

A Daffodil for Brian

Steven J Kollmansberger

To Brother Brent

“The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make His face shine upon
you, And be gracious to you; The Lord
lift up His countenance upon you, And
give you peace.”

Numbers 6:24-26

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Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping
than you can understand.

*William Butler Yeats,
"The Stolen Child"*

Fear no more the lightning flash,
Nor the all-dreaded thunder-stone;
Fear not slander, censure rash;
Thou hast finish'd joy and moan:
All lovers young, all lovers must
Consign to thee, and come to dust.

*William Shakespeare,
"Cymbeline", Act IV, scene ii*

Foreword

This book is a work of fiction, meaning the names, places and situations have been invented. However, the themes which drive the narrative are not at all fiction. I have been asked if Brian, the main protagonist, is an image of myself. Yes, he is. But so is every character in the book. Each of them represents a voice which has, at some time or another, spoken in the seat of my mind.

I am not a Christian, nor a believer in a personal God, but the Judeo-Christian mythology is sufficiently compelling that I have used it for much of the spiritual basis of this book. Therefore, the metaphysical statements in this book should not be construed as a statement of belief or faith on my part.

Brother Brent once said that people who have a difficult relationship with their earthly father often have trouble relating to God as Father. I have always found this an interesting premise, and one of this book's strong themes is a study on just that. On my wall above my altar is an image of Kanzeon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Among all the various images in Buddhism, why her? I have often wondered if it is just that: her gender. She appears in male forms as well, but those never interest me as much. Why not? Unlike the protagonist, I have an

excellent relationship with my father. Even so, is it still possible that the very concept of Father could make me uncomfortable? This book is a study, yes, but may it not be an academic study. May it not be dry, may it not be cold. May it be real, may it be raw, may it be the cry of my own heart. Our Father...

I would like to thank my parents, who inspired me to write a novel. I would like to thank Brother Brent, who seeded in my mind most if not all of the great themes in this novel. I am also thankful for his excellent editorial review. I would like to thank my master artist Kate Beck for creating the cover. And, of course, thanks to all the readers without whom there would be no point to writing this novel.

~ | ~

Lonely

Exile

Chapter 1

Light streams in from the stained glass, forming images of color depicting a moment in time. The pew is wooden, without any padding. It hurts to sit on for a long time, and this service seems to be going on forever. The pastor gives her sermon, energetic and normally gripping, up front, but I'm not really paying attention. The stained glass windows are much more fascinating. I like to think of what the scenes would have really been like—there's Jesus with the disciples, another shows Jesus on the cross.

“And now, as our savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say,” the pastor announces from the front. This is the worst part.

“Our Father, who art in heaven...” the entire congregation reads the prayer out loud. They all sound as bored as I am. But I'm still stuck at the beginning... “Our Father”... “Father”... “Father”... I can't hold back the tears sometimes, but at least no one notices.

Nobody knew; nobody expected him to leave that day. “Just going to the store,” he said, “Be back in a few!” He was always so cheerful, so happy. After a while, when he didn't come back, Mom got worried. He had taken the only car, so she called a friend.

Together, they went to the store, and they searched the routes he might have taken. She got home late, and exhausted. I was scared.

“Where’s Daddy?” I asked. I was only seven at the time.

“I don’t know, sweetie,” she said. She tried to sound comforting, but she was scared too. I could hear it. She called the police, but didn’t talk for long. She didn’t sleep at all that night. She sat by the door, waiting for him to come home. But he never did. He never came home. The next week was a confused jumble. Mom found out that he had closed their bank account, taking all their money in cash. Nobody ever found him. He just disappeared that day. Maybe he’s dead. Maybe he lives down the street. I don’t know.

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” the congregation reads. I loved my daddy. He never hurt me or yelled at me. And then one day he was gone, and he took everything with him. How can I trust you, daddy? That’s why I hate this prayer. We come here every week, and calling out to “Our Father”, but does he ever answer? Does he ever come home? Never. Sometimes I would sneak out of bed at night, after Mom went to sleep. I would stand on the front porch, in the cold. So very, very cold. I remember looking into the darkness. I wanted my daddy back. I would do

anything to have my daddy back. But my daddy never came back.

The prayer over, people start to go forward for communion. There are tears on my face, I realize. I quickly wipe them away as the usher arrives at my row, and I join the line headed to the front of the church. Soon I find myself kneeling at the rail. The pastor, we call her Reverend Lisa, is coming down the line slowly. She's got the business-style short, cropped and straight haircut. If I didn't know better, I'd think maybe she was a lawyer and not a pastor. Even so, I think I'll go talk to her after the service. Her words are often the balm to my wounds which otherwise cannot be healed.

Reverend Lisa gives me the wafer and the bitter wine, but I'm not focused on it. I can't get the images of my father out of my head. We had good times together. Everything seemed so right. I'm back at the pew before I even realize it—my feet seem to do what they know without my intervention. Shortly after the service is over, Reverend Lisa and her assistants walk down the aisle as the recessional is sung. I don't sing along. Soon the church vacates. Small groups of two or three, sometimes four, people stay to chat. Always the same people. Always the same groups. My girlfriend, Sandy, is supposed to pick me up today as usual. She's often

late, though, so I figure I'll have time to talk to Reverend Lisa.

A quick scan of the parking lot confirms that Sandy is nowhere around. I should give her a call and let her know that I'll be talking to Reverend Lisa for a bit. Fortunately, I have my cell phone with me. I call the apartment, and after a few rings, she picks up.

“Yeah, hello,” she pants out, as if out of breath.

“Uh, it's me, Brian,” Did she just run a marathon or something?

“Yeah? Oh, yeah! I'll be right there!”

“No no, I'm going to chat with Reverend Lisa for a bit, I'll call you when I'm done, OK?”

“Uh, yeah...” I hear someone else there, in the background. But who would be there on a Sunday morning? “Yeah, uh, how long do you think you'll be?”

“Uh, twenty minutes? Were you planning to go somewhere?”

“No, not at all. Take your time,” she seems pretty happy with that last statement. “Call when you're done. Bye now.” Click.

“Call Ended” my phone informs me. I hold the phone in my hand for a moment. Something seemed very wrong about that call. Whatever. I

pocket the phone and head for Reverend Lisa's office.

"Have a seat, Brian. It's always good to see your face," Reverend Lisa greets me warmly.

"Thanks," I say.

"How are you doing?" she asks. She really cares too, not like some pastors I've known.

"OK, I suppose..." What can I say? That I miss my father? That my girlfriend is acting strange? Reverend Lisa waits for me to continue. "I don't know. I just don't feel right. I feel like everything's wrong."

"How so?"

"Like my girlfriend. I just called her, and there was someone there. Like something was going on. On a Sunday morning? And she never mentioned anything to me. Normally she tells me what she's up to." For some reason I'm getting carried away with this.

"OK, calm down. Rather than worry yourself over it, what if you just asked her?"

What can I say to that? "Yeah," I say weakly.

"We all have worries in life. We don't know how things will turn out, what will happen. You know that as well as anyone. But Jesus is always there for

us. We can always count on him,” she says in an assuring tone.

“Yeah,” I say, again weakly. How many times have I heard this? And what I am supposed to do about it? I want to ask her about Dad. But what can I say? Reverend Lisa cares, but how could words ever convey what I feel? “Well, thanks,” I say.

“Anytime,” she says. And so the meeting is over. I find myself once again outside her office, standing in the cold. Winter has certainly arrived.

I should call Sandy and have her pick me up, and quickly. I feel like it could start snowing any minute. Normally it’s not so cold around here. I make the call.

“Hello?” she answers.

“Hi, it’s me. Could I get a ride?”

“I’ll be right down.”

“Thanks.”

“Bye.” She hangs up. The apartment isn’t too far; if I wanted to, I could walk. Maybe I would if it wasn’t so cold out. Maybe I could make that a New Year’s resolution. It would certainly help me keep in shape. A few minutes pass, and the green car pulls into the parking lot. Sandy has always had this weird green sedan. I never liked it, but she seems to. She

pulls up, and I hop in the passenger seat. I look over at her beautiful brown, curly hair. Her green eyes don't sparkle as much as they usually do, and her smile seems somewhat lacking. She pulls out and we cover the short trip home in silence. The day passes uncomfortably, with sparse and awkward words between us. Finally, during dinner, I decide to break the ice.

“So, when I called this morning, it sounded like someone else was here.”

She looks up from her food. “What are you trying to say?”

“I'm just curious what was going on.”

She sets her fork down and straightens up. “If you must know, I had a friend over. Is that a problem?”

She seems more hostile than usual. “Uh, no, of course not. I mean, I was just curious.”

“Are you accusing me of something?”

Well, actually... “No, of course not.”

“Good.” She gives me a cold stare for a few seconds and then returns to eating.

I nibble a few bites. Something just doesn't seem right. After a few seconds, she looks up again.

“What?”

“I didn’t say anything,” I reply.

“You’re staring at me.”

Was I? “Sorry.” I look down at my food and try to continue eating.

She abruptly stands. “Don’t ‘Sorry’ me! First you accuse me of... of... something! And now you’re acting like a jerk because of I happened to have a friend over without getting your permission first! I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware I needed your permission!”

“You don’t...”

“I am not your property! You know, maybe, just maybe, if you were better in bed than ... than a sack of rotten potatoes, I wouldn’t have to!” She starts crying. “You’re so possessive! It’s like you own me! And when I want to feel good, it’s always no, it’s always your needs, your wants, and then you just chuck me aside like... like... like a piece of trash! You have no passion! No romance! You just... USE ME! Tom is so much more understanding...” she trails off into quiet sobs.

“Tom?” Now I’m standing too. “You cheating on me with my best friend? How could you?” She sobs and backs away, raising her arms slightly. I realize I’m still holding my fork, tightly clenched in my fist. A deep breath... I set the fork down.

“Look,” I huff, “I trusted you. And now you’re crying as if it’s all my fault!” What am I trying to

say? How is this possible? Why would Tom do something like this anyways? It doesn't make any sense!

For a moment, there is a tense silence, broken only by Sandy's breathing. I don't know what to do. I find myself grabbing my coat and heading for the door. "Where are you going?" she cries.

"I don't know," I say curtly as I close the door. The night is cold, very cold. I walk out clear of the building and stand in the darkness. My breath fogs heavily before me as silence embraces me. "Hello, darkness my old friend," I find myself quoting song lyrics from so long ago, "I've come to talk with you again..." It reminds me of a time when I was alone, so alone. I pause for a moment more, then head straight for the car. I soon find myself driving down the night road. The clouds have settled low, almost fog-like, and they obscure the streetlights. A pallid haze seems to cover the road, making visibility minimal. Where am I going? I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. Why would she cheat on me? It doesn't make any sense.

BEEP! The sound of a tinny horn startles me, suddenly there are headlights—they seem to right outside the window! I slam on the brakes and the car screeches loudly to a halt. What happened? I'm in the middle of an intersection, and my light is red. I didn't even notice! The other car veered off too,

looks like a little VW bug. The driver flips me off and pulls away. Maybe I should get off the road. Cindy lives near here, I'll drop by and talk to her. She's always been helpful in the past.

I soon pull into the driveway of Cindy's modest house. Light streams from the living room window, indicating that Cindy is home and awake. I hustle through the cold night, my every breath turning to fog instantly, and knock on the door. Seconds later, the door opens and there stands Cindy. A cute smile graces her face as the TV drones in the background. Her smile quickly vanishes. "What's wrong?" she says, standing aside so that I can come in. As I step through the door, she kills the TV with a remote.

"Everything," I shake my head, "Everything is wrong."

"You look really shaken up," she says as we sit down on her plush couch, "What happened?"

"Sandy..." With that one word, that name, all my fake machismo falls away. I begin to cry. Cindy watches me, but says nothing. Finally I regain control. "She cheated on me. With Tom! How could she? How could he?"

Cindy seems taken aback. "You, uh, walked in on them or what?"

"No," I shake my head, "She was acting strange and then she got all upset and defensive. Before I

knew it she was blurting out all this about Tom being a better lover and so on and so forth.”

For a moment, there is silence. I can tell that Cindy is at a loss for words. “I’m really sorry,” she whispers, barely audible. There’s not much else to be said. I sit down on the couch and curl up with the afghan covering it. Hours pass as I think about Sandy, about Tom. About life. What’s it all about, anyways?

Chapter 2

“Brian,” I hear a voice. What’s going on?

“Whu?” I’m on a couch. This is Cindy’s house. It suddenly comes back to me. “Oh... Yeah...” Light streams in through the window. “What time is it?” I mumble.

“About eight. I figured you probably need to go work, Monday and all that.” Cindy half-smiles back at me. She’s still troubled by the revelations of last night.

“Yeah,” I sit up, “Thanks.” Cindy nods and wanders off, leaving me alone. I walk slowly to the bathroom, and stare at my face in the mirror. I could use a shower, I could use a shave. I could use a life that doesn’t suck. Work started at eight, unfortunately. I debate for a moment just not showing up today, but I know that Mr. Budd depends on me. He’s a good guy, through and through. I owe it to him to show up.

I splash some water on my face, grab a banana from Cindy’s kitchen and put a fake smile on my face. Cindy gives me a half-wave and a weak smile as I leave her house. I don’t return the gesture; I just don’t have the energy.

I climb into the car and sit behind the wheel for a moment. Finally, I start the car and head toward

work. It's actually a nice day, for winter—sunny and not too cold. Last night's fog is nowhere to be seen, and work isn't too far away. The drive passes without incident, although last night's near collision compels me to drive carefully. I pull into the two story office building marked "Budd and Associates". I step out of the car, take a deep breath, reinforce my fake smile and walk toward the building. I'm twenty-three minutes late.

The door to the building is locked, and the lights are off. This is very unusual, but what can I do? I wait a couple minutes, and an old car pulls quickly into the parking lot. Mr. Budd jumps out. I'm just about to apologize for being late, but he's already talking.

"Sorry about this," he says, fumbling with his keys, "I got a flat tire on the freeway. I go to put on the spare, and guess what? It's flat too! I had to wait nearly a half hour for a tow truck." He drops the keys. "Oops!" Quickly, he grabs them again, and unlocks the door. "You're better at being on time than I am," he says. I smile knowingly.

The day is uneventful for the first couple hours, until Budd receives a call from an old friend dropping by in town. "Hey," he says, "I think we'll close at lunch today, how about that? That's the advantage of being the boss," he smiles, "you can close whenever you want. I'm going to go see

Robert, he's just in town for today." Lunchtime comes and we close up. Mr. Budd peels out. I notice one of the tires on his car is much newer than the other three, and I smile.

I start the car and sit, listening to the rough idle of the engine. It's lunch time, and I am kind of hungry. I could go home, and risk facing Sandy. Just to see her would ruin my whole day. Even thinking about that situation is enough. I don't know how I managed to put up with her for this long. I pull to the edge of street. Left or right? The big questions, I smirk, that dog our everyday existence. That reminds me of Aaron! I turn left, and start driving toward his place. Aaron is a cool guy; he's really relaxed, mostly because of his weed habit, and he's always going off about the big questions. I chuckle, remembering him describing the origin of universe while totally stoned once. It is the middle of the day, but he's not exactly big on working, so he'll probably be home.

I pull into Aaron's driveway. The front lawn needs mowing, the paint is peeling and one of the screen door hinges has broken off again. Aaron always says he'll take care of things "soon". I hike over the weeds up to the front door and knock, and wait. I don't hear any noise from inside, but his old beater truck is here, so he is probably at home. I try the door, and it unlocked. No big surprise there.

Aaron's living room is a cluttered mess of plates and old food, cups and paper. "Aaron?" I call out, "It's Brian!" Silence. Well, maybe he's not at home. I wander into the kitchen. Dishes piled in the sink, and on the counter. Various amounts of half-eaten food on them. I dare not open the fridge; what horrors may lay within I cannot imagine. I shudder, and turn away. I head for the hallway toward Aaron's bedroom. In fact, there's Aaron, standing in the doorway. "Hey Aaron!" I call out.

Aaron does not reply. He doesn't react at all. My stomach twists into a knot. "Aaron?" I query into the silence. I step closer. Aaron's feet dangle six inches from floor, a tie around his neck knotted firmly to a pull-up bar mounted in the doorway. Hollow and lifeless eyes stare at me. I scream, but there is no sound. His eyes stare at me. I am on trial, the judge pounds his gavel. I see Aaron sitting with my father as the prosecution. They stare at me with empty, lifeless eyes. The judge pounds the gavel again.

"Have you reached a verdict?" He calls out.

My father slowly stands up, like a zombie. "We have, Your Honor," he intones. I try to speak, to call out to him, but I cannot. I realize I am bound and gagged. Unable to move. Unable to speak. "We find the defendant," he continues, "guilty on all counts." The judge pounds the gavel.

I'm on the floor, my face is wet. I manage to sit up, although my muscles hurt. It looks like I passed out and threw up on myself, maybe not in that order. Suddenly I remember—where am I, and what happened here? Was it a dream? I raise my eyes slowly, and they meet the dangling figure of Aaron, still staring back at me. I shudder, and stand. I find myself at the phone, calling 911.

“911 emergency,” the dispatcher answers.

“My friend hung himself,” I find myself saying mechanically, “I found him, I'm at his house now.”

“What's the address, please?” the dispatcher asks. She doesn't seem to be concerned that Aaron is gone. I tell her the address. “Thank you, we have an officer on the way,” she replies. I hang up. Time passes, it seems like an eternity. Finally, a patrol car rolls into the driveway. I meet the officer at the door.

“You have a suicide situation here?” he asks.

“Yes sir, my friend Aaron hung himself, inside,” he follows me in and to the hallway. He inspects Aaron's body for a few minutes, and then talks on the radio.

“OK, son, I just need to ask you a few questions,” he says to me. I nod. “Did you touch or handle the body in any way?”

“No sir,” I reply.

“Good. Before today, when was the last time someone talked to or saw Aaron?” he asks. I ponder. When was it?

“It has been a while since I last talked to him; other people, I don’t know,” I say.

He makes some notes on a pad, and collects my name, address and phone number. “OK,” he says, “Well, you’re free to go. We’ll take care of things here. I’ll call you if we need to talk to you again.”

“Thanks,” I say. For what? I wander outside. The day has stretched into afternoon, and a cold breeze cuts across the yard. The barren trees waft lightly. Everything seems a little colder, a little darker. I walk down the street. Slowly... Slowly... The cracked concrete guides me silently through the cold barrenness. I sit on the curb, accompanied only by my tears and the cold winter breeze.

Some time later, I arise. Where should I go? I think I’ll go talk to Reverend Lisa, maybe she has some helpful words. I drive down to the church, and sure enough, the light is on in Reverend Lisa’s office. I knock on the door.

“Come in,” she calls from inside. I open the door and walk in. She looks at me and frowns, “You don’t look so good. What happened?”

I collapse into a chair and shake my head. “It’s all... everything is falling apart.” I can feel tears

welling up, and I try to suppress them. “First, my girlfriend cheated on me. Now Aaron is dead!”

“OK, slow down,” she consoles, “You’ve talked about Aaron before. What happened to him? An accident?”

“No, no,” unable to restrain the tears, I begin to cry, “he hung himself.”

Reverend Lisa shifts in her chair, and pauses for a moment. She takes my hand. “I’m sorry all this is happening to you. It’s not your fault that Sandy cheated on you. It’s not your fault that Aaron died. You need to realize that. Both of them were acting selfishly in what they did. It’s not your fault.”

Her words echo in my head, “It’s not your fault.” They mingle with the words of my father, in the courtroom, “Guilty on all counts.” Guilty. Innocent. I don’t even know what those words mean anymore. “I don’t know,” I choke out, “I don’t know why Aaron would... would do that.”

“We can never truly understand what someone else is feeling,” she says softly, “Did he perhaps leave a letter?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper. I didn’t really get very close to him, I didn’t search around.

“Just remember,” she says, “It’s not your fault. And no matter what happens, God always loves you. He will always be there for you.” Our Father...

A while later, I find myself sitting at a table in a greasy fast food joint. A half eaten burger sits on the table, but I'm not hungry anymore. Why am I here? Where am I going? I could go home, to... what? To Sandy? Maybe Tom would be there too. I wouldn't want to interrupt their bliss. Oh no, can't have that. I could just sit here until they kick me out. Sleep in the car, just waste away until I die. I could go to Aaron's house, and hang myself in his place. That would be a fitting end, a solution to all of these pains.

I leave the burger on the table and walk into the cold. The sun setting reveals a tapestry of reds and purples. Red, like blood. Purple, like bruises. Like pain. Like suffering. Like sadness. I drive to Aaron's house. The other cars are like mice all around me, I simply ignore them and they scatter. I arrive at Aaron's house. No one is around; apparently the cops did what they needed to do and left. There's no sign of anything out of the ordinary. As I walk toward the door, the breeze feels especially cold. The sun has set, but the moon is bright. The bare trees create a silhouette in the moonlight; they seem to be towering overhead, coming closer at every step.

Will the door be locked? I turn the knob, and the door swings open. Inside, an inky darkness fills the house. The trees rustle and creak. I glance around,

but no one is here. Inside, I turn on the light. A dim overhead bulb casts marginal illumination around the messy living room. The shadows seem to fight back, repelling the light. I make my way into the kitchen, and then toward the bedroom, turning on lights as I go. In the door-frame, Aaron is gone. The tie is gone. The pull-up bar, anchored to the door-frame, remains. The whole scene is surreal; I feel like I'm not even here. Like a puppet, pulled on strings to and fro, I go from hurt to hurt, and I'm powerless to stop it.

Inside Aaron's room, a jumble of debris faces me. Did the police search his room? Or maybe he just left it really messy. I start digging through his things. Here's a photo of him and I, and here, an old high school yearbook. I start searching the desk; perhaps there is a note, or at least something to explain why he did this. I search for a while, finding random trinkets and papers, none of which cast any light on what really happened, or why. Finally, having completed an inspection of his desk, dresser and most of his closet I sit on the bed.

The comforter covering the bed drapes down onto the floor. Maybe he put something under his bed? I climb down onto the floor and lift up the comforter. Sure enough, a wooden box with a lock on it! The box isn't too big, but it's locked with a nice combination lock. So much for finding a key. I

play with the box for a bit; it seems quite sturdy. I should just leave it, let his parents deal with it. But I'm compelled to open it; I must open it.

A quick trip to the garage yields a crowbar and a hammer. But I hesitate. The wooden box is well crafted, polished and stained a rich dark brown, and carved with intricate patterns. To destroy it would be a horrible shame. Compulsion is no kind master, and my arguments are soon laid aside. I jam the crowbar under one of the latches and pry. Shortly, the nails come loose and the latch falls off. The hammer wasn't even necessary.

I open the box. The inside is covered with soft, purple velvet. A single item sits on the bottom, like a boulder in the middle of a lake: a book, bound with a dark and heavy cover. The edges of the pages look yellow and brittle. I slowly lift it out. It seems to weigh more than I could have imagined. The cover is embossed with an intricate pattern, which seems somewhat hypnotic. There is no title on the front, nor on the side. I open to the first page.

“This is the Book of the Dead, and the Book of the Living; the Book of Rising and of Falling.” Interesting title. Underneath it, in smaller letters, “Who can withstand the Power and the Glory within?” The power and the glory... What kind of book is this? Why did Aaron keep it locked in such a fancy box? I heft the book in my hands. I should

put it away, and leave. Go home, and see Sandy. She is surely worried sick by now. But no, I have to stay. I have to keep reading. I have to understand what drove Aaron to this horrible end. Outside, the trees creak in a sudden breeze, and one of the branches brushes against the house.

The next page bears a short poem, “Far beyond this mortal land, where life and death do meet, vanquished monuments do stand, and crumble beneath my feet. Monuments pay tribute, as much as stone can do, to the Palace of our Master, whom through this tome lives new.” Beyond that, without introduction or contents, the book launches into discourse. The words, describing creatures, rituals, incantations and events too fantastic to be real, compel me to continue reading. Punctuating these tales are symbols and graphs, the likes of which I have never laid eyes on before, and although I do not comprehend them, they terrify me. And as I read, the words “Who can withstand the Power and the Glory” echo, as if between mountains, in my mind. The tree branches scrape against the house again.

Chapter 3

Sunlight streams through the window, and I squint. Turning away from the brightness, I open my eyes. Aaron... Yes, I'm at Aaron's, laying on his bed, surrounded by his junk. I sit up, and my back complains achingly. I must have slept in a weird position. My eyes fall on the book, laying closed next to me on the bed. I should leave it here, with the rest of his stuff. It's really not mine, and it was obviously a prized possession. I bite my lip. Who cares anyways? It's just a stupid book babbling on about incoherent things. I grab the book and head out the door.

As I close the door, the brightness of the sun and the coldness of the air bombard me. My breath instantly turns to a cloud as I exhale, and I watch as it floats away, breaking apart and dissolving into nothingness. Such a poignant simile to my life lately. I hustle to the car, and with some effort, manage to get it started. I put the book under the passenger seat. That should be a safe place for it. Not like it really matters, of course. I wonder absentmindedly if Sandy is upset that I disappeared with her car for two days. Well, she has no right to be upset, after what she did to me. I start driving home. What will I say to her? What will she say to me? Maybe she moved out, moved in with Tom. The apartment

could be empty. She might have even sold all my things. What a punk.

I pull into the apartment complex, and step out of the car. I can't let Sandy know I have the book, so I leave it under the seat. I can get it later tonight. I walk up to the door, take a deep breath, and go inside.

Sandy jumps up from the couch. "Where the hell have you been?" she yells.

"I..."

"And you took my car! It's a good thing I can walk to work!"

"I..."

"You need to get control of yourself! You can't just walk out on someone like that!"

I need to stop the conversation. "Aaron's dead," I interject. Sandy falls silent. "He hung himself," I add.

"Look," she says, "I'm sorry for cheating on you. Maybe it has just been a tough week for both of us?"

"You're sorry for cheating on me? How convenient. Maybe you should have thought of that before you did it!"

"Look! I am trying to extend a hand to you, your friend fucking killed himself, and all you can do is

bitch and moan at me? I'm trying to help you!" She bursts into tears. "Fuck you! I hate you!" Slam! Suddenly there is silence, broken only by muffled sobs coming through the bedroom door.

I should let her calm down, and then apologize. But you know what? I'm sick of this crap. This is her fault. This is all her fault. I rummage through the cabinets and find some breakfast. Bran cereal. Cold milk, slightly sour. Bitter orange juice. What a wonderful life.

I eat some of the cereal, maybe half a bowl. It's just so nasty. I dump the rest down the drain. I can still hear Sandy; she's still crying, or at least making a good show of it. I sit back in the chair. Normally on a Tuesday I would be at work, screening Mr. Budd's calls. I called him this morning to tell him about Aaron. I was going to ask just for the morning off to get myself together, but before I asked, he told me to take the rest of the week off, without concern. It's kind of sad, I smirk, when your boss seems like the only friend you have.

The bedroom door is still closed, but beyond I can hear only silence. I pause for a moment, then head for the door. Cracking it open, I peek in. Sandy is laying on the bed reading a book. I open the door and she looks up at me.

"Yes?" She says, sounding annoyed.

“I... uh... I just wanted to see how you were doing.” One hundred percent on the lameness meter there. I smack myself. Nice move, Brian. Nice move...

“Good for you,” she quips. “You insult me, yell at me, and then come to see how I’m doing? How do you fucking think I’m doing? You think I want to see your ugly face? That’s just like you too! You’re such a loser. You think you’re cool, you think you’re all that. You know what, you’re not.” She throws her book off to the side of the room. “Why are you even here, staring at me? What do you want from me, compassion? You’re like a lost puppy. You can’t take care of yourself and you just mooch off everyone else.”

I stand, dumbfounded, in the doorway. What could I possibly say to that? She sighs, collects her book and returns to reading. I leave her be, and move toward the living room. I hesitate for a moment. This could be a good time to bring the book in. Sandy would never notice. I slip out to the car, grab the book from under the seat and bring it in. Where to put it? My head scans to and fro. Ah, the seldom used kitchen drawer. Inside, an old phone book and some wires. I slip the book in. She’ll never know. Feeling smug in my accomplishment, I retreat to the living room and watch some boring TV. That evening, Sandy still

won't communicate with me. I make some food for myself. If she doesn't want to acknowledge me, then I can just ignore her too. Two can play at this game. She doesn't seem to mind, and gets her own food from the fridge.

“What are you trying to do?” I break the silence, “Are you trying to punish me for pointing out your own problems? You need to get a hold of yourself. Maybe you should consider apologizing for fucking my best friend. You know, that hurt.”

She looks at me. “Fuck off,” she quips, and abruptly leaves the room. What's her problem? After several more hours of silent separation, I head to bed. She immediately rolls away and faces the far wall. I'm too tired to deal with her little games right now, so I just sleep.

I wake up, surrounded by darkness and silence. The clock reads 2:35. Sandy is breathing softly next to me; I can tell that she's asleep. I get up, walk into the kitchen and pour a glass of water. My eyes fall on the drawer with the book. With the moonlight streaming in through the windows, I open the drawer and remove the book. The embossed cover seems to glow. Inside, the strange title greets me again. “The Power and Glory,” I mutter aloud from the subtitle. What could that mean?

The first discourse is some kind of discussion between a father and his son regarding angels,

wisdoms and deep secrets. The writing is archaic, and difficult to follow. The yellow paper, combined with the moonlight and faded ink, make reading a slow task. I read until my eyes hurt and my vision is so blurred that I can no longer make out the letters on the page. I put the book back into the drawer carefully. Nearly an hour has passed, and I return silently to bed and sleep. The glass of water sits in silence, forgotten, next to the sink.

In the morning, Sandy's attitude is changed. "I'm sorry about last night. I wasn't really myself. Maybe it's that time of month." She weakly smiles, unsure how this olive branch will be received. I smile back. She starts to giggle, and embraces me. "I'm so sorry," she says. We embrace warmly for a moment.

Sandy leaves for work, and for lack of anything else to do, I dig through my old photographs. Pictures of mom, dad, and me. Together. A family. What a foreign concept. I start to cry again.

After dad left, mom was never the same anymore. She was so happy before that. But afterward, she was quiet. Always quiet. Except sometimes, at night when she thought I was asleep, I could hear her crying. She wanted daddy back too. We got by, in time; friends helped us financially, but it was never the same. The next year, on the anniversary of dad's departure, I came home from school to find my mom had slit her wrists. She was just there, on the

kitchen floor. There was blood everywhere, so much blood. I don't remember what I did, I must have called 911. I remember the police, the ambulance, the neighbors. So many noises, so many people. But none of them were daddy. None of them were mommy.

What can I do? Who can I call? Normal people would do what? Call mom, maybe. Or call dad. Or call a friend. Yeah, that's great. That's real helpful. Who do I have left? Tom the cheater? Like I'd ever want to talk to him again. I have Sandy, maybe. There's Reverend Lisa, but you know, the more I think about it the more I wonder if she really cares at all. There's Cindy. As nice as she is, I just get the feeling she doesn't understand me. Aaron understood. But now he's gone.

Damn it, why does everyone have to die? Do they really hate me that much? I'm in the kitchen, my hands are closed on a steak knife. I could join them, finish this circle and be done with it.

No, I just have to hang in there. I set the knife down. Something will come up. This could be an opportunity—some time off to relax before starting work again. Always look on the bright side, right? I suddenly realize how bored I am. What do people do when they aren't working? Nothing seems inviting. Maybe I'll just sit here and hope a freak asteroid hits the apartment and kills me.

Sandy comes home that evening, we eat dinner, make meaningless small talk, and go to bed. Again I wake up in the deep of the night and read more from the book, although its contents remain a mystery. Some compulsion drives me, relentless, to keep digging, searching for an answer in a tome whose mysteries are more bizarre than I could ever understand. The week progresses slowly, each day a mirror image of the last, identical except for a little more grime and dirt covering the walls, the floor, and even my life. I feel this dreadful malaise, as if someone malevolent was playing with me, like a rat in a maze. Except that for me, I can see no exit, and no cheese.

Saturday morning I decide to return to Aaron's house. I tell myself it is to look again for any clues he might have left behind. But I feel that already I have grown distant and calloused from his death; he lingers in my mind only as a faint memory, almost a fiction. I drive across town, a damp cloudiness tempering the winter cold, and arrive at Aaron's house.

"For Sale," the sign in the front yard reads. His parents must be moving quickly to liquidate his things. I feel sad. Aaron is taken from me, and they feel the right to take whatever is left? How will I remember him? The front door is locked, but peering through the windows reveals an empty house,

bare in every way. All of Aaron's things, down to the furniture and posters on the wall, are gone. The house is nothing more than a shell now, a construct of wood and brick that has been robbed of meaning.

That night, I watch Sandy as she sleeps. With every breath, her chest rises and falls. To think, I used to be excited about even being near her. I used to be excited about seeing her, touching her. I used to be excited about life. What do I have left? What do I have to live for?

Chapter 4

Sunday morning, I get up at the insistence of the alarm clock. Every Sunday I do this; every Sunday I get up and go to listen to Reverend Lisa. Every Sunday is the same. The same service, the same hurt, the same pain. Yet I keep going, driven by ... what? Another unseen compulsion? Perhaps free will is an illusion—perhaps life is merely a collection of compulsions. I wake up Sandy. “Mmh?” she mummurs.

“Church,” I whisper, “I need a ride.”

“Mmm,” she replies. Groggily, she gets up, throws on a decent robe and off we go. I get out at church and she drives off. She’s probably heading straight back to bed.

Some of the congregation are gathered in cliques around the front of the church. Every week: the same people, the same cliques. Like at a high school party, only with less innuendo and loud music. I sit in the back and wait. The figures in stained glass stare down at me, like an audience watching a show. And really, is this anything more than a show? I look around, watch people as they come in, walking with their gossip groups.

Eventually, the service begins. We all stand up for the processional. Reverend Lisa smiles at me as she

walks by... or maybe I just imagined that she did? The service proceeds: we sit, we stand, we kneel. We listen, we recite, we repeat. At one point, an offering plate is passed around. It comes to me, but I pass it without opening my wallet. Why should I? This charade is hardly worth watching. I don't even know why I'm here. Can they bring back Aaron? Can they fix things with Sandy? What about...

“And now, as our savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say,” Reverend Lisa calls out. Oh no. Not again. I can already feel that this time will be worse than the last. They torture me! They drag me in here and flaunt eternal life, and they rub my mommy and my daddy in my face! What did I do to deserve this? Soon the prayer is past, and Reverend Lisa calls the peace. That's the sign for the cliques to start gossiping again. It's like they need a fix, so we interrupt the service so people can gossip. Unbelievable.

“Peace be with you!” the man calls out as he grasps my hand. He's not looking at me; he wants to get back to his clique. He shakes my hand merely as perfunctory gesture. How can he possibly care? He doesn't even know me. More people come up; men, women, all of them quickly passing me by so they can be with their friends, in their comfort zone.

“Peace of the Lord be with you.”

“Good to see you this morning.”

“Peace.”

And so on and so forth. Finally everyone returns to their places, except one man I haven't seen before. He stands short and wiry, with the blackest hair I've ever seen, and eyes to match. He has been watching me this whole time... why? He grasps my hand in a calm, yet quick manner. His hand is cool to the touch, almost as if he wasn't really here. “May the Power and the Glory be with you,” he says with a coy smile. Before I can even respond, he's moved away and returned to his seat. I'm left, speechless, holding my hand out. Did he really say that? Perhaps I misheard. Yes, that must be it.

The service proceeds, and I keep an eye on the strange man. He doesn't go to the rail for communion, simply waiting in the pews instead. The more I watch him, the more I'm sure I haven't seen him before. Surely I would have remembered him? He could be new of course. But what about the greeting? It could be a coincidence. Besides, no one knows I have the book, certainly not some random person I've never seen before.

Reverend Lisa gives the benediction, and then as the recessional begins, I notice the man slip out the door. I pause, but decision seems to be made for me. I dart after him, turning a few heads nearby at my quick departure at such a rude moment. Out in the parking lot, I see the man climb into an older

sedan. I stop and he turns to look at me. A moment passes, and then he motions at me through the window. I walk to the car. “What am I doing?” I whisper silently to myself as I open the passenger door and climb in. He starts the engine and we pull out of the parking lot.

He drives smoothly, taking turns unfamiliar to me. Before long, I have no clue where we are. The road and scenery are completely unfamiliar. A sneak a glance toward him. What if he’s taking me out to the woods to kill me or something? I could ask him to stop the car, but that would be like a sign of weakness. And what if he says no? Then what do I do? I’m ringing my fingers. Now I’ve given myself away. He knows I’m nervous. He knows he has the upper hand. Why did I ever get in this car?

“Been having a rough week?” his voice breaks the silence like a shot. I jump, constrained by the seat belt. What’s he talking about? I immediately think of Aaron, of Sandy, of my life. But he doesn’t know about those things—I’ve never even met this guy before today. Hell, I don’t even know his name! What should I say? Better to be non-committal. He’s probably grasping at straws.

“Uh, sort of, not too bad though,” I stammer.

“Not too bad?” he glances over at me with a smile. “I would hate to see your definition of a bad week then.” My skin shivers as my body tenses.

What did that mean? Surely he couldn't know? Or maybe he does... Ah, I get it. I bet he's one of Aaron's friends or relatives.

"You uh, knew Aaron?" I venture.

"I did. His death was ... unfortunate," the man expresses no emotion or inflection with his choice of words. A moment of silence passes.

"Friend or, uh, family?" I ask.

"Acquaintance," he replies matter of factly, "but I'm not here to discuss Aaron." Again he glances at me. "I'm here to discuss you."

"Me? What about me?"

"I know what you've been through, I know what you've been feeling," he looks over at me, "I know of your long nights reading a certain book." My skin turns to ice. There's no way anybody could know about that. Nobody even knew I had the book! Nobody!

"How... How did you know about that? That's my book!" I'm surprised to find anger in my voice.

He laughs. "And before you it belonged to Aaron, and once you're gone someone else will find it." Immediately my anger with replaced by the earlier fear. I notice that we have left that city and are driving on a winding road. Bare trees arch over the road with intimidating branches, and small stone

obelisks line the sides of the road. I don't recall having ever been here before. I think I would have remembered it.

"What do you mean?" I ask timidly. I imagine myself ending up like Aaron, or worse.

"The book has served its purpose with you," he answers cryptically.

"What?"

"Changes have already taken place. You are not the same person you were last week. Today, you can receive our message."

"What message?"

He pauses for a moment. "There is a warehouse at the intersection of 15th and Denver," he states.

"Yeah," I reply, "I think I've seen it before."

"Be there tonight at ten."

"What!?" Surely he doesn't just expect me to show up at some abandoned building in the middle of the night.

"It's your choice. The book won't get any clearer and you'll always wonder what you passed up on. What you missed. What you left behind," he leans closer to me. "What I'm offering you," he whispers, "is the chance of a lifetime." He straightens up and speaks normally, "Choose wisely."

I realize the car is stopped, right in front of my apartment. I open the door in a daze and step out, closing it behind me. As I turn toward him, he speeds off without a word. I'm left, standing in the cool air in front of the building. I shake my head. What the hell is happening to me? Is my life some kind of movie now? How many more people are observing me just like he is? I didn't even catch his name, and he already knows so much about me. Even, I realize as I start toward the building, where I live.

"I was worried when you didn't call," Sandy says as I enter the apartment. "You normally call."

"I, uh, got another ride." What else can I say?

She eyes me suspiciously. "I see."

The afternoon progresses slowly. I pace nervously, unable to free my mind from the images and words of the strange man from earlier today. I don't even know his name, but he seems to know everything about me. Should I go, tonight, to the warehouse? Or should I stay here? I could pretend I never met him. But what if he comes back next week? What do I do then? Maybe I could take someone with me tonight? But no, that wouldn't be a good idea.

Sandy notices my brooding behavior, but she stays clear, observing with a concerned eye. I eat dinner lifelessly, stewing even more intensely.

“What’s wrong?” Sandy finally asks, “You haven’t been acting normal all day. I’m sorry for what happened last Sunday.” She takes my hands, “I hope we can work it out.”

“It’s OK,” I murmur, “It’s not you.”

“Then what is it?” She asks. But I just pull away.

“I’m, uh, heading out now,” I stammer through a dry mouth.

Her eyes drip with anxiety and concern. “How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t know,” I shake my head, “I don’t know.”

~ || ~

The

Power

and the

Glory

Chapter 5

Rain pelts the windshield as I drive into the older part of town. Sandy watched me leave and walk out the door without even kissing her goodbye. She seemed to know that something was about to change; I even saw her start to cry as I left. The sensible thing? The sensible thing to do would have been to return; turn around and go back to the apartment. But I am compelled—by what, I cannot say, to go forward. The darkness and rain swirl in my headlights, creating specters and illusions. I drive slowly as I enter the unlit section of town. Shady characters lean in the darkness against boarded up buildings. I drive slowly, watching the street signs. 13th... 14th... 15th, this is it.

I pull in to a spot next to the warehouse. No lights are on that I can see, and nobody seems to be around. Should I just leave the car here? It's almost guaranteed to be stolen. And it's not even my car. What will Sandy think? Well, I don't really have a choice. I turn off the car and listen for a moment to the rain pelting the roof. Taking a deep breath, I open the door and step out.

The rain hits hard on my thin coat. Almost sleet... or hail. I move quickly to the door. The old rickety door is graced with a faded "No Trespassing" sign. Should I knock? Just let myself in? Or maybe now

would be a good time to leave. I turn to head back to the car as the door opens. The strange man stands in the doorway. “There you are,” he says, “We’ve been waiting for you.” I step inside, and he closes the door behind me.

The warehouse is large, extending into the darkness in every direction. I can hear the rain on the roof somewhere above me. Candles provide the only illumination, filling my vision with dim shapes and eerie shadows. A chill runs down my spine. I can see at least ten people, there could be more in the darkness. Each of them is only a vague shape—it is impossible to determine anything about them. The man leads me forward, and most of the other people gather near us. I can make out the dark robes those standing next to me are wearing. One figure breaks from the group and stands behind a candle lit altar.

“Those who oppose us,” a female voice speaks from behind the altar, “are blind, without guidance, without path. Our power grows, and their power weakens. Night by Night the prophecy is fulfilled; night by night the energies shift. He who would enslave us weakens, his deception fails. Lies are no longer seen for truth, and truth no longer for lies,” she finishes with a note of triumphant. The room falls silent, save the pattering of rain on the roof.

I lean to man next to me, “This is kind of weird,” I whisper, “So, uh, I think I’ll just be going now. I mean, if that’s OK.” The man does not respond. He doesn’t even appear to have heard me. I don’t want to say it louder, then others might hear it. Maybe I could just make a break for the door? I can’t see it, but I think it’s behind me. The women standing behind the altar raises her hands in the air.

“Alsi ku nushi ilani mushiti!” she calls out. With barely a breath, her voice continues in unbroken ecstatic calls, filled with words and phrases that mean nothing. Even so, they sound somewhat familiar. I think I have read things like this in the book. I didn’t understand it then either. As she continues, I feel a tingling sensation. Enough of this, it’s time to go!

I try to turn, but my body doesn’t respond. My feet seem glued to the floor. I try to move my arm and fail. I try to scream, but nothing comes out! I am frozen, covered in a tingling which holds me prisoner. Louder and louder the woman cries out. Are we all frozen? What does she plan to do with us? The man next to me looks over at me. He can move! I can barely breath, my vision is constricted. I feel nothing but raw fear. The voice of the woman is distorted, she sounds like an evil clown on a scratchy record.

Just as the terror can't possibly get any worse, the woman finishes with a final cry. A cloud of darkness forms above the altar, obscuring the candle light. The fear is almost gone, it's beyond reality. This must be a dream. A hallucination. The cloud emits words, like those spoken by the woman earlier. But it doesn't matter, it's just a dream. The cloud then moves over each person, speaking to them in turn in this strange language. Soon it is three people away, then two, then it is next to me. Now the fear has returned. What if this is not a dream?

The cloud settles directly above me. My vision blurs and I feel light headed. No words are spoken. Some time passes; a second, a minute, maybe more. The cloud moves on and speaks to the rest of the people in turn. Finally, the cloud returns to its original place above the altar. The woman speaks with it in a low voice, and then calls out again in that crazy tongue. After a short time, the cloud disappears.

The group disperses into the darkness, even the man who met me, and soon I stand alone. The woman remains at the altar. She looks up at me. "Brian," she says, "follow me." How does she know my name? But before I can even think of it, she's walking into the darkness. I should leave now, while I have the chance. But like a dream, I follow, into

the darkness, walking beside her. “Why are you here?” she asks.

“I... I don’t know. I mean, this guy talked to me and told me to come here.”

“Which guy?”

“I don’t know his name. He’s short, with black hair, black eyes. He met me at church.”

“You attend church regularly?”

“Yeah, every Sunday. Well, just about.”

“Why?”

“Um...” What kind of question is that? “Well, I just do.”

“Do you believe in it?”

“In what?”

“In the things the church teaches,” she glances over at me, but her cadence is uninterrupted.

“I guess so.”

“What happened here tonight?” She asks.

“Hey, you tell me. That was some freaky shit.”

We walk in silence for a few seconds. “My name is Shyndia, by the way,” she says.

“I’m Brian. But, uh, I guess you already knew that.”

She smiles. “I know many things. Including,” she glances at me purposefully, “that you are someone special. Someone with potential.”

“Potential for what?”

“To change the world, to form the future, you know, all that stuff.”

“What are you talking about?”

“There is more at work in the world than most people know. There are spiritual powers available to those who can accept them.”

“Like you?”

“Like me. And many others. This is what I am talking about. You have the potential to be a great conduit for spiritual power.”

“What makes you believe that?”

“The visionary told me.”

“Visionary?”

“The cloud you saw. It is a spirit inspired by our master,” she replies.

“This all sounds pretty weird. I’m a Christian you know. This kind of stuff is like sorcery or witchcraft or something.”

“The Bible would tend to agree with you,” she nods.

“So you worship the devil?”

“Who is the devil?”

“What?”

She smiles. “You have many questions. You have seen proof that there is more to life than your boring existence. There is more than sitting in church every Sunday, worshiping a Father who never appears. With the powers you could develop, you might even be able to find your father. Your real father, not some sky fairy.”

“So what’s the catch? I have to sell my soul? Become condemned for life?”

“I am a high priestess, trained by the Grand Sorceress herself. She lives alone, secluded, rarely seeing others. People join us and train for years without seeing her face to face. The only interaction they get is through the visionary inspired with her messages. She knew you were coming tonight. She has planned this for you in particular from the beginning. She asked you to be brought here so that she could evaluate you more closely.”

“So this whole thing was... an evaluation?”

“The Grand Sorceress liked what she saw. We leave tonight to go to her castle. You will come with us,” she adds with a note of finality.

“Whoa, whoa, what?” Go with them to meet some crazy old lady? “I’m not going anywhere. I don’t know you! I don’t know anyone here! I don’t know this lady you’re talking about either!”

“I understand your uncertainty. Think about what you have seen. She can answer your questions. She can offer you a new hope.”

I mull silently for a moment. The silence is filled by the sound of the rain running off the roof. I should stay here. But why? What is left for me here? “Indeed,” she says, “What is left for you here?”

“You can read my mind,” I answer suspiciously.

“Not always, only when it’s obvious.”

“How can do you that? You don’t even know me.”

“If you have the potential that the Grand Sorceress claims, and there is no reason to think otherwise, then these things are but a glimpse of what you will be able to do. “

“Just take and eat,” I answer bitterly, “And I will be like God?”

She pauses, her step faltering for a mere moment. “An apt analogy,” she replies shortly.

I shake my head. “I can’t accept this. I won’t sell my soul for some crazy ability to summon demons and read people’s minds.”

“Yet you read the book. You accepted the ride. You came here tonight. Why?”

What do I say to that?

“You are compelled,” she continues, “in this way. Forces more powerful than you, more powerful than me are shaping what is happening. If God owns your soul, then wouldn’t he be looking out for it?”

“Well, maybe he is... In some way...”

“The tide is changing,” she says, “Now, you are uncertain. But you will learn and see the truth. This is no less than true freedom I offer you. Freedom to be without constriction. Without binding.”

“Well, uh... What about Sandy? What about my bills and things I have to take care of?”

“Do you know,” Shyndia answers angrily, “What Sandy is doing right now?”

I hesitate. This is not a road I want to pursue. “Uh, no.”

“She’s fucking Tom on the kitchen counter.”

“Why should I believe you?” I snap at her, “Sandy told me she wouldn’t do anything with him anymore, that she was sorry. I have no reason to believe you!”

“I don’t mean to hurt you,” she says quietly, “But you know what I’m saying is true. There is nothing for you here. Your life is a dump, a refuse heap. Nothing good will come of it here. But there is a way. If you don’t come with us, you will always regret it. You will always wonder what you could have been, what you could have done, what happiness you could have had. You will spend your life being cheated on, being hurt, being taken advantage of and watching your friends leave you or die. You will stand,” she says finally, “alone.”

I quickly brush a tear from my eye, not wanting to show any weakness. “Alright,” I reply, “I’ll go with you. But I’m not promising anything! Not to stay with you or to do anything you say!”

“That is all I ask,” she replies.

Chapter 6

A few more steps find us at the edge of the warehouse, next to a dimly lit door. She opens it, and we step out into the rain. We stand in an alley, rain pouring down onto us. A van waits with several people, including the strange man, already inside. Shyndia opens the door and, after a moment's hesitation, I climb in. The door closes with a resounded clunk. I feel like I've sentenced myself to some kind of prison, and that the gate has just been closed. Shyndia climbs into the driver's seat, starts the van and pulls out.

Rain drops on the windows reflect the lights which weakly pierce the night around us. They pass quickly as Shyndia makes a number of turns down roads unfamiliar to me. Soon, we are beyond the city and in the blackness of the countryside. The van's headlights are dim, providing barely enough illumination to see the road. The rain continues to fall heavily, streaming off the windshield and back across the windows. I stare out the window next to me, through the rain, my eyes desperately clawing for any light, even a candle by the road. But there is only darkness.

What road could this be, with no houses or lights of any kind? I realize now that I haven't seen any other traffic since we left the city. Around me, my

companions sit in absolute silence, making no noise or speech; nor even a gesture. The hum of the engine running steadily mixes with the sound of heavy, fat raindrops pounding the windshield. The white noise of tires on the slick pavement combines with the motion of the van to act as lull. Beyond that, there is only silence.

I look at my watch: eleven fifteen. It doesn't seem to have been that long, but then things happened quickly. Time passes, the road continues, the rain continues, the silence continues. Even now, the outside is shrouded in darkness. I lean back against the seat and the steady hum rocks me away from consciousness.

In my dreams I see vague shapes and images; they clarify like a camera coming into focus: a woman, extending her hand to me. A horse galloping in the darkness. A man, walking with a cane. And into darkness my vision fades. I awake suddenly, to what I do not know. Rain continues to pelt the windshield, silence and darkness likewise are undisturbed. I discreetly glance at my watch: three in the morning. About four hours now, at highway speeds? We could be anywhere. But it looks more like we're nowhere. What kind of highway has no lights? No traffic? What the hell is going on here?

But even beyond my wonder, the ultimate dullness and soft noise returns me to sleep; wherein

my dreams again feature this woman beckoning toward me, always approaching but never reaching me. She speaks, but I can't hear her words. I try to call out to her, but my voice is also silenced. There are images and feelings I can't quite seem to comprehend. I reach out, but they seem even further away. Now it's all a blur, and slowly the dream breaks apart.

Wham! I wake suddenly as the van bucks through potholes in a dirt road. Sunlight streams through the windows and hurts my eyes. Amazingly, not a single cloud remains in the sky. The van continues to rock through potholes. We're definitely out in the country—rolling hills, a few trees, but no houses; not even in the distance are there signs of civilization. Nothing but this road which, incidentally, is starting to make me feel a little sick. We round a bend and pass through a rotting and half collapsed wooden fence. Shyndia told me we were going to see the Grand Sorceress; her castle must be near.

We pass a partially collapsed barn, with about a dozen horses munching on the grass around it. Ahead, more of the same rotted fencing pens in several goats. Squawks and clucks emerge from a chicken coop nearby. This is looking more like a farm than a castle so far. Seeing all these farm animals makes me realize how hungry I am. What

time is it? I glance at my watch; eight in the morning. A bathroom break would also be nice. The van rounds a bend and pulls to a stop. We quickly pile out onto the dusty ground. Even under the unshielded sun, the air is crisp and cool. The air seems thin as well; maybe we're at a higher elevation. The smell of manure and feed wafts around us.

We parked near a small shack, clearly a single room, at most ten feet on either side. Streaks of rust run down the tin roof where nails hold it to the shack's frame. A rusted metal pipe emerges from one corner of the roof, and smoke slowly drifts out of it. Some castle this is! The door opens with a loud creak and an older woman walks out. Shyndia embraces her and they begin to discuss something in low tones. The man who invited me steps over, drawing my attention.

“What do you think?” he asks.

“Well,” I reply hesitantly, “This doesn't seem like much of a castle.”

He looks at the shack. “It doesn't, does it,” he agrees. We watch Shyndia and the woman, I assume she is the Grand Sorceress, discuss in voices too low to be heard.

“I didn't think that the Grand Sorceress would live on a farm,” I say.

“She doesn’t, really,” he replies, “she just keeps a few animals that she raises.”

Shyndia turns to us and nods, then goes into the shack with the woman. “Come on,” the man says to me, “We have work to do.”

I follow him back to the collapsing barn. He walks right in, ducking under fallen rafters. “Um, this doesn’t look very safe,” I stammer.

“Not at all,” he laughs. “But we will all die someday, why live in fear?”

I follow him in cautiously. The barn smells musty and damp. The rafters over my head creak precariously. I climb under several fallen rafters and around fallen sections of the roof to reach the man who is picking up saddles at the far end. He loads me down with a saddle and some equipment, and we head back outside. With the saddle in tow, it takes even longer to get back outside. Sweat drips from my brow, half from hauling the saddle and half from the fear that the barn inspires.

Once outside, I find him fastening the saddle on one of the horses. He motions for me to do likewise, but, having never even ridden a horse, I have no idea how to proceed. He soon finishes and comes over to me.

“Never saddled a horse before?” he chuckles. “Here,” he says as he takes the saddle from me with

surprising ease, “let me show you the basics.” He takes me through each step, describing how to set the blanket and the saddle, and how to cinch it up. Several times he points out little things, such as pulling back the blanket to ensure the horse’s hairs are all going the right way, that I would not have thought of.

“These aren’t racing or show horses,” he says, “so you won’t need to worry about them taking off or anything. Pack animals, that’s what they’ve always been.” He pats the one we just saddled on the side. “Come on,” he says, “we need to get the rest of these saddled up.”

I run up to him as he enters the barn again. “What’s up with the horses? We’re here, isn’t this place what we came for?”

“You said yourself,” he grunts as he climbs under a particularly hazardous rafter, “that this place didn’t look like a castle. It certainly isn’t.”

“Wait... Do you mean that lady isn’t the Grand Sorceress?”

“That’s right,” he shoots me a smile, “she’s just a friend, so to speak.”

I consider this as we continue to prepare the horses. “So,” I ask tentatively, “I suppose that we can’t take the van, since we’re saddling these horses.”

“No roads,” he says, “At least, none that could safely take a car.”

“How far will we have to ride, exactly?” The saddles look pretty uncomfortable, so hopefully it will only be a few hours. Sheesh. How did I get myself into this anyways?

“Actually,” he replies as he cinches the last saddle, “I haven’t been there before. I think it’s a few days out.”

“Wait... A few days? On horses? Are you serious?”

He shrugs. “Why not? People used to travel cross country by horseback. You’re just spoiled.”

Unbelievable! These saddles look about comfortable enough to spend maybe five minutes tops on, and here I’m supposed to ride for days? What the hell am I doing here anyways? Maybe I could just stay here. But then again, who knows what kind of crazy woman lives here.

“She’s not crazy,” Shyndia’s voice startles me, and I jump with a gasp. She smiles. “Don’t worry, you’ve come this far. Soon all your questions will be answered. I see you have finished with the horses. Please, come and eat,” she motions us toward the shack.

We walk over the dusty ground toward the shack. A table has been setup outside, with the others

already sitting around munching on pancakes, eggs, bacon and basically ordinary food. After all the strange things that have happened, I'm almost disappointed. You can't get much more ordinary than this. I grab some food and take a seat.

"I have made arrangements," Shyndia nods to the older woman, "for us to borrow some horses and supplies for our trek. Being winter, there is snow in the mountains, so be prepared. We leave immediately after breakfast."

Mountains? Snow? Horses? Enough of this crap! I walk over to Shyndia. "Listen," I say in a low voice, "I agreed to come with you, but this is starting to get crazy. We're going to ride horses for days, through a mountain pass which is snowed in? No, OK. Just no. I'm not going."

"Where then will you go?" she inquires.

Where would I go? "I could take the van back into town," yeah, that's the ticket, "And, uh, come back to pick you up when you get back. Or something."

"I don't think so," she replies coyly, "The nearest town is pretty far, I doubt you would find it."

"Well then," I say hotly, "How about you give me directions? Because I'm sure as hell not going any further with you. You may know all this great stuff about me, but I don't know you, and I don't know

these people, and I don't know where we're going, and I don't think I should play along with your little game anymore."

"You could stay here and milk some goats while we're gone. Maybe the fresh air would help you relax a bit. Then you could return to your fantastic life and everything would be great. Or maybe you would kick yourself every night, knowing you were that close and turned back. The time is now, Brian, this is the final stage, the last leg, the end of the journey. You have nothing to fear."

"Nothing to fear!? How could I possibly believe you?"

"We will be with you, and the Grand Sorceress will be watching over us," she smiles and puts her hand on my shoulder. "You've almost made it."

What choice do I have? I shake my head. I'm sure I will regret this some day. "Fine, whatever," I say, defeated, "It's not like you're giving me a choice."

"That's the spirit!" she says joyfully, "Come on, let's get this stuff loaded."

I help put away the table and food from breakfast and begin loading heavy bags onto some of the horses. Soon enough everything is loaded. The old woman waves to us. "May your journey be blessed, and may you all find that which you seek." Her eyes

are fixed on me for the last part, and I shift uncomfortably. Is she like Shyndia? Does she know everything about me too? But the time for speculation is past. We mount the horses (although it takes me a few tries to get it right) and, with Shyndia in the lead, depart slowly toward the hills.

Chapter 7

Just as I suspected, we are hardly beyond the farm and my ass already hurts like hell. I shift around in the saddle, but it's no use. I bounce up and down on the most uncomfortable seat in the world as my horse slowly plods forward. Clomp-clomp-clomp-clomp. Its head swings to and fro as it walks. We are making slow progress, very slow. Unimaginably slow, in fact. Only slightly faster than walking. Or maybe riding snails. The sun is bright, but the weather is cold. As morning becomes afternoon, a cold wind begins to cut through the rolling hills we are now riding through. The horses seem tired; I don't blame them. I'm tired too. And hungry! I pull the blanket around me tighter as the wind seeks any crack to sneak in upon me.

As the sun slowly drifts toward the horizon, the shadows of small trees and bushes on the hills grow long. I imagine creatures, demons even, hiding with beady eyes in the shadows; waiting for us unwary travelers to stumble by. And clomp-clomp-clomp go the horses' hooves. An occasional neigh is the only sound—the group is silent. No one has said a word since the moment of departure. Overhead, a hawk circles in the evening sun, looking for a meal. The next time I look, it's gone. Shortly we reach a stream, at which point Shyndia dismounts and the

others do likewise. I, personally, don't need a second invitation to get off this stinking saddle and proceed to do so, falling flat on my face on the ground.

My legs wobble as I pull myself up. I brush dirt and pebbles off my face. After a few minutes I'm able to walk around again; sporting only a slight limp. The horses and people drink from the stream, and Shyndia breaks out some dried fruit, jerky and bread from one of the packs. The food is passed around and we all eat. It could be better. Dry and chewy, but what else can I expect? Again, no words are spoken. I want to ask why, but I'm not willing to break the silence. Who knows, maybe it's some kind of sacred silence or something.

We set up camp at the stream for the evening. Well, I don't know if you could really call it camp—everyone just spreads out their blankets, and Shyndia ties up the horses. While the others seem to do some kind of meditation or prayer, I watch as the sun slowly dips into the horizon. The few scattered clouds take on a deep purple hue. The sight is breathtaking. As the sky finally darkens, I lay down. It's only about six in the evening, but the long ride has made me very tired. I close my eyes, and sleep comes quickly.

I wake the next morning, squinting into the early sunlight. The others are already up and a small fire

crackles, warming a pan with sizzling bacon. I stumble over to the fire. Shyndia offers me some bacon. “Thanks,” I mumble as I munch it down. As soon as I say the word, several of group shoot me a glance. I hesitate in mid-chew. Apparently there was some kind of silence rule in effect. I glance at Shyndia, but she’s already moved away, digging through a pack. I worry for a moment that they might leave me behind. Then what would I do? Stranded here in the middle of nowhere—I have no idea which way to go! There could be a town over the next hill, but I wouldn’t know it. I mope through the rest of the morning, until finally we depart once again.

Clomp-clomp-clomp; with each step the saddle bounces me uncomfortably. My butt is sore from yesterday’s ride, and yet I offer it no rest. We ride on through the day, eventually reaching a fast moving river around midday. Shyndia signals a stop and we all dismount. I manage to avoid falling on my face, but the soreness still gives me a bit of a limp. The others don’t seem to be having any problems. The river itself is wide, probably sixty feet across, and moving fairly fast. The bottom is smooth, and only the faintest ripples betray the river’s speed. There’s no bridge anywhere in sight. Then again, why would there be?

Shyndia surveys the river, then we again eat from dried rations. Blech! I'll take a cheeseburger please! Whatever happened to good taste in food? After the so-called lunch, we pack up and once again mount the horses. Shyndia leads her horse into the river, and we slowly begin the difficult trek of crossing the river. I suspect it's more difficult for the horses than it is for us, actually.

As we trudge across the river, the horses fidget and struggle against the reins and the water. Suddenly, one of the horses (being ridden by a young man who hasn't spoken to me yet) falls into the water! The splash erupts onto several other horses nearby, and in a bizarre chain reaction, the horses begin to stumble and fall. I watch this in slow motion until suddenly the domino chain reaches me and the horse catapults me into the water.

Cold and wet. Can't breathe. I surface with a gasp. Moving quickly, being pulled downstream. What do I do? I try for the shore, which shore should I try for? The water is too fast, I can't fight it. The current pulls me down, like a hand. Is there something in the water? My shoes, must be my shoes weighing me down. I struggle, and manage to kick them off. Ahead, the river bends; I swim toward the shore and the river carries me into an eddy. From there, I reach the shore, exhausted. I lay on the shore and close my eyes, breathing deeply.

After some time, I sit up and survey the area. The river rushes quickly by, looking even more menacing than before. The pack I was carrying is gone—it must have slipped off when I fell off my horse; or perhaps the water pulled it off. No one else seems to be around. “Hello?” I call out. I listen carefully.... The rolling hills escort my voice away and do not echo it back. I began to trudge upstream, assuming I will find my friends there. Friends? I suppose when lost in the middle of nowhere, anyone who knows the way becomes a friend. I hike for some time, and my bare feet begin to scream in agony. Limping onward (what other choice do I have?) for who knows how far, until I crest a small ridge to find a collection of horses, and my companions.

“There you are,” I gasp, “I nearly drowned.” The others glance at me, and ignore the outburst. All this, and they still maintain this code of silence? These people are fucked up. I survey the area—no packs or supplies in sight. The sun is going down, and it appears that we will be staying here by the river tonight. Dusk turns slowly into darkness as I shiver in the cold. I’m mostly dry, but still a little damp, plus the lack of any blankets makes sleeping outside very uncomfortable. And my feet... They’re already just about to fall off! Especially given that it’s winter time. Somehow, between the chattering of my teeth (although no one else seems to be

having this problem) and the shivering of my numb limbs, I fall asleep.

When I wake in the morning, a fire blazes with the dawn. Pancakes, eggs and bacon are passed around. Where did all this come from? One of the packs must have been saved. Soon we saddle up and head off, and I notice that in fact no packs have been saved—no one carries anything besides the clothes on their backs. And yet we press onward? How will we eat? Ahead, the hills rise into mountains, covered in winter snow. How will we stay warm? And yet onward we trod, slowly, rocking with the shuffle of the horses. The day passes slowly by, as the snowy peaks draw closer. At lunch and again at dinner, Shyndia and a few others pull food out of seemingly nowhere. We eat well. As we settle into rest that evening, I can see the snow is not far at all. The night is very cold, and I shiver.

Suddenly, a blanket is draped over me. I turn, Shyndia stands there, smiling. Where did that come from? I look around, sure enough, everyone has a heavy blanket. There is no way anyone managed to have these in their back pocket! What's going on here? I want to ask Shyndia, but knowing how they have been responding to my questions so far, I decide to remain silent. The blanket is very warm and I sleep well through the night. In the morning I find a light dusting of snow has covered the camp

during the night, although the blankets somehow are bare and dry.

We proceed high into the mountains, through blizzards and along narrow cliff ledges. The snow never seems to actually touch us, disappearing as it hits an invisible bubble that surrounds our group. It is an odd sensation. The blankets continue to keep me warm in an almost supernatural way. Maybe it is supernatural. Or, I chuckle to myself, they could be battery powered electric blankets.

For several days we continue through the mountains. Snow falls heavily all around us, but we ourselves stay dry and warm. Each morning and evening we eat; from whence, I do not know. Each night we sleep, dry and warm, surrounded by cold and wet snow. The routine has become almost automatic. I have lost track of the days since we left. Even the shack, the van... Sandy... are a distant memory. All that seems real now is the mountains, the snow, and the journey—every step of the horses' hooves.

Finally, one day we turn into a small, snow covered valley and I see what must be our destination. Shyndia makes a signal and we all stop, staring down upon the valley. A castle of stone sits in the middle. It resembles an old European cathedral with a cross shape. Wooden buildings flank one side of the castle, adjacent to pens for

animals. An orchard and garden, filled with barren trees covered in snow line the opposing side. Smoke whiffs out of several chimneys in the castle swirling into the blowing snow and disappearing.

After several moments of motionless silence, Shyndia abruptly calls out, “The silence is ended; the destination is at hand!” Everyone murmurs in assent. We start down into the valley and soon arrive at the castle. It is larger than it appeared from a distance, and more imposing. Everyone seems nervous, except Shyndia. She confidently leads us to the stables where we dismount and tie up the horses.

“So,” Shyndia addresses us, “the Grand Sorceress will, I’m sure, be waiting for us inside. Be on your best behavior.” And with those scant words of wisdom, she turns toward the castle’s imposing wooden doors.

Chapter 8

Beyond the doorway a blast of warm air greets us. The entry hall is majestic and enormous—a vaulted ceiling towering high above, with torches burning in hanging chandeliers. The rising walls are constructed of giant hewn stones. Unbelievably sized suits of armor with various weapons line either side of the hall, as if to guard against unwanted visitors. A plush red carpet guides the way between the statues of armor toward the interior of the castle. Shyndia closes the giant door with surprising ease, and the vibrations soon subside. A awesome silence falls over the group as we all gawk at this place. It is like ... a storybook! A dream! Such thoughts briefly bring Sandy, and Aaron to the surface of my mind, but they quickly submerge out of sight as Shyndia begins to lead us down the hallway.

Our footsteps fall silently on the carpet, and it springs back up as we pass, leaving no trace that our feet ever walked there. My feet are thankful for anything other than cold, sharp rock to walk on. The hallway is long, and anxiety fills me as we approach the main chamber ahead. What will the Grand Sorceress be like? I have heard only hushed tones, rumors and vague sayings from Shyndia and the others. Will she recognize me? Say something about me? The only time I've ever “met” her was

when she appeared as a dark cloud in the first ritual. Is she even a real person? Maybe Shyndia will just conjure the cloud up again. This whole place could just be for show—a stage for a magician behind the curtain.

The main chamber, a circular room with a vaulted ceiling even higher than the entryway, is now directly ahead. The floor is a mosaic, representing some symbol, an insignia or seal. Around the edges of the circle are roughly a dozen chairs. Two grand stairways, one on either side, ascend from the entryway around the edge of the circle to a balcony above and ahead. Directly ahead, below the balcony, sits an elevated chair. Clearly the throne, the chair is padded with plush reds and purples, and the headrest is a miniature version of the circular mosaic on the floor.

On this majestic throne sits the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Her skin is beyond pale, almost albino, starkly contrasting her shiny jet black hair which flows down all around her. Her eyes share the same shade as her hair. Her dress is a simple matter, like a blue quilt draped over her, yet she makes it appear most majestic. I get the distinct impression that dirty rags would look like the finest robe of majesty on her. She sits, perfectly motionless, as if a statue, on the throne. Shyndia

steps in front of us to the middle of the circle and drops to her knees. We all do likewise, awkwardly.

The Grand Sorceress (at least, I assume that's who she is) rises slowly from her throne and walks down into the circle. "Rise, my friend," she intones in the most perfect voice that I have ever heard. We all stumble to our feet as Shyndia rises gracefully. For the first time, my companions (except Shyndia) seem to be nervous and uncertain. "Please," she addresses us with open arms, "be seated." We migrate over to the chairs at the edge of the circle while the Grand Sorceress returns to her throne. "It is good that you have made it," she says, "There were many mishaps along the way, but faith and power has brought you here. Shyndia, your leadership was admirable. Brian"—I stiffen as she speaks my name—"I am glad that you chose to continue your journey. You have found that which you came to seek. Your journey has reached its close." She smiles, I shift nervously.

"Well," she addresses the group, "you are all tired, and hungry. Tomorrow we shall begin a great many things, but tonight is for rest. But first, we shall eat." Suddenly a plate of steaming food appears before each person. Mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans, some kind of meat... It looks great! Certainly way better than what we ate on the trail, although the origin of that too is a mystery. We all chow down

quickly. Soon enough, the food is gone and I for one am slouched in my chair feeling like a walrus. After so many days of crummy crap, it's like being a king! This is truly the life. The others, previously tense, have now relaxed. Small chit-chat about the journey, especially about the fall into the river and losing all our things, is the main focus of conversation.

After a short time, conversation dies down, as exhaustion begins to again show itself. Shyndia approaches me. "Come, I will show you to your room." I follow her up the majestic staircase into a hallway. As we rise out of view, I can see the Grand Sorceress smiling at me. For some reason, she makes me uneasy.

"I understand your point of view," Shyndia says, as we walk into a hallway. "She intimidated me for the longest time. But you must understand that she truly wants only what is best for you and for everyone." I mull in silence as Shyndia leads me to a door, and opens it. Inside is a small but nice room, consisting of a comfortable looking bed, big enough for two, along with a dresser and a mirror, and a small bathroom. A window admits the brightness of the stars and the moon, along with an eerie outline of the countryside, built of the moon reflected off the snow.

"So, tomorrow..." I started.

“No need to worry,” she smiles, “we will wake you up at the appropriate time and everything will be explained. Sleep well.” She closes the door gently, with a smile. I pace the room, but soon feel tired. I lay down, and find the bed as comfortable as it appears. Last time I slept in a real bed, it was with Sandy. But now... she is long gone, or perhaps more correctly, I am long gone. My thoughts soon dissipate, however, into blissful sleep.

Chapter 9

My feet hurt. Where am I? Light streams in through the window, and I squint. The castle... it all comes back now. The Grand Sorceress is sitting at the end of the bed with a pan of water. She cups water in her hands and pours it over my feet. Each time the water touches my feet, they loudly remind me of how much they've suffered. "You're in pain," she says. I nod. In the light, I can see my feet are covered with discolored blisters and scabs. I hadn't realized it was that bad. It's really hurting too. "That won't do at all," she says gently, "pain will only distract you from the reason you are here." She lifts the pan and immerses my feet in the water. For a moment, there is a searing pain, but just as I am about to scream, it is gone. She lowers the pan. My feet are completely healthy, not a blister, bruise or scab to be seen. The pain is gone.

She leaves the pan behind and walks slowly toward me; seeming to radiate an indescribable beauty. The light coming in the window sparkles through her like crystal. She smiles, and a wash of feelings overwhelm me: love, devotion, lust, desire. She takes my hand, and a shock runs down my arm and through my body. I gasp. "You are not an extra," she speaks softly, "You are not a tag along. You are not unimportant. On the contrary, your

potential is greater than any of the others with whom you have traveled. That is why I have called you here.” She lifts my hand and places it against her breast. The soft warmth engulfs me and supersedes the world. There is nothing but her and I. Her mind, and my mind. There is only one mind. I hear her thoughts, she hears mine. She really loves me, and has something great for me—that I know now. Then, just as it began, the connection is broken. The world has returned: dirty and grimy, dim and dark, disgusting and decrepit. “Come,” she says with a smile, “Breakfast is served.”

We descend the stairs together, side by side. The others are already seated. The Grand Sorceress leads me to my seat, and then advances to her throne. She surveys us with a glance, and then lifts a finger. A full breakfast appears in front of us: pancakes, eggs, sausage and bacon. The food is, of course, the most delicious thing I have ever tasted. As the meal concludes, the Grand Sorceress addresses us.

“My good friend Shyndia”—Shyndia nods—“has visited me here before, and has seen the fulfillment of the promise you have all received. For the rest of you, this is your first time here, your first time to see me in person, and probably your first proof that your faith is not empty. Previously, you had faith in a promise of things unseen; but I tell you that those things have been fulfilled before you this very day.

You have received from me, from Shyndia, and from the Book which has touched you all, a promise. In this world of pain and suffering, this is a Power. And for those who can harness this Power, there is Glory. The Power and the Glory is mine, and it is yours as well.”

“With this Power,” she continues, “We can fulfill ourselves, and our friends. Heal their sickness, ease their pain, give them what they want most. This is the promise which is available to all of you, through my grace.” She pauses for a breath, and a moment of silence passes. “Now, Shyndia will take you all to the divining pool to determine the best way to empower each of you individually.”

Shyndia nods. “Come on,” she waves to us and starts walking toward one of the doors. We all start out in that direction.

“Not you,” I feel a hand on my shoulder, “You are not a number, a sheep, one of many.” The Grand Sorceress stands there, smiling. We watch Shyndia and the others disappear through a doorway, and then we are alone. “Come,” she says, “Let us walk.” I walk beside her in silence, soaking up her beauty and radiance. What a blessing to be in her presence! I see her smile slightly. At the boundary of a doorway, she stops to hand me a pair of shoes from a basket. Her movement is so exquisite—kneeling slowly to take them tenderly,

then standing again to hand them to me. I put the shoes on; they are soft yet firm. She leads me out a side door and into the cold snow. We walk slowly, my feet for once unpaired, the snow crunching as we travel step by step. Around us, bare fruit trees covered in snow wait for the warmth of spring to release leaves and grow fruit again.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” she asks.

“What?”

“The fruit trees. In the spring, they all blossom. But even now they have an elegance and strength.” She reaches out her hand to the branch, and a small section of snow vaporizes. A tiny bud emerges and two leaves sprout in a matter of seconds. Soon, a flower blooms and then is replaced by a young fruit. The small, green fruit quickly grows and turns into a yellowish pear. She plucks the pear and takes a deep bite. Juices drip down her chin.

I’ve seen her do a lot of things, but this is something else! “How... How do you do that?”

“Much better than cursing the tree, don’t you agree?” she says with her mouth full. “It’s delicious!”

I shiver as we continue to walk. The cold mountain air cuts through my thin clothes. I bunch my arms in tightly to try to keep warm.

“You see,” she says, “once you have realized the power that is waiting for you, you will not need to

feel cold, or hot, hungry or any other negative thing ever again. All the world will be yours, will respond to your command.”

“OK,” I stutter with teeth chattering, “What do I have to do to get this power?”

“Nothing,” she says, with a smirk, “All power in the earth is mine, and I will give it to whomever I choose.”

That line vaguely sounds familiar, but I can’t quite place it. “So, you’re just going to give it to me then?”

“Oh, not quite yet, you must be ready for it first. But you are already on that journey. Here, there is no reason to be cold.” She nods and a warm blanket materializes around me. Instantly, the cold is gone.

“Thanks,” I say weakly.

“It’s nothing, literally,” she laughs.

“So why I am so special? Why did you choose me?”

“Many are called,” she replies cryptically, “but few are chosen. There is a great power in you.” She suddenly seems very serious. “I hope you will listen to what I am saying. Your future is very bright, but you still must walk through the door. Things may be frightening, but you must not run away.”

“Uh, OK,” I reply.

“Everyone else,” she waves her hand, “follows like sheep, going this way or that. Whatever Shyndia learns from the divining pool they will follow without question. That is an admirable trait in a soldier, but not a sorcerer. Whatever their lives become, they will never be as relevant as you. But you,” she says with smile, “your destiny is already known, your path is already marked. Your questioning, ironically, has sealed a definite path. You are not content to be one of many. You will be the best. At the appropriate time, you will take my place.”

We walk in silence, and I think of what she has said. Take her place? I don’t even know her, or these people, or this place! I have no powers! Shyndia would be much better suited. “Shyndia has aspiration and power,” she nods, breaking the silence, “But her destiny is elsewhere. One day you will far surpass her. Shyndia can manipulate her power and show her glory, but you have the ability to embody the Power and the Glory. That is what is required to sit on my throne.”

“So,” I ask hesitantly, “What’s the first lesson? What’s the starting point? How do I read people’s minds or grow magic fruit?”

She laughs. “Neither of those are the starting point. In the beginning, there is word—our philosophy, our way of thinking. And the word is

connected to the power. In fact, the word is power. That's the first lesson," she smiles.

"So, what's the philosophy?" I ask. So far, it seems like everything has been magic, show and words with little meaning. Time to get to the heart of the matter, if I can.

We walk silently, the snow crunching loudly under our feet. "What would you have done to save Aaron?" she asks finally.

At the mention of his name my eyes fill with tears. The horrible sights come flooding back! The body, hanging in the doorway. I choke. The Grand Sorceress waits in silence as I regain composure. "Anything," I finally say, "Anything that I could have done. But I didn't know, I didn't know until it was too late..." My voice trails off.

"If you had only had the power we offer, you would have known he was going to do it. You would have known why. You would have known what to say. And, failing words, you could have stopped him directly. Aaron would still be alive today, had only you held the knowledge and power to intervene. I'm sure he would thank you for it," she says dryly.

I nod, with a heavy lump in my throat. "You went to church," she looks at me, "you sought

refuge in God. Why? Why didn't God save Aaron?"

Crunch, crunch goes the snow. Why didn't God save Aaron? "God is all knowing," she says slowly, "So he knew about Aaron. He watched Aaron take the rope, and loop it around the bar. He watched as Aaron stepped onto the stool, and put his head through the noose. And he watched Aaron die."

I say nothing. What can I say? "God is all powerful," she continues, "Had he wanted, at any time, to save Aaron's life and save you the pain and suffering you have felt, he could have done so with the greatest ease. It would be so easy for him, that it would actually take as much effort to not save Aaron as it would to save him."

I shift uncomfortably, my sorrow compounding with ... anger? Anger at God. Why didn't he intervene? Why didn't he save Aaron?

"Why indeed," the Grand Sorceress asks with a sharp voice, "Why indeed... Why didn't he save Aaron? Why didn't he bring your father home? Why didn't he help your mother? He saw them suffer. He had the power to stop it. But maybe," she turns to me, "just maybe, he didn't want to. Maybe... God hates you."

"What?" I cry out, tears streaming down my face. "How can you say that?"

“Look around you,” she shouts, waving her arms, “What is there but suffering and death? Where is your all-loving God? We are but ants, and I’m sure he enjoys watching us suffer. Maybe he even shakes us up from time to time, just for added fun; just to watch us cry and be forced to rebuild.”

I look away. “You don’t like what I’m saying,” she observes, “You want to think that God loves you and cares about you and,” she then says in a squeaky high pitched voice, “has a special plan for your life.” “Well,” returning to her normal voice, “time to get with reality. Here, let’s take a look at your favorite word of God. Remember in the beginning, the serpent tempting Eve?”

“Uh, yeah,” I reply. It has been a while since I actually opened the Bible. What was that about? Didn’t Adam and Eve get thrown out of the garden? For... what? Something. Eating an apple? I just don’t remember so well.

A book appears in the Grand Sorceress’ hands. “My trusty Bible,” she smirks, “I always keep it handy. It’s the best argument against God I’ve found yet. So here we are, Genesis, the book of beginnings. God tells the man, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’ So here we have a moral commandment, one you would

have to be able to understand good from evil to follow, given to a man who does not understand good from evil. Furthermore, God threatens the man with immediate death if he eats the fruit. So, next chapter.” She flips forward a page.

“The serpent, obviously the devil, has another opinion. He tells the woman to eat the fruit, saying ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ Now that seems pretty straightforward. It is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, so it makes sense that they would gain that knowledge. But he also says they won’t die. So which is: immediate death, or not?”

She looks at me. “Well, which is it?”

“Uh, didn’t God drive them out with a sword or something?”

She smiles, “Or something... But, to finish what I was saying, God has told the people they will die ‘the day’ they eat of the fruit. The serpent has told them this is a bluff. One of them must be lying. Let’s turn the page, and find out who.” She turns the page. “The Bible says that Adam didn’t have his first child until after he ate the fruit, and here in chapter five it says that Adam had his first son at one hundred thirty years old. So, if Adam was supposed to die the very day he ate of the fruit, he

should have died at least within a year of that. Does that seem reasonable to you? I'm giving God some leeway here, you know, to keep his promise. But no, the Bible says Adam lived to be nine hundred thirty years old! So who lied in the garden? The serpent was right, God's threat was a bluff."

"But why would God do that?" she asks. "Maybe because he wanted his people to live in fear of him. He doesn't love us, he wants us to hurt and suffer. It's fun, you know," she says bitterly, "he created us to die. Because he likes it. He likes the shedding of blood, the Bible is sure full of it!"

She falls silent, ending the long winded rant, and the deafening silence of the valley rushes in to take its place. We stand, no longer walking, in silence among the bare trees. Snow drifts lazily around, blown here and there by the wind. A bird chirps mournfully in the distance. Inside, however, I'm anything but cold and lifeless. My sorrow for Aaron is overwhelmed by anger... at God, and at the Grand Sorceress. She's trying to take advantage of me by spouting theological nonsense! "What are you," I ask, with a rough tone, "Satanists?"

"Who is Satan?" she asks.

"Oh, don't give me that crap! You're here to tell me that God hates me and what? The devil loves me? Is that it? Is that your grand fucking philosophy?"

“History,” she says calmly, “is always written by the victors to make those who lost look evil. If God’s heaven was perfect, why would any angel rebel? Much less, an entire third of heaven following the Angel of Light? And here we see them both, God lying and Lucifer telling the truth, even though the propaganda is slated against him. You judge, but you do not know.”

“You follow evil then,” I say curtly, “You worship Satan and follow evil. That’s what this is all about.”

“What is evil?” she asks again, “And don’t cut me off. Really think about it. Why is something evil?”

“Well,” I think for a moment... “Because it hurts us.”

“But God hurt many people in the Bible, flooded the world, burned cities, and so on. All of that hurt people, a lot of people. So then, God was acting evil?”

“No, no!” I answer quickly, “It’s not like that! God is righteous, he can’t do evil.”

“So how do you excuse these things?”

“Well,” I stammer, “I don’t know... God must have had a higher purpose that would be better in the end.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“Because... Because... God is always good. It’s just his nature, you know?”

“So evil then,” she smiles, “is anything that goes against God.”

“I guess so.”

“Then good and evil are meaningless, based merely on the whim of a being who has already been shown to lie and ignore people’s suffering and needs.”

“Look,” I say quickly, “I just don’t want to talk about it, OK?”

“Of course,” she says with a smile. She looks back toward the castle. “Shyndia is just about done with the others. Perhaps we should adjourn to the meeting hall?”

I nod grimly. What else can I do?

Chapter 10

We return toward the castle, our feet crunching through the snow faster than when we left, as if compelled by some urgency. Once inside, I follow the Grand Sorceress to the main chamber where we ate last night. Shyndia and the others are already present. The Grand Sorceress advances to her throne, and after a moment of hesitation (for what?) I discreetly take a seat.

“Shyndia, “ the Grand Sorceress calls out.

“Yes, my Lord,” Shyndia replies with a nod.

“What wisdom has the divining pool bestowed upon us today?”

“We have learned much,” Shyndia replies, “Everyone here has a great and powerful future for the advancement of themselves and of our order.” She stumbles at the end of the sentence.

“Is there anything else?”

“Well, yes, actually,” Shyndia hesitates, “David’s reading wasn’t like anything I’ve seen before. It was... cloudy, uncertain, unclear. Like somewhat was obstructing the divining pool and preventing it from telling me something.”

“Indeed,” the Grand Sorceress nods and rises from her throne, walking slowly and ominously

toward David. David shifts in his chair. “David,” she says slowly, “Good to meet you.”

“Yes ma’am,” he squeaks, “Good to be here.”

“Is there anything you would like to share with us, David?”

The room is deathly silent, punctuated only by the clicking of the Grand Sorceress’ shoes on the stone floor and she paces slowly in front of David.

Finally, he speaks. “I don’t understand, what do you mean?”

She stops pacing abruptly and spins to face him. “We can do this the easy way, or the hard way. The choice,” she spreads her arms, “is yours.” She looks away in disgust and resumes pacing slowly.

David remains silent.

“You came here,” the Grand Sorceress finally says, “not as a seeker, not to learn, not to explore your potential.” She paces for a moment, watching David. “You came here as a spy, a mole, to learn how to destroy us.” Shyndia gasps. “Yes,” the Grand Sorceress chuckles, “All this time you studied with Shyndia, gaining her trust, and yet you hated us and everything we stand for. You just want to expose us. Why?”

A moment of silence passes.

“I see,” she says, “you think that what we do is wrong. Is evil. You want out, but more than that, you want to take all of us with you.” I can hear malice growing in the Grand Sorceress’ voice.

David, suddenly emboldened, stands. “You are corrupting people!” he cries out and points at the Grand Sorceress, “You tell them your powers are good, but they are evil! I can feel it!”

The Grand Sorceress raises her hand and the room is filled with light. BOOM! I am nearly knocked out of my chair as a lightning bolt jumps from her hand and strikes David. He collapses to the floor, and the smell of burned flesh fills the room. A cloud of smoke wafts around David as he turns slowly and moans.

“Someone will stop you,” he moans, “you offer people power, but it’s not true.” He seems to be looking at me, and I stiffen. “It’s a lie, a deceit! You’ll only lose in the end!”

“Well,” the Grand Sorceress says curtly, “your moralisms have ceased to amuse me. I will not allow you to compromise this organization for your own twisted concept of right.”

“What are you going to do to me?” David queries softly.

“I am kind and gentle,” she smiles, “I do not have a torture fetish. I am done with you, you are in the

Lord's hands now, and from all accounts, he is far more harsh than I am," she smirks. The Grand Sorceress raises her hand, snaps her fingers loudly, and David turns to ash. His body immediately loses its form as it collapses into a pile of fine, gray ash on the floor. I feel my blood go cold. I want to run, to get away, from this twisted house of horrors.

"An unfortunate incident," the Grand Sorceress says with surrealistic calm as she returns to her throne, "Some people cannot comprehend good from evil. Now, let's eat!" As before, a plate heaped full of delicious looking food appears in each person's lap. But I am no longer hungry. I poke at the food, but even with its enticing aromas and perfect consistency, I can't bring myself to eat of it. All I can think about is David. Why did he come here? How is it that someone I didn't even know can fill my thoughts so much? Why did she kill him? Surely, there was another way. Something else, something not so drastic, so final.

The others notice that I am not eating, but they say nothing. I look toward Shyndia, but she averts her gaze. The Grand Sorceress merely smiles at me, a most unnerving smile. The smile of con artist, it seems. I wonder what she is really after, what really motivates her. Why am I really here? So I can end up like David? As night falls, I ascend the grand staircase alone, listening to each step that falls on the

plush carpet. It seems to take forever for me to climb the stairs. Why should I? Finally, somehow, I end up at my room and close the door tightly. There's no lock, and I have a feeling that it wouldn't make a difference anyways.

I lay on the bed and consider what has happened. My life fell apart, and by amazing coincidence (or maybe not!) these people swooped me under their wing, bringing me on this unbelievable journey to a place that seems straight out of a fantasy novel. And this woman, who claims to care so much about me... It just doesn't seem right. I promised Shyndia I would come here and listen and be open. Well, I did that. I fulfilled my part of the bargain, and I don't like what I see. What would I become if I stayed? Would I become like the Grand Sorceress? Her so-called love and kindness are simply a facade! I can hear the anger and hatred in her voice, in everything she says and does! I don't want to be like that.

I rise slowly, and peer into the inky blackness through the window. Clouds have covered the sky—no stars tonight. I walk over to the door and open it a crack. The hallway is silent, everyone else having retired as well. Slowly I walk down the hall, as quietly as possible. I don't know where to go, or how to get there, but I know this: I must get out of this place. It's simply not right. Down the stairs, the main chamber is empty. The throne sits silently, the

glamour of its queen absent. I hesitate for a moment. The dim silence of this great chamber seems to be calling me. I can see myself, sitting on the throne, being glorified and powerful. I approach the throne slowly. Maybe just sit on it once before I leave.

No! Part of me seems to awaken suddenly and my reverie is broken. I stumble. I cannot be drawn in by this place, by the powers of this place or by my own lust. It's all a lie! If I can just get away, I know I will be free. I turn and jog down the great hallway, the enormous suits of armor seeming to be staring down at me. For a moment, I imagine that they animate and chase me, but the metal stays motionless, cold and silent. I make it to the enormous entryway, and, perhaps by magic, the doorway opens with just the slightest push. A blast of blowing snow rushes in as I push outward beyond the warmth and security of the castle.

Where do I go? I fall into the snow, and rise again. It's much colder out here than I expected. The stables! I head for the stables. I try to run, sloshing through the deepening snow. Like a hamster on a wheel, the stables seem to be unreachable. Finally, I make it. Our horses are inside, eating hay. In this cold and dark, there's no way I could figure out how to put the saddle on. So I just find the horse I rode in on, untie him, and ride

out of the stable. Now I just need to figure out which way to go.

The great doorway into the castle stands open, and the Grand Sorceress waits in the arch. She watches me with what appears to be almost indifference. “Going for a ride?” her voice echoes in my mind. Not only can she read my thoughts, she can plant them too!

I’m too far away, separated by blowing wind, for me to reply in speech, so I merely think my reply. “I can’t stay here,” I think, “I can’t do what you want me to do, or be what you want me to be.”

“You will,” her voice echoes through my head, “in time.”

“What are you going to do? Kill me like you killed David? Lock me up until I agree to follow your commands?”

“Not at all. You’re free to go. I can assure you that distance is no obstacle for me. Your training has already begun. You will return to me, willingly, when the time is right. The seeds have been planted and watered, we now only wait for them to sprout.”

I hesitate. Why run if she can follow me anywhere? But no, I must not be deceived by her hollow words! She is a liar, I’m sure! She must be! I give the horse a kick and gallop away from the castle.

The castle falls into the distance and soon I am enveloped by a blowing sheet of snow. In every direction, I can see nothing but darkness. Which way am I going? Which way should I go? The horse gallops, as if following some unseen trail, and I merely hold on and let it run.

The cold continues to creep in, the snow blows through my clothes and against my skin. Every moment seems to be colder than the previous, and my disorientation increases. What's going on? The snow seems to blow through me, chilling me to the bone, and the darkness around me dissolves. It's not so cold anymore. It's not... anything. Wasn't I somewhere? Outside? A horse? Or something... I'm confused... I can't feel anything... So peaceful here... Must sleep now...

~ III ~

The
Mystery
Of
Faith

Chapter 11

“Veni, veni, Emmanuel”

What is this sound?

“Captivum solve Israel”

My head hurts. Pain. Pain everywhere.

“Qui gemit in exsilio”

Heat. My hands and feet are burning.

“privatus Dei Filio”

Fire. There is fire. “Fire,” I croak weakly.

“Gaude, gaude, Emmanuel nascetur pro te, Israel.”

I’m laying in front of a fireplace, blazing brightly. The heat billows out onto my body, thawing it thoroughly. What happened to me? I remember the castle, the Grand Sorceress. Yes, that’s right, I rode away in the snow. I got lost, and... And what? I don’t remember what happened next. Somehow I must have ended up here. But this is not the castle; at least, it doesn’t look familiar. No, the architecture is different.

“Veni, O Sapientia, quae hic disponis omnia, veni, viam prudentiae ut doceas et gloriae,” a rich, deep voice echoes off the walls. I stand slowly, my legs protesting as I stretch them. This seems to be a

study or small library. There are bookshelves, a large chair and a desk. Over the fireplace hangs a crucifix graphically showing Jesus on the cross. Two archways on opposite sides of the room lead out. I walk slowly, unsteadily, out one of the arches. This appears to be the kitchen.

“Veni, veni, Adonai, qui populo in Sinai legem dedisti vertice in maiestate gloriae,” the song continues. A few more rooms, and I enter a large chapel. Stained glass windows, familiar yet different, grace the walls. At the front, a bald priest stands at an altar. He wears a robe with white and gold vestments. Above him, a life-size crucifix mirrors the smaller one above the fireplace. His arms are wide and his eyes closed.

“Veni, Clavis Davidics, regna reclude caelica, fac iter tutum superum, et claude vias inferum,” he sings slowly, deeply. I walk toward him, as if in a trance. As I approach the altar, he opens his eyes and looks at me. I am stopped short, abruptly, by those eyes. Such deep eyes, powerful eyes. It is unlike anything I have seen, unlike anything I can describe. He smiles at me, a warm and generous smile, and, taking up his cane, begins to hobble slowly toward me.

“O come, Thou Dayspring from on high,” he says, never breaking eye contact with me, “and cheer us by thy drawing nigh; disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death’s dark shadow put to flight.” He

nows stand directly ahead of me, and observes me silently.

“Hello,” I say haltingly, “I’m a little confused.”

“I’m not surprised,” he responds kindly, and begins hobbling slowly toward the kitchen, “You had a rough night, I can tell. You were almost dead when I found you.”

“Found me where?” I ask, following him.

He stops and turns to me. “On the front porch, actually,” he says, then resumes his slow journey. “Your horse will survive, I think. She’s in the stables now. Don’t worry, it’s heated in there. There’s fresh hay as well.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Providence,” he says, putting some water over a small fire in the kitchen. “About two thousand years ago, today, Providence gave us a great gift. Throughout the years I’ve learned something,” he chuckles as he pours the now steaming water into a bowl of oatmeal. “I learned that Providence never stops giving.”

He mixes the oatmeal with a spoon and hands it to me. “Merry Christmas,” he says.

I eat the oatmeal slowly at first, and then faster as I realize how hungry I am. The old priest watches me eat, and when I have finished, he takes my bowl

and sits down at the table with me. “So what’s your story?” he asks. “How is it that you ended up riding through the snowy night on a horse without any supplies, provisions or even a heavy coat?”

I shift in my seat. “I really appreciate the oatmeal, but I should probably go.”

“Go where?” he asks.

“Um, well, where’s the nearest town?”

“At least two days by horseback,” he replies.

Damn it, why are these places always in the middle of nowhere? “Look,” I reply, “I don’t mean to spoil your Christmas, but I’m not...”

“Not what?” he asks.

Not what indeed! I was going to say “not a believer.” But then, I went to church. I guess I believe... something.

“Well, maybe you could say I’m not a true believer.”

“A true believer in what?”

I smile. Is he just playing with me? “Like that two thousand years old stuff. I don’t know anymore, I just don’t know. You say God gave us a gift. Well, I don’t see it.”

“Something happened two thousand years ago, and it, whatever it was, influenced many people and

events. As the ages passed, more people and events were influenced, deeply touched by something they could not fully understand, until finally I committed my life to live here alone, in order to understand truly and deeply what happened two thousand years ago. If I had not found you; or perhaps, if you had not found me, you would have certainly died. Your life, then, is that very gift.”

“Yeah, but the Bible and all that stuff. I just don’t buy it, you know.” I never really thought about it this way. Maybe the Grand Sorceress had more of an effect than I realized.

“Put the Bible out in the snow and the rain. The words will blur, the pages rot. Soon there will be nothing left. It is not for such transient things that I am here. It is for eternal things,” he answers. “But you have evaded the question. You will forgive me if my curiosity is now truly piqued.”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” I said, shaking my head.

“They say truth is always stranger than fiction,” he responses.

“OK, then...” and I tell him the story, from the beginning; Sandy, Aaron, Shyndia, the strange man, the strange trip, the strange place. The Grand Sorceress, the castle, the debate and the escape.

“Well,” he says slowly, after listening to my long-winded spiel, “you have certainly been through a lot. Hopefully you can start to find the peace that you were promised.”

“I suppose you’ll tell me that you can give me that peace.”

“No,” he laughs, “I myself can do nothing. But Providence is merciful, it is he that you must ask if you seek peace.”

“Pray, you mean,” I spit out with disgust. Our Father indeed.

“You dislike the idea?”

“I guess so,” I say, suddenly humbled. “I mean, for years I went to church and prayed and nothing came of it.”

“Are you sure?”

“What?”

“How do you know that nothing came of it?”

“I... Well, it just seemed like my life wasn’t any better than anyone else’s. If anything, maybe worse.”

“What did you pray for?”

I shift uncomfortably. “Well... My dad left us when I was young, so I prayed a lot that he would come home. Then, I sort of... I mean, I don’t want

to be offensive, but it seemed like God was just like my dad—I kept calling out, but he was never there.”

“I see,” the priest says. He looks at me for a moment. “I think,” he says, “that you’ve never prayed even once in your life.”

“You think I’m lying to you? Why the hell would I make all this shit up?”

“No, no,” he says quickly, “It’s just your descriptions don’t indicate prayer as God intended. I can teach you.”

“I don’t seem to have much choice,” I reply tartly.

“Always there is choice. It is choice, yours and mine, that has brought us together. It is not the way of Providence to restrict our choices,” he says, and extends his hand, “My name, by the way, is Father Amos Jacobs.”

“I’m Brian,” I say, shaking his hand briefly. He nods. “So, go for it. Teach me to pray. It can’t be any weirder than what I’ve already seen.”

“Prayer is not supposed to be weird,” he says with a smile.

We walk together into the sanctuary, and at his direction, I kneel before the altar. “When the disciples asked Jesus how they should pray, he gave them what we now call the Lord’s Prayer. Do you know the Lord’s Prayer?”

“Yes, I learned it when I was little,” I let some annoyance creep into my voice. Hopefully he has something more insightful to say than ‘recite the Lord’s Prayer’.

“It’s not the words that are so important,” he says, “nor the recitation; but rather, the attitude and goal. In the Lord’s Prayer, look for what our prayer does: First, we exalt God, saying ‘Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name’. Second, we declare the finality of God’s judgment and action, saying ‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’”

“Only once we have established our place explicitly below God do we petition,” he continues, “First asking for material needs, saying ‘Give us this day our daily bread’. But beyond this most basic request, material needs and desires are irrelevant. What really matters is spiritual needs. These form the heart of the prayer: ‘And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.’”

“These are not material things - we seek forgiveness for sins, and likewise forgive any who have sinned against us. We ask to be guided, not to riches, but to a place where we can serve him better. ‘For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.’”

“The power and the glory...” I whisper.

“Yes,” he says, “they are reserved exclusively for God. We should never seek power nor glory for ourselves—it will be our undoing.”

I nod.

“Think about these things. The meanings. Pray here, but instead of asking for people or things, ask for forgiveness, and the forgiveness of those who have wronged you. Ask to be led onto your true path, that your search may culminate in finding the living God.”

He wanders off, and I try to pray like he said. I try to be repentant, I try to be sorry... But how is it my fault that he left? It’s not my fault! For years afterward, people would take every opportunity. “We’re so sorry about your parents,” they would say, “just remember that it’s not your fault.” So now it is my fault? I’m sorry? For what? I’m not good enough? Not smart enough? Not worthy of my dad’s attention?

“Our Father...” Daddy. “Who art in heaven...” You took everything and made a life for yourself. Without baggage. Without me. “Hallowed be thy name...” But I still love you. Right? If I say it enough, does that make it true? “Thy kingdom come...” In addition to fucking us up just to have a bigger slice of pie, I hope you get even more. Fuck

that. “Thy will be done...” Yeah, I’m going to listen to you. You’re a real role model. A real hero. “On earth as it is in heaven...” You just take it all, don’t you? Never content. Doesn’t matter who you fuck up, as long you get yours. And theirs. And every-fucking-body else’s too!

“Give us this day our daily bread...” You took it all! And now, now you want me to BEG a piece of bread back from you! “And forgive us our trespasses...” Oooooooooohh... I wouldn’t want to accidentally step onto your perfectly manicured lawn! God forbid, I might put a blade of grass out of place! “As we forgive those who trespass against us...” Yeah, with a role model like you, I’ll never have any problems in this department! Fuck you.

“Your fault!” I yell out suddenly, my internal fury breaking free of the moors of my mind. I jump to my feet. “This is all your fucking fault!” Breathing heavily, I realize I am pointing at the crucifix over the altar. I stare at the twisted image of pain and death. “I hope it hurt like hell,” I hear myself say.

Father Jacobs hobbles into the room at top speed. “Is everything OK? I heard you yell,” he asks kindly.

“Yeah.... Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks,” I nod, and give him a false smile. I kneel down again, and he leaves the room. I’ll try again. Maybe stay away from the

“Our Father” part this time. Forgiveness, yes, that’s what I’m supposed to do.

The hours tick by slowly. “I forgive Sandy for hurting me,” I pray. Do I mean it? It won’t change the fact that she’s still a total jerk. “I forgive the Grand Sorceress for trying to fuck me up.” Whatever...

That night, the priest shows me to an empty room. “This will be yours as long as you are here,” he says, “It’s not much, but I hope you’ll find it cozy.”

Cozy indeed. The room contains a small bed lofted over a desk. A small bookshelf and a dresser grace the walls. A tiny window lets in a small beam of light. There is barely enough room to stand in. I climb into the lumpy bed and quickly drift into sleep.

Chapter 12

“You are progressing quite nicely,” the Grand Sorceress says.

“Thank you,” I say. Why? We are standing on a cloud, the only cloud in a clear blue sky. All around us, only ocean. For miles, only ocean.

“Let your true feelings flow,” she says. The cloud grows and darkens. Rumbles of thunder and flashes of lightening shake the surface.

“Are these my feelings?”

“He asks you to ignore them. Can you make them go away?”

The cloud continues to grow. All around us now is a dark gray mist. It’s cold and clammy. The mist shakes with thunder. Fear. I’m afraid.

“These are your true feelings. Anything else is a foolish lie,” she says.

“Where are you?” I can no longer see her, it’s dark. I try to run, but I’m frozen. Panic. Can’t move.

“I am with you always,” her voice echoes as thunder through the clouds.

Sheets. Fabric. Bed. I’m in bed. It must have been a dream. Yes, just a dream. I chuckle.

Everything will be fine. She's not here, she can't get to me here.

For the next few weeks, I continue following in Father Jacob's footsteps. Well, I try to. Prayer still seems so empty and futile. I can tell Father Jacobs knows my frustration. Weeks turn into months, and the snow begins to melt. The days lengthen, and birds begin to chirp. Sunlight streams through the windows more and more often as the clouds fall away.

"Come with me," he says one morning after breakfast. I follow him slowly as he hobbles outside. The fresh, crisp air of a cold spring morning shocks me awake. "See this," he says, gesturing to the dirt.

"What?"

"Look closer," he says.

I get down on my knees (in the mud, yuck!) and inspect the ground. Sure enough, tiny plants of some kind are emerging from the soil. "What about it?" I ask.

"There will soon be a garden here, as there is every year," he says. "You will help me tend it. You can learn so much from a garden. About love, faithfulness, caring and giving. Every garden needs a gardener." He looks at me. "You, too, are a garden."

"Are you saying I need a gardener?"

“We all do,” he replies.

“And I suppose you’re my gardener?”

“No, no,” he laughs. “Tomatoes do not tend to oranges, nor do oranges tend to strawberries. But the Gardener tends to all the plants.”

“OK, whatever.” Yeah, the gardener has been tending me real well. Kill off everyone I care about. Destroy my life. Dump Weed-be-Gone on me. That’s it, maybe I’m a weed in the cosmic garden. I smirk.

“What’s funny?” the old man asks.

“Nothing,” I say.

In addition to the new growth, Father Jacob shows me some older plants, already of fruit-bearing age. As the months go by, I help him fertilize, till and prune the trees and bushes. “This action,” he says one day as we work under the hot spring sun, “of pruning may seem horrific to the tree. Here comes the gardener, the one who is supposed to care for the tree unconditionally, and he cuts off a branch.”

The old man cuts several branches from a tree, then continues, “From the tree’s point of view, the gardener is the enemy; The tree views the gardener as an attacker, one who only claims to be concerned about the tree’s welfare, but who is really out to destroy the tree.”

He trims a few more branch's. "The tree doesn't understand the need or value of pruning. All it understands is the loss of a branch. One tree, one bush, one plant cannot see the intent of the gardener. Nor can the gardener even explain to the tree what his intent is, for the plants could not possibly understand. He can only prune, till and fertilize, knowing the trees will be better for it in the end."

The spring air has long ago melted away the snow, and the small church on the mountainside seems much warmer and more inviting, yet also more dull and futile, than it did in the days I first arrived. Perhaps I have seen through the facade of the old man's hospitality. Father Jacobs and I tend to the building and the grounds, and I continue my fitful prayer routines. Everyday, I do as he asks. I trust him. But, like my father, I can't help but wonder if all this is a lie. Why haven't I accomplished anything? Whatever happened to the peace I was promised?

"This world," he tells me over lunch outside one day, "is filled with evil. You have seen it yourself."

I nod. Birds nearby chirp, and I pay them more attention than the old man.

"You can't overcome evil by fighting it, just like you can't extinguish fire with gasoline."

Well there's a shocker, I think sarcastically. All this time, I've been filling my fire extinguishers with gasoline. But I say nothing.

"Only a heart of purity and goodness can overcome evil," he says.

"Yeah, OK," I say.

He smiles weakly. "You don't understand what I mean."

"Yeah, good wins, evil loses. Got it," I say.

"But you don't really understand. You'll have to experience this."

Whatever. Lots of talk, but no results. You want me to just stay here and run your garden forever? This place blows. I'm like a slave or something, and I'm stuck listening to this old man babble on and on about jack shit.

That night I toss and turn in my bed. I need to get out of here. I've been here for... months now, at least three or four. Every day, it's the same shit. Breakfast. Prayer. Lunch. Gardening. Dinner. Prayer. Bed. Rinse and repeat. I can't even begin to explain how fucking boring this is! It's been fucking three months since I've even seen a hot girl, or any girl for that matter.

A squeaking sound and shuffling. Something is in the room. In the dim light of the moon, I see a rat

run across the floor. It hesitates in the moon beam, framed as if a portrait. Wham! I strike it with a shoe. There's blood, and squeaking. It's injured, but not dead. Limping quickly toward the space under the door. Wham! I strike again, with deadly accuracy. The internal organs rupture out the belly, and the rat lies dead in a pool of blood.

“And some plants,” I mutter to myself, “the gardener just has to kill. But don't worry, have faith! It's all for your best.” I stare down at the sickening guts of the rat. “Yeah, right,” I mutter.

Chapter 13

More days and weeks go by, how many I don't really know. I can see the seasons, feel the warmth of the sun, but I don't know what day or month it is. Everyday is basically the same. Father Jacobs spouts his stupid little platitudes and I continue, for some reason, to tag along like a lost puppy. Every day that passes, the foolishness of Father Jacobs becomes more apparent. It's like he's completely out of touch with the world!

All this praying, what is it accomplishing? Nothing! Just like it's always been. Our Father... Hope you're having a good life, dad! Hope you're having a good life, God! I wouldn't want to bother you, oh no, of course not. Don't let your own fucking son get in the way of your happiness. I'm nobody, right? Fuck this shit. If I had anywhere to go, I'd be out of here.

"Brian," the old man says one day, "You seem very unhappy."

"What are you talking about?" I ask defensively. Why the hell would I be unhappy? Maybe because I'm trapped in this fucking church like a fucking slave? Oh no, that couldn't be it!

"I've been hoping over these months that we would really have a breakthrough. I don't know

what to tell you. All these things we do, they help bring us closer to God. But ultimately, God touches a person, or he doesn't. God works on his own time, we just keep seeking him and eventually he will find us."

That's great. What a motivator. Let's get the executive summary sans the bullshit: God hates me. I can't believe he buys this stuff! Is the world really that simple to him? Father Jacobs must be the most black and white person alive.

"Ultimately," he says, "The ways of Providence are a mystery. We can't understand, so we have faith. And what do we have faith in? Even that is somewhat of a mystery—the mystery of faith." Well that's a convenient excuse. Just call everything a mystery and be done with it!

I don't talk to him for the rest of the day, ignoring all his attempts to communicate with me. It's pretty clear what kind of scam this is: he's old and needs someone to do work for him. I show up and he thinks he's got it made. Well, surprise. As soon as I can figure out where to go, I'm out of here. Let the "Gardener" take care of him. We'll see how well that works out!

The next day, I kneel as usual. I'm not really praying, of course. I quit that nonsense long ago. Now I think, ponder and work out my strategy—where can I go? How can I get there? The old man

won't tell me anything, so I'll have to figure something out for myself. But until then, I have to keep up the facade, pretend to be on his side. He's just trying to control me and manipulate me. I can see right through him.

I am kneeling before the fireplace, my new preferred position for "prayer" when the old man comes hobbling in. I don't see him, but I can hear him. I can hear him a mile away.

"Brian," his frail voice calls out. I open my eyes.

"Yeah?"

"I've been concerned about you and your spiritual health. I really feel that something is very wrong." He pulls out a small vial. "I have this blessed holy water to anoint you with, it will seal you for God's kingdom." His puts a small amount of the water on his hand and reaches for my forehead.

"No!" I yell and jump to my feet, swatting at the old man's hand. The hit knocks the vial out of his hand and it shatters on the stone floor. For a moment, there is silence. I take advantage of his shock. "I don't want to be anointed! I don't want to be sealed! I want to live my own life, doing my own thing! I want to leave, and I want you to tell me how to get out of here!"

"Brian, I can see you're very upset, why don't..."

“Why don’t you get the fuck out my face!” I yell back.

The old man stares at me, then slowly turns and hobbles out of the room. I drop to my knees, overcome by turmoil. What’s happening to me? Oh God, why can’t I have a normal life like everyone else?

“Because you are different,” the soft voice replies.

“What?” I say aloud.

“Your destiny is beyond these petty rituals and prayers.” The image of the Grand Sorceress appears in the fire. “You can feel the power in your veins, pulsing with every beat of your heart,” she continues, “and yet you deny it, subjecting yourself to him. You need to break free.”

“How?” I whisper.

“You know what to do. You know what needs to be done. He is an obstacle. Those who are weak succumb to obstacles. Those who are strong, remove them. You have the strength within you, be fettered no more.” Her image fades into the flames.

I know what I need to do. What do I need to do? The iron poker rests next to the fireplace. I know what I need to do. I need to be strong. I need to remove obstacles. I take the poker in my hand. It’s heavy, with a sharp hook at the end. I know what I need to do. I must be free. Free to do what I want.

Free from people telling me what to do. Free from people telling me what not to do.

I stumble, in a daze, into the main sanctuary, the poker in my hand. The priest is kneeling at the altar rail, muttering his prayers. He's so pious. Or maybe it's all a fraud. Maybe he just acts that way to convince me he's genuine. I stagger toward him. He stands and turns to face me, leaning on his cane.

"Brian, what's wrong? You look ... like something terrible has happened." It's all a lie. His concern, his care—it's a lie. He'd say anything to keep me, to hold me here and make me do his work. He doesn't care about me at all. Our Father...

"Your fault!" I blurt out. I see the image of my father in front of me. He looks down at the fallen body of my mother, and shrugs. "Your fault!" I yell at loud as I can, and swing the poker at him. The hook connects soundly with the jaw, and a horrible ripping sound echoes through the hall as the impact pulls the poker from my hand and flings the old priest over the altar rail onto the floor. He lands hard. The poker remains sunk into his jaw, which is half ripped from his face. Blood pours out of his mouth and nose onto the cold floor. The crucifix over the altar stares down at us in painful silence.

The moment seems to stretch on for eternity—what did I really just do? Behind me, a slow

clapping interrupts the silence. The Grand Sorceress advances slowly toward the altar.

“Very good,” she says, “You have taken your destiny into your own hands, recognized obstacles,” she glances at the motionless and bloody body, then returns her gaze to me. “And removed them. Your training has gone well, and I am impressed by your strength and independence,” she finishes.

“You were behind this all along?” I ask. The visions, yes, I remember, I thought those were just dreams.

“Not just dreams,” she smiles, “I am with you always.” In a flash of light, we are transported back to her castle. I gasp, and she continues, “I told you when you left that I would be with you, that you would return to me. Now you have overcome a great obstacle, one who threatened to divert you away from the power you hold. Today, you have returned.”

“I have returned,” I agree absently.

“I would never let you go,” she says, “You are far too valuable for me to let you be crushed by a mean old man. Come, we must celebrate your return.”

Chapter 14

I follow, as if in a daze, up the grand staircase. The splendor and luxury of this castle is sharply juxtaposed in my mind against the dinky church where I have been living. Down the hall we walk, flowing over the beautiful soft carpet. Oh, carpet! It has been months since I felt carpet. Always stone. Cold, cold stone. But now, carpet and warmth!

The hallway ends in ornate wooden double doors which the Grand Sorceress opens without delay. Inside is an extended dining table, filled with all varieties of steaming, hot dishes. Chicken, pork, duck, veal; vegetables and fruits, rich nut breads and pastas, wines and champagne. “They say the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach,” she says as I stare in awe at the table. All this time, eating oatmeal and gruel, usually lukewarm at best, from the mean old man at the church. Why didn’t I leave? What was I thinking?

The aromas mix together in the air and seem to call to me. Hunger. I never realized how hungry I was at the church. I’m hungry now. Very hungry. The Grand Sorceress smiles. “Take,” she says, “and eat. This,” she nods, “is given for you.” I take a seat and quickly start piling everything within reach onto a plate. I eat and eat. Oh, it’s all so good! The

Grand Sorceress eats as well. And why not? Good food is a joy to be celebrated!

Soon I am stuffed, and recline in my chair feeling more satisfied than I have in months. The Grand Sorceress eyes me from across the table. “I think it’s clear to you now,” she says, twisting her wine glass in her hands, “that the old priest didn’t care about you. He didn’t even try to care about you. All he saw in you was a tool. Something he could use. I am glad you finally made the right decision to come back.”

“I’m not like you,” I say, trying to remember why I left, “I don’t hurt people like you do.”

“Don’t you?”

“No. Last time I was here, you killed that guy. He was no threat to you,” yes I remember now, David; the one who challenged her when I was here last. “You hurt him and made him suffer. Then you killed him. You,” I rise up, “are a murderer! That’s why I left!” I remember now!

“So,” she leans back, “You call me a murderer. You believe in the Bible, right? See here... Why do you look at the speck in your brother’s, or should I say, sister’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“You killed the priest in cold blood. Before you accuse me, consider yourself. You’ve crossed the line. You’re with me now, and our life,” she raises her wine glass, “will be glorious.”

Now wait... Did I kill the priest? I didn’t mean to. Or did I? I’m not sure anymore. I don’t know exactly what happened. Why not? “I don’t understand,” I say aloud.

“As I have said before,” she continues, “your potential is far beyond any of the others who have passed through the doors of this castle. You have fear, uncertainty; it is these very traits which make you ideal. And yet, they also work against you. You run, you hide, you pretend to be something you’re not: pious, holy and loving. You cannot escape your destiny forever. Not in the farthest temple nor the highest mountain nor the deepest ocean can you escape from it. From me. From what you must become.”

“What I must become...” I whisper.

“It has already begun,” she says, confidently, “You express your power more and more directly every day. You may not see it, but I do. You are on the brink, on the edge, on the verge of a breakthrough which will prove to you once and for all the truth of my words. Months ago, you came to me in search of certainty. The road to certainty has been long and difficult, but I assure, tonight you

shall cross the first boundary of faith. And tomorrow..." she smiles broadly, "your journey shall be complete. Behold, your destination is near at hand."

"My destination..." Where am I going?

"Come," she rises, "and follow me."

I stumble up, almost knocking my plate off the table in the process and scuttle after her. She walks with an intense beauty, a glowing magnificence, and a perfect, effortless glide down the hallway. Twist and turn. Stairs up, stairs down. All I can see is her. She extends ahead of me like a light in the darkness, shining like a beckoning star in the sky. I find myself in the most magnificent room I have seen—towering ceilings, exotic, surreal yet somewhat erotic paintings hang on the wall, illuminated from... light sources unseen. A detailed rug covers the entire floor, at least fifty feet in both directions.

The room is dominated by a huge bed on which the Grand Sorceress sits seductively. The comforter is a similar pattern to the rug; an interconnection of diamonds, circles and other shapes, all in perfect harmony. Carved wooden poles at the four corners suspend a translucent multi-colored tapestry above the bed.

She motions for me to sit. As if in a daze, I follow and sit beside her. Why? My thoughts are

muddy, my actions are not my own. Or are there? I don't understand. "It is impossible for you to enter heaven," she says gently, "unless you are born again. This is your rebirth—your old self is going away, and your new self is arising."

Old self... New self... Rebirth... Death?

She smiles. "Your old self is nothing but an empty shell. Filled with confusion and resistance, not understanding of the power and the glory. Your new self embodies these things."

"There is now nothing left for your old self," she continues, and begins to stroke my arm slowly, "Your self was attached to his friends, to Aaron, to Sandy; to his old life. These things are gone. There are nothing left for your old self to live for. Doors of opportunity stand before your new self—this is your destiny. She takes my hand, and puts it to her breast. Like before, a wave of energy seems pulse through me. The world, if this is even possible, becomes even more beautiful than it already is. I feel her mind, my mind, her body, my body. Is there any difference? Is there any separation?"

She looks into my eyes, and I can see the depths of her soul. So loving, so true. How could I have ever doubted her? She touches me gently, and with a wave of supernatural energy, my clothes fly off onto the floor. "You won't be needing those," she whispers.

I focus the energy I feel, and direct it toward her shimmering robes. They fall off, onto the bed. “Incredible,” I whisper, both at the magnificence of her body and the magic of what just happened.

“From passion, comes energy,” she whispers, “Through energy, your powers begins to show. With power, comes glory. Let us rejoice and be glad, as two become one.”

Chapter 15

Darkness. Thick, heavy darkness. Candles cast dim illumination, and struggle against the darkness. Voices cry out, syllables, words unknown. Symbols. The book. Someone in robes, dark robes, crying out. Reading an incantation from the book.

Spirits. Powers. The darkness heaves. Vision is obscured. The robed figure turns toward me, exposing in the candle light half her face. Shyndia? No, it's the Grand Sorceress... But different somehow. "I am so glad you made it," her voice sounds detached, far and distant. "Now you will know what you can do, what you can be. You will never be alone."

She approaches slowly, the darkness swirling off to her side. The candles shine on her whole face, revealing the other half; a skull covered in crawling worms. Startled, I try to scream, but cannot. Frozen in place, just like before. Nowhere to run to. "What can you be," she hisses in deep voice and leans close. One of the worms drops off and lands on my arm. Unable to move, I stare in horror as it begins to munch into my skin, and blood oozes out around it!

"You can be mine," she chortles.

"Gaa!" I flail for a second, getting tangled in sheets. A dim glow emits from the paintings on the

wall, and I can see the moon through a window. The room is heavy with silence. The worm. My arm. I reach tentatively over to where it had been eating my skin.

My fingers run across it. Just skin. No blood, no hole, no worm. So it was all a dream. I sit up slowly. The Grand Sorceress is gone, and I sit alone in the dim grand bedroom. I'm not tired anymore, having been shaken by the dream, so I arise and begin to walk around the room.

My feet fall softly on the beautiful rug as I walk from painting to painting. Each one is surreal, like a dream; like lovers in their own world. I walk to the window. The moon shines down upon the valley. The snow that covered the valley last time I was here is gone, and in the orchard below, the fruit trees are surely putting forth their blooms.

The doors to the chamber open silently at my touch, revealing a long hallway. I walk slowly down the hallway, past doors lining either side. Which doors should I open? Where do they lead? I stop to listen.

Silence. Silence is the only response to my wordless query. I resume walking, passing the doors illuminated by the dim light of the moon. At the end of the hallway is a set of simple double doors. I hesitate, my hand brushing against the handle. Should I open the door?

Before I can think it through, I find myself opening the door. I pass through the portal into a large room. Candelabras dot the room, their candles burning brightly. Between them, tall bookshelves filled with tomes. Approaching one of the shelves, I find the books seem very, very old. I run my hand along the covers. They vary greatly, not like books from a bookstore, more like hand-bound books. Like the book I found at Aaron's. I pull one from the shelf, and a cloud of dust erupts in its stead.

The book seems older than I can imagine. Inside, brittle yellow paper is marked with a faded, brownish ink in strange language that I can't read. Even so, I can feel a burning energy come from the shapes and words on the page. If I could read them, who knows what would happen? I close the book slowly and return it to the shelf. Onward I walk, slowly passing rows of similar books. What mysteries might they contain? Or perhaps...explanations. If I could read them, would I understand what's going on? Would I understand what's been happening to me?

At the end of the library is a similar set of modest double doors. As I approach the doors, I hear ... something on the other side. I hesitate for only a moment, and then press my ear up to door. Hey, it works in movies, right? I can hear the voice of the Grand Sorceress calling out in some unknown

tongue, chanting ecstatic mantras. I open the door a crack, and peek in.

The room is a temple or ceremony center of some kind. It's pretty dark, but the candles on the large altar in the center of the room illuminate their surroundings a little. I can see statues and images of strange, grotesque creatures. In front of the altar, her back to me, the Grand Sorceress shakes and convulses while crying out. "Ha-alsi lu ha-nushi lucifi mushiti!" her mantra she cries over and over, along with other strange calls.

Her cries are drowned out suddenly by a deep moan, which shakes even the stone foundations of the castle. A dark cloud, somewhat like the one that I saw when I was in the warehouse, appears over the altar. But this cloud is different. It is huge, and dark. Very, very dark. Words spoken; the Grand Sorceress speaks and the cloud speaks. Of what tongue and meaning, I do not know. Finally, the cloud says,

"This mountain high has stood, while many years have passed, for one who knew she could, focus the power of its blast. But now the time is met, to make all things anew, to transmit the glorious spirit, making him as you."

With these words, the Grand Sorceress cries out again, and the cloud evaporates into mist and disappears. The room is suddenly very silent. I hold

my breath, slowly withdrawing my head from the door. Should I close it? No, that would make noise. She'd surely discover me! But if I don't, she'll find the door ajar and know I've been here.

My choice is cut short when she calls out from the other room, "Brian, so good of you to drop by. There's no need to hide." She opens the doors and comes out; seeing me, she smiles.

"This is a great night for you. When we were first together, you asked me how to gain the Power and the Glory. At that time, I deferred because you were not yet ready to receive it. But now, you are ready. You have traveled this long and hard road, endured many strange things and obstacles. All of these were designed, yes, purposefully placed to strengthen you and prepare you for this very day. The day when I become obsolete, useless; when this body of mine is discarded like an empty shell. The day when you gain the embodiment of the Power and the Glory, and take my place on the throne as holder of the Earth itself."

Wait a minute... "You... planned everything that happened to me?"

"We've known from the beginning your potential. Even from birth you were selected. Even from birth we guided your path," she nods.

"My..... father?"

She stares at me for a moment. “I did what I had to,” she finally replies.

“What did you do? What did you do with my dad?”

“The past is irrelevant,” she says, dismissively, “it is gone and cannot be changed. There is no sense in discussing it. What matters is that you are here now, ready to receive the Power and the Glory.”

This isn't right. It's a setup! She was pretending to be my friend, but she set me up! “What if I say no?” I try to sound strong, but my voice shakes.

She smiles. “You can say anything you want, but it won't change a thing. You don't have a choice.”

Chapter 16

Why am I following her? I don't know. Why do I do the things I do? We walk, together, through the hallways and into the main chamber. Across the great seal inlaid in the floor our feet trod. I am outside my body, floating alongside. It is a relic, it is not me. The Grand Sorceress leads on, her robes billowing as she walks. Purposeful, powerful; nothing can interrupt her. Even before, in her most serious moments, she was at least a little jovial. Now, her determination leads us with an air of finality.

The Grand Sorceress leads me through an almost hidden doorway into a dim stairwell sinking into black darkness. She pauses for a moment to focus, and accompanying a sharp breath, torches along the walls burst into flames. I can now see the stone stairwell, covered in dust, descending into the depths. The edges of the ceilings and steps are filled with cobwebs, and in the distance I can hear the skittering of rodents. One step, then the next, the dust swirls around her feet. She does not hesitate even a moment to descend the ancient stairway.

At the bottom of the stairs, the passage continues forward. In the walls are set open tombs; skeletons in varying degrees of disintegration sit uneasily on the stone shelves. The air is thick and musty, and

heavy with some unpleasant odor. The passage way splits, and again, and so on as we walk through a confusing maze of death. Down another set of stairs, and the air gets even heavier. More tombs, more death. More stairs. I can barely breathe, but the Grand Sorceress continues to stride purposefully. She has not stopped to consider her path and is unphased by the stench and heaviness of the air. She continues, like a knife through butter.

Finally, we enter a circular chamber. The walls are decorated with ornate mosaics, which appear to be made of various precious gems. The center of the room is marked by a large stone podium on which sits a giant, ancient looking book. “The book which you held was a vast reduction,” she breaks the silence. I jump, startled. “You read the words, and felt a power. But here, in the deepest levels of the castle, beyond the remains of those who walked before me for thousands of years, lies the ultimate book. Before the creation of the world, yes, even before the universe itself came into existence, the Book existed. This Book is the very Word which is our Power. From eternity, the Morning Star looked upon the tyrant. The Morning Star knew the uncaring nature of the tyrant, and called out to all those like Himself, saying,”

“Who can answer the most high one? Who can remove him from his cruelty? Indeed, this I have

done. Man must see and darkness know, so that he understand disparity.”

“With these words,” she continues, “he called for a vote; a democratic election if you will. Yet the tyrant cast him down. And so he gave his strength to us. You should not think that this Book contains words, but rather, this Book is the Word.” With that, she opens the book. A wind whips through the chamber, whence it came and where it goes, I do not know. The pages of the book ruffle and glow slightly. My spine tingles as the Grand Sorceress begins to read from the book.

“Ha-alsi lu ha-nushi lucifi mushiti!” she cries out, her voice echoing off the old stone walls, “Ha-tanse lu mufi an-golan” On and on she cries, and the words blend and dissolve in my mind. The chamber becomes blurry, as if a heavy mist was set upon it. I feel heavy, like a lead weight in my mind. I can’t hear her anymore, the words, I just see a mouth moving. Blah?

The book glows, the room glows, the Grand Sorceress glows. Everywhere there is an energy, a power, a glory. She lays her hand on my shoulders. “In this turn of the moon,” her sounds resounds through the glow, they seem to be one, “let this old shell be broken, and a greater one made anew.” Suddenly, she is here. With me. In my mind, I can feel her like never before. What is this? This is me.

Who are you? I am the new you, the Power and the Glory. What about me? All that is you shall be joined with me, and we shall be one. There is no you, no me. I don't want this! Get out of my mind! It is also my mind. You didn't tell me it would be like this! You lied to me! Does it matter? I get what I want, you get to be center stage of the expression of the most ultimate Power and Glory in the universe. You can't ask for more than that.

Get out! Get out! Get out! The priest, I should have listened to the priest! We killed the priest. He's nothing but a worthless liar anyways. What could he offer us? Something! Freedom! Not this... Not this... This is our destiny. Already we are together, soon this discourse will be over. You can't hold out forever. Must... The heart... What did he say? Nothing important, I guarantee that.

"Only a heart of purity and goodness can overcome evil!" Meaningless words! Empty words! I am not evil. I will purify my heart and embrace goodness! With a mental shout, the link is broken. The Grand Sorceress is thrown away from me and hits the wall with a sickening thud. She crumples to the ground, breathing heavily. I hesitate only a moment, surely a moment too long, and then run for the door.

My hair raises, the air smells of sulfur. Engulfed by electricity, I flip off the ground as pain courses

through me and my body burns. I scream, piercing the darkness. Thud! My body strikes the cold, stone floor. The pain constrains me like ropes, but I manage to roll over to face her. Fully recovered now, she stands with a sour look. “Surely,” her voice is dark and angry, “You did not think your petty platitudes would be sufficient to free you? Your heart is not as strong as you think.”

The pain begins to subside, and I slowly stand. The Grand Sorceress smiles at me from across the room, then raises her hand. Suddenly, my feet are ripped from the floor and I slam into the wall, pinned by an invisible hand. “Let me go,” I start to cry, “I hate you! I hate this place!” I struggle hopelessly against the invisible force that holds me. “Stop it!” I yell.

“Fool!” she cries out, approaching me, “You have delusion. A delusion that you have a choice, that you are something. But you are nothing. You are a shell, a vessel for me to use, for me to be. You have begun to realize your magical potential, but do not think that it is anything compared to mine. I could destroy you instantly, but I have a better use for you.” I struggle, still suspended off the ground against the wall.

“Now,” she continues, “your end is at hand. Your mind will decrease, my mind will increase. For almost five thousand years now, this order has

continued from one master to the next; but really the body changes, but the master stays the same. Even now, the sequence will continue, as it has been, unbroken, since the beginning.” She lays her hands on me again, and this time, my mind cannot resist. Our thoughts are becoming one, the unification is at hand. Footsteps. Slow, methodical footsteps. Someone approaches in the darkness. The Grand Sorceress is distracted, and her connection broken.

A robed man, with a cane, hobbles slowly into the room. A dark hood covers his head, and his walk is unsteady. The Grand Sorceress backs into the center of the room, uncomfortable. Her attention turned, she releases me from the wall and I stumble to the floor. “Show yourself,” she calls out authoritatively. I smile. I have seen her mind, I know she is uncertain. She did not expect this. Although, I shift uncomfortably, neither did I. Who could this be?

He continues to hobble slowly, so feebly that even a slight breeze might knock him down. But the room is still and silent. His presence seems to override everything else here. Even the energy which filled the room seems to be pushed back in his presence. He raises his old, feeble hands to the hood, and pushes it back. The Grand Sorceress screams.

Behind the hood, the face is horrible. The entire jaw is ... is missing! A horrible twisted mass of scar covers the whole side and lower part of the face. "How... how can this be?" the Grand Sorceress cries out. "You were dead! We killed you! I saw you die!" I look harder at the old man... It is the priest! Father Amos Jacobs! He somehow survived... But that's impossible!

Although he has no mouth to move nor tongue to speak with, his voice fills the chamber. "Such is the Mystery of Faith!" He turns to me, and in his eyes I see the same compassion and care that was there from the beginning.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, tears in my eyes. "So sorry..."

"Run!" he says to me.

"NO!" the Grand Sorceress interjects, "he's mine! You cannot take him from me." Raising her hand, a bolt of brilliant electricity strikes against the old man like a wave crashing against rocks. And like the rocks, he stands unmoved. "You shall die!" she cries in rage, "You shall both die!"

Again and again she blasts him, the energy filling the room with a burning smell. He stumbles, I can see that he weakens. Yet still he withstands this awesome onslaught. "Run, go now," he says to me again. This time, I heed the call. Out the door,

leaving the tortured screams of the Grand Sorceress behind, I switch back and forth through the torch lit catacombs. Up stairs, through passageways, I am guided by some unknown force giving me direction. Finally, I arise into the main level and enter the main room of the castle.

Once again, my eyes fall upon the empty throne of the Grand Sorceress. But her throne is no treasure to me now—now that I know what she is and what she wants. She lied, even from the beginning, she lied. It was all a lie. Down the hallway, between the guardian figures, I run. The padded carpet springs in my step. Arriving at the great doors to the castle, I see a coat laying here on the floor. I slow, and pick it up. It is Father Jacob's coat. In a moment of pause, I realize he will not be needing it anymore; indeed, he left it here for me. Donning the coat, I burst into the night.

The snow has all gone, and the night is not as cold as it once was. With the coat, I am almost comfortable. Standing near the door is a white horse, a beacon in the night. I quickly climb on, and the horse begins to trot. Away from the valley of the castle, through trails in the mountains. The horse seems to know the way, and I rest in that assurance. The images flash in my head as the trail goes by. The Grand Sorceress in anger, in hatred. Attacking the priest. The priest standing his ground.

How could that be? What did he say? “Such is the Mystery of Faith.” A mystery it is, how someone could survive death and stand against such an enemy... But what is this faith? I shake my head. This faith is still beyond me, the words I do not understand and the touch I do not feel. I know mystery, yet I do not know faith.

~ IV ~

The
Peace
of
God

Chapter 17

Higher and higher the horse trots, without need for rest, water or food. I sleep, on and off, in the days that follow, yet I must admit I am without need or want. All around me the snow capped mountains shine in glory, and every step is a step onto holy ground. My mind tires, and I am done with conjecturing and fighting, with ruses and deceit. I rest, now, in the arms of an unknown angel who sustains the horse and me, and guides us.

Rounding a corner, a magnificent waterfall is revealed, thundering down the side of the mountain. At the base, the water pools in a deep, still and crystal clear pond. The horse stops and I dismount. Together, we drink from the perfect water. A verse echoes from the water, a verse taught to me by Reverend Lisa long ago, when I was only a child. “He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me.”

I am thoroughly refreshed by the water, yet I did not even know I needed it. The horse kneels for me, and I climb on. Rising again, it trots away, leaving the waterfall behind. We ride on, the scenery changing yet staying the same—always the

mountains. How far do these ranges extend? I can't even say how long it has been since I left the castle, and the Priest, behind. As the days pass, I tire more and more. Finally, as the sun begins to dip into the horizon, showering me with beautiful hues of red and purple, the horse stops outside a small shack. I slip off and approach. The shack is clearly hewn by hand, made of various logs. It's small, probably not more than eight feet on either side, with a small opening in the center of the roof, presumably a chimney.

I knock on the door. Silence. "Hello?" I call out. Silence. The horse watches me as I begin to pace back and forth. What to do now? The sun continues to dip low, the shadows become long and fill the landscape. I look to the horse, but I can tell it does not want to go on. This is the place, I can almost hear it saying, that I was to bring you. I turn back to the shack, and try the door. It swings open without resistance, and a waft of incense passes my nose for an instant. It is now clear why no one answered my call or knock: There is no one here. In the center of the shack is a small fire-pit, currently cold. Some grassy bedding lines one edge to my right, a number of clay pots line the far edge, and some kind of altar is to my left. The altar is a simple thing - upon two large rocks sits a plank of wood, on which sits three clay bowls: flowers on the left, water in the center and incense on the right.

My attention is quickly drawn instead to an open pot near the bedding. Inside is a variety of fruits and dried meats. Suddenly, I realize how hungry I am. How many days has it been since I ate? Or maybe that was a hallucination! It doesn't matter; I stumble in, letting the door close behind me, and begin to eat the food waiting here. Having stuffed myself, I lay down on the bedding, very tired as night finishes its coup over day.

The smell of cooking meat awakes me from my slumber. Sunlight shines through the cracks in the walls and I can hear birds chirping outside. The smell seems to be coming from outside the door. Getting up, I can hear a fire crackling. Last night... Was peaceful! Ever since I left the castle, in fact, I have had no dreams and no visions of the Grand Sorceress. Perhaps now... I shift uncomfortably. Perhaps she waits outside. To laugh at me, collect me and return me to the castle. Surely, she would not be too far behind me. The old priest could only stand against her for so long. Now she has found me, come to finish the job. To use me as a tool for whatever her crazy purposes are. Maybe, I back against the far edge of the shack, maybe she will take me back to that deep chamber, but this time, there will be no one to save me from her. No one will rescue me from her all invading mind, taking over my every thought and sensation.

There is, however, no way out except the door. And even if there were, surely she would pursue. Gathering what little strength and courage I have, I open the door and step into the sunlight. The light hurts my eyes, and I squint. I can see a fire burning, and a rabbit suspended by a stick over the fire. A figure sits next to the fire, tending it. She looks up at me. "Good morning," she says, "I hope you slept well." She acts as if my appearance is nothing out of the ordinary.

It is not the Grand Sorceress, nor Shyndia. Who, then, is this? Her hair is long and unkempt, and her face and hands are dirty. Her body is covered with a simple dress made from animal furs. She's definitely got the homeless raised by animals look going on. "Would you like some breakfast?" she asks.

"OK," I say, sitting down. What else could I say? No? As I sit, I notice the priest's beautiful horse is gone. I didn't tie him up or anything last night... he must have wandered off. She tears off a piece of cooked rabbit and hands it to me. Not quite up to par with the food I've become accustomed to, I accept it gingerly, but then find myself hungrily devouring it.

"If you eat too fast," she observes calmly, "you will become ill." We eat in silence save the sounds of chewing; myself vigorously, her quietly and paced. She seems preoccupied, intently focused.

Upon finishing, I ask her the question I now fear. “Who are you?”

She reflects for a moment. “My name is Yevi. I am a seeker.”

Right. “Seeker of what?”

“When I was little,” she speaks softly, “my mother was very ill, in a coma and on the edge of death. My father left her in the care of her sister, and took me to the top of a mountain. There we prayed, together, for seven days and nights. When we returned on the eighth morning, my mother’s sickness had gone, and she was stronger than ever. Her sister told us that it was that morning, at the first light of dawn, when my mother came out of the coma and was completely healed. She died several months later after having made her peace with herself. Later, my father was killed in a car accident by a drunk driver. Completely senseless, I was torn up inside. I couldn’t go on with life, and I almost killed myself. In the darkness of despair I returned to that very mountain to seek the same love which had healed my mother so many years earlier.”

“Did you find it?” I whisper. The mystery of faith...

“I prayed for seven days and seven nights, and on the eighth morning, at the first light of dawn, my father appeared to me.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing. I called out to him, ‘Father!’ and fell at his feet, sobbing. He reached down and touched me with the abiding love that only a true Father can. I looked up and saw him smile. At that point, all my pain and sorrow was washed away. He vanished, and I haven’t seen him since. But when the wind blows,” she leans back, staring into the sky, “I can hear his words, and when the rain falls, I can feel his touch.” She looks at me, “Since that day, I remained here, on the mountain, in this very place.”

I pause, digesting this incredible tale. “Why are you still here? What more is there?”

“Why would I leave? This is my true home, my temple, the temple of my Father.” Our Father... This is such a different Father than I have ever known. “You are stranger,” she continues, “I do not even know your name, yet you are here, surely for a reason.”

“I’m Brian,” I say shyly, “I’ve been, well, I mean... you wouldn’t understand.”

“Indeed,” she nods, “No one can truly understand another.”

“I’ve seen some really weird stuff,” I look down, and start playing with a stick. I shouldn’t tell these things to a stranger, yet I so much want to just be free of all these burdens.

She nods.

“I’ve been running,” I say, “first from a life that was falling apart, then from a friend who turned out to be not who I thought she was, then back to her, then away again. It’s all been so unreal. You know,” I half laugh, “I never really believed in God or the devil, but I’m starting to wonder if maybe they are real.”

“Maybe they are,” she says.

“I just don’t know,” I whisper. “I have seen the mystery of faith, but I don’t really know faith.”

“It seems to me things are not always as simple as we like to think. If there is a flood, and someone drowns, is that the work of God or the devil? What if the same flood rejuvenates a parched field, saving a farmer’s crop?”

“It’s more than that,” I shake my head, “I saw weird stuff. I mean, like magic and supernatural and all that.”

She smiles. “What is the difference between natural and supernatural? Between magic and mundane? Only our own understanding, our own senses, our own feelings. To one person, all things are mundane. To another, all things are sacred.”

“Look,” I wave my hands a little, “I just don’t want to go there. I don’t have to think about it

anymore, and I'm not going to, any more than I have to."

"The past will never leave you," she says, solemnly, "If you ignore it, it remains. If you fight it, it grows stronger. Only by reconciliation can your past be healed."

"You can't be reconciled to what I knew! I knew evil!"

"So against evil you would lash out with more evil?"

"I don't know..." I shake my head, "Maybe I don't know the difference between good and evil anymore." I look at her. "What do you think? What is it that makes some thing or some person evil? I just seem to never know, I keep going here and then there, uncertain, rejecting what turns out to be good and embracing what turns out to be evil."

"If I knew all things good and evil, then I would no longer be a seeker."

"I don't want to seek, I just want to know! I've been seeking, seeking, searching, searching," I start to cry, "this whole life of mine I've been wandering and looking for... for whatever it is... for something..."

"For the one who looks and searches for you," she whispers.

“Maybe... I don’t know... I just want to be done. To know, to have the faith, to have the right answers, to be done seeking.”

“All people, I believe, are seekers at all times. People are never fulfilled, never have enough. Always people will continue to seek. Whether they seek for material things, wealth; or for spiritual things, peace; or perhaps for power, there is never enough to satisfy people. Always we continue to seek. I, too, continue to seek, and will forever. I can only pray my path will remain seeking after good rather than self.”

“What’s wrong with seeking after self? What’s wrong with wanting to be fulfilled and happy?”

“Nothing is wrong with that,” she smiles, “I don’t believe so, anyways. But I have found in my experiences that if you try to pursue happiness by doing whatever feels good, you will end up quite unhappy indeed. The world is greater than any individual, and we are all tied together. So if any one seeks just for themselves, they are cutting off the bonds that connect them to the rest of us.”

“But look at you, here in this mountain... Aren’t you cutting the bonds?”

“Perhaps,” she nods, “I will not deny my many flaws. But perhaps by welcoming all those who

come here, like yourself, I can help to patch the bonds just a little.”

“I’ve had some really different people try to teach me their way of... of being fulfilled. But it never worked out.”

She smiles. “I don’t think I would want anyone telling me that only this or that way works. My relationship to the greater is my own. Likewise, I can’t tell you how or what to do. I can tell you what I have found helpful, but it might not be the same for you.”

“Well,” I say, “Why don’t you show me something I can try?”

The fire has reduced to some smoldering embers, and Yevi stomps it until the last embers are gone. “Come inside,” she motions me, “I’ll show you a prayer-meditation that I’ve worked out.”

Chapter 18

The incense smoke rises and twists in front of my eyes. Like the Eternal, it is barely visible yet fully present. My prayers and meditation ended, I step out into the warm summer day. Several months, at least, have passed since my arrival here. Spring became summer as Yevi and I walked together in this journey. She has taught me about herself, her journey, about the God, the Eternal, about kindness and compassion. Together we have walked long through the woods and she has shown me many sacred places; cathedrals of the forest. I reflect on the time passed; from the earliest moment when I found the hut to today. We are so alike, it seems, having been turned out from the world and yet not home elsewhere. But still, it seems that something is lacking...

“You look contemplative this morning,” Yevi startles me, coming from the woods behind me.

“I suppose so.”

She sits. “What’s on your mind?”

“I don’t know. I really feel like it has been great being here. So peaceful and fulfilling. And yet, I feel like...” Like what?

She nods, “Something remains.”

I look up at her. “Follow me,” she says, rising and walking into the forest. I am stunned for a moment, but quickly gather myself and trot after her. She leads me up and away, along a new path that I have never walked before.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“Of all the holy places I have shared, there remains one that I withheld.”

“Why?”

“It is meaningless until one is ready to see it.” In the distance, I hear water rushing.

“You think suddenly I’m ready? How do you know?”

She turns back for a moment with a smile. “I don’t. No one can ever know the heart of another. From your words and your expressions, today and as of late, I think this will help.” The sound grows louder as we approach.

Lofting a crest, I find myself standing at the edge of a ravine, a chasm about fifty feet across. In the depths below, a river thunders through the rocky bed, erupting white spray into the sky. I watch this, overwhelmed by the intense power constrained within such a small space. Yevi pauses with me for a moment. “Come,” she then says, “for we are almost there.”

We walk along with the chasm, and the loud roar of the water continues to increase, almost to deafening volume. I reach to cover my ears, but Yevi seems unaffected, as if she doesn't even notice the noise. Finally, we reach a spot where the chasm widens for only twenty feet or so. In this wide spot, the water swirls in a massive vortex. Even though it must be two hundred feet down, the spray reaches our faces easily. "What is this?" I ask in awe.

"The vortex," she exclaims, "is yourself. You think you are at peace, that everything is good and fine. But really," she looks into the depths, "you are filled with a raging turmoil that is only made worse by the constraint which you have put on it."

I stare into the roaring waters, taken by the intense power and sound thrashing about and yet contained. "How do you know?" I ask.

"When you first came, I told you my story. But of course, that was not the whole story. Always, there is something more. The part we don't mention for fear of ridicule, or worse."

"What is it?"

She stares into the chasm for a moment. "After I saw my Father, I became upset that He didn't return. Frustration was followed by anger. I felt that my Father had betrayed me and left me alone to die. And yet, I bottled this up inside, pretending it wasn't

there, even to myself. Even though there was no one around to see me, I acted as if I was happy and everything was perfect. Yet as the days went by I grew increasingly despondent. My facade began to fail. I tried to pray, but I could not. Finally, I went to leave the mountain; but I was confused by my anger, became lost, and found myself here at the vortex.”

“I see,” I whisper.

“There’s something more,” she adds, “for I did not realize what the vortex really was. I saw it as a physical thing, surely, but not as myself. I thought there was only one way to see my Father again, to end my anger and sadness.”

For a moment, there is silence. “What did you do?” I finally ask.

“I jumped,” she says, matter of factly.

“But,” I object, “nobody could survive that fall! And even if you did survive, the vortex would tear you up and pulverize you against the rocks!”

“You are right,” she says. “The moment my feet left the ledge, I knew I had made a mistake; a mistake I could not undo. As the mist and water got closer, all the sorrow and anger I had been covering up burst free. I was, for the first time, completely broken. The fall seemed to last forever, and I cried and screamed and everything inside of me poured

out. I realized that I hated my Father, and yet loved Him at the same time. I tried to cover up the negative, but that only made it stronger. As the bottom of the canyon approached, the waves of the vortex seemed to reach up to snatch me from the air. It was at that moment that I saw...”

“Saw what?” I ask.

“A daffodil,” she smiles.

“A ... daffodil?” I had been hoping for some great vision or something.

“Solitary, growing on the bank of the river, with the water splashing all around it.”

“I haven’t seen any daffodils around here,” I mention as I look around.

“They don’t grow here,” she adds.

“Ok... Interesting.” I think I’m losing the plot. What’s her point?

“When my mother died, my father and I buried her ourselves. My father planted daffodils over her body, and from that time forward, that was always our flower. For every birthday, at Christmas and other times, he would buy me daffodils.” She smiles. “It was his way of saying he loved me.”

For a moment we stare into the canyon.

“So...”

“That was the last thing I remember. I woke up some time later here, back at the top of the ledge, completely soaked.”

“Wait... How did you get back up here?”

She smiles. “It is the mystery of faith, to use your terms.”

We wait in silence for a few moments. Finally, I speak. “Why did you decide to show this to me?”

“Because I think you have a vortex within yourself just as I did. I think you’re trying to cover it up and pretend that everything is OK, but it’s not.”

Everything is ok... Everything is fine... I mean, yeah, I guess I do feel a little troubled every now and then... But what can I do about it? I’m already doing everything I can, right?

“I really think,” she says slowly, “that you are just covering up the hurt you think you left behind. I think you need to face it.”

“How?”

“You need to forgive her. You need to forgive the Grand Sorceress.”

I stare into the surging waters. I find myself searching the banks for a daffodil, but see none. “I don’t know if I can,” I finally say, coldly.

“I think you should go to her, meet her and forgive her.”

“In person? Are you insane? She would destroy me!”

“No,” Yevi shakes her head. “You’ve already said that love is enough to stop her in her tracks. You are hurting, yes, but you have gained a lot of love in the past couple months. I’ve seen the difference.”

The vortex screams and roars. Wouldn’t it be nice to be like Yevi, to just jump off and have all my problems solved?

“I can’t tell you what to do,” she continues, “but I think you should consider the sacrifice the priest made for you, and how important love really is. Even if you die, at least you do so being a carrier of love.”

“As opposed to a coward,” I finish.

“Think about it,” she says. With that, we leave the chasm behind, pass through the woods and finally return to our home. Our home... Really, it’s her home. I’ve just taken to calling it ours even though I neither selected the site, nor gathered the materials, nor did any construction. We eat dinner in unusual silence, and that night I am unable to sleep. I get up late and step out into the moonlight.

The summer night is clear and cool. The moon, currently nearing full, shines down and illuminates

the forest and surrounding mountains. It seems so radiant and peaceful, like this is the height of perfection. But still, Yevi is right. There is a strong turbulence deep inside me. People I've never forgiven... Like Sandy... I hope she's happy now. I really do. I'll never see her again, I know. But that's OK, as long as she can be happy.

As for the Grand Sorceress... I shake my head. I just can't find it in my heart to forgive her. Returning inside, I pray and meditate at the altar for some time. How long? Who can tell? In the stillness, I feel the voice which I have heard from the beginning. The voice which tells me that I must forgive. I must go back, an emissary of love.

The next morning, Yevi awakes to find me preparing a pack. "I am going," I say.

"I wish you the best," she takes my hand, and we sit for a moment in silence.

"I ... I need directions," I say, mildly embarrassed.

"Of course," she says. "Her castle is not so far from here as you might think. I found it by accident a while ago, and have stayed clear ever since." She proceeds to give me directions, and off I go. "The journey should not take you long," she says, "for this is the most direct way, unlike the wanderings of the horse which brought you here. A few days on foot, probably."

“If I don’t see you again,” I say, slightly choked up, “I want to thank you for everything.”

“I thank you,” she says, “You have been a great blessing to me.”

There is nothing more to be said, it seems. So off I go. My time outside as of late has made me far more comfortable with nature, and now I seem to easily find water and things to eat without even trying. The path seems obvious. I orientate myself by the mountains around me. On the way in, they all seemed the same. Now I can see the subtle differences that distinguish one from the other. Before, all plants were the same. Now, each kind of plant sticks out, and I know plants which are healthy, unhealthy and neutral. I recognize animal tracks and follow them to water and trails. The days pass, but I don’t mind sleeping outside. My path takes me down into the valley, and as I approach the final ridge, I feel my stomach turn uneasily. In less than an hour her castle will be in sight, and from there, it will not be long before I stand in her hall again. I had long hoped never to see this place again, but here I am, going back with a message so important I must accept death for it.

Chapter 19

Cresting the last hill, the valley bursts into view. Immediately, however, I feel that something is wrong. My pace falters, and for a moment, I stare, motionless, down into the valley. The castle is there, but it looks... old. Very old. It's difficult to say for sure, but it looks like one part may have even collapsed. The orchard that used to flourish even in the dead of winter is now withered. Among all of the trees, not even a single one looks healthy. I hurry down the switchbacks into the valley. Where the stables once stood, now I see only a pile of rotting wood. The castle itself is practically overgrown with vines and bushes. The giant stones which seemed new and perfect when I was here only months ago now look as if they have aged centuries. They are worn, rounded and covered in moss. I reach out impulsively and touch one, as if to prove to myself that this is real. The grandiose entryway is gone; in its stead, a gaping maw leads into the castle. The archway which held the doorway has partially collapsed, with several large stones lying broken nearby.

I stop under the broken archway, amidst the shattered stones. The air is silent and motionless. Even more, my mind is silent and motionless. I should have heard her voice in my head by now.

She would have seen me coming. Here I am, within her reach, and yet there is nothing. Silence. Decay. Death? Could the Grand Sorceress have died? Perhaps the ritual attempt was not simply one of opportunity, but of necessity. How can I forgive a dead person?

With the weight of these troubled thoughts, I step across the boundary. The once plush carpet is ruined, reduced to a torn and tattered figment of its former glory. The torches in the candelabras are extinguished and in some cases missing. The suits of armor which once guarded this hallway with dignity are now fallen onto the floor, broken and rusted. Some parts have disintegrated completely, leaving only a reddish-brown stain in their wake. I climb carefully over them and proceed toward the main room.

The main hall is still intact, although the glory just seems to have been sucked out of it. The seal on the floor is drab and faded, the stones that make it up cracked and dirty. One of the staircases looks quite unsafe, and the railings are gone from both of them. The throne remains, but is now just a stone seat, stripped of its majesty. Upon the throne is seated a figure quite unlike any I had expected to see.

She lifts her head slowly, as if it causes her great pain. "...” she whispers something, but I cannot hear. Her face is gaunt and stretched, twisted and

wrinkled like putty left in the sun. Her white hair frizzles sparsely; most of it seems to have fallen out. She wears only a tattered robe which conceals a thin, frail frame. I approach slowly, staring into her recessed eyes. Where have I seen this face before?

“I knew you would come,” she croaks at barely above a whisper, “You don’t know how hard it has been to hold on, but I have. Here you are, finally. I knew you would come back.”

I am stunned beyond words. This is her, the Grand Sorceress. Yet, only months ago she was young and beautiful, strong and supple. Now she appears old beyond years, and completely at a loss of her faculties. “Grand Sorceress, what has happened?”

“No,” she shakes her hand slightly, and then breaks into a fit of coughing, keeling over. I help her sit back up, and she continues. “I have lost that title, and I am glad of it. What I have retained has been solely that I might see you one last time, so that...”

“What is this!?” a voice booms in the hallway. I spin, stumble, and end up on the floor next to the throne. Shyndia approaches boldly. Her face is filled with a rage unlike any I have seen from her before. “What have you done?” she addresses me. “You will not survive.” From her elaborate cloak, she withdraws a dagger.”

“Wait,” the Grand Sorceress croaks.

Shyndia stares at her. “How have you allowed yourself to be corrupted to the point of sacrificing yourself to this imbecile?” Shyndia shouts, “Look at you! What happened to the Power and the Glory? Surely this fool’s nonsense talk did not convince you, the greatest of us all, to give up your position?”

“I have given up nothing,” she replies, quietly and slowly, “I lost it, and having seen the outside world again, I would never desire it again.”

“You speak like a crazy old woman,” Shyndia scoffs, “Forget this fool,” she motions to me, “he’s obviously not working out. You must use me for the transmission. The lineage must not be broken.”

The Grand Sorceress shakes her head, and coughs. “The line is gone,” she replies after a pause, “I have nothing to transmit.”

“This is impossible,” Shyndia begins to pace nervously, wringing her hands, “Completely impossible. Cannot happen. The line cannot be broken. The line has never been broken. Never! In all history, from the first Prophet to this very day the line has never been broken!” She rushes up, knocking me aside, and grabs the Grand Sorceress. “Do you hear me!?” she yells into the Grand Sorceress’ face, “The line has never been broken!”

Her screams echo off the old walls, and several small pebbles fall from invisible crevices.

Yet the Grand Sorceress seems unmoved, as if she hasn't even been listening.

“A Prophet!” Shyndia cries out, releasing the Grand Sorceress. “This is the right time! Yes, surely that it is! The line has left you because the Fifth Prophet has come!”

The Grand Sorceress shakes her head slowly, but Shyndia pays no heed.

“Tell me,” Shyndia grabs the Grand Sorceress again, and in a low voice, she asks, “where can I find the Prophet?”

The old woman begins to laugh, or perhaps she is coughing; it is difficult to tell. “Do you see,” she whispers roughly, “any Prophet here?”

Shyndia releases her into the back of her chair abruptly and stands. “You have betrayed us,” she says, twirling her dagger in her hand, “you have sold out. Thousands of years we have followed this great path of freedom, and you end it for us.” Shyndia paces for a moment. The Grand Sorceress' eyes follow her every step. “Don't think this will really be the end though,” Shyndia starts up again, waving the dagger, “Lilith will send another Prophet!”

The Grand Sorceress shakes her head, “You know that no Prophet has ever come about in that way. The line is ended. It is finished.”

For a moment, there is stillness and silence. Shyndia and the Grand Sorceress seem locked into an eternal stare-down. Suddenly Shyndia erupts, diving toward the Grand Sorceress and driving her dagger into the Grand Sorceress’ chest. A stain of red blood begins to spread through her robes around the wound. “Enjoy your time in hell,” Shyndia spits, “because you aren’t going anywhere else.”

Shyndia then turns to me. I should be afraid. I should run away and not look back. But I’m not. I expected death coming here. Not this, definitely not this, but still... “Shyndia,” I cry, looking down at the gasping Grand Sorceress, “Why have you done this?”

Shyndia spits in my face. She tries to say something, stumbling over her words, then without warning runs toward the entrance. “I hate you all!” she screams, her anger mixed with tears. Her sobs echo off the walls as she runs down the dilapidated hallway to the outside. My thoughts remain with her for a moment, then quickly revert to the Grand Sorceress.

She is covered in blood. The gleaming yet tarnished dagger is still stuck in her. Staring at her, I see my mother. So much blood. Mommy... “You

can't die," I take her hand and cry, "please don't die. Mommy, don't do this to me again. Don't leave me again. I promise to be good. I'm sorry mommy."

The light in her eyes dims, but still she looks at me. "It's OK," she says slowly. Blood drips from the corners of her mouth. "I waited for you. For you to kill me. It was your right, not hers. My repentance cannot undo my debt to you." She coughs, and blood drips down onto the edge of the chair. I am not disgusted.

"I don't want to kill you," I whisper, crying, "I came to forgive you."

She looks at me, straddling the border between here and the netherworld. "I forgive you," I whisper the words that had been rolling over and over in my head over the entire journey. "I forgive you," I cry.

"Then I am truly free," she slurs, "I have no fear of this death, for the path of love has been shown to me."

"How?" I ask, "How did this happen?"

She pauses for a moment. Drip, drip goes the blood. "You," she finally coughs, "the moment you touched me with true goodness, I was broken. By the time you were at the door, I had lost it. My powers were simply gone. I am," she coughs, "so old. Older than you can understand. And yet the

light is within me, I have the strength to live even though I should be dead.”

“The Priest?”

She shakes her head slowly. “He died. I killed him. You killed him. When I understood, I tried to save him, but it was too late. Too late...” Her voice trails off.

“All my magic,” she resumes, “is all gone. My appearance was all fake, this castle held together by magic. All gone. I am glad it is gone. The line is broken, such destruction is finally ended.” Drip, drip. “I am glad you came,” she says, absently, “I am glad to see you again.”

“Grand Sorceress, I’m so sorry...” I begin.

“No,” she says, “that is not my title, that is not me. My name is...” She pauses, as if to search her memory. “Ellen,” she says finally, “I have not used it in so long, I almost forgot.” She smiles.

“Ellen,” I whisper.

“I am like a baby,” she says, “I know nothing at all. Do you think there is a life after this one?”

“I... I don’t know, really,” I stammer. Who am I? She’s the one who should know all these things!

“I hope so,” she nods. Her eyes dim further. “I hope to show the love and forgiveness to others that

you have shown to me. You,” she coughs. Drip, drip. “You are my savior.”

Uh... What am I supposed to do with that? “No, no,” I start, “I’m just... just like you.”

She smiles weakly, “I knew you would say that. Tell Shyndia that I forgive her.”

“Of course,” I nod. Do I mean it? Will I actually track her down?

“Goodbye, Brian,” a single tear drops onto her cheek. The first time I have ever seen her cry.

“Ellen...” I whisper.

The dim light in her eyes goes dark, and Ellen, the Grand Sorceress, leaves the Earthly plane. I cry. How long do I hold her cooling hand and cry? I can’t count the hours. I see the blood all over her, just like mom, when she lay dead on the floor. So much blood. It’s on my hands, the chair, the floor. Somehow, she is different. In her death there was a ray of hope, a ray of understanding. I can’t explain it, but it’s the smile, the joy. Mom never had that. Mom died hopeless and alone.

I stay the night, sleeping at the foot of her dead body. The body of someone who hated me then loved me, who was evil then good. What is evil? What is good? What is death? It does not seem like a tragedy, but merely a step, another change in the every changing vortex of life. The sun rises. I bury

the body in the orchard, at the foot of the tree where she first brought forth the magic fruit. “Perhaps you will again bring forth fruit,” I whisper, “in another way.”

Shyndia is gone. Where would she go? Could I ever find her? Every moment leaves with me more questions than answers, but yet, also a deeper peace and understanding of this world. I set off in early afternoon, leaving the valley behind, on my way back to Yevi. Yet I am not the same one who left Yevi to come here; these events, I reflect, were so unexpected as to shake me to the core. Who am I, really? Surely not a savior.

Chapter 20

As the days pass, I can tell something has changed. The trees sway in the wind as they always do, and the birds chirp as they always do. Yet something is different. There seems to be an intense peace, an intense quiet everywhere here; the sounds of my footsteps, snapping twigs and rustling leaves, the sounds of birds and animals, these are all echoes in a great silence. Yet this silence is not dark, but light; it dances with me and swirls around me. I stop for a moment to rest, and sit on a fallen tree, covered over with moss. The world seems so bright, so ... excellent. I check my foodstuffs to make sure I haven't accidentally included any hallucinogenic mushrooms. Nope, everything is as it should be. Life is as it should be. What does this mean?

My path deviates, and I find myself walking toward the canyon. In the distance, the roar of water sounds as always, yet it is not the same. Before, I heard agitation, now I only hear water being water. I come out of the forest alongside the canyon. In its depths, the water flows, splashes, and jumps through the rocky canyon. It is like a symphony, with each eddy, hole, wave and water droplet an instrument. And finally I come to the widening of the canyon where the great vortex swirls. But yet, as I approach, I do not hear its roar.

The river noise seems to subside as I approach, like a bubble of peace in a constantly changing world. Looking down, now, into the canyon where the vortex once roared I see a pool; silent and clear. From upstream, water rushes in but is instantly calmed. Downstream, water silently drops out of the pool and begins its turbulent existence once again. The vortex is now the cathedral, I muse, stoic, beautiful and deeply silent.

“Things have changed,” I am not startled to hear Yevi’s voice behind me. She walks up beside me. I see her move as if a ghost in water.

“What has happened?” I ask in awe.

She looks at me and smiles. “What words can describe things as they are?”

I look into the deep canyon. “It is still,” I say.

Her eyes fall upon the river upstream and downstream. “It is turbulent,” she says.

I look up. The sun is deep in the western sky, and darkness will soon be here. “It is cold,” I say.

She looks at the sun, and squints. “It is warm,” she says.

“Things have changed,” I conclude. What has happened? The world seems different somehow.

“Things have stayed the same,” she replies.

“The vortex is myself,” I recall Yevi’s words from before I had left.

She nods, “In the past, you had a false peace. Now, you have touched true forgiveness, accepted it and given it, and you can be at peace. Even with turbulence all around, the pool is still.”

The next day, Yevi and I return to the canyon to prepare a memorial for Ellen. With the juice of crushed blackberries, I inscribe her name on a stone, and burn incense there. “It’s such a pity,” I say to Yevi, “she died just as her heart changed. She never got a chance to make right any wrongs, to seek forgiveness or do anything besides become weak and die.”

Yevi places some fern branches around the memorial stone. “Some things are beyond understanding,” she says, “Her heart was pure; there will be forgiveness, some day, some how.”

In the past, I muse, I probably would have challenged her, demanded an explanation or started an argument. Now, I have nothing to say. Like a water jug in the desert, I am empty, yet being empty I also am full.

The day passes and we leave the stone behind. The rain will wash away all traces of the memorial, but it will always exist. Another day, another night, and they are beautiful, endless and free.

The shack is small; too small for both Yevi and myself. Collecting fallen trees from the forest over several months, we build a new cottage. Most of the time is spent foraging for supplies, of course, and some days nothing gets done. Yet this does not matter, nor is there any concern. By the time fall comes, the cottage is complete. We prepare a larger sleeping mat and a new altar.

One morning, early, I go to the canyon to meditate and pray. The silence of the pool is so rich and full, it easily drowns out the roar of the turbulence. I find myself at the memorial, with the stone, the writing faded and blurred from the occasional rains. I take it back with me and place it on the altar.

As the months go by, it becomes apparent that Yevi is pregnant. Totally natural, yet unexpected. Yevi seems brighter every day, and I feel certain this child of ours will be a great blessing. Winter passes, food is more and more difficult to find, yet always we have enough. The fire burns and animals give themselves as necessary to feed us. Spring comes, life is reborn; flowers bloom, trees bud and birds chirp. Now also, Yevi gives birth to our daughter. Washing her clean, I ask an exhausted yet smiling Yevi, "What should we name her?"

"I have an idea," Yevi replies.

“So do I,” I say. I am afraid to say it. Why? After all this, am I still afraid of misunderstanding?

“Ellen,” Yevi says, echoing my thoughts.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Some things are beyond understanding,” she says, laying her head back.

“Like a little girl,” I whisper. Yet this place, this wilderness is unforgiving. I love, yet fear. My peace is almost perturbed by these thoughts, and I sway back and fro. “I hope she grows up strong and healthy,” I whisper, rocking the baby in my arms. She cries only a little.

“Yet even so, she may die. The Lord giveth,” Yevi quotes, “and the Lord taketh away.”

I stare in the crystal-blue eyes of my daughter. She blinks, squirms, and closes her eyes. “Blessed be the name of the Lord,” I finish.

“All things you have been through, all your pain and suffering, has all been for one thing,” Yevi says, “for the gaining of the grace to say those very words, to understand them and mean them.”

Yevi rests, falling into a peaceful sleep. Her breathing matches the breathing of Ellen; they sleep in unison while I sit under the warm spring sun in the greatest peace the world will surely ever know.