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Stories of The Re-awakening

A Thesis Submitted

by

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Chapter 1

Artist Statement

Introduction

The manuscript that I will write for my thesis lands in the realm of science fiction/fantasy for a young adult to teen audience. A young adult to teen audience typically ranges from the ages of twelve to eighteen years old. The reason for appealing to this audience is one that makes sense to me, in part, because most of this genre of literature is relatively clean and devoid of unnecessarily explicit details. Young adults and teenagers already have a lot to deal with at that time in their lives, especially with regards to some derogatory and immoral behaviors that have become more acceptable in modern society. However, those destructive behaviors should in no way be acceptable and positive fiction can help to shape a different narrative. Society attempts to mold young minds, in great part, because they are remarkably teachable, especially by people they admire and respect. Unfortunately, young people also tend to make uninformed and impulsive decisions, which can dramatically alter the course of their lives. Another factor that authors must keep in mind is that teens and preteens tend to be influenced more by others than their own parents. Most youth are attempting to solidify their own viewpoints and trying to align those viewpoints with others of their age to form some sort of a social support group. It is often their view of the world that determines which of those existing groups of friends has the greatest influence on their development.

Healthy Escapism

To survive those harsh years, a form of escapism can often become a necessary tool which can be used in helping them deal with complicated matters that are out of their control. Their decided forms of escapism can also help when making friends. In fact, quite often, friends share common interests in types of escapism and form bonds through that escapist ideology. Therefore, as a parent and a Christian, the responsibility to teach the younger generation life skills and moral lessons is imperative. However, in some cases, society has allowed this most recent generation to escape from the natural consequences of their own choices and actions. For example, coaches give trophies to every player, regardless of their attendance at practices, performance in a particular game or dedication throughout the season. Parents whine to principals when their child is suspended for starting a fight. Teen pregnancy is treated as normal and abstinence as an archaic construct. This lack of accountability is unacceptable. For any society to work in proper order, consequences must naturally come and follow bad choices that an individual or a society make. While my work will not focus directly on these social and moral issues, it will demonstrate to young readers what happens to the protagonist, antagonist and those around them when they make certain choices. Good decisions, bad decisions, or making no decision at all- each of those decisions have their own equal and opposite reactions.

Necessary vs. Unnecessary Profaneness

This is not the only reason I chose to address the young adult and teenage groups, however. I chose these age groups for my own comfortability as well. For example, I do not

believe it is necessary, as is graphically described in many adult novels, to write pages detailing sexual acts or unnecessarily grotesque violence. I also abhor the frequent use of explicit language and feel it is usually unwarranted in youth fiction. None of those things help to tell a story or create characters that are worthy of emulation. Instances of intense violence should only be used or shown to make a very particular point, drive the plot forward in necessary ways or tell important societal truths.

In Elie Wiesel's *Night* one can find an instance of showing just enough necessary violence. This book describes the very real and absolute horrors of Jewish concentration camps that existed during the reign of Hitler. At the end of *Night*, the main character describes himself in this way, "From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me" (Wiesel 133). For this ending line to have an impact on readers, the author needed to describe in earlier pages the horrors that were inflicted upon Elie:

One day when Idek was venting his fury, I happened to cross his path. He threw himself on me like a wild beast, beating me in the chest, on my head, throwing me to the ground and picking me up again, crushing me with ever more violent blows, until I was covered with blood. As I bit my lips in order not to howl with pain, he must have mistaken my silence for defiance and so he continued to hit me harder and harder. (Wiesel 71).

Night is a very real story about a real person, not a fairy tale, nevertheless, it does use extraneous violence in an acceptable way to make a point. In fact, if the author had disregarded the violence of the Holocaust, his book would have been disingenuous.

Fairy Tales and Morals

I am also motivated by the belief that morals can be taught through stories. Originally, the reasoning behind various fairy tales was to teach appropriate behavior and morality to children. The original *Grimms' Fairy Tale* from Germany, when translated into its English title, is actually titled *Children's and Household Tales* (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). These stories were clearly aimed towards teaching youth at a time when their characters and choices were malleable. Such tales also helped children to deal with the realities of losing a parent, with becoming lost and afraid, and of the dangers of trusting strangers in a sometimes-evil world.

Combining the Best of Both Worlds

As technology is advancing at such a rapid pace, I am also fascinated by the combining of science fiction with fantasy. Things that seemed fantastical only ten years ago have now become a reality, and science, when pushed to a certain level, can make something that seems to come from fantasy a literal reality. The possible destruction and reconstruction that science can provide to this world also interests me, as is evident in my thesis.

Christian Ideology

Being a Christian, however, I do not know all of the ways God works but considering that He is all-knowing and works for our good on a level that we do not fully comprehend, yet that does not mean we cannot comprehend parts of how some things work. Biblical healings and miracles happen using various different circumstances, some objects, the principle of faith,

prayer, laying on of hands and even the healed themselves often have to act. There simply must be things that God understands that humans do not yet understand. He understands that certain things have to work in a certain way. He is the eternal author that comprehends how elements must be used, combined or applied using certain principles to make them work as desired. This is also a wise principle to keep in mind while writing.

Thesis Manuscript World Justification

All of this leads to my manuscript introduction. The world, at this moment in history, is in a state of great unrest. Political and moral ideologies of what is good and what is evil are in a state of constant flux. As a Christian, those ideologies should not fluctuate. Those ideologies should align with the absolute judge of morality, God. Satan is constantly trying to blur the lines between what is right and what is wrong by portraying evil as good. Modern examples of this are the principles of homosexuality and gender, stealing and rioting for a supposed cause, dishonoring a father and mothers' sacrifices, believing there are no long-lasting consequences for wrong choices and violence such as genocide and abortion. It is a greater divide than I ever thought I would see in my own lifetime. The speed at which this moral decay is progressing is absolutely mind-boggling.

Thesis World Creation

Therefore, in my manuscript, the figurative button of our dystopian and potentially magical future has been pressed. At this point of time, with the limited information we have, we know that several particle colliders exist. The most notable of these colliders is the Hadron Particle Collider in Europe. China is working on a particle accelerator and there is a rumor that

America has already built a much smaller plasma-based particle accelerator. It is from these facts that I draw my scientific conclusions throughout my story. Most of these countries say that these particle accelerators are being built with good intentions and these machines will supposedly help scientists understand science on a molecular level. This is all of course being done for the purposes of a non-acknowledged greater good or purpose. While a good portion of this may indeed be conjecture, there is also some truth behind it, and the existence of particle accelerators is a fact. Nonetheless, what is being presented to the public is most likely only a portion of the truth behind what the actual purposes are for these particle colliders.

In my opinion, the power to divide and possibly unite varying particles is a type of “God science.” However, mortal men and women are not God. That being the case, they do not always have goodly or Godly intentions when creating such things. In the introductory thesis, due to a preemptive nuclear strike and the concept of Mutually Assured Destruction, the world faces the catastrophic repercussions of nuclear warfare. People still live, but their lives are shortened, and reproduction is limited due to the impacts of radioactive fallout. This is where the two ideas of world altering warfare and particle accelerators meet. If man can use science to divide or unite varying particles at an atomic or a subatomic level, would it then be possible to use that same technology to eliminate or change the form of radioactive particles? While most major cities in this scenario would be wiped out from nuclear war, the wildernesses of the world might still survive, however, they would be severely altered from radioactive fallout. From what is known, the current particle accelerator in Europe is built underground, so if the other accelerators were built similarly, they may survive nuclear blasts. My current thesis is only the beginning of a

series of novels, therefore, some details described from this point forward are only touched upon and will be described in detail as the story progresses. One of these is the gaming system created after the war that is supposedly meant to help incorporate individuals who fled the major cities into the country living lifestyle. It is essentially an outdoor VR (Virtual Reality) gaming system. Select wildernesses became designated as gaming dungeons or adaptability training and asset management simulations (ATAMS).

Factional Divide

Meanwhile, there are two main factions involved in pursuing this idea of cleaning the now radioactive world. One faction wants to use this particle acceleration technology to benefit themselves alone- the Investors. The other faction believes that such technology, along with all of the other emerging technologies, needs to be used for the benefit of mankind. Several characters in my thesis are aware that some scientists are trying to undo the damage caused by the nuclear fallout, but they are yet unaware how that actually occurs. On the eve of the first radioactive fallout extermination test, the particle colliding machines, along with the power plants that are being used to sustain themselves with clean energy, are sabotaged and activated worldwide at the same time by one of those factions. This creates a ripple effect that no one could predict. Coincidentally, or non-coincidentally, the VR systems were getting an update to effectively make the enemies, items and weapons within the game more realistic than virtual.

Virtual Reality Becoming a Reality

The updates to the VR systems were rolled out with the intention to fully incorporate into its systems a holographic and augmented design that uses objects as representations of actual

weapons, this update also allowed seamless merging into the surrounding environments. This update also included preserving and adding into its databases the stories of local mythologies. Although they are as yet unaware how it happens, the characters in my thesis discover that this perfect culmination of events has led to a preternatural rejuvenation of the earth and everything that lives on it, including themselves. The particles in the accelerators, and all over the Earth, collide and unite. With the help of this ATAMS update and the power surging, a figurative worldwide unpredictable bomb gets set off. These circumstances trigger changes all over the earth including the reemergence of what many consider to be supernatural powers or magic. The Earth and all its inhabitants are essentially resurrected from the nuclear holocaust.

Thankfully, a safeguard was built into the VR program which protects players from physically harming other players within its dungeons. It prevents players from dying, however, they can disappear from the game. The saboteurs responsible for this new world implemented and promoted various safeguards meant for themselves. However, not everyone will choose to live within those safeguards, and some will try to find ways around them.

Education and Conflict Resolution

In the midst of all the confusion that follows the rejuvenation, schools will be formed with the intention of helping people adjust to and learn how to use these new powers. These schools of the new order will also compete against each other as a source of conflict resolution. To harness these new abilities, a more practical application branch of ability usage will also be created. New governmental systems and forms of dispute resolution between countries will also be agreed upon. These agreements are put into place to prevent another nuclear-like, world

changing, extinction level catastrophe from happening ever again.

Students and Prologue Purpose

As instructed by their history professor, this manuscript is a collection of stories from a group of students who attend one of these universities and historical writings recovered after the renewal. Essentially, this thesis contains an introduction into this new world from the viewpoint of several key characters. By writing the beginning of my series as a prologue, introduction, memos and journal entries, it enables readers to understand the world they are walking into and the characters they will be traveling with on that journey. This is meant to help readers transition into this new world by sympathizing with the characters rather than allowing them to become completely lost in descriptions of the setting and backstory. When I introduced my first draft to a broader audience, they enjoyed reading it and appreciated the fairytale-like vibe that shined through its storytelling. However, a few readers mentioned that they felt a little lost in the world I had created, needed to connect with characters on a more personal level and that they needed the detailed setting of the story and its evolution to reveal itself to readers more gradually. As the author, I do appreciate that some information should be withheld from readers at the beginning of any book series. Nonetheless, a reader sometimes needs to be brought into a book with enough of an understanding of the setting and background that they feel welcomed into the world and stories I am creating.

Technology, Magic, and Christianity

In this way, science fiction can often be overwhelming and filled with unexplained

technology for many readers. Science fiction worlds can be infinite in their expansiveness and unlimited in its access to universes and planets. Still, amongst all the fantastical machinations of a human mind, the author must somehow keep their work singularly human and relatable.

Because of this, and the knowledge that many readers love a good fairytale filled with mythology and magical wonder, I have decided to merge the two sometimes interrelated genres. Unfortunately, particularly amongst Christians, there are a few of them who are very vocal in their opposition of magical powers, associating them with witches or the demonic. Nevertheless, by combining natural elements with the use of technology to create magic, I hope to eliminate some criticism from the Christian community. However, as a good portion of my inspiration comes from authors who rely upon elements of magic in their works and some in the Christian community have criticized their novels, I expect to receive some negative comments. For example, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series got me back into reading. People kept telling me how wonderful the books were, but when I watched the movies, I found them to be underwhelming. This led me to the conclusion that I needed to read the books. Love her or hate her, I will forever be grateful to Rowling for rekindling my interest in literature. Now fast forward a few years to the author Rick Riordan and the *Percy Jackson* series. In an English composition class, I had to select and write an essay about an author. I chose Rick Riordan. Through that essay and research, I realized how a writer could use authorial tools to get children, and in Riordan's own life his children, involved in the creative learning and writing process. He was originally a middle-school teacher who used mythology as a starting point to inspire students

to write their own “creative writing project” stories, based on mythological characters (Riordan Q &A).

Christian Perspectives in Fictional Writing

To see the Christian perspective in writing, one does not have to look any further than J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* or C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*. Both authors wrote stories about fantastical worlds, employ magic within their stories and have characters that represent Jesus Christ and His apostles. On a personal note, I even had a conversation about this topic with my son. He had just come home from school after watching *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. With my guidance, he was able to conclude that Aslan represents Christ (Lewis). This led me to conclude that my intent, as a Christian scholar, is not to write a story about a character that literally represents Christ. I would not be opposed to incorporating something akin to or reflective of the twelve apostles, but that is not my intent either. My intent is to write something that gives teens/pre-teens a form of escapism from the craziness of this morally declining world. I want to give them a series that teaches them a form of Christian morality without bluntly saying it is Christian. Rather, my goal is to teach them about the idea of an absolute morality that has been established by something far bigger than themselves.

Biblical Justification for Fairy Tales

Because I feel that I am skilled at writing fairy tale-like stories, I am choosing to incorporate some of those elements into my writing. Christ himself often spoke in parables or miniature stories with underlying themes and lessons. He taught valuable ethics through those

stories without directly explaining their underlying meaning to His audience. Christ was able to get the audience to think for themselves and draw their own conclusions- something I intend to draw upon.

Ultimate Publicity

One day, like all dreamers, I want my writing to be published as a series of books. Like most modern authors, I also hope that movies, TV series, video games or even board games about the world I have created will follow. However, as a Christian scholar, it is important to me to stress that these fictional things aren't always evil. In fact, they can be used as positive distractions and tools of learning. What can be evil, like most things, is how they are used or abused in pursuit of total escapism from reality. Life is meant to be enjoyed within certain bounds.

A Shared Creators Inheritance

God is the great creator of all. As the offspring of God, humans have been given creative minds that are imbued into their beings and in this we share a certain part with Him as we perform acts of creation. Some of those created things are impossible to grasp onto or obtain while in this Earth life. That impossibility only stems from the limited capacity that comes from the condition of mortality, and as such, those impossibilities can only be realized and created within one's own mind. Written language, however, allows mortal beings to put onto paper those impossible thoughts. Those written thoughts turn the human experience into something immortal. Through God, hard work and knowledge, some of those impossible thoughts may one day become possible. Nonetheless, as humans and the offspring of a supreme Creator, this

creative power is not just in our DNA, it is a part of our spirits. The desire to share in this power of creation, and the desire for such creative and limitless possibilities is essentially embedded into our minds and spirits. It is an inherited part of the human experience, and an inherited part for all of us who are the offspring of God.

None of us are on an equal level with our all-knowing Father. Nevertheless, God expects his creations to share in His joy and to have joy in our own creations. Simply put, however, words can last forever. When putting words down onto paper and into something that will possibly far outlast the writer of those words, the author must consider carefully what he chooses to write. Magic or miracles, technology or creation, science or fiction, fantasy or reality, none of those things are inherently evil. What is or can be evil is how those things are used and the appropriate or inappropriate lessons that can be gleaned from them. Writers must also be careful to avoid the self-aggrandizement that can stem from success and pride. The antidote to this is humility and acknowledgment of the God that gave me the desire, ability and hands to write my creation in the first place.

Chapter 2

Critical Paper

Setting, Characters, and Escapism: Vital Themes for a Fictional Best-Seller

Introduction to Some Best-Seller Themes

Crafting a bestseller in any form of literature can be difficult, but there are several vital components that, when they come together in popular fiction, work to formulate something readers cannot set down. When formulated correctly one can create a viable work of top tier writing. Two of these vital craft elements that will be discussed in this paper are the characters or characterizations and settings within a story. This piece will focus on the particulars of creating a fantasy/science fiction novel for young adults and teens. One of the issues with these particular age groups is that the writer should be limited to non-explicit details. Depending on the author, that could either be a benefit or a challenge. At these ages, forms of media, books and games are often used as a form of escapism from life's burdens. For a responsible author, the question then becomes: Is escapism appropriate? If that question is viewed from a Christian or religious perspective, the answer is yes and no. One reason for choosing this age range as an audience is that not only are they more teachable, but youth literature pieces also often reach a broader audience. This can be seen in the form of movies, streaming entertainment series and even video games. This can be seen through the proliferation of various forms of toys and other paraphernalia attached to works of teen and young adult fiction in print and media.

Morality in Creative Works

With the purpose of designing a successful work in mind, these craft elements may focus on implementing morality into literary pieces designed for a young adult or teenagers through heroes that stand as good examples of morality. This incorporation is similar to many childhood fairy tales, or even the parables found in The Bible. Each of these implements, lessons, or a moral within the tale, are often emphasized at the end of the story. This particular genre also tends to be read for many generations. Its reach extends through many years, rather than being consigned to the annals of pop culture. Examples of more modern works that encompass this ideology and are frequently read intergenerationally are as follows: Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Games*, C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter Series*, and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings*. Interestingly, all of the works listed are series rather than stand-alone novels. As noted by Kerrin, author of *The Pleasures of Writing a Series* for "Canadian Children's Book News," stated this about book series, "Sustaining conflict is most easily achieved by developing depth in a cast of characters, essentially a group that the reader wouldn't mind spending significantly more time with compared to a stand-alone novel" (Kerrin). Likewise, Kerrin states, "Parents and librarians support series because they are a proven way to engage children in reading" (Kerrin). The more engaged a reader is in a story, the more a reader can learn from that story. The brilliant use of locations and revolving characters who each have their own stories and backstories help to keep an audience reading

Fairy Tales

Although fairy tales are not a series of stories, such as the ones named above, fairy tales

also rely on building a recognizable world and morality code for children. This is often accomplished through potent, yet familiar characters that step out of their commonplace settings, ready to fight the foe of the story. Author and philosopher G.K. Chesterton asserts:

Fairy tales, then, are not responsible for producing in children fear, or any of the shapes of fear; fairy tales do not give the child the idea of the evil or the ugly; that is in the child already, because it is in the world already. Fairy tales do not give the child his first idea of a bogey. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of a bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon. (Chesterton qtd. in Nowak).

Every fairy tale needs a villain and a hero or heroine to slay them, a fact that many authors of youth fiction capitalize on.

Heroic Figures

In Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Games*, a heroine named Katniss, is thrust into action as a tribute for the society she lives in. In an act of self-sacrifice, Katniss decides to take the place of her younger sister as a tribute (Collins 22). This classic example is another theme that repeats throughout children's literature. In C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, young siblings are swept off to a mysterious world through a wardrobe, where they learn they are the prophesied rulers of that world. Aslan, a great and wise lion, acts as a direct representation of Christ in that world. Aslan ultimately sacrifices his own life for Edmund Pevensie's sins and is gloriously resurrected (C Lewis 71-88). Like Lewis's books, fairy tales are stories that contain elements of

good versus evil, with good represented through the characterization of the hero eventually conquering the evil enemy; this also conveys to readers that choosing good will have a positive outcome in the end.

A Love of Reading

Many youth fiction novels and series grow beyond simply teaching a morality lesson, however. Some works, such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series are responsible for helping many people establish a love of reading through these tropes. In this series, Harry Potter is an orphan who is protected and physically marked by his mother's love (Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone*). In the end, that love, and the love of his friends protects him and ultimately the entire world he lives in through his sacrifices as well (Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone and Deathly Hallows*). One of the primary keys to this connection readers feel to the series are central characters that carry these powerful themes and make them universal and relatable.

Religion in Fiction

Then there is the ultimate classic, the grandfather of all modern fantasy literature, which also strongly connects readers to its characters, which is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings*. Throughout this series, Frodo is an innocent and happy small little hobbit who accepts the unbearable burden of carrying and destroying a ring that corrupts everyone who touches it (Tolkien 55-84). This innocence and burden are yet another representation of Christ, one that could not possibly reach its audience effectively if readers could not emotionally empathize with Frodo and his friends. However, it is also wise to look at the whole series as a reflection of the

story of Christ instead of merely viewing Frodo as the only Christ-like character. Indeed, Tolkien does an excellent job of representing a misnomer in Jewish thought. For example, the Pharisees and Jewish rulers expected Christ to be a conquering king rather than a humble carpenter (*The Holy Bible* King James Version). While Frodo and Christ do conquer evil, the way they circumvent evil is not by becoming conquering commanders or knights with swords. Instead, their examples, sacrifices, and love for others accomplish this conquering evil goal. It is an interesting reflection on literature in general. There are also many other points and characters in *The Lord of The Rings* that could directly reflect New Testament characters such as Adam and the twelve disciples, each of whom also play their part in thwarting the proverbial dragon. What is evident in all of these works is that the characters reflect the better parts, and sometimes fallible parts, of human nature and teach something to their readers in the process. These authors prove to their audience that the enemy, and one's own demons, can be overcome.

Setting: Make Believe or Real?

Another craft element often present in young adult and teen fiction/science fiction is the author's ability to build upon an existing world, and sometimes even create a new world entirely. Particularly in science fiction, a palpable and enticing setting is one of the most important things to establish. In fact, in science fiction, a believable and fantastical setting seamlessly crafted by the author is an absolutely necessary part of any bestseller. The author must quite simply welcome the reader into a world forged by their own imagination. Whether that world exists in the future, the past, or a uniquely timeless universe is determined only by the limits of the author's writing. An article by Tanya Egan Gibson from *The Writer* journal discusses three

approaches to setting and the potential strengths and weaknesses of each. When one makes up a setting that doesn't exist, they need to make sure that it is believable enough to anyone that it could exist (Gibson). A good way to do this is to create certain details which "allow you to be playful, creative and even satirical" (Gibson). It is better to invent something possible than for a reader to recognize that the story is impossibly unreal "and wake...from the fictional dream" (Gibson). However, Gibson also advises, "When you keep it real," it can save "writing time and save your readers from pages of exposition" (Gibson). The benefit of this is a relatability to the readers that avoids unnecessary exposition which is an error that writers can sometimes make. However, a real setting can also impose restrictions upon a story that can either strengthen it and the protagonist, or do quite the opposite, particularly if the author makes a factual mistake. In the end, a mixture of the fictional and the nonfictional is another option altogether. Furthermore, the author mentions that in "Bringing fiction to life, in most cases, requires a blend of invention and fact. The real part of it makes the 'unreal' believable" (Gibson). Therefore, research is often a requirement for any fictitious piece of literature as everything from the laws of physics to historical context can play its part in establishing a realistic setting in an unreal world. As Gibson explains, "The more outrageous and eye-catching your made-up place is, the more it needs to be dead-on real" (Gibson).

Different Settings, Same Purpose

Setting can also often determine more than a reader consciously realizes. Take for instance the massive difference between the dystopian world of *The Hunger Games* versus the completely fantastical world of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In *The Hunger Games*, survival is

paramount, and technology is harnessed by a ruling class who uses it to brainwash and torment people via a violent contest for food in a world where food is scarce (Collins). Whereas in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis establishes a magical, mystical setting full of curiosities and a girl simply hiding in a wardrobe while being evacuated from London during World War II (C Lewis 3-18). Both create a tense world with a heroine at its center. However, one provides a possible look into our future and a comment on our culture's obsession with vanity, technology and games; while the other takes real life events and transports the reader into a realm that has beavers and fauns that talk but is not futuristic or dystopian in any way. In each case, the setting tells readers something crucial about the character, such as the fact that Katniss is a survivor and Lucy is still very innocent and childlike. This makes the setting part of the characterization itself. For example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the reader is immediately introduced to a wizard and hobbits with their humble homes and an all-consuming ring meant to represent sin (Tolkien 1-41). It is a place called Middle Earth that often mirrors our own, but with its own magical creatures and characters, all of which creates its own setting and world. This setting is a guiding storytelling force in its own right in such novels. As is the case with Tolkien's work, fictional settings place the character into situations that can determine the direction, themes and character-building moments in a story.

Point of View

One craft element which is essential to characterization and one of the most influential factors for the author's voice is the point of view. In the academic journal *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Dr. Suhair Al Alami explains, "Point of view is important because it *filters*

everything in a narrative. It determines the amount of information the narrator shares with the reader. It can also influence the degree to which the reader can identify with the protagonist” (Alami 911). This makes the point of view within any story the driving force that formulates both the setting and the characters. The two main points of view employed by authors are first-person or third-person narration. First-person narration involves the author taking on the role of a character and authoring the story from that person’s perspective. This may help connect readers to the characters on a more personal level, however, it does restrict the reader and the author by only offering a “window on the events which take place in a fictional text” (Alami 911). On the other hand, a third-person narration allows the author to tell the story from either an external or internal viewpoint as the narrator themselves are, “possessing either unrestricted or restricted knowledge” (Alami 911). Internal narration allows the author to access each character’s internal “thoughts; feelings and attitudes” (Alami 911). Whereas external narration “is limited to accessing the characters from outside” (Alami 911). The decision as to what type of narration an author uses determines in part, particularly in a first-person narration, the authorial voice. In fantasy/science fiction, world building and an action focus can benefit from a third-person narrative with much greater omniscient authority throughout the piece. Yet, when attempting to focus on a more relatable level and a character’s emotional basis within a story, that narration may benefit more from a first-person narrative.

Characters and Characterization

After establishing a setting and deciding upon the narrative perspective of a book or series, the next step for that author is the decisions made for characters and their characterization.

Niall Connolly, in his article about “Fictional Characters and Characterization” published in *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, makes this observation, “Literary critics make claims about fictional characters that seem to be true but whose truth or acceptability appears to require the existence of a particular type of theoretical entity” (Connolly 348). It could be argued that every real-life human being requires the existence of some type of either theoretical, or very real entity, whose existence lends itself to a form of realism. The existence of that entity gives life, and often purpose, to both real and fictional characters. The argument of the necessity for a greater being, or the existence of a not-so-great entity, could go in several different ways and is based on many different factors. Nonetheless, for someone or something to actually exist, their existence needs to be acknowledged by something or someone other than themselves. That acknowledgement means that the character themselves, or that human being or creature, does indeed exist outside of their own mind, world, or self-acknowledgement. This self-acknowledgement can even lead them to the point of sensing their own consciousness, however, it is that same self-acknowledgement that can confuse themselves regarding their own existence as well. Therefore, it could be argued that an external entity, real or make-believe, is required to give direction and purpose to any character which thereby wholly verifies their existence. This then allows the writer to create characters that are self-aware and justifiable to the reader.

Character Roles

The author’s decisions about who and what the main character or characters, protagonist, antagonist and supporting cast of characters will be is also essential for guiding and telling every story. As noted by storyteller and musician Niall Connolly, “External and internal realism as

defined by Friend both get something substantially right about the occupant of one of the theoretical roles that needs to be filled” (Connolly 359). Simply put, every work of literature needs to fill certain roles within its characters to tell a story. Regardless of the type, or form of literature, without a character or characters, there is no story to tell. By defining characters and giving those characters roles, it gives a reader a sense of that story’s direction and fills the setting with life. This direction then gives fictional literature of any genre, a strong and established basis in realism and reality. Characters can be complicated to design and portray and are meant to be just like every living human being. However, in a story, they still need to play certain roles, just as every human being has a role to play in that story called life. This grounds the themes and settings in realism for the reader as they discover characters they can identify with and believe in.

Sympathy and Empathy

In creating the characterization of a character, helping readers develop sympathy and empathy for a character is crucial. It is these pieces of characterization that make readers want to discover a character’s journey and progression in the first place. Sympathy for a character keeps a reader reading and empathy makes a reader relate to a character directly. Often, this character connection is covertly accomplished through dialogue, action and the shift or growth of a character. While there may be obvious plot shifts and growth points in any story, it is usually through subtle progression, using sympathy and empathy, that a story becomes more profound for a reader. Professor Dan Shen of Beijing University suggests these shifts of progression are accomplished through “covert plot, a second story, a submerged plot, a submerged narrative, or

even a short story” within the overall narrative (Shen 3-5). These telling signs in a story often develop sympathy and a depth of character that the most obvious parts of a narrative’s progression often do not tell. Furthermore, Shen reminds authors that “In some narratives, the target of irony in the plot development becomes a means of conveying irony against another entity in the covert progression” (6). One example of this is the relationship between Harry Potter and Severus Snape in J.K. Rowling’s series. Their story and interactions exude a sense of enmity between the two characters, yet it ultimately lends sympathy and even empathy to Severus at the end of his life and a type of progression to the story that would not otherwise exist. When the reader is permitted to see Severus’s journey through his literal tears and the fact that he was actually protecting Harry the entire time, both his actions and Harry’s are seen in a new light, allowing the characters to take progressive leaps (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* 655-658).

A Characters Story

This subtle manipulation of readers' sympathy for a character not only forms bonds between readers and the characters, but it also provides interest to the plot of the story through these covert progressions as well. As Howard Sklar, author of *The Art of Sympathy in Fiction*, states “Just like in ‘real life’ our encounters with fictional ‘people’ sometimes surprise us by turning our judgements upside-down by countering our initially negative impressions of a character with information that causes us to view them more sympathetically” (Sklar qtd. in M Lewis 1). Covert progressions in a story do just that and often change our impressions of a given character. By learning more, readers can sympathize more, empathize more and set aside hasty

judgements. This is a principle that can be taught to and through any reader or writer and that sympathy is a great way to keep the reader reading, often out of concern for a character's predicaments or challenges. By putting characters into precarious situations, based on certain personalities, settings and other characters, those obstacles will lead to empathy and certain outcomes. If the author truly knows their own characters that they themselves created, they will then know how that character will respond in any given circumstance. As such, the characters themselves can often push through and help the author fashion a story when the author is running out of ideas or is struggling with plot progression. Characters and the characterization of those characters can often themselves tell the story.

Audience

When writing youth fiction, it is also important for the author to remember that they are writing to a specifically selected audience. In an article for the *Society for Research in Child Development* titled "Learning to Learn From Stories: Children's Developing Sensitivity to the Causal Structure of Fictional Worlds," researchers Caren M. Walker, Alison Gopnik, and Patricia A. Ganea support the idea that fairy tales can teach children and help them to cope with real life. They postulate that the causality which fictional worlds introduce to children can often help them to understand and confront issues in life; it can even offer them a brief respite from those things. The authors state, "Here we explore how children acquire casual knowledge from storybooks. Fictional stories provide important opportunities for children to learn information that cannot be experienced directly—particularly with regard to unobservable phenomena." (Walker, Carren M., et al. 310). Rick Riordan, author of the *Percy Jackson* series, used Greek

mythology in his classroom to give his students a starting point to help them make up creative stories and to teach them to write. This then became highly successful novels about Greek mythology meant to help his dyslexic son enjoy reading in spite of his disability (Riordan *Q & A*). There are powerful things to be learned, knowledge to be gained and lessons that can be taught through stories, and it is a responsibility authors should not take lightly. In the conclusion of their study, Caren M. Walker, Alison Gopnik and Patricia A. Ganea, assert this distinction, “Those children with the greatest amount of knowledge about fantastical representations are the least likely to draw analogies between worlds” (Walker, Carren M., et al. 315). They also noticed that children three years and older “are able to evaluate the information embedded within fictional stories when selectively learning and generalizing novel story content to the real world” (316). In fact, “as children develop, they become better able to discriminate between realistic and fantastic fictional worlds when assessing which stories are likely to provide relevant causal knowledge” (315-316). This is important for two main reasons. One, lessons can be learned from reading fiction and applied to life where it is applicable. Two, by learning, reading and understanding fantastical fictional worlds at a young age, children can learn to distinguish between what is real and what is fictional. Therefore, fictional stories give children, teens and young adults a healthy form of escapism, as long as they are able to distinguish between the two clearly. Again, this is a responsibility an author should not take lightly.

A Fairy Tale Escape Provides a Solution

This escapism into a fictional world can become a concern, however. Escapism, as defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary is “a way of avoiding an unpleasant or boring life,

especially by thinking, reading, etc. about more exciting but impossible activities”. This can be challenging in many instances, but when reality and fantasy collide, it may be especially problematic. Pat Pinsent, in his article about a modern fairy tale state’s this:

One of the oldest genres, the fairy tale, live on in contemporary children’s fiction, and thus provide authors with an alternative to ‘gritty realism’ as a means of presenting to young readers the harshest of topics and environments. This blend between fantasy and realism endows the novel with a positive message about the qualities of the human spirit. (203)

In this fairy tale form of escapism, specifically in a reference to *Holes* written by Louis Sachar, Pinsent, a Principal Lecturer and Senior Research Fellow of an English Department, emphasizes that, “the final message of the book is to live positively” (212). The message in the aforementioned novel “resembles that of many fairy tales,” in “a universe where we are encouraged not to say, ‘If only,’ but rather to make our own efforts and then to thank God or providence when good comes out of evil.” (Pinsent 212). Escaping reality, if but for a moment, is sometimes needed to reenergize the human spirit, mind, or body, and that is not a bad thing. Particularly if something good and positive comes from it. That brief escape can teach someone that no matter the trial or awful circumstances that one may be presented with in life they can overcome those trials or circumstances. It is often said that God will not give a man, or women, more than they can handle in life. In fact, they can take and make something wonderful and profound from those very same trials and awful circumstances.

Escapism and Christianity

Although some religious groups believe escapism is contradictory to Christianity, the answer to that question may lie in the author's intent and the reader's ability to differentiate fact from fiction. In Christianity, according to the New Testament, followers are required to acknowledge their sins, repent of them, then be baptized and continue on in their faith for the rest of their lives (The Holy Bible *King James Version*). Following that logic, when someone acknowledges Jesus Christ as their Savior and repents, He then takes away all that person's sins. That person will typically try to make amends where they can, if they can, but the fact that they do not have to suffer anymore from their own mistakes may also seem like an escape from consequences and reality. That full escape only occurs, however, if the sinner has learned their lesson and does not continue to repeat the same sins without regard for its effects on themselves and others. In other words, Christianity is actually an acknowledged form of escaping from the world when applied properly and responsibly. The same can be said for moral works of fiction. Christians receive comfort and relief through Christ. In some ways, escaping into positive stories is a useful and comforting tool that can be learned from, or provides temporary relief to someone when needed. As was acknowledged in a study by researchers Debajyoti Pal and Chlonameth Arpikanondt, "With regards to the drivers of escapism, real world problems can lead to negative emotions and frustrations. We propose three types of real-world problems based on the self-determination theory (SDT) that advocates the fulfillment of three basic human needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness" (Pal and Arpikanondt). They continue by stating that when those needs are not met or satisfied, "it might create real-life problems and frustrations"

(Pal and Arpikanondt). Appropriate escapism can fulfill those needs in children and teens in healthy ways. The appropriate nature of these worlds and the characters that inhabit them are then, in turn, crafted by responsible authors who create vivid settings and sympathetic characters for young readers to temporarily escape to.

Conclusion

In conclusion, each of the craft elements for fiction are vital when constructing a narrated piece of literature, however, the settings and characterizations within a story play an especially critical part. Setting establishes the perimeters of a story and the point of view then tells that story; however, characterization lends realism to a story while provoking sympathy and empathy in readers through covert or overt progression within a story. All of these craft elements and their importance to a story should not be taken for granted, particularly by an author who, by putting pen to paper, has now become the creator of a new world. In fact, it is a moral imperative for writers to offer positive escapist experiences to young readers and characters with ethical backbones. We can even remind young audiences that the struggle between good and evil is ongoing and urgent, but good will eventually triumph. The authors of ancient fairy tales certainly had that purpose in mind. Commenting on this purpose, G. K. Chesterton observes:

Exactly what the fairy tale does is this: it accustoms him for a series of clear pictures to the idea that these limitless terrors had a limit, that these shapeless enemies have enemies in the knights of God, that there is something in the universe more mystical than darkness, and stronger than strong fear. Sometimes the sea at night seemed as dreadful as a dragon. But then I was acquainted with

many youngest sons and little sailors to whom a dragon or two was as simple as the sea. (Chesterton qtd. in Nowak).

Temporarily escaping reality can teach readers lessons that help them cope with life. Sometimes it is the reader and sometimes it is the author, but eventually, every human being who hopes to survive and thrive must become a knight of God. If we begin our journey by believing in our own godly existence and in our divinely inherited power, then we will also believe we have the power to survive and confront our adversaries in life. Dragons and demons, even when they come in the form of other human beings, can be escaped from and defeated. As authors of fiction, we also have the power to help readers escape from their own dragons and demons, even if only for a moment.

Chapter 3

The Stories of the Re-Awakening

An Introduction by Professor Caius Twindale

Life. Life is a morphological concept of being, decided by an unlimited number of possible choices, confined to an ever-changing finite amount of time. Seemingly insignificant decisions made by a significant person led to a never-ending multiplicity of possibilities. I am Caius Twindale, Professor of Magical Ethics at Fae Land University. Fae Land University, or the land it is built upon, emerged from the sea as a result of The Re-Awakening. The following is a collection of origin stories encompassing what happened immediately before and after The Re-Awakening on the 6th of April 2042. This collection will encompass a small portion of my own story, along with a few of my students' stories, and some brief insights into history from my constituents. On April 6, 2042, around midnight EST, in the words of Professor Joseph Sigmund, "A bright-bluish yellow mushroom of a cloud appeared on the horizon. Immediately thereafter, a radial golden shockwave burst across the world emanating from the base of an abnormal cloud."

As the shockwave made itself around the world, every person who was still alive after World War III was immediately knocked unconscious. Most feared another catastrophe had occurred as the world was already reeling from the aftereffects of war. When the human species awoke the next day, our planet and the races that we once knew had become something unrecognizable to us. Only now, seven years after that event, is the Earth reclaiming some sense of normalcy.

The Third World War ended in 2035. That war not only destroyed the known world orders of governments, but it also turned half of the world into a radioactive wasteland. Afterwards, we were introduced to new forms of governance. Those forms of government have once again been reorganized into something else completely. Eight of the nine continents are governed by organizations that specialize in particular sources of power, or specific commercial prowess and specialized goods. The Re-Awakening transformed each continent predetermining their greatest assets. We now, in this world, have some resemblance of peace, but it seems a new threat has possibly emerged.

For now, most points of dispute are settled in digitally created arenas or dungeons that have morphed into something very much alive and are not so digital anymore. Most people's spirit animals, which appeared shortly after The Re-Awakening, protect them from any form of serious harm. The eight major powers, or new forms of schooling and governance, are as follows: Cybernetics or Engineering (the specialty of New America), Chi and/or Martial Arts and medical concoctions (the specialty of Zhinhangyu or Asia), Inventions and Enchantments (the specialty of Chazilico or South America), Spirituality or Healers (the specialty of The United Republic of Europe), Scientific Mutations (the specialty of Pearland which encompasses the conjoined landmass area of Southeast Asia and Australia), Natural Products or Nature (the specialty of Teongo, namely Africa and some of the Middle East), and Weapons and Armor (the specialty of Orosslav, or Russia).

Fae Land University is on the neutral ninth continent Elfame. Elfame is responsible for keeping and teaching the world's history and education. Its existence is a fundamental necessity for keeping peace in the world. History and knowledge are Fae Land University's great power.

This new island, which the university sits on, is surrounded and protected by the World Star Tree. Each specialization and country have their own land and specialty branch on Elfame. It now operates as the world's foremost destination for talented students and is the international summit for the meeting of governmental leaders. The hope for the world is to never again experience the devastation of war. The majority consensus throughout the new nations is to avoid the tragedy of war through education and compromise. If necessary, in either arenas or dungeons, a digital, yet very real battle instead of war, will be held between nations and will serve as a way to solve disputes. The monsters in the dungeons and arenas, along with random loot drops, are the only things that were originally digitally made. Your human opponents never were. Each person's spirit animal, or so we call them, protects their owners. These interactive friends and animals are a direct reflection of their owners. We still do not fully understand everything about these familiars or pets. What we can conclude is that they are somehow connected to a certain vaccination, which one of my constituents created for the world. He must have known something that most did not. These spirit animals, and their owners, do not sustain any real injuries from other humans or from other animal spirits and monsters in the arenas or dungeons. Instead, competition outcomes are decided via virtual HP bars and real-world skill battles.

We, at Fae Land University, help to prepare our students mentally and physically for this new and rapidly evolving world. For our students, success in this new world is the goal. By helping them to achieve their potential, they can help to sustain the current order of the world. Which in turn will hopefully ensure peace for generations to come. Our students will be ready to compete in digital battles and dungeon explorations. They will also be ready to help others, along with themselves, in their various professions of choice with great proficiency. We believe that

every skill our students learn complements and works better when used in cooperation, hand in hand, with peoples of varying backgrounds and differing skills. If each nation becomes dependent upon each other, and they learn to work with and compromise with one another, then and only then, can true world peace be possible. Peace will be required to sustain this newly formed interdependent world economy. Fae Land University is the starting educational institution and center meeting point for these students and future world leaders. The ultimate learning experiences can only be gained through individual exploration and study in each of the varying eight countries. Enough with the introduction and on to the stories of The Re-Awakening.

Repercussions (A prologue)

Part I

A New Beginning

March 28th, 2042, 4:00 pm

“Professor Sigmund.” The teaching assistant’s face appeared on the desk's holopad. “A Doctor Lambert is calling on the Pad, he says it's urgent.”

“Doctor Lambert? Is it about the vaccines again, Patricia?”

“Don’t know, but he seems more flustered than usual, and not that it matters, but Dr. Avila is there as well.”

“Avila?” Joseph Sigmund immediately pushed the connect call button in light of this new information. An image of Avila and Richard appeared over his desk. “What is it this time, Richard?”

“It’s happening, a week from now on Easter morning,” came the reply.

“Fitting. And you’re on board with this Avila?”

Avila interjected, “Not fully, but we have run out of options and time.”

“What about your girls?”

Avila and Richard exchanged a look of sadness and determination, “They are with people who will take care of and love them. Besides, they have already been injected with the vaccination. They should be alright.”

“Injected? You know I don’t agree with that ideology Richard.”

Richard adjusted his glasses, “Yeah, we know. Unfortunately, protection from the things that might happen isn’t guaranteed without it.”

“Does that make it justifiable?”

“I really wish it didn’t Joseph, I really do. But if we don’t act now, at this very opportune time, things will get worse for everyone except the few.”

“How sure are you of this?”

Avila interrupted, “You know better than most who we work for.”

“Unfortunately, I do. They have been after me for quite a while. Speaking of...” Joseph looked past the holopad and toward the door of his office which was now cracked slightly open. “Make what you have to say here quick and succinct.”

“Yes,” Avila held up a cube of radiating iridescent golden light. “Here it is, and the programmer has done his job, well, more than his job.” Avila looked at Edward who let out a defeated sigh.

“Alright I will trust you then, and that golden light makes you look as beautiful as ever Avila.” Edward now squinched his brow as jealousy furrowed them, “Edward, you should have gotten over that by now. You know I jest. You won her heart fair and square. Besides, I have a full congregation to lead. I have no time for romance.” Joseph looked back up at the door, “I truly am sorry that you are the ones that have to do this.”

Edward chuckled, “Check on the girls every once and awhile for us, will you?”

Joseph responded, “Of course I will.”

Avila flipped her long dark hair, “Alright you two, enough. You know we can’t talk for much longer.”

Edward glowed looking at Avila, and then jokingly glared back at Joseph, “Make sure you and your congregation get the vaccines. You have a week.”

“Yeah, yeah, I will also tell that to my curious assistant,” Joseph looked up at a wider crack in the door. The door shut ever so slightly.

Avila interjected again, “Joseph, we’re serious here. I don’t fully know what is about to happen or for how long we might...if ever.” She holds back tears. “Check on them, and if we can...or you can, look for that symbol. It may be the last time we....” Avila’s tears started subtly flowing down her cheeks.

Edward wiped the tears off Avila’s face and hugged her. Then with one last look back at Joseph, “Here,” he said as he lifted up a piece of paper and then immediately burned it and threw it into the nearby fireplace. “That’s the symbol. Tell them we love them, and we sent you some other letters containing important information. Goodbye, Joseph.” Edward turned off the holopad and sat Avila down on the bed, kissing her through her tears. “If we don’t do this, they might never even have a chance. We have no choice”

The last thing Joseph saw in the holographic image above his desk was Edward’s arms around Avila. As he turned away from the camera, the video faded out. He heard his friend’s voices fading and Avila crying, “I know it Richard, I know it....” Joseph realized he must act quickly.

“Damn holopad,” he said to himself. “Why does it always have to fade out? Why can’t it just turn off immediately? Holopad Jerney, please record that last message and send it to me. After that, delete all other copies of that conversation.”

Holopad Jerney promptly responded, “Initiating recording sequence from memory. Sending recording to private server. Now deleting all other copies of that recording from the RAM and front desk.” A screen popped up, the bars started ticking upward and Patricia’s screen name appeared in the lower left corner of the screen. “Recording from front desk is not authorized. Request has now been completed.”

“Thank you, Jerney. Huh, the front desk, I figured as much.”

“My pleasure, Edward.”

Joseph looked at the now closed office door and pushed a button on his desk. “Patricia, can you come in please?”

“Yes sir, I’ll be right there,” replied Patricia.

Patricia walked into Lambert’s office. His office was a weird combination of religious symbology intermingled with psychology books and texts. The two slanted walls on each side of his desk were lined with shelf after shelf of bookcases and religious objects. Some had been used as bookend holders and others were used to break up the monotony of the many academic volumes. On his desk, the holopad desktop took center stage, and his name was projected a few inches above the front. Each side of Edward’s desktop contained stacks of religious doctrine and books from every form of religion. Behind him on the wall, a ragged picture of Christ hung along with both of his degrees. His degrees were a direct reflection of his namesake. Joseph was

the father of Jesus, or beloved son of Israel (Jacob), coming directly from The Holy Bible, and Sigmund Freud was the founding father of modern psychology. With degrees in both psychology and theology, his, was a uniquely theological perspective on applied psychological impacts. This best describes this man's unique perspective.

"Easter morning, huh?" asked Patricia sheepishly.

"I figured you might be listening in. Patricia, please close the door behind you. I will always know if someone else is listening in and that includes you, my assistant." He nodded at Patricia, but she already knew she was found out.

Patricia attempted to skirt around her nosiness and leaned over the desk, revealing a little bit of herself to Edward. "So, what about Easter morning? I swear, that was the only part I heard."

"Sit down, dear one." Joseph Sigmund had gotten into the bad habit of calling his congregation dear ones.

"Yes sir," Patricia grabbed the closest chair and sat down ever so slowly and subtly, trying to flaunt herself before him.

Joseph rolled his eyes and sighed, "You know I have been over Avila for a long time now."

"Really, then why did you only pick up the call after I mentioned her name?" A hint of jealousy in her tone.

"Seriously, you know I am a psychologist as well, right?"

"Yeah, whatever."

Joseph slightly bowed his head, pinching his nose between two fingers and began massaging his bridge before looking up. “You see, my friend Edward...well, he’s a good soul and man, but his ideas can sometimes be out there. She lends credibility to him.”

“Uh-huh, you sure you just didn’t want to see her again?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Besides, as you know, the intermingling of friends and lovers can often make for complicated matters.”

“Of, course I know that, and?”

“And I don’t even know why I am explaining this to you. You know full well that you were the one who was eavesdropping on a conversation that you shouldn’t have been listening to.” He picked up one of the books and lightly slammed it on his desk for effect.

Patricia rolled her eyes. “Well, I have noticed that whenever I mention any of your colleagues, and particularly Avila, you tend to get a bit worked up. Can I not be a little jealous of that respect or reaction?”

“Unfortunately, within the current state of the world, no, you cannot! But, maybe, just maybe, soon enough, we all can.” Trailing off to himself, “Still, I wonder?”

“Wonder what?” She leaned forward, intrigued and probing.

“You mentioned Easter morning.”

“Yes, I overheard that part.”

“Edward and Avila work under, and for, a conglomeration of some of the most powerful people within the new world governments.”

“This I know.” Patricia fiddled with her fingers but pushed on. “Or at least I figured so. If

not, then why would you even care about what they have to say?"

Joseph had always been suspicious of Patricia, and now it seemed his suspicions were justified. He must be careful of what he tells her next. Thank goodness he erased and saved that call to a secure server; that lasting image of Edward and Avila sitting on the bed, their backs turned to him, along with that drawing of that symbol on the paper. Those images would stay with him for a while. Joseph wondered what that image meant. Was it an X marks the spot? No, it was something more. With them, it was always something more. It looked like a Jewish star, but it included one more triangle. Whatever could that mean? He wasn't sure what it meant, but if they burnt that paper, it must be important enough to keep it a secret. With that resolve in mind, he continued, knowing to never reveal anything about that image to anyone.

"Easter morning," Joseph stroked his stubble. "How coincidental."

"Coincidental how? Professor?" Patricia knew Joseph sometimes got lost within his own mind. She glanced at the books behind him, relics of an age before the war, and the establishment of the online library of Alexandria.

"What, based on the current state of this world, is its foremost problem?" He asked.

Leaning in closer, she put her hand unconsciously on her chin as she thought, a trait or habit she gained from her mother. It made her look like the thinker statue, only made of flesh and bone instead. "I mean, there are the different governmental factions who often fight amongst themselves. Each one is grasping for power within their own nations while attempting to keep the peace treaty between other nations."

"That infighting most likely does exist, but it's only speculation. My question, however,

as I phrased it is simple. It's a problem that extends its unseen invisible hands physically touching every person within this radiated world. With that in mind, what is the world's greatest problem? It does include humans, as they are the ones who caused the initial problem for Mother Earth."

Patricia still looked confused.

"Let me ask another simple question of you, Patricia?"

"Ok, shoot."

"What, at this point in time, is your life expectancy?"

"Thirty-five. Forty-five if I am lucky."

"Ok, and what age am I now?"

"In your late thirties."

"And you, you are in your late twenties. This means I could very well die tomorrow due to poisons, radiation, cancer and a slew of other issues. You could die within the next ten years."

Patricia's face reflected a deep sorrow and anger. "Your point?"

"Edward and Avila both have kids. How can humans survive as a species when even parents don't have enough time to raise a child. Can you even have a child?"

"That's a very personal question, Professor." Patricia started to stand up, clearly uncomfortable and a bit perturbed.

"Sit back down! This is an important question, and I don't expect you to have an answer for me." Joseph opened a book to his right. "Psalms 127:3 paraphrased, 'Children are known as a gift or heritage from the Lord.' When a human being has a child, it is only then that one can

understand and experience true joy and love. Being a parent is one of the most unselfish, yet selfish things in the world. Most parents that I know would do anything for their child, and I mean anything. This includes giving up their own life for them, without hesitation. Does that concept sound familiar?”

Patricia sat back down, “Your point professor.”

“It’s biblical. God sacrificed his most precious son for all of his other sinful sons and daughters. Can you, or rather why can’t most people, have a child right now or why won’t they even try to have one?”

She answered sullenly, “They might not survive long enough for it to even matter, and even if they could survive, they still might not be able to conceive a child due to fallout issues. Even if that is possible, then who knows medically if the child would even be ok?”

Professor Sigmund stood up and loudly closed the Bible, “Exactly, and why is that?”

“The radioactive fallout reeks all sorts of havoc on human beings and the Earth.”

“So then, what is the world’s and the human species’ greatest issue right now? Think about it. If a human has no purpose in life, other than to live for themselves alone, what is bound to happen? And what is the point of life?”

Patricia looked at the ornate Bible Joseph just closed. “There would be no point to life other than to eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we could literally die. With that selfishness we would repeat history and do the same things over and over again- the same things that led to our own downfall. The very things that we are trying to avoid doing again.”

Professor Sigmund sat back down. “Exactly. That means there is only one way to solve

all the issues on earth. People must have a purpose in their life. They need to leave a legacy of sorts. If there is no purpose to life, no legacy, no children, no future, then why would humans even try to save a dying world and a doomed species?"

Patricia's expression lightened as she pulled her head back and pointed her finger toward the wreckage of a building outside the window. "The only way to save the world would be to restore the world and the sanctity and miracle of creation. But is that even possible? The radiation is crippling everything."

"What if there was a way to eliminate the radiation outside?" Joseph placed one hand on his chest and grabbed Patricia's hand with the other, "And inside?"

"Wouldn't that take forever?" Patricia asked, a little flushed.

"Maybe, or maybe not, we need to have faith."

"Faith in what? A god who abandoned us all?"

"You know how I feel about that. What happened to us, and this world, was our own doing and not God's doing. Although He did let it happen and so He left us to our own devices. Likewise, He left it to us to fix a problem we created."

Patricia leaned in ever closer, ready to finally listen to the secret she had been seeking. "How?"

Joseph Sigmund knew he had her on the wire now, "How? The God Particle. Without it, the things that are required of us to do would be impossible to get done. If we were left completely to our own limited knowledge and underqualified technology, there would be no way to resurrect a tainted world."

“I thought that particle was a myth?”

“Is it though? Or is that exactly what those in power would lead you to believe?”

“But how?”

“The particle accelerators all over the world can collide, destroy, unite and even change particles. If done correctly, with enough power and the right particles, then who knows what could be truly possible?”

Patricia leaned back, took her hand out of Joseph’s hand and stood up. Then she walked back to the office door and looked at Sigmund, “And what can your friends do about that?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know? All I can tell you is this: on Easter morning, they are meeting with those very same world leaders in power about that very thing. They are also meeting at one of the world's particle colliders.”

“You really like to get a girl’s hopes up, you know professor?” Irritated, Patricia slammed the door behind her and returned to her desk.

On her desk, a message from Professor Joseph Sigmund played out loud, “It wouldn’t be my first time.”

She chuckled to herself as her heart beat a little faster. “For a congregational leader, he sure knows how to flirt,” Patricia whispered to herself. Flustered and fanning herself she sighed, saddened by what she knew she had to do.

Prologue Part II

Betrayal and a New Hope

Patricia sat back down at her desk. She let out a long sigh and immediately called Lilith.

“Lilith, you there?”

“Yes, Patricia,” Lilith sounded a little annoyed, “What is it this time? As you can see, I am busy preparing F.A.I.R.I.E. for the Investors.”

“As expected, Doctor Lambert called Professor Sigmund. Unfortunately, you know all about Edward and Joseph and their obsession with privacy,” she whispered.

Lilith was now intrigued. “Yes, yes, I know them all too well. Just text me back with whatever info you can glean from Joseph for me, that is, after they are done talking obviously. As much as I despise Edward, I know he still cares deeply for Reuben.”

“The meeting. I know about it,” Patricia interjected.

“You know what exactly?”

“Easter morning, that is when the meeting at the particle accelerator is supposed to happen.”

Lilith took off her sunglasses and glanced around at the facilities, “Everyone, continue your work as normal. I have to take this call.”

An emphatic, “Yes ma’am!” could be heard amongst the loud noises of ongoing construction. Lilith walked into a soundproof room overlooking the particle generator.

“So, Patricia, why exactly would they tell Professor Sigmund about this meeting? It's

none of his business and is supposed to be confidential!”

“Not sure exactly.”

“What do you mean by ‘not sure,’ Patricia?” Lilith’s tone sounded like a domineering mother raising her voice at a rebellious daughter.

“My guess is to convince him to get the vaccine that he’s been hounding Edward about for over a year now.”

“The vaccine? Why would the vaccine that Edward created matter that much? I need to get my scientists to take a closer look at the coding of that vaccine.”

“The coding?”

“Never you mind. Anything else?”

Patricia was unsure how much she should reveal to Lilith. She knew she had to tell her, but still, how much and what? Joseph told her specific things, and she was sure he would only reveal to her what was necessary. Joseph was not a dumb man. “Who knows,” she answered convincingly. “He rambled on about radiation, children and God Particles for who knows how long. You know how confusing he can be with his mind constantly straying between a mixture of religious and psychological philosophies.”

“Indeed, he can be confusing, but he will always reveal the truth in-between those ramblings.”

“The truth, huh?” Patricia hesitated then continued, “Would it be possible to have a child? Could it really be possible, and could the earth actually be healed? Is a future still possible?”

Silence resonated on Lilith's side of the call until it was interrupted by a worker stepping into the room.

"Ma'am, we need you to take a look at something."

"Ok, I'll be right there." Lilith hesitated before saying this to Patricia, "I don't know Boo, we can only hope so."

Patricia sat in silent contemplation, staring into space for thirty minutes. She hoped she hadn't revealed too much to Lilith, but she owed her. Still, she wanted Joseph to remain safe.

Joseph exited his office, looking more disheveled than normal. He was a naturally stocky, but handsome man, at least to Patricia. He had the zealous glow of a religious believer that lit up his otherwise dark blue eyes. The peppered hair, which was precisely cut to fit the shape of his rounded head, duplicated his partially ghostly pallor. In his prime, Joseph certainly must have been an enthusiastic speaker and imposing man. The devoted congregation that still followed him reflected that long-lost vigor.

Patricia, however, reflected the completely opposite appearance and attitude. Her hair was long, dark and braided. Her skin was the subtle color of mocha. Skepticism lay behind the glasses placed over her dark brown eyes. Because of those oppositions, Patricia figured the professor chose her as his Teacher's Assistant to keep him on his toes. Yet, she had to admit to herself that somewhere along the way she fell for the man and what he could still become. She was good at keeping a not-so-old man, who had become far too old due to a weighted mind, youthful. Which is why the next words out of the professor's mouth floored her but didn't surprise her.

“Come, Patricia. Let’s go get the new mRNA based vaccine that Edward developed. Oh, and we need to pick up an analog camera along the way.”

Patricia nodded eagerly then immediately texted Lilith about the vaccine again. She was puzzled by Lilith’s seemingly unconcerned response. But that was because Lilith had a few secrets of her own.

Lilith rubbed her arm unconsciously, right where Edward himself had injected the vaccine. She texted another purposely vague answer to Patricia’s next question and tried not to think about anything except the Investors and the task at hand.

April 1st, 2042, at 11:30 pm

Joseph Sigmund decided to take the advice of his constituent, Doctor Edward Lambert. He sent an email to his congregation encouraging them to do likewise. This came as a shock to them, but they figured if he asked them to get vaccinated, there must be a good reason for it.

This email was followed up by a congregational meet up text from Joseph reading, “Join me in the Adirondack Mountains, far-far away from the low-lying, busy coastal areas of the abandoned Eastern seaboard and refresh yourself with the fresh, semi-radiated waters of the Finger Lakes.” Messages like this from Joseph were quite unusual, so most of his congregation obediently followed him there.

April 5th, 2042

After a nightly service with his congregation, Joseph left them with this message of hope: “For today we suffer, but on the morrow, despite our ailments and sickness, we and this world

shall receive a resurrection of such. In the morning, we shall awaken and be healed by the all-encompassing power of God.” He justified this elaboration by telling himself that none of what he thought was about to happen would be able to happen without the God Particle. He was, however, amazed at the great trust he put in other human beings who he had great respect for. Truly, Joseph hoped and prayed that they would succeed in their task and not make him a liar to his people.

In the cabin he rented, Joseph pulled out the old analog camera and re-recorded the messages that Edward and Avila left behind for their children. It was the least of the simple things that he could do for them. Those messages arrived, as promised, by mail that week. They were intended to be left as a legacy to them. He needed their children to know that in spite of whatever was about to happen, they were never abandoned. Instead, they were daughters of true heroes. It weighed heavily on Joseph that Edward and Avila asked him to do this. What did they think was going to happen to them? He completed the personal task they asked him to do, just as he had promised.

Solemnly, with water rimming his eyes, he looked out the window pointing towards the east. Shortly, his next God-given task began to appear on the horizon. A bright, bluish-yellow mushroom cloud appeared on the horizon. Then a radial golden shockwave burst across the world, emanating from the base of an abnormal cloud.

A single thought occurred to Sigmund at the very moment the shockwave overcame him, “No human should ever try to play God”.

Every human across the world was instantaneously knocked unconscious and would not

wake up, until twelve hours later.

April 6th, 2042, *Easter Sunday* 12:00 pm

The world would never be the same.

Joseph arose from a deep slumber, his body seemed to teem with a new, revitalizing, unknown energy. After getting knocked out, he, along with the rest of the world, had no idea of knowing if they would arise the next morning, but his faith never wavered. His first thoughts turned to the possible sacrifice of his colleagues Edward and Avila. They, in the midst of a clandestine meeting with the world's most powerful people, probably gave their lives to save a dying world. Those two people, unless their sacrifices were ever divulged to the world, would likely be forgotten. Joseph pondered that most true heroes, like his friends, were heralded as either fanatics or became martyrs, lost to the annals of history in an ever-changing world. What would become of their legacy was yet to be seen.

A deep reverence for his friends sunk in. He wondered if he would ever have been courageous enough to do what they did. And their children...why was he given such explicit instructions not to reach out to them with the full truth about their parents until they turned fourteen? Maybe it was a type of protection for them, until it became very clear what had become of the corrupt leaders.

Saddened and still shaky, Joseph slowly began to rise from the ground. Halfway up to rising on his feet, he decided it would be better to be on his knees and ask his God why? As he began to utter a prayer, an answer immediately seized upon him. It was a calm, yet firm voice,

filled with the power to move the earth.

As God spoke in his mind, it seized upon his breast. “Joseph, my son, were you not already given a task to do by my servants? Go and do, for much needs to be done. Arise and go forth; your task has already been given to you and their task has been completed. They have earned their rest for a time.”

Never before had any answer come to him with such power, clarity, and directness. Was this because of the new energy that filled every part of his being? What had truly happened, and what had Avila and Edward done?

Joseph felt that the first major task assigned to him was to assess the state of the New World and his congregation. He stood up, opened his bag and tried to turn on the holopad. It was fried. He looked up and noticed that the cabin no longer had power. Joseph wondered how long that would take to get fixed. Of course, it would probably depend on the state of what was left of the few reorganized local and national governments, if they still even existed. Oh well, he would have to do this the old-fashioned way for a while.

Joseph exited what remained of the cabin. A sense of dread and excitement flooded him. He rifled through his pocket for the letter Edward gave him before the event happened. It was meant to prepare Joseph for what could be, but nothing could prepare him for the reality of it.

Edward’s letter warned Joseph that, “What was going to happen was akin to opening Pandora’s box.” Regardless, he was sent a list of possibilities, which thankfully he printed up and copied just last night, hoping it would help. He began to look at it as he slowly made his way to the other cabins, using it almost as a distraction. The earth itself seemed alive, vibrant even. He

could feel it in his bones and throughout his veins, a sensation that could only be described as magical. Similar things were merged with like things, such as the trees around the cabin he slept in merging with previously long dead, hand-cut logs around the property. Joseph quickly realized he was one of the lucky ones. Some cabins were now nearly treehouses some thirty feet in the air as the wood structures melded into their natural cousins. Others sunk deep into the cavernous ground finding long hidden tree roots- the grass had now become their roofs. Some stone residences even faded into cliff faces, forming what looked to be long hollow caves. Thankfully, wherever there was a window, gaps remained exposing the inside of the structures to fresh oxygen. He unconsciously breathed in deeply. No one would suffocate at least. Now the worry lay with those trying to exit the varying cut-off structures which extended upwards into the skies or poked out over the water that lay hundreds of feet below.

Joseph perused the list he was given. “Well,” he said out loud, more so to explain things to his disbelieving self, “the Earth is almost healing itself. These buildings must have been created by the merging of the eDNA.” *Thankfully, I don’t have a wooden arm!* He thought to himself. Then aloud again, “I mean, according to this list, the DNA is continually mutating. Maybe certain circumstances have to be met.” Frustratedly, he yelled, “Heck, I’m no scientist, I’m a pastor and psychologist.” He mumbled, “Stupid list.”

Suddenly, the front door opened onto a newly formed treehouse. Joseph watched in horror as a member of his congregation plummeted to the ground screaming, “Paaasstooooorrrr.” The scream was followed by a thump and an “oof.”

Joseph cringed at the sounds then ran towards the man. He always carried his flock in his

heart and mind, but this time something instinctively and strongly began emanating his emotions and thoughts towards his congregation. *Everyone, for goodness' sake, please stay put and don't come out of your houses. At least not yet until I can figure out what's going on!*

A head peeked out from one of the grass-roofed cottages, "Seriously, Pastor! I just woke up! Do you really have to scream so loudly?"

Oh, crap, did I scream that? Wait, I didn't even say that out loud.

Another head poked out from another cabin, "You sure as hell did! And why do I feel like I have a hangover, mixed with an energy drink?"

Joseph began to panic over the realization that his private thoughts were no longer his own. *I should learn to control my thoughts better.*

"Sounds like a great idea to me," someone else interjected from one of the tree dwellings.

As Joseph reached the fallen man, he noticed a residual green mist surrounding the slight indentation that was left on the ground. The man he approached sprung to his feet as spry as a young buck, "No, worries pastor, I feel perfectly and surprisingly unharmed."

Shocked, yet somehow not surprised Joseph commented, "Umm, Jim you fell from like thirty feet. You sure you have no broken bones or possibly internal bleeding?"

"Nope, in fact I feel better than ever," Jim said as he touched his muscles and joints checking for damage. "But could you explain to me what's really going on here? Why did you send us all an emergency message to leave the remaining cities to come and meet up here?"

Some inexplicable connection had formed, and not just between the earth and its once dead parts. Both consciously and unconsciously, Joseph and his flock were connected in ways he was only beginning to comprehend.

A sigh of relief and hesitation escaped Joseph's lips, "Ok, well here we go." He tried to project his thoughts to everyone in the congregational vicinity. He thought it just might work based on the man who had yelled from the grass roof cottage. *"Everyone, carefully and cautiously leave your places of dwelling and meet me around the fire pit. If you cannot safely exit your dwelling, we will try to help you exit. Sit tight until then."* Joseph looked at Jim who had just fallen from the treehouse and spoke aloud calmly, "Did you hear that, Jim?"

"Loud and clear, loud and clear." Jim responded, shaken by the experience. Yet, he was remarkably composed for someone who just heard an inaudible voice inside his head and toppled thirty feet onto the ground unharmed.

One hour later, after jerry rigging a few ladders for the cliff and tree dwellers and constructing makeshift bridges out of twisted branches, the congregation met in the center of the retreat around the firepit just as Joseph had asked. He tried to explain to everyone what was happening with his newfound ability, even though it was still a mystery to himself. He began with what little he knew about what Edward and Avila had accomplished and sacrificed. Then one by one he examined each member of his congregation. Was anyone harmed or were there noticeable changes to their bodies? He wanted to know. He needed to know. Joseph assigned each of his people tasks to secure the food and water they needed. In the meantime, he had to figure out the repercussions of the changes that everything, and everyone, were undergoing.

With Edward's letter as a guide, he searched for, and thankfully found Dr. Pleños.

Together, they begin to compile a new list of important information. They did this by comparing and contrasting, recognizing, and explaining things as best as they could. For example, Braden's functional and electronic prosthetic leg had now become a part of him- the machine's veins melded with the child's own veins and muscles. Taylor had an organ transplant when he was six. That pig lung xenotransplantation saved Taylor's life, but he was now sporting a literal pigtail. Later that night, when Brittany approached the fire blazing in the pit, a ball of fire latched onto the end of her smores stick. It then became a self-declared wand. When she aimed it at Cassandra, muttered a few "magical" words and pretended to cast a spell with it, the stick shot straight at Cassandra with a stream of fire in its wake. In desperation, she put up her hands only to discover that a rock-mole-like creature had blocked the fireball. A day later, that rock-mole was still accompanying and protecting Cassandra. Days later, Joseph still wasn't sure which was more extraordinary, the truly magical wand or the mashup animal who could retract fire.

One week later, when the power grid was finally restored, Joseph watched in dismay as most people returned to their old lives without seeming to study or understand the new powers they had acquired. This especially worried him because of the human tendency to grasp for power then abuse it.

Thankfully, he discovered that the safety switch in this mess came in the form of what people call spirit animals. These animals are an extension and manifestation of the individual person they bond with and protect. They are the protectors of the old and young. Some anomalies in this trend manifested in certain locations, and in certain special cases. He also concluded that this was somehow the failsafe implanted into the vaccines. Vaccines which the whole of his

congregation were exposed to, thanks to the protection implemented for them and everyone by Edward and Avila.

For his part, Joseph's next task led him to Fae Land, thanks to the symbol that Edward burned forever into his mind. Edward's letter also asked him to become the dean and creator of Fae Land University, which is now the world's foremost facility created for the sole purpose of teaching the gifted children the vaccine created. Its location, F.A.I.R.I.E., was revealed to him through Avila and Edward and was left to him via the will and testament of Reuben. In F.A.I.R.I.E., a great tree arose, surrounded by nine extensions forming the shape of a Jewish star plus one more triangle forming three extra star points. All of which reminded Joseph that God does not forsake nor forget his greatest creation. The world had become united, the innocent children were protected and the humble were provided for. Nine new nations stood, yet a new threat loomed over the earth.

In time, Joseph reminded himself as he mourned his friends, the daughters of the world's greatest heroes would know of their parents' deeds. Until then, the story of Avila and Edward would be forever told in the hallowed halls of Fae Land. They were modern martyrs who saved a once dying world and the whole human race.

The Truth (A Memo)

The Logs of Dr. Edward Lambert

Week 1: Becoming Informed

It has been approximately six years since the end of World War III. Since then, the remaining nations and world leaders have built an artificial island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. It has become a meeting place whose existence lies far away from the normal volume of radioactive fallout. Thankfully, in that same location, they have built a particle accelerator and a clean energy fission reactor to sustain themselves. This is being done in an attempt to avoid the same mistakes of a world that once ran on nuclear dependence. Sadly, I also fear that others who exist within the circles of the current world leaders have a more nefarious ideology. I am fairly sure they plan to once again weaponize any form of advanced technology that could help them gain more power over an already broken world.

Week 2: Insight

One of my closest constituents has recently reached out to me. She informed me of a lab that exists on this island away from the fallout. She asked me to join her there, insinuating to me that they may have a solution to many of the issues caused by the radioactive fallout. She is concerned, however, as to how our body will react to the complete and sudden annihilation of radioactive particles. This procedure may also remove and destroy mutated cells that exist within most living bodies. Most people at this point in time have various afflictions, up to and including cancer and the complete sterilization of their ability to create life. If this issue is not dealt with, it

can and will eventually cause the literal extinction of the human race as we know it. If I can help I must. I have a daughter of my own. I am greatly concerned about her, and I want to make sure she has a future. However, I have been informed this is at a level of secrecy that will not allow me to have anything but brief moments of contact with her. I am hoping when this truth is revealed, we will have saved the whole human race. Maybe then she will eventually forgive me for disappearing and will get a chance to see these logs, logs which I am saving on a highly secured electronic device.

Week 3: Invisibility

I have seen the lab. I think we have a real chance to save humanity. Our population has been depleted considerably due to war and its aftereffects. Thankfully, I had a daughter before mass sterility appeared in us because of radiation exposure. My wife died during that war in one of the major cities that was destroyed. She died as a first responder trying to save those who had been injured by such intolerable violence. Her massive exposure to the radiation all but assured her a quick death, yet she ran to help while I ran away. This was something she always did. I felt like a coward running, but I couldn't help it. Looking at my daughter's face, who looks so much like her mother, I knew I had to protect her at all costs. She needed at least one parent to live. I wish I could have protected Diane the same way I was able to protect her. Our daughter is so silently stubborn, just like her mother always was.

As for the rest of the human population, most people who were given a warning, if they believed it, fled from the larger cities causing a mass exodus into more rural areas. Most of them

were unprepared for life without the conveniences of city life. I have informed my brother, the programmer, that my daughter will remain in his safe hands for now. I am afraid, from here on out, my updates will be silent for a time.

Week 6: Realization

It is possible. It may actually be possible. However, I wish Avila had not contacted me and shared her worries with me. The modification that could be caused by the combination, or separation of things on a cellular level, is God science and it could easily go horribly wrong. Could that be even more dangerous than trying to live with the effects of the fallout? Maybe, but my responsibility is to make sure the DNA within the human body knows how to respond to this tearing apart of, and possibly reinstitution of, a complete cellular reconstruction. My initial thoughts are to teach the cells how to respond to this either via nanobots or through the implementation of mRNA vaccines or some combination of them.

Week 12: Leery

I have become closer and closer to Avila; I might even make Sigmund jealous. Avila also has a daughter, and we fully understand each other's pain and desire to make things right for them. After all, it was our generation's faults that led to this catastrophe in the first place, so it is up to us to fix the problems we created. I am, however, very leery of Lilith. She is the one who called us all together, but she seems to be hiding her own agenda and objectives, part of which involves catering to her exclusive clientele over the needs of the general public. Apparently, my

initial referral to her came from Sigmund's assistant Patricia, and then Avila verified my experience and expertise. With that suspicion in mind, I have decided to focus on the mRNA aspect of what needs to be done. mRNA, when done right and programmed accordingly, does its task and is then done with what it has been programmed to do. Nanobots or microrobots planted inside of someone can be controlled externally, and if given AI, might be able to take over the host's body entirely. Some of the clients insist on using nanobots. I will give them what they want, but I will make sure the general public gets something much different and safer. The programmer has informed me of this much. Avila agrees with me on this point. I have been working with her for three months now and we trust each other implicitly. If only all of my previous endeavors and people in my life were the same.

Week 16: Convincing

It's been four months now, and I miss my daughter terribly. Even with what limited time I get with her; I have to be very careful what I say and do because I'm being watched. She is doing well with my brother and his wife. Apparently, like most people, they can't have children of their own, so they have assured me that my daughter is a great joy to them, and they treat her as if she was their own. This puts my mind at ease. Lilith and her sponsors have been putting more and more pressure on us because the particle collider is finally ready. The programmer has been notified of this information cryptically. I will soon release the mRNA only vaccinations to the public. I will also introduce the combined, and what they call superior, nanobot vaccine to the backers. I will incorporate certain safety precautions and fail safes into the programming of

the bots. Those who trust me have decided to follow my advice about taking the mRNA vaccines over the other.

Week 24: Realization and Vacation

Avila and I have completed our job for now. We are being watched continually by Lilith and her people. We have been dismissed from the project until we are needed again. Avila's daughter is off the grid with her ex-husband. My daughter is being protected by the programmer, my brother, and is untraceable. Avila and I are going off the grid together. We see where this is going, and we need to be able to protect the world from the elites. So, we have to figure out a way where they aren't the only benefactors of everything. They can already eliminate the radioactive particles. They are, as of this moment, trying to figure out how to harness that power to program and manipulate their own DNA to their desired specifications with the help of these nanobots. The programmer will help them with this task, but he will also install reactively triggered viruses into them, just in case. Reuben is the only leader I trust from that island, and he is dying from cancer. He has asked that we fully initiate the protocol before the final steps, and he has given us something particularly special that was discovered by the particle accelerator scientists. The leaders found it to be useless and a possible threat to what they are attempting to accomplish. They have tested this discovery in Korea with someone Reuben trusts, someone we will be introduced to the next time we appear on the island. He sent us this particle, contained and under control, to be used in the final test. In spite of all her flaws, Lilith does care about Rueben and Patricia. Rueben is indeed a good man. I believe that Lilith believes the only way to

save Reuben is for her to pander to the elites and other world leaders. Knowing those connections, Avila and I have kept our communications limited to contact with Sigmund.

Week 32: It Is Finished and It Has Begun

Avila, I, and the programmer, have come up with a solution to the issue and how to incorporate the gift that was sent to us. I will briefly show this magnificent sight to Sigmund before we are called to go back to the island.

Week 42: It's Time

We have been called back to the island. We showed Sigmund the cube. It is truly miraculous and beautiful. Hopefully he noticed the new ring on Avila's hand. We got married in hopes that somehow, we might make it out of this alive. Yet, we will be at ground zero, so I can't guarantee anything. The letters I sent to Sigmund are the same things I communicated to Lilith. So hopefully, even if the letters are intercepted, there will be no suspicions. The letter to our daughters is also included. I pray to God that my new daughter, Avila's daughter, received the vaccine, as we asked Joseph to make sure that he found a way for her to receive it. Her father would be against it. My daughter is doing well from what I can tell, however, communication with the programmer has also been limited.

Week 52: Hope and Sadness

It has now been a year since Avila, and I were whisked away to the island. The communication with her daughter has been far more limited than the communication with my

daughter. A week ago, we just renotified and reemphasized some things of concern to Sigmund. Hopefully, he will pull through and listen to us and act. Unfortunately, his task is not yet over. Rueben is on his deathbed but should be there. I hope we can be saved along with the entire world.

The Way Things Are (A Moment)

The sun began to set on Blue Mountain Lake. Edward and Avila admired its beauty from a balcony in the Mount Magazine Lodge. The lingering scent of wildflowers lilted on the breeze.

“The sun always sets Avila, and it will always rise another day, with or without us.”

Avila, obviously flustered, let out a defeated sigh “I get it Ed, but I...we...and...I mean, wh-well what do you propose we do?”

Ed spoke a little more adamantly, “We have to do something. If not, our kids might not ever get a chance to see the sun rise again.”

“But...how are we supposed to protect them if we’re gone?” Avila pointed to a golden cube, “I mean this, this is literally opening Pandora’s Box.”

Edward looked toward the diamond shaped object floating above a pedestal on the bedside desk. “Honestly, I have no idea what is going to happen when we implement that. I do know that if we don’t do something, well, you know them. You know what they will do with that kind of power. Our world will be in even more trouble than it was before!”

“I know that! You think I don’t? But releasing that! How can you guarantee the safety of not only our kids, but the next generation as well?” Avila moved swiftly towards the desk and picked up the object, imitating throwing it out the window and into the lake far down below. “Can’t we just throw this into the lake and come up with another way?”

An eyebrow raised, Edward stood up and grabbed Avila’s hands, sweeping her into a hug, “It’s happening tonight. Time is out, you know that.”

Avila weakly hit Edward's chest with her free hand, "But our kids." A sob now escaped her lips, "Our kids."

Edward took the box from her hand and looked up at the ceiling, "The Mark of the Beast." He stated.

Avila's tears turned into confusion. "What do you mean, the Mark of the Beast?"

"It was a biblical idea that I got from Joseph. The vaccines, Avila. Those vaccines are the answer." He gently pushed Avila to an arms-length and looked into her eyes, "Why do you think I was so adamant that they received them?"

Realization hit her eyes, "You mean...but what about everyone else who didn't get them?"

He gave an audible sigh, "They will be fine, but they will not have the safeguard of the beasts."

"Beasts? Safeguards? Does that mean we are safe?" A look of hope emerged from Avila's weary face.

Dark sadness crossed Edward's face as he responded, "Unfortunately, no. I really have no idea what will happen to us. We will be at ground zero. I could hope...let's not think about that. From what information I can grasp from our friend in Korea, there is a chance, but it may take a while."

"Oh," the elation faded to despair. Sympathy exuded from Avila's expression, "Then who will take care of your daughter until then?"

“Uncle Cordell and Aunt Pansy will take care of her. As you know, they have had their issues in that area.” A look of a question flashed across his face, “And your daughter?” Avila quickly looked down and away.

“She is at his house.”

“Oh, will that be alright?” Avila asked.

“For all of his flaws, he does dote on her and spoil her.”

Avila sensed Edward’s jealousy. She took the golden cube from him and placed it back on the bedside table. Then her focus returned to Edward, with his mousy brown mussed up hair, tweed blue jacket and black round spectacles. A nerd for all intents and purposes, the cube reflected his heart. He was such a simple man, and her love for him was amplified by his humble, yet heroic bearing. “Come here, we don’t have much time left.” She reached up and took off his glasses, further messing up his hair.

Edward stared down at Avila, her tan skin glowing in the light of dusk, strands of gray dotting her long black mane. The flowing, skin-tight, emerald dress she wore matched the color of her eyes. *What did her ex-husband do to ever lose such a magnificent specimen of a woman?* Edward thought to himself. Out loud his lips slipped and whispered, “Oh well, my gain.”

“Whose gain, silly man?” She leaned in, a final embrace for possibly their final night on earth. The sun set as they dove into the bed, their sacrifice, unknown and heroic, coming a few hours later on Easter morning.

Book 1: A Preternatural Resurgence

Chapter 1: The Glass Castle of Dreams

The Story of Victoria Bodkin

Somewhere in the deciduous rain forests of New America, a twelve-year-old girl laid face down in a shallow creek. Her brown hair glistened in the moonlight as the slight downstream current gave movement to the lifeless girl's hair. Tonight though, it seemed as if everything else was alive. Even the fish kept swimming to her, attempting to teach the girl how to breathe underneath the cool clear water.

It all started about four hours ago. Victoria and her twelve-year-old friend Eli were unofficial stepsiblings. Victoria's mom was away on a business trip. So, Victoria was forced to stay with her dad. Victoria and Eli's parents moved to Washington state together and bought a gigantic piece of land for the sole purpose of raising and selling organic plants that supposedly combated some of the lingering effects of radiation. They were bored due to the lack of modern conveniences but entertained each other the best they could. Their parents chose to live, as they called it, off-the-grid.

Each day while the sun was still up, they decided to play their own made-up game, which was lamely called noise hide and seek or shneek. This was played by going into the woods and detecting one another via sounds, like the tossing of rocks, banging of sticks or animal noises.

Today, Victoria left the shack first, taunting Eli as she went. "Nany nany booboo, catch me if you ca-an."

Eli smirked, “You know I will, Vic, I always do.”

“Vic sounds like a boys’ name. Can’t you come up with something else.”

“Naah...I like it,” teased Eli. “And remember, no going into the bad areas.”

Attitude on full display, Victoria responded, “I never agreed to that stupid rule!” And with that she ran off.

Eli yelled after her, “Vic, don’t go there, trust me!”

Sixty seconds was the time limit given to Victoria to hide as she bolted away. She knew where she was going, and nothing was going to prevent her from winning today. Eli hoped she had listened and would avoid The Forbidden Plant structure, one of the few places he feared, and with good reason. He had been there once before and whatever happened to him left enough of an impression on him that he refused to go back. That place changed Eli.

Ignoring Eli’s warnings, Victoria headed straight for it. *But really, what could be so scary about a greenhouse? This game is mine to lose*, thought Victoria.

She pushed further and further into the fern-ridden, fog-shrouded woods. Nothing ominous or creepy about that at all. The trees, big, brown, and intimidating, looked down on her small, unusually white and frail body. Occasionally, she heard the distant thump of wood on wood, crackling as the trees swayed. Eli would never find her, and she had no plans to make a sound until she reached that glass castle. Deeper and deeper she went until finally the great glass structure appeared. It gleamed and glowed, almost dispersing the fog from around it. She never remembered it being so far away. The bright building blinded her eyes as it reflected the last light of day. It was a lone beacon shining in the middle of a vast wilderness. Cautiously, she

approached the structure, fearing a klutzy trip could cause the whole thing to tumble down.

Her competitive personality caused her to then gradually back away again, looking at the ground to see if she could find anything to make some noise. But there was nothing to be found. Behind her, in the woods, a rustling noise that sounded of footsteps drew closer.

It must be Eli, she thought. Little by little she inched towards the door of the castle, not wanting to give away her hiding space yet. As she did, the rustling steps came closer and closer. *Maybe I should just get caught and heed the warning...but I really want to win.* As her internal debate raged, a loud noise emanated from the backside of the greenhouse forcing her into action. She rushed headlong into the building, her instinct overriding other competitive thoughts. The door suddenly slammed behind her with a WHACK! Victoria involuntarily jumped!

When she had calmed herself enough to think again, she whispered to herself, “A setup, this whole game has been a setup, I went exactly where I was told not to go and he knew I would. That sneaky Eli, he tricked me!”

Rows and rows of plants lined the “castle” from back to front and side to side. Several, she had never seen before. Some had five-fingered pointed leaves and others had beautiful flowers as big as her head. Most were only reachable if she stood high up on her tippy toes. That was when she saw them. Towards the back, shadowy figures moved unabated through the narrow plant rows.

A terrifying thought quickly dawned on Victoria. *They know I'm here! I've got to hide.* She disappeared under the shelves that held the plants. Underneath those shelves, she made a discovery. Far below the rows sat bunches and bunches of fungus-covered piled. These oddly

shaped mushrooms grew in varying colors from black to violet. There was even a hypnotizing blue one that glowed and throbbed with what appeared to be a heartbeat. Victoria peeked through a gap and saw that the human-like shadows in the back continued to move among the plants without so much as a ripple of their movement touching the leaves.

It's as if all these plants came from my imagination, she thought.

Her curiosity compelled her to pry herself away from the spider-webbed regions of the shelf's underworld. She crept down the aisles, losing herself into the machinations of the man-eating plants that she thought were harmless sunlight drinkers and small neon-colored frogs that were talking amongst themselves.

Like the sudden collision of an accident, a looming figure rising from between the foliage snapped her back into reality. Trying not to panic, she looked at the figure up and down, but its features were lost to the backlighting. This truly was 'The Glass Castle of Living Dreams.'

"What you doin' here pumpkin?" A recognizable and eerie voice called to her.

"Umm...I was bored and wanted to explore the woods." Her voice came out more meekly and quietly than she intended.

"The woods? Really, then how'd you end up in here?" The voice rose a little in tone.

"Well, you see, Eli and I were playing hide and seek, and since he is afraid of this place, I..." she babbled, twiddling her toes as she spoke.

"Young Lady, that still doesn't tell me why you are here. Remember, we forbade you to come here until you were older." He said it while removing his gloves ominously.

“I know Daddy, I know, but why? It is soooo pretty here. And I really, really wanted to beat Eli this time.” Out came the princess’ tears. “Please don’t get mad at me. I promise, I won’t come here again.”

He strangled the gloves between his hands. “Still, that is no excuse for you coming here!” He sighed, “I never wanted to do this to you, what we had to do to him, especially at your age.”

“Please Daddy, please don’t. I don’t know what you did to him, but he hasn’t been the same since.” She forced the words out trembling, falling to her knees.

“Sorry princess, but I have to. I can’t have you remembering this place as magical. You...must fear it.” He continued, “If anyone found out what we have in here, all of us would be in trouble. I have no choice.”

He grabbed her forearm forcibly as she begged, “Daddy, I promise! I promise not to tell anyone!”

“Too late, I told you not to come. Even Eli warned you, but you didn’t listen.” He sounded regretful as he brought Victoria deeper and deeper into the back prison-like rooms of the structure.

He brought her into the middle room farthest from the entrance where a single lantern was lit. A table was surrounded by various herbs and mushrooms brought from the front of the Glass Castle’s hallways. Plants surrounded what appeared to be a star shaped sigil, whose middle contained a plain orange bowl filled with a brown, sludge-like liquid. At the back of the room there stood a single, red chair. It sat alone in front of a black obsidian altar which paralleled the closest wall. On the altar were five candles whose wax dripped like great drops of blood. Over it

hung a rabbit, a frog, a fish, and a snake. Their skins were peeled over their bodies revealing the sinewy muscles beneath. Along the sides of the altar were four separate motes filled with an unknown dark and congealing liquid. On top of the altar was placed a gigantic tarantula, bigger than her father's calloused, weather worn hands. The rest of the room was too dark and hard to see. At that point however, nothing else mattered to poor little Victoria.

"I am truly sorry Victoria, but I have to tie you to that chair. It is necessary to complete the ritual." Her father turned, locking the door behind them.

Victoria collapsed as her father brought her around the table. All she could think about was that single chair on the other side of the room. Her body froze, paralyzed by the sight of what she saw. Then she was picked up forcefully in her father's arms the same way he used to do so lovingly when she was younger. Her mind recalled all those times he called her princess or pumpkin and how on so many nights her cheeks were peppered with his kisses; but she also knew how severe his punishments could be. Just a week before this she walked in on him smoking some sort of bizarre smelling cigarette, and his response had been fierce. Never though, not ever in her twelve years of life with Daddy had she seen something like this.

Her father shoved her into that blood red chair and bound her hands and feet to it with a strong, itchy rope. Her father mixed ingredient by ingredient- a concoction of plants, herbs, and mushrooms together into a fiery orange bowl. Fear and panic rose in Victoria. Her heart began to rhythmically match the constant stirring of the bowl. Victoria desperately tried to free herself from this cold steel seat, but she soon found out it was bolted to the ground. The pounding and mixing finally stopped as he filled the bowl with the thick congealing liquid that lined the altar.

Finally, the man, who Victoria no longer felt she knew, crushed the tarantula with a mortar and pestle and used its remnants to top off the brew. On one side of the room a fire was started and she noticed that a brass cauldron hung mockingly above it. The man tossed the bowl's components into the giant pot. A green liquid inside the cauldron boiled into a frenzy. Higher and higher the liquid rose, cascading over its side like mini toxic waterfalls. As the liquid fell into the fire, its smell intoxicated little Victoria, and her vision began to fade. The room rolled around her as the shadow dipped a ladle into the vat.

Victoria woke up flat on her back, somewhere in the middle of the vast woods. Lingering visions of a dark, evil demon pouring a toxically burning concoction down her now scorched throat haunted her.

Water, water, water... was all she could think about, until the moon above gave her a wink. *Huh, that's odd, I never knew the moon had a face. Maybe I will just lie here and talk to it, it seems to be smiling at me.*

Once she started a conversation with the moon, her dry throat became more tortured with every word that she spoke. This made her realize once again how gravelly thirsty she truly was, and how dull a one-way conversation could be. Ever so carefully she rose up. First to her forever trembling knees. Next to her wibbly wobbly feet. To her left she heard a creek. Oh, so slowly she began to make her way to the bibbly, bubblely refreshment. Little by little she began to walk. Carefully, she avoided the tree limbs that loomed above like death's gray destructive hands. Below she watched her tiny footsteps weave in between patches of ferns. Their green tendrils lay in wait to snare her shuffling feet. Up ahead the full moonlight shone. Ever so brightly it parted

the trees revealing a hidden magic meadow filled with a sea of silver grasses. The sound of running water called to her burnt throat like the Sirens of old calling to one's ears.

Victoria's steps grew longer and longer and faster and faster, longing for the quenching of nature's life giver. She dropped to all fours and gulped down the ice-cold water, using up every ounce of strength she had left.

"Just one more drink and I'll be fine," this last whisper escaped her pale white lips, as her body finally gave out. Her face plummeted into the cold, dark, slow flowing water of life and death.

Slowly Victoria's eyes closed. A peaceful escape from the world that now surrounded her. Her young life was over, or so she thought, as she gulped for one last, desperate breath of air. The surprises for that night were not yet over for Victoria. Two strong hands pulled her up and out from her watery grave. Coughing and sputtering, the water escaped her lungs. She looked up to see Eli, an angel who never gave up on her. Mr. Moon seemed to illuminate the night brighter than it had been illuminated all night so far. Just then, a golden shimmering wave burst across the sky knocking Eli and Victoria unconscious.

Victoria returned once again to her watery grave. This time however, a strong jaw saved her from her demise. Above her stood a giant, furry, hulking mass of a dog. The closer she looked at it the more she realized this was no dog, but indeed, it seemed to be something from a fairy tale, a smoky black dire wolf. She only noticed it briefly before, once again losing consciousness. Only this time, perro lobo terrible gigante ahumado laid her in a white bed of moonlit ferns which wrapped around her cold wet body like a blanket. They gave comfort and warmth to a forever changed, no longer daddy's little girl.

Book 1 Chapter 2

“Oneirophrenia” (A hallucinatory dream-like state)

Victoria awoke from possibly the best sleep she had ever experienced in her young life. The night’s moonlight ferns were still wrapped around her body, giving her warmth and comfort from the morning’s chilly air. All around her, the plant life on the meadow’s ground reflected whatever light hung high in the multicolored sky. After an unexpected and one-sided conversation with the moon, she decided not to attempt a chat with the sun. Slowly and surely, last night’s experiences began to play inside her mind. How was she still alive? She shook her head, trying to remember. The last thing she could clearly recall was her lungs filling with the creek’s cold flowing water, which relieved her from its ever-burning state. Did the fish and the moon really speak to her? What was real and what was imaginary?

She recalled two strong hands pulling her up from her watery grave. It was an angel, or so it seemed to her, because the sky behind him seemed to light up with a giant golden halo. But then, didn’t she plummet back into the creek face first as Eli also succumbed to last night’s magic? Victoria should have drowned, but she was still alive. And why was she so very far from the water whose bubbling voice she could no longer hear? This sudden realization snapped her ever so slightly back to the reality of her state.

Eli, my dear Eli, are you alright? She thought.

With this sad thought came a most unanticipated happening. The ferns that blanketed around her unfurled their grasp and from underneath, a mossy bed inflated like a balloon. Carefully it lifted her up, then gently they supported her until she could stand back up on her

own feet. In front of her, the grass parted like the Red Sea. As the grass seemed to wave back and forth at her with the breeze, Victoria waved her hands in a friendly gesture. The grass once again appeared to wave back, drawing her towards the path that weaved between its blades. She looked at her unusual bed, the moss now deflated into its original form as if with the sound of sighing relief at a job well done.

Everything seemed to be more alive than ever, even the seemingly frail Victoria felt rejuvenated by something unseen. Further and further, she went down the newly made path which closed gently behind her. She tried only once to turn around, but the grass refused to part for her again. The surrounding forest she used to know so well had also changed.

After following nature's created path for a while, she began to hear the flowing creek. Victoria hurried toward the sound, bounding ahead like an excited puppy. As she neared it, she stopped short at the sight of a boy sitting on a giant rock next to the creek, his head in his hands. Eli's golden blond hair stuck up in a frenzy of various directions, which meant he was worried about something. He had a bad habit of running his fingers through his hair and then pulling at it when stressed. Given the state of his hair, something was terribly wrong.

Victoria was happy to see him, but she couldn't let him know that. Based on their past relationship and normal banter, she did the only thing that made sense. Instead, she decided to slowly creep up behind him and make him jump. Gracefully, quietly and ferociously determined, she began to sneak towards Eli. The pond on the left reminded her of a movie she once saw and another idea began to form. Along the pond grew some invasive reeds, and from where she was in relation to Eli, maybe, just maybe, a ninja-like approach was possible.

As quietly as her fingers could move, she snapped a reed and into her mouth it went. Victoria began her gradual descent into the shallow pond, but no sooner than her immersion began, a giant bufflehead duck surprised her. It rose from the pond, a rainbow of color beginning from its beak and leaking halfway to the top of its head before finally wrapping around its neck. The rest of its body was a mixture of white and black. The duck's great wings extended as it rose, and a furious gust of wind knocked Victoria onto her bottom. With a splash and gasp, the reed flew over her head. The giant bufflehead mocked her with its laugh-like call.

Eli, no longer surprised, stood up on top of the rock to get a better view of the clumsy happenings. He turned around, "Is that you Vic?"

Between Victoria's blubbling, unintelligible response and the duck's descent back into the pond, quite the view came into Eli's bright blue eyes. A mixture of relief and laughter came over him. By now, Victoria was filthy, soaked and broken reeds were strewn all around her. There were even a few reeds in her dark black, frizzy hair. Her complexion and appearance were a mixture of her dad and mom, and quite the opposite of Eli's. Although it had only been a year since their two families moved to the middle of nowhere in the backwoods and jutting mountains of upstate Washington, they had known each other much longer.

"What was that Vic? I couldn't hear you over the laughing duck."

"Ha, Ha," was Victoria's annoyed response. "I could have had you that time."

"What do you mean, you could've had me?" he smirked.

"I was going all ninja on you, with the reed snorkel and all." She looked longingly at the small pond, "If only that stupid duck hadn't attacked me."

“You mean my minion, the proud Sir Pufflecluck the First.” He made a dramatic, open-handed gesture towards the duck. The duck quacked and rattled his tail, turning one eye back onto Victoria.

“Your minion?” Quizzically she looked Sir Pufflecluck up and down.

“Yeah, he’s been with me ever since I woke up.” In one magnificent move, Eli leapt off the rock and bounded toward Victoria.

She tried to stand up, shaking the reeds out of her hair. By the time Eli got there, his jacket was off and around Victoria’s shoulders. Turning to look at Eli she asked, “How much do you remember from last night?”

“Last thing I remember was pulling you out of the creek.” He grabbed her hand protectively, “C’mon, we better head home before it gets dark. I have no idea how much the woods might have changed.”

A sly, knowing smile crossed her face, “Is that why you looked so worried?”

Eli’s eyebrow raised up a degree, “Worried about the woods? Never.”

“I’m alive Eli.” For a moment they paused. “I have no idea how, or why I was so far away from the creek, but...I’m ok.”

“Good,” a sigh of relief left his mouth. “Just, please, don’t vanish again like that on me. I thought you drowned.”

A sheepish nod followed, “I was just soothing my burning throat.”

“Burning throat, huh? I told you to stay away from there.” He looked knowingly at Victoria. “I’m sorry I didn’t catch you earlier.”

“I would have ended up there eventually. Today, tomorrow, in a year or some other time.” Sadly, she looked at her hand in Eli’s and then back up into his deep blue eyes. “I’m just sorry you had to go through that as well...,” She hesitated, “My dad....”

A look of pain crossed his face, mixed with a brief hint of consolation and the twisted relief of not having had that experience alone now. “Well, now we both know. And for your information, it was my mom for me. C’mon, we need to hurry up.”

On the way back towards the direction of what they thought was home, the little bit of talking that occurred between them was simply for getting their bearings straight. Now, they shared a traumatic bond inflicted on them by their own parents’ hands. Victoria was enjoying the quiet. It gave her time to piece together the other happenings from last night.

Eli continued forward, trying the best he could to orient himself properly and help them find their way back home. Around them, the normally giant redwoods had become even larger, some had become the size of great city skyscrapers. Up some trees ran great trumpet vines with bright orange flowers. They were interwoven one with another forming what looked like great ladders leading up into their canopy. Eli soon knew that the drastic changes in everything around them meant they were probably lost. They didn’t know what time it was when they got knocked out, nor did they know what time it was when they woke up. The only way they could deduce what time it was or what direction to go was with help from the sun. But was the Sun even the same anymore? The forest’s green leaves and needles were too thick and tall to be seen through at many points as well. With that in mind, Eli yelled out to Pufflecluck the First.

Victoria thought that calling out to an imaginary duck minion was a bit odd. She

chuckled, “I know he is your servant, and I get we’re lost, but really.”

“Cohort, not servant, and you just wait. He’ll show up.” Eli stopped and peered toward the area they had just come from. Pufflecluck obediently appeared, emerging from the direction of the pond and flew towards them landing next to Eli. A bemused smirk crossed his lips. Then a somewhat unintelligible conversation ensued, with a quack, quack here and a cluck, cluck there. Here a nod, and there a nod.

It would have been hysterical to Victoria if it hadn’t been completely real. For her part, she was completely confused and shocked at the scene playing out in front of her. Still, she couldn’t resist the impulse to tease him. “What now, old McEli? A farm?” she heckled.

Both the duck and Eli shot Victoria a disappointed glare. “Really Vic, I am trying to figure out how to get us home.”

Thoroughly dumbfounded by what Eli was clearly accepting as the new normal, Victoria said, “I couldn’t help myself, the timing, and the...oh, never mind! I’ll just let you two get on with it.” As the very bizarre conversation continued between the duck and her friend, Victoria’s eyes had time to adjust to the shaded forest. Below her, she couldn’t help noticing a plethora of subtly rambling leaf piles at the base of each tree. It seemed as if the tree’s roots themselves were moving. On the ground, for every small indent that existed, busy little leaf groups moved away from sheltered tree bases. They left their cozy little nooks quickly and filled in the depressed areas on the ground. Underneath them, small villages of neon rainbow fungi thrived. The insects finished their work, some deciding to stay behind in the freshly filled indents to start new colonies. Other insects returned home to the mother base of the trees. It was like watching some

sort of planet colonization documentary.

By now Victoria figured that Eli and Pufflecluck had already come to a decision as no more cackling and quacking could be heard. While her fascination distracted her, the duck had already gone.

“Victoria, earth to Victoria.” A teasing Eli jostled her from her zoned-out stupor, “You really spaced out there for a sec.”

“All over the ground, these little leaf-like ant things are making little towns.”

“Why should I care about that?” Eli quipped.

“They fill in little fissures along the path and cover a glowing city that they themselves construct.”

“And....”

“And that means we can’t tell where we came from.”

Eli sighed, “So, we really are lost then?”

Worry began to overtake her fascination, “Yup.”

“Don’t worry, the duck will lead the way.” He knew it was a strange sentence as the words tumbled out of his mouth.

Up flew Pufflecluck as high as he could. Yet with the massive height of the rejuvenated old trees, getting one’s bearings was quite difficult, even for a duck. Off in the west, Pufflecluck saw barren hills that seemed to be a bit out of place, as no great foliage sprouted from its gentle slopes. To the south, where the Glass Castle once resided, now stood a forest of mushrooms. On the border of the creek just past the forest and ponds of the east arose great, snow-capped

mountains. In the north, a great caldera of a lake had formed with multiple waterfalls descending down its cylindrical sides. In the old world they knew, when out in nature, whatever seemed to be most out of place was typically where civilization resided. But in this newly mutated world, the convergence of nature and what was left of civilization was so blended that nothing seemed to fit properly.

The duck began gliding back down to his companion. He found the mutated tree canopy to be a curious thing. Where bird nests and squirrel's homes once resided, wooden huts were woven together by nature herself. Upon returning to the ground, another odd conversation between human and duck began. Once the conversation ended, Pufflecluck once again flew off, this time back to the reed pond.

A mixed look of concern and determination crossed Eli's face. He knew where he was going to go but had no idea what to expect along the way. "C'mon Vic let's go, the sooner the better."

They began their journey to the west towards the desolate hills of Botkin Vale, or so they decided to name it as such during one of their many games. With the knowledge that Victoria had gained from her observations of the little ants, namely that any indented ground marker left behind would summarily be erased and with the directions of sunlight being scattered here and there by the branches above, what else were they to do?

Victoria spoke into her wrist, "A compass, please." Her electronic watch was powered by the sun, but would it still work?

Anticipation quickly turned to disappointment as it spoke back, in its mockingly human-

like robotic voice, “Reception down, GPS down.” With that response, the excitement of the night before, and the exhaustion of the day finally settling into Victoria’s mind, she couldn’t stop herself from crying. Water began to well up in her eyes and stream down her cheeks.

“It will be alright. I got this Vic.” Around Eli’s neck was something he had always kept, a treasured gift given to him by the dad he never knew. He flipped open the copper locket to reveal a picture of his father and an old-fashioned, non-digital compass.

Book 1 Chapter 3

A Cryptic Journey

Eli led the duo west, into the undergrowth of the towering redwoods towards what he, based on the compass, thought was the way home. The darker and darker it got, the deeper and deeper into the forest they went. Day turned to night, or was it that the canopy deceived the day by concealing the light? The new world was alive in ways they could barely begin to imagine.

As the trees and vines began to restrict and hide their way forward, a single ball of light, the size of a basketball, appeared in front of them. It seemed to blink into existence from nothing. After it appeared for a short instant, it would disappear and then reappear farther away. Over and over this occurred, directing the two down a particular path and towards an unknown destination. A choice needed to be made to either follow the blinking, color-changing light or to continue to follow the compass west.

The light suddenly stopped Eli and Victoria from proceeding down their originally intended path.

“Eli, Eli, Earth to Eli,” Victoria called out as she came around from behind him. Repeatedly she snapped her fingers in front of Eli’s eyes. However, they were transfixed by the blinking light. Slowly, step by step, he began to walk towards it. “Eli!” she stomped on his toes, and this seemed to do the trick, snapping him out of his trance.

“Ow, ow, ow! What did you do that for?”

“What do you mean, what did I do that for? You were walking forward like a zombie

looking for brains.”

Eli began his slow walk forward again, arms hanging limply. “Brains...Brains...”

“Seriously, this isn’t funny anymore, I just want to go home.”

“Do you really? Do you want to go home to that loving father of yours who did those awful things to you?”

It was as if Eli had slapped her. Victoria looked down, attempting to quell the tears that had already been building up behind her eyes. “I...I don’t know, but it’s better than being lost and possibly dying, lured to our death by an enchanted blinking light.”

“Enchanted?”

“Well, I mean, it did put a spell on you, didn’t it?”

“A spell?” Eli asked nervously.

“Yeah, you looked like a moth being drawn to a flame.”

“Did I? I thought I was just following a light that Pufflecluck placed in front of us for us to follow.”

“Pufflecluck, Pufflecluck!” Her anger and for some reason a slight jealousy began to fester. “What makes you trust a random duck? A duck you can mysteriously talk to by the way! It’s weird!”

“Whoa, chill! It’s not just any duck, remember. He’s, my cohort.” At this point, the light began to change its glow into a certain pattern of color as if it was feeding off their emotions.

“A cohort or a minion? What does that even mean? And how on earth did you just wake up knowing all this stuff?” Victoria’s voice had raised nearly an octave.

“I can read his thoughts, and he can read mine,” replied Eli. “Pufflecluck told me.”

“And you believed him? Trusted him? He’s a DUCK!” she shouted.

The ball of light responded before Eli could. It turned blue and sent out a spark that shocked Victoria. She collapsed to the ground in a heap.

“Not cool, will-o’-the-wisp, not cool.” Eli took a defensive stance between the light and Victoria.

It responded by turning green, with envy Eli presumed, and then violet with romance and then pink with love as Eli picked up Victoria and put her on his back. Back and forth it flew as if trying to get Eli to follow it.

“Fine, fine, I will follow you!” Eli relented. Then it lit up with the color of joy, yellow. Carrying Victoria on his back was already growing heavy. “Can’t you wake her up or something? There is no way I can carry her all the way back by myself.”

In response, the will-o’-the-wisp flashed quickly through its arrays of colors, eventually settling on a combination of white, yellow, and pink. Three of what seemed to be animated lightning bolts shot from each color. Together they swirled into a three-pronged bolt that parted around Eli and plunged into the back of Victoria. With a gasp and a shudder, she awoke and slid off his back. She put her head in her hands and massaged her temples while covering her eyes.

“What in the! Oh! I just remembered.” Quietly she whispered to herself recalling, “Perro lobo terrible gigante ahumado. Smokey giant dire wolf dog.”

Eli was relieved to see that Victoria was alright, but he and the will-o’-the-wisp exchanged a confused “glance,” if it could be called that. He gently helped Victoria back to her

feet.

“You alright?”

She dusted herself off, and then brushed aside Eli, glaring at the will-o'-the-wisp. It became smaller and turned red, followed by an inflation to yellow. “Yeah, you better be sorry. And no offense to you, but Eli, is that thing leading us in the right direction?”

“I think...I don't really know. The compass stopped working the farther into the forest we got.” He shrugged his shoulders, “See?”

The compass spun in one direction and then settled down for about a minute pointing towards the north, or the east, possibly the south, and then eventually the west. It had no real direction to give anymore.

“Seriously, and you are just now telling me this?” Her voice began to get higher and more concerned again.

Eli rolled his eyes, “And that is exactly why I didn't tell you. Instead, I figured we should follow this little guy.”

“And how do we know we can trust him or her?” she said pointing to the now lighter shade of red wisp which was moving a bit sporadically.

“I don't know, but what choice do we have?”

A frustrated and reluctant Victoria had to admit defeat. She had no idea what to do either, and she certainly didn't want to get shocked by another color of lightning from their hovering guide. Eli pulled out a knife from his belt and gave Victoria an assuring nod as he marked the biggest tree along the path. Still, with what this young pair had already observed from the path repairing leaf bugs, a confused compass and foliage that blocked return paths, they might end up

on a mountain of doom or in some witches' sugary sweet oven. Nothing was certain moving forward, but moving forward is exactly what they had to do.

And so on they went, following a temperamental little ball of light into the fathomless forest. Eli continued to mark the trees as they walked. The one thing that was clear is that wherever they went, it was not where they had already been. The forest grew thicker and blacker as silence engulfed the group. Occasionally, along the path they would see an unrepaired hole three times as large and far deeper than their own footsteps. They were giant prints that took the forests' workers much longer to fill. To the left they once heard a stick crack, and to the right was the sound of a rock being thrown and landing with a thud. By that point, Eli was putting on his bravest act as the fear in both he and Victoria rose. Their sweaty palms were encased in each other's hands. Closer and closer the noises got, and closer and closer Victoria got to Eli, something he didn't seem to mind.

"Excuse me mister wisp, are we almost home?" Eli eventually asked. "It just seems to me that we are more lost than we had ever been before."

The wisp responded by first going towards them, then away from them and then finally up and down as its shade turned pink.

"Ok, ok, I understand. We will trust you for now on." He bent over and whispered to Victoria, "It's not like we have much of a choice."

"Mister wisp," Victoria's voice trembled. "Can we please hurry this up? These noises are getting closer and louder."

With a quick up and down, it flashed turquoise and then yellow as it sped up its pace.

Suddenly, a rock was thrown in between the wisp and its followers. A small tree shook, and a knock echoed as an eerie howl surrounded them. In the distance, a high-pitched wail pierced the air and then everything went silent. The will' o' the' wisp and its colors went berserk as it shot into the sky like a firework and vanished. Behind them came an enormous BOOM! then CRASH! Something heavy and large landed on the ground accompanied by a blood-curdling roar. The kids panicked and bolted in the direction the wisp was originally leading them. Whatever little light was left began to fade fast. In front of them, a black shadowy figure appeared, and a greenish mist began to spread like tendrils from its outlined blurry cloak. Victoria was terrified that it may be her father.

A giant, hulking mass of an animal instantly leapt in between them and this ominous, unidentified outline of a thing. From the left, another roar directed them to follow it.

Whenever they veered off the forced path, another shadowy figure would appear, followed by a roar and another hulking mass jumping in between them and this figure of death. They were being directed, herded somewhere like cattle to some sickly corral. Who knew to what end? Maybe to be something's supper or perhaps to a twisted torturous death? A full-blown nightmare was stuck on repeat in Victoria and Eli's minds. They were scared, stuck in an endless loop of horror.

Eventually, the forest thinned, and the sun began to dip behind the hills. Up above, they heard a familiar cluck. From every side, peculiar shepherd beasts with long hair and chimp-like faces enclosed around them. The closer the beasts got, the greater their stings of putrid stench filled Victoria and Eli's nostrils, its smell attacking their senses.

An image both familiar and foreign came into view. On the dual hills of the finger

mountains sat two lone houses, unrecognizable from the homes they once knew. In the middle and down below, closer to the foot of the mountain, stood a yellow, diamond-marked shack of a sanctuary that had now become one with the ground. It was fused into the side of a deep canyon that weaved its way between the mountains and through the valley.

Oh, how they hoped the door to that shack would still open!

Pufflecluck descended from the sky, leading them toward the shack and away from the houses. They ran through the crevasses and up to the door. Pufflecluck released a giant burst of wind, opening the door and welcoming the children inside. His burst was followed by a great POOF and a giant dust cloud, concealing them in a bit of a smoke screen.

Hovering over them, a massive black wolf with eyes the color and depth of galaxies sat on the roof of the shack. The great beast stretched and yawned, slowly and deliberately raising itself up on all four of its massive paws. Having guided the children safely home, Pufflecluck quickly and gracefully ascended back into the heavens.

Meanwhile, Victoria and Eli ran faster than they had ever run before into their clubhouse, then slammed and locked the door. The wolf's low growl was followed by an echoing howl that made the roof, rocks and trees tremble. Whatever had been chasing them paused and then fled. All that could be heard for those last few seconds had been the desperate clomp, clip, clap of four human feet followed by the slamming of the shed's door. Through a small crescent window in the door, they could see that perro lobo terrible gigante ahumado had jumped down from his rooftop perch and stood patiently waiting at the doorstep. Before dusk finally turned into night, and with a wag of its huge tail, the wolf made a few circles then plopped down,

covering the window. Everything outside became engulfed by his furry darkness. Stillness now reigned.

Their clubhouse was no longer the same on the inside as it once was. That golden wave had not only knocked them unconscious, but it had also changed everything they had ever known. Thankfully, both beds and the rickety outdoor furniture all survived. Eli slid the second bolt closed on the door before sitting down on his bed. Likewise, Victoria laid down on hers. They were very still, catching their breath and remaining in stunned silence for a while, replaying the day's events in their heads.

Usually Eli spoke up first, as silence made him nervous and uncomfortable. This time, however, it was Victoria who wanted to break the stifling silence. If not, she would completely let herself give in to the inevitable despair, frustration and confusion that was pressing itself upon her.

She sat up slowly in her cot and jokingly tried to lighten the mood, "You know, I really should name him something other than perro lobo terrible gigante ahumado."

Eli looked at her with a blank stare, "What?" He was obviously not following her train of thought.

"That wolf, I think he is my Pufflecluck."

"So, what does perro lobo....," he asked trailing off, "or whatever, have to do with that terrifying thing?"

"It's what I called him in my head."

"Oh." Eli stood up from the bed forcibly shaking himself out of his stupor. "Don't know

about you, but I need to drink and eat something.” He took a couple steps towards their secret stash of food and snacks inside a mini fridge that was covered with vines. “Well, power is out. Not that I expected it to still be working after all this.”

As the sun set, the only light in the shack clubhouse came from the iridescent glow of mushrooms which lined the corners of the ceiling and sprouted in various sporadic piles of dirt on the ground.

As Eli handed Victoria a semi-cold soda and a granola bar, she pointed toward the door of the shack, “We should probably try to secure that better.”

“Good idea.”

Eli busied himself with the task and even toyed with the idea of a blockade. He finally decided on a tripwire and noisy cans that would notify them if someone was entering their clubhouse. A knock pounded on the shack door. Eli jumped and Victoria dropped her granola bar. Neither one of them wanted to hear the muffled voice they were about to hear. And where was the wolf that was curled up on the doorstep moments before?

“You two in there?” came the seemingly worried voice of Eli’s mother.

Victoria shook her head, relaying silently to Eli not to trust anyone or anything at this point. Eli agreed with a shrug of his shoulders and a nod of his head. He pointed to his eyes, then pointed to Victoria’s face, then back to the door. With a sigh and a lot of hesitancy, she stood up on some of the boxes to look out the shack’s crescent opening. The wolf was definitely nowhere in sight, and because of the glow of the mushrooms and the backlighting of the moon, the person’s face was impossible to see. She looked back at Eli, miming with her hands that the

stranger had long hair. With a wave of her hands over her face and a shake of her head, Victoria also indicated that there was no face to be seen.

Eli waited until after he had secured his contraption to speak up, “Yeah, Mom. We’re ok.”

“Can you let me in, dear? I just want to make sure you're ok.”

Victoria furiously shook her head. A fear he understood all too well after both of their experiences at the glass castle.

It was a fear his mom should also understand, so he replied, “Thanks mom, but after what Vic’s dad did to her last night, we are good in here.”

His mother was annoyed, “You sure you don’t need anything?”

“We’re good,” came the swift reply.

“Ok, I’ll be at the house if you need me,” his mom answered sweetly.

A howl echoed in the distance and the silhouette left hurriedly. This was to the relief of both of them. Eli took up a post on the box, his eyes pointedly looking outside and as he began to snack on some chips, Victoria laid back down. “So Perro Lobo...?”

“Just call him the Smoky Wolf for now,” Victoria interrupted.

“Yeah,” a slight pause, “you think he is your cohort or minion, why?”

“I was trying to remember everything, after what happened last night.” After one more quick glance outside. Eli sat on Victoria’s bed. “From what I could recall, you pulled me out of the water, a golden wave streaked across the sky, and I fell back into the water.”

“If I wasn’t knocked out too, there’s no way I would have let you fall back in.”

“I know. We didn’t have a choice.” She sat up and grabbed Eli’s hand to comfort him and herself.

Confused and worried he asked, “What does that have to do with the Smoky Wolf, or Pufflecluck for that matter? I’m not even sure if this is a dream, a nightmare or reality at this point.”

“Me neither,” she reassured him. “But we’re both hungry, sore and thirsty- that feels like reality to me. Something happened last night, and that wave started it all.”

“How so?”

“After the wave hit, we can agree that we were knocked out, at least for a little bit. And I briefly remember falling back into the water, helpless.” Her eyes glazed over, “The last thing I remember after that was a giant wolf-like face grabbing me from the water.” Victoria turned to look Eli in the eye.

Not a fan of eye contact, he looked away and then down, “The Smoky Wolf.”

“Yes, and then I woke up in a bed of moss, wrapped in ferns. For some reason those ferns reacted to me, they listened to me.”

Wanting to wake up from whatever this was, and not wanting to acknowledge their new and terrifying reality, Eli stood up abruptly and returned to his own bed. “For tonight, let’s just go to sleep.” But sleep would be far out of their reach that night.

Book 2: Inheritor

Chapter 1

A Friendly Encounter

The Story of Rochelle Lambert

“Up high in the tree,
Only I could see,
Hidden, a lion,
A future scion,
It jumps down and morphs,
Sorceress made from swarf’s”

The last time Rochelle heard from her father was a week ago. He seemed concerned, but excited. Perhaps it was the woman he introduced her to and the mentioning of a new friend his age that worried her so much. He had been gone for close to a year now on some undercover, world governmental, earth-saving mission. That didn’t stop Rochelle from dearly missing him.

They each certainly had their own trauma. Her father felt helpless because he couldn’t go back to save her mother, and Rochelle hadn’t wanted to lose them both. For years, her father stood by her, raising her in the wilderness of a pre-apocalyptic world. He had all the nervous energy of a scientist trying to make amends and was like a mad wizard exploring and conniving for ways to revive a long gone and dead or cursed lover. Rochelle understood it, but she also

resented him in a bizarre way for it. Maybe he was really moving on, and maybe he really was on a quest to revive this radioactive world. Could she move on?

Thank heavens Aunt Pansy and Uncle Cordell lived in the middle of nowhere in rural France. It was an odd location for his job, but it didn't seem to prevent him from doing it. Rochelle dangled her feet as she sat on the weeping figs' branches. The clear, languid creek reflected her light red hair and emerald, green eyes. In the reflection, she could see a baby fox, skinny and malnourished, coming to the water for a drink. Staring at this little red fox, she couldn't help thinking of herself. Its red hair was darker by nature, and it had golden eyes that were filled with desperation and survival, but still, they were kindred spirits. She couldn't help wondering if the little creature had also lost its mother.

Perhaps, she thought, I should go get something for it to eat? She couldn't help wanting to protect and feed it, it may have even been an unconscious way of helping herself. Uncle Cordell warned her of rabid animals and the aggressive actions starving animals might take. That warning didn't even mention the unknown mutative effects of radiation. *What do foxes even eat?*

Rochelle looked at the lunch on her lap. She had home grown potatoes and deer jerky. Based on the sharp pointy teeth sticking out of its emaciated face, a fox had to be a carnivore and predator, right? She carefully climbed down the tree and laid a trail of jerky bits down for it. The poor animal noticed her, but it seemed not to care. It was hungry for any sort of sustenance and that need easily overcame its natural fear. The little fox languidly wobbled toward her and started nibbling on the food trail until he reached the final piece of jerky which was face up in her palm.

Would he take it from me? she thought.

Cautiously, it took the offering from her and happily munched on the jerky. Rochelle reached up with her other hand and scratched it behind its cute triangular ears. The fox looked up into her dazzling eyes and politely bowed, wagging its droopy and tattered tail in appreciation.

“Hi, little one! My name is Rochelle. What should I name you?”

It sneezed,” Keetchoo!”

“Bless you,” she stroked it under its chin. “Then I will name you Ketu.”

The little fox, Ketu, cocked its head sideways and then nuzzled her hand with his head.

“Ketu it is then. Did you also lose your mother, little one?”

“Yip,” it appeared to reply.

The watch on her wrist suddenly rang, startling them both. Ketu accidentally nipped her finger trying to grab the last piece of jerky, then ran into the hollow part of the weeping fig tree where several other tiny, emaciated faces peered out. Ketu spit out small pieces of the jerky for each of them. Each of their eye colors varied greatly, unusual for foxes before the event happened. Her father’s scientific reasoning manifested itself in Rochelle as she pondered if that was a possible result of radiation. After watching them for as long as she dared, she walked back to the creek. Rochelle plunged her hand into the refreshingly cool water with the intent of washing her unintentional wound. Ketu yipped again in response to her watch ringing.

She pushed the watch with her finger sliding it up to her mouth in response, “Yes uncle, what is it?”

“An urgent message just came from your father. It’s important, dear...and a bit

confusing.” Her uncle’s voice betrayed the stress he was under.

Rochelle glanced sideways at Ketu and his siblings giving them the well-known pointer finger sign for hushing up. Well, it was well-known to humans at least. “Just wait a moment, Ketu. I promise to bring you more food.” In response, the fox licked each of his siblings and curled into a ball, looking at her with intelligent understanding.

“I told you it was urgent,” her uncle repeated.

“Sorry, Uncle I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking to Ke...Oh, nevermind.” Ketu looked up and shook his head from side to side, then mimicking her by putting his tail up next to his mouth in a hushed motion. *What in the? This little guy is no normal fox!*

“Rochelle? Can you hear me?”

“Yes, Uncle. Please just forward the message to me.”

Above her watch, a hologram message of her dad immediately appeared. He was accompanied by a stunningly beautiful, tanned brunette woman and quite the opposite look of his bushy-headed, freckled and pale daughter. Rochelle shifted uncomfortably as the audio in the message began.

“We just got married!” That was when she noticed that the tan woman was staring longingly at a ring on her finger. “I know its sudden sweetheart, but I don’t know what is about to happen, so there is no time to waste. It might even happen tonight by the time you get this message. We were planning on having a ceremony and introducing you to your new sister then, however....” Her father held up a picture briefly. The girl was simply a younger version of the tan woman. She was beautiful like her mother, but paler and stunning hazel eyes peered back at

Rochelle rather than the woman's green ones. "However, due to some things I cannot talk about, the timeline has sped up significantly." Her father glanced up at his concerned wife, Rochelle's new stepmother. "Much to our dismay," he whispered. "Save this picture. Please go and look for your new sister, when and if you can. I will tell you about the names of various people, some with a warning, and others that are good allies, later, if possible."

Allies, why would I need allies? Rochelle shifted uncomfortably again. And who said I wanted a sister in the first place?

"Forgive my cryptic language. This isn't a secure line, so I will keep everything as vague as possible in the hope that you will one day understand." He stammered and choked up, his normally monotone voice shaking. "I love you sweetheart. This will all be over soon. If I can't find you, come and find me after...and possibly with your new sister." He held up a picture of a nine-pointed star somewhere in the middle of what appeared to be an Ocean. "We sent the same image to her daughter. "He squeezed his wife's hand. "Find it and you can find us. Although, I hope we will be able to find you instead. We have no way of really knowing what is about to happen." He hesitated for a moment, "But I can tell you that the world will never be the same again. I have no idea what is about to happen to me and...." Her father became emotional and squeezed his wife's hand again. "If you do find your sis...."

In the upper left corner of the hologram, a woman abruptly charged into the room and yelled authoritatively, "Enough! Say no more. It's time."

"I love you," he shouted as the hologram's transmission became almost nothing but the sound of static and blurriness.

Her new stepmother interjected before hanging up, “I hope to meet you soon and in a perfectly clean and freshly born world.”

The other women chimed in, “Enough, A....” as the hologram ended.

“Watch, end message,” Rochelle said quietly. She couldn’t stop thinking about the last thing her “stepmother” just said. *What exactly was that supposed to mean?* She pulled up the image of the nine-pointed star, then stared at the image of this, ‘sister’ she had never met. “Ketu, what should I do?” She asked the fox.

She approached the den cautiously, setting out the rest of the jerky for Ketu and his family. The rest of his siblings looked far weaker than he did. Though not as immediately friendly as Ketu, hunger rapidly overcame shyness as they grabbed for the jerky and quarreled over the biggest pieces.

As if he comprehended far more than he possibly could, Ketu nuzzled Rochelle’s watch, his black little nose hitting the ‘save’ button on the image of the girl.

“Seriously, what exactly are you, little one? You are no normal fox!” With that, the fox gave her a sly grin, then trotted up a rock, stopping to look up at the sky. “What’re you looking at?” He lifted his paw upward, pointing at the sky.

On the horizon, emerging from behind the walled city of Avalon, a yellow-bluish green halo spread quickly. From Rochelle’s vantage point, the halo knocked out the lights in every house it passed over.

“Dad! What exactly were you working on? Did you do this?” she screamed. Within seconds, Rochelle was knocked onto the ground. The last image she recalled, before blacking

out, was the picture of her new sister. The last physical sensation before unconsciousness was Ketu's tiny tongue licking her face in concern.

Book 2 Chapter 2

Awakening

“She awoke on the ground,
To a sorrowful hound.
One had turned into nine.
Was it divine design
Or a sinister sign?
They have now become bound.”

Rochelle woke up to Ketu’s crying whine. Behind the fox, the den that his family once called home was now closed off as the tree sealed its own knots and holes. His head was turned toward it and he sniffed the peculiar little door that now stood in his way.

“What happened, Ketu?” She noticed with astonishment that the large notch at the base of the tree was sealed shut with fresh wood and bark. “You can’t get into your home?” Ketu trounced over to Rochelle, placed his paw on her hand and spoke in a language that she could clearly understand, “My home closed. What about your home?” She wasn’t sure if she was more shocked by the fact that a fox was speaking to her or the fact that it felt perfectly natural. Ketu motioned to the cottage that was once her house. It had now become something else entirely and was raised up at least twenty feet, stuck between the branches of the weeping fig tree and its giant branches.

A voice inside her mind jolted her into sitting up. She surveyed the conglomeration of wood, stone and vine that her house had become. She turned to Ketu, “Did you hear that voice? It didn’t sound like my aunt or uncle, but maybe it was them?”

“Yes, I heard voice, but it not them. They are safe. I hear them breathing and their heartbeats are steady. They live. What you heard was my voice, my thoughts, and not you aunt nor your uncle’s voice.”

“Wait? What?”

“I am, what do you call it? Shocked, yes shocked, that you can hear my kind talk now. Can you teach me to open this thing human people call a door? I need to check on my own family’s safety.”

“Oh sure, hold on.”

Rochelle got up and followed Ketu over to a door that had formed in the tree, creating a true den for the foxes. “How do you use this thing?” He pointed to the doorknob.

“We call it a doorknob,” Rochelle said patiently. “But I can just open it for you.”

“Door...knob,” Ketu repeated. “Many thanks, but no, you can teach me to do it.”

“Put your hand, um your paw on it like this.” She placed her hand on the door, grabbing the knob and turning it slowly, “Then turn it keeping your fingers around the edges.”

Rochelle watched as Ketu used his dexterous paws to grab ahold of the knob.

“Fascinating!” she exclaimed.

“Fascinating,” Ketu repeated as he struggled to turn the knob. “And this door and knob gives your family protection from rain and cold like our burrows do?”

“I guess, but it also protects us from more than just the elements.” She looked around at the sights around her. The walled town of Avalon, which was planted squarely on a plateau, had become quite literally part of the plateau itself. The walls were higher than ever, or possibly it was the village that had sunk into it. She was quite unsure what she was really seeing. Vines crept up its side, its long tendrils forming staircases at the entrances. There were also ladders formed from rock, which she was determined to actually climb, as if the cliffs themselves had constructed them for people to scale up their steepest sides.

“Yes, new town looks...fascinating. This is not easy!” Ketu held up his right, then left foot, “But I only have paws, no thumbs.”

“Please let me do it,” she pleaded.

“Do you hear them? I cannot.” Ketu turned to look straight into Rochelle’s eyes. “They might be gone; I must turn this knob and find out.”

Rochelle looked back at Ketu, baffled. “How do you know how to speak, or whatever this is?”

“Not sure, I can look into your mind and see meanings of things, what you call words, and pictures. Not all of it makes sense. But it’s like I am part of you.”

“I feel that too, like I am a part of you.”

“I am worried about these.” He proudly held up nine tails.

“Wow!”

“My family was almost dead before you gave me food.” A crying whine escaped Ketu’s lips. “I am scared as to what my tails may mean.”

Rochelle could actually feel his deep sadness, and not just by way of empathy, it was more profound than that. "I'm sorry if I was too late."

"Not your fault. I was scared. I didn't ask for your help sooner. If you didn't see me by the water, I might have died. Many thanks." Ketu tried one last time to twist the knob, the fur on his paws kept slipping against the slippery brass. Now, please open the door for me, would you?"

As Rochelle touched the doorknob the tree expanded to three times its size. Startled, they fell backwards. She sat up on her knees and gingerly put her hand on the knob, turning it a millimeter at a time. They both stood up as the door swung open and ducked inside.

"Cool!" They said simultaneously.

Then they saw the empty beds of moss and pine needles. The pain Ketu felt caused Rochelle to cry out. She grabbed her chest as her heart began pounding in an agonizing rhythm with his. Ketu approached the beds where his family once laid and put his paw down on each as if saying goodbye. A sparkling tear fell from his eye.

They looked around in awe as the walls came alive. A light split out from eight directions causing the walls and roots and bark to twist and turn. The lines of bark became living memorials that showed Rochelle the story of Ketu's life- the happiness of being a cub, he and his siblings prancing around carelessly. They pounced and landed on alpine field mice, only to let them go a moment later. Moving pictures became mom and dad catching some of the hundreds of bunnies that had become quite a nuisance around the property, bringing them back to their pups in the den for dinner. The sun began to set, as they poked their heads out of the den, calling their children in for the night with a yelp and high-pitched barks. After some more roughhousing and

a final call, the kits bounded hungrily into the den. Then, on the horizon, a light greater than the sun appeared. Mom and dad slung their pups as far back into the den as they could go, filling the entrance with their own furry bodies as they shielded their young. Finally, Ketu's mom and dad vanished. They had been killed by some dreadful creation of men.

"There is reason I didn't trust you sooner. Humans hurt us."

Rochelle was tearing up. She remembered the night she lost her own mother in the very same way. Thankfully, she never witnessed what actually happened in person, a luxury Ketu did not have. She walked over to Ketu and placed her hand on his head, stroking his fur tenderly. The lights, like golden fireflies, floated up from where hand and fur touched.

"I am so sorry," she said, her voice quivering.

His second little paw touched the bed and as Rochelle's tears fell on it, a blue light that twinkled like stars erased the previous story from the walls. Beautiful white flowers, hopping bunnies and scurrying mice could no longer be seen or heard. His previous home had become a wasteland with nothing safe to eat or drink. Now the tree revealed Ketu's journey with his siblings from the meadow to this tree. As the strongest in the litter, Ketu led them there and tried desperately to find enough food for them all to survive. Unfortunately, he lost several of his siblings along the way.

One was lost to the torrents of acidic rain that plagued the Earth after the blast; another was lost to a raging mudslide. Ketu gathered another ragtag group of orphaned foxes along the way. The few that were left of his extended family eventually made their way to the den and he tried to save the younglings before succumbing to starvation themselves. Now their spirits lived

on, becoming connected to Ketu through his tails. Each soul was represented by a tail, as they merged into one, and then fanned out into nine.

The wall shifted and creaked as it forged a final image. In the middle stood a brave and kind fox whose one tail had turned into nine. Above him stood a girl who looked a lot like Rochelle.

Ketu walked up to the wall and placed his front paws on it as if absorbing the story, they just witnessed into himself. The images that had represented Ketu's family and story gradually faded back into nine individual points of light. Those lights then lined up straight in front of Ketu and descended upon him. Ketu turned around and behind him his brilliant nine-tails fanned out and shone with brilliant golden lights. His fur turned from a reddish brown to pure white. He motioned for Rochelle to come to him, and he placed his radiant paws in her hands. Rochelle saw an image of her mother dressed in a golden robe on the wooden wall. Her mother descended into the girl within the wall behind Ketu.

Together they proclaimed, "We are now one. Each tail represents a part of me, and they have now become a part of you."

Ketu and Rochelle touched forehead to forehead. A golden streak streamed from the images of their lost family members onto their faces as they rested against each other. That same golden streak emblazoned itself permanently on the top of Rochelle's red-headed mane and the pure white crown of Ketu's head, extending all the way down his spine and interconnecting each of his nine tails.

Book 3: Ancient Empires

Chapter 1: Old Dynasties

The Story of Lily Lee

It was midday and the sun was high at noon. My breath frosted the air as it escaped my mouth. Old man winter was still refusing to relent his grasp. I was sitting in our pagoda, enjoying my endemic fishpond and drinking a calming herbal tea. The pond's surface was covered with a thin layer of ice. Dad went to a summit on some man-made island in the Atlantic. My brother, my uncle and Mom stayed behind to keep the people of my country still in a time of unrest and uncertainty. Most of the people in our kingdom were happy and well fed. That is most likely not the case for the bordering kingdoms.

After World War III, most of the world was left reeling and is still recuperating. Old powers in Asia saw this as a chance to reclaim what they had once lost, causing even more death and famine. Japan was left devastated and had joined with us in an effort to peacefully feed our country's hungry citizens. The blast displaced and evaporated so much water that a land bridge extending from Fukuoka to Busan had been exposed under the ocean. In their efforts to reclaim power, ancient Chinese dynasties became divided into some of the old empires. They became six distinct factions. Namely Wu, Chen, Jin, Qi, Liang, and Liu Song. The Khans from Mongolia also sought to take advantage of the war, and probably would have, if the Vlad family from Russia weren't of such a concern to them. Our little kingdom consisted of North and South Korea and all of Japan.

In an effort to protect his people, which my father saw as his obligation, he flew to the international summit. He hoped it would bring the powers of God and the universe to his fingertips and allow him to heal this land. My family and I warned him against such a greedy desire. Too much power can corrupt even the best of us, no matter how righteous that desire is. Not to mention the people my father associated with and owed favors to now. It was the only way he could gain access to the summit.

As I sat in the pagoda, I watched the sleeping fish slowly become more active as they escaped their winter's dormancy with each crack in the surface of the pond. A lion roared from the direction where I feared my dad was searching for things no man should find. This was no ordinary lion roar; we did not have real lions in my homeland. This was the roar of God's lion, and it was angry. The sound grew closer and closer until I felt the sensation of the creature's warm breath mingling with my own. I turned my head slowly to face the beast.

Before I could react, it picked me up and threw me into the shallow end of the icy pond. Floating amongst the fish, I lost consciousness. I woke up, my body still bobbing gently in the pond, yet I was surprisingly warm. In fact, the whole pond had melted. I remember thinking, *how long have I been here?* It didn't make sense that it felt like a nice warm bathtub. I stood up quickly, the lily pads tangling in my hair. For some reason, I was dry. Even as I unwrapped reeds from between my toes, they were dry. It was all very bizarre to me.

My next thoughts turned to concern for my father, my family and my country. My family was tough, that toughness was how we got to where we were and how we survived. My country, however, was very fragile. I walked back to the pagoda via a route that didn't involve water,

water worried me at that point. I moved slowly and silently, afraid of another attack.

As I crept along the boardwalk that connected the pagoda to the main living area, our compound's courtyard came into view. The courtyard's shape was that of a giant square and along its edges sat each relative's house, safely situated behind the walls and gates that were our only protection from the outside world. Toward the front, sat a covered throne room for rulers past and present to preside. As sentinels at the main gate and dotting the pathway to the throne room, stone giants, intimidating statues of mythical beasts guarded the palace fortress.

Father wanted to remove the statues saying, "They intimidate the guests and that is not the type of rulers we want to be." Uncle called them "historical, and monuments to greatness." The compromise was supposed to be moving them to a museum. Uncle would still be able to have his monuments, and father could show the people that we were moving forward with a new government, without forgetting about the past.

I had not been wrong about another attack.

What I was not expecting, however, was the fireball that roared from my younger brother's hands straight towards me as he rose out of a pond in the courtyard. I dodged it, but it followed me like a torpedo. My only option was to run back to the water and lure it to my brother, hoping he could control it, and it wouldn't harm him. As I ran back and dove into the water, I landed on a giant salamander. It looked exactly like the one gifted to my family from Japan, only much larger. The creature rose up from the depths and appeared to be the size of a baby Godzilla, at least from my vantage point. As I clung on to it, it swallowed the giant fireball, along with my brother.

“Bad, and good salamander,” I said. “Now please spit out Byung-ho.” To my surprise, it listened and obeyed the order. My brother was spit up in a ball of slime. With his hair singed at its ends and his eyebrows missing, he was quite the sight. As much as I was horrified by what was happening, I also found it to be quite hilarious, so I laughed. It was a short, nervous laugh that betrayed the anxiety building in me.

“Ewww, ewww ewww! This is disgusting!” Byung-ho was furiously shaking the slime off his body. I could tell he wanted to jump back into the water but thought better of it as he looked at the salamander. “That was so gross, but so cool! Did you see that fireball? I almost got you for once.”

With the best look of disapproval I could muster, I teased, “You know you could never surprise me, and yes, that fireball was cool, but also very dangerous!”

“No worries, I know you. You can take on and beat the world all by yourself,” he said with a wry smile.

At this, my disapproving glare subsided. He was always a sweet talker.

“How on Earth did you learn to throw a fireball?” I was curious and sincerely impressed.

“I didn’t,” confidently he squared his shoulders. “With that big explosion, I flew back and got knocked right on top of a lantern and then tumbled into the banks of the pond.”

I interpreted him, “Was there a fire? Is everyone ok? Are you ok?”

“Relax, sis. I don’t know how, but when I woke up, instead of being burned by the flames, they surrounded me and were somehow cool to the touch.”

“When I was in the pond, it was the opposite for me. I was warm.”

“Warm, what do you mean?”

“I flew into the water, but I didn’t stay wet. It was so strange! Did you notice? Your pond is probably warm, too.”

“I thought that was just my fire.”

“How could fire be cold and hot at the same time?” I asked, the older sister tone coming out.

“Don’t know. I mean, how can I even shoot fire? None of this is logical, at least not from the scientific laws we used to know.”

“Good point, how about we touch hands and find out who is actually hot and who is cold?” We had been competitive our entire lives, so I figured why change that now.

“What if we create like a giant hot/cold explosive reaction?” He looked awfully leery compared to how he normally reacted. Usually, he was the one diving in headfirst. Then again, nothing about this situation was usual. “Besides, I would prefer not to be swallowed again by that salamander.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed. “The salamander!” I had totally forgotten about the clever amphibian. Yet, it seemed to be a part of me, an extension of my core body like an arm or leg. “You’ll think I’m crazy, but I think I can communicate with him in some way. I can *feel* him.”

“Really? That’s the weirdest thing I ever heard! Let’s test that theory.” My brother trepidatiously approached the salamander. “You’re telling it I’m not an enemy, right? That I’m just introducing myself?”

The closer and closer he got to the creature, the more and more I could feel the salamander's belly rumble. Smoke suddenly blew from his nose and its great mouth gaped open. Before my brother could react, a huge, flaming slime ball shot out of the salamander's throat and collided with my brother. He looked like some super-charged, green-flamed anime character. It didn't help that his normally black hair had a bluish green tint and was sticking straight up. I laughed again and patted my salamander.

"Seriously?" He did not look amused.

"C'mon bro, he had to burp that thing up at some point or he'd have indigestion." I giggled uncontrollably, trying to say my next words for several minutes without much success. "Si-woo made you look awesome, like straight out of a comic book." I rubbed under the salamander's chin affectionately, "Isn't that right, Si-woo?"

"So, it even has a name now?"

"Of course he has a name. He probably always has, but we just didn't know it. You should look at your reflection in the water."

Byung-ho hesitantly approached the water, the reflection of the full moon highlighting his fiery countenance with a silvery hue. "I feel so gross, but...look...so awesome! You're right! I do look like an anime character! It's my childhood superhero dream come true."

Sufficiently proud of his handiwork, Si-woo let out a contented, knowing puff. Then he turned around several times in circles like a dog settling into bed and descended back into the pond. He looked ridiculous as he nestled under the mud and the water in the tiny pond overflowed onto the courtyard.

Byung-ho grumbled under his breath, “I really don’t like that big slug.”

“You shot me with a fireball first, so it serves you right.” I was greatly amused. “I think Si-woo and I will get along fabulously. C’mon, let’s get you dried off and search for everyone else.” My brother nodded in agreement, my head swimming with questions and suspicions. Why was this pond water wet, but I remained dry? Why did I suddenly have a giant Japanese salamander as a teammate? And should I tell my brother what I suspected about Dad?

We were silent on the way into the bathroom. I opened the cupboard automatically and handed Byung-ho a towel. It was impossible not to notice how much everything had changed in the last few hours, at least it seemed like a few hours, while we were “sleeping.” The arrowhead flowers from the pond had been overgrown to the point that they were wrapped around most of the previously bare pillars of the palace compound. Occasionally, Si-woo snored, blowing bubbles that floated up from the pond, turning into miniature storm clouds that actually rained. A few times, poor unsuspecting fish were caught up in this process before swimming frantically out of the bubble and plopping back into the water. The water lilies were randomly blooming, wilting, dying and then coming back to life only to repeat the process a few days later. Some unseen energy was changing everything in the compound and most likely the world. A golden lily that my father planted in the middle of the pond was glowing and pulsing. From what I could deduce, the glimmers of its energy seemed to be the source of the pond’s newfound powers.

Knowing that everything was a game to my brother, I gave him a firm warning before going to check on everyone else. “We don’t know what other powers people have, so please stay behind me and stop attacking.” I added a firmer warning, “And if you attack me again, the next

time I won't ask Si-woo to spit you out. You'll be salamander soup."

Reluctantly he agreed and then said, "To be honest, I am a bit hungry. Can we stop by the kitchen before hiking around everywhere to find everyone?" I tried unsuccessfully to convince him otherwise, and I'm ashamed to admit that my grumbling stomach agreed with him.

We were no less baffled by the changes we discovered inside the halls of our home than what we found outside. The kitchen walls had been turned into the same bamboo that once grew on the outsides of its walls, as if they turned inside out. The electricity was out, so we grabbed what snacks and drinks we could and headed out on a quest to find the rest of the family.

As we searched each room, not a small task when you're living in a palace, we encountered several servants and cousins who also had altered appearances, gained new abilities or bonded with a telepathic animal. Some had gained all three. These animals included a giant white rabbit that attached itself to my younger cousin and hopped jarringly in and out of the shadows. We really had gone down a figurative rabbit hole. I almost expected to see a smiling cat and a hookah- puffing caterpillar sitting on a mushroom.

Eventually, we made it onto the courtyard again and worked our way toward the throne room. The stone pavers were evolving, forming walls that were turning the once open area into a labyrinth. After several dead ends and wrong turns, we came to a thorny rose-covered wall, a wall which I encouraged Byung-ho to break through with a fireball. I was growing more claustrophobic by the minute. The fireball hit its mark and opened a path for us. As we began to make our way through this path, the thorns and roses, much like the water lilies, kept regenerating. Just when I feared I was about to be suffocated by the pointy, pokey, delightfully

smelling foliage, a red fiery sphere appeared causing the roses to shrink back. I soon realized the fiery sphere was created by Byung-ho, and it surrounded us protectively.

As we entered the throne room, we stumbled on Baem, almost literally stumbled. He was the serpentine advisor of my father, and he had always favored my uncle. I was suspicious that he was partially responsible for convincing my dad to go to the summit. When he nearly slithered from the floor and up onto the wall, his true form was revealed, that of the serpent I always knew him to be. He even had a forked tongue and snake-like eyes.

“I see....” he hissed, “You made it through my labyrinth. I am not pleased that you burnt my lovely rose wall.” He looked us up and down viscously, “No matter, you are most likely two little powerless bastards by now.” Instinctively, I stood in between him and my younger brother. “Your father was only a weak tool. He cared far too much about the people. Your uncle, however, is different. He will lead us to glory, might, and sssoooo many riches.”

I spoke up angrily, “What do you want, Baem?”

“What do I want? I want your brother dead of course. A 10-year-old has no right to a throne.” His shape began to morph until he became a snake in every way. “And he will be oh so tasty!”

“You will get nowhere near him, and there’s no guarantee that father won’t come back! And when he does, he will put you in your place and chop off the head of the snake!”

“Your father, your father! I sent him to the summit and to certain death. No one survived the explosion at ground zero. It was ssssooo close to the ssssource of this wonderful power.”

“How do you know what happened to my father?”

“Who me? I know everything, which is why I caged and held onto my beautiful snakes. I even knew what was going to happen after the original plans had been sabotaged. But enough drivel, let me make this ssssearingly clear. You can either get out of my way or I will simply go through you.” As towering and long as an Amazonian Anaconda, Baem lauded over them. He laughed, then coiled and struck.

My eyes were still closed when a great “BURRRRRPPPPP” echoed through the throne room. My brother, who was still cowering behind me, definitely did not look like an anime superhero at that moment. “Is it over yet?” I screamed.

Byung-ho eventually found the courage to stand up and peer around me. He walked straight to our father’s throne and reached out to where he thought my amphibian protector was hiding.

Si-woo licked my brother’s hand. Apparently, he was no longer the enemy. Byung-ho grabbed hold of Si-woo’s jaws and yelled down his cavernous throat. “Yeah! How do you like that now, Baem? I’ve been in there before! It’s not so pleasant, is it?”

This was one meal Si-woo never spit out.

I began calling out, hoping to find Mom, sister and other family members that were still missing. “Mom, Mom! Eun-joo! Uncle!”

“Check the secret space,” Byung-ho suggested. “It’s soundproofed in there, so she won’t hear you.”

Only a select few of people knew about the security room and, thankfully, Baem was not one of them. I searched for the button underneath the throne’s left armrest and pushed it twice. A

panel directly behind my father's throne opened onto a room as spacious as my bedroom. We found our mom and uncle huddling there. They were engaged in a very serious discussion that ended abruptly when we entered the room. Byung-ho rattled off everything to Mom, purposely doing so in front of our uncle. Uncle barely raised an eyebrow at what my brother had to say.

Mom showed only the slightest reactions to our story either. Her response was simple and straightforward. "Your father is safe. Your uncle...." she glanced sideways at him, an audible sigh escaping her lips. "Your father and I, fearing that the worst would happen, put certain precautions into place. I am terribly sorry you went through all of that. We thought the event was still weeks away or we would have gathered the family in here. We were lucky to be in the throne room when it occurred." She extended her arms towards us, "Just come here and give your mom a hug!" She squeezed us and kissed our foreheads, "and let's not ever mention Baem again. Please."

We all nodded in agreement with that. Somewhere in the distance, I heard Si-woo let out another burp.

"Lily, is Eun-joo all right?"

"Yes," I replied, "but she's changed a lot."

"And did you see a golden lily in the pond?"

"Yes, I did."

"Your father left that there for you," my mother told me.

Book 3 Chapter 2

Wonderment

I was unsure as to what I needed to do next or what my father expected me to do next. Often, I found myself sitting underneath the pagoda, staring at the golden lily in Si-woo's home. He guarded it with the same care he took with me. Because of my mother's interest in it, when my brother annoyed me with an occasional surprise attack, I was quick to turn him away for fear of damaging it.

"You know it isn't going anywhere," Byung-ho kept reminding me.

"Possibly, but Father chose a lily for a reason. And why was it that? Si-woo came from this pond too and that's not an accident either. We both fell into a pond and yet you don't even have a Si-woo yet. Something about it is meant specifically for me."

"That's not fair, I think I have an animal protector, too. I'm just trying to figure out what it is."

"Well then, why didn't it protect you against you know who?" I could tell the question bothered him, but it was a fair one.

"I don't know, maybe because Si-woo was already there."

"Now that is the right question that needs to be asked. After all, our sister Eun-joo already has a panda friend and our cousin Sep-yeon has the white rabbit...."

"Yeah, but Eun-joo was by herself in the bamboo forest when that happened. She didn't have to share anything with you. So maybe Si-woo is both of ours."

“I doubt that.” I gestured to Si-woo, “Si-woo come on out and say hi again to Byung-ho.”

“No, no, please don’t.” Si-woo poked up his head from the pond and opened his mouth, his tongue stretching in a broad yawn. “I swear I can hear you-know-who down there. And I still think that salamander is teasing me every time he does that!”

“Go ahead, lick him again,” I instructed.

Byung-ho braced himself for an inevitably oozy kiss as Si-woo obediently ran his tongue from the bottom of my brother's chin to the top of his head. Even when Byung-ho attempted to hide behind the dining table, Si-woo’s tongue was so long it could wrap around chairs and plant sneak licking attacks.

“Ew, ew, ew, not again!” he screamed. “This is not funny, you know!”

“Wow, you may not belong to Byung-ho, my sweet salamander buddy, but you sure have learned how to give him kisses.” Si-woo let out a confident blow of bubbles before descending back into the pond and snuggling next to the golden lily again.

“That is so not fair! Please, Sis! Can you help me figure out who or what my animal companion is? Just as soon as I go to the bathroom, I mean,” he rubbed his hand through the back of his now slippery green hair, presenting me with a glob of slime. “And get cleaned up! Yuck!”

I looked back at the shimmering golden lily, trying reluctantly to turn my attention to my brother’s problem. My thoughts were followed by a tail splash and muddy nod from Si-woo, giving his approval. “Sure, I guess. I can’t quite figure out this puzzle or my father’s purpose for the flower right now anyhow. Maybe if I help him, it will help me figure out the mystery of the

lily, too.”

I heard Byung-ho’s voice behind me, “I miss him too, you know, but just sitting here and staring at it won’t do any of us any good.” Small tears begin to well up in his eyes. I was instantly reminded how young my brother was to be dealing with such things.

I had to hold back some of my own tears as I stared at him and thought. *My goodness, how much he looks like a smaller version of our father.* His stoic yet laughable and good-humored face. His rounder, inquisitive eyes were always burdened by something that was shared with no one. It made sense, after all, because he carried the heavy burden of being the heir. Byung-ho even had the strength to stand up to Father when it was necessary.

I, on the other hand, could never say “no” to our father. Whatever burden he carried around with him, I always tried to lighten for him. Which is probably why he left this puzzle for me to solve. Yet right now, aside from his never-ending use of fireballs, Byung-ho, the future ruler of our nation, had nothing to protect himself against the likes of someone like Baem. I reached my hand out and stroked his hair, immediately regretting it. I washed away the slime in the pond. The pond, that is where I should begin to look.

“Please go wash up!” I shook the remaining goop off my hand. “I have an idea of where we should begin looking for your companion. When you’re done getting that stuff out of your hair, come join me at the library.”

“The library? How boring.”

“Do you want me to help you or not? Finish up and meet me there.”

“Ok, fine. I’ll meet you there.” A long, thin string of goop slid down his cheek and onto

his arm. "Can I go wash up now?" he whined. "This is gross!"

I chuckled at that, but was a bit saddened by the thought that he was about to grow up a lot faster than he should have to. I knew I would have to share my portion of that burden with him, at least until I could figure out how to get Dad back.

It was good that Byung-ho's personality was not lost, in spite of everything. I thought to myself as I heard the pitter-pattering of his footsteps and anticipatory breathing of excitement outside the library window. I suddenly heard him cry out in pain.

"Ow, what was that for?" he whimpered.

"What was what for?"

"I don't know...something warm and wet just smacked my face."

"Really? Eun-joo? Are you invisible again?"

I felt her warmth against my face as she exclaimed, "BOO!"

Eun appeared from behind the dark dusty bookshelf. Since the change occurred, she had been deliberately dressing in a long, white gown, leaving her straight, black hair covering her face. She whispered eerily, "No, I'm just a quiet, lonely ghost hiding over here."

"For the last time," Byung-ho replied, "you're not a ghost!"

"You know a ghost wouldn't respond that way if their name was called out," I said calmly.

"You have a point there, but it's just so fun!" Eun-joo quipped. "Whatcha doing now, Lily?" She disappeared again, weaving seamlessly in and out of the book stacks.

Byung-ho opened the door dramatically with a fireball glowing in his hand, "A ghost!

Where?”

Eun-joo reappeared right next to him, tickling his side as she did. Byung-ho screamed and fell onto his bum with a resounding THUD! The fireball shot straight up towards the oiled lantern that hung up over the doorway. Without thinking, I made a closing gesture with my right hand and the fire was immediately surrounded by a ball of water and extinguished.

Byung-ho was pouting. “Woah, that is so cool, but also so not fair!”

Eun-joo giggled at this baffling display and tried to vanish again into the background. “Eun-joo could you not leave right now? I want to ask you about your panda friend.”

“You mean Casper?” she replied.

Why was I not surprised that she named him after a friendly ghost?

Looking around at the situation I decided to take them outside for this. Between my brother's hands and a hungry panda surrounded by edible, combustible bamboo scrolls, the library was an inconvenient place to talk with them. So, I ushered them into the open courtyard. I wanted to see if something there would trigger a certain reaction from Byung-ho.

“Why here?” Byung-ho asked me as he looked around. “You just told me to meet you at the library, so what’s changed?”

“I want to test something and your spat with Eun-joo and pension for flames reminded me that fiery powers don’t mix well with books and scrolls. It's the same reason why I asked Eun-joo to come along. I’ll have to go back alone.”

“What’d you need me for? Can’t you two just fight it out like always and see what happens?” Eun-joo interjected.

“Just do it, Eun-joo. You don’t even need to walk to the courtyard because of your powers. You two have already seen and met Si-woo. So, can you please summon Casper? It’s time to meet him as well.”

With a sharp whistle, she called Casper into the courtyard. Just like his human counterpart, he appeared from nowhere and bear-hugged Byung-ho from behind.

Eun-joo giggled, “See? He’s a friendly ghost, and he likes to give bear hugs.”

“Seriously, again? Oh well, at least he’s soft and furry.” The fire began again in his hands, but quickly vanished when he realized who and what was behind him. “I could get used to this.”

“You feel anything? A connection,” asked Eun-joo.

“Well, he is kind of cute and cuddly,” answered Byung-ho.

“Nope, no connection. My work here is done.”

Before she could disappear again, a watery bubble surrounded her. She reached through the water and pulled her hand back through. “So neat! I can even breathe inside it!”

“If you and mister fluffy pants don’t want to get wet,” A ball of water, that turned green, hung over Casper, “or slimed, I would recommend you stay.”

“Not the slime, anything but the slime! I would listen to her, Eun-joo. Being swallowed by a salamander is no fun.” Byung-ho shuddered at the images in his head, which included the inside of a salamander’s stomach.

“Fine, fine! What is it you want, Lily?” Eun-joo called Casper to come to her side, the watery blob that hung over his head following him. She nodded toward Byung-ho, “Scaring him

and putting him in danger doesn't work."

"Why would you think that wouldn't work?" I asked.

"It's obvious. He's a bear. A cuddly, roly-poly panda bear. We need to ask him nicely.

"Ok, I see your point. Let's start with this, how did you first discover Casper?"

"I was in the bamboo forest, staring into the darkness after the incident and thought I saw a flickering light and a round, fuzzy figure. The light lured me towards it. Then a glowing spiral came out of nowhere. It extended infinitely in every direction and ambushed me right before I had the chance to catch the fuzzy figure. The long spirals extended outwards like a shaman's bony fingers, launching me towards Casper. When we touched, a bright, bulbous head attached to the fingers chomped down upon us. It was terrifying, ghostly even."

I looked at Byung-ho and he looked at me. We rolled our eyes in unison.

"It was scary, we get it, move on," Byung-ho pleaded.

Eun-joo huffed, "D'you want to hear my story or not?"

I gave my brother the stink eye. "Of course we do. Please continue."

"Then, when I woke up, I was laying on the very tippy tops of the thickest bamboo grass I had ever seen. I glanced down, panicked and accidentally rolled off, tumbling to the ground. And so, I was plummeting toward the hard-packed ground. I could see it getting closer and closer, but just before I hit the ground, Casper jumped out from the bamboo below to save me. His soft, plushy fur acted as the most luxurious landing pad ever. When I looked up from the black and white blanket, I saw Casper's adorable face and he's been with me ever since."

"So, Byung-ho do you want to jump off a very high tree to find your protector?"

He shook his head defiantly, “No way!”

Eun-joo punched through the water surrounding her as Casper approached her. He was baffled and kept trying to figure out how to get her out of the water trap. “So,” she said, splashing the water from the outside in, “You think you could let me out of here now?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry.” I grasped my hands together, signaling for the water around Eun-joo and the slime ball above Casper to vanish.

Byung-ho mumbled under his breath, “Lucky.”

“Hey Eun, before you leave, I have one last question to ask you.”

“I already know what you’re going to ask, and yes. Casper was most likely a real Panda, and Si-woo was probably a real Salamander.”

“Got it, thanks.” I replied sincerely.

Eun-joo vanished with a flick of her wrist, and then abruptly re-appeared. “Here, this is probably what you were looking for in the library. This information would’ve been much easier to find if the internet was working again, you know.” I looked at the book with curiosity. It was at least decades old as the pages were slightly yellowed with age. On the front cover, instead of photographs, drawings of mammals, amphibians, reptiles, birds and insects told readers exactly what to expect. It was titled, *Species of Southeast and Greater Asia*. Before leaving us, Eun-joo waved goodbye, then, almost as an afterthought said, “I would start with native water species or flying insects.” Then she vanished with a tiny pop!

“That really is going to take some getting used to,” I commented.

A chill ran up my spine as I realized that if she could do that, what could other people do? People

like Baem, who would use their abilities greedily, could be practicing and preparing to grab political power at any moment. I had a big salamander, Baem had a giant serpent, Eun-joo had a fluffy panda, so who knows what creatures could be controlled and manipulated into doing by their human counterparts? So far, some of us could manipulate water, fire and space. Did that mean that earth and wind could be harnessed as well?

“Let’s go Byung-ho, time to figure out what protector you have.”

A boyish grin spread across his face. He really did look like Daddy. *Father, please help me to figure this all out for them until you can come back again*, I thought anxiously. For now, at least, I was my brother’s protector and companion.

Book 4: Contrition

Chapter 1

A Prophecy

The Story of Catalina Voss

I am Catalina Voss, the daughter of one of the ancient tsars, and one of the last of the Russian oligarchy. All it took was one nuclear bomb to trigger MAD, or Mutually Assured Destruction that politicians have been warning us about since the Cold War. No one knows who actually attacked first, and within a few seconds, no one seemed to care. What is known is that it was not Russia, The United States or China as our radars showed no missiles coming from those targets and each of those countries knew the consequences. Was it a terrorist group? North Korea flexing its might and losing control of its testing program again? Israel targeting Hamas in the Gaza Strip? The first nuclear missile hit somewhere in the Middle East, making Israel or a terrorist group the most likely villain. Regardless, each of these countries, including my own, share responsibility for the tensions that brought about nuclear weapons in the first place. Nazi Germany's race to create atomic weapons surely steered the course of human history as well.

International nuclear regulations were also impossible to police and enforce. Russia ignored, and even promoted, the selling of nuclear weapons to extremists for profit. If that meant a bomb was set off purposely by terrorists or accidentally by someone, we sold old Soviet technology to, we are certainly guilty of genocide. Whatever it was done for and whoever first

pulled the trigger, it worked. All the dominoes fell into place for our Mutually Assured Destruction. Most governmental headquarters and large population centers were wiped off the face of the earth in a matter of days. Those who survived are experiencing the consequences of nuclear fallout. If nothing is done soon, if scientists don't find a cure, the entirety of the human race will be extinct. My father already has an incurable form of cancer caused by the fallout, and I expect to suffer the same fate. From the limited details he told me, he is working with some of the world's greatest minds, or at least the greatest minds that survived the initial blasts, to find cures for these fallout cancers and figure out how to block the radiation poisoning seeping into our food and water supplies. A wealthy group known only as the Investors is bankrolling their work. Their research could possibly resurrect the world.

I don't know what to believe or who to trust anymore as parts of my country have descended into chaos as people fight for power and resources. While this world is in a state of recuperation, what is left of most governments have agreed to what they call a Mutual Alliance of Nonaggression, or MAN for short. Whether there is an alliance or not, old feuds and desires for control and power still exist within the hearts of men and they always will. My father, Reuben, has assured me he does not trust everyone he is working with, and he is taking the proper precautions to protect himself against them. However, he gave me the names of a few select people that can be trusted if something happens to him. The fact that he gave me that list of names at all concerns me.

The last time I saw him, he said, "The next time you see me, you will see me as a completely new man, freed of the sickness ravaging my body." What worries me is the price he

may have to pay for that cure. Maybe there will be a price the whole world pays. I worry for him and this unstable, restless world. All I could do was pray for both him and the world and wake up tomorrow ready to survive again. It was all I could do every day.

One particular night, I went to sleep feeling uneasy for a number of reasons, not the least of which was my father's continued absence. I had a dream, a vision as some might call it. In that dream, I saw a woman in red looking out my bedroom window. Far below the small mountain we are sheltered on, the city was bustling. She was beautiful, with long blonde hair and light-blue, penetrating eyes. She looked at me and then at the body length mirror in the corner of my room. In that mirror, I saw myself. When I glanced again at the woman, she was staring back out at the beautiful streets lined with cottages and life, as if the nuclear bombs had never dropped. Somewhere off in the distance, a mushroom cloud bloomed into its deadly purpose. Her blue eyes turned black, and her hair turned to ash. The lovely dress she wore and the perfect flesh of her skin dissolved as she picked me up and stashed me under the floorboards, enshrouding me between the floors of our mansion and the basement that saved my life. Like the city below us, she evaporated in an instant.

I recognized, even in my dream, that I never knew my mother. She dissolved before me, a helpless, weak and truly wretched child. Like millions of other survivors, and in spite of my fortune in having a father who still lived, I was an orphan in one way or another. In my dream and in reality, I laid on my side in a fetal position trapped between the floorboards for what seemed like an eternity, my head on my knees, filthy and crying. Then I heard the voice of my father and his hand reaching for me, "Look, and behold, the work has been completed."

As I looked up, I noticed a bright light, more blindingly brilliant than any I had seen before. Although I had no way of actually seeing it, I knew that it encircled my little village and the world. I ran for the window, trying to open it, but it was locked. Believing it was locked from the outside, I began crying again. Then I realized it was locked from the inside and opened the window into a new world.

The remaining dust of this beautiful woman, my mother, swirled and regathered itself into a being who could only be described as an angel. Her blonde hair was now flowing and golden. She wore a crisp white robe, and her blue eyes were gilded and blazing. “All will be well my darling,” she said. Then she beckoned to me, “Come and look.”

Out on the streets everything that the mushroom cloud destroyed had reformed into something of such indescribable and unexplainable beauty. It was heaven on earth. Yet off in the distance, a darkness still hung in the air, a lingering and ominous fog hovering over the mountainous crags.

Staring intently at that fog, my mother warned, “There is still much work to be done. Arise and go forth, my child.”

I immediately woke up, feeling a complicated mixture of emotions as tears fell down my face. Then I ran to the window and peered through the darkness, but nothing had changed. It was as inky and dreary as before. And then it came, an ever-expanding light, just as my mother showed me. At that moment, I knew nothing would ever be the same.

Book 4 Chapter 2

Responsibility

When I awoke the next morning, my body felt whole and healthy. It was also stronger and more resilient than it ever was before. The possibility that my father could be cured became a reality. Reminded of my dream, I looked at myself in the mirror. Something inside of me knew that I had now become a part of the house literally and figuratively. Even my own reflection was somehow outlined with the velvety material of the curtains in my room on one side and the dark wood paneling of the walls on the other, yet my body and soul remained human and moveable. As for my appearance, I looked like the angel in my dreams from the night before.

I rushed to the window, hoping to find the renewed city promised to me by my mother. The plain window had become a stained-glass work of art, a Tiffany-like masterpiece. I tried to open it, but the hinges on the outside had melted into the stone of the outside wall making it impossible to budge. After a bit of struggle, I shouted out loud, "Come on, just open!"

A blast, so potent that it seemed like a gust of wind, shot out from my hands targeting the hinges with enough force to free them from the stone without breaking the stained glass. The window opened wide as if obeying my demand. Thoroughly stunned, I held up my hands and tried to repeat the process without success. My parents were right, the world had changed and so had I.

Yet, the sun still rose over the rocky crevices of my mountain, lending its light to all who might be caught in the fallout's shadowy grasp. The sight was truly beautiful to behold,

especially after the extended night the world had suffered. I stared down at the city as people began to empty out of their homes and onto the street. None of us could fully grasp the mixture of nature and man-made structures that were entwined into unfamiliar creations.

The holowatch by my bedside rang. I left the window open, letting in the rejuvenating air that was once so toxic and heavy. It was a message from my father.

“Hello, my beautiful daughter, I hope you receive this message, and it finds you in excellent health. I am not sure what every consequence will be or exactly what is about to happen,” he readjusted the oxygen cannula in his nose, “but those I trust have assured me that I will be cured. These trusted ones, my friends, will have to initiate the protocols at ground zero. This means they may have made the ultimate sacrifice for all of us. At least they have gained a love for each other through this ordeal.” His yellowing face grimaced in pain. “I don’t know when I will be able to contact you again, but as my friends are true heroes and saviors of this Earth, I need you to do something for me. My hope is that their daughters will eventually learn what their parents sacrificed. I am attaching a file to this hologram. It contains information about their daughters and their last locations. Please, find them and let them know about their parents. It’s the least I can do for them, especially after all they have done for me.” Reuben abruptly took out his oxygen tubes and spun around in his wheelchair as if he was squaring up for a fight. “Unfortunately, there are a few demons I have to deal with here first. I love you *moya malen’kaya printessa* (my little princess).”

I could see three people pushing through the door and standing behind my father. One was a woman with long red hair and striking features. She wore an expensive red suit. The other

two were men- one strong and bold looking wearing Middle Eastern garb and the other a typical, post-fallout, sickly looking man with glasses and looking every bit the stereotypical computer nerd.

“And now, my daughter, you have seen the faces of the devil I am battling.” This final written message scrolled beneath the holowatch video then shut off.

I grabbed my chest, feeling as if my panicked heart would painfully beat out of it. Was my father really cured of his cancer? I certainly felt alive and rejuvenated, so maybe his body had done the same? And if he was cured, when would I be able to see him again? Then I thought back to the dream and what my mother told me, “There is much work still to be done.” That phrase seemed to echo within my very soul.

I picked up my holowatch again. I needed to memorize each of the faces I had seen, each face my father called “the devil.” After that, I opened up the attached files he sent me. Both were beautiful girls but seemed to be complete opposites. One was a city girl who was transported to the countryside after the blasts. Understanding what might happen after that first strike, her father evacuated her as a preemptive precaution, wisely knowing that it could lead to an all-out World War III. She was now living in Europe with relatives. She also lost her mother, the same way I lost mine. The other sister lived in America and was still hiding out there. Her father cared more about being a doctor and the patients he operated on than her or her mother. Their relationship ended in a divorce.

Their holowatch and holopad numbers were also in the document. I immediately tried to call them, only to hear and see nothing after I dialed. I should have figured the world systems

were already down again. *My father must have sent his message last night*, I thought. It had to keep this information secure. No one could know that these girls existed or that I knew how to find them.

Until the systems were back up, I needed to explore the rearranged town and figure out an escape route before the woman who was determined to be my stepmom, in my estimation an evil stepmother, woke up. As my previous nanny, when the bombs struck, my father let her stay with us and cared for her. To her, I was a pretty little bird, meant to be locked in the cage of my room and trotted out to perform on demand. My only purpose was as a displayed doll for the townsfolk, a puppet princess Tsar so to speak. Unfortunately for her, I was no puppet.

I changed from my nightgown into my street clothes, then tucked my watch away in the inner lining of my jacket. From here on out I would keep that watch close to my own body. Next, I reached behind my mother's portrait into the gap between the frame and the canvas. It was the one place she never tried to look. My new world papers and passport were hidden there, along with the money I stashed for just this reason.

It was no surprise that as soon as I opened my bedroom door, she was standing there. I wondered how long she had been sitting there eavesdropping. I stared at her up and down and smirked. Even her robe was scarlet and purple, reflecting her thirst for royalty. In the middle of her robe, a black bustier purposely stood out. Her regal, yet wrinkled face, with a long bird-like nose looked down on me.

"So, have you heard from your father yet?" It was a statement more than a question. She already knew the answer.

I decided to tell her at least part of the truth, assuming she had heard his voice through the door. “Yes, if everything worked out, he should be cured by now. I was just coming to tell you about it.”

“Oh, really,” she murmured.

“Why do you sound so disappointed by that, Eleanor?” I probed.

“Oh no, it’s quite the opposite. I’m absolutely delighted by that! If he really is cured, then he’ll be home soon.”

And you can keep chasing him and his money, I thought.

She held out her hand, her black fingernails poking out of her draped robe and extending towards me. “Now be a good little daughter and give me that holowatch.”

“No, thank you!” I yelled, shoving her as hard as I could, then turning to run for the open window. Out of the corner of my eye, I suddenly saw wings peeking out from underneath the robe and spreading at her sides, causing me to instinctively jump backwards. She flapped them forward vigorously, but being unpracticed with her new power, the force of it shoved her against the staircase and launched me through my second-story bedroom window and out onto the walkway below.

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