I heard Jaylee singing a soft melody down the hallway.

I listened for a few moments and then it stopped. "Would you like to come to my room?"

Her voice, delicate as a flower's petal, floated down the picture-framed hallway. The muted sound of dishes being washed clanked from the kitchen. "Your grandparents won't mind?" I asked.

There was a small pause. "No…"

With each step I took, my heart quickened. A part of me, perhaps the best part of me, had walked this corridor for twenty years or more. I looked at the photographs of Vanessa and Jaylee that shone from the walls. I came right to the threshold and stopped to look inside, tentatively poking my head into the room with my hands pressed firmly against the door frame.

Jaylee was sitting on a bed with a notebook in front of her and a dozen color markers strewn about. "It used to be my mom's room, now it's mine. You can come inside."

"What are you working on?"

"Just drawing." She never looked up as she seemed absorbed in her work. "You can sit in that chair, but it's not very big."

“That’s okay, I can stand. I have a long drive ahead of me, so I’ll have plenty of time to sit.”

She looked up at me and capped her blue marker. “Do you want to go for a walk?”

I smiled as our eyes met, and nodded. “Sure.”

“We have a pond with fish and frogs and salamanders and turtles and all those things. I can show you.”

“If it’s okay with your grandma.”

Jaylee jumped out of her bed and grabbed my hand, pulling me down the hallway to the kitchen.

“Grandma, we’re going to visit the pond. Okay?”

Corin’s head swiveled between us as Jaylee and I stood in front of her. She smiled as she saw we were holding hands. “It’s a nice day, go enjoy it.”

“Thanks again for lunch, Corin.” I returned her smile.

She waved a limp hand. “You’re very welcome. It was so nice to have you join us. You two have fun.”

She turned around to the kitchen sink before she finished her words, her voice cracking a little bit.

We walked hand-in-hand down the gravel road to the pond. Her small hand was warm, and she suddenly squeezed my hand. “See it?” she said, pointing with her free hand.

I looked up in the direction of her finger just as a large hawk flew overhead, its feathers spread out to catch the updraft. “It’s a red-tailed hawk,” I announced.

“It’s a large bird, and its tail isn’t very red. I call them Wind-riders because they ride the wind.”

Who was I to argue? I smiled and nodded my head. “I guess it doesn’t matter what you call things, they probably have a name for themselves we can’t even pronounce.”

Jaylee chuckled. “That’s something my mom would say.”

“When does school start for you?” I asked as we walked down the embankment of the pond.

“In two weeks.”

“Are you excited?”

She shook her head. “Not really. Did you like school?”

“I liked it okay.”

“Why?”

“I liked to learn new things…”

“Yeah, that’s fun sometimes.”

“Do you have a lot of friends?”

“I don’t know,” she answered. “Did you?”

“Not a lot… but enough I suppose.”

Jaylee led me to an unpainted wooden box whose wood was weathered like an old fence post. It sat on the ground near the edge of the pond. She let go of my hand for the first time, and bent down. I could hear the sound of rocks as she picked through a pile of stones inside the box, and then closed the lid.

“We can use these,” she announced, as she turned to me with two handfuls of thin stones. “These are skippers. Good skippers. Grandpa finds um in his fields and has a pile of them that’s taller than me. I pick the best ones and put them in this box. I’m a little low right now, so we’ll each get only…” she counted them silently in her head. “…you’ll get six, and I’ll get seven, because that’s how old I am.” She giggled to herself and I nodded as she handed me the skippers.

“Seems fair to me,” I said.

We alternated skipping stones on the pond’s still surface. I could see Corin watching us from the kitchen window. Jason had left right after lunch to tend to some repair he was working on. The sun was warm and there was a crisp quality to the air that felt brisk and energizing at the same time.

Jaylee loved to skip stones, and when she got to her last one, she offered to

get more with a mischievous tone to her voice.

“No, that’s okay,” I said, “I’ve had my share.”

“Do you want to see something cool?” she asked, shielding her eyes from the sun.

“What?”

“Follow me.”

We walked around to the other side of the pond, and then I followed her past several large trees that looked like the border to a deep forest.

“There!”

She pointed to a collection of branches stuck in the upper portion of the tree. The cluster of wood was unusually large and very elaborate.

“What is it?”

“It’s an eagle’s nest. Isn’t it cool?”

“It sure is,” I replied. “Have you seen them?”

“Oh yes, many times. But they’re gone now. Grandpa says they fly down to Mexico so they can sun on the beaches, but I think he’s just joking.”

She walked closer to the tree. “My mom climbed up there once.”

“Really?”

“Uh uh, my grandpa told me.”

“To see the nest?”

“No, the eagles.”

“How old was she when she did that?”

“About my age, I asked my grandpa that same question, but he asked me to promise that I wouldn’t do the same thing.”

“And did you?”

“You mean promise?”

“Yes.”

“Sure,” she nodded, “what else could I do?”

I smiled at her response. “Did your grandpa say if your mom touched them?”

“She did. She even took one.”

“Took one, a baby?”

“Uh uh.”

“That must have been dangerous… most moms don’t like having their babies taken from them.”

“Grandpa said the mother eagle had died, and my mom knew it.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, he didn’t say. But she wanted to save it if she could.”

“Did she?”

“Grandpa said she did. The eagle grew up—lived in a dead tree by the pond. It was like a pet to my mom, but that was a long time ago. Grandpa thinks the eagles that use the nest now are from the same family. Do you think that’s possible?”

She looked at me with such soulful eyes.

“I’m not an expert on eagles, but yes, I think that’s possible.”

I instinctively brushed the hair from Jaylee’s face, and she gently took my hand and held it. I could feel the tiny flecks of sand and dirt from the skippers still on her hand. We both stared at the eagle’s nest for a few moments.

Then, Jaylee began to cry. It started small, I saw her wipe her eye… it could have been anything, I told myself. Then I heard a sniffle, please don’t cry. And then I felt the tremor from her hand in mine, and I knew.

“Is it okay?” she asked, her face contorted, trying to hold back the tears.

I knelt down and enfolded her in my arms. “It’s okay, it’s okay,” I repeated quietly. “Let it out… it has no other place to go.”

She cried softly for a minute and then took a couple deep, jagged breaths. She pushed back slightly and took my face in her hands. She looked into my

eyes deeper than I think anyone had ever done before. Her eyes glistened with fresh tears, but their focus was unwavering, as though she were conjuring something nameless from that place where unity is found.

Then, suddenly, still staring into my eyes, there was a point we met. How can I explain it? It was not a place of desperation or any claim of needfulness. It was the singular instant when hearts touch in some synchronous motion that transcends what we call time, where everything steps aside, and in doing so, pulls open the heart's veil.

Still holding my face, Jaylee whispered something so softly that at first I didn't hear it. She repeated it, and then I realized it wasn't really meant for my ears.

"I miss you."

Chapter 62: A Cloud

Jaylee's mood changed after our experience at the eagle's nest. She was more relaxed, more confident in our relationship. I felt a similar kind of ease. We had both shared a certain kind of vulnerability in the span of hours usually reserved for enduring, cherished friendships.

I had the thought that someday I would like to take Jaylee to meet Uncle. They felt like kindred spirits, and I was sure that Uncle would agree… I could almost see him nodding as the thought flashed through my mind.

We were still at the edge of the forest. Both of us were lying on our backs, staring up at the blue sky whose depth seemed infinite. I didn't really have much to say, I was just happy to be with Jaylee, and then she started to ask questions.

"Why are you sad?"

"I'm not sad," I replied.

"You are."

"I'm not."

I knew she could feel something inside me, but what she felt was my infidelity with Nammu, and I was certainly not going to talk about that with a child, or anyone else for that matter.

"Do you always sense people's feelings?" I asked, hoping to deflect her inquiry.

"Sometimes… don't you?"

"No, not really."

"Well, you're definitely sad. Everyone is, you know."

"Maybe I am, a little, but it's not always your business to know the cause, or to try to understand it."

"If you're sad, isn't it good to get rid of your sadness?"

“Maybe the sadness is helping me…”

“How?”

I started to speak, but stopped. There was a cloud that suddenly appeared in the sky. I watched it, completely transfixed. I heard Jaylee ask something, but my mind was absorbed in this strange, undulating cloud shape, and it suddenly became obvious that the cloud was not thousands of feet above us in the sky, but rather it was forming only a few feet above me. I reached out to it, and it moved away slightly.

Again, I heard Jaylee asking something, but I couldn’t look away from this cloud or concentrate on her voice.

“Do you see this?” I asked.

“I am it.” I heard a voice, and it was not Jaylee’s voice.

I glanced in Jaylee’s direction, but she was gone, and I was in some light-filled space that was without dimension of any kind. There were no walls, no horizon, no shadows, and I looked down at my body to see if I even existed, and there was only a sense of me, not physical, not wrought with human features of any kind. I felt like I had been reduced to a single eye that could see in every direction, and yet, wherever I looked, there was only a white mist.

From out of this mist a form appeared. As it came closer I could see it was a female form. Whatever I was in my coiled existence—man, human, beast, or soul, I was enraptured by the beauty of this form. I quickly came to one conclusion, the consciousness that animated it was not Nammu, and it made me hopeful.

“Who are you?” I asked, tentatively.

“I am the inmost vibration of that which you call Vanessa.”

I have no idea how such a thing could possibly transpire, but I felt, somehow in that moment, my human body shudder in some other world.

“You’re Vanessa?”

The form nodded. It wasn’t like an angel with wings; it wasn’t like a human Vanessa, either. She was completely transformed. The closest

description I can deliver with words is if you saw a marble statue given birth by the greatest artistry of humankind, and then animated with an internal light source that flung rays of light in every direction. This was what I saw.

The form came closer, and I began to see a mouth and eyes, and then I felt something reach out to me, bathing me in an intelligence so wide, so deep, that it could only be love. It wasn't the expression of love. It was love. I know the difference is subtle, maybe even indistinguishable, but it was, for me, the essence of the feeling: the intelligence of love.

"What are… why are you here?" I asked.

"Gratitude," she replied, the corners of her mouth edging upwards in a divine smile I will never forget. I felt a rush of energy flow through me. It was cleansing. It was clarity invoking. It was redemption—for what, I didn't know or care, I simply allowed it to flow through me.

I thought of Jaylee in that instant. "Your daughter is with me."

"I know."

"She's wonderful."

"I know."

"What… what do you do now? Here?" I asked.

"I am serving you."

"Me?"

"You." As she spoke the word, she swept her arms out wide, forming the shape of a circle.

"I don't understand."

"I know."

"Will I ever understand what is happening to me?"

"As much as you can, you will."

"I had a vision of some kind," I said, "…about my future. I saw Jaylee. She was working with me at an institute that developed a technology—the one you told me about in your video."

Vanessa nodded, and pointed to her right hand, which was wearing a ring. “I know.”

“So I will work with Jaylee?”

“Yes.”

“What can I do to help her?”

“Be her father.”

“I already am a father.”

“I know, be hers, too.”

“You mean adopt her?”

“In time.”

“Who would allow that?”

“The same man who sent you my video has the papers you will need. There is a process. It will be complicated, but please persist. I will help in every way that I can.”

I knew then exactly why she had come. The problem was that I couldn’t believe it. It was too fantastic, even for me to believe. How would Derya ever allow this, even if it were possible?

“I will try,” I said, but I knew Vanessa could hear a sense of doubt in my tone. I was transparent in this world, wherever it was.

“I know you will have obstacles in this,” she acknowledged with a whisper. “I understand your concerns. Just meet with him, and look at the process I have begun. It is all I ask of you.”

“I will meet with him.”

“There is one more thing,” she said softly.

I waited with some foreboding.

“Tell my mother to look in my closet shelf. I have a book there. I wrote something for her on page thirty-two.”

“If I tell her this, she might think I’m crazy.”

“She will understand. Please do this for me.”

“I will.”

As I spoke those words, my world of white mist began to dissipate. I watched Vanessa’s form melt into the whiteness of the space, and I began to smell the world I had left, the cool breeze, and then I saw the ever-present eye of Jaylee looking down at me.

Chapter 63: Closet

I was walking back to the farmhouse with Jaylee, when the message arrived. I stopped walking to read it.

“Is it from your wife?”

“Yes.”

“She’s in Turkey?”

“Yes.”

“With your children?”

I nodded, trying to read as best I could amid the questions. Jaylee bent down to examine some wild flowers off to the side of our path.

The message from Derya brought me to full consciousness.

“Hi Sol, we’re just finishing our packing and will be leaving for Atatürk Airport in about three hours. Everything is on plan. I’ll call you in when we get to JFK, and we can fine-tune our pick-up at New Haven—unfortunately, for you, I’ll be calling around

should get in around 6 A.M. tomorrow your time, and yes, I know that’s early, so get to bed before ten. Hope all is going well with your visit up north. Can’t wait to see you! Love you! - Derya”

I smiled, knowing her presence was getting closer, but at the same time, my encounter with Vanessa—however you want to define it—was still rumbling through my mind.

Jaylee told me that I had passed out again. Thankfully I had the presence of mind not to tell her where I had gone or who I had seen in my unconscious state. There was a triangle forming in my mind. In one corner was my infidelity with Nammu, in the other was Vanessa’s request, and the other was the return of my family. They all seemed to be converging, and I had no idea how there could possibly be harmony when they finally collided. And worst of all, there was this shadowy presence of the god-monster that seemed to

loom invisibly over every atom of my existence.

When we got back to the farmhouse, Corin was sitting in a rocking chair on the porch, reading from a tablet, which she promptly folded up and tucked in her pocket as we arrived. “How was your walk?”

“Great!” Jaylee announced without hesitation.

“What did you show Mr. Tonum?”

“All my favorite places,” Jaylee said jubilantly.

“It was a fun adventure,” I offered, my tone a little less convincing than Jaylee’s.

Corin smiled. “Well, good, I’m glad you got a chance to explore. Jason is still out on his repair.” Corin turned to Jaylee. “Dear, could you check on your grandpa and bring him a soda?”

“Sure,” Jaylee answered. “Now?”

“Yes, do you want one, too?” Corin looked as us. We both nodded, and Corin walked to the kitchen.

“Do you want to come with?” Jaylee asked.

“I think I’ll stay here and sit for a while and have a chat with your grandma. Okay?”

“Okay… but the equipment barn is pretty cool.” She stuck her hands inside her jeans.

Corin came out in a moment with sodas, and gave a small bag to Jaylee. “There’re two in there, so one’s yours.”

“Okay, bye,” Jaylee said as she turned and walked away. She’d only gone a few yards and turned around, walking backwards. “You’ll be here when I get back, right?”

“I’ll be here,” I said, nodding.

Jaylee spun around and continued her walking to the barn.

“Do you want to sit?” Corin asked.

“That’d be fine.”

I sat on a wooden chair with weathered, unpainted slats, but the chair was comfortable, and it felt good to sit.

“Here’s your soda,” Corin said. “Jason only likes this brand, so I hope it’s okay.”

“It’s fine, thanks.”

I took a sip. I wasn’t a big fan of carbonated drinks, but I was thirsty, and I figured it was only polite to drink whatever was offered. “Jaylee is such a sweet girl.”

“Like her mother.”

“She’s very fond of this place.”

“Yes, I only wish there were other children around. Most of the farms in this area are operated by empty nesters like us. The kids flee. They want the city experience. The bright lights…”

“But that wasn’t what Vanessa wanted, was it?”

Corin smiled and closed her eyes, taking in a deep breath. “There was some of that. It’s only natural. In Vanessa’s case, she wanted to focus. Here, on the farm, it was hard for her to focus on her inner world. Jason wouldn’t let her—too many chores to do. I think that was the real reason she left.”

I knew I had to mention the book in Vanessa’s closet. I had thought about little else from the moment I saw Corin sitting on the porch. “Corin, one of the things that Vanessa told me was that she had a book in her bedroom closet, and that she’d written something for you on page thirty-two.”

I hadn’t finished the sentence and Corin placed her hand over her mouth. “She told you that in her video?”

I nodded. A lie. I felt bad, but the truth was too strange, and I didn’t have the courage to tell her for fear that more questions would come. The adoption of Jaylee was something I couldn’t possibly deal with right now, and I doubted that Corin would want to either.

“Will you excuse me?” Corin pushed back her chair and stood up.

I stood, too. “Can I be of help?”

She looked at me as one sizes up an opponent. “Maybe you could reach it better than I. Come with me.”

I set my soda on the arm of my chair and followed her to Vanessa’s old bedroom. Corin opened up the closet door, and pointed to the upper shelf where there were boxes and a few books. “Can you reach those?”

I stood on my tip toes and reached as high as I could, but the shelf was deeper than I thought, and the books were too far back. “I’ll need a stool or something.”

“I’ll get one. Hold on.”

Corin came back a few seconds later with a white metal stool. “See if this will work.”

I stood on it, and now I could see most of what was on the shelf. I handed her a book, and she eagerly opened it to the page noted by Vanessa, but quickly shook her head. “This isn’t it.”

I reached back again and found another book that felt like an old textbook. It was heavier, and I strained a bit to collect it, but I finally succeeded and handed it carefully to Corin.

Again she searched through the pages to the one I had mentioned. “Are you sure she said page thirty-two?”

“I’m sure.”

“Any more books up there?”

“Let me look in these boxes… maybe there’s a book inside.” I reached in, but didn’t feel anything that reminded me of a book.

“She said her closet,” Corin whispered. “Wait, I think I know what she meant.”

Corin took the tablet out of her pocket and sat on the bed, unfolding it. She spoke a few commands. “Books. Vanessa’s library. Open Closet.” Corin looked puzzled for a moment, and looked up at me. “Did she mention a password?”

I shook my head. “Sorry.”

Corin closed her eyes and seemed to be thinking about possible passwords to try. She typed something, but her face reflected frustration, so it was obviously wrong. She tried again, same result. Over and over she tried different passwords, but to no avail.

I wracked my brain trying to remember if there was anything Vanessa had told me that could be a hint as to her password. I recalled the entire conversation. Then it occurred to me.

“I know.”

“What?” Corin asked.

“I know, that’s it.”

“The password?”

“Yes, try it.”

Corin typed it in, and a smile spread uncontrollably across her face. “It worked. Thank you, I never would have tried that one in a thousand years. She must have told you in the video… she had a strange way about her. She always said this phrase, and you had this sense that she really meant it.”

Corin looked down at the tablet. “Notes. Page thirty-two.”

I watched Corin’s face change to sudden wonder. “Oh, wow. She did… she left me a message.”

I backed out of the room and walked down the hallway, mindful of the photos on the wall watching me. I could feel Vanessa’s presence flowing through me. I walked out on the porch and sat back down. I felt I was done. It was time to go home. It was that feeling I got when I looked at a photograph under a magnifying lens and could see that every pixel was in its proper place, every contrast was set correctly, and every tone was perfect. I would simply click “save” and never worry about the photograph again. It allowed me to move on to the next thing.

I wondered what my next photograph would be.

Chapter 64: Adoption

When Corin returned she looked distressed. I had no idea what message Vanessa might leave her mother, but it didn't seem that it was a good one. It also appeared that my sense of closure was more of a wish than a reality.

Corin sat down and clasped her hands on her lap. She was still wearing her apron, and even in the sunlight it was spotless. She began to rock slightly, while she stared out to the sky. "You know, Vanessa was always careful about people. She wasn't one to really socialize. She seemed almost afraid of people… though I know that wasn't the case. She wanted to keep herself… clean, I suppose…"

There was a distinct tone of melancholy in her voice.

She turned and looked at me with a blank expression. "I don't know why or how, but she really trusts you."

I smiled awkwardly, but remained silent, finding my mind unqualified to speak. I began to think that maybe Vanessa, in her note, had mentioned the adoption to Corin, and my heart quickened at the thought.

"I barely knew her father, but in the short time I knew him, he was the same way. Skittish about people… even me, I suppose."

She paused in a faint recollection. "Did she mention anything to you about this message?"

"No." I shook my head, perhaps a little too strongly.

Corin looked at me for a few seconds. I turned away, but then my voice found words, and I couldn't stop them.

"Look, I don't know what Vanessa told you, I don't know what's going on in my life since my heart surgery. All I can tell you is that everything, and I mean everything, has been turned upside down for me. These blackouts I have, well, it's not just that I lose consciousness and nothing happens. I see things—people… beings… visions of some kind. Every day." I looked into

Corin's eyes and whispered. "Every day."

"She told me in her note," Corin said, as if ignoring my plaintive comment, "that she's asked you to do something that will make no sense, but that I… we need to accept it… the thing is… I can't accept it, and I'm sure Jason won't, either." Corin paused as if she were trying to regain control of her emotions. I knew then that she knew Vanessa's plan for Jaylee. I felt numb, but I needed to say something.

"I'm just as confused about this as you, Corin. It's not something I knew about until just an hour ago—"

"What do you mean?" she interrupted. "How could you have only known then? Did Jaylee tell you? Are we even talking about the same thing?"

"Adoption?" The word fell out of my mouth, and like a marble that falls on a tile floor, it bounced around noisily in the crisp autumn air. A pair of crows cawed in the depths of a field somewhere, but it was the only other sound in the stillness of the porch.

She looked at me like someone who was angry, confused, and desperate to understand something. "If there's an adoption, it would have to be the biological father…"

"Do you know where he is?" I asked.

Corin shook her head. "We haven't looked. We know his name, and that's about it."

Corin folded her arms across her chest; her mood was so different from when I had first walked up the steps to their home. "So how did you know?"

"I blacked out again when I was with Jaylee. It just happened… we were lying there in the field, and I saw this… well, for lack of a better word, cloud, and the next thing I knew I was talking with Vanessa."

Corin stood up as I was talking, and started pacing, and then pointed to the barn far in the distance. "Even if I could ever believe what you're telling me, he wouldn't. He comes from old money—has resources you can't even imagine. He'd fight you tooth and nail, and there'd be nothing I could do about it. He'd never believe this… any of this… he's already like a father to Jaylee. Oh, God."

She paused, putting her hands to her mouth, and looked at me. “How did you know the password?”

I could sense, in one instant, an emerging paranoia.

“Look, I know this is all hard to believe, but before my heart surgery… I was like him.” I pointed to the barn. “I’m not lying about what I heard from Vanessa. She told me about the note. It wasn’t from the video. If you want to see the video, I’ll email you a copy. I’m over my head. I’m way over my head with all of this. I didn’t plan this, no one asked me for my input, and yet here I am.” I could feel anger or indignation rising up in me, and I decided to take a deep breath.

“Corin, all I can tell you is that I’m as confused as you. Let’s give it some time and see how it all unfolds. Maybe my vision with Vanessa was just some kind of weird dream—”

Corin sat down in her chair. “It wasn’t a dream. How would you know about the note, if it isn’t in the video or her journal? No one could have written that note like my Vanessa. It was her words…”

Corin looked out to the barn, and straightened her back a little. “They’re coming back now. Let’s agree that this conversation stays between us for now. I just need some time to think…”

Corin paused and took a long breath and exhaled slowly, trying to compose herself. I could see the Rover coming into view, and the voice of Jaylee ringing across the distance.

“I’d like to see the video,” Corin quietly announced, eyes locked on the approaching Rover.

“I’ll email it to you. Would you let me see the note?” I asked.

“Let me think about it.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s keep our spirits up for Jaylee. I know she’ll be sorry to see you go.”

I nodded. “Of course.”

“She’s more precious to us than you know,” Corin said. “It’s not fair what Vanessa is asking. I can’t argue with her. She’s gone. Why didn’t she

mention this before she died?”

My heart went out to Corin. I understood why she was confused and upset. “I don’t know. Maybe it’ll all become clear in the months ahead.”

Corin turned her head to me. “When he hears about this, I’m not sure they’ll be any further communication between us. It’ll be in the hands of attorneys. God save us then.” She looked down at her hands, and fiddled with her wedding ring.

This was a complication I didn’t need, and to be perfectly honest, if I hadn’t seen Jaylee in my vision of the future, I wouldn’t even think twice about it. Somehow, I needed to read that note that Vanessa had left behind, and I especially needed to talk with her attorney and find out what he knew.

I glanced at the porch windows and saw the rippled reflections they cast of the farm and the Rover as it pulled up. Jaylee was waving to me. I waved back doing my level best to look unperturbed by the conversation with Corin, but I could see Jaylee squint at me as if she saw something in me that was wrong—not just sad.

Chapter 65: Visions

What prevents us from believing a vision? Is it the lack of materiality? Our inability to repeat them? After all, I couldn't reproduce any of my visions; only memory could reprise them. I couldn't draw down a cloud and visit Vanessa if I wanted, but in the real world, if I wanted a cup of coffee, I knew how to replicate that experience. So that was it, then—the failure to repeat the vision made me doubt them. They were always out of my control. One-offs, every last one of them. That sort of randomness didn't beget belief; it begat frustration, and probably a sense of failure.

And then there was never a clear distinction between a vision and a dream. What exactly was the difference? Let's see, a vision was supposed to be prophetic. It told a story of a future time that would occur. It was, in some way, helpful to a group of people, not simply one person. There was an altruism or group effect associated with a vision. A dream, well it was more for private consumption and seldom had anything of value to say outside of one person, if even then.

I was driving home and blithely entertaining myself with such abstract, internal dialogue, and rapidly becoming positively sick of myself. It was a long drive, and I was churning over in my mind the experience of my visit with the Longleys, wondering how they would fit into my new life.

The road hummed underneath my car, and the autumn colors of the northern New York countryside spun by weaving a magical sight. I had left Derya a message, knowing she was probably in flight at the time. I told her my meeting with the Longleys had gone well, that I was driving back home, and couldn't wait to see her and the kids. It felt a bit mechanical—my message—but I tried my best to inject some emotion into my voice, but my heart told me that I had failed. Maybe I was just tired.

I had a doctor's appointment later in the week; maybe my prescriptions were causing my groggy state. I thought about what Jaylee had told me as I hugged her goodbye by my car. She had whispered those three words in my

ear, and I couldn’t respond, because I felt the eyes of Corin and Jason on me. Now I felt bad. I felt horrible that I hadn’t said anything in return. Jaylee didn’t seem to mind, but I knew she had wanted more from me.

Suddenly in the periphery of my vision I saw a small explosion of light and shadow and there, sitting in my passenger seat, was Nammu. She was dressed in a gold- colored gown—the kind you might imagine Queen Nefertiti would wear. Her jet black hair pulled back in an extravagant display of braids and jeweled baubles.

I swerved the car in surprise and flung my head equally between the road ahead of me and her unwelcome presence. “Why? Why are you here? Leave me alone!” I shouted.

“I left you alone long enough,” Nammu said with a pouting expression. She touched my right thigh, causing the car to suddenly accelerate as I moved my leg away from her touch.

“Don’t touch me!”

“Such a sensitive one, you are.”

“What do you want?”

“Why do I have to want something to visit you? Maybe I just want to play with you.”

“Torture me would be more accurate,” I corrected.

“Enough!” she shouted. “I have a reminder for you. Your family is now in the air, hurtling through the clouds at thirty-nine thousand feet, traveling at seven hundred and fourteen miles per hour, and with one command I can take that plane down… into the waiting ocean.” She pantomimed the explosion with her hands.

Every cell in my body seethed at her.

“The only trouble is they wouldn’t feel a thing. It’d be over in an instant. You, on the other hand, would surely commit suicide within a week, perhaps two, you are quite strong. But usually it’s just a matter of a week… sometimes—I remember once, it was under an hour. But suicide always follows. It’s your freewill, after all.”

I pulled the car over to the shoulder. My mind was reeling. I was utterly at my wits end. Part of me wanted to kill her, though I had no way of doing it. She didn't even exist in my world. Another part wanted to open the door of my car and simply run. Apparently there was a third part.

"Stop the threats," I said, turning to face her. "I'll do what you want. Just tell me what you want that will make you disappear forever. What is it? Tell me exactly what it is, so there can be no doubt in either of our minds."

She looked at me, her eyes narrowing in tiny increments. "You're no fun, if you give up so easy."

"I'm just tired," I snapped.

"And angry," Nammu added, feigning a hurt expression.

She shifted her hips so she could face me.

We were on a two-lane county road. A few trucks and cars skittered by, but it was mostly quiet. Little did any of those drivers realize what was inside my car.

"My dear Solomon, my terms haven't changed since our very first meeting. You make it sound as if I've been changing my mind, but it is you that has this fondness for change. Not I."

"Then you need to do something for me."

"What?" She asked, suddenly curious.

"Take away all of these visions I have."

Nammu smiled. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Freewill."

"Well, it's these damn visions that cause me to change my mind, as you point out. I can't stop them, I can't control them, I can't tell them to go away. I need someone like you to do that. If I could get these visions out of my head, I could go about my life like a normal person. I could forget about all of this Sonverto stuff. All of it…"

"You want me to make the decision easy for you. Not allowed." Nammu

wagged her index finger at me and shook her head. “You have to make the decision, and you have to stand by it. A vision comes to you, you have to stop it immediately… unless of course, it’s me.”

I put my head in my hands and closed my eyes. I whispered as quietly as I could, “Make this vision go away.” The car was quiet. No cars on the highway. I turned my eyes to look and to my soulful regret, Nammu was watching me like a bird of prey waiting for its victim’s final breath.

“It doesn’t work.”

“As I said, you have to do it the moment you feel the vision. The very instant it crosses into your awareness. If you wait, it’s too late.” She smiled, pleased with her rhyming poetic phonetics.

“Now, as to your innocent family, so eager to see you with your full memories intact, I will spare them this last time, but mark my words, this is the last time. Are we clear about that?”

I nodded, bleary eyed. “Are we done?”

“In what way?” she asked.

“Will I see you again?”

“That entirely depends on your choices.”

“Look, my intent is not to harm my family. I don’t want to create waves or stir up any trouble… for anyone. Unfortunately, every day draws circumstances to me that make that intention difficult or impossible to maintain. It’s like something is testing me… pulling me towards this other path—”

“That other path is an illusion. That’s what I’ve been telling you. It’s an illusion. God showed you the effect of your so-called QuantaSeer technology. You were seen as a freak show and little more. And that, by the way, was by the world’s elite. Imagine what the everyday person would think. You see, the whole notion that my world could become visible is something that would destroy the delicate balance between our worlds.”

“Delicate balance?” I asked. “What’s delicate about it?”

Nammu smiled, started to say something, and then stopped.

A silence enveloped the car, and I felt my ears pop. Something was happening. I could feel a presence or a shift occurring. My first thought was to stop it—just as Nammu had instructed, but my curiosity was too strong. I looked to Nammu, and she was watching me with a peculiar expression of pleasure.

‘What… what’s… what’s happening?” I stuttered.

Nammu remained quiet, watching. I could see a subtle shadow pass in front of me. It was so subtle that I blinked several times wondering if I simply imagined it. Then I felt a panic. It rushed up from my gut and filled my head with absolute terror. Something was probing me. It had crossed some ancient line that I had drawn when I was first conceived as an immortal spirit, and it awakened a part of me that had never before surfaced.

I turned to Nammu with that part of me exploding in what I could only term anger, and I screamed one word: “Stop!”

I have spoken, in my lifetime, millions of words, but that one, that one word, was etched in fires of diamond brilliance, and drawn from a place so deep and primordial that I was shocked at its power as it came through me. In that next instant, I looked around wondering where that word had come from. Perhaps someone behind me had said it. But I was alone. Nammu was gone.

I clutched my phone. “Derya.” My voice thin, drained.

I waited while my phone searched the circuits that connected us. Then I heard her voicemail. Her voice, her beautiful voice filled my ears like a gentle balm that one puts on a fresh wound. I waited until the beep to hang up, too afraid to leave a message, knowing my voice would betray me.

I prayed.

I put my hands over my heart. I closed my eyes. I could feel the presence of all that had just transpired, but I clung to a new hope, that no God would be so cruel as to leave me alone in the clutches of demons. I prayed for love to enter me. I prayed for love to enter everywhere it had no hold. I prayed that my family was safe. I prayed that the one source of all would claim me and take me from the shadowy hands of those who wanted to control me. I prayed that every action I would take in my future would be guided by love,

and only love.

I prayed to Vanessa, to Uncle, to Kohana, to Kotari, to Tilopa, to Trisiel, to Zenith, to Dou Xing, even Burkhan… and then I prayed to Jaylee. It wasn't so much a prayer, really, it was a phrase we use every day, sometimes casually—too casually I suppose, but when I said it this time, it was straight and good.

I finally relaxed.

There was something in that experience that cleansed me. I don't know how, but I felt certain of one thing, my hope was justified, because I could pray to the people I could. That I had freewill to ask for help, to reach out and seek the hope of love. The frightful schoolroom, the soulless bullies, they would all leave as the real God stepped from its hiding place at my invitation —my prayer.

I was worthy.

It's odd how a singular, profound insight can come out of so many scattered experiences that had collected in some junction of the heart and mind like the wind that binds the fallen leaves to a corner of stone. And there, collected in some critical mass of energy and insight, a new breakthrough occurs. We might call it miraculous, transformative, or simply the outcome of experimentation, but for me it was a shift into a new state of being.

I no longer feared my visions.

Chapter 66: Appointment

My phone went through it normal machinations to locate a satellite link and in moments I heard his number ringing. I was driving home. It was about five in the afternoon, and I wanted to try to speak with Daniel Archer, Vanessa's attorney, before he left for the day. The sun was already casting a warm reddish tint on the trees that bordered the highway I was on.

"Good afternoon, Archer Davidson Torimaso Law Offices, how may I direct your call?"

"Daniel Archer, please."

"May I ask who's calling?"

"Yes, this is Solomon Tonum."

"One moment please, Mr. Tonum, I'll check to see if he's available to take your call."

I nervously rehearsed my questions while listening to soft, amorphous background music.

"Mr. Tonum, this is Dan Archer, how can I help you?"

"I'm not sure where to start to be honest," I said, struggling to bring order to my thoughts. "Did Vanessa Longley leave any other documents behind relative to me?"

There was a long pause on the other end. "I think this matter would be better suited for a visit, Mr. Tonum. Would you be able to come to my office later this week?"

"I think so," I said. "Can you tell me one thing, though, I just met Vanessa's parents and they didn't seem to know anything about her having hired an attorney. Did she hire you directly?"

"I am Vanessa's attorney, that's correct."

"Her parents didn't hire you or pay for your services?"

“Correct.”

He cleared his throat. “Would this Thursday at two P.M. work for you?”

I glanced at my calendar. “I have a doctor’s appointment in the morning… could we do a video conference instead?”

“I’d prefer to do it in person, if you don’t mind.”

“Would two-thirty be okay, I think I can make it to your office by then?”

“I just tagged you with our GPS coordinates; but I’d recommend taking the Amtrak into Penn Station, we’re just a ten minute taxi from there. Allow two hours.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“Also, per the instructions of Ms. Longley, there’ll be no costs for my services or travel to my office, so please keep your receipts. Was there anything else, Mr. Tonum?”

“Um, no… no I think that’s it. Thank you for your time, and I’ll see you Thursday at two-thirty.”

“Great. Have a good night, Mr. Tonum.”

“Thanks… you, too.”

“Bye.”

“Yes… bye.”

I hung up the phone. Not exactly what I had hoped to achieve, but at least I had an appointment that I hoped would bring some much added clarity to my predicament with the Longleys.

Chapter 67: Persistence

I returned to a dark house, ate a quick meal of ready-made pasta, flicked on Google News, watched the headlines, and made my way to bed. I was exhausted from sitting all day.

After brushing my teeth and showering, I plunked myself down in bed and called Derya. Now that I was cleaned up and looked presentable, I decided to leave her a video mail. The tablet camera turned on, and I saw myself. For an instant I felt like I was looking at an alien. How could that be me? That image on the screen seemed suited for someone else. Did I really look like that?

I flicked off the camera. I was embarrassed, and yet I didn't know why. I decided to do voicemail instead.

"Hi, sweetheart. I know you're on your way. Can't wait to see you and the kids. I'm back, showered, and ready for bed. My phone's on the nightstand, and yes, I turned up the ringtone to deafening levels. Hope your flight is smooth… I'll see you in… about eight hours. Love you."

I placed the phone on the nightstand, double-checked the volume for the ringtone, and flicked off the light. As soon as my head hit the pillow I closed my eyes, and the moment I did, lights were already glowing inside my head. I took some deep breaths and decided to put my full attention on my family, trying to imagine them sleeping on the plane, but then I began to see an image of a nondescript place beginning to appear. It wasn't a place I was familiar with. It was restrained, yet beautiful. Soft lighting, misty hues of blue and violet with tinges of billowing yellow deep in the background. Could this be a part of earth?

Suddenly I felt a powerful force like a gigantic mouth opening its jaws and breathing in. I felt like a particle of dust that was being drawn inside a giant's body, and yet I couldn't see any source to which I was being drawn. All I knew was that I was being ingested by something. Something or someone was absorbing me.

My mind went to the story of Jonah and the whale. I felt like Jonah. I was

being eaten, and yet there was no pain or even fear. The thought to stop the vision never occurred to me, as I was too fascinated by what I was experiencing—in fact, I wanted to follow it. Then, I felt more motion, a sense of speed that I had never sensed before. I was traveling through space inside some kind of vehicle, but it didn't feel like a spaceship or something external, I think I was the vehicle.

I don't have a clear sense of how long I had been traveling at this incredible speed, but I sensed I was slowing down. I was beginning to see objects, whereas before, when I was speeding through the universe, I was effectively blind, dumb, deaf— every sense had been shut down or switched off except one: the sense of motion. I even wondered which of the five senses to attribute the sense of motion to, but my mind lost interest in the topic as my world began to materialize.

The first object I saw was a chair, and then I noticed it was sitting in a field of high grasses that were flowing to the current of a gentle breeze. As I approached the chair I knew that it was there for me. I was supposed to sit in it, but for some reason I wasn't ready. I looked around instead. I could see mountains in the far distance, but in every other direction it was grassy fields stretched out for hundreds of miles. No trees, no houses or buildings of any kind. It was a vast, deserted plain.

I examined the chair. It was made from wood. It had a handmade look to it, and the thought occurred to me that it was made for me.

Then I heard a quiet, calm voice. "Sit."

I looked around in every direction, spinning like a top, but there was no source. The voice asked me to sit again, and because I was in its world, I thought it was the only polite thing to do. I sat down cautiously.

"Why am I here?" the voice asked.

I must have scrunched up my face as much as it was possible when I heard the question. "Why are you asking me?"

"Because you brought me here," the voice said.

"I brought you here?"

"Yes."

“And how did I do that? I don’t know where I am, how I got here, why I’m here, who you are… I know nothing!”

As I finished my last word, I felt something fall off me. It was a sensation similar to having a spacesuit unbuckle and fall to the ground. It was sheared off me in a single moment, and then I felt it.

From every possible angle, every possible trajectory there was a flow of energy, and it came to one focal point: me. I felt like I was a sun in the universe, and every ray that I had ever expressed was coming back to my core. And then I felt something shift, and the core of me was taken. I don’t know how it was taken away, but I felt it falling away, and it was replaced by a deep blackness. In this black void, I was completely alone and yet unafraid. I had no sense of time, no sense of space, no sense of creaturehood. I was at the beginning—my beginning.

Slowly, I felt a diffuse light dawning, and I realized that I was sitting in the chair I had seen before, but everything had changed inside of me.

“Do you remember the reason now?” the voice asked.

I slowly nodded as the knowledge entered me.

“Then tell me.”

“I want to know why you don’t just reveal yourself. Just tell the truth to all people. Open up the knowledge and separate what is real and what is not real.”

“What would I do with you, then?”

“What do you mean?”

“What purpose would you hold?”

I understood what the voice meant, and just to be clear, I felt that this voice was my creator—perhaps your creator, too. It never said this to me in so many words, but I think when you come within a certain presence of your maker, you know it, and I knew it.

“Maybe none,” I replied, “but the truth is the truth. It shouldn’t be withheld or bottled up for only a few to drink from. I don’t understand this. This is why I brought you here.”

“The truth isn’t withheld.”

“It is. Aren’t you aware of that?” I asked with a bewildered tone.

“Look out at the field of grass that sways before you.”

I looked and saw the same fields of grass I had before. “Yes?”

“Imagine every stalk of grass was a soul embodied in a human form. Do you see them moving to the winds that blow?”

“Yes.”

“The wind passes over each of them. No one is exempt. No one is excluded.”

“How is the wind the same as the truth?”

“Do you think the individual blades of grass are aware of the wind?”

“I don’t know.”

“If you looked underneath the ground you would see this enormous field of grass is actually one organism. Each root system is interconnected. If you were to pick one stalk of grass it would be like pulling a hair from your head. “When you look at a strand of your hair, you do not think of it as you. You think of it as yours. It is a piece, and a trivial piece at that. Isn’t that true?”

“Yes.”

“And yet, while it is on your head, it is you. Only when it separates do you make this distinction.”

“I suppose…” I said hesitantly, not sure where the voice was going with this.

“Does a strand of your hair have equal value to you… as say… your arm?”

“No, of course not.”

“It falls out and you grow another one, right?”

“Exactly.”

“Not so with the arm?”

“No.”

“But technically they are all part of you. Every one of those trillions of cells that constitute your physical presence, every feeling that flows through your body, every thought that is created within you, every inspired, imaginative insight you hold or create is part of you.

“And yet, do you think about this wholeness that defines you?”

“Probably not.”

“Then you have this immortal, inborn spark that I have given you from myself. And this spark also is you, is it not?”

“Yes.”

“And do you think about this part of you? Do you imagine its reality? Do you contemplate how it operates beneath the physical vehicle of cells and atoms?”

“Not very often,” I admitted.

“Do you think you will find the truth by swaying to the wind?”

“What is the wind, I don’t understand?”

“The wind is the external force that moves you. It is the baton of the powerful in your world—the ones you presume withhold truth.”

“I presume?” I exclaimed with some amount of indignation. “They do withhold it!”

“I just said the truth is not withheld from anyone. You can complain that the world sedates you with its wind, that it blows you off course, that the wind is the reason you are rudderless. You can make all of these claims, but you cannot say that the truth is hidden from you.”

“Why can’t I see it, then?”

“Always you complain about what you cannot see, and in doing this you are blinded. A piece of your vision is lost to every word of complaint, every feeling of separation, every thought—no matter how fleeting—that truth is hidden from you. That I am hidden from you.”

I was talking with my creator, I couldn’t say, at least anymore, that my creator was hidden, and yet I could only hear its voice.

“Perhaps you are not hidden, but you are difficult to find. You would at least agree to this, would you not?”

“I would not. I am so easy to find.”

“How can you make this claim?”

“I am here, there, everywhere. I am in all things—”

“Yes, I know this concept, but it’s just a concept. People, ordinary people, don’t see you or talk with you. You’ve been packaged into religion and spiritual texts. I’ve even seen demons who pretend to be you. For all I know, even now, you are only that.”

There was a long silence, and I wished I hadn’t said anything about demons.

“There are many creators, and there are many imposters. There are many illusions, and there are many illusionists. I remain what I am, and anyone who desires to know me can find me in their own way, and what they may find, if it doesn’t conform precisely to what I am, that is acceptable. It’s all part of the creative process that the atoms of my body—of which you are one—discover the whole of me—of which you are also one.”

“I still don’t understand why you allow the confusion or the half-truths to exist. How does it serve you if your creation doesn’t understand the fundamental truths of their existence?”

Suddenly, in a spark of time, I was behind a child who was peering into a bathroom mirror. The child didn’t sense my presence. It was a young boy about six years old. He was making faces in the mirror, and then suddenly stopped, as if he saw something. His eyes widened slightly, and he came closer to the mirror, closer and closer, until his eyes were within an inch of the mirror.

I saw his immersion in his mirrored likeness. I watched his eyes looking deep, searching for something that was underneath the surfaces. And then he spoke in the soft, whispered voice of innocence.

“I know you. You’re not me. You’re… something else. You’re not really here, are you? Come on, let’s play a game. You come out and show yourself, and I’ll follow you.”

The boy slowly withdrew from the mirror and smiled. I could see something moving in the air above the boy. It formed like a kaleidoscope of transparent colors that were poised like the billowing edge of a cloud. It rose out of the boy and then swiftly flew out of the bathroom with the young boy running after it.

The hardness of the wooden chair brought me back to the vast plains of grass that once again surrounded me. I looked around half-expecting to see the boy chasing the colored lights, but the fields were empty.

“What was that?” I asked.

“It was a memory of yours when you were a boy. You don’t remember…”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Children know a part of me. Not all children, but many more than adults. They’re playful in their approach. They experiment. They’re trusting. They’re looking below the surface. They don’t call me out to an empty field, sit in a chair, and ask philosophical questions. They don’t obsess about me. They seek me in the quiet moments. They invite me to play.

“If I am hidden, it is only because you have chosen to believe what you are told instead of playing with me directly. This is your freewill at work.”

There was that dreadful word again, and my creator had emphasized it. I was quite annoyed. Freewill seemed to be the curse of everything evil, misguided and oddly wrong with the universe.

“So freewill is the reason that you allow confusion and half-truths to plague my kind?” I asked.

“As the force that created you, I am not the force that controls you. If I did, I would have no creation. As your creator I am only pleased when you choose me without any conditions, formulas, intercessions, or intermediaries. You must explore me on your own, by your own, for all. This is my simple creed. I have no others.”

“And when people die needlessly… what then?”

“There is nothing in the entire universe that is not part of the whole, no matter how misguided or evil it may appear. The whole is all. I am the

interconnectedness of all. As you have trillions of cells that move in your body, I have life's infinity that moves inside mine. Like you, I have emotions and a heart. Like you, I have a mind. Like you, I have a soul. But unlike you, I hold all of the universes in my mind, and my skin stretches across all worlds of time, and my feelings belong to all beings, and my soul is inside everything.

"Before time was an imagined thing, I existed. I created the templates for how the universe could live in a dynamically evolving and interconnected system of life. Eons upon eons I perfected this design, and yet to my creation, it seems imperfect. It seems to be a theater of lies, subterfuge, confusion and half-truths, as you put it."

The voice paused. "I will show you this."

In the next instant I was hovering over a village harbored in darkness. A few flickering lights could be seen in the distance. There was a stone building that caught my attention, and I found myself flowing to it. Suddenly, I was inside a room where hand-woven rugs filled the walls. There was a large, wooden table in the center of the room and on its surface were some scrolls that were rolled up—except one. Sitting at the very end of the table was a woman who appeared to be asleep.

The room was utterly quiet. It was dimly lit by a few candles, and I felt certain that I had been taken back in time to meet this woman, whoever she was. I was not sure she would be able to see or hear me, so I cleared my throat. "Excuse me?"

She remained sleeping.

"Excuse me?" I spoke louder.

Nothing, not even a murmur or twitch.

I went to her side and looked down on a handwritten letter that was signed. I couldn't possibly read it at first, but as I continued to look at it the words slowly rearranged themselves into English.

I glanced at the woman again; she was about thirty years old. Her hair was dark brown and gathered in a net of some kind. Her dress was a simple frock of woven wool colored in cream. Even in sleep, there was an unusual strength

in her face.

I looked again at the open scroll, and just as I started to read, a door opened and two men entered who were dressed in the equivalent of deer hide and a red-colored cloth that was wrapped around their necks like scarfs. They didn't appear to see me, and stopped a few feet away from the woman.

One of the men, the taller of the two, shook the arm of the woman. "Charis, wake up."

The woman slowly looked up and sat back in her chair. "I'm not going."

"You must."

"I wish to remain here."

You have no choice."

"If I remain here, what will they do, kill me?"

"Almost certainly."

"And if I go I will live a little longer, but my mission will fail. Just as they want… no, I will stay."

"Charis," the older man stepped forward. "I've known you since you were a small child, as your guardian I must insist that you leave now… for your own good and the good of all who love you. Come with us. We'll protect you, and you will outlive your enemies, so you can return in triumph."

The tall man sat down at the table next to Charis. "We have only hours before they come for you. If you're here, they will take you, and they will surely torture you until you renounce what you have written. So your choices are to renounce what you believe—"

"It is not a belief, Hersounus, it is my vision."

"I… we understand this, but they will not. They will torture you until you renounce— they won't care if you're a woman. You will be treated no differently from any other confirmed traitor of the state."

He paused and let out a long sigh, and turned to look directly at Charis. "Save yourself. I beg of you, save yourself."

"Everything I have seen, everything I have written, or talked about to those

who will listen, is true. It is true."

"Truth doesn't matter to them," the older man said. "They destroy whatever threatens them, and you, you threaten them."

"Then perhaps it is time for them to confront the truth…"

"And kill you in the process?" The old man turned around in frustration.

Hersounus clasped his hands on the table and stared at them as if they were the only objects in the room. "Please, Charis. I know you want to fight them, but you cannot. I know you want to be truthful to your own self, but we live in times that kill truth and those who seek it."

Charis stood up and placed her hands on the table, striking a commanding pose. "I will not renounce what I have seen. The creator of me, is the creator of you, and you and everyone else. This creator has no affiliation with the King or his priesthood. This creator desires to be known from here." She placed one of her hands over her heart. "This creator has been defiled by those who pretend to know it best, and yet it is they who portray our creator as little more than a tyrannical child. This must be challenged, and if no one is willing to do that but me—a frail woman—then I shall step forward."

The two men looked at one another with sad, resigned eyes. Hersounus stood up from the table and turned back to Charis. "If there is nothing we can say or do to persuade you, then tell us what we should do after you are gone."

Charis smiled and closed her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. "The truth persists after this flesh falls to the earth. Truth circles us relentlessly. Even those who will strike me down, they know this. They fear this. They vainly try to extend the circle of darkness outward, hoping that truth will give up and finally turn away and leave them alone, but it will not. It will prevail, maybe not in this life, perhaps not even in a thousand, but time is the great illusion that colors truth as cowardly, when indeed truth is the force of persistence that will never perish."

There was a knock on the door, and an older woman entered slowly, walking with a cane.

"Mother, you needn't come," Charis said.

The older man came to her aid and offered his arm for her safety.

“I know. I know,” the old woman said, waving off the offered help. “I came anyway. Whatever these two have told you, listen to me. I will tell you only one thing… the one thing that matters.”

The old woman moved to a chair at the table, and Hersounus moved the chair to accommodate her. Following her lead, Charis also sat down. The old woman wore a dark brown shawl atop a tan-colored skin dress of some kind. She was gnarled by age, but seemed to have a vigor that all within the room respected.

The old woman adjusted herself in the chair and placed her cane on the table with a deliberate thud. “As a child I knew you were different. I knew you had a gift… a curse… there was no doubt. I told you to keep it to yourself, not because I felt you were wrong, but because I feared this day would come. I knew if you shared what you saw—what you knew, the priests would ultimately hear about it, and you’d be imprisoned.

“I tried to save you from that destiny, but I failed.” The old woman shook her head slowly. “God, I hate this. I hate this inability to be what you are… inside. I hate this control… to be what powerful men say it is okay to be. I hate this!”

The old woman picked at her cane with swollen hands and turned away from Charis’ gaze. “You are strong willed. You will be a sacrifice. A martyr. I may not even see you again. But I will tell you that I know you are a gift to this world and even if it destroys you, I know what you are. I know. Whatever you do, I will always love you, and I will always pray for your return to this world, because this world needs you…”

The old woman paused and wiped a tear-filled eye with her shawl. Charis sat listening, her eyes fixed on her mother.

“Do what you feel serves what you came here to do. In the end, what other choice is there?”

The old woman forced a smile from her wrinkled face and grabbed her cane and stood slowly to her feet. Charis stood, too, and embraced her mother. The two men looked down, their sorrow strong in their quick-turned faces.

“We will leave you to pray,” the mother said.

The Guardian hugged Charis without a word and followed the mother out the door. Hersounus waited for them to leave, and then approached Charis with torment inscribed on his face.

“Don’t be so worried, my dear Hersounus. I will be okay.”

“No, you won’t,” he whispered.

“Even if I am not, it is my choice.”

“Let me stay with you.”

“My mother’s right, I need to pray.”

“I’ll pray with you.”

“Alone.”

Hersounus, sensing the inevitable, embraced Charis. “I will always love you, too, and I, too, will pray for your return as will thousands of others. I will see to that.”

“Force nothing,” Charis said softly, caressing his face. “Promise me that. I want no one to do anything unless they desire it.”

Hersounus began to weep as he nodded to Charis’ request, and Charis put her hands on his shoulders. “Look at me. I will be fine. In this or some other world, I will be fine. My creator watches over me.” She backed away a few small steps. “Even now, I feel the presence. My creator is near…”

“When they come for you, please do not resist,” Hersounus pleaded. “Do not say anything. Just go with them, and… and be agreeable. Okay?”

Charis nodded. “I will.”

They embraced one more time, and I watched him walk out of the room, closing the door behind him.

I had watched the whole scene like one who sits in the front row of a play, but I knew these were not actors. The grave reality that befell this woman filled the room, and the people who had come to visit her were strong in their convictions, but felt powerless against the coming forces of the state.

I tried to think of a place in time when this could be. Who was Charis? It was a name I was not familiar with. Where was this place? It felt Middle Eastern for some reason.

Charis returned to her chair. I waved my hands and spoke as loud as I could, but it was obvious that she was unable to see or hear me. Besides, what could I possibly say to her?

Charis folded her hands on her lap and closed her eyes. “I pray to you, the one being that truly knows me. I have served my mission in this tiny world, caught in the turmoil of ignorance and selfish betterment. I am like a leaf held in some powerful tempest that has brought me to this… this precipice. And now that I am here, I quake in fear. I do not wish to leave this body… this place… my people… my family. I want to stay and continue your work of redemption, but I now fear the inevitable anger of the state will silence me. This anger has been accumulating on my doorstep. I have felt it draw nearer and nearer, stalking me like a hunter who plays with his prey. And now I am told it is a mere hour or two away.”

Charis paused and her face crinkled in decisive disdain. “I can feel the High Priest’s breath on my face as he threatens me with his questions, calculated for one thing, to make me a traitor of the state I mean to serve.

“Great Being of the highest and widest expanses, of the deepest heart of my inner worlds, let me be yours in this time of hardship. Cling to me as I to you, and together we will walk the road ahead.”

Charis paused as she opened her tear-stained eyes. I felt for a moment she looked at me. She saw something. I was standing in front of her on the far side of the table. I was simply observing, but as I looked at myself, I could see I was emanating a light that was flowing in the direction of Charis. It had no color, yet it was vibrant and bright.

The light began to collect and form into a sphere, and this sphere pulsed with every thought I had. I began to think, and I heard my thoughts coming from this sphere of light in the form of spoken words. It was as if I was channeling my thoughts through this orb of light.

I could see the light of this sphere reflecting on the face of Charis, and I knew, somehow, that I was manifesting in her world. Her eyes widened as

she became lost in the wonderment of this orb that floated above her table.

“Is it you?” Charis asked in an excited whisper.

My initial impulse was to stay quiet. Hide. But as I looked at Charis, I could not be indifferent. “I am Solomon.”

“My creator?”

“No, no, nothing like that.”

“Then who… or what are you?” Charis asked, her initial excitement dampened by my answer.

I hesitated, unsure of how to answer. “I don’t know,” I admitted quietly.

Her eyes narrowed in disbelief. “Did you hear my prayer?”

“Yes.”

“Then you are my guardian angel?”

“No.”

“Are you one of the angels?”

“No. I’m just like you, but from another time.”

“What time?”

“The year is two thousand twenty-one.”

“I don’t know what that means,” she said, “but it doesn’t matter from when or where you come, though you do not look anything like me.”

“I’m actually just like you. I’m a human; I’m only talking through this ball of light, because it’s the only way I can speak to you.”

“I see… Solomon, if you are here, there must be a reason.”

Charis folded her arms and looked as one does when they are trying to figure out something perplexing. “Are you alone?”

“I seem to be.”

“And who were you last with?”

How do I explain this one? I was last with the Supreme Being who created

all life in all dimensions of existence. It was a private thought, but as I thought it I heard the words roll out into the room.

“So the creator brought you here…” Charis whispered into her hands that covered her mouth in surprise. “How did it happen?”

“What?”

“How did the creator bring you here?”

“I… I don’t know?”

“Do you know why you were brought here?”

“I don’t know this, either.”

Charis tilted her head slightly and leaned forward, reaching out her hand to touch the light orb. As her hand came within a few inches of the light, it changed to an amber color and began to interact with her hand. The light began to flow down the length of her arm slowly inundating her entire left arm, then her left shoulder, and then it moved slowly and deliberately through her entire body as much of it as I could see. She was aglow in this amber light.

“What is happening?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I feel different. I am… I am becoming senseless. Oh my, I am… I am dying.”

I watched as her body slumped forward on the table in gentle slow motion. Her beautiful face quietly closed its portals to the spirit beneath, and in one sweeping gesture a golden-amber light rose from the shell of her body and in the next instant it was gone.

As suddenly as she had disappeared I was back in the wooden chair facing the endless prairies, and then I began to feel motion again, building deep within me, gradually getting stronger and stronger like the hum of an engine revving up. I knew I was being sent home—back to my body lying in bed on a quiet street in New Haven, Connecticut. Back to a world that seemed so far away and so remarkably small, but, in a final quest for understanding, I struggled to ask one more question.

“Why? Why did you show me this? Please, at least answer me this question.”

“You are clothed in many ways,” the voice replied. “You have returned to triumph over those who would seek to push the truth away. You are the expression of my persistence.”

I knew then what my creator meant. I understood everything in that very instant. In that tiniest fraction of time, where time no longer exists, the unknowable made itself known to me.

Chapter 68: Reunion

The airport in New Haven, though relatively small when compared to LaGuardia or Logan, still presented a daunting maze for visitors to get to the gates. Looking through the tall glass windows I could only see reflections as it was still dark outside. I studied my own reflection, and thought about the image of me as a young boy playing with God. I prayed my family would find me unaffected—that I'd still be the husband and father they knew and loved, but it was obvious to me that so much had changed since I had last seen them.

For one, my memory was restored. Then there was the complication of Nammu and my infidelity. Not to mention Jaylee and the whole issue of adoption. I tried to put these things out of my mind, and for a certain period of time, I was successful, but they inevitably returned like unruly children with muddy feet.

I had changed in more fundamental ways, too. All of my experiences were shaping me, and I could feel my connections to the old me and the world in which I once operated, falling to the wayside. A certain degree of fear enveloped me, because I knew that I would not be the same man. As I was waiting I even wondered if my family would recognize me—not the skin part, that, of course, they would recognize, but the part of me that was beneath the skin.

I felt a certain irony that after a month of amnesia where my family was unknown to me, I was finally returned to my memories and family, yet now I was concerned that they would not recognize me. An announcement on the airport intercom jabbed me to my reality as I watched their plane taxi to the jet way.

The dawn was beginning to show itself, but the windows' reflection made it seem darker outside. I glanced at my watch: 6:02 A.M. Right on time, or close enough.

Within minutes passengers began to stream by me. I watched their tired,

grim faces as they floated by emotionless as if they were sleepwalking. It was the voice of Jon that first found me. They were still in the jet way, but I could hear him in an excited pitch, and then I saw him running with his backpack to my waiting arms.

I was overcome with joy as I hugged him, my hands, feeling the smallness of his body, gripped him tightly. Marisa came next and joined our hug. The kids simply melted into me, and I felt their relief at being home with a father whose memory now encompassed their history. After a minute or so, I stood up and pulled Derya to my arms, and kissed her for the first time since waking up in the hospital bed.

I knew there were people streaming by, I could hear them whispering in their thoughts, but I could not hold back my affections and joy.

We laughed and talked the rest of the way home. No one detected anything different in me, no one could see behind the ever-thinning façade I wore. They were too happy to see the father and husband I was, to peer below the surface and touch the new me. But I knew that hour would come. It was the only texture of uneasiness in that reunion.

Chapter 69: Pandora

There’s a kind of restlessness that breaks down the doors of the temple in which one lives. I had lived in a temple, not the kind one usually considers, the kind that is wrapped in the spiritual gauze of holy rites, ceremonies of tender wishes, or a lineage of teachers saturated in the words of their founder. No, my temple was built from the repetition of a thousand activities, and in this repetition I had crafted a world—both inner and outer—that had become my temple.

Then my heart gave out. All of the therapies of advanced medicine, cardiac stem cells injected in my heart, advanced pharmaceuticals, even two surgeries had all proven the same result: fruitless. It was futile to try and fix what I had, I needed another heart, and without that I was a dead man. That was my restlessness, and then came Vanessa, my literal savior who rescued me.

Her heart, with all of its encoding, all of its subtle cues, all of its sculpting, all of its willful bestowments of love had somehow changed me in such a profound and immeasurable way that I was like a tumbled stone in the clutches of a powerful river current. I was tossed downstream, each bump of the riverbed polishing me into something that could no longer be covered or enclosed by any temple.

When we returned from the airport the ritual of unpacking took a good hour. I stayed mostly with Derya hearing all of the details of the funeral, how her parents were doing, how life had changed in Turkey, how her relatives were coping with the political strife in the region. I asked a hundred questions, attempting—perhaps subconsciously—to keep the conversation on her experience, not knowing how I would explain my own.

Jon and Marisa were both tired, and after they had unpacked, they took showers, ate a bowl of cereal, and went to bed. They had school the next day, so after their naps they would be focused on school work and no doubt chatting with friends.

With the kids resting and the unpacking mostly completed, Derya and I

finally relaxed at the breakfast table, enjoying a cup of coffee and a croissant. The conversation finally turned to my trip to South Dakota.

“So, Sol, how is it that you brought your camera out there and never got any film or even photographs?” Derya asked.

It had started. I looked down at my coffee cup for a moment trying to collect my thoughts to ensure an explanation that was reasonable, but in that second of reflection, I knew that reasonable was impossible.

“It’s so complicated… I’ve rehearsed a hundred different ways to tell you this… this… this experience I’m having and I don’t know how it will come out—”

“Just tell me.” Derya interrupted, reaching for my arm.

I could see her eyes spoke the words of alarm, as she leaned towards me.

“I’ve been having… visions.”

“What kind of visions?”

“The kind that feel… real. I’m sure they’re real.”

“What’re they about?” she asked.

I hesitated. “Remember the tree that shriveled in our backyard?”

“I haven’t been gone that long.” Derya smiled sarcastically.

“I’ve been tormented by demons, and one of them, named Nammu, did that.”

“Did what?”

“Caused the tree to shrivel… it’s even possible—”

“You can’t be serious…”

“I am.”

“You’re seeing demons? That’s what you’re telling me, and these demons are going around killing our trees? And you’ve… you’ve named them? Are you joking?”

Derya’s face turned from concern to panic. I could see her look at me suddenly like one looks at a stranger who is clearly afflicted with mental

illness.

“I don’t only see demons, I also see God… and… and others.”

Derya sat back in her chair. “For how long?”

“Since I woke that morning in the hospital after surgery.”

“It’s your medication. It must be your medication…” She nearly whispered the words, her gaze inward.

“It’s not the medication; I stopped taking any medication for nearly two weeks now.”

“Then maybe that’s why.”

“Derya, I’m not crazy, I may be having visions that seem crazy, but I’m not. Something’s changed since I got this.” I pointed to my heart. “I never told you, but Vanessa… she sent me a video… oh God, it’s complicated.” The words just spilled out, and I knew with every disclosure a hundred questions would be circling inside Derya’s mind. I needed to slow down, but once the unraveling began, I couldn’t see how to stop. Everything was connected.

Derya stood up and moved to the sink and rinsed out her coffee cup. “A video? Why’re you telling me this now?”

How could I tell her in a way she would understand, when I barely understood myself? “Vanessa was not your ordinary person—”

“Can I see this video?”

I thought about it too long.

“Solomon, tell me what’s on the video.”

“It’s just a homemade video of Vanessa talking about her heart. She said she knew her heart was going to a person that’d use it to make a discovery in about forty years.”

“What kind of discovery?” The words came slowly from her mouth.

“The human soul,” I replied.

Derya pulled a paper towel from the dispenser and let out a nervous laugh.

“Okay, so you’re saying the heart donor was crazy, and that the heart inside you is causing you to see visions? Is that about right?”

“No, I’m not saying she was crazy.”

“You believe her? That you’re going to discover the human soul… what, in forty years? That doesn’t sound crazy to you? Did Vanessa know you? Did she know that you were going to get her heart?”

“Not specifically… but she had visions—”

“Stop with the visions. Prophets have visions, not you or your donor. These… these are fantasies, and probably the result of a medical condition or complication from your surgery. Maybe she suggested these ideas in her video, and she’s… tricked you into this. I don’t know…”

“I went to South Dakota with my shrink, you know that. He introduced me to his uncle who’s a spiritual leader of his people, and his uncle confirms this.”

“And what is that, Sol? What do they say you are? A prophet? The next Mohammed or Jesus?”

Derya sat back down at the table. I was lost. I didn’t know where to go with the conversation. Every direction looked perilous, one wrong word exposing a new cliff to hang from. I let the silence of the kitchen lead us.

“Okay, I’ll play along with you,” Derya finally said, her voice sounding distant. “Why did the demons kill our tree?”

“The demon’s name is Nammu, and she killed the tree as a demonstration of her powers. She was threatening me—”

“Why? Why was she threatening you?”

“They don’t want this discovery.”

“So this demon—Nammu—knows, just like your shrink’s uncle and Vanessa, that in forty years you will make a discovery of the human soul, and these demons don’t want that for humanity, so they kill a tree? In our backyard? Sol, doesn’t that sound crazy to you?”

Her eyes were pleading with me. I wanted to agree with her just for the sake of being done with the whole conversation, but Pandora’s Box had been

opened and there was no way to ever close it again.

“Yes, it sounds crazy,” I admitted, “but it’s the truth. So much has happened since my transplant that I can’t begin to describe it all. All I can tell you is that you need to know that this is my life now.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I’m not the same man I was a few months ago. I’m not seeing the world in the same way I was before my transplant.”

“So everything’s going to change? Is that what you’re telling me? Do you know what I wanted to do after we finished a normal conversation?”

I knew the question was rhetorical, so I waited.

“I wanted to go upstairs and make love. That’s all I could think about on the plane— all I could think about since you told me you had your memories back.”

Her eyes began to tear as she spoke. “Solomon, you know me. You can’t expect me to believe in your fantasies… not about things like this. When you see Doctor Kendall tomorrow, you have to promise me that you’ll have this checked out. Get back on your medication… and stop seeing this shrink. He’s a bad influence.”

“They’re not fantasies,” I whispered. “I’m not sure what to call them… these experiences, but I know when I’m having them, and they’re more real than this conversation right now.”

“So you see these demons and gods,” she half-shouted, anger swelling in her voice. “You talk with them? You touch them?”

I flinched at her questions, especially the last.

“Sol, I’m real. You can touch me, see me, hear me, feel me. Are you really saying that all of these fantasies are more real than I am? Than our children?”

She got up again from her chair and walked to the refrigerator. “Doctor Kendall.”

The phone went into its dialing mode. My heart sunk.

“Tell him everything you’ve just told me, and ask him for another referral.

You need a psychiatrist that—”

A pleasant, but stressed voice interrupted. “Doctor Kendall’s office.”

“Yes, this is Derya and Solomon Tonum, is Doctor Kendall available?”

“Is it an emergency?”

Derya looked directly into my eyes as she spoke the word. “Yes.”

“One moment please, and I’ll see if I can connect you.”

Instantly soft, numbing music filled our kitchen while I stared into my hands, knowing there was nothing I could do. I was in the grasp of something that wished to shame me, beat me into submission, and return me to what was deemed normalcy. There was a new strength to this grip.

It was Derya.

Chapter 70: Lost

Sometimes there's no voice left to express what you know is true, even to the one you love. My conversation with Derya was unsatisfying to both of us. Thankfully, Dr. Kendall was open-minded to my explanation, perhaps Kohana was in part to thank for that. Dr. Kendall explained to us that psychological adjustments to heart transplantation can vary considerably. Disorders, of the kind I was exhibiting, were very rare, but they could occur as an outcome of anxiety or depression.

I chose not to argue my case with Derya present. She insisted that I see a new psychiatrist and asked Dr. Kendall for a referral. He said he'd have one for me when I came in tomorrow. We ended the consultation in about ten minutes. He seemed relieved that the emergency was of a psychological nature and nothing physiological. We ended our call on a friendly note.

Derya looked tired afterwards, and slumped in her chair.

"I'm sorry to bring all of this up," I offered, "but I needed to tell you what was happening."

"Is this all, or is there more?"

I looked down. Her gaze was too hard to meet. "There's more, but I'm not sure you want to hear it."

Derya reached out and took my hands in hers. "Sol, if this is all a part of your medical condition I can deal with it. If you're saying that you're now going to be seeing things that aren't really there, and that's just the way it is, I don't know how we'll deal with that."

"I'm not crazy."

She sighed. "I want to see the video."

I shook my head. "Not now."

"Sol, I need to see it. I need to understand what Vanessa has put inside your head."

I couldn’t explain why, but I didn’t want her to see it. Vanessa was a little spooky in her approach. I remembered that much. Derya needed some time to digest what I had just told her before I opened the floodgate.

“Later.”

“Now.”

I remembered our fights, and I seldom won, but this one was not one I intended to lose. “Derya, I don’t want to show it to you. Give it some time.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t feel you’d understand. You’d judge it as being wrong, and it isn’t.”

“Maybe it is.”

“You’ll have to take my word for it. There’s nothing wrong with it.”

“Then let me see it.”

“Look, when I feel ready to share it with you, you have my promise I will do so. I’m just not there now. Okay?”

“Did you show it to her parents?”

“No.”

“Do they know about it?”

“Yes.”

“And they didn’t want to see it?”

“Corin asked to see it, but it was a private thing—between Vanessa and me. I don’t know… I feel it was for my eyes only.”

“What happened when you met her parents?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re not telling me everything, you’re not showing me the video, what’s happening here?”

“She has a daughter,” I blurted out. “Her name is Jaylee.”

“Vanessa has a daughter?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t know she was married.”

“She wasn’t.”

“Was her daughter there?”

I nodded.

“Is she staying with her grandparents now?”

I nodded again.

“What is it? What is it you’re not telling me?”

I wanted to disappear. That was my wish. I knew the turns of our conversation, and I knew they ended in a fall over a steep cliff. I wanted to avoid it, but I also knew it would only postpone the inevitable. I was meeting Daniel Archer tomorrow, and Derya would know that I went to Manhattan, I couldn’t lie.

“Vanessa, as part of her will, requested that I… actually, you and I… that we’d adopt Jaylee.”

I let the disclosure reverberate in the quiet of the kitchen, but I could see Derya’s face form into a giant question mark.

“What?”

“That was her request—”

“Well, there you have it,” Derya said, “proof that’s she’s crazy. You’re not possibly considering it, are you?”

“I’m meeting with her attorney tomorrow. I feel that I owe her that much.”

“She gave you her heart, she can’t tell you what to do with your life or ours. Solomon, if you go to her attorney to discuss this, you’re playing her game—”

“It’s not a game,” I said. My own frustration was building, and I hadn’t really noticed, but the intensity in my voice suddenly made it clear to me.

“Look, I’m sorry,” I said, softening my tone. “I know this is all very confusing. I wish I didn’t have to spring it on you like this, but I have no

choice. I need you to understand what I've been going through. Jaylee is a sweet girl—"

"How old?"

"She's seven."

"Do her grandparents know?"

"Yes."

"And they're okay with this proposed adoption?"

"No," I shook my head.

"Why go to her attorney? It's just a money and time waster… it's the wrong thing to do. I know you feel a certain obligation to play along… she did give you her heart, and we all appreciate that, but she can't reach out from the grave and ask a total stranger to raise her child. It's not right, and even more so if her own grandparents don't agree. It makes no sense, Solomon, don't you see that?"

"I understand what you're saying, and I agree with most of it, but I need to meet with her attorney and at least put this thing to rest."

Derya sighed long and loud. "Okay, go meet the attorney, but make it crystal clear that we're not taking on the responsibility of raising Vanessa's daughter. Okay?"

I nodded, hoping the conversation would end there.

"You're still holding back. What is it?"

I bit my bottom lip hard. I could feel emotions surfacing that I felt ill-equipped to handle. My whole body seemed to be vibrating or shaking as if a tremor was building underneath my relatively calm exterior. And then it happened. I wept like a child. Oh my God, I couldn't stop. It was impossible to resist, despite my best efforts to hold it inside. Once it began, I was powerless. I could only ride it out like one does a storm when they're sailing the high seas.

Derya, after a few moments of anxiousness, touched my shoulder. "It's okay, Sol. These are hard times for all of us… you especially. Maybe I shouldn't have gone to my sister's funeral so close after your surgery. I didn't

know all of this was going on. It's okay… it's okay… it's okay."

I felt exposed, but I didn't care.

"Why're you so upset?" Derya asked after I found some degree of composure.

"When I spoke with you just after my memory returned, I felt instantly close to you. I felt like I could reach out my hand and touch you, even though you were thousands of miles away. Now, you're right here, I can literally reach out and touch you, but we're not really together."

"And why is that? You tell me that you're seeing things, talking with strange beings that threaten you, that you're being asked to adopt a strange girl, and I'm supposed to just accept all of this. Take it all in as normal?"

Derya put her hands on her knees and shook her head. "Remember that I've been under lot of stress lately, too. With your illness, all the failed tests and surgeries, and then finally a heart came available, and you got your transplant. You got your second life, but all of that came at the price of your memory. Then my sister passed away…. and now this."

She shrugged. "What am I supposed to do? I'm scared. I feel this distance between us just as much as you. Trust me. It's just as real for me. Something changed in you, I can sense it…"

Derya stood to her feet, and leaned down and kissed my cheek. "I know you. I know you're a good man. I've admired you since I first saw your photographs in that little gallery in Mesa. I knew you had a special soul; a sensitivity for justice, not just beauty. We'll manage this somehow.

"I want to check on the kids. I know you said there was more, but I can't process anymore. Let's leave it there. Tomorrow you meet with Doctor Kendall and Vanessa's attorney. I have to go back to work tomorrow, so after I get home, we'll open a bottle a wine, and you'll tell me everything. Okay?"

I nodded. "What about the kids?"

"We'll lock them in their rooms… they'll have plenty of homework, I'm sure."

Derya walked away, her shoulders slightly slumped. I sounded out her

name in my mind. I wanted to call her. I wanted to connect with her, but a wall had risen between us. Was it deceit that I didn't mention my infidelity with Nammu? Was it Derya's leap to judgment that I was lost in some psychological disorder or mere fantasy? Whatever the stone blocks of this wall were hewed from, they murmured a clear message: you are lost and alone.

Chapter 71: Walked on Water

My beating heart was amplified with great precision and visual effect. Doctor Kendall's office was always mystifying to me with its colorful displays and wireless headphones. Sometimes I felt like I was in an electronics store. It was gratifying to hear my own heartbeat, to really feel that persistent strength that seemed undeflected by time. Only in the end, when it made its last contraction and time finally shouted its victory over the seemingly immortal muscle, would it be silent.

The heart inside me was strong, not in terms of cardiovascular conditioning that one might find in an athlete, but rather, the essence of my new heart would never surrender to an outside influence. No shadow could cross it. No darkness could overtake it. No whispers of fear could find their way to its ear.

Did the heart really listen to the outside, mechanized world? Wasn't it the mind that took instruction from the outside, hoping to pass its messages to the heart, but the heart was too busy to read messages or compute anything the mind could send it. The mind sent unimportant messages about the conduct of the body, the rules of physiology, the mannerisms of social norms, but the heart, spurred on by its own purpose, simply broadcast into the sea of energy that seven billion human hearts created.

What was this rhythmic language? I listened carefully, certain it was a language. It was communicating something, the visual displays tried to capture it, but like ladders on a skyscraper their limitations were immediately obvious.

I closed my eyes, shutting them off, listening only to the comforting sound of my heart. Was that me? It was the centermost part of my body. It was the part that grew first from the zygote—the divided cell. It was the energy of my body. The rhythm was smooth, subtle, soft, ever flowing like a leaf that climbs the wind with no effort.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Solomon." Doctor Kendall came into the

consult room in flurry of white with his ever-present tablet in one hand. “I see Jenny got you all hooked up.”

“I actually find it therapeutic to just listen.”

“I know what you mean. A lot of my patients say the same thing, especially after they get their new hearts.” He winked and opened his tablet. “Solomon Tonum report.”

Within a few seconds, he was reading, his lips moving almost imperceptibly as he consumed the various interpretations of my heart’s code.

“Physiologically, you’re doing great. No signs of rejection. I’m not sure how you managed it without the meds, but whatever you did, it’s worked beautifully. Maybe South Dakota agreed with you, huh?”

“You may be right,” I said.

Dr. Kendall was a large man. Twenty years earlier he had played football for Yale and seemed to be one of those people where everything came easy, despite being average in every way. Not that I didn’t admire him for his competence in heart surgery, in that narrow spectrum, he was superb, but if you didn’t know he was a heart surgeon you might think he was an assistant football coach.

“You gave me a little start yesterday with the call, your wife seems to think you’ve lost it. What do you think?”

“I’d prefer to continue to see Doctor Chayton. He understands my situation __”

“That may be, but your wife read me the riot act yesterday and all but threatened to sue me for malpractice if I didn’t refer you to a new headpeeper. Now, I don’t want to get involved in your personal affairs, but I feel obligated to give you Doctor Carson’s contact info. What you do with it, that’s your business. If you want to see two shrinks, you can do that, too.”

“What do you think?” I asked.

“About your psychological state?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Your profile’s spotless—you qualified for this procedure so you had to

have a good profile. No family history of mental illness. You're as clean as a whistle."

He paused for a moment. "I bumped into Kohana in his office this morning," Dr. Kendall smiled. "I asked him how he thought you were doing, psychologically speaking, and he said you walked on water. His words, not mine. I interpret that as a good sign. Maybe your wife—Derya—is just a little stressed from all of this talk of seeing things. I'd lose that descriptive language. Focus more on compliments, how beautiful she looks… that sort of thing. Goes a long way, if you know what I mean."

He put his hand out. "Give me your mobile."

I handed my phone to him, and he waved it over his tablet and handed it back. "There you go. I'd give him a call and just see if you like his approach. I told his office you might call, but didn't mention anything else."

"Doctor Carson, right?"

He nodded. "Straight, middle-of-the road kind of guy. You'll like him. Professorial type. Wrote some books, that sort of thing. Google um, you'll see he's top-notch credentialed."

"Okay, thanks. I'll call him and set up an appointment."

I was relieved that Dr. Kendall skirted around the uncomfortable call from Derya yesterday. I didn't want to share what I was involved in with him, and I sensed he was of the same opinion.

I left after some more pleasantries, and almost trudged up the three flights of stairs to say hi to Kohana, but I needed to catch a train to Manhattan in less than thirty minutes.

It was cold and gray outside when I left the doctor's office. Dr. Kendall's assistant had a cab waiting for me. I waved my mobile phone over the reader in the backseat and heard an overformal computer voice say: "50 Union Avenue, Union Station, New Haven, CT. Is this correct?"

"Yes," I said, and then leaned back in my seat and waited for the taxi to hum away.

"Your destination is estimated to be seven minutes. Thank you for using

Yellow Cab.”

I almost said, “You’re welcome.”

Chapter 72: Six Million

My journey's end came on the 17th floor of a glass building whose reception area consisted of a Frank Lloyd Wright-style interior with Mission furniture scattered in conspicuous, but tasteful clusters. The receptionist noticed me before I noticed her.

"Can I help you?" she asked in a British accent. She was a pleasant-looking woman in her mid-forties, with long brown hair drawn into a pony tail. She wore a gray, two- piece Armani business suit, tailored to her well-appointed figure.

"Yes, I have a two-thirty appointment with Daniel Archer."

She glanced at her screen, and smiled. "He prefers to be called Dan, so you might take note of that. I'll let him know you've arrived. There's coffee and bottled water in that alcove over there. Help yourself to whatever you'd like."

"Thanks."

"Oh, and you can hang your coat right over there." She pointed to an empty coat rack.

"Okay, thanks again."

After hanging my jacket and grabbing a bottle of water, I sat down and glanced at the magazines. The waiting area was vacant, except for me. Considering the size of the office, I was surprised to be the only one around other than the receptionist.

There was light music in the background, classical renditions of the Beatles I believe, but otherwise the office was hushed in a thick, luxurious silence. Occasionally, I heard the receptionist answer a phone, but the whole space seemed oddly quiet and inactive.

I wondered how the kids and Derya were doing back in their normal routines. Derya had been quiet most of the morning, focusing on getting the kids ready for school and out the door. She seemed to barely notice me until

she was leaving the house herself, and then it was mostly to make sure I would be firm with Vanessa's attorney, and discuss new meds with Dr. Kendall and get his referral.

While I was waiting, I decided to call Dr. Carson's office and see about an appointment. It would at least assuage some of the guilt I felt from my conversation with Derya yesterday, and it would show progress to Derya.

"Doctor Carson," I said to my phone.

Almost instantly a recorded message came on. "Good afternoon, this is Doctor Carson's office, I'm not able to personally take your call at the moment, but if you leave a message, I'll return your call as soon as I can. If this is an emergency, please call 203-774-1800. Thank you."

There was a long pause and then a short beep. "Um, my name is Solomon Tonum, I was referred to your office by Doctor Kendall. I'd like to make an appointment in the next week or so. If you could call me back, I would appreciate it. My number is 860- 554-2132. Thank you."

That was one check box I could claim.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a man in a blue suit approaching. He was in his late fifties with gray, short-cropped hair and beard. He was well built, a bit on the stocky side, but definitely athletic. He wore silver-rimmed glasses, which only distinguished his already distinguished face. As he approached me I could see his smile warming up.

"Mr. Tonum, a pleasure to meet you in the flesh."

"Thanks, it's good to meet you, too."

"Any problems finding us?"

"No, no… it was easy."

"I see you have water, that's good. I have a conference room for us… a little tidier than my office, I can assure you. Follow me, please."

I grabbed the bottle and followed him across the office area and down a narrow hallway of exquisite rosewood paneling that was embellished with oil paintings lit beautifully with rich halogen lighting.

"Beautiful art…" I commented.

“Thanks, my partners are collectors, and they’re running out of room in their homes, so they started bringing it into the office some years ago, and now we’re running out of room here. We often joke that we’ll need a bigger office for the art.” He chuckled to himself.

He stopped at the threshold of an enormous conference room and motioned with his right hand for me to enter first.

“Why don’t you have a seat over there, and I’ll join you in a moment.”

“Okay, thanks.”

I sat down on a stiff, red leather chair, and crossed my legs, drumming my fingers on the large conference table, which also appeared to be rosewood. The paintings in the hallway were not reproductions, but I didn’t recognize any of the artists. One thing was for sure, this law office would not come cheap. I was thankful the costs were not mine.

The whole time I was waiting in the conference room for Dan’s return I never heard anyone or saw any partners or assistants. There was a deep silence that hung in the air that was almost palpable.

Dan returned, juggling some folders and a cup of coffee, and managed, with some difficulty, to set them on the table without a mishap. “Well, thanks for taking the time to come in and meet with me.”

“It’s the least I can do for Vanessa,” I said.

“Yes, well, I know she would appreciate it, too.”

He opened one of the folders and extracted a document, laying it in front of him. “Vanessa’s will was unusual in many respects—”

“Forgive my interruption, but… but how is it that Vanessa came to your firm to draw up her will? Your firm is a business law firm, isn’t it?”

“It’s a very interesting story, actually, Solomon… I can call you Solomon, can’t I?”

“Sure.”

“Please, call me Dan. There’re no formalities around here despite the way it might look. I had nothing to do with the highbrow decorating, I can assure you of that.”

He smiled and took a quick sip of coffee.

“Vanessa knew my father, actually.”

“In what way?”

“Ah, well, you see my father was a very rich man. This law firm is actually his. I’m merely a junior partner. His technology investments were, well, let’s just say they were astronomically successful. Vanessa was a counselor for my father.”

“A counselor?”

“Yes, well, it’s possibly the wrong name to use, but he rather liked her ideas or suggestions and she was quite good at providing insights into things. I don’t know the details of how she did it, and I don’t think my father really cared that much. She delivered, and that was enough.

“Part of their agreement was that she would get free legal advice from his law firm, for which my father tapped me as the one who would execute his debt… now that he’s dead.”

“I’m sorry, was it recently that he died?”

“Six months ago, actually, almost to the day… anyhow, my father was quite taken by Vanessa. I personally only met her once. To me, she was like a phantom, but my father would tell me stories that made me think she was something… unusual.”

“Like what kind of stories?”

“I’m not sure they’re relevant, Solomon, and in the interest of time, I’d like to go over some of her wishes in relation to her will. She had designated that I send you the video tape, which I assume you’ve watched. Correct?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

“You said that you had visited her parents, and so I also assume that you’ve met Jaylee, her daughter. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“Those were the stipulations to invoke the next phase of her will, which become a little more challenging for me to reveal.”

Dan paused, as if he were reading the file in front of him, but his eyes were fixed on the table instead. “You see, Solomon, Vanessa, and I don’t know how, believes you, her heart recipient, to be the best influence for her daughter. She would like you to adopt Jaylee.”

I had the impression that he had expected me to react with bewilderment, but I calmly looked at him. “I know.”

“How? How do you know?” Dan asked with a perplexed expression crossing his face.

“I’d rather not say.”

“Well, as her attorney there’s nothing you could tell me about Vanessa that would surprise or shock me, so don’t hold back simply because you think it’s too outlandish or… strange. Everything about her was, as I said, unusual.”

There was something about Dan, beneath his façade of professionalism, that felt unprepared to know Vanessa’s purpose, and once I started to tell him one thing, it would lead to another, and then the constellation of Vanessa would be revealed. I couldn’t do that. She should remain a mystery.

“Her parents aren’t keen on the idea,” I said. “Her stepfather is wealthy, and I’ve already been told by Corin, her mother, that he would take any and all legal action to block an adoption.”

“I can deal with the legal issues, don’t worry about that. The bigger issue is your acceptance of this. Do you accept it?”

“The adoption?”

“Yes, the adoption of Jaylee, with you as her guardian.”

“I do, my wife doesn’t.”

Dan leaned back in his chair. “Yes, well that does complicate matters, though I believe Vanessa foresaw that issue.”

“In what way?” I asked.

“As Jaylee’s guardian, you would also be given, as stipulated in her will, a little more than six million dollars. I presume that might change your wife’s opinion.”

Now I was bewildered. How did Vanessa acquire that kind of money? I looked at Dan, and he responded without my question even materializing.

“It’s a lot of money, I know. Like I said, she helped my father—she had a gift, and she used it to achieve something she believed in, and what she believed in was that you, Solomon, should raise her child.”

“I have two children…” I whispered.

“Now they can go to the best schools. Vanessa designated that her money would be in your control. You can use the money in any manner you see fit. You are the only trustee on the account.”

A hundred questions swirled around me. “I still don’t understand how Vanessa came by this kind of money. Is it real?”

Dan smiled broadly. “I can assure you it’s real. Our law firm holds the account in escrow, it’s held at our bank, and it’s earning interest even as we speak.”

“But how?”

“As I said, my father was a very wealthy man. Even if he only provided a tiny fraction of his investment windfalls to Vanessa, it would be in the millions. He left her the money. There’re no disputes, the money is free and clear. There’ll be some legal documents you’ll need to sign, and we’ll consult you on the best ways to marginalize those pesky tax collectors, but even in the worst case, you’ll retain more than five million dollars, especially because our legal fees are gratis.”

“It seems Vanessa had this all planned so carefully,” I half-mumbled. “Is there more… to her plans?”

“There is, but at the moment, I’m not at liberty to say.”

“What about Jaylee in all of this? What about her feelings? Her opinion?”

“All in good time, Solomon. Vanessa has… let’s just say, considered that in her plans.”

“I really don’t want a legal battle. Her parents will find out about the money, and they’ll think that’s the only reason we’d adopt Jaylee—”

“We have access to the best legal minds in the world. We’ll get it done, so

don’t worry about that, it’s really, as I said before, your decision that matters. If you wanted to sign these documents, we’d get started tomorrow and within six weeks it’d be done.”

“How? Vanessa’s parents will fight this tooth and nail.”

“Solomon, let me worry about that. Okay?”

“I can’t sign anything without talking to my wife…”

“Yes, well, she’ll need to sign some papers, too, so… of course, you need to involve her in this decision. I was only speaking hypothetically about signing these today. Vanessa had wanted the adoption to go forward in phases, hoping this would provide your wife ample time to adjust to the… to the situation.”

He paused, glancing at his wristwatch. “I made copies of the documents that you both need to sign, and I’ll make myself available to answer any of your questions as you look them over in the days ahead. Sound fair?”

I nodded. The whole thing seemed preposterous and surreal. Vanessa wasn’t the lonely, struggling introvert that I had assumed she was. She was more of a strategist, a planner who saw far into the future and wanted to ensure its eventual expression. I marveled at her ability to affect my life without ever meeting me. I did not know how it was possible, but she was leading me to do precisely what she had planned.

“There is one more thing,” Dan said, as he stood up, sliding a piece of paper in front of me. “If you sign this, you are the official signatory on the account.”

“What does that mean?”

“The money’s yours.”

“What?”

“The money is yours. Vanessa didn’t make any conditions that you had to adopt Jaylee in order to get the money. The money is yours. I’ll need to send you some bank account information, but we can do that over the phone. Sign it, and I’ll have the account turned over to you in the morning. It might take a few days for the official transfer—when you could start spending it, but that’s

just a formality of the banks."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Solomon, if there's one thing I never kid about, it's money, especially of this amount."

He slipped a gold pen from his suit's breast pocket, and handed it to me. "It's yours. No conditions."

"One signature and I get six million dollars?"

"That's before the tax man cometh, but yes, the money is yours."

I looked down at the innocent piece of paper. My mind could barely read. I was in some form of slow-motion shock. I saw bank account numbers, my name, the law firm's name and a red rubber stamp imprint that said 'This is not a copy!'

I looked up at Dan; my eyes probably still showing disbelief.

"It's what she wanted, Solomon. I'm only enabling her wishes. That's what I do. Sign it, and then let me know what questions you and your wife have as you review these." He pushed a leather folder across the table.

I looked down at the paper again, the signature line, empty above my type-written name: Solomon D. Tonum. A sudden impulse stirred me, and I signed my name. How could this be? How could she be so sure of me? I certainly wasn't.

Dan smiled at me as he took the signed paper and placed it in a folder. "I'll have copies made and courier them to you in the morning."

I slowly placed the pen back on the table. Dan bent over and picked it up and returned it to his pocket with elegant ease.

"Is there anything else you need?" he asked.

I stood up, pushing back the chair, and suddenly realized that my legs were a bit wobbly. I held the table for a moment or two while I got my balance. "No, I'll review these with my wife. I think she'll have a lot of questions, but… but I want to thank you for your help with this."

"You're very welcome." He extended his hand and I shook it firmly. "I'll

show you out.”

I followed him to the coat rack and put on my jacket, grabbed my new folder and shook hands with Dan one last time. I walked out of the office in a daze.

I really don’t remember much about the elevator ride down to the lobby with its fancy sculptures on display. I barely noticed the taxi as it pulled in and picked me up. I could only wonder how different my life had suddenly become, but then I realized there was nothing so sudden about it. Ever since my new heart, I had been rising in some spiraling current that was invisible to all but one person, Vanessa. It seemed that only she really knew where it would take me and her daughter.

I had to figure out how to break this news to Derya. Dan was right about one thing, $6 million would make the conversation a lot easier to have.

Chapter 73: Twenty-six

The train was two minutes early. I had upgraded my ticket to a private cabin that included a bed, a lounge chair and even its own washroom. I wanted privacy, and now I could definitely afford it. The whole time I was in the taxi to the train station I was debating whether to call Derya and report the news, but I decided to wait until we were together, knowing I'd be better able to explain the situation and read her reaction.

The private room was nicely appointed, though small. I had no luggage, but I took my jacket off and flung it over the upper bunk bed. I pulled out my phone and was just about ready to do some reading, when I heard a strange noise like tinfoil being crumpled, and then immediately a smell like gunpowder filled the room, and I spun around to see Burkhan.

"I found you," he announced with a half-smile.

"So you did… why did you find me?"

"I have some news for you."

"Okay…"

"They know about Jaylee."

"Who?"

"You know who," Burkhan snarled. "They've been tracking her."

"Why?"

"You know why! Don't play stupid with me."

I could sense Burkhan was in a foul mood. He was wearing his typical dark, ragged attire, carrying his nasty stick, and was utterly grotesque to every sense I had.

"You look unnerved," I said. "Is something bothering you?"

"Of course, something's bothering me, I'm here aren't I?"

He leaned against the edge of the lower bed, and took a long breath. "I'm

in danger.”

“Because you’re helping me?”

He nodded.

“How do they know?”

“He’s God, how do you think?”

“That monster is not God—”

“Well, let’s just say that his powers resemble God’s, and leave it there.”

I sat down, wondering how I could possibly help Burkhan. “I didn’t mean for you to get in trouble. Why are you helping me?”

Burkhan looked away and seemed to be studying the people who were still getting on the train. “I saw what you can do… as a lowly human no less. I think you’re worth saving. That’s all.”

“Why are they tracking Jaylee?”

“It’s not just Jaylee or you. They track everyone who has a significant role to play in the jailbreak they call sovereignty.”

“What do you mean?”

“The thing you will discover… that’s what they call it: Sovereignty. They know it will expose them. Their controls will no longer work. They’ll be seen for what they are, and they’ll no longer be able to instill fear in humans and control them. They see this event as the one thing worth avoiding.”

“Why can’t they accept it? That humanity must evolve and become aware of its deeper self?”

“Control… it’s that simple. They want control over the resources of this planet, and that includes the human resources. They want to keep this control for as long as possible, and so any event or person that jeopardizes this control will be seen as an enemy. They hold their enemies close. They hire beings like me to track them, observe them and report on them.

“There’re not too many like you, so it’s relatively easy for someone like me to track you.”

“How many… like me?”

“Only twenty-six at the moment.”

“There’re twenty-six Sonvertos—”

“There’re twenty-six incarnations on the planet in this time, whose destiny is to create the event known to our kind as Sovereignty. There’re many more who’re involved in a peripheral way, but those we don’t track. Too complicated.” He waved his scared fingers a bit.

“What happens… with these twenty-six?” I asked.

“Our best strategy has always been to herd them into madness and once there, they seek medical treatment, sometimes it’s even imposed on them. It doesn’t matter; we make sure they’re sedated. The drugs keep them in line. Some of them go on to live very productive lives… but the thought or inclination to save humanity… that withers, and when it does, we stop tracking them. Our job is done.”

“And what of Jaylee? Is she one of these twenty-six?”

“She is the…” He whispered so quietly, amid the background noise that I wasn’t sure what he said.

“What?”

Burkhan looked around defiantly and then leaned forward, whispering with a new intensity. “She is the one. She’s the one who makes the discovery. It’s her. All of my kind knows this. We’ve been tracking her before she was born —through her mother. It’s generational.”

“So you want to make us crazy, so we’ll stop trying to help humanity break out of the jail that your kind has put us in? Is that pretty much it?”

“That’s it.” He nodded a little too matter-of-factly for my sake.

“Fuck!”

Burkhan noticeably flinched at the rawness of my reaction.

“That’s crazy!” I said. “Who decided that humans should be prisoners?”

“I don’t know the philosophical reasons, nor do I care. I do know one thing: perform my job or suffer the consequences. In my case, the

consequences are uncertain, but I know they'll be painful and unrelenting. So I'm risking everything to tell you what I've just told you."

"Why?"

"I already explained. You're the first person I've tracked who was worth saving. It's as simple as that."

"You save me, you die. That doesn't sound like a good trade-off."

"Perhaps, but I have hopes."

"Like what?"

"Maybe you're right… there's another God, and that one will forgive me."

Before I could respond, Burkhan slowly dissolved into the gray light of the tiny cabin. I could almost feel his smile.

I looked at the place he had just been sitting. Was I crazy? Was I on the invariable road to antipsychotic drugs that would numb these feelings, still these voices, quash these visions, and return me to a withered normal? Was that my destiny?

I picked up my phone. "Derya."

"Hi, Sol." Her voice instantly calmed me, despite its distracted tone. "Can I call you back, I'm in the middle of something, and I need to finish it before I leave today… everything okay?"

"I just needed to hear your voice…"

"Are you okay, you sound worried?"

"I'm okay…"

"Where are you?"

"On a train, heading home."

"Your meetings go okay?"

"I'll tell you at home…. they were fine. Just fine."

"Did you get the referral?"

"Yes, I already called them for an appointment."

“Good. Thanks, Sol.”

She paused, and I found my thoughts oddly silent.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked.

“I love you,” I said in a reflex that I almost tried to stop.

“…Sol, I love you, too. We’ll get through all of this. Don’t worry too much, okay?”

“I’ll try.”

“Okay, I’ve got to run, Sol, when I get home you can tell me all about your day.”

“Okay.”

“Bye.”

“Bye…” I put the phone back in my pocket and stared out at the train station bathed in the dull, gray light of a rain-filled afternoon rapidly falling into darkness.

“Why did you tell me about Jaylee?” I asked out loud in a mere whisper. The train lurched slightly, and I felt it pulling away from the station as though it were a force propelled into nonexistence.

I imagined myself in some future time looking back at me, sitting here in this private cabin. Another self, peering through the inverted lens of time. Would my future self understand my choices? Would he see me with compassion? With repulsion? I wondered what choices I really had. Is there choice in destiny? Maybe I had made them so long ago that I no longer remembered them.

I hoped my future self would be compassionate.

Chapter 74: Will

We had a nice family dinner. I bought Chinese takeout at our favorite restaurant and had it all waiting when Derya and the kids came home. It was nice to sit down and have a relaxed conversation with them over dinner. I told them about my visit to the Longley's farm, but never mentioned Jaylee. Marisa showed me her photographs from the Black Sea and various parts of the Turkish countryside. Jon told me all about his adventures with his grandfather at the various museums in Ankara, which seemed to be the highlight of his trip.

After a dessert of fortune cookies, Derya reminded the kids it was time for them to do their homework, and they trudged off begrudgingly. Derya followed them, making sure they closed their doors and focused on their studies.

Chinese takeout was as efficient as it was good; it only took me a minute to clear the table of the after-effects of our feast. I poured wine for Derya and me, and waited for her return. As Derya come down the stairs, my heart began to quicken.

"I'm back," she announced, gliding into the kitchen.

I handed her a glass. "To a long and love-filled life. Cheers…"

She took a sip. "That's good wine."

"Cakebread 2005, Vintner's Reserve."

"The expensive stuff. I didn't know we had any."

"We didn't. I picked it up when I got the takeout."

"Nice. You seem to be feeling better than when you called me from the train."

"I am."

"It feels like we're celebrating something… are we?"

“I don’t know, maybe we should.”

“What’s going on, I can always sense when you’ve got something you want to tell me. What is it?”

“Doctor Kendall was all thumbs up on my stats. No more rejection issues. All my stats are in the normal range.”

“Great. That is worth celebrating.” She toasted her wine glass to mine and took a long sip. “What about the visions. Did he say anything about that?”

“No, not really. He gave me a referral to a Doctor Carson, and I called and left a message with his office that I wanted an appointment, but didn’t get a call back yet. I’ll call him again in the morning.”

“Okay… what about the attorney?”

I paused, wondering where to start. “This is hard to explain…”

“Just tell me the whole thing, from start to finish.” Derya’s eyes narrowed.

“Vanessa worked with the father of the attorney I met with today. His name’s Dan Archer.”

“Dan’s the son or the father?”

“The son.”

“And Vanessa worked for the father, at the law offices?”

“I don’t think so—more like a consultant of some kind.”

“Doing what?” Derya asked.

“He didn’t say, but I had the impression that she made Dan’s father money… lots of money. Anyway, Vanessa was given free legal services by the father who founded the law firm. He died six months ago.

“Because Vanessa had the free legal services she had them draw up all the paperwork for an adoption of Jaylee with me as her guardian.”

“But she didn’t even know who you were… she was going to leave her own child to anyone, as long as they had her heart. That’s crazy, isn’t it?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. The point is, is that Vanessa had this big Manhattan law firm behind her adoption plans, and her parents, according to Dan,

wouldn’t be able to fight it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, exactly. He just seemed very confident.”

Derya touched my arm and looked me in the eyes. “And you told him that we weren’t interested. Right?”

I quickly smiled and then frowned. “Look, I never got to that, exactly… I did tell him you were opposed—”

“But you’re not! Sol, that wasn’t our plan!”

“Hold on, just give me a minute to explain.”

Derya took another sip of wine.

“Vanessa was given a large amount of money when Dan’s father died—”

“How much?”

“I don’t know the exact amount, but well into the millions.”

“Wow…”

I took a deep breath. “Vanessa’s will set up an account with six million dollars in it… she willed it to me.”

I watched Derya’s face suddenly transform into shock. “What?”

I nodded with an uneasy smile. “Yup, it’s mine. I already signed for it. The money will transfer into my name in two or three days.”

Derya looked at me, eyes wide. “Six… million… dollars?” She pronounced each word with deliberation in the taut vice of her throat.

“Yes.”

“What’s the catch, Solomon? Do we have to raise her daughter? Does her daughter get the money after she’s eighteen or something?”

“No, there were no conditions. We don’t have to adopt Jaylee if we don’t want. The six million is ours no matter what.”

“Oh my God! Are you sure about this?”

“Dan’s sending me over a copy of the paperwork tomorrow morning. You

can see for yourself."

"Is this real? You're not hallucinating this? This isn't one of your visions?"

I took the leather folder that Dan had given me and opened it and pulled out some of the documents. Derya rifled through them with her fingers, glancing at certain passages, and then slowly a smile came over her face. "We can use this money however we want?"

"However we want. Dan was saying we can take our kids to the best schools. It's our choice how we spend the money."

"Oh my God…Doesn't it obligate us?"

"To adopt Jaylee?"

"Yes. Maybe this is how Vanessa planned to get us to adopt her."

"There're no conditions," I said, "but I want to adopt her anyway."

Derya looked at me like someone who just saw something suddenly disappear. "Why?"

"Because that's what Vanessa wanted."

"What about her parents? What about Jaylee's father? What do they want?"

"The Longley's want to keep Jaylee, but Dan said that they'll change their minds or lose the legal battle, I wasn't sure which. As for Jaylee's father, he was a drifter and hasn't surfaced in seven years. They don't even know how to contact him."

"She didn't have any sisters or brothers?"

I shook my head.

"Six million dollars… are you absolutely sure?"

"I'm as sure as I can be."

"It's a legitimate law firm?"

"Their offices are palatial. They do business law, but they have contacts in family law and hired the best to put this whole thing together. Derya, look, I know we have our own family, and adding Jaylee would be strange initially,

but I've met her, she's… she's amazing. If Vanessa wanted me to be her guardian, I need to carefully consider it."

"Why? She was an eccentric. May God's peace be upon her, that she gave you her heart and… and money, but that was her choice. It doesn't mean we're obligated to raise her only child. Right?"

"It doesn't mean we have to," I said quietly. "But I want to. I want to raise Jaylee."

"Wow… I'm really surprised to hear that. What's changed? You're a great father, don't get me wrong, but raising kids? You've always been invested in your work, not really the children."

"That's not fair."

"Okay, then what about my feelings in all of this?"

"I care a lot about your feelings. I want you to be part of this decision. I do, but you need to be open minded about it. Maybe meet her—"

"Jaylee?"

"Yes."

Derya pushed her chair back and stood up. "I don't think I can, Sol. I really don't want another child in our family, especially one that comes with all this baggage—"

"What do you mean, baggage? Jaylee is a seven-year-old innocent. What baggage does she bring into our family?"

Derya looked blank-faced. "Maybe I can't put it into words right now. I'm ecstatic about the money, that's… that's the best news I've heard in a very long time. But we're a family, if we take on this Jaylee, it'll change everything. What about the feelings of Jon and Marisa, don't they have a say in this, too?"

"To a certain extent, but the decision's not theirs. You make the assumption that they'll hate the idea. I'm not so sure, once they meet her."

"Now you want our kids to meet her, too?"

"She lost her mom. Her dad's missing. She's living on a farm in the middle

of nowhere with her grandparents. I think her grandparents are great people, but Vanessa still wanted her daughter to live with us… and it must've been for a reason. A good reason."

"Well, I for one would like to know the reason." Derya looked at me with her penetrating, Middle Eastern eyes. "Do you know, and you're not telling me?"

I shook my head, knowing a half-truth was about to leave my mouth. "I don't know for sure, but Vanessa felt like she knew me. She knew me somehow. Maybe she was a psychic or something like that, however she knew, I have to respect that."

"I still want to see the video," Derya said, sitting back down at the table. "Maybe… maybe I could feel more like you do about this whole thing if I could see Vanessa."

"You'd think she was crazy," I said.

"How do you know what I'd think?"

I looked down at my empty wine glass, knowing I had to show some compromise. "Okay, tomorrow I'll let you watch it."

"Why not now?"

"One step at a time."

"Are you going slow for my account, or yours?"

"Mine."

Derya sighed loudly. "I work tomorrow, so tomorrow night. Deal?"

"Deal."

Derya smiled at me and took my hand. "Six million dollars? I still can't believe it. What should we do with the money?"

"Let's wait a few weeks. There's no rush to do anything."

"I know, but we need to make sure it's safe… properly invested… all of that."

"We'll get to all of that. It's safe where it is."

That was the end of the conversation. We talked a little more about Dr. Carson and spent a few minutes looking at his website together at the kitchen table, a website that was essentially promoting his latest book called “Schizophrenia: A Strategy for Recovery.”

I felt an ease enter our relationship. Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was the six million dollars, maybe it was my bill of clean health from Dr. Kendall, but whatever the reason, I felt a sense of closeness with Derya.

It was good to be on the same side of the table with her.

Chapter 75: I Will

It’s true that I was nervous when Derya watched the video of Vanessa. I watched her body language from the corner of my eye. She was quiet the whole way through. She never said anything, never looked at me. In fact, she never took her eyes off the screen.

When it was over, she turned around to look at me. “”What are you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s crazy, you know that, right?”

“I don’t know that.”

“Mental illness is hereditary. Jaylee probably has the same illness. Even if she doesn’t, just being raised by her, would create enough problems.”

This was only the second time I had watched the video, and I was moved by it just as much as when I watched it the first time. Derya’s attack was not unexpected, but I was still caught off guard by the intensity of her accusations.

“What specifically did you find crazy?”

“All of it…”

“That doesn’t help.”

“She’s talking about your future—our future—like she had it all planned out. Doesn’t that make your skin crawl?”

“If she was the only one…”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot, you have a shaman in South Dakota that agrees. Sol, this is the twenty-first century. You’re a college professor. How can you take this so seriously?”

I didn’t know how to respond. I was totally tongue-tied. Part of me was in shock that Derya would attack the video in the manner she was. The whole

adoption issue had suddenly become fraught with more disagreement and heartache. Another part of me knew that Derya had only heard a small fraction of what I had experienced, so how could I possibly share it all with her? I was numb, I could see no path forward.

“When you meet Doctor Carson, bring this with you. I think he should see it.”

“Why?”

“Because it clearly has a hold on you. She’s… she’s… it’s like she’s hypnotizing you or something. Don’t you see that?”

I shook my head slowly.

“Sol, she’s not forecasting or hinting or suggesting this might happen… she’s telling you what you will do and when—”

“What exactly didn’t you like?”

“I didn’t like the fact that she’s telling you not to take your meds, and you didn’t—”

“And look what happened. My stats are near perfect.”

Derya ignored me. “I didn’t like the fact that she gave you a journal. What’s that about? Can I see it? Have you read it yet?”

“No, not all of it.”

“I have this feeling that she’s using you, Sol. Like she had some mission that she couldn’t complete, and now she wants you to be her surrogate or something. You definitely need to show this to Doctor Carson.”

“Why are you attacking it?” I asked. “You don’t see her kindness? Her ability to describe the subtle—”

“I don’t have a problem with her. She’s great. She seems like a wonderful person, but she’s clearly not well. She’s obsessed. She’s stuck in her small world, a single mom, dying of cancer, I don’t envy her one bit, but I don’t like her reaching out to you in this way. She’s obligating you to something, and she’s doing it by telling you lies—”

“What lies?”

“That you’re going to discover something that will change the universe… Sol, come on, you know that sounds crazy.”

I started to respond, and she raised her hand. “Don’t even bring up the shaman or your old shrink. I don’t consider them experts in this.”

She took a long breath and leaned deeper into the couch. “Talk with Doctor Carson, show him the video, and then I’d like to have a consultation with him, too.”

“You want to talk with him?”

“I want to be part of this. I want to hear a professional’s opinion. Maybe I’m overreacting, or I’m missing something, but I’d like to hear someone tell me what’s going on here.”

She stood up with a nervous energy. “You’re meeting him tomorrow at eleven?”

“Yes.”

“Take this video with you, and make sure you ask him about it. Will you do that, Sol?”

I paused.

“Sol?”

The numbness was back. Everything seemed to be shutting down. There was only one path: agree.

“I will.”

Chapter 76: Pound of Flesh

The office was small, and seemed a little chilly when I arrived. I could smell coffee in the air, but I made a mental note to keep my jacket on. I always felt colder when I was nervous, and for some reason, I was nervous as I came in the office.

There was an older woman in the waiting room when I arrived. She was reading a magazine and took a quick, timid glance at me.

“Can I help you?” a young woman asked from behind the receptionist’s desk, tucked around the corner from the entrance.

“Yes, I have an eleven o’clock appointment with Doctor Carson. My name is Solomon Tonum.”

“Okay, Mr. Tonum. Can I see your mobile, please?”

I handed her my phone, and she scanned it. “Your turn.”

She looked away while I put in my password. “Done.”

“Thank you. You can sit down. He should be out in a minute or two. Would you like some coffee?”

“No, I’m fine. Thanks, though.”

A few minutes later the door opened and a teenage boy, and behind him, an older man, entered the reception area. I recognized the man as Dr. Carson. The boy looked like he had been crying, but was trying to compose himself.

Dr. Carson went over to the receptionist’s desk. “Linda, please set up another appointment for Corry on Friday next week. Same time work for you?” He turned to the mother who had been waiting, but had now stood up and was gathering her jacket and purse.

“Yeah, that’ll do.”

“Good.” Dr. Carson looked into the boy’s eyes. “Sometimes it seems worse than it is. This is one of those times. Okay?”

He shook the boy’s hand and turned around and went back into his office, closing the door.

I had kept my head down as I didn’t want to be a voyeur to the boy’s exit. He seemed distraught. However, when I heard the door close shut, I thought it was odd that Dr. Carson hadn’t come over and introduced himself.

The room became eerily quiet as the mother and her son left the office. I looked around. An aquarium of saltwater fish stood near the back corner of the waiting room. I watched the colorful fish darting in and around large, hollow rock structures that filled the back of the tank.

Suddenly the door opened, and Dr. Carson caught my eye. “Mr. Tonum, why don’t you come in now.”

As I came closer he extended his hand. “I’m Doctor Carson, it’s very nice to meet you.”

“Thanks. You, too.” I stumbled a bit with my opening line. His office was well appointed, but not too pretentious. There was the requisite couch and several overstuffed chairs around a coffee table. A wall of books and framed plaques of his educational career, in a not-so-subtle way, were the proof of his credentials.

“So Mr. Tonum, how would you like me to address you?”

“Solomon is fine, and you?”

“I actually prefer Doctor Carson, if you don’t mind. I know it sounds a bit formal, and for that I apologize, but it just suits me better than my first name, Gerald.”

I agreed with him.

“Have a seat over there, and we can get started. I did read your file that Doctor Kendall sent, and I have a few questions, and they might be a good place to start. Are you game?”

“Sure, that sounds good.”

“You had transplant surgery seven weeks ago, a woman’s heart, I understand. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“You had some initial rejection issues and those caused at least one near-death experience. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“During your near-death experience did you have any… visions or peculiar experiences?”

“Yes, they were—”

He held up his hand. “Not just yet, Solomon. I only want to get a feel for your situation. Now, you had amnesia for nearly six weeks. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“Total amnesia?”

I nodded for the sake of variety, but because he was taking notes and had his head down at the time, I decided to speak. “Yes. That’s correct.”

“And you have no history of mental illness either in your personal circumstance or extended family. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve disclosed to both your wife and Doctor Kendall that you’re seeing strange visions as recently as a few days ago. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“And that these visions appear real in every way?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Solomon. I appreciate your patience as I try to understand the broad outlines of your case. Now, can we start with your questions?”

I looked at him quizzically.

“You do have questions, don’t you?”

“Not really.”

Dr. Carson smiled. He was about sixty years old, gray hair and beard. He wore a brown cardigan sweater with a white deer motif over a white shirt, and a pair of black, well-creased slacks. He was relatively trim, about six feet tall, and wore gold tortoiseshell reading glasses.

He wrote some notes on his tablet, and then looked up at me, removed his reading glasses and tucked them in his shirt pocket.

“Perhaps you can start by telling me why you feel you are here?”

He touched his tablet and set it on the coffee table in front of us. “I trust you won’t mind if I record our sessions. I like to take notes only to understand the framework issues of your case. But when it comes to the actual work, I prefer to record it, so I don’t have to be slowed down by my clumsy writing skills. Okay?”

“Sure, that’s fine.”

“So, go ahead, and tell me why you’re here.”

I ran my hand through my hair and took a long drawn in breath. “Since my surgery I’ve been seeing things on a fairly regular basis.”

“Define regular.”

“Every couple of days, but some days I’d have these visions two, even three times in one day.”

“Were these visions real in the sense that you were fully awake when they occurred?”

“I wasn’t always awake… no, sometimes I would pass out… drift off into another reality.”

“And when you drifted off into these other realities, were you cognizant of this reality?” He pointed to the ground.

“Sometimes.”

“Solomon, you said that you weren’t always awake, that infers that sometimes you were awake when you had a vision. I’d like you to pick one of those instances and tell me exactly what happened.”

I was suddenly nervous. “If I told you one of these visions out of context, it wouldn’t make any sense.”

“That’s okay. I really don’t mind if they don’t make sense. I’m actually looking for other information. I’m not so interested in storytelling at this point. Okay?”

I nodded. “Well, one time I was out in my backyard resting on a lawn chair, and this female entity sat down next to me. Her name is Nammu. She’s a very alluring woman, but not pleasant in any way other than looks. She has one objective: to threaten me so I remain a normal human.”

“And why is that, Solomon, why does she want you to be a normal human?”

“Because she believes I will make an important discovery in approximately forty years that will enable humanity to see its soul.”

“And she doesn’t want humanity to see its soul?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because she and her kind will lose control of humanity…” I stopped mid-sentence. I recognized, perhaps too late, just how crazy my explanation was sounding. If I had heard anyone tell me this story a few months earlier I would have declared them certifiably crazy on the spot.

“Go on,” Dr. Carson encouraged.

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“It sounds crazy. I think you need the full story to get the context, and that’ll take a long time.”

“Do you think you’re suffering from delusions, Solomon? Is that your diagnosis?”

“Look, I’m a professor of media technology. I had a heart transplant, because I was a dead man without one. Somehow, by some divine providence, I got a heart, not just an average heart, I got a heart from a woman who was, in my humble opinion, the closest thing to a saint there is on this planet. Once her heart got in my body, things started to happen. Now, some of these things could be seen as crazy, I admit that. But am I crazy, just because I see things and hear things that others don’t? I don’t think so.”

Dr. Carson remained quiet for a while. I noticed for the first time that he had a grandfather clock in a corner of his office half-hidden by his bookcase.

The ticking of time announced itself in the silent and rather lengthy pause that hung in the room.

“Doctor Kendall noted that you had met your donor’s parents. How did that go?”

He looked at me calmly and self-assured. He seemed genuinely interested in hearing about my experience with the Longley’s, but there was something inside me that shouted not to tell him. “Fine.”

“Nice people?”

“Very nice.”

I knew that Derya would be upset if I didn’t show the video to Dr. Carson, so I pulled out my phone. “My wife asked me to show you this video. I know it’s kind of a weird request, but it’ll be the first thing she asks me… did you show him the video.”

“Now?”

“Well, if you want, it’s only about ten minutes long.”

“What is it?”

“It’s from my donor.”

“You knew your donor?”

“No, her attorney sent it to me after her death. I first saw it a few weeks after my operation.”

“Why does your wife insist that I watch it?”

“I think she wants your opinion on its influence over me.”

“What influence does it have over you?”

“I don’t know. From my perspective not much, but my wife thinks otherwise.”

I reached over to him with my phone in my hand. At first he was slightly uncomfortable with the idea, but after it started he became slowly curious, then, after the first minute or two, his body language became more animated and his eyes intense. About the halfway mark he was taking a few notes, and

I had the feeling that he had forgotten that I was in the room.

I listened to Vanessa's voice on the tiny phone speaker, but couldn't see her. Her words remained soulful and poignant. How could anyone hear these words and think she was crazy? Had I lost all objectivity?

When the video ended, Dr. Carson wiped his eyes with his hand. "This is one of the most powerful films I have ever seen. She's not an actor, you're sure of that?"

"No, that's Vanessa, my donor."

"You know that for sure?"

"Yes… I met her parents and saw her photographs. That's her."

"I'm sorry to have asked this, but the world can play hoaxes on us, and I've been privy to some of them." He took a deep breath.

Dr. Carson leaned towards me, returning my phone and then sat back in his chair. "How did you feel when you first saw it?"

"I was shocked," I replied.

"In a good way?"

"I think so."

"Your donor… Vanessa, is it?"

"Yes."

"She's special—there's no doubt of it. What did your wife find so concerning about the video?"

I was relieved to see his reaction. He seemed to be genuinely touched by the video and almost sympathetic to my position. "It's a very complicated situation, and again, context is everything."

"Okay, why don't you tell me the context then?"

"Vanessa has a child, Jaylee. She's seven years old, and lives with her grandparents on a farm in upstate New York. Vanessa wants me to adopt Jaylee. Vanessa also left me a large sum of money, which I just found out about a few days ago. It's this adoption that is complicated and one that my

wife is less than excited to assume."

"You said that Vanessa had left you money…"

"Yes."

"Was this money contingent on your adoption of Jaylee?"

"No."

"But your wife feels this pressure?"

"I suppose so."

"Have you met Jaylee?"

"Yes."

"And your wife?"

"No."

He jotted down a note. The room fell silent again and the ticking sound intruded. I felt suddenly lightheaded and saw a pinprick of brilliant light to my side and turned to see Nammu lying on the couch like Queen Nefertiti in an elaborate gown of gold, turquoise and rich browns with accents of magenta.

"I like this one much better." She pointed to Dr. Carson as he was writing his note.

"What do you want?" I demanded, leering at Nammu.

"As they say in your world, my pound of flesh." She laughed with her full wickedness in tow.

"Do you see someone?" Dr. Carson asked with sudden intensity.

I pointed to the couch. "You can't see her?"

"Of course, he can't see me," Nammu announced. "What's the fun of that?"

"Solomon, describe what you see." His voice was authoritative.

"The female entity I told you—"

"—That's how you refer to me, a female entity! I thought we were lovers!"

She laughed again like someone amused at the torture of their worst enemy.

“Shut up!” I yelled.

“Solomon, tell me what you see. Concentrate! Listen to my voice.”

“Nammu, lying on your couch… right there!”

“She’s the one who was trying to convince you to be normal?” he asked, excitement rising in his voice.

“He’s precious…” Nammu chortled. She stood up and walked right up to Dr. Carson. I could see through her body ever so slightly. Dr. Carson was looking at me, sitting on the edge of his chair.

Nammu began to run her hand through his hair. “Jealous?”

“Shut up!” I said again.

“You really should try to expand your vocabulary, my dear.”

“Leave! Now!”

“Describe what you see, Solomon.”

“The video of Vanessa was a nice touch,” Nammu said, her face glaring over her shoulder. “You almost had him. Now you can enjoy life in the land of lithium. Goodbye, Solomon.”

In a split second Nammu disappeared. I realized my mouth was ajar, and I was drooling. I was on my feet, my arms were shaking. I have no idea how it happened— why I had been so angry. I should have ignored her. I should have simply ignored her. It was too late.

I slowly regained my wits and sat back down, and wiped my jacket sleeve across my mouth.

“What just happened?” I managed to say.

“It’s okay, Solomon. You’re okay. Everything is fine, so just relax. What are you feeling right now?”

“Shame.” My voice cracked beneath a veiled whisper.

“It’s okay. There’s no shame in any of this. You’re just under a lot of stress. Stress can do strange things. We’ll deal with it. I think that’s enough

work today, Solomon. I'm going to prescribe some medication that will help you control these hallucinations, so you don't have to deal with the likes of Nammu. Okay? I'll be right back."

I nodded, half listening, half in my own world of despair. I felt Nammu whispering the gilded word: checkmate. Hadn't Burkhan warned me? I didn't listen. I didn't act right. I blew it. I should never have reacted like that!

Was I going crazy? Was I a schizophrenic—a delusional misfit that was a parasite on society? Oh God, I suddenly wanted to die. What was happening? I began to cry. It was the only thing that felt remotely natural that was in my power to do.

In between my suppressed sobs, I heard Dr. Carson talking in a muffled voice to someone who was in the next room. He was whispering his prescriptions to the pharmacy. The elixirs of normalcy were being secured in plastic vials, labeled with warnings that extended onto the web. I could almost hear the brittle sound of the pills pouring from the funnel into the container below like an hourglass, filling the over-worn mountains of hope.

My despair was complete.

Chapter 77: 911

Describing my experience at Dr. Carson's office was impossible. When Derya had asked, I said as little as I could. She was only too happy to hear that I was going to get help from the new meds that would eliminate the delusions and hallucinations. These were the new words that had become a part of my family. I hated them. I hated them more than any words I could think of. If you've ever been accused of madness, I guarantee it, those will make your top three list.

The third word? Schizophrenia. I hate that one, too.

I had six million dollars in a bank account, and I had chaos in my life. It was such a contradiction. A terrible abyss. I wanted to run in fields of tall grass and shout with joy, running with my children and Derya to a golden beach just on the other side of a hill, but I was being labeled with words that weigh down the largest ships and grind them into the oceans' depths.

Sometimes, ironically, when people get their fortune they talk about how their ship has finally come home, but I could see my ship sinking in slow motion to the uncharted depths of some foreign sea, where no one would dare salvage or even write a poem about it. I was, in a word, gone.

In this state, I don't know where gone was. I was still walking around talking with people; I was still awake and still sleeping. I was still eating, and sometimes, I even heard laughter shudder in my chest, but life wasn't the same. There was hollowness; a sense of loss. It was an exquisite, torturous derailment of a life that had been so hopeful, that in its loss, hope itself was exchanged for an intolerable, unwincing universe.

I became very good at keeping everything that rubbed against the words on my list behind me, invisible and mostly silent. On a few occasions they would surface like sparks before the ignition, but sparks are okay. They die before you can name them. They thrust their heads out, call out their words of madness, and recede before the words are understood.

The prescription was an antipsychotic polypharmacy that ensured my

slavery to the soap of morals that would enable me to see enough of the world, my family, and friends and even make me believe that I was a part of their world. But I never believed this. Never. I was afraid to. I felt the world I was from was the world I was to be delivered to. The world in between, I didn't belong there.

I had gone to several sessions with Dr. Carson. The last one was with Derya just as she had requested. The whole notion of adopting Jaylee had somehow been altered into the future, with the powerful word: contingency. Everything became contingent on my recovery from madness. My name was temporarily taken from the bank accounts. My work was on long-term medical leave. My family was cautiously waiting once again for signs that I was sane, grounded, normal, balanced, healthy, competent and responsible. (These words, by the way, round out my top ten most hated words.)

I know, only a crazy man could have a list of words like that.

The only thing that held meaning in my life were memories. Kind of ironic isn't it? Me and memories were like oil and water. Not anymore, memories were where I lived. I would spend entire days remembering a vision of the island and picturing Zenith. I would imagine Trisiel in her full Technicolor glory, and remember her words. Sometimes I would even invent new words, but those I couldn't remember as well.

My children were my sanctuary. If not for them, I'm not sure how survival would have been possible. They understood me as well as anyone, even though I sensed their fear of my condition. They'd heard the words. The three words roamed our house like small, wild horses. The words carry the power to frame another person in a way that makes them dangerous, even when they are not. I suppose that I was a danger to some, but those lived elsewhere, and never visited me anymore.

Nammu was gone. The god-monster, too. Even Burkhan. Sometimes I would pray to Dou Xing and hope that he heard me. Sometimes I would pray to my creator and say things that were not always kind or even relevant, but I wanted my creator to know that my freewill was not being honored. Or so it seemed. But my prayers were few, and they lit nothing permanent that I could feel or touch or hold.

I needed a torch, a bonfire that I could wield and throw into the darkness that surrounded me. I could just keep picking it up and throwing it again; hoping it would never fall into water or an abyss, hoping its light would lead me into a new clarity.

I had learned the languages of Babel in this gone state. They were simple: learn to hide yourself. Learn to be what others want you to be. Give only what you desire to receive. Leave the subject of truth to others. Where God is concerned, feign obedience. Live in action for others to admire. Never live from the soul unless you are a saint. I knew these. They were written on every storefront in the village of madness.

I came down with the kids to have lunch and Derya was busy preparing sandwiches and drinks. It was either Saturday or Sunday, since the kids were home, I really didn't pay attention to days of the week. One day was pretty much the same as the next. The phone rang and Derya rushed out of the kitchen after she hurriedly placed the plates on the table and told us to eat.

I looked at my sandwich, studying it like an object of archeological importance.

Jon watched. "What's so interesting, Dad?"

"Do you see the image?"

Jon got up from his chair and looked. "You mean that?"

"That."

"Looks like a face."

"It is a face."

"Whose?" Marisa asked.

"I think it looks like Jon," I said.

"You're going to eat me?" he said, laughing.

I shook my head. "I can't. You should eat this sandwich, not me."

"I'll switch you," Jon offered, sliding his plate over and exchanging sandwiches like a magician.

"Okay, yours doesn't have any faces."

We ate our sandwiches and laughed as Jon ate his face on the sandwich. By the end of lunch Jon was perspiring and seemed to be dizzy. He looked at me at one point, his eyes beginning to roll back in his head slightly. “Dad, I don’t feel good.”

“Derya!” I shouted at the top of lungs. Marisa put her hands over her ears and winced. “Derya!”

Jon slumped in his chair, and slowly uncoiled like a puppet let go by its puppeteer. He slowly sunk to the floor and lay there like a crumpled doll. Marisa screamed. I was in a panic, uncertain of what to do.

Derya rushed in, looking at me with wide eyes. “What happened? What’s wrong?”

“Jon.” I pointed to his small body lying on the floor in an odd position.

“Phone—kitchen… 9-1-1,” Derya said half-shouting.

“Emergency Center, how can I help you?”

“I need an ambulance at 422 Lanebrook Road, my son is unconscious.”

“I’m dispatching the EMT, please hold.”

I listened as if I were in a movie. Derya was down on the floor cradling Jon, who was unresponsive. I wanted to understand what had happened, but the flurry of activity seemed too much for my senses, so I slowly backed away, still watching. Derya didn’t even seem to notice me. Her commands were all focused on Marisa and the 911 operator.

In what seemed like two minutes, the sound of an ambulance filled our neighborhood and in seconds EMTs were swarming our kitchen. I was terrified.

Derya looked at me as they took Jon out on a stretcher. Her eyes were like wolves’. “Did Jon eat your sandwich?”

I didn’t understand. Why would she ask me something like that? I think I shook my head. I was afraid.

“They switched,” Marisa said.

“Stay with your dad,” Derya ordered, and ran out of the kitchen following

the EMTs.

I chewed my nails, a recent habit of mine, and watched from the kitchen as the ambulance, with Derya in the back, rushed off with its lights blaring and the odious sound of sirens that gradually diminished into silence.

Marisa came over and hugged me. I was still looking out the window. “What happened?” I asked. “What… did Jon do?”

“He’s just sick, dad. He’ll be okay.”

“Can we go see him?”

“Not now. Later. Okay? Why don’t we go watch some television? Mom will call soon and update us.”

“Are you sure?”

“Come on, Dad. Let’s go. We can watch a movie if you want.”

Marisa pulled me gently in the direction of the family room and helped me sit down in my favorite chair. As the screen lit up my eyes closed at the brightness. I began to wonder what had happened. How to piece the mystery together? I had this nagging sense that I was responsible for Jon’s illness. Somehow I had caused it.

I was suddenly so tired. My eyelids, like heavy doors, finally closed.

Chapter 78: Meatloaf

When I woke, it was dark in the family room. The media center was turned off. One small light from a screensaver flicked a few photons into the room—enough for me to see the dial on my wristwatch. It was six.

I heard Derya's voice. I struggled to stand as the blood rushed to my feet, and shuffled my way towards the kitchen.

Derya's voice was hushed, but I could make out most of what she said. I leaned against a bookcase and listened.

"...he's from Child Protection Services.

"No, can you believe it?"

"I feel responsible enough…

"No, he doesn't know. He's sleeping.

"Just enough to pack an overnight bag.

"Marisa.

"I don't have any choice; none of our friends can watch him.

"Just for the night.

"Mom, I gotta run.

"I love you, too.

"I will.

"You, too.

"Bye."

The light in the kitchen was overwhelmingly bright as I entered.

"Where's Jon?"

Derya looked startled. "He's at the hospital, Sol. You don't remember?"

"Is he okay?"

“He had some food poisoning, that’s all. I came home to pack an overnight bag… I’m going to stay with him in his room tonight. The doctors wanted to keep him overnight just as a precaution. He’s a little scared there by himself.”

“Do you want me to come, too?”

“No… why don’t you stay with Marisa and take care of her. Tomorrow’s Sunday, and Jon’s expected to be released in the morning, probably around eleven. We’ll just come home then, and we’ll all spend a nice relaxed afternoon… maybe watch some football and make a fire. Sound good?”

I nodded, my eyes still adjusting to the light.

“Food poisoning?” I said.

“Uh uh.”

“Why didn’t we get it—Marisa or me?”

“You both had turkey from a different package,” Derya said, looking at the desktop on her phone.

“Oh, and I thawed out some of your favorite meatloaf, it’s in the refrigerator. Marisa is having soup—she’s trying to watch her figure. I already talked to her, but you were sleeping, so I let you sleep. Anyway, when you’re hungry… eat. Call me if you need anything, and take good care of Marisa.” She grabbed a bag from the kitchen table, and kissed me on the cheek. “I’m off.”

“Bye…” I said. “Tell Jon I love him, okay?”

“I’ll call you when I get to the hospital, you can tell him yourself.”

I nodded and managed to find a smile.

“Marisa’s upstairs in her room. Don’t forget to check on her. Bye, bye.”

“Bye,” I said quietly.

A moment later I heard the electric garage door open, and then Derya’s car start up. A few seconds later the garage door closed again and silence returned to the house. I didn’t know what to do with myself, so I went upstairs to see Marisa.

She was on her phone when I looked in.

“…yeah, can I call you back?

“Thanks… bye.”

She looked up at me with her dark brown eyes. “Hey dad, what’s up?”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Did you talk with Mom?”

“She just left for the hospital…”

“I know. Are you hungry?”

“A little…”

“Then let’s eat. I’m starved.”

“Okay.”

We went downstairs to the kitchen and began getting our food prepped. I took care of the drinks, and Marisa warmed up the food in the microwave.

I had just sat down, and suddenly I felt something poke at me, right below the ribs. I looked, but there was nothing there. A moment later I felt it again and looked down immediately, and again, saw nothing. Then I felt something tugging on my pants. This time I looked under the table and saw Burkhan with his stick. He had his finger to his lips. I looked at him—he was almost transparent. He shook his head from side to side as soon as I started to say something, pointing in Marisa’s direction.

Marisa was pulling the meals out of the microwave.

“I think I hear your phone ringing,” I said, “I’ll get the food on the table… if you want.”

“It’s okay, they can leave a message.”

“What if it’s Jon or your mom calling?”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right… hang on, I’ll check if it’s them.”

As soon as she left I bent down and looked under the table. My heart was beating fast.

“Don’t eat the food,” Burkhan whispered.

“Why?”

“It’s doped with drugs.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re being medicated, you knew that, right?”

“I take one pill at night and one in the morning before—”

“Those are sugar pills,” Burkhan interrupted. “They want you to feel like you have control over your meds. They’re monitoring you to see if you’re actually self- medicating. The real stuff, they’re putting that in your food.”

“Who are they?”

“Your doctor and your wife.”

I could hear Marisa running down the stairs.

“I… I don’t believe you.”

“It’s your decision. I’m just trying to help… It was very hard to find you… probably no one but me… could do it… ”

With each word he faded further into invisibility. I was still looking under the table when Marisa came in.

“What’re you looking for, dad?”

The phone rang.

“It’s Mom,” Marisa announced as she leaned back in her chair to see the caller ID.

“Phone, kitchen… Hi, Mom.”

“It’s me, Jon.”

“… Uh… I thought I dropped something.”

“I see you didn’t get our dinner on the table either.”

“I thought I dropped something.”

“It’s okay. My phone, by the way, wasn’t ringing. I doubt mom would be there yet.”

She sat down in her chair. “Did you find it?”

I stood slowly to my feet. “What?”

“What you were looking for?”

“No, I don’t think so…”

It suddenly hit me that Burkhan was telling me the truth. Jon was in the hospital because of it. We switched plates. He ate my medicated food and got sick. I was being deceived by my own wife and doctor, and my son paid the price.

I looked down at my plate. My favorite meal, meatloaf, was staring up at me, steam rising, the vapors of culinary perfection wafting to my nose. My mouth was salivating, and yet I looked at it and crinkled my face, pushing the plate away.

“What’s wrong, you’re not hungry?” Marisa asked.

“I think I’ll eat a little later.”

“I’d offer you some of my soup, but there’s not enough to share. Sorry.”

“No, I’m fine. I’ll eat later.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, hey, Jon. Turn on your video. We want to see you all hooked up with tubes and everything.”

“Very funny. Is dad there?”

“Yup, we’re sitting here in the kitchen. Come on, turn on your video.”

“Hi, Dad.”

“Hi, Jon. How are you?”

“I’m okay. Doing better I guess.”

“I miss you,” I said. “Your Mom said you’d be coming home tomorrow.”

“I think so.”

“Good. We’ll play some games when you get here. Okay?”

“Great.”

“Maybe watch some football… so get better real soon. Okay?”

“No probs.”

“Derya?”

“Yes, Sol.”

“Thanks for the meatloaf.”

“You’re welcome,” she replied, a little quieter.

“I’ll try.”

“Is Mom there with you?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. She’s staying with your overnight?”

“I guess, but I wasn’t scared or anything.”

“I’ve practically lived in those places,” I said. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. It’s like being at a hotel.”

“Except you got tubes up your nose,” Marisa added.

“Shut up,” Jon said.

“Put the video on, and I’ll shut up.”

“Kids…” It was Derya in the background.

“Did you guys decide to eat, yet?” Derya asked.

“I did,” Marisa answered, “Dad wasn’t hungry yet.”

“It’s meatloaf, what does he need to be hungry for?” Derya asked with a sarcastic tone. “You feeling okay, honey?”

“I’m fine, just not hungry yet. I’ll eat in a little bit.”

“Okay, well that’s it from here. Anything else, on your end?”

“Jon, I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Just that you got sick. I’m sorry. That sandwich should have been mine. I should’ve gotten the food poisoning.”

“It’s okay, Dad.”

“You forgive me?”

“It’s not your fault, Dad, but sure, I forgive you.”

“Okay, thanks. I love you. Have a goodnight’s sleep, Jon.”

“You, too, Dad.”

“What about me?” Marisa chimed in.

“Just get to bed before one, okay.” Derya’s voice was more distant, but still clear.

Chapter 79: Bury It

I searched for two hours before I found them. At first I thought they were cough syrups, but it didn't make sense why they'd be hidden so carefully in a high kitchen cabinet. Then I saw my name. The dark, amber-colored glass bottles had metric measurements running vertically, and were electronically coded with sophisticated anti-tampering lids. I couldn't have opened them if I had wanted, short of breaking the bottles, but the glass looked thick, probably a synthetic that was essentially unbreakable.

One bottle was called Lithium Carbonate and the other Olanzapine Oral Dosage, names deserving of the periodic table. The lids had dosage containers built into them in 5mg increments. My dosage, according to the prescription that circled the bottles, was to work my way up to 20 mgs/day over one week, starting at 10mgs/day. The date on the prescription was six days old, which meant I was taking nearly 40mgs/day between the two drugs.

It was liquid. It meant Derya was probably dosing me through the orange juice and food. I knew the orange juice had a strange aftertaste, now I knew why.

I was overwhelmed at being deceived by my best friend. The one person, who cared for me the most, was also the one who was sending pharmaceuticals into my bloodstream deceptively, hoping the chemical compounds would eradicate my odd visions and naïve delusions. My soul was being exchanged for my family's peace of mind—specifically, Derya's. And yet, she was the one spending a night in a hospital room caring for our son whom she poisoned. Unintentional as it was, it would never have happened had she simply told me to take the medicine.

Would I have taken it? I doubt it. I didn't take the other medicine for my heart. I suppose she and the good doctor decided it was unlikely I would take this new concoction. Was I taking the sugar pills? I think so, but maybe I did skip a few times. I didn't remember.

There was only one thing I could think to do. I found my phone. "Doctor

Chayton.”

It was a Saturday and fairly late in the evening, almost nine. The phone rang five times. “I was wondering when you would call. How are you, Solomon?”

“Not good.”

“In what way?” Kohana asked, his voice suddenly shifting to concern.

“My… ah… my visions didn’t go over too well with Derya. It’s complicated… that pretty much sums it up.”

“Doctor Kendall told me you were seeing a new shrink. I figured that was related. So what exactly is wrong?”

“Derya is feeding me a cocktail of antipsychotics without my permission or knowing… until a few minutes ago. I… I’m being drugged into normalcy.”

“You have proof of that?”

“Yes.”

“Your doctor is complicit in this?”

“I don’t know that for sure, but I think so.”

“Shit… okay, look, I can meet you in twenty minutes. We can talk it through and build a plan—”

“There’s more, my son, Jon, is in the hospital. He ate some of my food for lunch and ended up collapsed on the kitchen floor… EMTs took him away —”

“Is he okay?”

“He’s okay…”

“Thank God. Where are you right now?”

“Home.”

“And Derya?”

“She’s at the hospital with Jon.”

“What about your daughter?”

“She’s here with me, upstairs in her room.”

“Do you want my advice?”

“I need something, advice, hope, plan, whatever you want to call it. Right now… I feel hopeless.”

“Hang in there, man. It’ll be okay. Grab the drugs and throw them out, bury them, whatever you have to do, make sure they’re gone—”

“And what will I do when Derya—”

“Don’t worry about that now, just make sure the drugs are gone. Then, are you listening, Solomon?”

“Yes.”

“You heard me. Meditate. Read the journal Vanessa gave you. Read some Dou Xing. Whatever you feel will clear your mind and heart of any of the heaviness of your situation. Once you get to that place, then go deeper. Imagine what you would have done in Derya’s position. Bring it all to empathy.”

“Okay…”

“Do you understand this, Solomon? Are you clear enough to understand what I’m saying?”

“I think so.”

“Do that. Then call me back.”

“Tonight?”

“Hey, it’s Saturday night, I’ll be up for another three or four hours. If you follow my instructions, it won’t take that long.”

“Okay, and Kohana…”

“Yes.”

“I need to hear you say it.”

“What?”

“That I’m not crazy.”

There was a slight pause. I heard him take in a deep breath. “Solomon Tonum, you are not crazy, but I can understand why people close to you might think you are. Now get to work.”

“Meditate.”

“Huh?”

“Thanks.”

“Bye, Solomon.”

“Bye.”

I tucked my phone in my pants pocket and grabbed the two bottles. They were each about three quarters full, and were surprisingly heavy. I found a plastic bag and set them inside, and then went out to the garage and grabbed a shovel. I went to the exact spot where the tree had withered to bury the bag in the same hole that had formed when they pulled the tree out. It felt like a form of poetic justice.

As I was digging I stopped for a moment to rest, as the ground was hard, and noticed Marisa looking out her bedroom window talking to someone on her phone. She was looking at me, and as soon as I saw her, she backed away from the window.

Who was she talking with? I must look even crazier now, but my will to bury the bag was undiminished. Just as I put it in the ground and started to cover it with cold dirt, my phone rang.

It was Derya.

Chapter 80: Bottles

Ironically, when I pulled the phone out of my pocket, the time was 9:11 P.M.. I caught my breath, letting the ringtone bring me to my full senses. Suddenly, I wished I had put on a jacket when I had left the house.

“Hi Derya.”

“Why are you outside digging in the backyard?” Her voice was hard.

My head felt clearer, but I suddenly felt my throat turn dry. “I’m burying something.”

“What?”

“Two bottles.”

There was a long pause.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“At the hospital.”

“Are you with Jon?”

“I was… right now I’m walking to the waiting room… hopefully, it’s empty. Solomon, what’s going on?”

“I just told you, I’m burying bottles in the backyard.”

“Why?”

“Don’t you really want to know what?”

“Okay, Sol, what bottles?”

“They’re antipsychotics. The ones you’ve been drugging me with behind my back. The one’s that poisoned Jon and sent him to the hospital. Those bottles… how could you do that?”

A loud exhale filled my phone speaker. “Solomon, I’m drained. I didn’t know what else to do. I spoke with Doctor Carson, and he suggested trying this approach first and see how you’d take to it. We didn’t think you’d agree

to take them."

I heard her voice soften, and I knew she was in tears.

"It's okay," I said, softly. "It's okay."

"No, it's not okay. Jon's in the hospital, because of me. Child Protection Services have already talked to the doctors and me. They're concerned about Jon's safety— Marisa's, too."

"What do you mean?"

"They want to meet with us before Jon can come home…"

"Because they think we're poisoning our children? It was an accident!"

"They understand that," Derya said. "It's just the way they work. The doctor said it's their protocol. The hospital has to report any incidence of poisoning involving a child to CPS, and they have to investigate it."

She paused for a moment. "Solomon, if you refuse to take your medication, I'm afraid that CPS might take our children away."

My knees buckled. I sat down, involuntarily. "Please don't say that."

"Before you bury those bottles, consider the consequences. That's all I'm saying."

"Do you love me?" I asked.

"I love you. I know you won't believe me, but I did this out of love."

"How is deception an act of love?"

"Oh, Sol, love can be anything. It's the one thing that can be anything…"

I knew she was crying as softly as she could, but I heard it anyway. "Derya, I can forgive this deception, but I can't continue taking these drugs. It isn't right. I'm not crazy."

"Your own doctor's conclusion is that you have symptoms of schizophrenia, and you know he's an expert."

"Experts have been wrong before."

"Well, if this expert is asked by the CPS to render an opinion, whose opinion do you think they'll believe—yours or Doctor Carson's?"

“I don’t want to see Doctor Carson again. I’ll continue to see a shrink, but only Doctor Chayton. I’ll need you to meet him, and you can talk with him about my condition. He sees it differently.”

“How does that help us with CPS?”

“He’ll vouch for me. He’ll tell them I’m not crazy, and that the antipsychotics aren’t necessary.”

“Sol, let me ask you something… In the past week or so, have you seen anything you’d call a vision? Have you heard any voices? Have you had any delusions that you were going to save the world?”

“I was never deluded that I would save the world. That’s a lie!”

“Okay, okay, but answer my question. Have you?”

“No…”

“You’ve gone all day, and you haven’t had a dose since last night at dinner. My fear is that you’ll start seeing things again maybe not tonight or tomorrow, but it’ll happen, and then what? Will Doctor Chayton live at our house and make those visions go away by some magical chant or prayer? I can’t have you seeing things around the children. They’ll freak out. It’s not fair to them.”

“Let me ask you something… if I hadn’t brought this whole thing up about seeing visions, would you have even known anything was different about me?”

“Maybe not, I don’t know, but the kids will find out. You can’t keep this bottled up indefinitely. They already know you’re seeing a shrink and that you’re different.”

“I’m different, because of the drugs you’ve been giving me. I’m not taking them anymore, so you need to get used to that. Will you meet Doctor Chayton?”

I could almost see her running her hand through her long brown hair. “Okay, here’s what I’ll do. We’ll meet with Doctor Chayton as soon as he’s able, we’ll reinstate him as your therapist, if that’s what you want. We’ll call this whole thing a mistake with Doctor Carson and beg CPS to give us

another chance. But you have to make sure that Doctor Chayton has our back on this. Okay?"

"He will… he does."

"Do you think he could meet us at the CPS offices on Monday morning?"

"Why?"

"They wanted to interview us, and if he could join us, it might make a big difference."

"Does Jon need to stay in the hospital until then?"

"They're reviewing that now."

"Does Jon know?"

"No…"

"I hate this," I said bitterly.

"No one likes this, Sol, even the doctors are uncomfortable with the whole thing. I had a good meeting with the CPS case worker earlier, and he seems reasonable. My only problem is that I mentioned Doctor Carson, and he was taking notes the whole time, so if we suddenly show up Monday with a new shrink, we need to have a good story prepared."

"I'm cold," I announced suddenly. "I'm going inside. Do you want me to come over to the hospital tonight? I can feel my head clearing… maybe I could explain this situation to Jon."

"Get a good night's sleep, Sol. I'll stay with Jon… I'm already here. He's tired, I'm sure he'll go to sleep soon. Maybe tomorrow…"

"You sound tired, too. Will you be able to sleep there?"

"I doubt it, but that's okay. I can nap tomorrow, if I need to… Sol?"

"What?"

"If you start seeing things again… demons, gods, monsters, whatever it is you see, will you tell me?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes… and Sol?"

“What?” I opened the backdoor and walked inside, feeling the warmth of our family room.

“Thursday evening Corin Longley called,” Derya said tentatively. “She asked to speak with you, but you were sleeping at the time. I asked her if there was a message…”

“Was there?”

“She said her husband passed away from a heart attack. She just wanted you to know.”

I felt my heart swell with such pain that I forced myself to take deep, measured breaths. “Thursday… that was two days ago. I have to call her. I have to call her. My God, Derya, you have to let me in. You have to believe me. You have to… trust me. Please? You shouldn’t have kept this from me __”

“I know. I’ve fucked everything up. I’m sorry, Sol.” Her voice was a dry whisper, cracking underneath every word. “It’s been a lot for me to process this past month, and I think I’m near the end of my rope. It’s like there’s this huge magnet that’s pulling me away from you, and I’ve let it pull me away. I haven’t fought it… and I should’ve. Forgive me, Sol.”

“I forgive you, but I need to call Corin. I’ll talk with you tomorrow morning. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Goodnight.”

“Bye…”

The phone went dead. I sat down on a chair, debating whether I should call Corin. It was late… almost 9:30, but I needed to acknowledge her loss and Jaylee’s.

“Are you okay?” Marisa asked, poking her head into the family room.

“I’m okay. I just got some bad news that a friend died.”

Marisa came around to my chair and put out her arms. She didn’t say anything. I stood up and hugged her. It was the best feeling I had had for a very long time.

Chapter 81: Strong Side

I remember my father had told me that a strong man lives on. Of course, when you hear this expression as a child, you wonder what happens to a weak man, and who exactly determines whether you're weak or strong? As I grew older, I remember several occasions where I would look at myself and imagine on which side of the scales I belonged: weak or strong.

After a long sigh, I chose strong.

From some pure instinct I pushed my phone, and I heard it ringing in a quiet room in Lisbon, New York.

"Hello?"

It was Jaylee's voice… I was unable to speak for a moment.

"Is it you?" she asked.

"Hi, Jaylee. It's me. How are you?"

"I'm fine, but I'm sad. Are you coming to the funeral?"

"When is it?"

"Tomorrow."

"What time?"

"I don't know, my grandma knows."

"How's she doing?"

"She's with my aunt right now. I don't think she's doing very well."

"Do you think she can come to the phone?"

"I'll ask… I… I drew you a picture."

"Did you? I'd like to see it."

"Come tomorrow, and I'll show you."

"I'm not sure I'll be able to do that, Jaylee. My son is in the hospital, so I

may have to stay here. Maybe you could take a picture of it and send it to me in an email."

There was a long pause. I could hear some voices in the background.

"It's Mr. Tonum," Jaylee half-shouted.

"My aunt's coming," she announced, and then her voice went to a fine whisper. "Your son is fine. Don't worry. I hope you can come tomorrow… bye…"

The sound of a shuffled phone filled my ear.

"Mr. Tonum, I'm Corin's sister, Julia. Are you a friend of hers?"

"Yes. I'm… I'm the one who got her daughter's heart…"

"Oh my," she said, "I'll get Corin, hold on one moment."

I waited for almost a minute, and then heard the rustling of the phone as someone was picking it up.

"Hello?"

"Corin?"

"Yes."

"It's Solomon."

"Oh, hi, Solomon, thanks for calling back."

"I'm sorry it's so late—"

"It's okay. Everything's a little blurred right now, so time isn't really the same to me anymore."

"How're you doing?"

"A little lost."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Can you come tomorrow?"

"What time?"

"The funeral's at one, and then we'll come here afterwards for some pie

and coffee… or something like that. Even if you can't make it for the funeral, it would be good to have you here."

"Are you sure?"

"I've read that letter from Vanessa a hundred times since I got it… she had a reason. Maybe she saw some of this, I don't know, but my offer still stands. Send me her video, and I'll send you her letter."

We exchanged emails right then. I told her I'd do my best to pay my respects tomorrow, but I wasn't able to guarantee anything until I could speak with my wife. I explained to her that a lot was going on in my life right now, and I was a little lost, too.

There was a resignation in her voice. I felt it as clearly as if it were my own. Perhaps, in a way, it was.

I pushed the send button and knew the video was on its way to Corin. I prayed that I had done the right thing. That Vanessa was okay with it, and that Corin would find some peace from the video.

From birth there's always an ending. It was the strange paradox of life. I wanted to stay on the strong side, I wanted to live on. I needed to live on.

Chapter 82: Infinite Heart

The letter arrived minutes after I sent the video. I hesitated for a moment. There was no cover text, just an empty email with an attachment. I clicked it open and began to read.

Dear Mom,

You have been the one fixture of love in my life. When I was struggling to fit into a world that was always a step ahead of me, whirling into shapes that I wasn't, you would show me that I was different for a reason. I wasn't being punished; I was being blessed.

Your voice was the only voice that ever said this to me. And now I must tell you something that will possibly make you doubt that your confidence in me was well placed, but it is from a blessed space that I write these words.

I want Jaylee to live with the person who receives my heart.

I know you would only do this if you truly believed in my sanity, and I know that I have stretched this belief in you for many, many years, sometimes to the point of breaking it. The problem is that the line between sanity and madness in this world is seldom sharp or distinct. It suffers the same ungenerous judgments that lead people like me to stay quiet and unknown.

If there's insanity in me, it's that I adhere to the one thing that most people consider their point of vulnerability: their heart. I look at the heart differently. I see it as the infinite heart; the energy-maker that connects us in this world. The body separates us. The mind separates us. History separates us. Space and time separate us. But the infinite heart is what connects us.

One day, quite by accident, I opened a long-drawn shade onto the infinite heart, and I've looked through this window ever since. One of the things I saw was a man who would shape Jaylee into what she is to become; a man with my heart.

I don't believe in saviors and messiahs, you know that, and Jaylee is none

of those things, but she will invent something that will revolutionize the soul-based life forms of our planet. It is part of a project that serves the highest and deepest parts of humanity. It is not a trivial spirituality. It is not the latest trend of meditation, nor is it a religion of convenience with its resplendent hierarchies. It is the core of what we are in alignment to—what we will become.

This project's impact is profound and far-reaching, and at its human apex, sits my daughter, your granddaughter. Sounds impossible, doesn't it? This man, with my heart, will make it possible.

Who is he? He is as much a stranger to me as he will be to you. When he enters your life, you will be able to judge my sanity. So please, mother, don't leap to judgment, don't assign the impossible to my words. I am what I am in part because of you, even though I appear so different beneath my skin, but this difference is only because that is where I live—beneath my skin.

Mother, I have asked you to release Jaylee, your precious granddaughter, to a stranger that neither of us has met. This is my wish. The only thing that remains is that it be the wish of three other people: you, Jaylee, and the stranger who will soon have my heart. I have written this letter in such a way that you will see it only if I am able to make contact, after I die, with the man who receives my heart. If you are reading these words it is because he brought them to your attention, and you can be assured that it is because of me—not him—that you're reading this. He was only my messenger.

Consider this in your decision.

Your attitude will affect Jaylee. Please do your best to keep this to yourself so her decision is made freely, and not influenced by you, Jason or the man I wish to be her guardian. Also, the biological father is gone. Do not seek him or otherwise reach out to him in any way, as it would only confuse my request, and possibly Jaylee if she were to learn of your search.

In the event, unlikely as I believe it will be, that you and Jason resist and decide to fight my desire to have Jaylee adopted by my designee, then I have left detailed instructions with my attorney to proceed on a legal basis. This is my least favorite option, and I only mention it so that you realize the strength of my conviction. This is not a whim or something I pursue lightly.

Mother, please understand I am doing what I am doing because of my vision. If I am wrong, then the source of our heartbeats is wrong, and this cannot be. I have no real doubts. Please, make this, my final wish, a reality.

I love you with all that I am. Thank you for making the curses of life my blessings. Because of you, all of this is made possible.

Your daughter,

Vanessa

Chapter 83: A Battle of Cells

Maybe a clear and mysterious fire burns in every heart, warming the interior of a room with large windows that overlook the span of human destiny. Where the scales of time and space are so immense that they become false, dissolved into the illusion they arise from. I read the letter twice. It was Vanessa's voice. I felt it as clear as one can feel those things. Somehow I needed to go to Lisbon. I needed to see both Corin and Jaylee. I felt this, but I also felt a responsibility to stay with my family, especially with Jon in the hospital.

My finger activated my phone. "Doctor Chayton."

This time he answered on the third ring. "Hey, Solomon. That was pretty fast. I'm impressed."

"It didn't go exactly like I thought it would, but I made progress."

"It never goes like the plan, but the plan goes… a saying of my people. So, what's the latest?"

"Derya and I have reconciled—"

"Maybe you don't need a shrink after all," Kohana said with a chuckle. "What else?"

"Remember the parents of my donor?"

"The ones in upstate New York. How'd your visit go, by the way?"

"It was fine, but Vanessa has a daughter…"

"The plot thickens… and the father?"

"Nowhere to be found, but that's not the point. I had this vision of Vanessa, and she told me about this letter that she'd left behind for her mother, and she told me that she wanted me to adopt Jaylee."

"Wow… you saw this?"

"Yes."

“Okay… so now what?”

“It gets crazier.”

“Really? Because I was just about to retract what I said earlier about you not needing a shrink.”

“I met with her attorney—”

“Vanessa’s?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“She was working in some capacity with the founder of this law firm she hired, and somehow made him a fortune, and when he died about six months ago, he left her a bunch of money, which she willed to me.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how much is a bunch of money in your neighborhood?”

“Six million dollars.”

“No way!”

“It’s true, but there’s more.”

“Now, you’re starting to sound like an infomercial.”

“Corin—”

Vanessa’s mother?”

“Yeah, her husband died of a heart attack Thursday.”

“Man, the event strings in your life are unglued,” Kohana remarked. “You’re sure this is all on the up and up? No drug-induced exaggerations?”

“This is my life.”

“Whew… okay, I definitely retract my statement. You do need a shrink. So what’re you planning to do?”

“I talked with Derya about a half hour ago; she agrees that I stop going to Doctor Carson.”

“It’s too bad for him; you would’ve made a great case study.”

“Have you been drinking tonight?” I asked.

“Ty, have we been drinking tonight?”

I heard Tyler in the background. “If that’s my mom, the answer is no. If it’s my dad, we’re wasted.”

Kohana laughed and then suddenly stopped. “Maybe a little. Come on, it’s Saturday night, loosen up.” “Look, I need you to be my shrink with the Child Protection Services. We have a meeting on Monday morning. Can you come?”

“What time?”

“I’ll have to get back to you on that, all I know is that it’s in the morning.”

“Hold on. Ty, what’s my schedule Monday morning? Do you remember?”

“You’ve got a nine and a ten. Then you’re open till one.”

“Did you hear that?” Kohana asked.

“Yeah.”

“I could make it by 11:30 at the earliest. Let me know if that’ll work.”

“Okay… what if it doesn’t?”

“I could do a conference call. I can break from a patient session for ten minutes. I’m sure I can convince those CPS folks of your normality in ten minutes. Mine, on the other hand, might take a little longer.” “Okay, I’ll get back to you on that,” I said. “But I want to reinstate you as my shrink, and Derya agrees. I also want you to meet with Derya.”

“…Okay. What do you want me to do there?”

“Tell her I’m not crazy.”

“It’s not that simple, Solomon. I’ll meet with both of you, and we can see where it goes, but this is the woman who was deceiving you with powerful drugs a few hours ago. I don’t think she’s going to change her mind just because I say you’re not crazy.”

“But you’ll try, right?”

“All I’ll commit to is to meet with her and talk.”

“Okay. That’s fine, that’s all I ask.”

“What about Jaylee? What are you going to do there?” Kohana asked.

“Corin sent me the letter that Vanessa wrote. I read it twice before I called you. Kohana, I have no idea why, but I want to adopt Jaylee. Derya’s opposed, now, but maybe she’ll change her mind.”

“You realize that that’s a huge complication to your relationship with Derya, and potentially your children.”

“Everything’s a complication… that’s all I got right now.”

“You said that right,” Kohana whispered. “When did you say Corin’s husband died?”

“Thursday.”

“And the funeral?”

“Tomorrow.”

“You invited?”

“Yes. I spoke with Corin just before I called you. It seems like she’s warmed up to the idea of me adopting Jaylee, but I could be reading too much into it. She was tired and a bit confused.” “She’s lost her daughter and husband in the span of two months. It’s a lot to take in. Do you think Derya would go with you if you asked her?”

“To the funeral?”

“Yup.”

“I doubt it,” I replied.

“Derya’s been out of the loop on your journey. Every step you take alone makes the cohesion harder to come by. I’d suggest you ask her to accompany you.”

“What about the kids? We have one in the hospital… she’d never leave…”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Dumb idea. Never mind.”

“Do you think it makes sense to go alone?” I asked.

“What do you feel?”

“I want to go, but I agree that I can’t keep going by myself. It only adds distance between Derya and me.”

“Play it by ear. At least you’re considering the variables and consequences. Derya’s at the hospital, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You can always call her and discuss the alternatives.”

“She sounded so tired last time we talked… she’s probably asleep.”

“In a hospital? Have you ever been in one of those things?”

“Very funny. Okay, I’ll give her a call.”

“Solomon?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you take care of you know what?”

“Yeah, it’s buried.”

“Good. One more thing… There’s something about Jaylee that I can tune into, and she’s not going to be an easy addition to your family. It’s like she’s from a different place.”

“What do you mean, a different place?”

“Don’t read too much into this, I’m still working my way into the vibe I feel about her, but she’s not a regular human. Neither was Vanessa, I know, but Jaylee isn’t an easy thing to cozy up to. It’s ancient… if you know what I mean. It’ll spook people. If I can sense her as easy as I can sense her, she’s got something going.”

“She’s a beautiful child, innocent, kind, respectful. I think you’re wrong.”

“Maybe… just mentioning it for what it’s worth.”

“Vanessa said in her letter that Jaylee was the one who discovers it all.”

“All being the Grand Portal?”

“Yes.”

“Wow… it’s possible, but that would make her the ultimate target.

Between the two of you, you're going to be wearing targets the size of Texas. You better start packing some heat."

I reminded myself he was drunk, and took a deep breath to compose myself. "So much has happened since we last talked. When you're a little more sober, I'll catch you up."

"I might be wrong… but don't discount my feelings. I've had this ability all my life, and Uncle never poured any cold water on those fires, so I've learned to trust it. Okay?"

"I gotta call Derya. You and Tyler have a good night and stay off the roads."

"One last thing, before you run off, Jaylee is not the inventor. This project isn't anyone's invention. It's an organism. It's alive. It has its own intelligence. It doesn't become an invention just because someone comes along and finds the eyelids and opens them. It's an entity unto itself. And we're all a part of it."

"Okay, Kohana, I don't claim to know, all I know is what Vanessa feels, and maybe it's semantics, but she wrote that Jaylee is the one who opens the eyelids, as you put it."

"You have to love the way a plan comes together."

"Goodnight, Kohana."

"Goodnight, Solomon."

I turned off my phone and looked around my family room. It was quiet. Constellations of black and white photographs were scattered across the walls. An oak bookcase with a few books and even more photographs overlooked a desk with a monitor whose screensaver of soft, diffuse light forms shape-shifted like clouds on a windy day. I saw a pair of Jon's shoes by the sliding glass door to the patio. This was real. This was my life. Did I really want to complicate it by adopting Jaylee?

Somewhere in the distant recesses of my brain I could feel a headache coming on. I rubbed my neck and stood up, taking a deep breath. I felt I was at a crossroads, laden with battle scars that defined me—perhaps none more so than the seventeen- inch scar on my chest.

I sat back down and placed my hand over my chest and just listened. I could feel the soft murmur underneath layers of skin, muscle, tendons, and bone that hid the concussive beat that animated everything that I was. From conjoined generations of strangers, the genetic substrate of this heart was foreign and unknown to me save two people: Vanessa and Corin. But what lit me up came from a source that the rest of me had attacked, at least initially. My cells had fought her cells, and now, I wasn’t sure who had won.

Chapter 84: Everything Else

Maybe a clear and mysterious fire burns in every heart, warming the interior of a room with large windows that overlook the span of human destiny. Where the scales of time and space are so immense that they become false, dissolved into the illusion they arise from. I read the letter twice. It was Vanessa's voice. I felt it as clear as one can feel those things. Somehow I needed to go to Lisbon. I needed to see both Corin and Jaylee. I felt this, but I also felt a responsibility to stay with my family, especially with Jon in the hospital.

My finger activated my phone. "Doctor Chayton."

This time he answered on the third ring. "Hey, Solomon. That was pretty fast. I'm impressed."

"It didn't go exactly like I thought it would, but I made progress."

"It never goes like the plan, but the plan goes… a saying of my people. So, what's the latest?"

"Derya and I have reconciled—"

"Maybe you don't need a shrink after all," Kohana said with a chuckle. "What else?"

"Remember the parents of my donor?"

"The ones in upstate New York. How'd your visit go, by the way?"

"It was fine, but Vanessa has a daughter…"

"The plot thickens… and the father?"

"Nowhere to be found, but that's not the point. I had this vision of Vanessa, and she told me about this letter that she'd left behind for her mother, and she told me that she wanted me to adopt Jaylee."

"Wow… you saw this?"

"Yes."

“Okay… so now what?”

“It gets crazier.”

“Really? Because I was just about to retract what I said earlier about you not needing a shrink.”

“I met with her attorney—”

“Vanessa’s?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“She was working in some capacity with the founder of this law firm she hired, and somehow made him a fortune, and when he died about six months ago, he left her a bunch of money, which she willed to me.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how much is a bunch of money in your neighborhood?”

“Six million dollars.”

“No way!”

“It’s true, but there’s more.”

“Now, you’re starting to sound like an infomercial.”

“Corin—”

Vanessa’s mother?”

“Yeah, her husband died of a heart attack Thursday.”

“Man, the event strings in your life are unglued,” Kohana remarked. “You’re sure this is all on the up and up? No drug-induced exaggerations?”

“This is my life.”

“Whew… okay, I definitely retract my statement. You do need a shrink. So what’re you planning to do?”

“I talked with Derya about a half hour ago; she agrees that I stop going to Doctor Carson.”

“It’s too bad for him; you would’ve made a great case study.”

“Have you been drinking tonight?” I asked.

“Ty, have we been drinking tonight?”

I heard Tyler in the background. “If that’s my mom, the answer is no. If it’s my dad, we’re wasted.”

Kohana laughed and then suddenly stopped. “Maybe a little. Come on, it’s Saturday night, loosen up.” “Look, I need you to be my shrink with the Child Protection Services. We have a meeting on Monday morning. Can you come?”

“What time?”

“I’ll have to get back to you on that, all I know is that it’s in the morning.”

“Hold on. Ty, what’s my schedule Monday morning? Do you remember?”

“You’ve got a nine and a ten. Then you’re open till one.”

“Did you hear that?” Kohana asked.

“Yeah.”

“I could make it by 11:30 at the earliest. Let me know if that’ll work.”

“Okay… what if it doesn’t?”

“I could do a conference call. I can break from a patient session for ten minutes. I’m sure I can convince those CPS folks of your normality in ten minutes. Mine, on the other hand, might take a little longer.” “Okay, I’ll get back to you on that,” I said. “But I want to reinstate you as my shrink, and Derya agrees. I also want you to meet with Derya.”

“…Okay. What do you want me to do there?”

“Tell her I’m not crazy.”

“It’s not that simple, Solomon. I’ll meet with both of you, and we can see where it goes, but this is the woman who was deceiving you with powerful drugs a few hours ago. I don’t think she’s going to change her mind just because I say you’re not crazy.”

“But you’ll try, right?”

“All I’ll commit to is to meet with her and talk.”

“Okay. That’s fine, that’s all I ask.”

“What about Jaylee? What are you going to do there?” Kohana asked.

“Corin sent me the letter that Vanessa wrote. I read it twice before I called you. Kohana, I have no idea why, but I want to adopt Jaylee. Derya’s opposed, now, but maybe she’ll change her mind.”

“You realize that that’s a huge complication to your relationship with Derya, and potentially your children.”

“Everything’s a complication… that’s all I got right now.”

“You said that right,” Kohana whispered. “When did you say Corin’s husband died?”

“Thursday.”

“And the funeral?”

“Tomorrow.”

“You invited?”

“Yes. I spoke with Corin just before I called you. It seems like she’s warmed up to the idea of me adopting Jaylee, but I could be reading too much into it. She was tired and a bit confused.” “She’s lost her daughter and husband in the span of two months. It’s a lot to take in. Do you think Derya would go with you if you asked her?”

“To the funeral?”

“Yup.”

“I doubt it,” I replied.

“Derya’s been out of the loop on your journey. Every step you take alone makes the cohesion harder to come by. I’d suggest you ask her to accompany you.”

“What about the kids? We have one in the hospital… she’d never leave…”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Dumb idea. Never mind.”

“Do you think it makes sense to go alone?” I asked.

“What do you feel?”

“I want to go, but I agree that I can’t keep going by myself. It only adds distance between Derya and me.”

“Play it by ear. At least you’re considering the variables and consequences. Derya’s at the hospital, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You can always call her and discuss the alternatives.”

“She sounded so tired last time we talked… she’s probably asleep.”

“In a hospital? Have you ever been in one of those things?”

“Very funny. Okay, I’ll give her a call.”

“Solomon?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you take care of you know what?”

“Yeah, it’s buried.”

“Good. One more thing… There’s something about Jaylee that I can tune into, and she’s not going to be an easy addition to your family. It’s like she’s from a different place.”

“What do you mean, a different place?”

“Don’t read too much into this, I’m still working my way into the vibe I feel about her, but she’s not a regular human. Neither was Vanessa, I know, but Jaylee isn’t an easy thing to cozy up to. It’s ancient… if you know what I mean. It’ll spook people. If I can sense her as easy as I can sense her, she’s got something going.”

“She’s a beautiful child, innocent, kind, respectful. I think you’re wrong.”

“Maybe… just mentioning it for what it’s worth.”

“Vanessa said in her letter that Jaylee was the one who discovers it all.”

“All being the Grand Portal?”

“Yes.”

“Wow… it’s possible, but that would make her the ultimate target.

Between the two of you, you're going to be wearing targets the size of Texas. You better start packing some heat."

I reminded myself he was drunk, and took a deep breath to compose myself. "So much has happened since we last talked. When you're a little more sober, I'll catch you up."

"I might be wrong… but don't discount my feelings. I've had this ability all my life, and Uncle never poured any cold water on those fires, so I've learned to trust it. Okay?"

"I gotta call Derya. You and Tyler have a good night and stay off the roads."

"One last thing, before you run off, Jaylee is not the inventor. This project isn't anyone's invention. It's an organism. It's alive. It has its own intelligence. It doesn't become an invention just because someone comes along and finds the eyelids and opens them. It's an entity unto itself. And we're all a part of it."

"Okay, Kohana, I don't claim to know, all I know is what Vanessa feels, and maybe it's semantics, but she wrote that Jaylee is the one who opens the eyelids, as you put it."

"You have to love the way a plan comes together."

"Goodnight, Kohana."

"Goodnight, Solomon."

I turned off my phone and looked around my family room. It was quiet. Constellations of black and white photographs were scattered across the walls. An oak bookcase with a few books and even more photographs overlooked a desk with a monitor whose screensaver of soft, diffuse light forms shape-shifted like clouds on a windy day. I saw a pair of Jon's shoes by the sliding glass door to the patio. This was real. This was my life. Did I really want to complicate it by adopting Jaylee?

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Once I called Derya, there was no turning back. If I invited her to go to the funeral with me, it meant she would need to get Jon home in the morning, and even then we'd probably only get to Longley's by three or four in the afternoon. Was it really worth it? If I went alone, it meant that whatever I got out of the experience was mine and potentially a wider gap between Derya and me.

I fired up my phone. "Derya."

It rang only once. "Hi, Sol. Everything okay?"

"I just got off the phone with Corin and then Kohana… Doctor Chayton. Can you talk?"

"Sure, give me a second."

I could hear the sound of a door closing. "Okay, go ahead."

"Where are you?"

"In the bathroom."

"Is Jon asleep?"

"I think so, but the nurses keep coming in, so it's hard for him to stay sleeping."

"What about you… did you try?"

"To sleep?"

"Yeah."

"I'm tired, but not enough to sleep… at least here."

"Listen, Corin invited me to the funeral, which is tomorrow at one. I assume you wouldn't have any interest in going, would you?"

“Can I see you?”

“Sure, hold on.” I activated the video camera.

“Why don’t you turn on some lights, Solomon? Your face is dark.”

“That might be a good thing. I haven’t looked in a mirror for a very long time.”

Derya laughed softly. “You look okay. I just wanted to see you. Can you see me sitting on the toilet here? How could you be in any worse shape than this—a hospital bathroom?”

“I take it that Jon got a private room?”

“Yeah, in the corner no less.”

“Good… so what do you think?”

“I don’t know, Sol. If CPS comes in the morning and releases him, best case, I couldn’t be home before eleven. That’d put us there at what, four?”

“About that.”

“Isn’t that too late?”

“Corin said to come even if we were late.”

“She’s expecting us, not just you?” Derya asked.

“She didn’t really specify. I just think it might be a good opportunity for you to assess things.”

“You mean Jaylee. I understand what you’re trying to do, Sol, and if it weren’t for Jon’s situation, I might even do it, but with this, I can’t.”

She paused. I could see her face thinking. “Are you still going?”

“If I did, would you be upset?”

“Honestly… yes, but not for the reasons you might think. I want to talk with Doctor Chayton, I want us to get past this CPS fiasco, and then we can figure out our next steps together. If that includes taking a trip to Lisbon to meet Jaylee, then we’ll do that. Okay?” She smiled quickly, but it was a little forced, and she knew it. “I just need more time…”

“We’ll do that,” I said.

“Thanks. Can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“If I said no to adopting Jaylee, even after meeting her, can you live with that?”

I fidgeted in my chair a little as she asked her question. “I don’t know. Let’s see how it all works out. I can’t answer hypothetical questions right now. As you said, let’s take it one step at a time. I’ll send flowers to Corin, and I’ll call her and explain that I can’t make it. I’ll come up later next week, and hopefully you’ll join me.”

I paused and Derya remained quiet. “Why don’t you take the week off, Derya.”

“Sol, you know I can’t do that. I’m not on medical leave.”

“You don’t need to work anymore… we have money. Just take the week off, tell them you need a personal leave for family issues. It’s true, isn’t it?”

“I’ll think about it. Right now, I want to get Jon home, and I want to get CPS off our backs. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay, you’re right.”

“You said you talked with Doctor Chayton?”

“He was a little sloshed… but helpful. He can make the CPS meeting. What time was it scheduled for?”

“Ten.”

“Okay, he’ll have to conference in. Will that be okay?”

“I guess it’ll have to.”

“He’s got a client at both nine and ten, so he said he’d take a ten minute break and conference in. He’s pretty sure ten minutes is all he’d need.”

“How would they know it’s him and not some imposter calling in?”

“They’ll do some authentication, I’m sure.”

“All right. I’ll mention it to them tomorrow.”

“Should I be there tomorrow? I mean maybe they’ll think it’s odd that I’m

not there?”

“They already think it’s odd, but maybe you’re right. If you want, I can pick you up at eight, and we can get breakfast at Starbucks and wait at the hospital with Jon. Okay?”

“It’s a date. Should we bring Marisa?”

“No, let her sleep in.”

“Okay, see you then. Have a goodnight, Derya.”

“I love you…” she half-whispered.

“Love you, too.”

My mind continued to clear and feel better. I called Corin and told her about my situation, not all the details, but I wanted her to know that my son was in the hospital, and if not for that, I would have come. I explained that later in the week I would do my best to come up, possibly even with my wife. She seemed understanding, but I could feel an undercurrent like when you sense someone who wants to share a secret, but they remain quiet.

Then I asked her about the video—if she had gotten it—and she had, but hadn’t had a chance to watch it. She needed the right “space in time, perhaps in a few days, once the funeral is behind me,” she had said. Then she asked me if I had read the letter. I answered, “yes,” unsure how to explain my reaction, but I knew she understood.

Corin was different. She was fatalistic, as if the future was already here. I felt the same, though I didn’t tell her.

There was a long, awkward pause towards the end of our conversation. For a moment I thought she was crying.

“Is something wrong, Corin?”

“I heard her nose sniffling, and her voice suddenly became a cautious whisper. “When I first heard Jason shouting, I knew something was wrong. I didn’t know it was a heart attack. He’d never had a heart condition. I just thought he was angry at something… but by the time I came into the barn he was grasping at his chest and thrashing on the floor. I called 9-1-1 and told them where we were… the whole time he was in severe pain and I was in…

in a panic.

“When I put the phone down, he looked at me. His eyes were pools of tears. I’d never seen him cry before… really, maybe a little, but never like that. I kept begging him to stay, telling him over and over that he’d be okay, but he just looked at me like someone that was underwater.

“He said to let go… so I let go of his hands, thinking I was hurting him with my grip, and then he reached for my hands again and held them in his, and shook his head, tears falling with every turn of his head. He told me to let go of Jaylee. Those were his last words.

“It seemed impossible that he was telling me this, because when I had told him about Vanessa’s letter, he was against it with every fiber of his body. He loved Jaylee… but something changed, and I don’t know what, but it surely changed, Solomon.”

Her voice trailed off to silence. I was reflecting on her words, trying to understand her position.

“Maybe he saw something in those final seconds that changed his mind.”

“What could that be?” Corin asked, her voice lifting slightly.

“Maybe he saw Vanessa. I did… when I was out in the field with Jaylee, I saw her. You read her letter; she said she would do this—”

“There’re very few things I would say Vanessa couldn’t do, but she was no saint, Solomon.”

“And only saints do these kinds of things?”

“Well, that’s what I was always taught.”

“So how do you explain it?”

“Jason realized he was wrong, and wanted to make sure I knew his true opinion—not the selfish one. His true opinion. He wanted me to know this as his final words, because he knew I already knew everything else.”

“…Everything else?”

“That he loved me.”

Her words hung in some abstract space between us that was scarcely real.

“Corin?”

“I’m here.”

“Get some rest. I’ll stay in touch and try my best to get up to see you and Jaylee later in the week. Okay?”

“Yes, that would be good. Thanks for calling, Solomon, and for listening. You’re a patient listener, and an old woman like me likes nothing better.”

I could hear her smile through the phone.

“Have a goodnight.”

“You, too.”

Chapter 85: Neck

We arrived at Jon's room, carrying coffee and pastries. A nurse was attending Jon as we stepped into the room and gave us a quick glance. "Do either of you have any symptoms?"

"Hi, Jon," I said, setting down two coffee cups on a dresser.

"Hi, Dad."

"Is something wrong?" Derya asked.

"He's running a temp and is complaining about sore muscles. Does anyone else in the family have symptoms of flu."

Derya and I looked at one another, and shook our heads in unison. "No…"

"Okay," the nurse said, turning to look at Jon again. "We'll just monitor him."

"Do you think it's related to the food poisoning?" Derya asked.

The nurse turned to us and eyed me carefully. "We don't know. We'll just keep an eye on it. It's probably nothing to worry about, and if it is just the flu, we'll take good care of him. Right, Jon?"

Jon tried to smile and nodded his head.

As the nurse stepped away from the bed, Derya and I rushed to his side. Derya reached out to his forehead. "He's definitely warm. What's his temp?"

"One hundred two."

"And the last time you checked?" Derya asked.

"That was at four," the nurse said, looking at her tablet. "Normal."

"Jon, anyone at school out with flu?"

"I don't know… maybe."

"Can he have a pastry?" I asked, turning to the nurse.

“Let’s leave him on the hospital diet for now. So far he hasn’t had any complaints of stomach problems, but I think it’d be best to err on the side of caution.”

“I’m Solomon, his dad, by the way.”

“I’m Ms. Oakley. The day nurse, nice to meet you.”

“Thanks for all your care,” I said.

“You’re very welcome. I’ll leave you to your son. The doctor should be by sometime in the next…” she glanced at her tablet, “…thirty minutes or so.”

Ms. Oakley spun around and promptly walked out. I looked at Jon. He looked sick. He looked like someone who was going through the flu.

“This… this just came on?” I asked, turning to Derya.

“When I left to pick you up, he seemed fine. Jon, when did you start to feel bad?”

“When you left… I started to feel my muscles aching and kind of a headache.”

“Did they give you anything to take?”

Jon shook his head.

Derya got up from the bed and looked at me. “I’m going to go talk with Ms. Oakley. I’ll be right back.”

I took my hand and stroked Jon’s forehead and smiled at him. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too, Dad. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. Been a while since I’ve been in a hospital… I don’t miss them.”

Jon smiled.

I felt a throbbing in my head. Maybe the headache from last night was resurfacing, but whatever it was it suddenly came on with a vengeance, and then I heard it, Nammu’s voice.

“Once you’re labeled insane… always insane.”

I turned around, and she was sitting in the chair in the corner, legs crossed,

fingers pointed into a steeple, sneering at me like an executioner.

“What’s wrong, Dad?”

I turned back to Jon, and forced a smile. “Nothing, just feeling a headache coming on.”

“Solomon, Solomon, Solomon. You lost your hope, and now you’re grasping at your final straw. You can’t fight us. You know that. We’re superior to you in every way. Whatever move you make on the chessboard, we’re already strategizing the next game. Give up!”

I ignored her. I knew what she was trying to do. I kept stroking Jon’s forehead. “Close your eyes, Jon. Try and get some rest. I’ll stay right here.”

“No, you won’t,” Nammu said. “You’ll be living on the loony farm, the macadamia ranch, the booby hatch, the funny farm, whatever you like to call it, you’ll be calling it home.”

I turned around and glared at her, but remained silent.

“You don’t believe me?” I heard a slight rustle and turned around to see her stand and walk over to Jon’s bed. “Then watch this.”

Nammu reached out to Jon, her hands, quivering as they went towards his neck. I resisted making any moves. I gritted my teeth, watching her slow approach.

“Just a little bit more…” Nammu whispered.

As her hands latched around Jon’s throat, my face was trembling. I couldn’t do anything. I had to stay quiet. I couldn’t move. Suddenly, Jon opened his eyes, they were terror-filled. I will never forget his look. I tried to grab Nammu’s hands and remove them from Jon’s throat, but they were immovable. The whole room suddenly lurched into slow motion. I could hear Jon scream, and I was being pulled to the floor by someone. I didn’t resist. I couldn’t resist. I was still listening to Nammu’s voice as if she had dragged me into her world for one last humiliation.

“I do hope you enjoy your new home, Solomon. Look at it this way, your life just became a whole lot simpler. You’ll have a lot of staring into white walls, you’ll be with others like yourself, you’ll have all your meals prepared

for you, and best of all, you'll be able to talk with doctors who really understand that crazy people should be… well… they should be locked up."

I watched her blow a kiss to me and slowly dissolve into the air. I could hear Derya sobbing with Jon. I felt strong hands holding me down. In the next moment I felt a prick in my shoulder, and I could feel the room spin into darkness.

I let go of everything.

Chapter 86: Room with a View

When I next opened my eyes, I was sitting on the floor in the back of a van or truck of some kind. I was so groggy, and my environment was so foreign, I chose to go away, inside myself.

The next time I opened my eyes I saw lights overhead. I was being carried down a hallway. Again, I didn't want anything to do with that place, and I went back inside myself.

The third time I opened my eyes, I felt something bitter in my nose. My eyes flew open in a single instant, and I could see a room, and sitting in front of me was a man in a suit. I had never seen him before. He was clean shaved, well groomed and I would say sophisticated looking. His hair was close-cropped and his skin a bit mottled, though it was clear that he was African American.

"Solomon, how are you feeling?"

"Tired…"

"I'm Doctor Folsom, and this is my assistant, Mister Winters. You're in a mental health facility in New York, about an hour's drive from your home. Your wife, with your doctor's guidance, placed you here for some rest and rehabilitation. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I nodded.

"Good. Would you like a glass of water?"

I nodded again.

He handed me a glass, and I drank most of it. I was very thirsty.

"You will stay with us, under our supervision, so we can get you fixed up and back home. That's our plan. Sound good?"

"How is Jon?"

"Your son is fine. He's still in the hospital. He suffered a bit of an allergic

reaction to your medication. Something that Doctor Carson caught. It's called NMS, or Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome. It's a lot of words for allergy, but that's what Jon was suffering from, it wasn't flu."

I must have looked at him very oddly.

"We tell the truth here, Solomon. I don't hold anything back, whether you can understand it or not, I will always speak the truth, that you can be assured of. If you have questions, you can ask them, but I will not answer them more than once. So it is your responsibility to focus. That's part of our therapy."

I glanced at Mr. Winters, who seemed bored. He was a large man, dressed in a nurse's uniform that was pure white from head to toe, which in his case was about six and a half feet.

The office I was in was large and very basic. A cluttered, metal desk filled with folders, a few black leather chairs, a brown couch with small, yellow pillows on both ends, and the requisite books and medical plaques. The one window was small and seemed to overlook a wooded countryside.

I tilted my head. "Where am I?"

"A mental health facility, just outside of Cornwall, New York. We're only an hour's drive from your home. Your family can visit you as often as they like."

"I have to stay here?"

"Yes, for the time being. We need to find out why you're seeing these hallucinations."

"What happened?"

"At the hospital?"

"What did I do that brought me here?"

"Solomon, your wife found you strangling your son in his hospital bed."

How could anyone think I would try to kill my own son? The words numbed me to my core. I put my hand over my mouth. "Do you have a bathroom… I don't feel so good."

Both Dr. Folsom and Mr. Winters leapt to their feet and helped me to a

small bathroom in the back corner of his office, where I knelt on my knees and vomited. Humbling experiences can come in many forms, but this was definitely a bona fide contender for humiliation of the year, at least for me.

When I was done, I struggled back to my appointed chair and sat down with Mr. Winters help.

“It wasn’t me; I was trying to save him,” I croaked.

“From who?”

“Nammu!”

“And who is Nammu?”

“I don’t know exactly. She’s been entering my world, threatening me, since I got out of the hospital. She’s trying to make me crazy, so I can’t complete my mission…”

Dr. Folsom leaned forward. “And what is your mission, Solomon?”

I thought about it. It seemed so far away—my mission, whatever that meant. I wondered if it was even relevant anymore.

“Can I have some more water?” I asked.

I decided to stall for time, and reassess what I was saying. Maybe I was opening up too much. Talking about Nammu was a mistake. These people wouldn’t believe any of that. I drank the water and handed an empty glass back to Mr. Winters.

“Thanks.”

He barely nodded.

“So what is your mission, Solomon?”

I stared down at my hands. A thin, plastic bracelet graced my right wrist replete with strange codes. I had on clothes that I had never seen before, gray sweatpants and sweatshirt. “Where are my clothes?”

“Everyone in this facility wears the same clothes, Solomon. It’s our way of assuring that no one upsets anyone by what they wear. You were about to tell me the nature of your mission…”

“You have on a suit.”

“I’m a doctor, I meant everyone who is a patient. Now, why don’t you tell me what you think your mission is? It could be an important part of your therapy that would help us get you back on the road to recovery. Okay?”

“To be honest, my mission is so far into the future, it hardly matters now.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

“I’m so tired,” I pointed at his couch. “Can I rest there for a while?”

Dr. Folsom turned to his assistant. “Why don’t you take Solomon to his new room? He can rest there.” He stood to his feet and looked down at me with a smile. “Get some rest Solomon; we’ll talk more later on. Time is on our side.”

I struggled to my feet and immediately felt Mr. Winter’s strong grip on my upper arm. I walked wobbly-legged to the door, grateful to have his support. We walked down a long, empty corridor and then entered an elevator. Mr. Winter positioned my wristband by a scanner, and then pushed the number “5.” We went up two floors. Off the elevator we turned right, and I began to see open doors with people inside, all dressed like me.

Some of them were reading. Some were watching television. Some were looking outside. Each room had a window with thin metal grates that restricted the view and access to the outside. I sensed that Mr. Winters was not a talkative man, so I remained silent out of respect, but I was also trying to understand my new surroundings, and I felt certain that I was doomed. Words, when one feels doomed, don’t come easy.

When we got to my room, Mr. Winters opened the door with a security card that he flashed, and led me inside.

“Your room. You can sleep there.” He pointed to a single bed, sloping in the middle of its mattress like a slim smile.

I looked around. It was sterile. It smelled sterile. No pictures, no color, no objects wrought of creativity. I felt suffocated in off-white.

“There’s a toilet in there, but that’s it. Showers, soap, towels, and everything else is in the common lavatory down the hall and to your left. I’ll

come back in about an hour and give you the tour, make some introductions, that sort of thing. Okay?”

He looked down at me with bored eyes that seemed so distant. I nodded, anything to be alone.

He left and closed the door behind him. I tried the door handle a few seconds later. It was locked. I was a prisoner in a mental hospital. I had nothing that was mine. I was in a room on the fifth floor overlooking some wooded acreage that looked well- groomed and suitable for a golf course. My windows were covered with wire mesh. My bed was covered with drab whites that were tinted in vintage amber. I had one piece of furniture that looked promising: a television.

I curled up on my new bed. Its sheets hard and cold, the thin bedspread smelled of something I couldn’t place, but it wasn’t pleasant, that much I knew.

If only I could exhume the bag of antipsychotics in my backyard and guzzle them down, so I wouldn’t feel the headlong descent into madness that called me. It was probably the only time in my life that I could honestly say I was suicidal.

Chapter 87: Disclosure

Some days passed as I became acquainted with the other tenants of my destiny and the strange place called Stonemason Rehabilitation Center. It was a prestigious place, according to my new friends. “The finest crazy people of the Big Apple come here,” one of them told me.

I got names, but to be honest, I didn’t care what they were. It was enough to know their faces for now. It was Thursday, and I was expecting my first visit from Derya. The whole morning I had spent planning what I would say to her, but I would forget a few minutes later, and it was frustrating me.

No visions orbited around me, though I could tell that many of my fellow inmates had full Technicolor viewing privileges. Why bother with television?

I stayed mostly to myself. I did find a library with real books, and I took out Treasure Island, but I couldn’t get past page five for some reason. I slept a lot. I had no real schedule. Dr. Folsom would be in my meeting with Derya, so I would not have any private time with her, a reality that weighed heavy on me, if I concentrated on it.

Mr. Winters wanted me to shave every morning, but I refused as strongly as one can refuse a person whose arms and legs are twice his own. I figured I was a castaway. I might as well look like one. I began to grow a three-day beard that, unlike the hair on my head, seemed stubbornly gray.

Thursday morning I was in the common lavatory, and I was examining my beard, amazed it was so gray. As I was looking in the mirror, I studied my reflection. I remembered a vague experience of seeing myself as a young boy —was it a dream? I looked carefully.

“I see you,” I said. “You’re an empty vessel. Whatever soul played inside you… has gone.” I took my hand and smashed it against the mirror, and I heard the crack with horror. I gasped. Am I a violent person? I know I’m supposed to be crazy, but I was never, ever violent, and yet there was evidence to the contrary. I was looking at it.

I left the lavatory as inconspicuously as I could. That was the good thing about an insane asylum; your compatriots weren't really paying attention to you. They all had their own worlds that absorbed them. They were terrible witnesses.

I spent the rest of my morning watching television. Three channels were allowed. No news channels, only educational programming.

Around lunchtime, I heard a sharp knock on the door, and Mr. Winters presented himself with his typical silent persona. "Ready?"

I followed him to Dr. Folsom's office without a word. If you're wondering about my medication, so was I. I knew I was taking pills and drinking some kind of drink that was repulsive tasting, but no one ever told me the names. It didn't matter. I had no say in anything.

Dr. Folsom was sitting in his chair, and Derya was looking out the window when I came in. She turned to look at me and gasped at my appearance. She was crying a moment later. I looked at her and never felt so alone. She came closer to me, tentatively, like someone who was trying to look down the mouth of a geyser. "Sol… I don't know what to say."

My first question came out jumbled. "Jon… is Jon… how is he?"

She looked down. "Better… he's home. He's okay."

Dr. Folsom cleared his throat. "Why don't we all sit down and get comfortable, so we can talk through our plan." He had a notepad on his lap and a pen in his hand, poised to deposit his insights on the white pulp. He was dressed in a gray suit, so we were oddly similar in color.

"Mr. Winters, you can go about your duties, we'll be fine here."

The hulking white mountain of a man turned and walked away, closing the door behind him.

Derya remained staring at me. Our eyes locked in a strange embrace of recognition and confusion. She grabbed a box from the desk and sat down on a chair that Dr. Folsom held out for her. She set the box down at her feet. "It's just some things I brought for you. Mostly reading and some of your pictures…"

Tears kept coming out of her eyes. I wished I could cry. I was dead inside. There's a strange equilibrium in the state of indifference, unaffected by the exterior or interior, because the weight of its mask is so heavy, no light gets past. It is a black hole personality.

"Thanks," I said quietly.

"Solomon, why don't you sit here?" Dr. Folsom said.

I felt like a child sitting before a scolding school principal with my mom as a nervous observer.

"Let's agree to keep our expectations for this meeting simple and realistic," he began. "We're not expecting any breakthroughs or reconciliations. There's no pressure to forgive or wipe the slate clean. These things take time if they are to be genuine. Do we agree?"

Derya never took her eyes off of me, nor I her. I could see her nodding, and I felt my own head do the same.

"Good."

Dr. Folsom turned to his right. "Derya, we have a long tradition that the visitor, in this case, you, goes first. Do you have anything you'd like to say?"

"Sol, why?"

"I didn't do it, Derya."

"I saw you."

"It was Nammu, I was trying to stop her. You know I would never hurt our children— "

"I know, but I saw you."

I ran my hand through my hair. "What can I say to you to make you understand my world? I'm being tormented by beings that don't want me to achieve what I came here to achieve."

"And what is that, Sol? Save humanity from its ignorance of the soul? You're the new prophet? Is that it?"

"I saw it…" I mumbled.

“What?” Dr. Folsom asked. “What exactly did you see?”

I looked down at my hands, embarrassed to be sitting before them like a delusional child. “I was taken into the future—”

“Speak up, Solomon, I can’t hear you very well.”

“Does it matter? Whatever I say, you won’t believe me. I am crazy. Case closed. Now what?”

Derya began to sob, and I wished I could run somewhere back in time and erase all of the crushing experiences of my lofty mission. All of the things I was meant to do and be. I wanted to be left alone. I should have accepted the first offer that Nammu had made to me. I was such a fool to think I could win.

“Don’t be so dismissive of our ability to understand you, Solomon. We are your support. We want to understand you. We want you to tell us what you have seen and experienced. It’s why we’re here. If you can tell us, maybe we can find a way to help you. Do you understand?”

I looked Dr. Folsom in the eyes. “There’s nothing you can do. I’m a lost cause. Trust me.”

“There’s no such thing,” Dr. Folsom said forcefully. “The cause of schizophrenia is unknown. It is a genuine mystery to my profession. We can observe it, we can make its symptoms abate, we can paper over the underlying problems and hope the paper holds, but the illness remains a mystery.

“But the two of you need to know that I’ve done this for thirty years. I’ve seen miraculous recoveries. It can happen, and often if happens to the ones like you, Solomon, who complain that they’re a lost cause and beg us to give up on them. I won’t have any of it!

“We’re here to try. To make an effort. To look underneath whatever afflicts you, and I don’t care about your indifference, your doubt, or your assumptions that you’re a lost cause, because I know it can all shift in a heartbeat.”

He took a deep breath, poised his pen over the notepad on his lap, and looked at me over the tortoise-shell rims of his reading glasses. “Now, if you

don’t mind, tell us what you experienced.”

It was the first time I saw him for something human, something that was more than a machine that processed broken people as boarders of insanity. I began to open up.

I told them about my visions, trying my best to remember them in a coherent manner, which was a struggle at times. A few instances I was talking, and I saw Derya looking at me in a state of wonderment. I told them about my experience with Uncle, the Quantusum, Zenith, the monster-god, all of them. Even Canto. Dr. Folsom kept writing, occasionally asking me a question, but mostly letting me talk.

It was a long session, but there was one experience I left out, and it was my liaison with Nammu that night on the way to the Quantusum site. Because I was in the crazyhouse, drugged to some unknown extent, and spilling all of the secrets I had kept, I knew there would never be a better time to disclose this vilest of all indiscretions: I had made love to the creature that was trying to kill my son.

When that thought came through, I stopped speaking. Dr. Folsom looked at me and stopped writing.

“Is something wrong, Solomon?”

I could feel it welling up inside me. I could feel the involuntary spasms rising up inside my gut, to my chest, spreading across my face and leaping through the top of my head in one giant explosion. I looked at Derya with eyes that had seen too many shapes of worlds that were not meant to be seen.

“It’s all my fault. I could have accepted her terms and returned to a normal life. I could have been myself again.”

“There’s still time, Sol,” Derya said.

“No, you don’t understand,” I said in a faltering voice. “All of the things I told you are real to me. They happened to me in a way that… that made them tangible. These weren’t dreams… where you wake up and… and in a few hours they’ve gone away. These were visions of alternative realities. Nammu exists… somewhere… she is real, and I made love to her…”

Derya looked at me and then Dr. Folsom. Dr. Folsom raised his hand

slightly as if to send a calming signal to both of us. “Let’s all take a deep breath before we go on. Solomon, I have worked with hundreds of patients over the years, you are the first one who has opened up this quickly in such an articulate manner, and I want to acknowledge that. It is a very good sign, and you are to be commended.

“This disclosure, the one you just made, seems to be at the center of your illness. It seemed very hard for you to speak of it, so its disclosure is welcome here despite how painful it might be for you tell us and for Derya to hear it. Often it’s those admissions that matter most.”

He turned to Derya. “When you hear this, what can you say that will express how you’re feeling, but still acknowledge that Solomon showed courage in telling us?”

Derya glanced furtively at Dr. Folsom. Her eyes were red, but there were no tears left to fall. She looked at me with an expression of hopelessness. “I don’t know why you’re seeing all of this, Sol. I don’t know why you feel you should be tortured by imaginary beings. I don’t know why you think I could believe this… this fantasy… these fantasies. They’re happening all around you, gods and demons, saints and henchmen, quacks and… and an old shaman living who knows where.

“By some weird fate, you got the heart of a disturbed woman. Thank god she gave you this chance at a new life, but I think she’s infected you in some way… just as she said in her video, and I don’t know how that’s possible.

“Maybe there’s a reason for all of this, and it will become obvious to us in a month or a year, but right now… I’m so terribly confused I’m afraid for my own sanity.

“I have to be strong and take care of the kids. I’ll quit my work, so I can concentrate on all of this. I already gave them my notice. My mother will come over as soon as she can get her visa approved, and she’ll help out. But I need you to get better. I need you… Sol, we all need you.”

I stared at the cardboard box that waited on the linoleum floor at Derya’s feet. It held threads to my former life. I listened to her voice. It was the same voice I fell in love with fifteen years ago, but it was saying strange words now, and there was a tone of fear that was unmistakable—a fear that I had

brought on. A heaviness filled me, infinitely still and certain. It wrapped around me like a cloak made of thick lead. I stayed still, quiet, waiting for some sound, word, feeling—something to move me to speak, but I found nothing.

“Solomon?” Dr. Folsom’s voice filled the room. “Did you have something you wanted to say?”

I continued staring at the box, and then I felt something. It was small, almost too small to notice. It was a voice. Yes, it was a voice, a child’s, I think—maybe mine. It was at the age when the difference between a boy and girl is insignificant with respect to their voice. The voice, unhitched to any face or name, grew inside me. It began to open my mouth. It began to speak.

“I am afraid. I am not the person you thought I was. I am different… I have changed. I am something that only words can try to describe, but there is no description of me. I am something different than you or you. I am not what you are. I am not what you want me to be. I am me. I am afraid, but I am me.”

Derya raised her hand to her mouth and began trembling. She saw me for just an instant. I felt her eyes open for a glimmering moment when someone sees underneath the words, the dress, the face, the body language. When they look at something larger than the body, and feel connected to it.

Derya stood up from her chair and came over to me and hugged me, bending over uncomfortably. It was awkward, but it was the first time she reached out to me. She straightened up and took a step back. “That was the first time I saw you speak from your heart.”

I returned her smile, and the voice inside me retreated back into the palace turrets of some ancient place.

“I think we should end there, on a high note,” Dr. Folsom said, standing up himself. He walked to the door and opened it, and I could hear him say something to his secretary, about fetching Mr. Winters.

I looked into Derya’s waiting eyes. She bent down and picked up the box and handed it to me. “It’s yours. I’ll bring more later.”

“When will I see you again?” I asked.

“Saturday. I’ll come Saturday.”

“Have you heard anything from Doctor Chayton?”

Her expression darkened for a moment. “He’s left messages on your phone and home phone. Doctor Kendall called and said he’d gotten calls from him, too. I wasn’t sure what to say to him, so I haven’t tried.”

“Please, can you tell him I’m here?”

“I will…”

Dr. Folsom returned. “Thank you so much for your visit, today, Derya. It was one of the best sessions I have ever witnessed. I have great hopes for you both. On Saturday, you can have private time, so plan on that, okay?”

We both nodded. Mr. Winters’s presence filled the room as I could feel the tremors of his footsteps on the floor. I stood up and embraced Derya somewhat mechanically and then backed away, watching her expression like a child after telling their mother a bad thing.

Dr. Folsom and Mr. Winters were behind me by the door as I walked backwards, carrying my box. I mouthed the words: “I’m sorry,” and then turned around before she could say or do anything, and walked out. Mr. Winters, like an elephant’s shadow, followed me.

Chapter 88: Nessie

The sound of commotion woke me. I had fallen asleep in the late afternoon as the sun began to set—it must have pulled me with it. But now I could hear voices in the hallway as they struggled with something, and I went out to see what was happening, still half asleep.

I saw two EMTs leave a room, carrying heavy bags, on the opposite side of the hall. I had met her on my first day. She was bedridden. Didn't look too good—in terms of her health—so I figured I should stay away, which I did.

I heard one of the EMTs murmuring something as they walked away that "she should be in a hospice, not an asylum." The hallway was quiet again as the elevator had swallowed them. I padded across the hallway in my black slippers, and opened the door a bit wider, and looked inside.

I'm not normally a nosy person. I seldom venture into a neighbor's yard or seek interaction of any kind, especially where sick people are concerned, but there was something that called me, and to this day, I don't know what.

"Hey." A voice called from the darkness of the room—its windows covered in makeshift shades, courtesy of a blanket.

"Hi, I'm—"

"I know who you are."

"Really? Then you should tell me."

A soft laughter came from the bed. I could almost see her in the dim light, a dull shape lying on her bed.

"Your name's Solomon, right?"

"Right… if I'm disturbing you, I can go…"

"No, actually I'd prefer you to stay."

She coughed for a moment and then swallowed hard. "Are you who they say you are?"

“I don’t know… I’m a former teacher.”

“No, not that. Are you what they say you are in here?”

She moved her hand to her chest, but the light was so faint I wasn’t sure.

“What’s your name?” I asked, deflecting her question.

“They tell me that you’re here to save me. Now how you gonna do that?”

I looked around the room. It was empty I was quite sure of that. “Who’re they?”

“Ah, you can’t see them?” she said with a hint of surprise. There was a long pause. “Solomon, I don’t have long on earth, but I always wanted to meet you, or someone like you.”

“I’m not sure who you think I am, but I’m no healer.”

“No, I don’t need a healer—too far gone for that, and I’m not sure I really want to stay around… given my residence for the last eleven years. Come in, you can sit there.”

My eyes had adjusted to the dim light by then, and I could see the faint outline of a chair next to her bed. I sat down and heard it creak under my weight.

“My name’s Sandra. I was once a musician. Played cello, violin, piano, harp, almost anything I could get my hands on. I didn’t like to blow, but using my hands, I was good at that. Sorry about the suggestive tone… Freud would roll his eyes for sure on that one.” She chuckled weakly and started to cough again.

“Can I get you some water?”

“That would be wonderful.”

“I’ll be right back.”

I walked quickly down the hall to the lavatory and grabbed a plastic cup and filled it with water and returned, passing it to her with great care because of the dim light. She drank like she hadn’t had any water for a long time. I began to wonder if anyone was really caring for her.

“Do you have any family?” I asked, as she handed the cup back to me.

“Everyone has a family, Solomon. Even me. The question is does my family have a daughter, and on that account, it’s less clear. You see, I was a preacher’s daughter. I was raised by folks who believed in the Bible and the Holy Word… and then I came along. It was okay to speak in tongues, just as long as no one could understand you. But I started to speak in tongues, and my words were sensible. I dare say, and without any real pride because I’m long past that, they were beautiful. But my words had one problem, they were not religious… in fact, they were goddamn anti-religious.

“My folks kicked me out when I was fourteen. Not literally, they just put me in a boarding school, and it became my new home. I lived with my music teacher, during the summers. He made me his pet. Anyhow, it’s how I learned to play. I was talented… so he told me, and I started the life of a street musician, but the separation between worlds got thinner and thinner, and one night I was dropping some designer drugs with some friends, and I came to this place I can only call home.

“It was the first time I was stripped clean of everything that had accumulated over me. It was like a cosmic shower, and you felt every dark atom that had been sucking on you for years and years simply fall away, washed down some enormous drain where they were recycled in some backwater part of the universe where cavemen still exist.

“Anyway, I kept taking the drugs after that. I wanted more of that world. I wanted to feel that sense of expansion, and then I started to see things. My friends started to avoid me… well, all but one, but he’s gone now, too.

“I’ve done my time. I know what it’s like to be misunderstood. I had a dream once that I’d be a psychologist, maybe a music therapist. I tried that, but the drugs were hard to say no to… finally ended up here.”

She paused for a moment, and I could hear her mouth moving, but if she was saying something, it was impossible to hear. “You don’t know who you are, do you?”

She laughed and started coughing again. “How do you answer that question when it comes from a person who’s certifiably crazy? Huh?”

I squirmed in my chair a little.

“I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. Since I stopped playing any instruments, I use conversation as my music.”

How?”

“I don’t know, words have a rhythm, you know they bounce around and create forms in the mind of the person you’re talking to. They create a form and send it back to you, and pretty soon there’s a flow of music. You never heard it?”

“I don’t think.”

“Not common, I suppose, but fun if you know how to do it.”

“Are you sick, Sandra?”

“You mean physically, right?”

I smiled, even though I knew she couldn’t see my face. “Yes, physically.”

“I have about a week. That’s what they tell me, anyway. So I have to get all my ducks in order.”

“What ducks?”

“Shit, I wish I had a cigarette. You don’t smoke, do you?”

“No.”

“Didn’t think so. Married?”

“Yes.”

“The good ones always are…” she sighed, but in a light way.

“Kids?”

“Two.”

“Ducks… well, since it’s too late for a husband and children, those ducks will have to wait for some other life. My ducks have to do with forgiveness. I have to forgive my family.”

“Where are your folks?”

“I don’t honestly know. Wish I did… so it’ll be a one-way forgiveness, if you know what I mean. But the guides, bless their hearts, they know what

they want, and they make sure it happens."

Sandra paused, and then laughed quietly to herself. "They sure like you, so I guess that means that I like you, too."

"Sandra, what are you dying from?"

"Same as everyone else… life. Okay, I have some complications from life that not everyone suffers from, but drug addiction and schizophrenia are terrible bed fellows. No one told me that. It just seemed like it was my detour in this life to do both. Turned out that detour was a mistake."

"Do you have any siblings?"

"Yeah, they were younger, didn't really get to know them much. I heard from one of them when I was a street musician—tracked me down and everything, but then he met me… on a bad day. I had bad days sometimes. Anyway, it didn't work out too well. That was about… twelve years ago."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine…"

"So young…"

"Yeah, I used to play piano at a bar in Greenwich Village called Rose's Turn. Nice place. The owner heard me play violin on the streets outside his restaurant and invited me in. I saw his piano and told him it was my first instrument, so he let me play it. I'd go in there, and he'd let me play it while they closed the restaurant, and I'd tune into the higher music and let it flow."

"What kind of music do you play?"

"The higher music is what I call it. It doesn't really have a genre. It just flows in and through my hands. Remember, you're talking to someone who spoke in tongues when she was eight years old. A musical instrument is just another tongue."

"Who are your guides?"

"You want names, descriptions, attitudes, roles… what do you want?"

"You make is sound like they know me. How would they know me?"

"Solomon, you're here, because the chief asshole doesn't want you around.

You scare them. My guides call you a soul reader, and I think it has something to do with your mission down the line. Hold on…"

Sandra's left arm went up and then flopped down on her chest. "They want you to know that Nessie is going to help, if that makes any sense to you."

I suddenly had an eerie feeling, the kind when your skin crawls the length of your body, because you sense the presence of something invisible and extremely powerful passing before you.

"Dinner is served in ten minutes. Please come to the cafeteria to eat." The monotone message reverberated in the bright acoustics of Sandra's room.

"Okay, you need to catch some grub. It was good to finally meet you, Solomon. Just your being here, after those EMTs left, really helped me. Thanks."

"I didn't do anything… but you're welcome. I'll stop by later. Do they bring you food?"

"Oh yeah, I eat about the same time, they bring it to my room… you know, room service just like a fancy hotel, except the food tastes like shit."

I laughed, noticing it was the first time in a week. "I'll check back after dinner."

"Solomon, you don't need to look after me or anything. I'll probably go to bed early tonight. They're pumping in some pretty good drugs after dinner. Doubt I'll be up much after that."

"Then I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"Solomon, any chance you could put your fingers on some cigarettes?"

"I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks, I just a need a good smoke before I go up in smoke."

"Goodnight, Sandra."

"You, too."

I stood up and walked to my room, and sat down and flipped on the Discovery channel. Twenty-nine years old and dying in a mental hospital. Dinner wasn't interesting to me. I had lost my appetite.

Whoever Sandra’s guides were, they had some genuine insight, because no one but Jason or Corin would know about Nessie, the nickname of both Vanessa and Jaylee, given to them by Jason. Strange occurrences were uncommonly common in a nuthouse.

given to them by Jason. Strange occurrences were uncommonly common in a nuthouse.

Chapter 89: Phone

Is stared at the box that sat on my desk. I had wanted to open it when I came back from my meeting with Derya, but I was too depressed, and the box had sat unattended since. I knew that SRC staff would have already rummaged through it for any kind of contraband, but for some reason I felt that any reminders of my old life would pollute my new one. I left it unexamined.

I heard a sharp knock on my door and saw it swing open with Mr. Samuels, our night station assistant, eyeing me with a twinge of disdain, because I was the one responsible for him having to locate me. “You have a visitor—a Doctor Chayton is here.”

Visitors, as it was explained to me, were only allowed from 11 A.M. to 4 P.M., Wednesday through Sunday, unless they were your attending doctor, and there was some kind of an emergency. Stonemason Rehabilitation Center was a private facility, and they could set their own rules.

Technically, Kohana wasn’t my doctor, but somehow he must have managed to sweet talk his way in.

I followed Mr. Samuels to the library where Kohana was waiting, and went into a conference room near the back where Kohana was pacing.

“Thanks for coming,” I said as I embraced Kohana.

His large frame seemed at home.

“How are you?” he asked, holding my shoulders and looking into my eyes. His gaze was searching and powerful, and I had to look away.

“I’m okay… I think I’m okay.”

Kohana turned to Mr. Samuels. “Can you give us some privacy, please?”

Mr. Samuels backed away out of the room we were in, and pretended to be looking at books just outside our conference room. He remained visible through the glass window of the meeting room that looked into the library

that was now closed and mostly dark. Mr. Samuels had a wiry frame with the typical white nursing uniform and tennis shoes. His hair was sandy blond and he had a distinctive accent, though I couldn't place it.

"How'd you manage to get in?" I whispered.

"It's funny, I was going to ask you the same thing." Kohana said with a teasing laugh.

"Thanks for coming. I assume Derya told you."

He nodded. "I knew something was up when you didn't call me about the CPS meeting, and I was trying to reach you every way I knew how.

"Ty came along, too, but stayed in the car. He asked me to smuggle these in." He glanced over his shoulder to see Mr. Samuels looking down at a shelf of books, and passed me a cellophane-wrapped collection of cookies. "Stick'em in your pants," he whispered.

"Thank Tyler for me," I said.

"I will. So, tell me what happened."

We both sat down at the table with our backs to the window.

I explained the event that had triggered my visit to SRC. Kohana understood. I also told him about my meeting with Burkhan on the train. Kohana listened with great care. It was one of his best qualities, he really listened. It was not a partial tuning in; it was like radar locked onto its target and every atom of attention was riveted on the feelings of every word. It made the process of opening up that much easier.

"How do you like the director here?"

"Doctor Folsom?"

Kohana nodded.

"I actually like him pretty well."

"Good."

"What about the meds, do you know what you're taking?"

"Not a clue, but I feel better here than I did with the stuff Doctor Carson

was prescribing."

"How did you get in to see me?" I asked again.

"Bribe."

"Really?"

"It was the only way to make sure Doctor Folsom wouldn't know."

"You bribed Mr. Samuels?"

He nodded.

"And you're sure he won't say anything?" I asked. "Not sure, but it's in his best interest, because he took the bribe. Also, I told him you had a lot of money and he should see to your every need." Kohana winked at me.

"Since we're on the topic of bribes," I said, "can you find out who the patient is in room five twenty-five, and do me a little favor?"

"Sure. What kind of favor?"

"Do you have a piece of paper and a pen?"

He reached into his breast pocket and handed me a pen, and then found a book on the credenza behind us and tore a piece of paper out of a reasonably blank page at the back.

"Have to improvise," he said smiling.

"Once you have the last name—by the way her first name is Sandra—give it to my law firm and tell them I'll pay them whatever it takes to locate her family and bring them here to visit her."

Kohana looked at me with a stunned expression. "They'll do this on my instruction?"

It was the one flaw in my plan. How could I make it clear that Kohana spoke for me? "Tell Mr. Samuels that I'll pay him five hundred dollars to make a phone call to my attorney."

"First of all, I doubt Mr. Samuels will open a credit account for you, but more importantly, hell, I'll give you my cell phone for five hundred dollars." Kohana laughed. "I need to upgrade anyway."

He looked at me with his eyes smiling. “Do you get any sun in your room?”

“Some.”

“The phone charges for about one hour of use on a solar charge. But it prefers direct sun to get a good charge.”

“Are you sure you can live without it?”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay, thanks. Then I’ll call Dan tomorrow and do it myself.”

“One less thing for me to worry about,” Kohana quipped. “But you still need the last name, right?”

I nodded.

“You can’t ask this Sandra for her last name?”

“I’m not sure if she’d tell me… I have a feeling that it’s necessary.”

“Okay, I’ll take care of it and call you with the name, and anything else I can find out about her. Give me twenty minutes after we break here.”

“Thanks.”

Kohana made a few modifications on his cell phone while we chatted about the meeting I had had with Derya earlier in the day. He told me about his phone conversation with Derya and felt that she was trying her best to be helpful. He then slid the phone to me as he leaned in my direction to block the transfer from being seen by Mr. Samuels.

“I took all passwords off and set it to charge on solar. You should be good to go… just keep the ringer off, and whenever you’re not using it, turn it off. Alright?”

“Okay, I understand. One more thing, do you have any cigarettes on you?”

“Took up smoking, huh?”

“They’re not for me.”

“Never are…” he opened his coat pocket and took out a half-opened pack and passed it to me in the same manner as he had done with the phone.

“If our man out there keeps seeing me do this, he’s going to think I like you… if you know what I mean.”

I laughed a little nervously, but grabbed the cigarettes and stashed then in my pants.

“Do you need a lighter, too?

“If you can spare it.”

“All yours.”

Thanks again for coming out and seeing me.”

“That’s what we do. Take care of each other.” He patted my back and stood up from the table.

“Doctor Carson is still my doctor of record?”

He nodded.

“That’s another thing I’ll have my attorney look into.”

“Nice to have your own law firm and a few million dollars to oil the machinery, huh?”

“It has its advantages in theory, but so far, as you can see, they’re not many advantages to brag about.”

We both laughed and embraced each other. Kohana sat back down, and I went back to my room, escorted by Mr. Samuels. As we got to my room, Mr. Samuels looked at me.

“I should frisk you.”

“He just gave me some cookies,” I admitted.

“Show me.” His right hand curled, facing up, with its fingers dancing.

I took the cookies out of my front pants and handed them to him. He looked at me and then the cookies. “There’s enough to split.”

He unwrapped them and took three and left the rest for me.

“Have a goodnight,” he said, closing the door before his final word was spoken. I heard the latch close. I was locked in for the night, but I had, in my possession, the most important technology I could hope for.

I smiled as broadly as I believe I ever had.

Chapter 90: Sovereign Integral

Kohana called about fifteen minutes after Mr. Samuels had locked me in my room. I ate the cookies that Tyler had brought and had a drink of water to wash them down. They were chocolate chip cookies and tasted like heaven. As it turned out, I was right about Sandra. Her name was Allison Li. She had been a concert pianist until three years ago when her battle with schizophrenia ended in drug abuse, and she could no longer hide her mental illness.

According to her admittance file, her parents were in China. She had one brother, but with a last name like Li, it wouldn't be easy to track him down. According to Kohana, his address wasn't on any of the admittance forms.

Mr. Samuels had let Kohana peek at her admittance file for a mere $200, on top of the $200 he paid to see me. It was a good payday for Mr. Samuels. I was beginning to see how things worked.

I turned the phone off immediately after my call with Kohana and set it carefully inside the box that Derya had brought. I placed it underneath two photo albums. I figured the SRC staff had already examined the box, so they'd not look at it again. Besides, there was really no place to hide anything in the room.

I turned off the light. I had left the television on, and turned that off as well. The room was strangely quiet, and mostly dark. I thought about Allison just across the hallway. I hoped she was sleeping. I began to say a little prayer for her, and then I felt something stir in the room. When I opened my eyes I saw nothing. No hazy outlines of furniture, no window framed in stars. I was in some other place, and as I looked around, the world slowly formed into Dou Xing's encampment.

"I've been waiting for you to return," he said.

He was dressed in a traditional silk robe, colored in a royal blue with gold trim, his long black hair tied in a ponytail. He was sitting across the fire from me, almost identical to the last time I saw him.

“How is this possible?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him.

“We have thinned the drugs. You’re not really taking anything… it only seems like you are. It’s a placebo, but not for you, for your doctors.” Dou Xing smiled at me, his coal black eyes seemed to swallow everything like black holes.

“How?”

“Molecules. We alter them. With energy.”

“It’s that simple?”

“It’s not simple, unless you know how.”

He motioned for me to sit down, and I did.

“There is something I want to tell you,” Dou Xing said, “but first, you must do as I instruct. Are you willing?”

“Yes.”

“Then you are not ready.”

I looked at him, and though there were no mirrors around, I imagined my face was completely puzzled.

“Tell me about your experience?” he asked.

“What just happened? Did I do something wrong?”

He flashed a smile. “You were ready to take my instructions without question—”

“But I trust you, why wouldn’t I?”

“Trust is fine, but always question. Never give away what is yours, any more than you would take away what is mine.”

I could still feel puzzlement on my face.

“You are sovereign. Your world will try its best to tell you otherwise, but you are this—sovereign. You are also integrated with all others within your realm. So you are both sovereign and integrated. In this state, you are able to operate as a singular being that is connected to all other beings through the network of personal responsibility, which is to say, the virtues of the heart—

it is the only covenant.

“Do you understand?”

I nodded. “But questioning… even you?”

“It is not a sign of disrespect. It is a sign that you understand sovereignty. It is not willful disobedience to an authority; it is the practice of your heart aligned to what is called in some worlds, the Sovereign Integral. This is the consciousness that we all aspire to, whether we call it by this name or not.”

“You are aware, I take it, that I’m living in a mental hospital right now…”

“Yes.”

“And I am anything but a Sovereign Integral. Right now, I wear clothes that aren’t mine, I’m locked inside a room, I eat when I’m told, and I have no real freedoms, so how do I live as a Sovereign Integral?”

“You align with it.”

“And how do I do that?”

“Everything is about alignment in a world that is ordered hierarchically. Because there are levels or layers of the world, alignment is critical. I will show you… with your permission.” He nodded to me, and I nodded back.

In an instant we were flying by some invisible means above a place that was absolutely pristine in its beauty. There was a large waterfall, plunging into a dense, tropical jungle, and we flew into a pool of water that was only a few yards downstream from where the waterfall exploded into the river.

The sound of the rushing water was exhilarating. I could feel the power of the water pushing us downstream as we bobbed like apples floating down the river. In a few moments, the roar of the water subsided and the current diminished sufficiently, so we could swim to the river’s edge where we hoisted ourselves up and lay on our backs on the warm sand of the embankment.

“Do you see it?” Dou Xing was pointing upwards to some tree branches that hung high above us like green canopies, blocking the sky. I looked and saw only leaves, nothing peculiar or unusual.

“You mean the leaves?” I asked tentatively.

“Look closer.”

I squinted, but again saw nothing unusual. “I see only leaves.”

“Try not to look at the leaves, but rather, look at the movement of the leaves and what gathers at their lowest point.”

The spray from the waterfall kept the leaves in a perpetual state of glistening green and drops of water were falling from them, and I watched as these drops of water fell down on us. It was hypnotic. I kept watching, occasionally I’d feel a water drop hit my arm or face.

“Keep watching,” Dou Xing said. “Patience is rewarded.”

Then it happened, I was watching one drop form high above me, knowing somehow it would land on me. I watched it curling its energy into enough mass that it would suddenly burst from its leafy post and let gravity have its way with it. It began its descent, and I watched it fall into my eye with great relish. As it hit my eye, I immediately felt my body, such as it was in this world, become like water. It was a very strange experience, I began to dissolve, and I flowed into the river and felt myself merging into the water that flowed downstream.

I rushed by stones and boulders and smooth branches that poked out of the river like bones of trees that had long passed to a new world. I heard the sound of rushing water; I felt the movement, unburdened of any desire or will. It was utterly freeing to flow like this. To feel movement and yet no will. To be separate yet part of a whole. It was ecstasy. It was alignment.

The instant the thought hit me I was back sitting in front of Dou Xing’s modest fire pit with the faint outline of distant mountains in the background.

“I… I understand,” I muttered distractedly.

“Alignment is flow. But what do you flow with?” Dou Xing asked.

“Love?”

“Is it a question?”

“Love.”

“And where does this love come from?”

That was a good question. I thought about it for a few moments as I was readying my answer, feeling like a test was being played out. “It comes from here.” I put my hand over my chest.

“Remember the waterfall?”

“Yes.”

“It’s like the heart, but before the waterfall, there was a source, what was it?”

“The whole river was the source,” I said.

“So we align to love’s unity instead of the small drop—the one ego. We align to the part of us that is the whole river.”

“The Sovereign Integral…” I half-whispered.

“Yes.”

“But if it’s just a concept, if I’ve never experienced this state before, how do I align to something that’s a mere thought or concept?”

Dou Xing looked heavenward for a moment. “This will come as a surprise to you, but you, in your human instrument, are a mere thought or concept, too. You have only accepted it as your reality. It is the only difference. So when you align to a larger picture of your true self—the whole river—you assign a new sense of priority to your interaction with the universe. This can be done on a subconscious level; it doesn’t require you to will it into manifestation with prayers and visualization. Just hold the desire to be aligned… to be the whole river. The rest, as they say, will follow.”

As his words finished I opened my eyes and saw the drab outlines of my room hazy in its darkness. I was once again alone. I was once again wondering about my sanity. Why me? Why did I have this ease of leaving my world and seeing other dimensions? I reminded myself, at least this time it was Dou Xing and not Nammu. For that, I was indeed grateful.

I slept, hoping my alignment was wind-cradled to a higher, wider perspective, where everywhere was assembled within a glittering frame, and everything named, was gone.

Chapter 91: Complicated

It was Saturday. Derya would be visiting, and I was excited to see her. My mind was clear. I don't know how my meds were being doled out, or whether Dao Xing's comment was based in reality, I only knew that I was feeling… normal. I don't like the word, as you, the reader, must by now know with absolute certainty, but I don't have another word to conjure.

They opened my door a little past 7 A.M. every morning. I really don't know how the term, funny farm, came to describe a mental health facility, because I had yet to see anyone really laughing or having fun. Most of the residents (I prefer this term to patients) trudged through their day a bit like wind-up toys that have been pointed in the direction of three areas: lavatory, cafeteria, and the commons.

The commons was a room where guests could be entertained and the residents could interact. I preferred the library as it was quiet. I preferred to stay by myself, not because I didn't like my fellow residents, I just had nothing in common with them it seemed, because they mostly liked to watch television in the commons, and fight over the remote control. Because there were only three channels, all of them educational, it seemed pointless to me.

I decided to try and call Dan Archer, though I didn't have high confidence that he would be in his office or have a published phone number.

I fired up Kohana's phone and took a quick peek down the hallway to make sure no one was nearby. It was empty; the residents were no doubt relaxing in the commons. I found the law firm's phone number and dialed the number.

I was quickly directed to voicemail. I had the option to select the voicemail box of several attorneys and waited patiently for Dan Archer's mailbox. It never came up.

Maybe I'd spaced it out. I called back and listened again to the voicemail, this time with complete concentration, but with the same result. No Dan Archer.

I turned off the phone and placed it back in the box, underneath the photo albums, which I still hadn't opened. Maybe Dan only used the law firm occasionally. It was his father's law firm, so the Archer name didn't necessarily mean Daniel Archer. I pulled the phone out again and fired it up. "Do you have a listing for: Daniel C. Archer, Manhattan, New York?"

I waited patiently. The automated voice came on in its characteristically mock- human style: "Daniel C. Archer is unlisted in Manhattan, but there is a Dan Archer in Chelsea at 315 West 33rd Street. That number is: 646-524-8188. Would you like me to dial the number?"

"Yes."

I could hear the number dialing, and my heart was pounding slightly harder than it should. What was I nervous about?

"Hi, this is Dan. I'm unable to take your call right now, but leave me a short message, and I'll probably call you back. Bye now."

It was definitely his voice. The recognition calmed me. I decided to leave a message.

"Hi Dan, this is Solomon Tonum calling," I whispered. "I was hoping to talk with you about a situation I needed your help with…" I walked to my door and looked around the corner. No one was there, so I closed it.

"It's complicated, and when I say that, I mean complicated. In fact, there's no way for you to reach me. However, I need you to do whatever research you can on the following person, and I'll call you Monday afternoon and see if you were able to find out anything. Time is of the essence, and I'll pay whatever is necessary to make it a priority for your firm."

I cleared my throat, trying to speak as clearly as I could, but not too loud. "The name is Allison Li. She was a concert pianist here in the New York area. About three years ago she was admitted into a private mental hospital. She's dying. I need to find out if she has any family. There may be a brother who lives in the States, but I don't have a name. Any help you can provide would be appreciated.

"One more thing, I want to change my attending doctor relative to my mental health. My… my current shrink is not working out, and I need to get

my previous one, a Doctor Kohana Chayton back in charge of my mental health. If you could look into that and be prepared to advise me on Monday when I call, it would be most appreciated, too.

“Sorry for the long message… I’ll call you Monday. Thanks.”

I turned off the phone and immediately placed it inside the box in its usual hiding spot. I went to the door and casually opened it. There were two residents slowly walking down the hall to the lavatory, arguing about something, but otherwise it was empty and quiet.

I thought about my message to Dan. What would he think? It was a little out there, but then that’s where I lived now. Out there, but aligned. I smiled at the thought, and walked across the hallway to check on Allison.

Chapter 92: Leave

Knocking on the half-open door, I opened it cautiously, “Sandra, are you awake?”

I could hear the sound of labored breathing, and assumed she was asleep. I came nearer to her bedside, and looked at her.

She was Asian, young, and at one time, I was sure, beauty held a prominent place throughout her body. But now she looked like many of the drug addicts portrayed in the movies—pale, lifeless skin, bags under the eyes, thin and gaunt-looking. She was, in a word, emaciated.

I lightly shook her shoulder and felt mostly bone. She was wasting away. No IV, no medical equipment. Nothing. I went to the lavatory and filled-up her cup with water and brought it back, setting it next to her bed.

It wasn’t fair, a woman with such talent wasting away in her bed with barely anyone to care for her. I marched out of the room and went to the commons to find someone to register a complaint to. Mr. Winters was standing by one of the doors like a stone sentinel.

“Sandra or Allison, whatever her name is, in room five twenty-five, right across the hall from me—is anyone taking care of her?”

He looked at me with such empty eyes. “What’s it to you? Is she your business?”

“No, but I never see anyone in her room, and she’s obviously sick.”

“Look, everyone’s sick here, and there’s only two of us to watch. Cost reductions.” He pointed with his hand. “The new drugs out there, fewer people in here. That’s the way it works.”

“It doesn’t work, Mr. Winters. That’s the problem. People need love and care, and she’s clearly not getting either.”

Mr. Winters grabbed me by the arm and took me outside in the hallway. “Listen, I’m gonna let you in on a little secret, that girl in there, she’s got no

one. Not her fault, maybe, but that's the way it is. She's only got a few days, and she's gone. Okay? So why don't you go find a new project to worry about, because that one… that one is gone. It's already gone."

"So you've just given up on her… make it easy for her to die? Move it along a little faster by doing nothing!"

"What are you, a doctor?" he asked.

"All I'm saying, is even if she only has a few more days, can't we make them a little easier for her?"

He pulled back a bit and looked at me. "You talking euthanasia?"

"No, of course not. Just make sure she has whatever she needs. That's she's comfortable and feels cared for."

"She's getting the best drugs we got. She seems pretty comfortable."

"Really? Drugs? That's the way to make her feel good?"

I started to walk away, confused by the conversation. Mr. Winters followed me a bit down the hallway, maybe his conscience found his tongue. "Look man, I'll give you whatever you want if you want to look after her. I have to stay around here and the cafeteria. I can't be hanging out there."

I considered his words. "Okay, I'll take care of her. I'll get you a list of what I need. Okay?"

"I'll do what I can."

"No, you said you'd give me whatever I need if I want to take care of her. I'm going to make a list. I have money, but not with me. If you get me what I want with your own money, I'll pay you back."

He put up his arms. "Look man, do I look like a cash machine? I'm not going to loan you money. You think I'm crazy? I just work here… that don't make me crazy. It's just a job, man."

"What if I pay you double whatever you buy for me?"

"Double?"

"Yup, you spend a hundred dollars; I'll pay you two hundred back. That's a good return isn't it?"

“How you gonna do that?”

“I’ll have my wife do it. She’s coming today for a visit, I’ll talk with her, and we’ll work it out.”

“Make it triple, and you have a deal.”

“Okay,” I said. “Triple it is. Shake on it?”

We shook hands, and I walked back to Allison’s room, glad to have a plan —as shaky as it was—that could help her in some way. I knew my arrangement with Mr. Winters was sketchy, but I hoped, if my list was reasonable, that Mr. Winters would make good on his promise. I went directly to my room, grabbed a sheet of paper and a pencil, and went to Allison’s room where I decided to stay until she woke up.

I sat down on the chair next to her bed, and started writing, making three lists. The first of these related to things SRC already possessed like clean sheets, pillow cases, a new bedspread, towels and drinking water and food.

The second list was for things like nutrition and protein drinks. I didn’t know if they would work, but I added them anyway, along with some fresh fruits and vegetables.

The third list was for things that were a little more exotic. I wanted to see if a hospice care giver could do an assessment, I wanted to look into air ventilation and any medical equipment that could make her more comfortable. I realized that the third list would require more than Mr. Winter’s resources and capabilities, so that list I would take up with Dr. Folsom.

I heard Allison stir a little bit and went over to her. “I’m here, Allison. Can I get you anything?”

She blinked her eyes, trying to focus on my face. “Who are you?”

“Your neighbor, Solomon.”

She smiled lightly. “They said you’d be back…”

“What else did they tell you?”

“That you’d bring cigarettes…”

I smiled and nodded. “I did.”

“Aren’t you a sweetheart?” The mention of cigarettes seemed to activate her interest in waking up. Allison struggled to sit up, and I tried my best to help her, but it was a little like trying to make a rag doll stand up on its own.

“Here’s some water for you.”

She drank several gulps and handed the cup back to me. “Where are those cigarettes?” she croaked.

“Here.” I gave her one, which she promptly put in her mouth. I grabbed the lighter from my pocket and flicked it on, and she blew the cigarette out of her mouth with laughter. “I can’t smoke, Solomon. I just wanted to feel one in my mouth. I wanted to pretend. My lungs are wasted. I’m not in that big of a hurry to leave this earth… especially now that I have a new neighbor.” She struggled to smile.

“Can you get the cigarette for me? I think I blew it to the end of the bed somewhere.”

I found it and returned it to her mouth.

“Thanks. Besides, if they caught me smoking in here, I’m pretty sure my bed would end up in the parking lot, and that’s assuming they’d let me have a bed.”

We both laughed.

“I’m making a list of things to get you.”

“A list?”

“New sheets, protein drinks, things like that. Is there anything you’d like?”

She looked into my eyes searchingly for a few moments as if she were a sailor trying to get her bearings. “What do you want from this, Solomon? I can’t even be a friend but for a week or two. I smell. I look like shit. I’m a schizophrenic on steroids, my personality is bitter. What do you get out of this?”

“I don’t know. I’m just doing it, because it’s the right thing to do.”

“Why? What makes it the right thing to do?”

“Because if I were in your place, it’s what I’d want.”

“Well, don’t assume that what you want is what I want… Shit, I liked it better when we were both in the dark.”

She turned away from me. “I don’t want you staring at me, okay?”

“I wasn’t staring.”

“Well, don’t.”

There was a long uncomfortable pause.

“I did some research on you,” I said, hoping to start a new conversation.

“Really? I’m that interesting to you?”

“You were a concert pianist only three years ago—”

“That’s a lie. I wasn’t a concert pianist. I was never that good. Go fuck yourself, and leave me alone.”

“Allison, I was—”

“My name is Sandra. Stop with the Allison shit. You don’t know me. You can’t know me. I’m something that’s never been on this planet before. Truthfully, I’m not even human, but that’s another story, and I’m glad to be leaving here, so do me a favor and don’t do anything that would prolong my agony. Got it?”

Her words were like weapons. Every one of them piercing my skin and sinking into my heart. I knew it would be easy to stand up and leave and never come back. It was what she wanted, but for some reason it wasn’t what I wanted.

“I’ll go,” I said, “but I will be helping you, so get used to that. You’re in no position to reject my help. Ask your guides.”

She took the cigarette out of her mouth as if it were lit, tapping it lightly on the bed rail as if it had an imaginary tip of ash. “Just leave. I want to sleep.”

She took a drag from her cigarette and looked away.

This is the odd thing, I didn’t mean to do it, but I felt something rise inside me. You could call it a higher self or a spirit of some kind, I don’t honestly

know, but I reached over and took her hand in mine. That bony, cool-to-the-touch hand, and even though her instinct was to pull away, I held it strong with both of my hands. Her struggle was short, and I watched tears flow from her eyes without sound or struggle.

Her face watched the wall on the far side of the room, and my eyes averted to the window to avoid staring at her. I searched for an alignment to love, the kind that comes from the deepest part of you, when you are the whole river.

“You can let go now” she whispered. “You don’t have to stay.”

“Just answer me one simple question. Do you want my help, or don’t you? Last night you suggested I was even going to save you… was that all just talk?”

She turned to look at me, directly into my eyes for the first time. “That’s my problem. I don’t know what I want. It’s always been my problem.”

“Do you know what I will do one day?” I asked her.

She closed her eyes and when she opened them again they fluttered like moth wings. “The things we have names for, they live in the past. The things of the future are the only things that are truly nameless. The thing you will do is nameless. Even if you try to think of it, to give it birth through names, you’ll only strike a match in a cave so vast that you’ll see nothing but the ground beneath you.”

I felt this presence roll into the room. Lying on the bed was a ninety-pound waif of a person, delicate, trained in the precision of something that only a handful of our entire species could even imagine. I could sense her mind—twisted by the hands of judgment and misunderstanding—reduce itself into the counterfeit of a murky fate to protect the guides that stood behind her.

“Are you one of her guides?”

“I am.”

“Why are you speaking with me?”

“You asked a question that only we can answer.”

“She could have answered no.”

There was a long silence.

“Leave her,” I said. “Let her last days in this body be hers and only hers.”

“She loves us, without us she would perish.”

“She is dying with you. Leave her.”

“By whose authority do you tell us to leave?”

“I have only my own.”

“And you are certain of that?”

“I am.”

“We sense that you are more than that. You are much more than that. Yet, you do not make yourself to be more than a simple man. That is the only authority we needed.

“You have brought something to Sandra that we have not been able to. We have the best intentions, but we do not understand your world. We will leave her in your hands if you promise that you will stay with her, but this promise must be pure.”

I looked at her waiting for my response like a bird awaits its resurrection after hitting a window. “…I promise.”

“Then we release her.”

Slowly, Allison’s eyes fluttered open and began to focus on my face as they found me. “What happened?”

“I spoke with your guides—”

“They’re gone!”

I couldn’t tell if she was happy or horrified. I could tell by her face that she was probing her internal affairs—listening for the inner sounds of voices like a mother who seeks the sound of children after they have grown up and left.

“They’re gone…”

The cigarette fell from her limp, startled mouth.

Chapter 93: Adversaries

Once when I was very young, maybe three years old, I had this dream where I was fighting with a large tree whose branches were animated and sought to capture me. I knew, though I don't know how I knew, that it needed me to grow a new branch, and I didn't want to be a branch, or anything else related to a tree.

I fought it relentlessly. It was a battle that no three-year-old should have to fight, but I did.

Mr. Winters led me to my Saturday meeting with Dr. Folsom fifteen minutes prior to Derya's scheduled arrival. When we got into the elevator, Mr. Winters looked at me out of the corners of his eyes. "You got your list?"

I handed it to him. "I'll need receipts. You bring me those, and I'll have my wife send you an e-transfer for three times the amount. Okay?"

He scanned the list. "I'll do a test run, first. If you and your wife come through, I'll get the rest of the stuff. Here's where she can send the money."

He handed me a piece of paper with handwritten numbers on it, which I stuffed into my sweatpants.

"Look, there isn't time to waste on test runs," I pleaded. "Just get the stuff."

"I'll need four times the rate if you want me to get all of this… this is serious dough. I'm assuming a major risk if your wife decides she doesn't wanna play along."

"I'm meeting her in twenty minutes! I'll know if she's going to play along, so I'll confirm that everything's a go when you bring me back to my room. Okay?"

"I still want four times… it's a lot of stuff."

I sighed as the elevator door opened. "Only for this list. The next one will be three. Deal?"

He nodded gruffly and sauntered ahead of me.

When we got to Dr. Folsom's office I sat down in my chair and exchanged pleasantries. He asked Mr. Winters to wait outside, and close the door behind him.

"So, Solomon, how are you feeling today?"

"Good… and you?"

He looked at me, apparently surprised I would ask him such a question. He gathered up his notepad and pen from his desk. "Are you aware that your wife is coming for a visit?"

"Yes."

"Good."

He sat down opposite me and began rifling through his notes, looking for something specific. "Your last therapist—before Doctor Carson—was a Doctor Chayton, is that correct?"

I nodded, wondering why he was asking.

"Is there any reason why his phone would be in your room?"

My heart sunk. I could feel the rush of blood to my face, and I couldn't think of a good answer, so I lied, something I'm absolutely terrible at. "Perhaps my wife brought it by mistake…"

"We searched that box very carefully before she gave it to you. There was no phone in it, Solomon, and if there had been, we wouldn't have permitted it. The only explanation is that Doctor Chayton visited this facility. Now, something we don't talk about much around here is that these premises are under twenty-four hour video surveillance. It so happens that we have video of Doctor Chayton arriving here last night at precisely 8:32 P.M. He used our phone entry system—you can see him in this picture. That is him, isn't it?"

He handed me a printed photograph of Kohana talking on an entry phone. I had no recollection of seeing the entryway to SRC, but it looked convincing. I simply stared between the photograph in my hand and Dr. Folsom's calm, but stern face.

"So my question is, did Doctor Chayton visit you last night and give you

his phone, or did you steal it?”

“I didn’t steal it!” I exclaimed. My response was pure instinct, and as soon as I reacted, I knew it was probably not the right answer.

“Then why did Doctor Chayton give you his phone, and how did he even get into this facility when he isn’t your Doctor of Record?”

I handed the grainy photograph back to Dr. Folsom. “He came, because he wants to help me. He gave me his phone, because I begged him to.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to talk with Derya—”

“The last call was to a Dan Archer in New York City. All the calls before that were before 8:30 P.M. last night. Who is Dan Archer?”

“How is any of this relevant to my therapy?”

“Let me decide what is relevant to your therapy. Who is he?”

“He’s my attorney.”

Dr. Folsom straightened his back slightly, and blinked a few times. “And what was so important to you that you would call your attorney, but not your wife or children?”

I started to speak, but I felt my mind going blank. A wave of heat was rising up my spine.

“What do you know about Allison Li?” I asked, sounding like an armchair detective.

“Solomon, I’ll ask the questions, now answer mine.”

“It’s related. I wanted to talk with my attorney about Allison.”

Dr. Folsom took off his reading glasses and rubbed his eyes. “And why would you want to do that?”

“She’s dying, and I wanted to see if he could find her family.”

There was a notable relief that spread across his face. “And if he could locate her family, then what?”

“I’d fly them out at my expense, so they could have closure.”

“A noble thought, Solomon, but that doesn’t change the fact that you broke the rules of our facility—”

“I thought my shrink could visit me off hours.”

“Doctor Chayton is not your therapist. I’m you’re attending therapist, and Doctor Carson is your Doctor of Record. You’re well aware of that. I could petition the state to revoke Doctor Chayton’s license if he’s willfully violating our patient-doctor relationships. You asked your wife to let Doctor Chayton know you were here, and she did. He came. You used your wife to break the rules. This is unacceptable, Solomon.”

“Allison is dying with little or no intervention, my only desire was to help her,” I replied. “If you want to punish me for that, then be my guest, but don’t you dare bring either my wife or Doctor Chayton into this…”

“Or what?”

I leaned forward in my chair and narrowed my eyes. “I’ll have my law firm sweep down on you so fast it’ll make your head swim.”

“On what possible grounds?”

“Staff to patient ratios, dereliction of duties to allow medical attention to a dying woman—who was once a concert pianist—”

“Did she tell you this?” He looked at me with squinting eyes.

“What difference does it make?”

“Just answer my question.”

I was angry. I didn’t really feel like disclosing anything to Dr. Folsom, and I had just threatened him with legal entanglements that could undo any of my gold star status that I’d earned in my last session with him and Derya.

He was now looking at me not as a shrink, but as an adversary. Unfortunately, he had the keys to my freedom, and we both knew it.

“Solomon, how can you expect to get out of here if you intentionally break our rules?”

I folded my arms across my chest.

“When the phone was discovered, I called your wife and explained the

situation. I've canceled your meeting today, because I want you to think about your actions—"

"You can't do that!"

"I can, Solomon, because that's part of the therapy, to play by the rules. If you're not willing to do that, then there are consequences."

"And what about your rules to take care of your patients? Allison lies in her dirty bed, alone, with hardly even a cup of water to drink. No medical—"

"Mr. Tonum, do not get smart with me!" Dr. Folsom stood to his feet and angrily waved his finger at me. "You are a patient here, under my supervision. You do not get to define care-giving protocols, you do not have a say in the medical treatment of anyone under this roof. I am in charge of this clinic. Do you understand?"

He walked to his desk and set his notepad down and tossed his pen on top of it. "Go back to your room and stay there for the rest of the day and reflect on your decisions to undermine this institution's rules of conduct. And one piece of advice, Mr. Tonum, never threaten me with legal action. My chief donor, the woman who made all of this possible, has a son here, and she won't take kindly to your threats, because she likes this place, and do you know what she did to make her considerable fortune?"

I turned and looked away.

"She was a senior executive at JP Morgan Chase. So, don't threaten me."

"Okay, I'm sorry to have threatened you. What did you tell my wife?" I asked quietly.

"What was that?"

"What did you tell Derya?"

"I told her that you had shown a propensity to not follow the rules, and I had no choice but to invoke disciplinary actions… one of which was to isolate you in your room for the balance of the day, which meant no meetings."

"When can she visit?"

"Perhaps tomorrow in the afternoon, we'll see when we have our next little

chat. And Solomon, do not look at Allison as someone who is dying. She is sick here." He pointed to his right temple. "Medically, there's nothing we can do."

I stared at him, wondering how he could possibly believe that. How could I ever trust him again? "Look, I have money. I can hire a private physician for Allison and have them do a complete—"

"Solomon, you're not listening. Her condition is psychosomatic. It's here." Again he pointed to his head, this time with more emphasis.

"Then why did the EMTs who left her room two days ago say that she belonged in a hospice?"

He sat down at his desk chair. "Maybe you misunderstood them. You're taking a treatment program that includes powerful antipsychotics… it's hard to say." He pretended to be busy shuffling some folders on his desk.

"Mr. Winters?" he shouted forcibly.

The door opened cautiously, and Mr. Winters walked in, just past the threshold.

"Take Mr. Tonum to his room, where he's to stay until the morning. Understood?"

Mr. Winters nodded. "Meals?"

Dr. Folsom looked me over. "Dinner only, but in his room."

Mr. Winters nodded again and motioned with his hand for me to follow him, which I did.

When we got on the elevator, Mr. Winters pushed the button, waved my wrist above the scanner, and leaned back against the wall with a sigh. "You must've fucked that up pretty good."

I held my tongue.

Mr. Winters led me into my room and was about to seal me inside when I burst out.

"Look, wait a second, if you unlock my door tonight, so I can help Allison out, I'll give you two hundred dollars."

“For how long?”

“Two hours.”

“One hour, five hundred bucks. That’s the deal.”

“Come on, one hour? For five hundred bucks?”

“Hey, the doctor has suspicions about you, that means he’s gonna be watching you, which means I’m taking more risk. It’s your call, man.”

“Okay, but I’m not sure when I’ll see my wife next, so the money might take a little longer.”

“I’ll give you three days, after that it goes up five hundred a day. Got it?”

I nodded. “Just one more thing. Can you check on her and see if she needs anything?” I pointed to Allison’s room.

He glared at me, and I backed away from the door, taking a quick glance at Allison’s doorway. It looked closed.

“Thanks…” I said, staring into the pale white door as it closed in front of me. I didn’t even bother to test whether it was locked or not.

Chapter 94: Forgive Me

There are very few things that matter when you have nothing.

When I turned to my desk, after Mr. Winters had locked me inside my room, I noticed my box was missing. My photo albums were gone, and whatever else was inside with them. I was angry. I flipped on the television only to see that it, too, had been tampered with and was shut off. I was left with nothing.

I lay down on my bed and closed my eyes.

A Sonverto, indeed. I was more like a homeless man in a jail cell. I remembered when I got back from my trip to South Dakota, having what seemed like an indelible sense of awareness and understanding. I was a spiritual leader. I was someone the elite were watching, guiding, helping to undertake a heavy and important mission. The evidence certainly contradicted that, because the not-so-soft entrance of chaos held my wings down like the hand of a giant.

And that was assuming I had wings to hold down.

Where was my infallible spirit? The great and capacious heart of a spiritual wunderkind called Vanessa? Had they abandoned me? Perhaps, I was like a document on God's desktop that was unceremoniously led to the icon that looked disparagingly like a trash can. A cosmic cursor had latched onto me and suspended me over the trash can, because I did something wrong. I failed a test. I only wish I knew which one. It was a long list, of that much I was certain.

The real problem when you're in God's trash can is the utter loneliness you feel. There may be overflows and abundances of many things, but loneliness is one thing that should not enjoy this state. It should be rare and perish quickly beneath time like a thin bubble of water in the desert. But my loneliness seemed to deepen, underscoring the darkness in me with garish, fluorescent colors.

I was in a village once in New Guinea, producing a film for the BBC, and I was watching a man who was undertaking an ancient ceremony in the woods behind his hut. My translator told me to look away, and when I asked him why, he said the man was going to kill himself. I told him we should stop him, and he said no, we should leave him to his duty.

It was such a strange experience to see a man pour a flammable substance on himself in a fire pit fit for a wild boar, but certainly not a human, but to those villagers the differences were immaterial. The man had caused the death of another villager, and he must repent, and in so doing, recompense the gods, or the gods would haunt the entire village.

I was young then. I didn't understand the sanctity of life as I do now, so I turned on my camera and filmed him. I zoomed in close as he began his ceremony; concentration filled his face as he doused Eucalyptus oil over his body. I watched him through my lens; he had no anger, only the jagged tremble of fear. His loved ones circled him chanting songs that had lived in their hearts for thousands of years, some of them crying, some of them jeering.

A torch was presented to him, and the presenter backed away slowly, never taking as much as a glance from the face of the offender. The presenter, I was told later, was the brother of the man he had killed. The man held the torch and said some prayer, possibly atoning for his actions, and then took the torch to his feet and then his stomach and quickly his neck. His whole body was engulfed in a matter of seconds. I could only watch. There was nothing I could do. I kept telling myself there was nothing I could do.

For two days after that I didn't speak, eat, or even try to interact with anyone. And yet I saw the offender's loved ones the next day and, yes, they seemed more sullen than usual, but they were eating and talking. It only fueled my sense of anger at them—all of them. Godless fools I thought they were. I never told my translator for fear my words would find expression, and I, too, would be handed a torch.

I never showed the film to my BBC colleagues, but one of my assistants happened on the film in the editing room and took a medical leave for a week, and never talked to me again. The film was confiscated from me, and I was reprimanded. I was supposed to have stopped it… moral duty. A BBC

corporate psychologist looked at it and left the room early, cursing at me under his breath. I felt terrible, as if I was partly responsible for the death of this man. The whole scene haunted me.

That night, after my meeting with the corporate psychologist, I had gone into the digital archives where I knew this film would be stored, and I found it, made a disc and deleted the master file. I took the disc to the roof of the BBC office building in downtown London, along with a metal wastepaper basket, a book of matches, and a bottle of scotch that posed as a receptacle for virtually pure alcohol.

I prayed to that man, as I sat behind a massive HVAC structure that hid me from the rest of London's buildings. This was almost twenty years before Vanessa's heart beat in my chest, and I prayed with such a sense of pleading to that nameless man, whom I had never met, or ever had a single interaction with other than to see him die, and I asked him to forgive me. I asked God to forgive me, and frankly, anyone who was tuned into my soulful purging of guilt.

I felt lonely then, more than any other time previous, and I wept amid the turning of an orange sky to blackness. As it got dark, with just enough scotch left, I poured the bottle's contents over the delicately etched polycarbonate plastic that held the physical memory of my witness, and dropped it into the wastepaper basket. I struck a match and said my final prayer of atonement and let it fall. The orange sky reappeared for a brief time and then an acrid smoke found its way into my lungs.

I coughed and coughed, but no one could hear me. No one knew I was there. As I coughed my lungs out, I thought for a moment that I saw a man standing against the gray metal sheets of the HVAC as I was on my knees. I looked, but he was like a shadow of light. And then I heard the words that I had sought, filling the night air: forgive me. It was like an echo, etched into the steep canyons of the tall buildings that surrounded me.

Whenever I came to London after that, I always felt those two words were still echoing among the buildings there.

It was becoming dusk outside my room. I watched the patterns of shadows dance on the ceiling above me. They were suddenly mesmerizing in a manner

that they seemed alive, and my eyelids became heavy, and I fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 95: Curved

Dreams were a rare event for me. Ever since I woke from my hospital bed after my transplant surgery, I was dreamless. The irony was that I was seeing a lot of things, not while I was asleep, but rather while I was awake or in some altered reality.

As I fell asleep, after Mr. Winters had locked me in my room, I dreamed I was back on the island and sitting in one of the listening chambers. Zenith was not there, but I could sense a presence from something else. I looked through the thick glass window that separated me from the underwater realm and slowly I saw golden lights dancing in the black water.

They looked like the fireflies I remembered seeing in my backyard when I was boy, only these were underwater. Suddenly, I heard static in my ears, and the dancing lights came closer and closer until I could see they were attached to a massive, wingless sea dragon. It was Trisiel.

I smiled a deep relief. I had wanted to speak with her again for a long time. “I’m so glad to see you again,” I said.

Her voice started as a crackle of distortion, jagged frequencies that were indiscernible as a language, but slowly I began to hear an occasional word that I recognized. “There is…feeling…to see…when it…now.”

Her majestic image slowly twirled in a perfectly balanced manner. The lights glowing and pulsing in patterns that arched across her entire length, and her glowing eyes, like solar orbs, cast a magical spell.

“Forgive me, but I didn’t understand you,” I said, my voice reflecting my state of awe.

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“Forgive me, but I didn’t understand you,” I said, my voice reflecting my state of awe.

“Be…come…you will…what I am…you…world.”

I was becoming frustrated. I so wanted to understand her and to be able to communicate with her. “Trisiel, I can’t hear you! Please help me to understand!”

“There is…some…if you…to the sound…can…you.”

The static was driving me crazy. I shouted as loud as I could. “Let me hear!”

I was suddenly swimming underneath a blue ocean with light billowing in from above in blunted, slanting angles. I spun around, and there before me was Trisiel.

“Hearing is so much easier when you are in my world,” she said.

I looked into her eyes and felt they were icons of home. I wanted to hug her, but my arms were far too short.

“Can you hear me?” I asked.

Her massive head, nodded. “You have returned. How can I serve you?”

I felt unprepared for such a question. I had never met anyone who so quickly asked to serve me. “I… I’m… I’m crazy.”

“Do you feel love?”

I nodded.

“Do you express love?”

I nodded again.

“Do you act in love?”

“I think so.”

“Then you are not crazy.”

“I’m in a mental institution…”

“You are where you need to be.”

“And why do I need to be there? If I’m supposed to be a Sonverto, who will listen to me once they know I’ve done time in a mental institution?”

“Come with me.”

Trisiel suddenly uncoiled and darted for the depths of the sea, and I followed her. When we arrived at the bottom, there was only a dim light, but the light was sufficient enough that I could see that there were stones strewn everywhere. She opened her mouth, and a loud piercing sound came out, and a few of the stones began to wobble.

“Do you see which stones move?” she asked, turning to me.

I looked carefully, and there were still some that were rocking back and forth. “The ones that are curved?” I replied tentatively.

“Yes, the ones that are curved, small, rounded and balanced. Their contact with the bottom depths is limited to the middle portion of their bodies, their ends reach upwards. Some of the stones are curved, but they lay flat on their sides, because they are not rounded properly.”

Trisiel, from out of her left eye, shed a beam of light on one of the curved,

rounded stones. “This one responds to the vibration, because it has been properly shaped. Those that are flat, that hug the surface with all their mass, or are too thin to stand up, they move, too, but imperceptibly.

“You are like this curved stone, your ends—arching upwards to the surface, and when the vibration of the Creator’s voice resounds in your world, you wobble. You move to it, and in this movement, you are taken to the place you need to be.”

“I need to be crazy?”

“The ones that are on earth to plot the destiny of humankind do not care about the labels of humankind. They care about the worlds of love and how to make them available to all. As they do this, they may seem odd, uncaring of the real world of survival and achievement, but it is only because they see the worlds of love and want to hasten their appearance in all worlds.”

“But if I’m locked up and labeled crazy, there’s not much I can do to bring the worlds of love… anywhere.”

“When the curved stone wobbles,” Trisiel explained, “some would say it is unstable. It is out of sync. It should be at rest. It should fall into line and hug the bottom. Stay like us. But you are not like the flat stones. The currents of the ocean have shaped you into what you are, and because of this shape, you respond differently to the vibration of Allness.

“In your case, you began to see visions. New people came into your life as catalysts. You began to see that the world of appearances was not the only reality. Because you are a Sonverto, you will be attacked by those who desire that humanity continues to hug the bottom, to be comfortable in dimness and ignore or resist the vibration of Allness.

“Do you see that stone?”

The light from her left eye shone on a large boulder that I hadn’t noticed.

“I do now.”

“This is a collective of consciousness, grouped together into a shared belief. It will not move at all. It is large, rigid, and like a herd of animals, feels the comfort of numbers. Yet, with a simple flick of my tail, I can render this immovable mass into a pile of small stones.”

As she finished her words, she swept her tail against the boulder, and it instantly broke into hundreds of pieces. As the silt settled, I could see the broken pieces appear with their serrated edges, shards of their former mass.

“These will smooth over time,” Trisiel said, “as the ocean currents flow over them. Some of these will become curved, and they will find that delicate balance to reach upwards towards the source of light that beckons beyond the surface. It all proceeds according to time, but what seemed like destruction only a moment ago was actually the precise thing that was needed to shape them into sovereignty.”

“And how does that relate to my question about not being able to do anything in a nut house?”

“Sometimes we do one thing that appears to be small, isolated in the wilderness of experience; no one will notice, we say. And these acts shift something that causes a chain reaction that sweeps over everything. We do not always see the relationships of the small and the cosmic, but they are there, nonetheless.”

“So there is something I must do?”

“There is something you have done, that you have already set in motion. Follow it. It is all you need to do, and remember that you are a seamless soul steeped in shadows so you may release what is confined.”

With that I started to feel a rumbling. The stones shook all around me. I looked for Trisiel, but she had disappeared, and my entire body began to tremble as the vibration began to toss me into a sense of panic.

“Wake up!”

I rubbed my eyes, and saw Mr. Winters shaking my shoulder. “Damn drugs…”

It was dark in my room except for the hallway light that was streaming in. “Sorry… I was dreaming.”

“Well, if you want to dream your hour away, be my guest, but I still expect my seven hundred dollars.”

“I may be half-asleep, but I remember we agreed to five hundred dollars,

so don’t try and change the deal.”

I glanced at Mr. Winters and thought he might have smiled for a second.

“I’ll be in Allison’s room, so just get me in an hour.”

I got up and we walked out to the hallway. “If you want anything in there, you better get it now, because I’m going to lock it.”

“Go ahead.”

“Stay out of sight, okay?” Mr. Winters said, as he turned to walk down the hallway back to the commons.

“Like I said, I’ll be in Allison’s room.”

“Whatever…”

I padded across the hallway, still groggy from my dream. Allison’s door was closed, for a moment I was worried it might be locked, but the doorknob turned fine.

“Can I help you?”

A woman was sitting in the chair where I usually sat, and looked up from a tablet that she was writing in. She had short, curly hair and a pleasant face. She looked a bit startled at my entry, but as I opened the door a bit wider I could see Allison propped up in bed and smiling at me.

“Ah, he’s my delivery man, Solomon. Did you bring more cigarettes?”

Chapter 96: Circle

The curves that life can take are, I suppose, infinite, but sometimes they seem to be anything but infinite. They seem manufactured, like a child moving two ends of a thin strip of paper together to make a circle. A circle will result. There really isn't any other possibility.

"I'm her neighbor," I said smiling, "… from across the hall."

"I'm a hospice nurse—Nurse Morales. It's nice to meet you, Solomon."

"Are you… new?" I asked.

"Doctor Folsom called this afternoon and explained the situation and thought it might be good for me to visit with Allison. And so I am." She smiled warmly.

I instantly liked her.

I noticed that Nurse Morales was using Allison's real name.

"You can come in, if you like."

I closed the door behind me and walked closer to the bed.

"You said Doctor Folsom called you?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"How're you feeling today?" I asked, turning to Allison.

"A little better today," she said weakly.

"Good."

"Did Mr. Winters see to your needs?" I asked.

"That was you?" Allison asked. "Should've known… I figured he was just feeling guilty. What did you do?"

"Asked him to look after you a little."

"Right… I suppose you had something to do with getting a nurse here,

too.”

“I’m glad you’re getting some well-deserved attention.”

“I don’t know how deserving I am, but I like this one.” She pointed to Nurse Morales.

“We were just talking about the piano… and Allison was telling me about her background with music.” Nurse Morales said. “Did you know that she played at Lincoln Center once?”

“No,” I shook my head with a knowing smile, “but I knew there was something special about her.”

Allison smiled back at me, but her face looked tired.

I heard Nurse Morales squirm in her chair, and noticed she had turned to look at me.

“Do I know you?” she asked.

“I can’t imagine how,” I replied.

“How long have you been here?”

“Two weeks or so.”

“I came here once before about a year ago. Maybe I’ll remember later. I have a good memory for people.”

I pointed to myself. “Drugs and memory don’t mix.”

She smiled, but kept staring at me. She was young, probably twenty-eight or so, no wedding ring, but lots of silver jewelry on every other finger, including her right thumb. A few tattoos on the underside of her wrists made it pretty obvious that she wasn’t your average nurse.

Her voice was very calming. A light Hispanic accent, but it was subtle, and what was left of it was comforting somehow.

“So how did you two meet?” Nurse Morales asked.

Allison fidgeted, rolled on her side and grabbed a cigarette she had hidden underneath some papers and stuck it in her mouth. “Cigarettes.”

“Cigarettes?”

“Well, she asked if I could get her some, and it sort of happened that I did.”

“But you’re not actually smoking?”

“I have more sense than that…”

“Being just across the hall, I saw some paramedics here the other day, and I realized there was someone in here that was sick. I looked in, and… we became friends.”

“That’s his story, I was actually swearing at him yesterday, would’ve thrown him out, but I’m stuck in this bed.” She grinned.

I glanced at Nurse Morales, who was still staring at me, and smiled. “She’s exaggerating.”

“What’s your story, Solomon? How did you end up here?”

Nurse Morales leaned back in her chair as if she were ready to hear my life’s story.

“How did I end up here… well, I had a heart transplant and that seemed to have started it all, because I began seeing strange visions almost immediately afterwards—actually even during the surgery, and then my life changed. I started seeing things while I was awake—”

“What sort of things?” Nurse Morales asked.

“I’m not sure you want to get started with that discussion,” I said. “You’d be here all night.”

“Give me an idea; I’m interested in those sorts of things. You won’t shock me or anything.”

“Okay…” I nodded. “I had visitations from these creatures that were like sea dragons, met my creator, along with a spiritual teacher called Dou Xing, a few demons that I’d rather not talk about, and a shaman in South Dakota—he was real— I mean physical. That pretty much sums up the high points.”

“But why’d you end up here?”

She looked at me as if my very summative brief was no big deal. Everybody sees that stuff. Right?

“Well, believe it or not, not every person thinks these kinds of visions are normal… especially when they happen in broad daylight.”

There was a long pause, and we both turned to Allison who had fallen asleep and was now breathing heavy.

“I should probably go,” she said quietly, and stood up. “An interesting coincidence… I knew a woman that I cared for who was a heart donor. She passed about two months ago. She was… a very good friend.”

As soon as I heard that I knew that this was the woman that Jaylee had painted. I couldn’t remember her name, but I remembered her painting and there was definitely a resemblance, and she had been a hospice worker, too. My entire body started to vibrate from the sudden realization.

“Are you okay?” Nurse Morales asked, sensing something was happening to me.

“I know you… I mean not me… I know of you… I have Vanessa’s heart.”

As soon as the words came out of my mouth she put her hands to her face in sudden shock, and then came over to me and embraced me. She began to cry softly, but I knew it was not grief or sadness; it was more a feeling of relief—like the closure of a circle.

“That might explain why you’re seeing visions,” she said in a whispered voice. She stepped back and took a long look at me. “I have so much to tell you.”

Chapter 97: Amin

Her first name was Luella, and we stayed and chatted until Mr. Winters collected me and stored me back into my locked room like someone putting a carton of milk back into his refrigerator.

We had talked while Allison slept for at least forty minutes and when the door opened and Mr. Winters tapped his wristwatch, I was sad to leave. We said hurried goodbyes, and she promised she would come to visit soon—possibly even tomorrow.

I slept that night as soundly as I had since arriving at SRC. I had hopes that Allison was on a better path, and now that I'd seen how life's absurdity could reveal a new page, written by a sweet hand without the stammering fragments of desolation and loneliness, a new hope bloomed inside me. I dared to even hope that it was not simply a page, but perhaps a new chapter.

Sunday morning arrived and I heard my door unlock and was greeted by Dr. Folsom with Mr. Winters standing behind him.

"Good morning, Solomon. How's your mood today?"

"Excellent."

He looked at me with a degree of suspicion, uncertain if I was being sarcastic. "…I'm glad to hear that."

He pointed to my chair. "May I sit down?"

"Sure."

"Mister Winters, could you please tell Doctor Amin that we'll be in her office in about ten minutes?"

Mr. Winters turned and walked down the hall, never one for words where action would suffice.

I looked with some surprise at Dr. Folsom. "Doctor Amin?"

"Yes, she's one of our psychiatrists in our east wing, specializing in what

are called shared psychotic disorders. I thought you two should meet and she can do an initial evaluation."

"What's a shared psychotic disorder, and why do you think I have it?"

"I never said that I think you do, in fact, I'm doubtful that you do, because it usually affects a different personality profile than yours, but we have a world renown expert on our staff, and it only seems logical to have her opinion on it. If it proves to be relevant to your case, then we can implement a more precise treatment program."

Dr. Folsom sat down and looked at me with unyielding eyes. "Solomon, to be honest, I found our session yesterday to be much less satisfying than I had hoped. Why don't you tell me what you learned from it?"

I looked at him as one does when he wants to be honest, but isn't sure if it's safe. I decided to be honest anyway. "As unsatisfying as it may have been for you, at least you weren't locked inside a room, the equivalent of a jail cell, where you had nothing to do but sleep."

"Ah, yes, but I didn't want you to sleep, Solomon, I wanted you to reflect on your actions. And did you do this?"

"Yes, I had it figured out before I left your office. The lock down was simply punishment, and you know it."

He looked out the window, and sighed. "And what did you figure out?"

"That I should mind my own business. Focus on my own issues. Play by the rules. Etcetera, etcetera."

"You sound like someone who's reciting words, but has no real belief in them. Do you feel that's accurate?"

"No, I sound like someone who's sharing his reflections so the listener, that would be you, would be satisfied and move on to another topic… like, when would I be able to see my wife again."

Dr. Folsom put his hands on his knees and looked like he was about ready to standup and leave, and then suddenly leaned back in the chair. "Solomon, you are a very peculiar patient. You have this marvelous ability to express yourself, but I don't think you really feel what you say, and by feel, I mean

own it."

He looked at me to see my reaction. I remained quiet with a pensive look.

"As for your visitation rights, I will grant you a visit today, but you need to remember the rules, and do your best to abide by them. Isn't it fair of me to expect this from you?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then I'll call your wife and suggest a time this afternoon. Any other reflections?"

I wanted to thank him for getting Luella Morales to visit Allison, but I couldn't. Instead, I chose a compliment of a different kind. "I like your tie—nice colors."

He looked down at his tie as if he had forgotten which one he had put on, and then gave me a quick smile. "Thank you, Solomon, it's always been a favorite of mine, too."

He turned to leave and then noticed Allison's door, and seemed to suddenly remember something. "Oh, and by the way, I started a nursing service for Allison. So she will get more attention."

"Thank you," I said.

He nodded. "You can get some breakfast when you finish your meeting with Doctor Amin. Follow me, I'll walk you to her office."

We walked mostly in silence, but occasionally he would make a comment about the weather or a particular room as we passed by.

I had never been in the "east wing," it was a part of the SRC I'd never seen or even heard about. SRC looked like it had once been a mansion and later converted to a psychiatric clinic, though it was hard to imagine that a building that large could have been a private home at one time. The third floor, unlike the fifth, had not been downgraded very much. It still had the plush carpets in the hallway and wood paneling of its former stature, perhaps a little more worn, but the vintage qualities of old world craftsmanship were evident to any discerning eye.

Dr. Amin's office was on the third floor, same as Dr. Folsom, and when

we arrived, I noticed it possessed the same old-fashioned linoleum floor, but the furniture was more to my liking as it was antique and very ornate.

Dr. Amin was sitting at her desk when we walked in. She was Egyptian I believe, stout body, late fifties, and very large eyes that seemed to protrude from her face a little too much. Her eye shadow was a bright turquoise, which, and I know this is a subjective opinion, emphasized her bulging eyes, to the point that she was looked like a goldfish. “Welcome, do come in.” she said genially.

She walked around her desk and shook my hand with a loose grip.

“This is Solomon Tonum,” Dr. Folsom said. “I’ll leave him in your very capable hands as I have another meeting to attend to.”

“Thank you, Doctor. We’ll just have a friendly chat. Solomon, why don’t you have a seat over there.”

Dr. Amin walked outside with Dr. Folsom and I heard them whispering in the hallway, but I couldn’t hear any of their conversation. In a few moments she returned with a nervous smile—the kind you see when hosts have admitted someone to their party who was not invited.

She grabbed a chair next to mine and sat down. “Doctor Folsom shared your file with me, and I found it very interesting. One of the things we do every morning is to share our patient cases with one another, especially those we’re finding particularly vexing. Yesterday—”

“Excuse me, Doctor, but you work like this every day? I mean, it’s Sunday morning…”

She smiled broadly at my observation. “We’re very dedicated, Solomon. The work is hard, the hours long. You know the story.”

“Did you come in specifically to meet with me?” I asked.

“No, I frequently work the weekend shift.”

“Okay, sorry to interrupt, it just seems weird.”

“Sunday is our most popular visitor’s day,” Dr. Amin explained, “so the potential for problems is higher. There’s probably more staff on Sundays than any other day. I know it sounds weird, but that’s psychiatry for you.”

We both chuckled a little.

“Now, Doctor Folsom mentioned in our staff meeting that you had undergone a heart transplant two months ago. Your wife…” Dr. Amin glanced at her notes, “…Derya, has shared a concern that the heart donor may have contributed to your sudden change in temperament. My specialty is in shared psychotic disorder, which, rare as it may be, is quite real for my patients. Someone in their immediate environment, usually a dominant personality, infects them with their pathology. It’s kind of like a psychological virus or—”

I held up my hand. “You’re taking a comment from my wife and suddenly making a hypothesis that I’m seeing visions because my donor was crazy?”

“Hear me out, Solomon. It’s only a thought we’re exploring, no one’s making accusations here. Okay?”

“Okay, but I resent the not-so-subtle suggestion that my donor was crazy.”

“Crazy is a term we don’t like to use. It’s very imprecise… has a lot of baggage. Now, what do you know about your heart donor?”

“First, tell me what your specialty is all about,” I said.

She paused for a moment, assessing how to proceed. “I’ll give you an example. I had a patient once who was a doting wife. She and her husband lived in a rural area where he was a retired handyman. He was suffering from severe paranoia— particularly about aliens… the extraterrestrial kind. He was convinced they was spying on him, even visiting him at night. Over time, his wife developed the same paranoid delusions, in part, as a coping mechanism.”

“Have you ever heard of this coming from a heart transplant?”

“No,” she replied, “but in theory, it’s possible. A relatively new branch of medicine is called energy cardiology, the basis of which is that information can be sent electromagnetically between the heart and brain, and it’s through this electromagnetic broadcasting that the brain receives information from the donor’s heart. There’ve been many case studies of these phenomena, but never in the realm of psychopathology, as far as I know.”

“Then, why do you think this makes any sense?”

“Solomon, you have no family history, no medical reason, no dementia, and no drug abuse. Your brain was mapped when you had amnesia, we’ve seen all the scans, and there’s no physiological reason for any kind of psychosis. The only obvious factor is the stress of a heart transplant and accompanying amnesia, but a man of your character with a strong family would generally handle that stress without breaking down, especially to the degree you have. The fact that you did, that you ended up here, well, it means that a possible variable could be the psychological conditioning from your donor.”

“You know about the video she left me?”

Dr. Amin nodded.

“And the journal?”

She nodded again.

“So I assume you know about her daughter and that she wanted me to adopt her?”

“Yes, you see these could all be part of the psychological conditioning to get you to see things and feel part of a delusion—her delusion.”

I was dumbstruck. I couldn’t believe they were seriously exploring this angle. My distance from all of humanity seemed to be telescoping at the speed of light.

“Solomon, how are you feeling right now? Are you all right?”

“No, I’m not all right. Vanessa was different, but not crazy, schizophrenic, or any other word you want to use. She was a beautiful soul, and to answer your question… I feel like everyone is trying to point the finger of blame on her, and I don’t like it.”

“Solomon, I’m not trying to blame anyone here. Let’s just have a conversation about Vanessa. I’m interested in knowing your perceptions. I have an open mind, and I truly respect your view on her, because you know her much better than I do. Okay?”

She sounded genuine. Her words calmed me.

She crossed her legs and glanced at a folder in her lap where she had notes.

“She was an albino?”

“Yes.”

“And she died of skin cancer?”

“That’s what her mom told me.”

“So you met her parents?”

“Yes.”

“And her daughter, too?”

“Yes.”

“She only had one child?”

“Yes.”

“How many times did you watch her video?”

“Three.”

“Have you read her journal?”

“Parts.”

“Did you like what you read?”

“Yes.”

“How old is her daughter?”

“Seven.”

“Did you like her?”

“Very much.”

“Have you seen Vanessa since your heart transplant—not the video or photographs, I mean, have you seen her in your reality?”

Damn. I didn’t want to talk about it.

“I had a dream of her…”

“A dream… while you were sleeping?”

“Look, I saw her appear to me, she told me about a letter that she’d left

behind for her mother. I told Corin, her mom, and she found it. Without that dream, she never would have."

Dr. Amin began writing a note. "What was the letter about?"

"It was Vanessa appealing to her mom to let me adopt Jaylee, her daughter."

"And you read this letter?"

"Yes, her mom sent it to me."

"When?"

"The day before I was admitted here."

"Solomon, how well do you think your son, Jon, would take to Jaylee if you were to adopt her? Aren't they about the same age?"

"I don't know, I haven't thought about it."

"But you think it's important that they get along, don't you?"

"I suppose."

"Tell me about your experience at the hospital when you were alone with Jon."

I looked at her with suspicious eyes. This was where she was maneuvering me all along. "Are you implying that I would want to kill my son so I could adopt Jaylee?"

She put her hand up in protest. "Not at all. Not at all. Solomon, if you're not able to talk about the hospital incident, I'm not going to push it, but please, there're no accusations here. I'm only trying to understand the possible influences of Vanessa on your mental state prior to your breakdown in the—"

"What you call breakdown is not what happened. I was trying to save my son from an attack by an entity that only I could see. She's the entity that's been tormenting me since I woke up from the surgery. She wanted me here." I pointed downwards with my right index finger for emphasis.

"And this is Nammu you're referring to, correct?"

“Yes.”

She paused and looked at her notes, taking a measured breath. “I understand that there was a very detailed dream you had while you were getting your heart transplant. You were on an island, right?”

“Yes.”

“You were isolated from everything, but there was one woman on this island, and if my notes are accurate, she was also an albino… is that correct?”

“I don’t know if she was or wasn’t. She lived underground in this cave structure. She might have been pale-skinned for lack of sunlight.”

“Or she was an albino…” Dr. Amin said.

“Maybe.”

“You said earlier that Nammu wanted you here. What did you mean by that?”

“She wanted me to be labeled insane, so I’d be unable to perform my mission.”

“And the mission, could you explain that to me?”

“It’s probably in your notes…” I said, frustration hanging from my words.

“I’d prefer to hear you tell me. Can you do that, Solomon?”

I had this feeling that I was being led somewhere, and like an old horse that’d lost any sense of purpose, I was going to be put out of my uselessness as a patient. I was not going to be allowed to hide anymore, and it was painfully obvious to me that Dr. Amin would perform the uncloaking.

I remember once when I was a boy that I had found this beautiful chrysalis that held, what I thought at the time, to be a monarch butterfly. I took it from its branch and brought it home; holding it inside my warm hand, hoping it would not hatch before I could find a suitable jar.

A week later it had still not opened and my patience was gone. I decided, in my vain attempt to hasten its birth, to cut a slit on the chrysalis, hoping it would somehow encourage the butterfly inside. I used a sharp knife and my surgical skills were that of a nine-year-old boy, and I cut the slit too deep. I

quickly put it back into the jar, but I knew I had done something wrong. The butterfly never emerged, and I finally had to bury it in the woods behind my home.

I felt like Dr. Amin was opening up my chrysalis, but she would see, if she looked, that I'd already left. I wasn't there. What she was hunting for was an illusion.

"Solomon, tell me what you like about your mission?"

I cleared my head, and decided to keep going. "In forty years I will work in an institute that will discover the human soul, using a technology that I will help to develop. Anyone who will use this technology will have irrefutable proof of the human soul. It's a discovery that will change the world, because no one will own the soul or possess it. Not science, not religion, not government, not education… no one. All individuals will see that they're immortal, sovereign and beyond the reach of time as we know it. That's what I like about my mission. It will bring freedom. True freedom."

"Do you remember the Greek god, Prometheus?" Dr. Amin asked.

"I remember the name."

"He stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans, and the gods punished him as a result. Do you feel like Prometheus?"

"No," I shook my head.

"But your mission, isn't it kind of the same, you're bringing fire—illumination to humanity, and the gods will not be happy, because they're the ones who decide when humans should get fire… not one person."

"I don't know who you're referring to when you say gods. And I'm not one person. As I said, it's an institute, and I'm part of that."

"Did you see this institute in one of your visions?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"A demon, for lack of a better name, escorted me some forty years into the future and showed me. The QuantaSeer technology—"

“This is the technology that allows our future selves to see the soul?” she interrupted.

“Yes.”

“And you had a hand in its development?”

“Yes.”

“You know, Solomon, I wish sometimes that I knew what I was doing in the distant future, but I’m not sure I would trust my vision of the future if, as you put it, a demon showed me. Did you trust this vision?”

“Not entirely.”

“What made you trust it at all?”

“I saw Jaylee as an older woman. It was my first exposure to her actually.”

“What do you mean?”

“I had this experience of my future before I knew Jaylee existed—before I even knew Vanessa had a child.”

“That’s quite amazing,” she said softly, shifting positions in her chair. “The experiences you’ve had are, by any standard, incredible. Can you understand that when your wife or your psychiatrist hears them, they find it hard to relate?”

“Yes.”

“I certainly never had any experiences like these,” she said. “I doubt your wife has either. It’s possible that no one else on the entire planet has. You might be the only one. Do you think that’s possible?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Solomon, you said that Vanessa wanted you to adopt her daughter… Jaylee. Was it a request or more of a demand?”

“A request.”

“I see in my notes that this request was accompanied by six million dollars —”

“The money she left me in her will was not contingent on my adopting

Jaylee."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, her attorney was very specific about that."

"Okay, but you'd agree that when someone gives you that kind of money you often feel an obligation to follow their wishes."

"Yes, I suppose some would. I wanted to adopt Jaylee before I even knew of the money."

"Why do you think you have such a strong desire to adopt her?"

"I've met her, and I love her, it's hard to explain. We have a natural connection."

"How do Vanessa's parents feel about this?" "They weren't keen on the idea initially, but her stepfather died of a heart attack last week and that changed the dynamics, so her mother, when I last talked with her, seemed more inclined."

"Did Vanessa leave her parents any money?"

"I don't know."

"Solomon, did you and your wife have a good relationship prior to your heart transplant?"

"Yes."

"When you came out of surgery and had amnesia, did she support your efforts to rehabilitate, and re-integrate into the family?"

"Yes."

"And then her sister passed away and she and your children went to Turkey for the funeral—that was for a week, correct?"

"Yes."

"And this is when you went to South Dakota with Doctor Chayton?"

"Yes."

"Did it seem odd to you that your psychologist would suddenly hear your story and whisk you away to meet his uncle on an Indian reservation in South

Dakota?”

“Yes, at first, but we had an instant connection.”

“And what was that?”

“He knew of the creatures I met on the island. They were sacred to him.”

“Really? What creatures, could you be more specific?”

“They’re known as the Quantusum. They were mythical creatures, but they held a presence on the island, and I met them in my dream. This, to Doctor Chayton, was very significant.”

“Why is that?”

“They had bones of this creature on their reservation, in a sacred site that only a handful of his people know about.”

“Really… did you see these bones?”

“Yes.”

“And these bones looked like they could belong to the creatures you saw in your dream?”

“Yes, but I also created a film many years ago called Gemeni, and these creatures were also in that film. And then I had a French archeologist approach me—both before and after my surgery—and she was finding these creatures depicted in a cave some ninety-thousand years ago.”

“So these creatures look like sea dragons?”

“Somewhat.”

“And what do they do?”

“They’re carriers of information… of how to navigate into higher dimensions of consciousness. I don’t exactly know.”

“They’re talking dragons?”

“They are to me.”

“Does Doctor Chayton also talk with these dragons?”

I shook my head, quick to Kohana’s defense. “He knows of their

mythology, and he's been excavating their bones for many years, but no conversations."

"Did Doctor Chayton believe you when you told him that you had spoken with one of these Quantusum?"

"I don't know, you'd have to ask him."

She turned a page in her notepad and cleared her throat. "While you were in South Dakota, did you have any relationships with a woman?"

I started to shake my head, but I knew where she was going with the question. "Nammu… but I can't call her a woman."

"What is she?"

"A dark entity of some kind. I really don't know how to put it into words, but she's not a physical human being. That night, I got lost… and somehow she found me and seduced me…"

"This seems to be particularly hard for you to talk about. Why?"

"Because I don't like betrayal. My father was this way; I saw enough of his infidelity… it's not me. I want Derya to trust me."

"And does she?"

I let out a long sigh. "She did."

"But not now?"

"Look, I feel guilty at what happened. All I can say is that I wasn't myself. I was weak. And I hated that I had been so weak. I can get past it, but there's so much distortion in my life, I don't think Derya believes me when I tell her I was unfaithful. To her, this was all in my mind."

"Wasn't it, Solomon?"

"That's what I'm saying—no. It was not in my mind! When it happens that Nammu enters my world, she's as real as you. Absolutely perfect in every aspect, except she can somehow move between worlds.

"Three months ago I was waiting to die. I had no dreams, hopes, visions, my world was the same as everyone else—singular, physical, touch it and it's real. Anything else was… fantasy. I'm well aware that what I'm saying is

impossible to believe as reality, and yet, for me, it is. And that truth is all I can stand on, both the good and the bad of it."

Dr. Amin looked at her notes and then slowly closed her notepad. "Would you like my initial evaluation?"

"Yes."

"Yours is the most incredible story I have ever heard, and I have heard some good ones, I can assure you. I don't sense anything but transparency from you, so I believe that you believe your experiences are genuine. However, I do think that Vanessa wielded considerable influence over you, even to the point that she is now a part of you, and some would say, the most important part of you.

"I would like to see the video that she sent you, and I would like to read the letter… and the journal, too. Do you still have them?"

"I believe so. My wife has the video, and the letter is on my phone, which she also has… I assume. The journal is hidden, I'm not sure I'm willing to share that."

Dr. Amin seemed to be willing to overlook the journal for the time being. "I think I would also like to meet Vanessa's mother and possibly even Jaylee."

I flinched. "I'm not sure it makes sense to talk to Jaylee—"

"I would only do so if I had the permission of her guardian, which would be Vanessa's mother…"

"Corin," I offered.

"Yes, Corin, thank you. If Corin agreed, I would only do a simple evaluation with Jaylee, nothing that would make her uneasy. No tough questions."

"What do you hope to learn from Jaylee? She's innocent in all of this."

"I understand, but she's like the eye of the hurricane, isn't she? The calm center, but around her is this… this chaos. I need to have this additional insight, so I can render a more precise diagnosis. Will you help me with this, Solomon?"

“Does it mean that I’ll be meeting with you from now on?”

“It’s your decision, but yes, I would like to continue our sessions.”

“So you think I have this shared psychotic disorder?”

“I don’t know, and I need more time and information to find out.” She smiled warmly and stood slowly to her feet with a little effort. She tapped her head with her right index finger. “Open mind. I try to keep one.”

“If it’s my decision, I would like you to be my therapist.”

“Okay, I’ll see what I can do to make it all happen. When is your wife visiting next, do you know?”

“This afternoon…”

“I’ll see if Doctor Folsom can call her and get her to bring along the things I’d like to see. Would she also be able to bring the other film you mentioned —the one you made?”

“Gemeni?”

She nodded.

“She can bring it.”

“And the phone number for Corin?” Dr. Amin asked.

“If she can bring my phone, I can show you the letter and Corin’s phone number.”

Dr. Amin looked at me for a moment, and paused. “Why don’t you want me to see the journal, Solomon?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay, we’ll leave it there for now.” Dr. Amin folded her arms. “Solomon, have you seen any visions since you arrived here?”

“No…”

“You’re sure?”

“I had one dream, but it was a real dream.”

“Okay, I’m going to leave you on the same meds for now.

“One last question… are your financial resources in a joint account?”

“You mean with the money that Vanessa left?”

She nodded, looking down at me.

“Yes, it’s a joint account.”

“Okay, that’s it. We’re done here. I’ll call Mister Winters and have him escort you back to your room.”

My face reflexed into perplexity. “Why did you ask me about the bank account?”

“Oh, nothing. I just wanted to see if there would be any undue pressures on your wife for finances while you’re in our facility. Sometimes the lack of a joint account means the family suffers. It adds pressure and stress to the rehabilitation effort. It’s a routine question.”

“Okay… but Doctor Folsom never asked it.”

She buzzed Mr. Winters and told him to pick me up, and then walked to her door and opened it, as if saying to me, “It’s time for you to go.”

I stood up on cue and walked obediently towards her and the doorway.

“Doctor Folsom probably asked your wife already about the financial arrangements, which is why he wouldn’t have asked you. I always like to hear the patient’s perspective.”

She looked down the hallway. “There’s your escort now. I’ll leave you to a good day, and I may stop in when your wife visits to introduce myself, if that would be okay?”

“Sure…” I nodded.

Mr. Winters, in his characteristic manner, walked ahead of me without a word, leading the way to the cafeteria. When we arrived in the elevator he mentioned that he would be off for the next two days, but that he still expected payment on Monday.

“Don’t worry, I see Derya today. She’ll handle it.”

I slapped his back as I passed him to get breakfast. I was actually hungry. Most of the other patients had already finished and the cafeteria was mostly

empty.

Mr. Winters made sure I got my meds, waiting until I drank them down. When his task was done he walked away with scarcely a sound, and certainly no words. His large frame, dressed in white, presented a heaviness in more ways than simply weight. There was something, a dark story or a lack that I couldn’t quite sense, but it was locked inside that mountain, never to see light.

Chapter 98: Possessed

It was Dr. Folsom who tapped me on the shoulder. “Can I talk with you in private, Solomon?”

I got up from the table I was sitting at with some of my co-residents, and felt a sudden uneasiness as I followed Dr. Folsom to the hallway. He abruptly stopped and spun around to face me.

“Your wife… Derya, is on her way here, and she’s bringing your son with her.”

I started to say something, but he cut me off. “It’s against my wishes, but your wife insisted, saying that your son wanted to see you and would not accept any alternative. I spoke with Dr. Amin, and she thought it could be a good thing for your therapy, so I’ve reluctantly agreed… however, you must promise me that you’ll be on your best behavior and…” he put his hand up again to silence me. “I will not allow private time while your son is here, so Doctor Amin has agreed to host the visitation in her office.”

He glanced at his watch. “She’ll be here in about twenty minutes, maybe now would be a good time for you to clean up.”

He looked me over from head to toe and then walked away.

“Doctor… can I ask a question?”

He stopped and turned around. “Yes?”

“What should I say to Jon?”

“The truth.” He quickly spun around and resumed his fast-paced walk down the hallway.

I wanted to ask another question, but instead I made a path to the lavatory, deciding the good doctor was right; a respectable grooming was in order.

When I looked at myself in the broken mirror, I wondered if I should shave my beard. Maybe it would scare Jon to see me this way. I decided to wait, a rash move like that with the limited time I had, would probably only make

me look worse. I opted for a quick shower and a fresh uniform of gray sweat pants and top.

After my shower, Mr. Winters found me in my room. “You know the drill,” he said, curling his fingers in a half-grip that motioned to the door.

We arrived at Dr. Amin’s office a few minutes later where I was deposited in a chair by Mr. Winters and told to sit, after which he promptly left. I was alone in the office, wondering where everyone else was. I had the impression that Mr. Winters was just outside the open door like a sentinel, (though as I write that, “sentinel” may be a misnomer, because they usually guarded the throne or a god, so it would be more accurate to say: like a jailer).

Suddenly, I heard a familiar voice lilting down the hallway. It was Jon’s. The young voice bounced among the wood paneling of the hallways to my ears. I also heard Dr. Amin’s voice, quieter, smooth like a polished agate, and with a distinctive Egyptian accent. It sounded like she was explaining things to Jon. When they arrived, I stood to my feet in anticipation and faced the doorway.

“Dad!” Jon ran to me and hugged me without reservation.

I closed my eyes and savored the embrace of small arms. “There’s my angel,” I said. “Have you been growing again?”

“Maybe,” he said. “You have a beard!” he pointed to my face.

“Guilty as charged…” I smiled, and let him run his hand through my fledging beard.

I looked around for Derya, but only saw Dr. Amin. I looked at Jon. “Where’s your Mom?”

“I thought it might be better for just the two of you to visit,” replied Dr. Amin. “I’ll send Mister Winters to get your wife in a few minutes.”

“Thank you,” I said.

I stood up with Jon in my arms. He was a slight boy, and I could tell my muscular development was not what it used to be, though I told myself it was just that Jon was growing.

“Let’s sit.” Dr. Amin spread her arms to show a group of chairs we could

sit in. Jon wanted to sit on my lap, and we clumsily settled in one upholstered chair.

“Jon, why don’t you tell us why you insisted that you come to visit your Dad?”

“I wanted to see him,” Jon replied matter-of-factly.

“But what did you tell your Mom?”

Jon suddenly turned quiet and tentative. “I told her that you didn’t touch me in the hospital.”

I looked at Jon, and my eyes flew open wide. “Did you see her?”

Jon shook his head and nestled closer to my chest. “I didn’t see anything, but I felt something pushing on my neck, but your hands didn’t do it… you… you were fighting something I couldn’t see.”

“Jon?” Dr. Amin said quietly. “Your Dad never touched your neck, is that correct?”

Jon nodded, and I could feel him snuggle closer to me, as if he wanted to burrow inside me.

“Jon, it’s good to make sure that everyone understands the truth of what happened, since, other than your Dad, you were the only one who was in that hospital room. Thank you for clarifying what happened.”

I could feel Jon’s head nodding against my chest.

“Could I ask you why you didn’t mention this just after it happened?” Dr. Amin asked in a friendly tone.

“It all happened so fast and they took Dad away, and I was… I didn’t know what happened. I told Mom, but she didn’t hear me… no one did. Then they told me you were in the hospital and weren’t feeling well, so… like… I thought you had the same as me.

His voice became quieter. “But then Marisa told me you were going crazy, and… and I knew that wasn’t true.” He looked up at me. “Mom kept telling me that you were in the hospital… like… like you were sick. When she said she was going to visit you today, I told her I wanted to come. That’s when I told her that you weren’t crazy…”

My heart swelled as he explained his story. I felt the doors of my cage opening, maybe not flung open entirely as I would choose, but definitely opened. A new light was cast inside my dark room, and I was holding it in my lap, a beautiful, pure light that no one could possibly doubt.

I held him tight. “Thank you, Jon,” I said, kissing his cheek.

He looked up at me out of the corner of his eyes. “Can you come home now?”

“That’s up to the Doctor, angel. We’ll see.”

Dr. Amin shifted in her chair. “Jon, you said you didn’t see anything except your dad seemed to be fighting something, but you did feel something on your neck. What do you think it was—the thing that was pushing on your throat?”

“The devil.” Jon looked at Dr. Amin with a child’s conviction.

“Why do you think it was the devil?” she asked.

“I don’t know… it just felt like it.”

“Did you ever hear your Mom or Sister use the term, devil, when they were talking about your dad being in the hospital?”

“No…”

“Your dad never said devil when he was wrestling with whatever it was that was pushing on your throat?”

Jon shook his head slowly. He was still curled on my lap.

I sensed that Dr. Amin was finished, and she leaned back in her chair, wrote a note to herself, and then stood up. “I’m going to ask Mr. Winters to get Derya. Okay?”

I nodded and hugged Jon. This was the therapy I needed. It’s interesting that when everything is taken away from you, you feel a return to simplicity, which has its comforts. The complicated things of life have been removed, and all that’s left is to confront loneliness and misunderstanding. There was a time, a day or two after I arrived at SRC, that I thought I had lost even my family. I was destined to be completely alone, fed drugs, and kept like a caged animal with occasional visits from those who didn’t know me

anymore.

Now, with Jon's story and a new doctor, I had hope.

When Derya arrived, and she saw Jon in my lap, she smiled nervously. I didn't get up.

"Hi Sol," she said. "It's good to see you."

"How are you?" I asked.

"Good… pretty good, and you?"

"Much better, thanks for bringing Jon."

"I didn't really have a choice," she smiled and sat down at a chair offered her by Dr. Amin.

"Jon was explaining his experience at the hospital," Dr. Amin explained. "He was very helpful. Thank you again, Jon."

"You're welcome," Jon said quietly.

"Mister Winters, could you please escort Jon to our playroom and keep an eye on him? We won't be long."

Mr. Winters smiled thinly, and nodded his head. "Sure."

"Okay, Jon, you go with Mister Winters and have some playtime, okay?" I said.

"Can't I stay here?"

"Sorry, bud. Just grown-ups this time."

"Fine…"

He got down from my lap and walked over to Mr. Winters.

"It's just down the hall," Dr. Amin said, turning to Derya. "It's used exclusively by visitors. Okay?"

Derya nodded, and Dr. Amin nodded to Mr. Winters as if it was time to go.

They left, and I could hear Jon ask a question as they walked away. I hoped he would find Mr. Winters more talkative then I had.

Dr. Amin opened her notepad. "Thanks again for bringing Jon. I think it

was wonderful for Solomon to reconnect with him."

Derya nodded, glancing at me. She seemed tense, perhaps because Jon was here.

"Derya, you know that Jon has said that his Dad didn't touch him or try to strangle him. How do you feel about this admission?"

She cleared her throat and looked at Dr. Amin, avoiding my eyes. "I'm glad that Jon told the truth, if that's what it is, but it doesn't solve the problem."

"How's that?" asked Dr. Amin.

Derya faced me. "If you're really seeing demons, and those demons are hurting our children, how does it change anything? Maybe you're possessed… or… or maybe you're telling the truth and these demons are trying to stop you from doing something forty years from now. I don't know, but whatever the reason, our children are in danger."

"Do you believe that Solomon is telling the truth?" Dr. Amin asked.

"I don't know. I only know that he believes he's telling the truth. But the only thing I care about is that my children are not going to be harmed by a possessed father or a demon that's trying to torment him. Either way, how can I live with that, Sol?"

She turned to me with a pleading look, and I was speechless. Whatever hopes I had of leaving this place soon, those hopes withered as she looked at me. She wasn't fearful of Jon being at SRC. She was fearful of me and the demons that I had brought into our shared lives.

"I brought Jon because he cried for an hour this morning after Dr. Folsom called to schedule a meeting today. An hour! He misses you more than you can imagine, Solomon. For the past four months you've hardly been at home, mostly in the hospital and now here. He knows this isn't a hospital for sick people. He knows you're staying here, because people think you're… you're seeing things. This is really hard on him. Marisa has more of her own life, but you… you are his life…"

I looked to Dr. Amin as if to ask her to support me. Surely, there was something positive she could say, something in my defense, but she looked at

me so passively, as if it was my turn to speak. I struggled to open my mouth.

“I’m not sure how to respond to all of this,” I spoke slowly with a slight tremble in my voice. “What are you saying? That you want to give up? Is that the alternative? Divorce me, and then keep me away from my children? How is that a solution?”

I had thrown the line out about divorce just so Derya could refute it, but she remained quiet, and my heart sunk into an abyss I knew too well. I could feel the estrangement. Her disaffection formed into an array of rational concerns, and none of them I could wrestle to the ground and defeat. The energy I had with Jon was now gone. I went inside myself, into that inconsolable place that left me hollow, but safe from more hurtful words.

Our session ended then. It was brief and pointed. I knew what Derya wanted. It was now just a matter of time and the collected papers, neatly bound, would find me with the last one containing a signature line with my name underneath, calling for my seal of approval.

I didn’t see Jon again. It was all kind of hazy to me. I remember Derya leaving, with Dr. Amin. I stayed in the office, staring out a window. I watched a flock of geese in a chevron pattern fly across the width of the window and then disappear into the wall.

When Dr. Amin returned, my melancholy was in high gear, and I refused to talk more. She finally gave up and had Mr. Winters escort me to my room. He asked me about the money, but all words seemed useless to me, so I kept an expanse of silence around me. I think he could tell that Monday wasn’t going to be the payday that he had hoped it would.

Chapter 99: Creature

Mr. Samuels brought me my meds. I skipped dinner Sunday night, and while he brought me dinner, I shrugged it off. Meds were not so easy to dismiss. He waited while I drank both cocktails and washed them down with a water chaser.

I remembered Dou Xing's declaration that somehow my meds were being diluted by some beneficent force, making them less deadening to my system, but tonight I drank them down and hoped they would have their full effect. Douse me with a blanket of calm, I prayed.

Twenty minutes after Mr. Samuels left, I was feeling no difference, so I uncurled myself from my bed and walked across the hall to Allison's room, hoping to engage in a conversation that would grant me a reprieve from my depression, even if only for a minute or two.

Her room was quiet when I looked in. I heard the rhythmic breathing of sleep, but I went in anyway and sat on the wooden chair next to her bed… if only death pursued me, and not some crazed demon who wanted me to live the pointless existence of an imprisoned madman.

I heard a cough, and I saw a flicker of hallway light reflected back in the glassy eyes of Allison. "Is that you, Solomon?"

"Yes," I said, still unsure if I wanted to talk.

"You sound pissed."

"Had a bad day."

"Visitors?"

"How'd you know?"

"Visitors bring their judgment, and judgment brings depression. Or… they bring their love, and love is hard to leave. Which was it for you?"

"Both."

“Yeah, that’s tough.”

“How was your day?” I asked.

“Quiet.”

“Did Nurse Morales visit?

“No, I think she comes tomorrow.”

“Can I get you anything?”

“Bastards took my cigarette away while I slept. Thought I hid it pretty good, too. They were probably looking for money or something. Won’t find any of that here.” She chuckled to herself.

“They took all of my stuff, too. Sorry, no cigarettes.”

“Do you ever wonder if anyone cares?”

“All the time.”

“I used to perform in concert halls, Solomon. Nearly three thousand people would listen to my fingers tapping on ivory keys at Lincoln Center—Fischer Hall, what a place. They would listen to every nuance, every flare I would bring to the composition that was my interpretation and they’d either adore or curse me, but mostly adore. Either way, they cared.

“I used to touch these people through my fingers, without touching them. It was magical. Sometimes I would play in the concert hall before the audience arrived or any of the orchestra members, and I would imagine someone sitting in a chair in the audience, and I would play just for them. I felt that even in an empty hall, there were always listeners.”

“What happened… why’d you stop playing?”

“I never stopped playing, really. I still play; it’s just in my head. I’m defenseless… I think my brain is overactive. It hears music in everything. Even as a child I would hear music playing, and I’d ask my friends, and they would look at me like I was crazy. I got used to that look, but over time I wouldn’t ask anymore. What’s the point, I figured—no one could hear it.

“It was okay when I started to take the music I heard and play it through a piano. Then others would hear it, too, and they would even pay money to

hear it. As long as I shared it, it was okay."

"Were you one of those prodigies?" I asked.

"No, I was completely self-taught… even had my own musical language. I wasn't a particularly skilled pianist, until a few years after the accident."

"What accident?"

"My father beat me once…"

"Why?"

"I hadn't been doing my homework, and my grades were suffering because of it. I was too busy capturing the music and writing it down. He beat me good when he found out."

"Doesn't sound like an accident," I observed.

"That wasn't the accident. After he beat me, I managed to get out of the house, and I ran to a friend's house. We lived outside of Beijing, on the very outskirts, and my friend's house was about a mile away. A large field separated our homes, and I was running across this field in the dark. I tripped and fell and when I fell, I hit my head on a large rock. Knocked me out cold.

"When I woke up, I not only had the pain of my backside, courtesy of my father, but my head was bleeding, and I was paralyzed. I lay on my back, staring up at the night sky—shit, it was the only thing I could do: watch the stars.

"But then I began to hear the faintest music, and it was coming from the sky. I was sure of it. It wasn't the kind of music I'd heard before, it was more like a vast rhythm that spilled out from the heavens, and somehow, I heard it, and it… entered me.

"It was like someone from another world visited your home and gave you something from that world to prove they were real. I realized that the music I heard wasn't in my head, it was coming from the movement of planets, stars… everything. A musician, the scale of an entire galaxy, was sending out its musical codes through some form of movement and energy, and while I didn't understand the physics of it, I understood the sounds."

"How'd this accident make you a concert pianist?"

“I lay in that field for two days. I couldn’t move. I had some kind of paralysis—can’t remember the medical name now, but I was lost. My family and friends were searching for me. I couldn’t even yell. I was in a field of tall grass. I could hear them searching for me, some came within ten feet of my position, but unless they literally stumbled on me, they couldn’t see me. I was quite aware that I could die just a few hundred yards from my home.”

“How’d they find you?”

“A dog saved me. When I was finally found, I spent two weeks in the hospital and had every kind of test you can imagine, but I remembered the music. My father’s guilt, at nearly causing my death, became the coin of my realm, allowing me to get piano lessons at a music conservatory, and it was the start of everything.”

“Do you ever think the cosmic musician put you in here?”

“You mean, made me crazy?”

“Yes.”

Allison smiled weakly, and shook her head. “No, I made myself crazy by allowing the music to have too much of a hold on me. I needed balance, and I didn’t give it. I had too many voices in my head… too much music… it was overload that did me in.”

She looked at me. “So what fancy words do they use to describe you here?”

“I think they’re still deciding,” I replied.

“Oh, come on, they must have something.”

“The latest one that seems to be gaining popularity is shared psychotic disorder.”

“Folie a deux,” she said.

Even in the dim light, my quizzical look made an impression.

“The folly of two,” she added.

“How do you know that?”

“It was on the menu for me, too. Didn’t stick though. They decided on

meat and potatoes schizophrenia with a little spice called MPD."

She glanced at me like an impatient teacher. "Multiple Personality Disorder."

I leaned forward, putting my elbows on my knees. "Why're you here?"

"I tried to kill myself too many times. They kept saving me from myself. Finally, and with no real authority, mind you, they decided to medicate me to the point where I didn't have the strength to kill myself. The meds will eventually take care of that for me. And here I am, waiting at death's door."

"When's the last time you've been out of your room?" I asked.

Her forehead crinkled. "Maybe a month."

"Let's go for a walk tomorrow."

"I can't walk."

"I'll get a wheelchair."

"Don't think they have those."

"It's a hospital, they gotta have them. Anyway, I'll find out… if they do, will you go with me?"

"You find the wheelchair first, then I'll decide."

"Okay."

We talked for another ten minutes or so as I watched Allison slowly fade into another round of sleep. When the rhythmic breathing filled the room, I stayed. I had nowhere else to go. There were no adornments of time in this place. Nothing called me to go anywhere or do anything. So I sat in my chair, and began to remember another chair I sat in, surrounded by vast fields. I imagined myself an invader of God's world, testing locked doors, jimmying window latches, until I found one that was open.

But this time, I didn't go anywhere. I didn't need to. It came to me. A light formed in front of me, that was initially shapeless, but seemed nourished by my focus, and as I looked at it, it grew. It became a person, quite possibly a human being, but I couldn't be sure, because the light was so concentrated that any detail was devoured in its radiant energy.

Allison’s room was as bright as if it were on fire, yet there was no heat or sense of discomfort on my part. “What are you?”

“The same as you,” the light said.

“Who are you?”

“Does it matter?”

“What do you want?”

“To show you something.”

“What?”

As soon as the word left my mouth, mind, or wherever it first formed, I felt movement. I was torn from my body, seized by some wind that blew me to a dark place where I saw nothing, but I could feel dirt, and I knew I was sitting on a floor in a cavern. Suddenly, and without a single doubt, I knew I was back on the island.

It was exactly that place where I had lit my first match inside the cave that ultimately led me to Zenith and all that followed. Why would I have come here again? I ran my hands over the dirt floor, searching for some matches, and with only a small effort, my fingers came upon the matchbox, which I instantly opened. I struck a match, and light poured out from the wooden stick’s tip, enough to show me the wall to my left.

I had about ten match sticks in the box, and I gripped the box tight. I walked up to the wall and looked at the hand-drawn figures that had been painted by someone before me. I held the match in the very tip of my fingers like it was a tiny torch. There were various creatures, none of them earthly, but they looked familiar anyway, the kind you might see in dreams or books about mythology. I reached up and touched one of the pictures, it was depicting a Quantusum, and when I touched it, it glowed. I pulled away for an instant. Was it my imagination? I summoned the courage to touch it again. This time it glowed, but I felt my hand move inside the wall, as if the wall had disappeared, or possibly my hand—I wasn’t sure.

And then I felt something pull me inside, and I had no choice but to follow. As I went inside the wall, I could feel a sudden coolness and the deep, inky blackness reminded me to light another match. As I did, the space around me

revealed that I was in a huge space, whose walls, if there were any, were too far away for my meager light to reveal. I began to tremble as a presence collected itself in front of me, one light particle at a time.

As my match withered, I struck another. The light showed that a creature was being assembled before me and it was not of physical mass, but rather, bejeweled lights. As it assembled before my eyes, my match went out, but the light from the creature was more than sufficient now to light the space we shared, and I could begin to see the size of the room. It was three times the size of a domed stadium in every dimension, and the creature that was manifesting needed that space for it was huge.

Without thinking I kept moving backwards in small steps, riveted on the spectacle of seeing this enormous creature reveal itself in such a mesmerizing manner. It was difficult to define this creature until it was almost complete, and even then, I'm not sure I saw all of it from the angle that I stood, so whatever description I could provide, it was, I'm afraid, incomplete. The term, dragon, is a pale metaphor for what I saw. I will tell this much, it was a Quantusum of enormous proportions, but it was not of the water. It was of the air. It was pure light, and the structure it held was so intricate, so beautiful, that I felt a wondrous smile flash across my face.

The creature, and I'm only using that name for lack of a better one, was similar to a great winged dragon, except for a notable lack of teeth, quick-to-anger eyes and the signature breath of fire. It looked exquisitely calm and regal.

I wondered if the appearance of the creature was just a coincidence, and as the final raiment of its light body floated into position, just above its eyes, the eyes opened. It wasn't so much that I feared that it would kill me deliberately; it was more the feeling of being in the presence of something that would not even notice if it killed me.

Its wings were larger than any sailing vessel, and yet they moved with such grace as the creature positioned itself for comfort. Its eyes were not like regular eyes, they were orbs that had a translucent depth that was profound and magical. "You have called me into being, what is it that you desire?"

The voice thundered across the vast interior space, and every cell of my

body was vibrating in its energy. There was a power in this creature as ancient as time itself.

I knew I had to answer the question or risk the consequence of a toenail accidentally crushing me. I spoke with every force I could muster, hoping my tiny voice would find its ears. “I didn’t know that I was calling you into being. I only tried to touch an image that looked like you.”

“The image you touched is me. You are granted one wish for your decisive action, whether you intended it or not.”

“One… one wish?”

“Only one.”

“And it can be anything?”

“Do I look like I am limited in what I can do?”

I shook my head vigorously, not wanting to upset the creature. “No… no, not at all. You look very… unlimited.”

“Then tell me your wish.”

“Do I need to decide now?”

“I will give you a moment to reflect.”

“Do you make suggestions?” I asked.

“In regard to your wish? No. I would suggest that you focus and decide quickly for I cannot manifest in this world for long.”

As you might imagine, when one is suddenly thrust in this position, it is also a predicament. The presence of this creature made my wish—any wish—seem trifling. I had no doubt that the creature was capable of miraculous wish granting, I just didn’t know what wish, what single wish, I wanted to propose.

A shallow wish like money or power would certainly not do. A profound wish like world peace would place so much responsibility on my shoulders that I started to shake my head. “Can I ask you a few questions, first?”

“You already have asked three questions and posited not a single wish. If you desire to ask more questions, I feel compelled to warn you that your wish

making opportunity might evaporate. While it took me a long time to assemble into the image you see, I depart much, much quicker."

"I understand. Are you a Quantusum?"

The great head nodded. "I am of the air, but as you can see, we are related."

"I have seen the Quantusum. I have even spoken with one of their kind. I have seen their bones, and I have felt their presence. You are majestic in comparison to them, and they are astonishing creatures unto themselves. What I don't understand is why you're offering me a wish, when they never have. Can you answer that?"

"In a way, every question is a wish," the creature replied, its voice still thundering with every word. "I will not count this question as your wish, but take care not to ask more questions of me, for the next question I will only accept as your wish."

Its wings, standing from the ground to their highest point would have been the height of a skyscraper. They moved like ocean waves rippling from a powerful breath of wind.

"I offered you a wish, because that is what I do when one has entered this world and summoned me in the precise manner that you did. Those who have found me are few in number, and when they knock upon my door, I will open it and provide them a reward for their diligence.

"My watery brethren serve another purpose, and while they may not grant wishes as I do, they are very capable of doing so. Thus, it is their choice not to do so."

I was unsatisfied with the answer, and now I had to find a way to learn more without asking a question that could be construed as a wish. I would need to be very careful. "I am a Sonverto whose mission is compromised."

"What is your wish?" the creature insisted.

I repeated my statement exactly as before and waited, exposed to the invulnerable whim of the creature's mood.

"Why is your mission compromised?" the creature finally asked to my

great relief.

“I am locked away in an asylum for the insane. I am soon to lose my family, and they are the centerpiece of my entire life. I have the heart of a woman who seems to compel me to do things that bring trouble to my life. I am supposed to expose the human soul to my species, but I have no idea how that could possibly happen. These are the main reasons.”

I was quite sure that I could have gone on, but as I was talking I couldn’t help but notice that the creature’s tail began to move in an erratic sort of way. In most animals this means annoyance, and so I shortened my response accordingly.

“Is your wish, then, to ensure that your mission is not compromised?” The response echoed in the huge space.

I considered the question carefully. I could not find a single thing wrong with answering to the affirmative. The word, “yes,” almost leapt from my mouth, but I closed it into a muffled utterance. There was a subtle difference in what I wanted, in what I needed.

“Great being, I wish to meet with the one who assigned me my mission. I wish to understand it and to remove all doubt as to its purpose. Please, I ask of you, grant me this wish.”

“Your wish is flawed, but it will be granted anyway.”

“What was my flaw?”

The great creature began to disassemble, and as promised, it seemed to unravel at a more rapid pace.

“What was my flaw?” I shouted.

“Your wish is granted,” the creature said, its voice already less resonant, thinner like a sound uncontained. “It will come to you in the natural flow of time. It will come soon.”

“How will I know?”

The light began to fall like sparks from a welder’s torch, some of them landed on me, and I could feel them pierce my skin, filling me with something like burning light that plunged deep inside me. A few seconds

later the last spark drifted slowly to the ground and burned for a moment on the dirt floor and then sizzled into darkness. I clutched my matches and instead felt something foreign.

It was a chair.

Chapter 100: Wheelchair

I lived like a seed in the smallest spaces, tightly compressed by pitiless walls and uncurtained windows, but my dream of the winged Quantusum gave me hope that whatever fed on me, whatever darkness came to suckle on my light, it would end.

It was Monday, and I had no appointments but one: find a wheelchair. After breakfast I asked Mr. Samuels if he could locate a wheelchair, to which he gave a look of utter disbelief.

“What the hell do you want a wheelchair for?” he had asked.

When I explained, he thought it was a bad idea, but when I insisted, he told me to find one myself. I offered bribes but apparently word had spread that my money was mythical—or might as well be.

I realized he was being sarcastic that I should find a wheelchair myself, but I decided to take his challenge seriously. While Monday’s were probably the busiest workday for the vast majority of businesses and professions, SRC was actually the slowest on Monday. The number of nurses and doctors was probably less than ten in the whole facility. The hallways were mostly empty as I trudged to the elevator to see if I could find a way to the third floor.

I pushed the down button, just as Mr. Winters had done many times and waited for the elevator. It finally came, and I went inside and waved my wristband over the scanner. The door closed, but the elevator seemed to have indigestion, sputtered and then opened its doors as if it were spitting me out.

There had to be stairs. I looked at the very end of the hallway, where architects usually place the stairs, but the only door that looked promising was locked.

Then I remembered that the food that was served in the cafeteria had to come from somewhere below. If I could get into the backroom of the cafeteria there had to be an elevator there. I shuffled my way as inconspicuously as I could to the juice bar—a term of endearment by my

fellow residents for the place where the meds were dispensed.

I saw an opportunity to casually walk through the door. No one was behind it. The room was small and empty, except for white cardboard boxes, and there was another door at the backend. I opened it slowly. Seeing no one, I ventured out to the next room. I heard some voices, and I ducked behind a coat rack that was mostly filled with jackets. The voices belonged to two women who were probably kitchen workers. They disappeared as suddenly as they had appeared.

I kept edging deeper into enemy territory. I was actually having fun. My concentration, intellect and senses were all present as I made an emboldened rush to a bank of elevators and pushed the down arrow. I heard a metal cart moving inside the elevator as it came to the floor I was on. I stepped back in case there was someone on the elevator and hid behind the corner.

As the elevator opened, a young man I'd never seen before pulled a metal cart with a dozen or so trays on it from the elevator and pushed it down the hallway opposite me. Thankfully, the doors of the elevator had been set to close slowly, and I was able to sneak on just as the doors closed behind me.

I pushed floor "3" and noticed there was no scanner. The elevator lurched a bit and then smoothly descended. I prayed that no one would be waiting for an elevator on the floors beneath me. I went past the fourth floor and then came to stop on the third. The doors opened, and I waited. No one was there, thank God. As the doors started to close, I stuck my arms out, and they opened again. I sliced through the doors and quickly walked down the hallway. I heard some voices and panicked, there was only one door nearby, and it was closed. My thought was simple: door unlocked, no one inside… please. I had no real choice but to take the chance.

I turned the nob. It opened. Part one: complete. I entered and closed the door behind me as silently as possible, taking a quick scan of the room, no one was inside. Part two: complete. I looked around to see if there was anything resembling a wheelchair, but the room looked more like a doctor's office. One window provided enough light to see, and I went over to the desk and saw a phone.

It was an old fashioned phone, the kind you saw in movies. I grabbed the

device and hit the “talk” button. There was a dial tone. I would need to call information, so I dialed 411, and asked for the number of Dan Archer’s law firm, and then dialed the number.

“Good morning, Archer Davidson Torimaso Law Offices, how may I direct your call?”

“Dan Archer, please.”

“May I ask who’s calling?”

“Solomon Tonum.”

“One moment please, Mr. Tonum, I’ll connect you to his voicemail.”

Before I could object, I heard a connection glitch and then a message. “Hey Solomon, this is Dan, sorry I can’t take your call right now. I did get your message on Saturday, but had no way of calling you, so I made this personal message for you. Please enter your account PIN number.”

I was perplexed. I looked at the phone’s numbering system, and pushed nine-five- nine-seven, and waited for a few moments.

“Hi Solomon, here’s the message.

“Allison Li resides at Stonemason Rehabilitation Center in Cornwall, New York. She’s been there under an alias, Sandra Wang, for three years and five months. She was twenty-three when she was taken from New York Methodist Hospital, and placed at the Stonemason facility. She was in the hospital because she’d attempted suicide several times. Anyway, she had a wealthy benefactor, who wanted to remain anonymous, who put up the money to have her stay at Stonemason.

“According to our research, the stay was supposed to be temporary—maybe a few months, but it trickled out over three years, and the benefactor eventually lost interest. Probably thought she’d make a re-entry as a concert pianist, but it just didn’t pan out, so they stopped paying. Now she’s probably getting by on medical welfare. I’m not sure why she’s still there. There’s really nothing on her for the past three years.

“She does have a brother named Guanghai—same last name. He’s an engineer with an aerospace company in Orange County, and we can contact

him, if you'd like. Her parents live in Beijing, where her father is a government official of some kind, but there's no indication that they've ever come to the U.S., and we have no information on their address or phone. So the brother is our best bet.

"Now, relative to your other question about your doctor. You can assign Doctor of Record privileges to any doctor you want, unless you've been involuntarily committed to a mental health institution. Then, it would be your wife's responsibility to make that decision, if you were deemed incompetent, unless you had previously created a Psychiatric Advance Directive, which I doubt you have. Your wife would probably use the expertise of your current doctor, but she might also seek a second opinion, and her decision would be the final authority.

"If you're in such a position, then you need to let me know the details, so we can start the process of securing your release from your wife's authority. It can be a thorny process, but I'm sure we can do it for you.

"One more thing, and this may be related, your wife's attorney has requested that your joint account be closed, and all legal affairs be handled by her new designee, a Mister Richard Connelly. Usually when these types of things happen I don't have any serious concerns provided the directive comes from both people on the account, but given your last voicemail, it feels strange. Could you let me know what's happening?

"That's it, Solomon. I hope all is well in your world, and do leave me a response when you get this message. Thanks."

There was a short beep. "Please press one to leave a response. When you complete your message, press one again or the pound sign for more options. Thank you."

My heart was pounding. I looked at the phone in my hand and wondered whether I was in any condition to leave a coherent message. I took a deep breath, and the operator's message came on again as a reminder that I was taking too much time to respond. I pressed "1" and walked to the far corner of the room, furthest from the door and spoke into the corner.

"Dan, this is Solomon," I whispered, well aware that I probably sounded paranoid. "Thanks for your message. I'm staying at the Stonemason facility

against my wishes. I was accused of… of harming my son, which I never did, even my son says that, but I'm here anyway. I need your help, Dan, and if Derya has transferred our money to a new account, I don't know how I will pay you, but I'll find a way.

"I would like you to contact Allison's brother and arrange to bring him here, if he's willing. So please proceed on that.

"Also, please do whatever you can to discreetly look into my release from this place. If I could get Doctor Chayton as my Doctor of Record, it would make all the difference. Please contact Doctor Kohana Chayton in New Haven, and see if there's anything the two of you could do.

"One last thing, Derya's probably making the arrangements to divorce me. If she wants the money, that's one thing, but I think she's going to prevent me from seeing my children again on the grounds that I could harm them, and that's really what scares me. I don't know anything about her having an attorney. That's new to me. I've never heard of Richard Connelly before.

"Dan, if there's any way you could come here for a visit…" I paused. "I know it's a lot to ask. I know you're busy… I really have nothing else in the way of resources. I'm talking to you right now on a phone in an office I shouldn't be in. I have no communication. Anything you can do would be appreciated. Thank you. I'll try and call again as soon as I can.

"Goodbye."

I pressed "1" and set the phone down quietly on the desk.

Maybe the meds were working better than I thought. I had been so intent on sneaking my way downstairs to find a wheelchair that I'd forgotten that my wife might be sneaking behind my back and talking with attorneys to seal me away. I could end up like Allison.

I needed to throw some cold water into my face, breathe in the reality of my situation and… and do what? I was an inmate. I had less freedom than someone on death row, at least they got to talk with their attorney and make appeals to the Governor. I felt the blood rushing to my face. I was getting angry, but when I thought about it, I couldn't decide with whom I was angry.

Chapter 101: Love

After my phone call with Dan, if that's what you could call it, I lost my desire to find a wheelchair. I even lost my fear of being caught. What could they do? I can't even walk the hallways? I was actually hoping someone might happen upon me and ask me what I was doing.

It wasn't long before someone did.

She was small, in a nurses' uniform with a name tag of Candice. I, on the other hand, was regaled in my chic gray-tone uniform popular with the mad-crowd, a small and silent niche market whose purchasing powers were really in the hands of administrators like Candice. I was on the loose and on the floor where doctors and visitors conspired on ways to have positive outcomes with the crazies upstairs.

"Sir, where are you going?" she asked.

I turned around and saw her. Had she sneaked up behind me?

She pulled out a scanner and pointed it at me. "Hold out your wrist, please."

I put out my right wrist, pretending to be stupid.

"The other one."

I raised my left hand like someone who was going to wave goodbye. "I'm patient four-seven-two-six-Alpha-Lion-three-one-two."

"Mr. Tonum, you're supposed to be on the fifth floor. How did you get here?"

It's an amazing principle of human psychology that when someone thinks you're crazy, you almost feel obliged to give them a show. At least, that's how I felt with Candice.

"Transporter beam… I'm not quite sure." I averted her stare as if I was parrying a fencer, and then touched my chest with both hands. "Molecularly, I seem to have arrived in one piece. Do I look strange to you?"

Candice looked at my records on her tablet and probably saw I was harmless. “What are you looking for Mr. Tonum?”

“A wheelchair… do we have any of those I could rent for a short time?”

Candice almost smiled. “Why would you want a wheelchair?”

“Well, Candice, there’s a young woman on my floor who hasn’t been out of her room for almost a month, and I would very much like to escort her in a wheelchair, so she could see a little bit more of our wonderful surroundings… perhaps the juice bar, the cafeteria, or the always popular commons. Is that too much to ask?”

“If I can find you a wheelchair, would you go back to your room without any fuss?”

“If you can find me a wheelchair I’ll nominate you for President of Stonemason Rehabilitation Center, and I will go to my room without any fuzz… fuss. Damn, I always confuse those two.”

She smiled. “Okay, follow me.”

I felt like a young duckling that had just be imprinted by his mother to follow carefully behind her waddling posterior. We walked down the hallway to a storage closet and Nurse Candice told me to wait outside in the hallway. In less than a minute she wheeled out a wheelchair.

“Will this do?”

“It most certainly will. Thank you so much! Would you like to try it out? I can push you.”

She looked at me with a slight uneasiness. “That’s okay, but I’ll let you push it to the elevator. Okay?”

“No fuss here.”

I pushed it into the elevator, and she rode up with me without a word. When the doors opened to the fifth floor, she pointed down the hallway. “Your room.”

“Lead the way,” I said.

When we got to my door I stopped with the wheelchair and pointed to

Allison's room. "Well, Candice, you've been a saint, and Allison will gain the benefits of your sainthood, I can assure you of that. Would you like to meet Allison?"

"I have to get back to my station, Mr. Tonum. Have a nice day."

"For how long may I keep this?"

"I'll let Samuels know you have it—it'll be his decision."

"Thanks again."

It was the first show of compassion I had seen since I arrived. I turned off my act as quickly as I had started it, and pushed the wheelchair to Allison's room.

"Ta dah!" I said as I opened the door.

"I thought I heard your voice out there in the hallway. You actually did it. You got me a wheelchair."

"So, are you ready for a spin?"

"Looking like this?"

"Just tell me what you need, I'm on a roll."

"A clean bathrobe would be good…"

"Okay, anything else?"

"Cigarette."

"Anything else?"

"No, that'll do."

"So if I come back with those things, you'll take a spin on your new wheels?"

"I promise."

"Be right back."

I knew the bathrobe wouldn't be too hard to get. Those were standard issues. Many of the residents used them as their regular clothes. The cigarette, that would be tough, but I had hope. I started at the commons,

where the maddening crowds congregated to watch television and argue over remote controls. I stood right in front of the projector to ensure I would get seen. “Excuse me, but does anyone here have a cigarette they would be willing to part with? It’s for a good cause.”

“What’s the cause?”

“And do you have a cigarette?” I asked the burly gentleman who had body hair so thick that he looked like a wolverine.

“I just want to know the cause.”

“First the cigarette. Anyone?”

An older woman motioned to me with a subtle tick of her head. I seemed to remember her name was Agnes or Annabel, something with an “A.” She looked like a reasonable prospect for a cigarette. I went up to her.

“If it’s for Sandra, my answer is no, she shouldn’t be smoking in her condition.”

“Well that’s just it, she won’t smoke it. She just likes to pretend.”

“So I could get it back?” She tilted her head as if we were about to sign a pact or treaty.

“Sure, I think that could be arranged.”

Agnes-Annabel took a careful look around, opened her pocket, and took out a small deck of playing cards. She opened the cards and pulled out what looked like a joint of marijuana.

“These are tobacco cigarettes, right?” I asked.

“Rolled ’em myself. My son, he’s a banker in Atlantic City,” and then in a hushed voice, “…brings the tobacco inside Dairy Queen Cakes, puts it inside these cute little plastic bags. It’s not a lot of tobacco, so I can only make seven or eight cigarettes at a time, but it’s damn good tobacco.”

Agnes-Annabel was at least sixty years old, toothless, but sprightly. Thin as a young sapling, but looked strong and hearty. She handed me her cigarette, and I took it gingerly, wrapping my hand around it. In a sudden impulse, I bent down and kissed her on her cheek. She paused for a moment and looked up at me. “It’s been a long time since a younger man did that, I

almost slapped you. Be careful.” She smiled and pointed her finger at me. “Remember, don’t let her smoke it, and I’m hoping you return it in good condition, and then we’ll be right as rain.” She nodded her head, almost the same way Uncle did. It reminded me of him.

I thanked her profusely and assured her that her cigarette would be well taken care of.

I was just about to walk away, when she grabbed my wrist firmly. “Take good care of that girl. Her last days should be good ones. That kiss you gave me, give it to her, too. She deserves it. She certainly does.”

Mr. Samuels was at the juice bar getting preparations underway for lunch service. Most residents took their meds at breakfast and dinner, but I noticed a few took them at lunch as well. They seemed more like zombies than humans, sitting stock- still like the long-legged birds just before they strike their prey, only these birds were too slow and too tired to strike anything.

“Mr. Samuels, can I get a clean robe for Allison?”

He glanced at me from behind the bar. “First, her name’s Sandra… so keep it on that. Second, I’m busy right now. So it’ll have to wait.”

“I can get it myself, if you tell me where they are.”

“That’s just it, you can’t get it yourself. I heard about you and the wheelchair, man, you can’t just go around picking stuff up. You were on the third floor unattended… on my shift. You made me lose twenty bucks, because Candy needed her hush money. So you’ve already cost me twenty, and it could’ve been much worse.”

“I’ll take care of the twenty, in fact, I’ll make it forty.”

“Yeah, right, just like you told Mount Winters.”

“I’m good for it, really.”

“And here’s another issue,” he kept organizing the meds for patients as he talked. “Spose you’re out peddling your girlfriend around, and Doctor Folsom walked by and sees you, what’re you gonna say?”

“That you had the charitable heart to bring the wheelchair to Sandra, so she could get out of the room she’s been cooped-up in for the past month.”

“And do you think he’d believe that for a second?”

“Look, what do you want me to tell him?” I asked, leaning against the wall.

“Tell him that you begged me to get a wheelchair and threatened me if I didn’t.”

“Right, and he’ll believe that?”

“If you sell it, you’re damn tootin he’d believe it.”

“Alright, you got it. When can you get the robe?”

He made a slight grimace. “Maybe after lunch.”

“Okay, thanks,” I said, and started to walk away.

“Remember, forty bucks, right?”

“Remember, after lunch,” I said over my shoulder.

When I got back to Allison’s room she was sleeping. I had kept the cigarette rolled up in my right hand and could smell the rich tobacco leaves wafting through the room as I set it on her nightstand. I put the wheelchair against the back wall of her room with an accidental, loud thud.

“You’re back?” Allison croaked.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to wake you.”

“That could only be one of Abby’s cigarettes… am I right?”

“I knew her name started with an ‘A.’”

“Can I hold it, Solomon?”

I handed her the cigarette and sat down in my chair. She put it under her nose and closed her eyes. “My father loved to smoke as much as my mother hated it.”

“What does your father do?”

“He ran one of the suburban districts in Beijing for almost twenty years.”

“Like a mayor?”

“Yes.”

“Is he retired now?”

“I don’t know.”

“When’s the last time you talked with him?”

“Four years ago… something like that.” She looked around for a moment and popped the cigarette in her mouth. “I don’t see a bathrobe.”

“Mister Samuels is bringing it after lunch.”

“I’m impressed, Solomon. I’m impressed.”

She took a long drag on her new cigarette and pretended to exhale.

“Can I ask you a personal question?” I asked.

“You’ve earned the right, shoot.”

“What do you think your mission was in this life?”

“What makes you think I have a mission?”

“Doesn’t everybody have a purpose?”

“Maybe, but it doesn’t mean they have a mission.”

“What’s the difference?”

She looked at me, her eyes narrowing to tiny slits. “My purpose could be to figure out how to live and die, but my mission might be to write a song that helps other people figure out how to live and die.”

“Was that your mission?”

“Who knows?”

“Where do you think your mission comes from, I mean… who gives it to you?”

“Why’re you asking me? Do you see me here? Do I look like a guru to you? I used to hear voices, and they’d be able to answer you, but they weren’t all wise and happy either. They just had opinions, and loved to share them.”

Allison took the cigarette from her mouth and exhaled a long, invisible trail of smoke. “You have to be a philosopher to care about it. All I cared about—for most of my life—was the feeling of being connected to a larger

intelligence. I knew my little brain wasn't it, as powerful as it may be, it wasn't it. It was a node that knew it was a node. Not many can say that, you know."

The room turned quiet as I thought about her comment.

"When we go for our ride, you have to leave that cigarette here."

"I know…"

Suddenly her voice seemed to reflect a mind grappling for feelings that were cold and hidden. "Solomon, I'm lonely. Sometimes I get these waves of… I can only describe them as love. They come on me like I was this sandy shore, and they wash against me, wave after wave, but I have no way of sharing it…"

"How do you want to share it?" I asked.

She half chuckled and sighed. "How do you share love? Is there any other way?"

There was an awkward silence. I felt like someone had suddenly set me down in a mine field and the only rational move was to remain motionless.

"I wasn't suggesting anything—"

"I didn't think you were." I said.

The intercom interrupted with the announcement that lunch was served.

"Solomon, go have some lunch. I'm tired suddenly."

"What can I bring you?"

"They'll bring me something, don't worry."

"I'll stop by afterwards to make sure that Samuels brings you a new robe. Okay?"

She smiled and nodded her head.

Abby's directive echoed in my ears, and I bent over and kissed Allison on her cheek. She raised her arms over my back and hugged me tenderly, but I could tell her arms were exhausted, done in from atrophy.

I stood up and took the cigarette from her mouth. "I'll leave it right here,

underneath the washcloth.”

“It’s dry?”

“Yes.”

“Okay… Solomon, don’t take it the wrong way, but I love you.”

I smiled. “Get some sleep. I love you, too.”

There, love had found a way to express its longing. Maybe it had been a tad clumsy and indefinite as to its true expanse, but two hearts with nothing in between, have nothing but love. It is the vacuum filled. It stands out in the darkening life like a shard of light that has never known darkness.

Chapter 102: Tuna

Mr. Samuels was true to his word. When I returned from lunch a clean nightgown was draped over the wheelchair, and a plate of mostly uneaten food on Allison's nightstand.

"How you're feeling? Ready for a ride?"

Allison looked at me with a thin, mischievous smile. "To be honest, no."

"Did you get enough to eat? I can wait while you finish."

"Oh, I'm finished with this food." She muttered mostly to herself.

"The rolls were good." I offered.

"Maybe to you. I can't stand to even look at them."

"Have you ever been in love?" I blurted out.

"…Yes…" she said coyly, glancing in my direction.

"Did you have an appetite then?"

"Better. Why do you ask?"

"Was he a musician, too?"

"Why the sudden interest in my love life?"

"It's not sudden, really, it just… came out. More curious than anything. Just tell me."

Allison reached for a hair brush on her nightstand and began brushing her hair.

"He didn't really do anything. His parents were socialites."

"Ah, the idle rich. I suppose concert pianists attract that sort of thing."

"We attract nothing of the kind. I had poor boyfriends, too."

"But you didn't love them, right?"

"They didn't understand me."

“And the socialite did?”

“He was as crazy as me… it helps.” She looked at me with a knowing smile.

I grabbed the wheelchair and brought it to the edge of the bed. “How do you want to do this?”

“I don’t want to do this… you’re the one who wants to do this.”

I grabbed the bathrobe and put it next to her on the bed. “Put it on, I’ll turn around. When you’re ready, I’ll pick you up and set you in the wheelchair. Sound like a plan?”

“I can get up on my own. I don’t need you to be a crane. Go ahead, turn around… I can’t have you looking at me.”

I turned around and heard her wrestling with the robe. I could hear the bed squeaking as she stood up. “Okay, I might need a little help sitting down in this thing since it’s on wheels.”

In a half-second I rushed to help her sit, holding her hand and steadying the wheelchair with my other hand. “Sorry, I forgot to put on the brake.”

“It’s okay.”

“Your hands feel cold, are you warm enough?” I asked.

“I’m never warm enough,” she replied. “Let’s get this over with.”

I got behind her and pushed the wheelchair out of her room. “There’s my room, in case you were interested.”

“You’ve seen one room, you’ve seen them all,” she quipped.

“Where would you like to go first?”

She pointed behind her. “Back to my room.”

I ignored her. “How about the commons?”

“Everyone will be there. I don’t know…”

She pulled out her cigarette from her bathrobe pocket, and put it in her mouth. “I know…I’m a bad influence.”

“You’ll get caught, and they’ll take it away from you, which will mean I

can’t return it to Abby, who’ll then hate me, and there goes my credibility.”

“Okay, okay, stop whining. It’s gone.” She took it out of her mouth and put it discreetly in her hand.

“I can smell it.”

“You’re worse than my Mother.”

We went by the elevators and said “Hi” to some of the residents who apparently liked to wait by the elevators and watch the floor lights and see who would get off or on the elevator. Usually they were the ones who lost the remote control privileges in the commons, and the elevator post was their fallback position to pass the time.

I wheeled her to the cafeteria, which was mostly empty. A janitor was cleaning one of the tables in a corner, and two residents—both middle-aged women—were playing cards on one of the smaller tables. They glanced in our direction, but mostly ignored us.

“If you could eat anything in the whole world, what would it be?” I asked.

“Sushi.”

“What kind?”

“Doesn’t matter, as long as it’s fresh and made by someone who knows what they’re doing.”

“No sushi here, what about fish?”

“I like fish, especially tuna.”

“Wait here.” I walked to the back by the juice bar and snuck in without the janitor noticing and started rummaging in the back for anything that said fish or tuna. Needless to say, I didn’t even consider that sushi would be an option. After some poking into cabinets, I heard the shuffle of feet.

“What are you looking for, and why are you back here?”

It was the janitor, an older man with a graying beard like mine, but unlike me, looked and sounded like he was from India.

“I was looking for some tuna, so do you know if we have any?”

“You’re a patient.”

“And… you’re a janitor. Hi, I’m Solomon.” I put my hand outward to shake, but he didn’t make the corollary move, and in fact looked away from me entirely as if he wanted to make sure he wasn’t being set-up for a practical joke or something unseemly.

“You need to return to the cafeteria.”

“I will, but I really want to get some tuna for my friend, who, as you can see, is just skin and bones. Do you know where it is?”

All the workers had both scanners and talkers—the latter allowing them to communicate with other staff on the floor. He started to activate his talker.

I raised my hand. “Please don’t do that. I won’t harm anything… I… I just want to get some tuna for her. Okay? If you help me with that, I’ll get back to the cafeteria straightaway.”

He paused and studied me, probably assessing my disposition for aggression, which I should think to anybody looking at me, was negligible at best, especially if the observer was someone who also wore a graying beard like mine.

“Go back there, I’ll bring you a plate of tuna. But you need to go back and stay back. Now.”

I started to walk back to the cafeteria. “Two forks, please… and maybe something to drink if it’s not too much trouble,” I added cheerfully.

I could feel the janitor watching me as I left. I realized that I sounded like a demanding resident, but I assumed I was paying good money to stay in this place, so I had a valid right to be demanding.

I returned to the table where Allison was sitting and sat down next to her. “I spoke with the chef… or… janitor, depending on your definition, and he offered to make us a snack of tuna.”

“Yes, I could hear his enthusiasm.”

“You could hear that?”

“The walls are thin.” She smiled at me.

I hoped that he would in fact make a plate of tuna for us rather than call Mr. Samuels and have us escorted out, but the odds were that he would call and report me.

“So, this crazy boyfriend of yours, when did you last see him?”

“I don’t know, maybe four years ago…. Something like that.”

“Where’d he go?”

“Probably some island in the South Pacific where he can sip his umbrella-laced martinis and frolic with bikini-clad girls who have tan lines. I really don’t know. We lost touch after my breakdown.”

I heard the faint sound of clanking plates, which I took as a good sign.

“What about you? What about your wife?” Allison asked.

“I saw her yesterday, actually.”

Allison smiled quickly and then gave me a deadpan look. “I wasn’t asking when you saw her last, what’s your relationship like?”

“That remains to be seen, but right now, I don’t have high hopes. The mere fact that I see people and have visions has her pretty spooked… and it’s not just that I see things, but there are… there’re dark entities that like annoying me and my family.”

“How?”

“You’re going to think I’m crazy if I tell you—”

Allison put her thin arms out and shrugged.

“I know,” I said, “it’s like prisoners who claim that they’re never guilty, I’m in a crazy house, and of course I’m not crazy, but it’s true, in my case… it’s true.”

She reached out and patted me on the top of my hand. “I believe you.” Her sarcasm was thick, but I liked her touch anyway.

“Did you ever see the source of your voices?” I asked quietly.

She shook her head slowly. “No, they were just voices.”

“I see the entities as clearly as I see you. The only difference is that they’re

slightly transparent if I look really hard, but a casual look, and you'd never tell the difference, especially indoors or at night."

"Are they evil or good?"

"I see both."

"And it's the evil ones your wife is worried about?"

I didn't want to tell Allison about the hospital event with Jon, or the sordid rendezvous with Nammu in South Dakota. "I think they all bother her, it's just that the evil ones wanted to sideline me in some dark alley like this place. They put me here, quite literally."

"So are they really so evil?" she asked, looking me directly in the eye. "To me, they're practically angels."

It's funny how sometimes another's self-interest, brimming with needs unfulfilled, are filled by the misery of another, and there seems to be this discreet settlement of one outpouring of sorrow that forms hope in another. I understood in that moment that Allison was right. Maybe Nammu, to her, was an angel. Maybe what goes on in the wide expanse of life is so complex as to make an analysis impossible.

I was glad that Allison had left her hand on mine.

The Janitor brought us our post-lunch meal, and without ceremony, or words, placed it with some care in between us. I could see him quickly glance at Allison, and he seemed to soften his expression a little.

"Thank you. What is your name, sir?" I asked.

"Samir."

"I'm Solomon, and this is Allison."

He bowed slightly and then turned and walked away.

There was one dinner plate with the contents of canned tuna poured out in the middle, in chunks, languishing on a large leaf of lettuce. It looked a little like cat food to me, and having recently eaten, my appetite seemed absent. I looked up to see Allison watching me. There's something about gratitude that is noticeable in the human eye. It's one of those unsayable characteristics, but when you see it, you know it. She was looking at me differently, and it

warmed my heart.

We ate our first meal together, one plate and two forks. Samir came out a few minutes later with two cups of water and plunked them on the table.

“When you’re done, you can put your dishes on the counter there.”

“Thank you, Samir. You’re the second saint I’ve had the pleasure to meet today.”

He looked at me with a tiny bit of trepidation, unsure of how to read me. “You’re welcome.”

I don’t pretend to know when or how love appears between two people. Maybe it’s all a projection as some would say, but I don’t think so, not where love is concerned. True love seems to evolve from the tiniest molecule of care, and if that first molecule is genuine, it attracts—through some divine order—more molecules. More love. And then veins are filled with the vital substance that powers universes and life suddenly becomes magical.

I picked at my food, mostly pretending to eat, but Allison seemed to enjoy her tuna, and that was enough for me. We talked about things in the outside world like goldfish chatting about the objects outside their bowl. It wasn’t about the politics of the day, or the drab autumn weather, or the injustices of the media; we talked about the objects unseen: creativity, the muse, the way in which fingers could touch souls, and the way life flowed onward no matter how we might resist or give up.

We never made it to the commons. Allison became tired, and I pushed her back to her room and helped her to bed. I placed the wheelchair discreetly in the back corner, hoping that Mr. Samuels or Mr. Winters would overlook it as just another piece of barren furniture. I got her a fresh cup of water and placed it on her nightstand. She was sleeping within a minute or two of lying down, and I fished the cigarette—mostly guilt-free—from her bathrobe pocket. It was a little disheveled, so I straightened it out a bit, and took it with me.

I bent down and kissed her cheek.

“Thank you,” came the slightest of whispers.

“I thought you were asleep,” I murmured.

“I’m trying to awaken, Solomon. I’m trying.” Almost immediately the rhythmic breathing began, and I slowly retreated back to my room.

I remembered when my heart was full, before my surgery, and I would believe that love filled it. I felt great love for my children and Derya. And I was sure that I still did, and yet here I was feeling such deep love for a woman I met only a week ago, who had been utterly destroyed by her life. A discarded rag doll was the best way to describe her, and yet I loved her without reservation.

Maybe it was the isolation. I felt a trace of vertigo every time I thought of Allison, and I knew it was a higher love that transcended physical needs or age or health. Something inhabited the space between us that I had never felt before. I had to be careful, but I didn’t want to be.

Chapter 103: Visitors

Tuesday was like any other day except that I had a session with Dr. Amin later in the afternoon. Other than that I was free to roam on the fifth floor, which meant that I was in Allison's room. We had been talking about our childhood and how it was so different, she, growing up in Beijing, and I, Cape Town.

A sharp knock on the door and I turned around to see Mr. Winters.

"Sandra?" he asked, looking past me.

"Yes?"

"You have a visitor to see you."

She looked at me and opened her mouth in a gasp. A young Chinese man entered her room, and she instantly began to cry. I watched them embrace, both of them lost in the other. I stood to my feet and backed away slightly. A man, half-eclipsed, standing behind Mr. Winters caught my eye and was mouthing the words "You don't know me," and shook his head strongly. It was Dan Archer. I was confused and elated at the same time.

"This is her brother's translator. He wasn't sure if she spoke Mandarin anymore." Mr. Winters announced, mostly to me.

I reached over to shake Dan's hand. "I'm Solomon… from across the hall."

"Nice to meet you Solomon, I'm Dan." He was dressed in a pair of jeans and orange sweater over a crisp white shirt.

I turned my attention back to Allison and her brother, their embrace was as soulful as any I had ever seen. Even Mr. Winters watched with rapt interest.

"How… how did you find me?" Allison whimpered.

Dan stepped inside the room and looked at Guanghai, and spoke something resembling Chinese Mandarin. Guanghai responded and Dan turned to Mr. Winters. "He's asked if he could have privacy with his sister. Would you be

so kind?”

Allison glanced at me with eyes of wonderment, as if she knew something wasn’t right. I just smiled back at her, hoping to ease her confusion.

Mr. Winters excused himself and motioned for me to follow, but Allison interrupted. “Solomon, I’d like you to stay.”

“I’ll be back in thirty minutes,” Mr. Winters intoned, and then left.

“What’s going on… how’d you find me?” Allison asked, her eyes still reflecting wonderment.

Her brother held both her hands. “Solomon contacted his attorney—this man… he’s… he’s not interpreter, he’s Solomon’s attorney.” Guanghai smiled broadly. “Allison, meet Mr. Archer, he prepared everything.”

Guanghai’s English was a bit choppy, but sufficient. “Mr. Archer found me… I live in Santa Ana, California. I work in small company as engineer. He called me and told me that you were in a hospital and sick. I knew you had been taken to hospital, but we couldn’t find you because they used wrong name—Sandra Wang.”

Guanghai turned to Dan. “He brought me out on private plane and brought me here. I’m… overjoyed.” His eyes filled with tears and he wiped his face with his sleeves.

Allison looked at me as one would if a tree suddenly began to speak. “You did this?”

I smiled and looked down. “I had a small role.”

“Mr. Archer, thank you so much. I can’t believe I have my little brother here with me.” She leaned over and stroked her hand over his short-cropped hair. “Guanghai, you look so much older… are you going bald?”

He smiled sheepishly. “Mother genes…”

“Do they know?” Allison asked, her tone suddenly sober.

“I called them immediately.”

“What did you tell them?”

Dan poked my shoulder and motioned to me to follow him to the far side

of the room. “We don’t have a lot of time, Solomon—”

“Man, I’m glad to see you! Thanks for doing this, Dan.”

“No problem, glad to help out. Here’s the deal, I can’t get you out of here without a hearing, but I have everything in motion. I talked with Doctor Chayton and he’ll help.”

He glanced over his shoulder at Allison and Guanghai who were now talking in Mandarin. “The new account is offshore—the one your wife set-up. It’s clearly not intended to be accessible by you. We think it might be in a Turkish bank, but we haven’t been able to confirm it. These things take time to engineer, or high connections. Either way, your wife didn’t just make this move impulsively in the last few days.”

“What does it mean?” I asked in a loud whisper.

Dan looked away for a moment as if he were collecting his thoughts. “Your house went on the market last Sunday. It was done discreetly and we only found out about it through a cross reference we were making on some local banks, but it was sold the first day it was placed. Cash deal.”

I turned around to hide my expression, but some choice, four-letter words escaped— though I did have the presence of mind to whisper them.

Dan touched my shoulder. “Look, we think she’s moving to Turkey, but we don’t know this for sure. It just looks this way. Does she have dual citizenship?”

I nodded.

“And the kids?”

I nodded again.

“The proceeds of the sale of your home are in a new account, and it’s sitting in your bank. If I were a betting man, that’ll be her parting gift.”

“I don’t care about the money…”

“I understand, but this isn’t just about the money.”

“What can I do?” I pleaded.

“Until she files the papers, not much. She’s taken full advantage of your

situation. Her attorney knows what he's doing."

"What about the kids? If she moves to Turkey how will I see them?"

"We'll figure that out when the time comes, don't worry. The bigger issue right now is getting you out of here. I'm petitioning the court to get your medical records from Doctors Kendall, Chayton, Carson and anything they have on you here.

"What's your doctor's name here?"

"Doctor Amin."

He wrote the name down on a small notebook he pulled from his pocket. "Folsom is the managing director, and he has some skeletons in his closet that we intend to exploit." He pointed behind him. "What about her, can we use her situation?"

"What do you mean?"

"Medical negligence, anything like that."

"Can you get Allison out of here, too?"

"We can try."

"Dan, I have no idea how I'm going to pay you for—"

"Did I ever tell you that Vanessa made my dad a lot of money?" He looked at me with a twisted frown, but under the circumstances it seemed appropriate somehow.

I nodded. "Yes, you mentioned that."

He pulled out something neatly folded from his pocket. "Here're ten, one-hundred dollar bills. Doctor Chayton thought you might find these useful in here."

I grabbed them and placed them in my pocket. "Thanks."

"I'd like to take a few pictures of her room—"

I grabbed Dan's arm. "Can we get her out another way?"

"Why?"

"Doctor Folsom mentioned that the funding source behind this facility, is

an executive at JP Morgan Chase, and her son is here—”

“That’s got to be the link—”

“What link?”

“One of the articles we found on Allison was that she had a wealthy, unnamed boyfriend, and they had some kind of a suicide pact. They were both found in a hotel room… do you know the name of the executive?”

“No, he just said it was a woman and high up in the bank. That’s all I know.”

“Okay, that might be enough. We’ll research that.”

“…He used the past tense.”

“What do you mean?” Dan asked.

“Folsom made it sound like she worked there in the past, she might be retired now.”

“Okay, good, that’ll help narrow the field. We’ll look into it. If her son is still in here, she won’t like the idea of us releasing information about his mental state—or what’s been happening to his ex-girlfriend.”

“Keep her out of the newspapers, Dan. Okay?”

“They’ll just be threats. We won’t do anything unseemly. You have my word, but sometimes with these people, threats are all you got.”

Dan looked over at the siblings who were talking a mile a minute.

“You did good here, Solomon. You did real good. The fact that they hid her name gives them a major legal problem. Guanghai knew nothing of his sister’s whereabouts, I’ll start with that. Notification of next of kin is a legal obligation. The fact her parents lived in Beijing will be their excuse, but according to Doctor Chayton, SRC knew she had a brother living in the States, and they did nothing to contact him. I have a feeling our bank executive was behind that…”

Approaching footsteps put us both on guard. Dr. Folsom walked into the room looking dapper in this hounds-tooth suit coat and gray slacks. “Good morning. I heard that we had visitors” He turned to Guanghai. “You must be

Sandra’s brother.”

Guanghai squinted at him in a questioning look.

Dan walked over in a flash, holding out his hand. “Good morning, I’m Dan Archer. I’m Guanghai’s translator—English isn’t his first language.”

“Ah, yes, the translator, Mr. Archer, my name is Doctor Folsom. I’m the director of this facility. I see you already know Solomon Tonum—”

“Yes, we were just trying to give them some privacy.”

“Let me ask you something, Mr. Archer, why would a high powered attorney, such as yourself, serve as a translator? I wouldn’t think you would need to be moonlighting at this stage in your career.”

Dr. Folsom stared unflinchingly at Dan. I was speechless. Thankfully, Dan wasn’t.

“I really don’t practice law anymore,” he said casually.

“Of course you don’t,” Dr. Folsom replied sarcastically. “It doesn’t change the fact that you entered these privately owned and operated premises under false pretense. So I would ask you to take your leave now. Visiting hours, for you, are officially over.”

“Are you sure you want to play the cards that way?” Dan asked.

Dr. Folsom glared at Dan. “I’m only following my own attorney’s recommendation. Something I’m sure you’d agree is wise.”

“May I have a word with you in private, then?” Dan asked.

“I have Mr. Winters with me, so the privacy will be limited.”

“As you wish,” Dan said as he brushed by Dr. Folsom to leave the room and wait in the hallway, where I presumed Mr. Winters was already stationed.

Allison and her brother looked at me apprehensively.

“What’s happening?” Allison asked, as Dr. Folsom walked out to the hallway.

“Dan’s my attorney, Folsom is nervous that Dan’s here. He wants him out.

It’s as simple as that.”

I could hear them talking outside, but I couldn’t understand the meaning, though it sounded like it was heated.

Guanghai looked at me, his eyes moist from tears. “My sister tells me many good things about you. I thank you for all you do.” He nodded politely.

“You’re very welcome.” I bowed back reflexively.

Dan broke in. “Have to go now, Guanghai. Say goodbye to your sister. I’ll arrange for a second visit on our way out.”

The two siblings hugged and said their goodbyes, and Guanghai vowed he would be back, shook my hand hurriedly and went out of the room, unsure of himself. Dan was standing with his back to the hallway and mouthed the words: “They will search you when I leave…” I didn’t catch the last half of what he tried to say, but the first half was enough. I took the thousand dollars and quickly handed it Allison. “Hide this.”

I went over to Dan and shook his hand. “Thank you.”

“No problems, hang in there.” He turned to Allison. “Both of you.”

“Mr. Archer, thank you.” Allison put her hand over her heart for emphasis.

Dan and Guanghai walked silently down the hall, escorted by Dr. Folsom. Mr. Winters stayed behind and motioned for me to follow him.

“I’ll see you later, Allison.”

“Bye…” she said with a soft wave.

As soon as I got into the hallway, Mr. Winters was standing next to my door, pointing inside. “Get in.”

I went in, and Mr. Winters searched me immediately. “Did he give you anything?”

“Who?”

“Don’t play dumb with me.”

“No one gave me anything,” I protested.

He finished his thorough pat down with a muttered expletive and a long

sigh. “You’ll be staying here for now. Dr. Amin will be seeing someone else in your time slot. I’ll bring you dinner, but for now you’re in lockdown. Understood?”

I nodded and sat down at my table.

“Can you keep an eye on Sandra? Make sure she has food and water?”

“You offering to pay me again?” He grinned at me sarcastically.

“How much?”

“Man, I’m gonna need a calculator just to keep track of what you owe me. Your tab is going up and up, and I’ve yet to see a dollar.”

“Just help me out here, okay? I’m good for the money.”

“I don’t know why I trust you, but I’ll give you one more day. After that, man, you’re on your own.”

With that, Mr. Winter lumbered his way out the door and the telltale sound of the door lock resounded in my ears.

Chapter 104: Door

My food came that evening with three doses of meds. I had commented on the extra dose to Mr. Winters and he had just shrugged, but insisted I take them all, which I did, hoping that Dou Xing was watching.

Three hours later I still couldn't sleep, and SRC had, as was their standard procedure for lockdown, disabled my television. I was bored out of my mind and began pacing my room like a caged animal, but at least it was a way to get some exercise. The meds, to the degree they were having any effect at all, were keeping me awake.

After thirty minutes of restless pacing I heard a light knock on my door. I walked over to it, unsure if I was imagining the sound or there was someone knocking on my door.

There was a muffled voice, but I wasn't sure whose it was.

"Solomon?"

It sounded like it could be Allison's voice, but as it was a whisper, it was hard to tell.

"Allison, is that you?"

The response was too faint to understand.

"How did you get here?" I asked.

"Remember the wheelchair?"

That was my touchstone. "It's good to hear your voice. Can you hear me okay?"

"Yes, put your ear right on the wood."

I did as she instructed.

"I'll talk right onto the wood," she said, "so you should be able hear me even if I whisper. Can you hear me?"

"Pretty well…"

“Listen to the knock, that’s exactly where my mouth will be.”

She knocked very lightly and I imagined her sitting in the wheelchair. Between the knock and that visual approximation, I felt confident I knew where to place my ear for the best sound, and I put my ear precisely over that spot.

“Okay, try now,” I said.

“Solomon, I love you.”

My face, I’m quite sure, lit up with a voltage that I was unprepared for. I nearly wept.

“Solomon, did you hear me?”

“I was just overwhelmed for a moment. I heard you, and I love you, too.”

I think I heard her breath upon the door, or maybe I imagined it, I don’t really know, but I felt a connection between us that would need more than a slab of wood to contain it. There is no way that anyone can say that we—our energy, what truly defines us—are only as large as the borders of our physical body. I know differently. I believe everyone does, some just admit it.

“Solomon, what you’ve done for me, this past week… it’s more than anyone has ever done for me before. I think if you hadn’t come along when you did, I may already be dead. The voices told me I had a week, maybe two, to live. I was starving myself to death. It was my only way to leave this world.

“I don’t want to leave it anymore…”

I waited with my ear and heart.

“My brother says you are the only man that he’s met that actually did something that proved your sanity. He is a delicate man, not very strong as people think of strength in the West, but he is intelligent in that place that lies between the heart and the mind. Anyway, I wanted to tell you that, and I wanted to tell you that I agree with him. I agree with him.”

“Allison, one thing I’ve learned in this place is that suffering isn’t failure. Suffering has a purpose. Perhaps in your case, that purpose has yet to reveal

itself. I can only tell you that I hope it mingles with my own. I hope you are with me."

"Remember when I told you that I like to hear music in conversation?"

"Yes," I said.

"I heard it clearly just then. It was beautiful."

I smiled. "Did you eat tonight?"

"You know," she replied, "I had this daydream that we were eating at a restaurant somewhere, and we had both stuffed ourselves so completely that we could barely walk from the restaurant.

"Solomon, I'll need some time to change my habits, but I will change them. I see it clearly now, and that was not the case just a week ago. Be patient with me, okay?"

I could hear her heart speak so clearly. Soft, vulnerable, open, honest, all of the devices of protection that she had shown me in the first days of our relationship were gone. She spoke in feelings that came through the door with ease.

"Whatever I can do to help you," I answered.

"I wish you could push me in this wheelchair, it's a real pain to steer this thing." I heard her soft chuckle.

A small scuffling sound brought my attention to the floor. "Solomon, I'm trying to kick something under the door, can you reach it?"

A sheet of paper appeared under the quarter-inch space that separated the door's finality from the floor. I grabbed it and saw some handwriting.

I returned my ear to the portal.

"Read it later."

"I will… you wrote it?"

"I think I should get back, Solomon. I hope you can visit me in the morning. Sleep well. I will be thinking of you from across the hall. Goodnight."

“Goodnight, Allison.”

I heard the sound of her wheelchair creak slightly, and I could sense her absence. I took the paper to my desk and turned on the light.

I don’t know why you saw in me what no one else has, and you saw it when I was at my lowest point. My very worst. You asked me a few days ago about my mission. I can only tell you that I hope it mingles with your own. I hope I am with you.

If it’s true that we become what we desire, then I will have my prize. Your kindness took all the feelings of abandonment and disillusionment that had saturated me year after year, day after day, and transformed them into love, and you did this when your own world was crashing.

I am building my strength, and I will share it with you as soon as I have it. There could not be a better place for it to go. But this strength is like a foreign object in my world, I will be clumsy with it, and make mistakes, I know.

Be patient, please. I will catch up with you. I promise, I will catch up.

Love always,

Allison

I imagined a cloud of light, built from my heart’s hands, drifting across the hallway, and inside it was inscribed one thought that would fall upon Allison like a gentle, hope-filled rain. The thought? We will walk from this place. Together.

Chapter 105: Only Mine

I was sleeping when my door opened. I heard the creak of its ancient hinges, and I wondered what the new day would bring. It was Mr. Winters. He looked in on me. “Did the tooth fairy bring you some money, too? I’m still waiting. Last day.”

“I’ll get it,” I mumbled. “Have faith.”

“Faith rhymes with waste for a reason,” he said, and walked away. My door was left open.

I was thinking about what he said, comparing the two words in my mind, but not finding them perfectly fitted as rhyming words, but I got his point anyway. Why had he asked if the tooth fairy had left me some money, too?

Then I looked for my note from Allison, and it was gone. Mr. Winters had taken it, and he walking down the hall with it. I ran down the hall, past the lavatory and looked both ways at the crossways section by the bank of elevators. He was just stepping on the elevator.

I ran as fast as I could, shouting as loud as I could. “Mr. Winters! Stop! Stop!”

The doors began to close, and I stuck my right arm in at the last second and the doors suddenly jerked opened apologetically. “That’s private. It’s mine. Give it back!”

“Lockdown means lockdown. No communication. This looks like communication. I need to report it. That’s how things work around here.”

He pushed me backwards and then pushed the elevator button again. I stepped forward. “Give it!”

He looked down at me, his hulking figure uncoiling in the prefatory body language that unambiguously displayed the primal signals of physical supremacy. I instantly felt small.

I backed up a step. “Look, I have the money. I’ll give it to you right now.

Just give it back. Okay?”

I could see he was considering my proposition. He looked around. My shouting had gotten the attention of several residents who were gawking at us from down the hallway, just outside the commons. He pulled me inside the elevator. “Look, this is the last time I’m going to listen to your claim of money. I’ll give you exactly one minute to bring me five hundred dollars. You do that, and you can have your love note back. Got it?”

I could see the veins in his temple pulsing, his eyes glaring; every cell that composed his body seemed to be pressing on me.

I nodded. “Give me two minutes, wait here, I’ll be right back.”

Without his confirmation I turned and ran to Allison’s room. I burst through her door. “Allison, the money I left you…” I stopped mid-sentence looking around. Her bed was made, the wheelchair was gone. An antiseptic smell invaded my nose and my heart pounded so hard my breath started to shake. I ran senseless down the hallway to the elevator, past the residents who were now watching me with nervous cheers and chatter. Tears were streaming down my eyes, I knew something was happening and it was the last thing I wanted to know, but I had to know.

I ran to the elevator, my lungs heaving. “Where’s Allison?” I shouted.

Mr. Winters put his hand to his ear. “Who?”

That’s when I snapped. I don’t know what makes a person go insane, but I knew, in that moment, I was insane. I lashed out at Mr. Winters, not because I hated him. He just happened to be the emblem of everything that was wrong in my world. I ran at him as if I were tackling someone. He went backwards against the elevator wall, and then I felt a crushing bear hug as he wrapped his arms around my middle.

I pulled my right arm free and flung my fist as hard as I could between his legs. I heard a loud groan, his arms loosened on me, and he dropped to his knees. The elevator shook. I saw the note sticking out from his pants pocket and grabbed it and ran. A large crowd of residents were standing around now, some cheering me, some looking anxiously around as if the end of world was near.

I ran to the only place I could go: my room. I closed the door. My arms were shaking. I looked down at the note in my hands. I wanted to save it. I wanted to read it again, but my brain had shut down and the words had lost their meaning. Drops of perspiration and tears dropped on the crumpled paper as I stared at it one last time. I tore it into small pieces and dropped them in my toilet and flushed them away. I had no choice. There was no place to hide those words. They weren't meant for any eyes but mine. Only mine.

I made one tortured scream and released every anger and feeling of injustice I could find inside me, and then curled up on my bed to await the inevitable punishment.

I heard the shuffled walk of Mr. Winters approaching. I heard my door open. I kept myself curled in a zone of protection.

"You're gonna be sorry you did that, you little bastard. You think you're safe, because you cried your way back to your room? Fuck you!"

I felt a tiny prick on my bicep. My door slammed shut and I heard the lock close like covers that invite darkness. I stayed curled on my bed. I couldn't move—movement requires motive and coordination or both, and as fate would have it, I was "D—none of the above."

Chapter 106: Threats

A knock on my door woke me from a deep sleep. The light in my room was dim. It was probably after four in the afternoon. How could I have slept that long? The door opened, but I was too groggy to really see who it was.

“Solomon, you attacked a member of our staff who was performing his job duties. This is a private facility; we have our own rules to look after. You incited a great degree of stress across the entire floor. What have you to say?”

I recognized Dr. Folsom’s voice. It was curt and vindictive.

I was blinking my eyes and feeling generally woozy. I felt like I was waking up from a bad hangover. I tried to focus on his face, but it kept slipping out of focus.

“Solomon, this is Doctor Amin—tell us why you attacked Mister Winters.”

I heard them whisper something, but I was still too groggy to think clearly. “Where’s Allison?”

More whispers.

“Tell me where you put her?” I said, my voice forceful, but my speech slurred.

I felt another prick in my arm and immediately sensed a surge of energy and rising clarity in my head. I shook my head a few times and rubbed my eyes.

“Where is she?” My eyes focused on both doctors.

“She is none of your concern,” Dr. Folsom replied. “Your attention, for the time being, is to reconsider what behaviors will enable you to leave this facility and re- enter your life as a college professor and make a contribution to society. Isn’t that what you want?”

I turned to Dr. Amin. “Where is she?”

“Solomon, Doctor Folsom is right; your focus needs to be on your own

behavior and therapy. We're alarmed that you've become obsessed with another patient and have lost your perspective on what's best for you. What's best for your own therapy and rehabilitation…"

I put my hand to my head, feeling a headache coming on. "Your premise always starts with a simple, but profound error that I'm crazy, and I'm not. I see things. That's my only problem. The things I see do not make me crazy or insane. Therefore, I don't require therapy; I don't require help to understand my problems, because there's nothing you can do to prevent me from seeing things that truly exist! Do you understand?"

The two psychiatrists looked at one another, unsure how to proceed.

"If you don't want a lawsuit that will take this facility down, then I recommend you bring Allison back to her room, and you let us leave here immediately."

Dr. Folsom snickered, and stepped back. "Mister Tonum, you have a fancy attorney, we have a fancy attorney—do you really want to go in that direction and waste your time and resources? Don't you think your therapy is more important than tossing legal hand grenades around? Some of which could blow up in your own face."

I pointed my finger at Dr. Folsom. "You have my word; I will spend all of my considerable resources to bring you down, if you don't return Allison, and let us go."

Dr. Folsom folded his arms. "We can't help you if you threaten us, Mister Tonum. Our protocol is to move aggressive patients to Fishkill Correctional Facility—a facility that operates with a focus on the criminally insane. We're not funded, nor are we designed, to deal with belligerent patients who attack and threaten our staff. It only requires a stroke of my pen. Do you understand how grave this situation is?"

I took a deep breath and let time flow. I put my hand over my heart, hoping to calm myself and bring a new perspective to my situation. "You took Allison away. Why?"

"She was becoming part of your delusion. We needed to isolate her, for her own good."

“What delusion would that be?” I asked calmly, my eyes closed in concentration.

“That you could save her,” Dr. Folsom answered.

“I was saving her.”

“You’re a patient here, not a doctor. You have no authority to invite family members, who, for all you know, caused her problems.”

“Are you really saying that her brother coming here was against her own interests? That it… it somehow set her therapy back? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“Solomon,” Dr. Amin said, “there are complexities in this patient that you’re not aware—”

“Her name is Allison.”

“Yes, well, Allison is a complex case, and because of this, it requires more sensitivity to therapy protocols, which you don’t understand. Inadvertently, you could have done some real damage by bringing her brother here—”

“You can dress everything up in complexities and hide behind them if you find that helpful, but I know what I know. Allison was getting better. Ask her. She will tell you herself.”

Dr. Folsom shrugged his shoulders. “Mr. Tonum, we don’t encourage patients to diagnose themselves or other patients for that matter. That’s what we do. We’re the only ones who have the full picture and the training and tools to—”

“Spare me your justifications,” I interrupted. “You’re full of shit, and you both know it. You can bully me all you want, but my legal threats are real. Return Allison, and let us both leave this place, or I will bring this institution down. Do you understand me?”

My voice was quivering, but not from fear, from intensity. I wanted them to know I was in full possession of my wits and I was threatening their livelihoods. I remembered what Dan had said; sometimes all you can do is threaten them, and in my case, it was all I could do.

“Your threats are hollow,” said Dr. Folsom. “Go in your bathroom, look in

the mirror, and see if you would believe them anymore than we do. You're a patient…"

I raised my hand as forcefully as I possibly could and glared at him. "You say you have a fancy attorney, really? You'd do better with a magician, because that's what you'll need if you do anything—anything that would harm Allison or me. I'm a goddamn professor at Yale! Don't get uppity with me; I will bring this institution down, if you don't honor my demands."

"Mr. Tonum, ultimately any dispute you may have will be brought to a court for review, and SRC is a prestigious facility with donors from the highest echelon in New York City. You, on the other hand, are a disturbed patient who has a police record stipulating that you tried to kill your own son. While your wife chose not to press charges, nothing is irreversible in this regard. Moreover, you've aggressively injured one of our nursing staff, and you have threatened and interfered with your own psychiatrists—the ones who are trying to help you. Who do you think the court will see as reliable and trustworthy?"

Dr. Folsom turned to Dr. Amin and pointed to the door with a subtle nod of his head. "Let's give Mr. Tonum some time to think about his options. I'm sure once his head clears he'll want to resume therapy with you."

Dr. Amin looked at me, her eyes appealing to my higher nature. "Solomon, Corin and Jaylee are coming tomorrow to meet with me. Would you like to see them?"

Just the sound of Jaylee's name brought me to a new reality. I nodded. "Yes, I would."

Dr. Folsom smiled for the first time. "Good, then let's start with that. You can meet them tomorrow, if you promise to relax with your threats and allow us to do our jobs. No interference, Mr. Tonum. Do we have an agreement?"

I nodded.

"We agree then?" He looked at me with narrowed eyes. "I want to hear you speak, Mr. Tonum."

"Yes."

"Good. I'd like you to stay in your room tonight. I'll have dinner and meds

brought to your room. We'll reinstate your floor privileges tomorrow morning, if you show improvement. Do we have an agreement?"

"Yes, but what about Allison?"

"She's in good care. Put your concerns on yourself."

He turned to face Dr. Amin and put his arm out in the direction of the door. "Goodnight Mr. Tonum."

They walked out the door and the sound of the lock was the last sound I heard, and then my room returned to an eerie silence. The light outside was almost gone.

Chapter 107: Soul-Heart-All

That night I was aching for a chance to leave my room. There's something about having no distractions and being forced to see your issues on full display that weighs on a person's sanity. My issues were numerous—Allison being plucked from my life, my wife leaving, my children being taken from me, being accused of attempted murder of my son, my home being sold, my money being hijacked and Jaylee being subjected to this awful place tomorrow. These issues became my fixation, and they were literally driving me crazy.

I needed a way to see something new. Normally, people resort to drugs or alcohol when asked to confront the megalithic losses I was facing, but while I had the drugs, they did very little to dull my sense of pain. It was the equivalent of having surgery without anesthesia, and the pain was real, oppressive and ever-present.

The world inside me was polluted, and I had to breathe its foul vapors. I was no novice to pain. I knew its thirsting throat and crooked hand. But usually the pain didn't pile on top of pain on top of pain on top of pain. Too many layers. Was someone testing my capacity to bear the density of despair? I decided to question it. To seek some answers of myself or whoever was deep inside the polluted world I had created.

I called on Dou Xing. I imagined myself sitting at his fire. I brought into sharp relief every detail of his encampment that I could imagine. I wanted him to explain to me what was happening and why it was happening. It could have been anyone, it didn't have to be Dou Xing, and in some ways I was hoping for a higher power. I needed someone at the very top, who could convey the highest perspective on the events in my life.

Nothing was happening.

I tried to visualize the listening chamber on the island. Nothing.

I imagined the stiff wooden chair in the vast field of tall grass. Zero.

I thought about Zenith and her underground chambers. Zilch.

And then I prayed. Not to a person or a deity. I just prayed. If anyone wanted to listen, it was a freewill universe and they were allowed, I didn't really care. I talked about my condition, how I was being wronged. Caged. Abused. How my captors were both real and extra-dimensional. How all the things I loved and cared about were being ripped from my hands as though I had done some inexplicable, but reprehensible act.

I finished my prayer, feeling no better, and maybe a tad worse, since nothing had been felt, no response had been heard. Just the emptiness of my dark room. I was a man of vision, and yet, I hadn't seen anything for several days. Ah, the irony, I was in the crazy house, but I couldn't get crazy.

I lay down on my back, sore from my confrontation with Mr. Winters. I remembered something I had read in Vanessa's journal about breathing. The entire page was devoted to one word: Breath. Around this large, beautifully crafted word were tiny words so small I needed to use a magnifying glass to see them. Words like follow the breath, the breathing system is conscious, easy is true, and exclude nothing.

How could such a simple word be the only word in her entire journal that she gave an entire page to? I made my breath the center of my universe in that moment. Nothing fancy, mind you, I just listened to it. I followed every breath I brought in and expelled out. I imagined atoms of oxygen, in the trillions, rushing into my lungs and entering my bloodstream and making the journey to my cells, meeting them within me like ambassadors of their airy world.

That was when I started to feel a shift inside me; some subtle inkling that I had crossed a threshold of one reality and entered a new one. I left my eyes closed. I didn't really care where I had gone. I kept my focus on my breath.

I heard this sudden sound like a pop, and I opened my eyes to a new world. Before me was a world of exquisite splendor as if carved from the hand of an angelic spirit so steeped in beauty that nothing dense, twisted, angular, asymmetrical, ugly, unharmonious could live in this world.

I appeared to be alone, in a large building with cream-colored walls and huge, open windows that allowed breathtaking views of the wooded

countryside. Jeweled inlays adorned the walls in fantastic patterns that seemed to express concepts I couldn't understand.

"Hello?" I queried tentatively. I felt like an impoverished traveler who had just stumbled upon an abandoned palace. "Is anyone here?"

The palace, or whatever it was, seemed empty.

I kept walking through beautifully appointed rooms, and then I heard the faint, but familiar sound of children playing. I looked out one of the windows and saw several children playing outside. I found a doorway that led outdoors and walked towards them. They didn't seem to notice me even as I waved my arms.

One of the children, a young boy, finally looked in my direction and said something to his friends and then walked over to me. "Yes, can I help you?"

"Where am I?" I asked.

"Ah, you're lost, then." The boy observed wryly.

He was about eight years old, dark-skinned with black, curly hair, but his eyes were cobalt blue. He wore a white vest and a pair of blue shorts that went to his knees. He had an accent, but I couldn't place it.

"I'm so lost, I'm not sure if I'm even lost." I smiled, well aware that I had made myself vulnerable to him.

The boy put out his hand. "I'm Mykelti."

"I'm Solomon, nice to meet you."

"Yes, well, you picked a good place to be lost in."

"It does appear to be the case," I said, looking around.

"Would you like to play with us?"

"What are you playing?" I asked.

"Hide and seek."

"I think I need to do something, but I think it has to do with something else."

"What then?"

“I don’t know.”

“Then come play. Maybe you’ll remember later.” He pulled me by the hand, and I reluctantly followed. There were five other children, all about the same age and all were the same in terms of their clothing and look. The girls had straight black hair while the boys had curly. Other than that, it would have been hard to tell the difference between them.

“Do you know the rules?”

“Of hide and seek?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I do. For how long does the seeker count?”

“To twenty… would you like to be the seeker?” Mykelti asked. “We hide right here, in the garden.” He pointed to the garden perimeter.

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to be the seeker in such a strange place, but I nodded. The beauty of the day was seductive. All the children seemed to be excited to have a new seeker, probably thinking that their favorite hiding places would be impossible for me to find.

Mykelti led me to a huge tree whose girth was easily fifteen feet and told me to count with my eyes closed, facing the tree trunk.

“Ready?” the children asked in a chorus of excitement.

“Ready,” I replied, turning to the tree and closing my eyes. I began to count, and immediately heard the scattering of footsteps and laughter. I was in the moment. I felt an exhilaration welling up in my body that I hadn’t felt in a long time.

“… eighteen, nineteen, twenty. Ready or not, here I come.”

I turned around and saw Uncle standing before me with a grin on his well-worn, handsome face.

“You found me,” he said.

“How? …How did this happen? Where did you come from?”

“Disappointed are we?”

“A little…” I smiled and walked over to him and embraced him. “Actually, there’s no one I’d rather see right now.”

“Let’s walk.”

“What about the children, shouldn’t I tell them I’m leaving the game?”

“They know.” He started to walk away, and I followed him. We walked on a path that was cut into a forest of tall trees with virtually no underbrush. The smell of cedar was strong and the air was pure, it reminded me of the word, breath, and how it had brought me here.

We came to a small circle of stones that had been shaped for sitting, and Uncle pointed to one of them as if offering me a chair.

He sat down on one himself, and I followed.

“It’s good to see you… it is truly you, isn’t it?” I asked.

“A part of me anyway.” He grinned and rubbed his chin. “What are you seeking, Solomon?”

“A few minutes ago I would have said six children… now I’m not so sure. Maybe you.”

“When I was a young boy, living on the rez, we had no toys, but I remember when my stepdad came back from a trip to Sioux Falls and showed me a ballpoint pen he had bought at a store there. He gave it to me. I was unschooled. Couldn’t write my name. I could draw about as well, I suppose. But I wasn’t interested in the ink. I took the pen apart and found the spring. Now that was interesting. I’d never seen a spring before. I’d push it down and watch it compress, I’d let it go, and it would jump out of my hand.

“It wasn’t too long before I’d figured out how to make that spring jump in a direction that I had some control over, and then… pretty soon I had constructed a game. I didn’t have a lot of friends—we lived in the sticks—even by rez standards, it was remote, but the few friends I had liked the game, and this one little spring entertained us for many hours…”

He closed his eyes for a moment and paused. “Do you know why I told you this story?”

I shook my head.

“You’re like a spring, sitting between a thumb and a finger and they’re squeezing you down—compressing you into something small, and you’re resisting with all your might. You want to find out whose hand this thumb and finger belong to. And once you find that out, you will have a good talking to the owner of that hand, and maybe even punch them in the face. Am I right?”

I nodded, knowing it was not an option to say he was wrong. He was Uncle. He was never wrong in my experience.

“Do you know whose hand it is?”

“Mine…” I said.

He bobbed his head. “Why would you do this to yourself? Why would you squeeze yourself into this tiny, tight form?”

I looked carefully, and I saw that he had an actual spring that he was holding tight between his thumb and index finger.

He maneuvered his thumb and finger to bend the spring like a bow, and shot it high into the air where it disappeared among the tree branches. “…to let go. Not bad, eh?”

He smiled with satisfaction at launching the spring into the forest and turned once again to me. “No one is out to get you, Solomon. No one is oppressing you, squeezing you down like a spring. Your medicine men are good people; they simply see your world of visions as weeds in the garden that need to be pulled out. All people, all entities, even the dark ones, are only doing what they believe is in their own self-interest. That is freewill in action.”

“Self-interest? If everyone operates in that mindset, we’re doomed.”

“Maybe, but freewill’s been around a long time. It’s messy when people live in separation and see their bodies as their first and final garment. That’s the world of the ego-mind, where the skin is the edge of existence. The soul-heart is being born now. This is what the Sonvertos have been preparing for thousands of years on this planet. The Grand Portal is just the culmination.

“What you’re living, humanity is living. It’s the nature of the Sonverto to live the canvas of their kin. To feel what the whole of humanity feels… to

understand by being what others are—the full range. But more than this, the Sonvertos meet all of the fences, walls and barbed wire obstacles that prevent the great discovery."

"Of what?"

"The soul-heart."

"So a Sonverto lets go amid all of the ego-mind dysfunction of this world? That's it? They just bend over and take it? Well, maybe I'm not the Sonverto they thought I was. Maybe I should step aside and let someone else take my mission over."

"Ah, mission relinquishment," Uncle said with a broad grin. "I was wondering when that would rear its impatient head. Given your circumstances you did real well to hold it off as long as you did."

"If that was meant to be a compliment…"

"It was meant to help you see that love prevails. You don't give up. You don't bend over. You love."

"I tried that, and I've lost my wife and children despite—"

"—Not the love I'm talking about."

"Then maybe you can tell me what you are talking about, because I heard you say the word, love."

"Love isn't an emotion. Love isn't the feeling of love imagined or projected. Love is a state of consciousness that flows from the soul of the individual to the heart and aligns the perspective of the individual to the Sovereign Integral."

"There're those two words again," I said. "I don't get it. Being separate and whole at the same time doesn't—"

Uncle put his hand up, stood to his feet, and knelt down on the dirt floor in front of the large stones we were sitting on and drew a heart and then a vertical line about three feet long. "The top of this line, that's the soul." He drew two lines like a funnel. "The bottom is the human being." He punctuated it with a large dot. "The middle is the heart. This line is the sovereign."

He drew a line horizontally that was about the same length that intersected the vertical line at the heart, making a large cross. “This is the axis of connection that allows the sovereign to interact and share with others. This is the integral. Taken as a whole, this is the Sovereign Integral: soul to heart to body, and heart to the universe beyond the skin. It is the transmission. This is what Sonvertos have come to teach, always, and in all times and places. There is no relinquishment, my dear friend.”

Uncle returned to his chair of stone and stole a quick glance at me. “Besides, you’re just starting.”

I accepted his explanation, but it only made me curious to know Uncle’s opinion on another, more personal issue. “Uncle, I met a woman… she’s… she’s important to me in ways that don’t make any sense, but I have this strong desire to bring her into my life. And then, I have this young girl named Jaylee—”

“It’s too complicated for me, Solomon. I’m a simple man. I teach Sonvertos, but I chose not to be one myself… mostly for the reasons you already know too well— women!” He rolled his eyes playfully. “All I can tell you is to place this symbol of the Sovereign Integral before your every move, and it will guide you straight and true.”

He stood up and stretched his back. “Rocks for chairs. Bad idea. Next time we meet, let me choose the place.” Uncle looked at me after a long exhale. “Love is the state of soul-heart-all. If there is more to know than this, Solomon, it escapes my sight. Kind of like me.”

Literally, in a blink of my eye he vanished.

“Uncle?” I stood up and spun around in search of my teacher, but he was gone. “I wanted to ask you who assigned my mission…” My voice trailed off into a bitter silence.

The woods suddenly felt cold and detached, and I made a conscious decision to move back into my body. I found it without any effort, but in those final three feet, I stopped and looked down at my body lying on the bed. It was the lowest on the vertical line of sovereignty—a mere dot. Dense, slow, awkward, confused, but despite that, it was also magnificent in every way, because it was connected to the soul-heart-all, and in one second, it

would know it.

Chapter 108: A Thousand Dollars

The morning light stirred me awake, or so I thought, but in actuality, Mr. Winters was sitting in a chair watching me, so it may have been his presence that truly brought me from my slumber.

I propped myself up slightly more vertical with my elbow. “You’re going to break my chair.” My voice cracked a bit, but I considered it a pretty witty comment for someone coming out of a deep sleep.

Mr. Winters apparently didn’t find the humor in my observation. “Fuck off. I have some information I thought you might be interested in,” he reported.

I sat up on the bed and crossed my legs underneath me. “What information?”

He raised his hand with his index finger pointing upward. “First, you have to apologize for punching my nuts.”

I took a deep breath; this was not the way I liked to wake up in the morning. “Okay, I’m sorry I hit you.”

He curled his fingers in his characteristic manner.

“…and I will never do it again.” I relented.

I was hoping the information would be about Allison.

Mr. Winters shifted in the wooden chair, and I was thinking my earlier observation was about to become true, as I heard the chair straining to support his bulk.

“I overheard Doctor Folsom say that your wife and children moved to Turkey. She’s divorcing you. Even sold the house. Has your personal stuff in some locker. Just thought you should know.”

He stood up slowly, dusted off his hands on his pants.

“I already knew all of that. Do you know anything about Allison?”

“You have ten minutes to get your meds and breakfast; otherwise, if you make me come down here with them, I’ll lock you in for the rest of the day.” He walked out of my room without another word, but he left my door open. I knew he was trying to hurt me, but for some reason, I was in a good mood, and because the news was old news to me, it didn’t cut very deep.

I strolled to Allison’s room on the off-chance she had been returned per my threats, but I could tell she was still gone. Her presence was absent even before I looked in. The room remained as I had seen it yesterday, though the cleaning fumes had subsided.

Looking around, I wondered where she might have hid the thousand dollars. I picked up the lamp on her nightstand, it wasn’t under the base. I went into her bathroom and looked around, but there were hiding places; even the ventilation grills were too narrow to pass anything through and then have any hope of retrieving it. I lay down on her bed, trying to imagine where she could have put it. I checked her pillow case, but that, too, proved fruitless.

I got up and pulled the mattress to the side and looked—nothing on either side. That had seemed like a long shot anyway. I remembered that Allison had told me that she had hidden cigarettes for a long time in her room, so wherever her hiding place was, it had to be fairly large to hold the width of a cigarette. The linoleum floor had a baseboard and it suddenly occurred to me that it could hold the width of a cigarette as it curved to meet the floor. I started to look along the perimeter of her room, and then I saw it, behind the door to her bathroom. The baseboard was bowed out slightly and was loose. I couldn’t get my finger there, but I could feel something, and I was sure it was a wad of money.

I said a prayer for Allison and felt my skin stipple and a tremor rose from around my shoulders. I had a plan.

I left the money there—it was safer there than in my possession or in my room. I made a beeline to the cafeteria and found Mr. Winters waiting for me.

“I was just about to lock your ass up. Put these down.” He handed me three paper cups on a tray. “Your breakfast is over there.”

I drank them in succession, wincing after each swallow, and handed the tray back to him. He examined them and looked at me. “Swallow.”

I swallowed and opened my mouth as I was taught.

“Go eat.”

I hesitated.

“What do you want?” Mr. Winters asked.

“Hypothetically, if I could produce one thousand dollars, would you arrange to have Allison returned to her room?”

On rare occasions, I had seen Mr. Winters smile, but I was unprepared to see one of his genuine belly laughs. It almost scared me.

“Man, you’re one funny sicko, man. Go eat.”

I leaned in his direction and brought my voice to a whisper. “Look, I have the money. If you can do it, I’ll give you ten, crisp one-hundred-dollar bills.”

Mr. Winters came closer to my face, almost within a foot, and spoke slowly. “What you don’t know is that we searched your room when you were out cold. We covered every square centimeter of your room. You got nothing!” He pulled his face away slowly, keeping his eyes on mine. “Go eat.”

I remember Uncle’s advice to place the symbol of the Sovereign Integral before every move, and I was trying my best to do just that. I think Mr. Winters was wondering what I was doing as he looked uncomfortable. He came around the juice bar and grabbed my arm and walked me over to the tray of cold food on a metal- wrapped Formica table, and pointed down at the innocent food. “Eat! Now!”

“Sit with me,” I said. “Come on, you have some time, we can work this out. I know I’ve been crying wolf on the money, but I can assure you I have it this time, and it’s not in my room, so you wouldn’t have found it. I can take you to it right now, if you promise me you’ll arrange to have Allison returned to her old room.”

“Even if you gave me a million dollars, I couldn’t do that. Doctor Folsom makes all of those decisions. Nurses have no input.” He pushed me down and

sat me in a chair. “Last time, eat.”

“What could you do for a thousand dollars?”

Maybe my persistence had worn him down, I don’t know, but he sat down. “Shit… look, I could maybe get you a visit for ten minutes late at night, but that’s it.”

“She’s here?” I asked excitedly.

“You show me the money… I’ll arrange a quick visit. Best I can do.”

I grabbed the muffin and took a quick bite of the cold applesauce. “Follow me.”

When we arrived at Allison’s room I held up. “Give me a minute.”

“Nah, I’m coming in.”

“Can’t do that, you’ll know her hiding place.”

He shoved me inside, and it became clear that my plan was starting to unravel.

“Don’t waste my time.”

I bent down to the baseboard and dug at it with my fingers, but they were too large. I couldn’t slip them underneath. “Do you have a tool like a screwdriver or something?”

He bent down to look at the baseboard, and seemed to be satisfied that it was a possible hiding place. He rummaged in his pockets and handed me a key. “Try this.”

I took the key and swept it across the narrow space and knocked the folded bills out on the floor. Mr. Winters grabbed for them but I was quicker, and backed away out of his reach.

“Now, look. This is how we’ll do it.”

“You’re in no position to dictate rules.” Mr. Winters started to slowly back me into the far corner of Allison’s room, blocking the exit with his massive frame.

“I’ll give you five hundred now and five hundred after I meet with Allison.

Okay?”

I counted out five bills and put out my hand. He took them and counted them, satisfied they were real, and shoved them in his pocket. I was mildly hopeful. I prayed he would nod his head and leave.

But then came the curling fingers. “The rest.”

“My proposition is reasonable. What would you do if you were me?”

“I’d kill myself.”

His instant response, for whatever reason, hurt my feelings in a strange way. Suddenly I could feel how weak he was. Underneath that mountain of skin was a whimpering child. I had no way of defending myself. I was as vulnerable as anyone could be. All I could hope for was that his sense of fairness could somehow find a way to come through.

“This is going to sound weird, Mister Winters, and I really hope you don’t take it the wrong way, but…” I took a deep breath, and saw him watching me with curious eyes. “…I need your help. I need you to be fair with me. All I need is for you to let me have this one thing. Agree to my proposition. It’s fair. It’s fair.”

There was a glimmer I saw in his eyes. He understood, but it didn’t stop him from walking right up to me and grabbing the other five bills from my loose hand.

“I’ll try and set it up for tonight,” Mr. Winters said as he stuffed the other bills in his pocket and walked out the door.

I looked down at the baseboard where I’d extracted the money moments earlier, and saw the tip of a cigarette sticking out. I went over and gently pulled it into my hand. It was half smoked, dusty, and the copper-brown tobacco brittle and loose. I pushed it back inside. As I did, I heard something like paper brush against it.

I grabbed a towel from the bathroom and placed its corner in the slot and caught the edge of the paper and fished a portion out. It was enough for me to grab hold of. It was a poem.

He brings me things

That no one else has.
A cigarette. A nurse.
He came and the voices left.
He found my brother.
Sushi of sorts.
But of all the things he has brought to me
None compare to that thing called hope.
I had no seeds or water or sun
And yet I now have a flower
In my heart.

Chapter 109: 48 Hours

After lunch I was watching television in my room. I heard the telltale footsteps of Mr. Winters walking down the hall ending in a sharp knock. “Visitors. Doctor Folsom wants you. Follow me.”

“Who’s the visitor?”

“Your attorney.”

I felt a sudden anxiety in my gut, but I was glad to hear that Dan hadn’t given up on me.

When I got to Dr. Folsom’s office, Mr. Winters escorted me in and told me to sit, and closed the door. Two minutes later, I heard the shuffle of shoes congregating outside in the hallway. Whispered voices emerged and sounded like they were arguing.

The only word I could make out was at the very end of the conversation. The word “Agreed.”

The door opened, and Dan came in first with Dr. Folsom and a new person I didn’t recognize. I embraced Dan and turned to Dr. Folsom.

“Solomon, this is Ronald Jensen, SRC’s attorney. We’ve asked him to sit in on your visitation, because you’ve been so vocal in levying threats against this facility. We would normally allow you to meet with your attorney in private, however, because your behavior this past week has been… erratic, the probate judge agreed to have this first visit supervised. If all goes well, and we certainly hope it does, then, on Mister Archer’s next visit, you can meet in private for up to one hour. Is that agreeable?”

I looked to Dan, who was nodding, but I could see traces of frustration on his face.

“So, you’re just here to observe and listen?” I asked.

“Yes… and answer any questions you might have.”

“Good, then let’s start with why you moved Allison to a new room.”

“Solomon,” Dan interrupted, opening a folder, and donning his reading glasses “for now, let’s focus on matters that pertain directly to you.” He glanced at me, as if to say, Let me drive.

“Okay…” I said.

“First, let’s begin with an update. I’ve petitioned the probate court to convert your involuntary admission under the Criminal Procedure Law—”

“What does it mean? I’m a criminal?”

“Because of the incident at the hospital, police were involved and escalated your case to an attempted murder charge at the time of your admission. Therefore, the director, Doctor Folsom, signed you in as an involuntary admission under Article 730 of the Criminal Procedure Law. It means that some, or all, of your civil rights can be suspended, pending your behavioral assessment, which must be completed within thirty days of your admission.

“After which time, a report is filed with the probate court, and this report defines your treatment plan and anticipated length of hospitalization. Now, because your wife did not press charges, I’m petitioning the court to convert your admission under Mental Hygiene Law, which is more appropriate to your specific condition and history.

“Though SRC is a private psychiatric facility, it still must adhere to the State of New York’s guidelines, which allow you to have access to phone privileges and communication with your family and any legal counsel. It also must allow you visitors insofar as those visitors adhere to normal visiting hours and procedures.

“Those privileges are immediately reinstated according to Judge Henderson, whose signature is on this particular order, of which you both have copies.” Dan looked over his thick black-framed reading glasses at Dr. Folsom and Mr. Jensen.

“So… I can call you or my wife anytime?” I asked.

“Not anytime,” Dan corrected, “but during regular hours you can request the use of a phone, and you must be granted this privilege when you—”

“To be specific,” Mr. Jensen interrupted, “your behavior must comply with our policies and procedures in order to have access to these privileges.

Striking one of our nurses in their testicles will not qualify you to use our phones."

Mr. Jensen was a handsome, well-groomed man, dressed in a blue, two-piece, three- button suit with a pinstripe shirt and bright yellow Versace tie with tiny medusa heads staring out at me. It was hard not to like how he looked. I, however, in my gray resident clothing, seemed bizarrely unqualified to be in the same room. I imagined that the medusa heads found me revolting.

Dan closed his folder. "Solomon, how many times have you been required to remain in seclusion since you entered SRC?"

"Three times… I think."

Dan turned to Dr. Folsom. "Can I get copies of your written directives for each of these incidences?"

Mr. Jensen leaned over to Dr. Folsom and conferred in a hushed voice. "Dr. Folsom will forward those to you tomorrow."

"I'd like to get copies before I leave," Dan replied.

"My assistant is off today," Dr. Folsom said. "Can't it wait until tomorrow?"

"No, it can't. I'll wait while you call your assistant and get those files, or shall I call the judge?" Dan pulled his mobile device from the breast pocket of his jacket.

"It's possible that Dr. Folsom doesn't have those files handy." Mr. Jensen squirmed in his chair.

"You mean he didn't follow protocols?"

"He's a very busy man…"

"What is your occupancy rate at the present time?" Dan asked.

"That is none of your business."

"What about your doctor-patient ratio?"

"Again, none of your business."

“Doctor Folsom, a William Collins is a patient of this facility, correct?” Dan took off his reading glasses, and leveled his eyes on Dr. Folsom.

“Again, none of your business,” said Mr. Jensen.

“William Collins is the son of one of your most prestigious donors, a retired executive with JP Morgan Chase, Jennifer Collins. She’s currently serving on their Board of Directors. Her son, William, was alleged to have been behind an attempted murder- suicide three and half years ago at The Carlyle—”

“Where are you going with this?” Mr. Jensen asked, his agitation rising.

“Allison Li, not Sandra Wang, was the name on the original police report. She was the victim of Mister Collins’ alleged murder attempt. My client’s discovery that Allison Li has been abused by this facility is very relevant to his own treatment.”

“That’s a lie!” Dr. Folsom shouted.

“Listen well to me, gentlemen,” Dan said. “I don’t want to dredge things up, especially when the statute of limitations hasn’t passed, but I can make it imminently possible to reopen this case, and bring to light all of the dirty little maneuverings that brought William Collins—a pampered, crazy socialite—to SRC, when he should be serving forty years in Rikers, or, at minimum, in lockup at Fishkill.”

Dan’s voice became very quiet, but resolute. “He attempted to murder a concert pianist, whose father is a high government official in China. My firm can make that story fly from here to Beijing…” he glanced at his Rolex, “… in about ten seconds.”

“You’ll never prove anything of the kind. It’s… preposterous.” Dr. Folsom said.

“Is William Collins here?”

Mr. Jensen leaned forward, putting his left hand on Dr. Folsom’s right arm. “I think we would do well to end this meeting now—”

“I don’t think so,” Dan continued. “Mister Collins left within a few weeks of landing here, didn’t he? He’s off in some third-world country sipping his

spiked lemonades, while the woman he nearly killed is wasting away under your watch."

"I want you to leave right now," said Dr. Folsom, standing to his feet. "These are ignorant lies, and I will not waste my time listening to them!"

Dan stood to his feet and jabbed his finger into Dr. Folsom's chest. "Bullshit! These aren't lies. I will personally make it my mission to look under every rock, and I won't care if it's a piece of sand. I will avail every resource I have, and I will not stop until I have your license suspended and this facility closed down."

Dan paused, and sat back down, his voice turning strangely calm. "An interesting bit of data for you, Doctor Folsom. Thirty-eight percent of psychiatrists that lost their license committed suicide within one year of their suspension. Did you know that?"

"What do you want?" Mr. Jensen asked with a resigned voice, motioning for Dr. Folsom to sit down.

"My client and Allison Li are made voluntary status patients immediately, and they are allowed to be discharged within forty-eight hours."

"And if this is done?"

"We're done. You'll never see anything of us again."

"If I draw that up, you'll sign a waiver?" Mr. Jensen asked.

"You send me the waiver, and I'll look it over. If it's reasonable, we'll sign it. You have my word." Dan leaned over and passed his business card to Mr. Jensen.

Dr. Folsom sat down, looking like a lost puppy.

I'm not sure I had blinked my eyes for the last three minutes, and suddenly felt their dryness. The energy in the room was suddenly quiet, but tidal waves had rocketed through moments ago and left me dazed in their wake. Did that just happen? I looked at Dan for some confirmation, and his eyes smiled reassuringly.

Had the gauntlet finally been swept away?

"I'd like a few minutes in private with my client," Dan announced, as he

stood up.

Mr. Jensen glanced at Dr. Folsom, but noticed that he was still reeling from the outcome of the meeting. “Follow me. You can talk in the room across the hall.”

We followed him to a small conference room with a table that had eight chairs. Mr. Jensen closed the door behind him when he left.

Dan and I stayed standing.

“You said Allison had been moved?” Dan asked as soon as the door clicked shut.

“Yes, they took her to another part of the facility yesterday.”

“How do you know she’s still here?”

“I paid Mr. Winters a thousand dollars to see her tonight.”

“That reminds me…” He passed me another wad of cash. “In case.”

“Thanks,” I said, “I’ll try not to lose it.”

I looked back to the door and lowered my voice to a whisper. “Do you think you could ask to see Allison before you leave here?”

“I think I can ask anything, including having her relocated to her old room. Her brother wants to see her again before he has to go back to California. I brought a client agreement, so I’ll have her sign that as well. I’ll represent her from now on.”

“Thanks so much.”

“You’re very welcome, Solomon. Someday, I’ll tell you the whole story.”

“What did you find out about this William Collins?”

“Old bloodline. Very well connected in the financial and political sectors. We interviewed some of his ex-girlfriends, which turned out to be very helpful. We knew he was just placed at SRC to beat the attempted murder rap. I’m not saying he didn’t belong here, but there were rumors he was in Paraguay only a few weeks after he was brought here. The trail got very cold when we snooped around at the police. Families like the Collins look at people like Allison as loose ends—dangerous loose ends. They’d just as soon

have them dead.

“Allison’s bloodline is interesting, too. It has a number of prominent leaders going back over a thousand years.”

“How do you know about the bloodlines? It doesn’t sound like the kind of thing law firms usually worry about.”

“Solomon, we’re not your typical law firm.” He winked, and pulled out a mobile device, handing it to me. “Keep it, just in case. I’m pretty sure they’ll treat you well now, but keep it hidden just the same. All my numbers are there, and the hotel where Guanghai is staying, too.”

“Anything from Derya?”

“Yes, but nothing actionable. Let’s get you out of here first, and we’ll deal with that later. There’ll be plenty of time.”

“Okay.”

“Anything else, before I go?” Dan asked.

“When you see her… tell Allison… that I…”

“I’ll tell her, don’t worry.” He patted me on my shoulder and opened the door, walking across the hallway like he owned the place.

Chapter 110: Wyatt

Within twenty minutes of being back in my room, Dr. Amin stopped by. She was dressed in a black pants suit with purple pin stripes and a light lavender shirt underneath. She seemed a little tense.

“Corin and Jaylee are on their way… I expect them any minute. Would you like to see them?”

“Yes… absolutely.”

“I’ll let you wash up, then, and you can come down to my office when you’re ready.”

Confusion spread across my face.

She pointed to her wrist. “Your wristband has third floor privileges now, you don’t need an escort. You’re voluntary.”

“I could just walk out?” I asked.

“You could, but let’s do it the proper way. Okay?” She gave a quick smile, turned and walked out.

I went into my bathroom and washed my face. I was excited to see Jaylee and Corin, though my circumstances were not exactly impressive. At least I could explain to them that I was being released in a day or two.

After I cleaned myself up, I strolled to the elevator bank and pushed the “down” button, and got on. I pushed floor number “3,” confirmed with my newly empowered wristband and the elevator lurched into descent. A smile spread across my face. Freedom is such a relative thing.

When I arrived on the third floor, a younger woman motioned to me. “You’re Solomon Tonum?”

“Yes…”

“Follow me, please.”

She was in regular clothes, perhaps an administrator of some kind, I didn’t

know. She escorted me to a room and stood aside from the doorway, motioning me in. “Please wait here, Doctor Amin will be with you shortly.”

She closed the door, and I heard her walk down the hallway.

I was wondering why Dr. Amin would want to meet in such a small, dark room without outside windows. There were drawn curtains on the far, interior wall, and I decided to open them. They revealed a large window that overlooked an adjacent room that appeared to be a play area for children. The room I was in seemed to have only one purpose, to observe what was happening on the other side of the glass—through what I presumed was a one-way mirror. I could see tables, some with computers, some with blocks and drawing equipment. There was a large chalkboard on the opposite wall—in many ways it was just like a schoolroom.

I looked around the room I was in, and noticed three barstools and a high table with an intercom device sitting on top. A minibar was in the back, with a lamp resting on its top, radiating its timid 20-watts of mood lighting. I walked over to the minibar, hopeful there would be water inside. It was empty, and unplugged.

The door opened, and Dr. Folsom rushed in. “I would like you to leave. Now.”

“Doctor Amin invited me here…”

He closed the door behind him, probably to contain any argument that might ensue. “I don’t care if the president of the United States invited you here; I want you back on the fifth floor.”

“No.” I spoke the simple word with great resolve.

“Your therapy is done here. I’m the director of this facility and you will abide by my decision, or—”

“Or what? My doctor invited me to this room, and I’m going to stay, until someone explains to me in a rational tone of voice why I should leave.”

He glared at me, seemingly speechless.

And then something distracted me. It was Dr. Amin showing Jaylee and Corin into the playroom. Jaylee was dressed in denim jeans and a pink t-shirt

with a white hoodie. She looked around the room, her blonde hair poking out of the sides of her hood.

Corin looked distracted, eyeing the mirror with suspicion, and sat down on a red plastic chair that was too small. I could see Dr. Amin speaking, but there was no sound. “How do you turn on the sound?” I asked.

Dr. Folsom, to my surprise, turned on the audio.

“…if you have any questions or don’t feel completely comfortable, just say so, okay?”

Jaylee nodded.

“Do you know why you’re here, Jaylee?” Dr. Amin asked.

“Do you mean why I’m here according to what my grandma told me, or why I’m here according to what I know?”

I heard Dr. Folsom walk a little closer to the window.

Jaylee was still standing, as if she was trying to sense where or even whether she should sit. She seemed relaxed and inquisitive. Her face was elfin and beautiful, and every atom in me wanted to embrace her.

“Why don’t you tell me what you think the reason is,” Dr. Amin said, smiling.

Jaylee walked around the room as she spoke. “Well, I know Mr. Tonum is here, and I know he needs my help. I believe that’s why I’m here.”

“In what way do you think Mr. Tonum needs your help?”

“He’s sad… he has my Mom’s heart inside him, did you know that?”

“Yes, I did. Your Mom was very kind to donate her heart. Why do you think he’s sad?”

“He’s here.”

When Jaylee spoke those words she looked right into my eyes. I glanced at Dr. Folsom. “She can’t see me, right?” He went to the back of the room and turned off the lamp that had been on, and returned to his position as a silent observer.

“You think this is a sad place?” Dr. Amin asked.

“Don’t you?”

“I suppose it could be, but it’s also a place where people can be healed.”

“Do you heal someone who isn’t sick?” Jaylee asked.

“You don’t think Mr. Tonum is sick?”

“Do you mean here?” She pointed to her head.

Dr. Amin nodded.

Jaylee laughed. “You don’t know who he is, do you?”

“What do you mean?”

Jaylee continued to walk around the room and came to the mirror and casually examined it. She went over directly in front of Dr. Folsom, and reached her hand out, touching the mirrored glass. Jaylee started to hum softly, ignoring Dr. Amin’s question. “What did you mean, Jaylee… that I don’t know who he is? Who do you think he is?”

“Do you know this man?” Jaylee pointed exactly to the position of Dr. Folsom.

“It’s a mirror Jaylee, what man are you pointing to?”

“He’s a healer… but he’s tired of healing. He needs his own healing.”

“How do you know that?”

“I look. I see. I know.”

Dr. Amin glanced at Corin, who shrugged.

Jaylee opened her mouth and a tiny shudder went through her body. I could see a difference in her. “Your son is okay.”

“Whose son?” Dr. Amin asked.

Jaylee was still looking up at Dr. Folsom who began to visibly shake.

“He says he knows that there was nothing you could do.”

Dr. Amin cleared her throat. “Jaylee, can you tell me who you’re talking to?”

“He says it’s time to tell his story… he hopes you will. It will fix everything if you do.”

Dr. Amin stood up and walked over to Jaylee, putting her arm around her shoulder and nudging her away from the mirror, but Jaylee stood her ground and kept her focus on Dr. Folsom.

“He wants you to forgive yourself…”

Jaylee closed her eyes, and put her left hand flat against the mirror. Dr. Amin stood by her side, fascinated by Jaylee’s intense focus.

“Put your hand here,” Jaylee said.

I looked at Dr. Folsom who was still shaking with tears streaming down his face. He slowly put his hand against the glass, hesitant to be following the words of a seven- year old.

“Remember the day we flew kites together, and my kite broke its string and flew off on its own?”

Dr. Folsom nodded in a trance.

“That’s all that happened; I flew off on my own. It wasn’t you who broke the string, I chose it. I chose it. I have no reason to forgive you, but I do forgive you, because I know it will help you to forgive yourself. If there’s one thing you can give me… that’s it. Forgive yourself.”

Jaylee opened her eyes and pulled her hand away. “He’s a very nice boy. I like him very much.”

Dr. Amin looked at the mirror, her face somewhere between bewilderment and anxiety. “Excuse me a moment.”

I looked at Dr. Folsom who, for all appearances, was in shock. “Are you okay?”

He stepped backwards in a daze, and looked at me, his eyes disoriented.

The door to our room swung open and closed.

“What just happened?” Dr. Amin asked

“I… she… she talked to my son. He was here.”

“I didn’t know you had a son,” Dr. Amin’s tone suddenly shifted to a warm cadence.

“He died… when I was… we went camping on a remote beach in North Carolina. I… I fell asleep, and my dear Wyatt went swimming and a… a rip tide pulled him out. He was only eight at the time… I had never told him about rip tides… I should have, oh God, I should have—you swim parallel to the beach, but I never told him… I never told him.” He broke down, fell to his knees and wept uncontrollably.

Dr. Amin rushed over to console him, placing her arm on his shoulders and repeating the universal message of solace. “It’s okay… it’s okay… it’s okay…”

I slowly stepped backwards and made my way to the door, and opened it quietly.

“Don’t go in there, Solomon.” Dr. Amin stayed with Dr. Folsom, but she knew where I was going.

“Why?”

“I wanted to do an evaluation of Jaylee, if you go in there, it will change the dynamics.”

“I’m sorry, but I have to see her.” I left, closing the door behind me.

Chapter 111: Marker

The door to the playroom was open, and when I came in, Jaylee shrieked with joy and ran up and hugged me. I closed my eyes as her head rested on my chest. I could feel her small hands patting me on my back. It was a moment of bliss.

When I opened my eyes I found Corin watching us. “Thank you for bringing her.” I whispered.

“She wanted to see you,” Corin said with a tender smile.

I cupped Jaylee’s face with my hands and looked into her eyes. “And thank you for coming.”

She beamed her smile to me, bright and effortless, as only a child can, and then, as if dark clouds were gathering in her mind, she suddenly looked at me with apprehension. “They’re coming.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know their names, I only feel them.”

I looked around and saw nothing.

Corin seemed uneasy, too, and stood to her feet.

“Do you mean the doctors?” I asked.

“No,” she shook her head. “These are…”

Then I saw a bright light crackle as if a rift opened and then suddenly closed, and standing before us was Nammu and Burkhan. Nammu held a rope that was tied around Burkhan like he was a dog. He looked terrible, blood-stained face, red, bulging eyes, and bruises over most of his body. He was beaten to a pulp. Nammu, on the other hand, looked regal in a golden cape that overlaid a beautiful black gown.

She pushed Burkhan to the floor with a powerful kick. “Well done, you found them, and your life, such as it is, will be spared.”

Nammu began to circle Jaylee and me. I placed my arms around Jaylee in a protective gesture. I turned to Corin, but she appeared to be unaware of what was happening—her face frozen in time.

“Well, well, Solomon. I see you found a little friend. Should I be jealous?”

I ignored her question and spoke to Burkhan, but kept my eyes on Nammu. “Burkhan, can I do anything?”

“For me… or against her?” he replied, his voice hoarse.

“Isn’t that nice,” Nammu injected, “another friend you’ve picked up along the way. He’s turning out to be as much use as you are. Now, this pretty thing, maybe she could be useful.”

Jaylee remained still even as Nammu came within a few feet of our position. I could hear Jaylee’s breath. I kept my eyes on Nammu, unsure of what she wanted.

Nammu kept her hands behind her back as she walked, circling us, and I kept rotating to face her so our backs were never exposed.

“What do you want?” I asked. “I’m right where you wanted me, in a mental hospital. What is it you want now?”

“What makes you think I want anything from you?” She reached out one of her hands to touch Jaylee’s golden locks, and I slapped her hand away.

“Don’t touch her!”

“Such delicate mortals… humans.”

I felt Jaylee begin to tremble, and I held her a little tighter.

“Why are you seeking me?” Jaylee asked.

“Ah, she speaks? Wonderful. Finally, someone with intelligence who asks a question worthy of my time.”

Nammu narrowed her eyes on Jaylee. “I’m seeking you, my dear, because you are valuable… you’re valuable because you are a bridge between the present and the future. You are an anomaly. A freak of nature. A mutant.

“Now, I realize these terms are not flattering in your world, but in mine, they are to die for. They are the means to transform an entire species. They

are downright Darwinian, if you know what I mean.” She laughed.

“But I can see you don’t understand; your eyes are glazed over like all humans. Perhaps you’re less precocious than I thought… let me put it this way, I want you, because you are dangerous to my kind.”

“How am I dangerous?” Jaylee asked.

“How am I dangerous… humph… that’s funny. Playing innocent with me? Are you sure that’s wise?”

“What I see in you is fear,” Jaylee said. “You’re like the wood ticks at my grandparent’s farm that suck blood, and when they get all that they can, they drop off and fear they will be stepped on by their host—”

Nammu suddenly thrust her finger at Jaylee. “Don’t think for a moment I can’t end your life right here right now. You dare to speak to me like this? You’re a little human child—”

“—that you fear.” Jaylee finished the sentence with perfect timing.

Nammu’s mouth was left open as if Jaylee had stolen the words.

“You should go now,” Jaylee said. “Stay in your world. Don’t try to control this one, because it’s not yours.”

Nammu turned away, and I could see her anger consuming her composure like acid on flesh. “I will leave this world when it is done, and the likes of you have gone to your new Eden. In the meantime, whatever safety you think you have in your genetic gifts will be tested by those who do my bidding.”

“She has a marker,” Burkhan shouted.

“Shut up, you fool,” she said, and grabbed his stick from him and slammed it against the side of his head.

In that moment I went to the aid of Burkhan, though I had no idea how I could possibly fight Nammu. I grabbed the stick as she was about to deliver her second blow, and she turned to look at me. Her eyes were a golden-green color, anger swelling from them, and when she saw that I was trying to intervene she laughed, and shook the stick from my hands and started to come at me.

“What’s a marker?” I asked, hoping Burkhan was conscious enough to

reply.

“She can use it to find—”

“Shut up!” Nammu screamed at Burkhan. “Shut up!”

“How does she do it?” I asked, still backing up.

“She places it in your—”

Nammu thrust her arm out trying to stab me with something that looked like a high- tech knife. I lurched back just out of her range, but fell backwards on some chairs. Then she lunged at Jaylee with the same device, cutting her just above her elbow. That’s when I really lost my temper. I got to my feet and started to charge Nammu with all my strength, and she looked at me with such a strange expression, raised her hand, and I immediately felt time slow down.

“Goodbye, Solomon. I have what I wanted.” She held up the blade of her knife with Jaylee’s blood dripping down the blade. Her voice was slow and halting, and suddenly deep sounding like a machine had taken over her vocal chords, and she was running out of energy.

In a strange mixture of light and time anomalies, I watched her disappear, but not in one flash, as she had come, but rather as a slow motion process of dematerialization. I looked at Burkhan and he was already gone. I saw Jaylee holding her arm, and I went in her direction, but time had decelerated, and I was struggling to move as in a dream when everything slows down.

Corin began to move, and I could see her eyes widen as she became aware of what was happening. Time righted itself, and I began to feel an equilibrium to time and space as everything around me began to resume the countenance of reality.

“What happened?” Corin asked, standing with her hands over her mouth. She hadn’t even noticed that Jaylee was bleeding yet.

I ran to Jaylee. “Let me see it, sweetheart. Are you okay?”

“Oh, my God,” Corin said, rushing to Jaylee. “What happened? What… what happened?”

Blood was soaking through Jaylee’s white sleeve near her left elbow. She

was composed considering what just happened, but was in a mild shock, and her body was trembling. I tore off my sweatshirt and wrapped it around her arm. I glanced at the mirror, wondering what everyone had seen.

Both doctors ran in, looking confused, offering to look at Jaylee's arm. They took her into an examination room down the hallway, and Dr. Folsom stitched up her wound. All four adults were surrounding her, and the unspoken incident floated above us like a tortured storm waiting to unleash its rain.

Dr. Folsom was very sober as he stitched Jaylee, his eyes were still red, but his hands were calm and when he completed the task, I thought I saw him take a drink from a silver flask he had in his coat pocket. Corin was very quiet through the whole procedure, allowing me to provide the support while Jaylee was stitched up.

In all, the cut required twelve stitches. When the bandage was finally applied, everyone walked silently to Dr. Folsom's office and sat down, including Jaylee.

Dr. Amin was the first to speak about the incident, her voice sounded distant. "I heard Jaylee say something about 'they're coming,' and I stood up to see what she was talking about. I… I saw a flash of light… almost… almost like an explosion, and then it was as if you disappeared for two… maybe three seconds. I couldn't believe my eyes, and when I turned to see if Dr. Folsom was seeing what I was, I saw you again, and Jaylee was bleeding. What happened? Can you explain it?"

I fidgeted in my chair. "It was—"

"Let's let Jaylee tell us first," Dr. Folsom suggested, patting my arm.

Jaylee's feet didn't touch the floor as she sat in her burgundy leather chair. She was wearing a standard issue SRC sweatshirt—just like mine—that was two sizes too large. Her hair was tussled, but otherwise she looked unruffled. "This was an entity from another dimension. They're not human."

"You mean like ghosts?" Dr. Folsom asked.

Jaylee shook her head lightly. "These are the beings that were once called gods on this planet."

“How did you cut your arm so quickly?” Dr. Amin asked. “You were only gone for a few seconds.”

“To you it seemed like a few seconds,” Jaylee said. “To us it seemed like three or four minutes.”

Dr. Amin looked at me. “How’d it happen?”

“Nammu…” I replied. “…is unpredictable. She can do things that to us seem like magic… like… like slow time down. Nammu had some kind of a high-tech knife… she tried to stab me, I fell back against some of the chairs, and while I was on the floor, she cut Jaylee.”

“Why?” Dr. Amin and Dr. Folsom asked in unison.

Jaylee began to sniffle a little, and I stood up and led her over to my chair and held her on my lap, with my arms around her. “Are you okay to talk about this?” I asked.

“I am with you…”

“Only me?”

“They won’t believe me.”

Dr. Folsom leaned forward in his chair. “Jaylee, you saw my son, Wyatt. He’s not with this other entity you’re talking about…”

“Oh, no. He’s a very good boy. I really like him.”

Dr. Folsom sat back in his chair, relief showing on his face. “When you do that… when you speak with… with spirits, do you see them?”

“Sometimes I see what I call memory parts. I saw the experience of you flying kites like watching a film, you were in a park that was surrounded by tall trees, and Wyatt’s kite was a red dragon, and yours was a yellow diamond.”

Dr. Folsom whispered one word. “Extraordinary.”

“Her mother was the same way,” Corin said, patting Jaylee on her back. “Maybe we should go. Are you tired, Jaylee?”

“Corin,” I said, “I’ll be out in a day or two—”

“Really?” Jaylee perked up and looked up at me. “Will you come to visit?”

“Yes, I certainly will. I’ll arrange it with your grandma.”

“Good. This weekend?”

“I’ll try.”

I had the distinct feeling that both doctors wanted to continue their investigation, but Jaylee, a seven-year old girl, had school the next day, and I was now a voluntary patient that would be released in a day or two. There was a sense of remorse, that this amazing experience was a once-in-a-lifetime and they’d have no way of exploring it.

But something remarkable and awe-inspiring had transpired in their unremarkable playroom, and they would not soon forget, especially Dr. Folsom.

Chapter 112: The Sixth Picture

Saying goodbye to Jaylee was tough. It wasn't just that she was physically gone; I was concerned about the marker that Nammu had used. Jaylee thought she knew why Nammu had done it, but I never had a chance to ask her. All I knew was that Nammu had said she had what she had come for. Jaylee's blood? If it was just to place something inside Jaylee, she would have said something like I did what I came to do—not I have what I came for.

It was all so confusing and disquieting.

My new mobile device, courtesy of Dan, began to ring. I answered it. "Hello?"

"Solomon?"

"Yeah, it's me, Dan."

"Just wanted to give you a heads-up. I didn't meet with Allison. They had moved her to a different facility—"

"Where?"

"It's okay. I have their word that they'll bring her back by seven tonight. If she's a minute late, you call me, okay? I have Jensen's mobile."

"Okay…"

"How're you doing… you sound a little down?"

"Jaylee came for a visit and just left."

"I understand…" Dan said. "How'd it go?"

"Fine… strange, weird, ended in twelve stitches…"

"What?"

"It's a long story, Dan. Sometime, when I get out of this place, we need to talk. Maybe have a drink somewhere. I'll tell you everything… if that's even possible."

“Sounds good, Solomon. I’d like that. By the way, I told Jensen I expected the waiver before the end of the day, so I hope to have that signed and sealed by tomorrow morning. We’ll both need to sign it, as will Allison—”

“Why Allison?”

“She’s really the one who has the damaging testimony. I just have a big mouth. You, I don’t think they worry about you too much. So, yeah, Allison needs to sign.”

“Okay.”

“Once the waiver is signed, you should be able to walk out. Sound good?”

“Both of us, right?”

“Yes… can Allison walk?”

“She’ll need a wheelchair.”

“What about hospitalization for her?”

“I know a nurse I want to hire to stay with her.”

“I take it it’s not someone from SRC?”

“She was the hospice nurse for Vanessa.”

“Ah… okay. Hey, Solomon?”

“Yeah?”

“I found a place for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“When you get out tomorrow, I have a place where you can hang until you find a place of your own.”

I paused, because I had no idea why this man was so good to me. It really touched me. I wasn’t even sure if I could pay him, and he had singlehandedly boosted me out of SRC and brought Allison along, too.

“Solomon, you there?”

“Thank you, Dan. I’m here. Just a little overcome by your kindness.”

Dan chuckled to himself. “Did I ever tell you that Vanessa made my father

a lot of money?”

I laughed a little. “Yeah, you told me, but I’m not Vanessa.”

“Are you sitting down?”

“No…”

“Well, find yourself a chair.”

I looked around in my room and decided my bed would do fine, and sat down. “Okay, I’m sitting…”

“The six million you got…”

“Yeah?”

“Vanessa had considerably more. She only doled out about ten percent in that first transaction. I think… don’t ask me how… she knew your wife would take it. There’s another fifty-five million currently sitting in off-shore accounts, in a trust for Jaylee, and once you’re her guardian, the money will transfer to your name as the executor—to use as you see fit.”

The proverbial jaw dropping occurred. My mind almost went blank, while a form of shock spread through my body.

“What?” It was more a reflex than a real question, and Dan knew it.

“I got a place for you not too far from Lisbon, right on the St. Lawrence River. Beautiful views from what I could see of the listing. It’s partially furnished. I leased it for a year… should give you enough time. I just sent you an email with pictures. You can see it for yourself.

“Call me when you’re ready to check out, and I’ll have a driver take you there. If you want to have the nurse with you, I can arrange that, too. What’s her name?”

“Ah… Nurse Morales… Luella Morales. L-U-E-L-L-A…”

“Got it. Vanessa mentioned her. Does she know about this?”

“No…”

“If she took care of Vanessa, she probably knows enough,” Dan said.

“Solomon?”

"…yeah?"

"Vanessa wanted it this way. She knew what she was doing. You okay with everything?"

"Yes. A little stunned, that's all."

"Understandable. Okay, I'll let you go. Have a look at those pictures, and we'll talk soon. Okay?"

"Thanks, Dan."

"You're welcome. Take care."

"You, too."

The phone call ended, and I opened up the email app. One message was waiting for me, its subject line appropriately enigmatic: Yes, it's tuned. I opened it, my mind unfettered with any expectation.

Solomon,

I found this quite by accident. But I thought you would find it helpful to be close to Jaylee and her grandmother. Hope you like it.

Regards,

Dan

There were six attachments and I flicked the icons with my finger, and they opened up simultaneously like cards stacked neatly on top of one another. The first one was of a large estate, looking down a tree-lined driveway onto a log cabin that was three stories high in the middle and dropped to two levels on either side. It was large. This was not a summer cabin.

The second image was taken from the back deck, facing the river that flowed behind the house. There was an island in the river, and the river looked like it was about two-hundred feet across, so the island was small. I think I could see a dock and boat.

The third picture was of the kitchen—a beautifully appointed gourmet kitchen that would no doubt accentuate my stunted cooking skills.

The fourth picture was of a bedroom that seemed up high, because I could

see the tops of aspen trees out the window. There was a bed, also made from logs, and two nightstands, but otherwise, the room looked pretty empty. It was large and open with wood floors and throw rugs with Indian patterns.

The fifth picture was a little blurry, but showed a rec room with a ping-pong table, pool table, and a variety of old pinball machines pushed up against a paneled-wood wall. A glass sliding door connected it to the backyard where I could a see an old- fashioned swing hanging from a tree.

The sixth picture was of the living room with a large bay window that overlooked the river. It was sparsely furnished, but sitting in the middle, like a sphinx atop a beautiful Persian rug of gold and red, was a grand piano. I don’t know why exactly, but when my eyes saw it, they filled with tears.

Chapter 113: Agreement

I took my dinner to my room, and skipped the juice bar. I noticed that Mr. Winters eyed me as I walked by his meds post, but he didn't say anything, though I could sense a grumble in his attitude.

It was almost 6:00 P.M. when I sat down in my bedroom with my tray of processed turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, and some rounded carrots that looked like they had been drowned in a clear, sugary sauce. I concentrated on the turkey and potatoes. I was actually hungry.

Every time I heard a sound in the hallway, my heart would skip a beat, hoping it was Allison returning. By 6:40 my anxiety had multiplied. I walked my tray back to the cafeteria and saw Mr. Winters cleaning up the juice bar. He looked at me with some disgust as I approached.

"No refunds."

"What?"

"You're not getting your money back because Sandra's returning to her room—that was your doing, not mine. I was still planning to take you there tonight."

"Right… she was in another facility, how were you going to do that?"

"I have a car."

"Anyway, I don't care about the money, you can keep it. Do you know when she'll be here?"

His demeanor was instantly better. "Anytime, last I heard."

"Okay, thanks." I started to leave.

"You leaving tomorrow?" Mr. Winters asked.

"I think so."

"You and the girl?"

"That's the plan."

“I hope it works out well for you, man.”

“Thanks… you, too.”

I walked back to my room to wait.

At 7:01 P.M. I called Dan.

“Hey Solomon, I take it that Allison hasn’t shown up yet?”

“I’m worried.” I said. “Can you check on her status?”

“I’ll call you right back.”

“Thanks.”

I sat on my chair, holding the phone. All I wanted to do was to see Allison’s face when she saw the home we would be in tomorrow. I prayed for her safety, the words flowed effortlessly, until the phone interrupted. “What’d you find out?” I asked.

“They had a problem about two hours ago, Solomon—”

“What… what kind of problem.”

“Alison tried to commit suicide. She’s in intensive care right now at Orange Regional Medical Center in Middleton.”

My world suddenly began to collapse into a fog. “What… what happened?”

“She slit her arm open, Solomon. She lost a lot of blood, and they’re working on her now. I can get there in about… two hours, if traffic isn’t too bad, but that’s all I can do.”

I barely remember running down the hall. I ran into the cafeteria. “Mr. Winters, can you take me to Orange Regional Medical Center?”

“No, man… she’s coming here…”

I tried to catch my breath. “Please… please take me there. She tried to kill herself. I need to go. Please.”

“Shit… how do you know this?”

I held up my mobile device. “My attorney told me.”

“Okay, hold on.”

He pulled out his talker. “Mary, is there anyone who can watch fifth floor for the next two hours or so?”

I could barely hear her reply.

“Now.” Mr. Winters said, glancing at me.

I took out a wad of money. “I’ll pay,” I whispered.

He motioned for me to put the money back. “Yes, it’s an emergency.

“Okay, thanks.

“I owe you one.”

Mr. Winters looked at me. “Let’s go.”

I followed him out to his car while he called Dr. Folsom to let him know what he was doing. At first Dr. Folsom objected, but as he heard the full story he offered to call the hospital and get more details and call us back.

We zoomed down Interstate 84 West doing eighty miles per hour. When Dr. Folsom called back, Mr. Winters put him on speakerphone.

“They don’t seem to know exactly what happened. Somehow, she managed to find a scalpel or razor, and cut a four-inch incision on her forearm.”

“How… how is it that they don’t know how she did it?” I asked.

“Apparently, she’s not very cooperative or communicative.”

“Did they find the razor or whatever she used?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but given that they told me it was either a scalpel or razor, it sounds like they may not know. Probably all happened quickly, and they’ve been focused on keeping her alive.”

“What’s her current situation?” I asked.

“She’s in recovery, had two blood transfusions and her wound has been stitched and wrapped. She’s gaining some strength, but still not communicative.”

“Her choice, or is she unconscious?” Mr. Winters asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“Okay, doctor, we’ll be there in about five minutes.”

“I’ll be there in about fifteen. So I’ll see you there.”

“Solomon?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry about Allison. We’ll do everything we can, you have my word.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled. My mind was numb.

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Mr. Winters turned off his phone.

I called Dan back and updated him, and told him to stay put. I’d call him later once I had more information. He would call Guanghai and arrange to get him to the hospital.

When we arrived at the hospital, we were escorted to a room off the emergency room. Allison was in a room with plastic pull curtains for three walls. Technology protruded from the wall behind her bed, providing her vitals, and Mr. Winters poked his head through the curtain to look at the numbers carefully. The ER nurse was talking with him, and I walked to Allison slowly. Her eyes were closed. She looked like an orphan of humanity, silently enduring her world of beeps and blinking lights.

Her left arm, just below her elbow, was bandaged and traces of blood had seeped through. I put her hand in mine, and stroked her forehead, moving her hair aside. I bent down and whispered in her ear. “Allison, it’s Solomon, I brought cigarettes.”

She stirred slightly. I felt her hand move as if she were trying to squeeze my hand.

“Are you awake in there?” I asked.

I could see her mouth move, and her eyelids fluttered almost undetectably.

“You left her, we told you, never… leave her.” Her mouth moved, but I

had a sense it was not her speaking. Her voice was raspy and uneven, with a rhythm unlike her own.

“I didn’t leave her, she was taken from me,” I whispered.

“How could you let her be taken from you? It is the same as if you left her.”

“It isn’t the same thing. I’ve found a way to take her with me. I have a house where I will take her. I have a nurse to care for her. She will never want for anything, including love. You can leave her in my hands. I will take her from here.”

“How can we trust you?”

I paused. I had nothing to say that would endow me with trust. I was a person of low stature, and in a way they were right. “You don’t need to trust me,” I said. “You can stay with her, but you must promise me one thing.”

“What is that?”

“If you hear her play music again, you must promise to leave her.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“Then you can stay.”

“You have proven yourself to be a fair person, and while we do not entirely trust you, we think your suggestion is agreeable. Thus, we are bound.”

I felt a light sigh release from her and she slept. I kissed her cheek, and stayed holding her hand until Dr. Folsom came. Mr. Winters stood outside as if he were guarding the flimsy room. I could hear them conversing, but couldn’t make out their words.

Suddenly, Allison stirred, and I felt something move through her. It was one of those strangest of experiences because she opened her eyes and looked at me, but I instantly knew it wasn’t her.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I… I’m Solomon.”

“Ah, the wisher is given their wish…”

“Who are you?” I asked.

I heard Dr. Folsom poke his head inside. “Are you talking with her?”

“Give me a few minutes, okay?” I said.

He pulled back, and I heard him walk away with Mr. Winters.

“I am you, talking to you.”

“I don’t understand…” I confessed.

“Your mission was written by my… our hand. I am fulfilling your wish to meet me.”

“Why in this way? Why through Allison? Let her rest.”

“The mission is like an arrow shot from a bow aimed at a target that is moving in unpredictable ways. The arrow is never the same. Every person has a different mission—every single living creature has a different mission. Not one is the same as the other, and yet, there is only one mission.”

She paused and closed her eyes for a moment. “Do you understand?”

“I think so…” I answered, but I wasn’t sure if I really did. I felt a strange ambivalence. I wanted the voice to leave Allison alone, so she could rest, but this voice was the answer to my wish that the winged Quantusum had granted me.

“But what is the one mission?” I asked.

“It is to create the potential for the Sovereign Integral consciousness to live in full expression in any sentient life form within a realm.”

“Just the potential?”

“In a realm of freewill, it is the highest mission.”

“And who made this the highest mission?” I asked.

“You did.”

“I did?”

“Freewill, remember?”

“No, I mean who first created this mission—the one mission?”

“Again, my answer is the same… you did.”

“How can I create something and yet have no memory of it?”

“The same way you have a dream and the next day it is forgotten.

“In your world, the world of turbulence and change, your role in writing your mission is unseen. You feel like an actor who is given the wrong script, and you seek the writer, because you want it changed. You want to make it conform to happiness, because that is the Holy Grail in your world. But when you wrote your mission, you knew happiness would ebb and flow with its counterparts of despair and sorrow.

“The key is to bring love as a state of consciousness to your world, and you can only do this if you hold the principle of the Sovereign Integral in your very being. And this mission is what we… you wrote, and every turn, every bump, every nuance of change that you encounter, brings you to this realization. When you have it, you will find the way to enable others to have it as well.”

Allison was staring at me, the technology around us was staring at me, and I felt the entire universe was somehow looking down on me. It was an eerie feeling. I ran my hand across my bearded face, which reminded me of how much change I had met in the last three months. I was in the strangest of circumstances imaginable, and yet I felt a dawning of awareness. I felt a clarity coming over me that was precisely the counterpoint of what my eyes beheld.

An ER nurse came into the room and checked on Allison’s vitals. I watched Allison’s eyes close, and I could sense a part of me receding into that place where I went with my seeking lamp to decode the world.

Chapter 114: Perfect Moment

Allison was moved to a new room at about 2:00 A.M. Her vitals were stabilizing, and she was no longer considered a high-risk patient. Dr. Folsom and Mr. Winters had left around midnight, and before he left, Dr. Folsom had given me a thorough update on Allison's progress, which by all accounts was positive.

I still had on my gray residency clothes that alerted anyone who could read that I had a membership card to a mental institution. Dr. Folsom had offered to get me a new shirt, but I turned him down. It just wasn't a priority, but I appreciated his offer just the same.

Allison's brother, Guanghai, had arrived shortly after Dr. Folsom and Mr. Winters had left. He was terribly upset, asking me repeatedly how it could have happened. Why had she been moved? I had done my best to explain the reasons, but I didn't really understand that much better than he. The good news was that by the time Guanghai had arrived, Allison's prognosis was much better, and it made my explanation that much easier.

When I watched Allison, she seemed to be dreaming at times, and occasionally she would say a word or two, but they were mumbled in such a way that even when I placed my ear to her mouth I couldn't understand.

I had tried to call Jon around 1:00 A.M., but his phone simply rang. No voicemail. I tried Marisa with the same result. I realized they were gone, but I needed to try. Maybe they could sense my effort, if nothing else.

When I came back to Allison's room, Guanghai was talking with her, though Allison appeared to be asleep. He spoke in Mandarin and as soon as he noticed me, he stopped.

"She is tired?" he asked.

"I'm sure she likes to hear your voice," I said.

He smiled, but it quickly turned to a frown.

“She was strong once. She was so strong…”

“She will be again. Don’t worry.”

“When?” he asked.

I didn’t know how to answer his question, so I left it unanswered.

“I have to call parents, and tell them,” Guanghai announced suddenly. “But I don’t know what to say…”

“Tell them that she’s being released from the hospital in the next few days, and she’ll be living with a man who loves her and will take care of her. Tell them that she will live on a river in a large, beautiful home, and we will send pictures as soon as we can. Tell them that… don’t mention this. Okay?”

He looked at me with eyes that wanted to believe, but had doubt. “This is true?”

“It’s true,” I said, my eyes fixed on Allison’s closed eyelids.

“You are right. That is correct thing to say. Thank you. Thank you.”

Guanghai bowed several times and walked out of the room.

I sat down in the chair next to Allison’s bed, and ran my hands through my hair, leaned back in my chair, closed my eyes and prayed. I visualized the symbol of that odd cross that Uncle had drawn, and then I heard the sound of lips trying to move.

“…where am I?”

It was the voice I had waited for.

My chair was almost behind her, and I raised my head over the side of her bed, slowly, as not to scare her. I could see her profile so clear, her eyes searching, looking for something she recognized, something that would pull her to come closer to her world. Suddenly, her eyes found me, and I could see her soul move out to me in the form of glistening tears.

“Oh God, Solomon, is it you?” Her arms reached out, tethered to plastic tubes that snared her, but I moved my face closer so she could touch me. Our eyes found each other and in that moment every step I had taken, since my first, cry-filled breath, had placed me here—in this exact, perfect moment.

Chapter 115: For You

The limousine was admittedly a bit pretentious, but Dan had insisted, so it could carry everyone comfortably. The driver, or should I say, chauffeur, was a tall chap with a British accent, derby hat and black suit—very formal. Dan was riding shotgun in the front seat, the dividing window was down and he was mostly watching us. Guanghai, Allison and I were in the back seat, with Allison in the middle, and opposite us were Luella, Tyler and Kohana.

It was a perfect autumn afternoon, filled with laughter and the witty conversation of good friends. Allison had been released from the hospital only two hours earlier, and we were within a short distance of our new home. Allison held my hand the entire trip, even when she had taken a quick nap; she leaned against my shoulder and kept hold of my hand.

Tyler had brought snacks for us, and they were spectacular sushi sandwiches, as Tyler called them. I have no idea how he knew Allison loved sushi, but they tasted like heaven. Dan was indeed the Magic Man—Tyler's pet name for him—making all of the arrangements to bring us together to spend a Sunday together at our brand new home and christen it.

After conferring with our chauffeur, Dan made the announcement that we were within a mile of our destination and told us to fill our champagne glasses. He turned and asked if anyone would like to make a final toast.

Allison instantly held her glass out, her eyes slightly mischievous. "I think my first words to Solomon were that I asked him if he was going to save me. I don't know where those words came from, but, as it turned out, it was the right question to ask such a man. My toast is to Solomon." She turned to me. "Thank you." She leaned over and kissed me. A chorus of "ahs" resounded in the limo and then the clinking of glasses.

However, before anyone could drink their champagne, Allison added another toast. "I also want to toast Vanessa, who, in a strange way, made all of this possible. To Vanessa."

"To Vanessa," everyone echoed, and then in unison started to pull their

glasses to their mouth, but then Allison shook her hand. “And one more… to the unsung hero that collected us and made new friendships possible… who found this new home for Solomon and me… to Dan. We love you.”

A blushing Dan raised his glass, and all of us, out of the corners of our eyes, watched Allison to see if she would actually drink or add another toast. She took a sip, and we all followed.

Suddenly we slowed down and turned onto a gravel road.

“We’re here,” Dan announced.

Our new home revealed itself as we followed the driveway around a bend. The oaks and elms were nearly leafless, but the large pines hid the home until the final turn. It was basking in the sunlight of a late afternoon, giving it a slightly orange hue, and we all gasped a bit at its beauty.

I had shown Allison all of the pictures, but when you’re actually standing in front of the real thing, reality sets in, and it suddenly seems like there is nothing that can intervene or stop the future from becoming the present. It was a very good feeling.

I watched Allison’s face light up as we entered our new home. While our friends explored the main floor with its kitchen and family room, Allison walked with a purpose. I helped her climb the short flight of stairs to the living room, and when she saw the piano, she tapped me on the forearm and let go of me. It was her way of saying, “Wait here.” She walked to the piano without any help, as if it were the only thing she wanted to see in the entire house. I could see traces of her face reflected in the large picture window, and I thought she was smiling.

She pulled out the bench, turned back to look at me, and with a radiant smile spoke only four words: “This is for you.”

I leaned against the wall, some thirty feet from her, and closed my eyes as the most beautiful, poetic music filled our home.

Chapter 116: By the River

Before the adoption papers were filed, Jaylee came to visit our new home. As large as it was, our home still had a guest cottage that looked more like a lake cabin, in part because of its size, and in part because it was only fifty feet from the shore of the river.

It was a cold day, with wisps of tiny snow pellets that made noise as they hit the ground, roof, and trees, sounding like a hushed hailstorm. Luella and Guanghai were fixing up the guest cottage, which had two bedrooms, two bathrooms, kitchen and a cozy living room that overlooked a deck that provided incredible views of the river as it passed by in its implacable calm.

Corin and Jaylee arrived right on time. The Longley's farm was only a ten-minute drive. I ran to the door and excitedly invited them in.

"Wow, it's really big!" Jaylee said after she hugged me.

"Yes, it is." I replied. "I'll give you a tour in a little bit."

I embraced Corin and had them follow me to the kitchen. "Let me introduce you to Allison. Allison, this is Jaylee and her grandmother, Corin."

Allison had on an apron, and was preparing lunch. She was still a waif-like woman, but her strength was rebounding steadily, and her arms opened like an ark, and Jaylee went in.

"I've heard so much about you." The two embraced one another, and Corin and I smiled as our eyes met.

"Would you like to help me make lunch?" Allison asked. "I could use a good helper…"

"I was just going to give them the tour," I said, "but I'll leave it to Jaylee."

"I'll stay and help. I can look around later," Jaylee said.

Allison came over to Corin and gave her a hug. "Good to meet you, too."

"Thanks for inviting us over," Corin said.

“I’ll give you the tour,” I said, “and we’ll let these two chefs make lunch…”

“Jaylee, do you remember Luella?”

“Of course.”

I went over to an intercom on the kitchen wall and pressed a button. “Luella?”

A few seconds later. “Hey, Solomon, what’s up?”

“Someone’s here, about four and half feet tall, blonde hair, looks an awful lot like an angel…”

“Jaylee!” Luella half-shouted.

Jaylee came over to the intercom. “Hi, Luella.”

“I’ll be right there… you owe me a big hug.”

“Okay,” Jaylee said, giggling.

I took Corin’s arm and led her away from the kitchen. “Time for your tour.”

We walked upstairs to the living room.

“How’s Jaylee’s arm?”

“It’s healing, but it left a nasty scar, but she seems fine. It’s a little stiff that’s all. How about Allison? How’s her arm?”

“It was a deeper wound. She’s having some problems with her coordination—with that arm, but the wound itself is healing okay. Luella is really helpful with that.”

“Is Luella staying here?”

“Yes, we have a guest house—cottage really… but it’s very nice. Great view of the river. Come over to the window, and you can see it.”

We walked by the piano, and I pointed to the guest house, half-hidden by a small grove of bare aspen trees. “We have an extra bedroom there, Corin.” I stopped her and put my hand on her shoulder. “Corin, it’s time to sell the farm. Live here with us.”

She glanced at me, slightly surprised at my invitation. “Thank you for the offer, Solomon, but I want to do some traveling. I’ve been landlocked on a farm for almost forty years; I’m not ready to watch the river just yet. I know Jaylee is in good hands here… it’s my time to roam. I’m selling the farm back to Jason’s family. They wanted to keep it, and the money I’ll make on that… well… I can travel the world and live pretty well doing it. Maybe when I get back, I’ll take you up on that offer, if it still stands.” She smiled.

“Good, I’m glad for you. I didn’t know you wanted to travel. If you need anything, you let us know. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“I have Jaylee’s stuff in the car,” Corin said. “Do you want to bring it in now?”

“And stop the tour?” I gave her a quick smile. “Come on, I’ll show you Jaylee’s bedroom, and then I’ll bring in her things.”

We walked off to the bedrooms, and we chatted about Corin’s travel plans, and how she’d decided to see Prague first, since those were her family’s roots. I could sense her excitement at the way life had opened up. She was my adopted mother every bit as much as Jaylee was my adopted daughter, and the love I felt for Corin was no less.

We had a wonderful lunch, full of laughter and good food. Jaylee had really taken a liking to Guanghai, especially when she found out that he’d been a key member of the team who had invented a robonaut for the International Space Station that could essentially run the entire complex in outer space.

After lunch, Jaylee and I went out to Corin’s car and brought in her things, which consisted of two suitcases of clothes and several large boxes of “just stuff,” according to Jaylee.

“Do you like your new bedroom?” I asked her.

“Yes, very much.”

“You can change things to your liking, get some plants, maybe new bedding… we’ll let you do whatever you like.”

“Can I paint it?”

“Sure, whatever you like.”

“That’s all I’d like to do,” she said.

“Okay, we’ll go the hardware store, just as soon as I can find out where one is…” We both laughed.

It was a perfect day. Corin stayed until three that afternoon. I was sad to see her go, but she promised she’d be back every few days to check in on us, at least until she spread her wings and transformed into a wayfarer.

After she left, I walked down to the river with Allison and Jaylee. Jaylee was excited to see the water, and instantly started looking for skipping stones. She found some down on the banks of the river, and quickly brought them to us. She had five “skippers” and gave us each one, and kept three for herself—a trait I took notice of. Allison rubbed her arm and passed me hers, so I had two.

I slid down to the bank below, so I was level with the water, and Jaylee and I skipped stones, counting the ripples that they made, comparing our successes, to the delight of Allison who cheered us on from above. It was cold, but the sleet had stopped, and had been replaced with the most delicate snowflakes that fell like soft kisses from the gods.

Jaylee handed me a stone and pointed downstream. “Throw it downstream, it will go further.”

Maybe it was the ideally shaped stone, perfect weight, a little curved, and maybe her suggestion was wise, but we watched that stone skip across the water so many times we all lost count, and it finally slowed down and was swallowed by the river.