

The Dohrman Prophecy



Dohrmanovo proroctví

James Dohrman

Od autora, umělce, básníka, skladatele, který vytvořil současnou mytologii známou jako WingMakers, přichází nová cesta do vědomí, která provokuje a vyvolává duši.



James wrote



the
Dohrman
Prophecy

Cover illustrations by James Mahu
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Translated by Ondřej Průzračný
TvurciKridel.cz

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Introduction

Anthropologist Francis Harwood interviewed a Sioux elder about the myths of his tribe and his love of storytelling. He asked him why his people told stories from generation to generation. The elder replied, "To become human beings". Harwood asked, "Are we no longer human beings?" The elder smiled in understanding. "Not everyone made it happen."

Becoming a human being is not as easy or automatic as many believe. Certainly, our bodies are human, but we can live in a void in which the individual is influenced to direct their attention away. Our attention is like a gust of wind, it is scattered and uncertain where to fasten. What should he believe? What is it supposed to express? Our true humanity remains in a protective cocoon state, waiting to break through the walls that contain it.

What are these walls? Why do they exist? How do we emerge from our cocoon and spread our wings to discover the subtle dimensions beyond our human senses and thereby become more human? These are the questions that are explored in Dohrman's Prophecy.

As a young child, you may have looked at an apple tree and seen apples hanging from the branches and believed that apples grew from the branches. Later you understood that the branch is only part of the tree and that the tree is only part of the earth and the earth is only part of the universe. In this chain of interconnectedness, you can almost understand how an apple grows from space. That's how it is in each of us. Whatever branch (culture or ethnicity) we originate from originates from the wider universe, and thus in response the universe originates from our collective essence.

John's Apocryphon, a text by Naga Hammadi, says, "We work closely with the Earth Goddess so that our higher wisdom can repair what she lacks through the expression of the light that is within us and that we share." Gnostics believe in a higher connection between earth and humanity. They understand that reconnecting life on earth with our cosmic center is a spiral of co-evolution that will make us truly human as we will be able to perceive the earth as a part of us.

I understand that people tend to reach for the sky when they think about their spirituality, but sometimes what we look for in the branches can only be found in the roots. Earth plays a major role in Dohrman's Prophecy and is expressed in the figures of stones, trees, animals and other elements. Earth is a grounding force in this story, and because its presence is so strong, the subtler energies of the higher dimensions can be used as a counterpoint in a musical composition.

Although this story is set in a mythological time and place, it is important to know that it will pull you out of self-immersion so that you can work as a holistic reader or listener who fully embodies the story and its archetypes, without comparing your time and place to time and place of the heroes of the story.

You will be able to get more out of this story if you participate in its telling by using Comments and Notes in the Sections, or by participating in the Groups. It's not necessary, but for most of you it will help anchor the insights, ideas, and inspirations you gain along your reading journey.

"Hierophanes" is the Greek term used to describe the manifestation of a saint. Hierophanes are breakthroughs of divine energy into the material world. They are like portals between dimensions. The role of storytelling is to try to bring these energies into our world of separateness and ego, and the role of the reader is to receive them, explore them, share them, and use them if they feel inspired by them.

A Hierophant using today's technology is quite different from those used in ancient times. Here in this project is the story, the images, the technology, and there is also a global community of readers and writers that functions as an aspect of this hierophane: The Dohrman Prophecy Web Book Project. Each of you is an expanding part of this project if you choose to be. Those who make this choice can add a new dimension and pattern to this project during its growth and future development.

Myths are not unanimous or one-sided. They give light to those who approach them with a growing sense of unity. They have a certain meaning for me, for you, and for anyone else, but that meaning can be very different for each of us. It is therefore important to appreciate the diversity of interpretations, or at least honestly admit differences, so that interaction and the formation of new insights can occur.

Harmony is a powerful aspect of Hierophans. Those who live in close connection with their environment are not looking for a way to control it, but rather to understand it. How to establish some form of harmony with him. I would like to ask that each of you keep this in mind as you contribute your notes and comments to this project. You will add elegance to it and allow its meanings to expand and include other points of view.

Each person has a rich and complex internal structure that responds to information - especially hierophantic -

information that combines earthly archetypes and higher dimensional energies. It is this internal structure that controls the reaction; similar to the sonar that guides a ship. Our "sonar" is what we use to navigate through life, and you can guess it's the faculty of intuition. I recommend you listen to it while reading.

There is an interdependence between all participants in this reading journey. It forms a community - a real community that is caring and supportive - which is an appropriate and important element of this project. You can look at this web book and see only words and images, but if you sense a common thread, it will lead you to a hidden inner order that is gently, unspoken, and patiently waiting to be revealed in this project by someone like you.

William Sullivan wrote, "One first feels a myth and only later understands it." If you try to analyze what you read, understand it immediately, you may miss the emotional component of the story. A folder where you are everything in the story. This is the state of insight that I would like to ask you to read and listen to, as this is the state from which you will reap the greatest benefit.

All the characters in the story are part of each of us. As you go deeper in your reading journey, you uncover aspects of yourself that are obvious as well as those that are hidden or unmanifested. Maybe there will be some characters that you will reject. However, I want to encourage you to invite all the characters into your heart and listen deeply to each of them.

The Dohrman Prophecy is very different from the Wing Maker materials, but what they have in common is the intention to evoke twenty-first century hierophantic information and share it with as many people as possible. I hope that this story becomes a journey into your individual spiritual nature, and that it helps you contemplate the inner and deep qualities that lie within you. The story will grow with your help. Its meaning will evolve. I hope you enjoy it and listen to his composite voice with the understanding that it is in fact your own.

From my heart to yours

James

Prologue

As Cadriel Mitra walked beneath the ancient pines that towered above him into the predawn darkness, the depth of the fallen needles made his passage more difficult. Cadriel thought that the forest was very quiet this morning. He slung his pack over his other shoulder to distribute the pain from his weight. This was unusual territory, even for Cadriel, who was renowned for his explorer's zeal.

As was his custom, he made his camp before sunrise. He followed his instincts as taught by his grandmother. Thirty years ago, when Cadriel was a young boy, she said to him, "The owl closes its eyes to see the forest, do the same." He tried for many years, closing his eyes and imagining a forest. He called upon it to come alive within him, but he never saw anything he could call real.

Whenever he pondered this lack of result, his grandmother would tell him, "When your intention and your heart follow the same path, you will see what is real and what is shadow." Cadriel could only nod and continue his attempts. Ignoring Grandma was out of the question. She was the leader of the Tribal Assembly of his people, and her demands were never neglected - especially by her relatives.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, Cadriel saw a strange pulsating dim light filling the western side of the otherwise dark forest. He pondered the correct determination of the cardinal points, since the sun rises in the east. Cadriel's interest quickly turned to fear as a low rumbling sound that he felt more through his body than he could hear with his ears began to drift across the forest floor.

The forest immediately erupted with excited birds, crickets, frogs and squirrels making panicked noises. A wild, contagious terror spread through the forest, like an electric shock spreading to every inhabitant regardless of their location. All the creatures in the forest were welded together as a single organism, seeing and feeling with their quivering senses.

Cadriel swallowed hard and knew he should run away, but some part of him - as shrouded as it could be - felt that this might be his sign, his moment of awakening - as his grandmother called it. Running and warning his people that he saw a shining light in the forest would only add to his reputation as a freak. His people would not believe him without providing evidence or greater details of this event.

His feet began to move towards the light and the rumble of sound that was below the threshold of hearing. With each step that brought him closer, he could feel the heat growing. But his attention was fully occupied by the silhouettes moving behind the tree trunks he was beginning to see standing between him and the source of the strange sound. It must be God, thought Cadriel. Who but God could create such sound and light? God is definitely visiting!

As he came nearer, the commotion of light and sound suddenly ceased, and a dark silence entered the forest with an uncomfortably eerie stillness. Cadriel felt his heart beat even faster. He was blinded by the sudden darkness, but he could still sense movement. He found courage and walked forward, fumbling with his hands in front of him as if he were blind.

He felt a rush of energy high above him. An invisible stream descended directly on him. He felt goosebumps in indescribable ecstasy, and he almost passed out from the intensity of the sensation. He bent to the ground and curled into a ball. His only thought was that he was in the presence of God. His emotions were fully exposed and he reacted with uncertainty. He certainly wasn't God's favorite, he thought. Why would God appear to him?

Then he heard it. The unmistakable sound of language. Although he could not understand him, he knew without a doubt that beings very different from him were nearby. The proximity of their presence scared him and he wished he could stay curled up on the forest floor with his eyes tightly closed. He prayed to the forest to return him to his familiar self.

Then a new sound and a new light made him open his eyes. He saw three outlines of huge stones descending from the sky into a small clearing between the trees. They floated down on beams of blue light. Cadriel winced in astonishment. Then he saw movement under the stones and it seemed that some tall beings were settling the monoliths on the forest floor with their wands of light.

Cadriel rose slowly to his feet, his eyes blinking in disbelief and his mind frozen in sacred awe. Three stones, each the size of thirty men, slowly fell with a monotonous thud to the forest floor. Cadriel felt an electric jolt. Suddenly he knew nothing at all. It was as if his world had disappeared and he was suddenly a nomad in some otherworldly place. He could only look at the light show that enveloped the huge monoliths and marvel at their purpose.

To maintain his sense of identity, he began counting. Three stones. Three beings. Three very tall beings. Three very large stones.

And then it happened. One of the beings walked towards him, slowly, without fear or surprise. A pale yellow glow oozed from its eyes, which became apparent as the creature came within about eight feet of Cadriel. Cadriel began to shake uncontrollably. The creature was bluish in color and had the least standing

seven feet. To Cadriel's deepest astonishment, she was liquidly translucent. Cadriel wanted to speak, but his entire body, including his tongue, seemed unable to move. He wasn't even sure if he was still alive.

The creature's eyes were the only threads into its existence that he could sense. Staring into those eyes, he slowly began to hear a voice that resonated within him, as if a vein of gold shot from the ground into his heart.

"You are here as one of us. You will live in this place, immortal to your world. You are the human representation of our divine flame. You came here, to this specific place and time, to be a human translator-body for our highest gift to our people."

Cadriel blinked. It was the first movement of his body in several minutes. Do you want me to live in these stones? As? Why? He felt his thoughts like stormy waves heading for something deeper within him that reached beneath the envelopes of immeasurable confinement.

Everything in his brain was telling him to turn and run like a wild dog back to his pack, but there was something about the being's presence that made him listen. If this is his moment of awakening, he needs to be sure what he woke up to. He needed to stay.

The giant blue life form turned and moved its hand towards the tallest of the stones. Golden light emanated from the monolith, spurting and falling into the darkness. Cadriel could see swarms of gnats floating in the air, and the light reminded him of a cloud of these tiny gnats. Only in this case the mosquitoes were glowing particles of light. Millions of dots flowed together as a collective intelligence. Unhurriedly - as if performing a ritual dance - they moved towards Cadriel.

The light was so clear it wasn't bright. It was more of a soft luminescence. It was an ancient light spun from another world and when it was brought into this world it was dampened by crude frequencies.

The light began to envelop Cadriel, dressing him in its robes in a soft, golden glow. She began to have a new sense of self. He didn't feel like a man - a self - a freak, but like an instrument of some vaguely known intelligence that was bubbling up in him at that moment. She pushed herself out of him as surely as a bird chases a worm, freeing herself from her earthly home to enter her new purpose.

In a flash of time, Cadriel left his body and became part of the cloud of light that surrounded him. He was no longer contained within the confines of the human body, but was now part of something infinitely larger and more complex. It was as if he were a grain of sand suspended in a beam of infinite light, and he became that light. He understood all parts of his mission: coming to this place, being human, and transforming into something he had been prepared to do for millions of years.

Chapter 1. The birth of knowledge

There were times when Maia was lost in the mountain winds that fell from the heights of the great white peaks. That day, however, she walked in complete disinterest in the outside world and its beautiful attractions. Her mind was focused on something else internal. But she also knew that the path she was on was narrow, with tree roots jutting out at angles that defied prediction, requiring her to subject her path to visual study and therefore thought. She decided to sit on a large boulder in the middle of the forest floor just a few feet from the edge of the road. There he will be able to focus on his problem. As she made herself comfortable on the cool surface of the stone, Maia became acutely aware of the mood of the forest and noticed how quiet it was. Only the sound of an occasional scream somewhere deep in the trees disturbed the otherwise quiet morning. The sun illuminated the forest floor, mixing together light and shadow from the mosaic of leaves that fluttered in the light wind.

It wasn't too long before she heard footsteps and saw the vague outline of a stranger coming down the path. He was an elderly man, she assumed a beggar, because it was known that he sometimes went to the forest to collect mushrooms and brambles. Maia, a trusting soul, greeted the old man with a gentle 'good morning', nodding her head slightly as she spoke.

The man stopped in his tracks as if startled by her voice and slowly looked up. "I haven't seen anything good in him for a long time". Maia was surprised by his grumpy reaction, as it was indeed a beautiful morning - by many's definition. But then she noticed that he looked tired and frail, and that his clothing was an unmistakable sign of beggary; it was threadbare and barely felt warm.

"Where are you going?" Maia asked. He looked at her closely and saw a beautiful young woman in her early twenties with minimal adornments or pretenses. Her black hair was partially entangled from the low-slung branches that would initiate anyone walking this path into the forest, provided they had hair on their head. Her eyes cast a bright intellect as surely as a shadow is cast by a bright light.

"My goal is undecided", he replied. "Anyway, I've heard of an oracle hidden far away in this forest, and I've thought once or twice...in fact, so many times I can't even count, that I'll find this oracle-lum and give it a piece of my mind..."

"If there is an oracle here," Maia replied, "you should ask him kind questions and not tell him anything. Oracles are very special, as you know, and can bring you great harm or great help depending on how you approach them".

The old man looked at her and laughed, pretending it was spontaneous, but Maia could see it was calculated. "Somehow you brighten the light of my heart", he said. "Perhaps you would like to join my search?" The old man blinked, trying to keep his invitation playful.

Maia quickly refused. "I really don't know what I should ask the oracle, and secondly, I'm not sure if I would believe what he tells me. How would I know if it is wise and helpful or just a scam?"

"That's it, the oracle is hidden for a reason", he replied. would he bother to hide If it was a hoax, who it? Have you not heard the legends about this forest?"

Maia shook her head slightly and narrowed her eyes. "Legends?"

"Long ago, the oracle of this forest was used by the Son of Dohrman to overthrow the king and his high priests. He only succeeded because of his connection with the oracle." The old man looked down at his torn boots and added, "I'm surprised these legends aren't taught in schools anymore."

"What is taught is not to trust oracles," noted Maia. "It is impossible to impart wisdom from subtlety."

"If this is so, how could the Son of Dohrman achieve victory over King Merchand's forces and his army of priests whose cunning is undeniably superior to any deceitful oracle?"

"If the legend is true, of course," replied Maia. "Where do you think the oracle is?" Maia threw her arms as wide as she could. "These forests are deep and wide and have many unexplored parts. Even the mapmakers dared not enter their depths for fear they would never return."

The old man smiled to himself, but loud enough for Maia to hear in the silence of the forest. "That's not quite true," he began. "I will tell you that I was not always a beggar. I lived and worked properly as an artist and had some friends that I could count among the elite of my city. One of them was actually a mapmaker, albeit of dubious status, but only because he suppressed and carefully filtered his popularity. His name was Josiya and he had dreamed of finding Dohrman's oracle ever since his father had told him the legends. From the time he was a small boy he had heard stories of an ancient oracle hidden in these deep woods, taken to this planet by a race of beings so far removed from our time that they appear to men as Gods, though of course they are men."

"Are you saying that this oracle... Dohrman's Oracle is from cosmic beings?"

"That's the legend."

Curiosity rose in Mai. She believed in extraterrestrial life; the existence of countless worlds in space made sense. However, it didn't occur to her that space beings could be people from the future. This legend, it seems, was more interesting than she first thought. But she was careful, after all it was just a legend retold by a stranger who became a beggar.

"And I will add," continued the old man with a careless explanation, "Josiah found the oracle."

"He must have had a map," Maia whispered.

"Before he died, Josiya called me. I was shocked by his sudden turn to death. He was a powerful man with the stamina of an ox, and except for his inability to speak, he was a man who in all other respects enjoyed excellent health."

"How did you meet him?" Maia interrupted.

"Our friendship started when I painted his portrait and the portrait of his wife. Despite his inability to speak and my own inability to understand sign language, we were able to exchange notes on art, philosophy, politics, and of course space, which was his favorite subject of all."

"When did you find out he had the oracle map?" Maia asked.

"Be patient. There's a sequel to that story," he replied with a hint of a smile. "Josiya sent me post-notes for many years and one day he asked me to keep his notes because he wanted to write his memoirs when he got old. The truth was that I had been collecting his notes for a long time—all of them—because they gave me meaning that I had not found in any other writings." "Shortly after his death, his wife visited

me. She told me that before her husband died, he wrote me a long letter and she must have read it inappropriately. She apologized and justified the indiscretion in her behavior as that of a grieving widow anxious to hear, or in this case read, the words of her beloved, even if they were meant for someone else. I dismissed her concern, but she started shaking terribly as she handed me the letter..." "What was in it?" Maia interrupted.

"He confirmed that he had found the Oracle of Dohrman and much, much more. He claimed in his letter that the post-marks I have can be combined into a form of mathematical code that will provide access to the Oracle."

Maia stood up. "So it wasn't a map? How can that help access the Oracle if you don't know how to find it?" "Josiya never

had a real map, although he knew where the Oracle was. In his letter, he said that Dohrman's Oracle was guarded by the Supreme Guard and was inaccessible to anyone except the High Initiates of the Church. It was guarded as if it were the most important object in the entire world. Making a map was pointless because the person using it would most likely lose their life. That's why he refused to release the map because he didn't want anyone's death on his conscience."

"And now you want to find him?" Maia asked with

a teasing tone in her voice.

"Josiah found the Oracle, or rather it found him."

"How do you mean it found him?"

"Josiah wrote that an apparition came to him in the forest - this was about two years ago - and told him that it was the Oracle. It was somehow able to project itself out of its stone fortress in which it was imprisoned. The oracle told him that he was becoming human and that he would soon be able to free himself from the stone monolith in which he lived." The man paused. "The oracle gave Josiah the code."

"And how exactly will this code help you locate the Oracle?" Maia asked.

"I really don't know," the old man's voice trailed off in uncertainty, "however, I have a theory if you care to hear it."

Maia ran her hands through her hair and sat back down on the large boulder, indicating her readiness to listen to the continuation of the story. The problems she had been struggling with before had completely vanished from her mind.

"The letter gives instructions on how to summon the Oracle, or in a sense, call it into being. Josiya mentioned that when you are a certain distance away from the Oracle you can summon it to appear and it can manifest out of thin air. I know it sounds improbable and I quite agree with that, but that makes it interesting and at the same time dangerous in a way".

He leaned forward and directed his gaze at Maia with new intensity. "Josiya wrote that the code was given to him by the Oracle itself, claiming that it was a communication portal, something like a telephone to another race that works outside of our time and space. He was placed on the planet as a source of wisdom for humanity's leaders and originally was

used in this way but only for a short time and then fell into the power of the Church, who used his knowledge to manipulate the power of the Royal Courts.

"Unfortunately, Josiya's discovery of the Dohrman Oracle was foretold by the Oracle itself, and the High Priest knew that some uninitiated could discover its greatest secret, but the High Priest did not believe in fate, he believed that Josiya could be stopped."

"Did the Oracle name Josiah?" Maia asked.

"No, and that was an opportunity for the deceitful Karnomen, the High Priest. Karnomen knew that the Oracle-lum had served the bloodline of his ancestors faithfully and had never fallen into the mistrust of even the Royal Family. The Oracle was the most closely guarded secret in the Ages. The oracle foretold that some man would arise who would be able to detach him from the controlling interests of the Church and use his wisdom for the benefit of all men. And so Karnomen waited. He watched every movement into the forest, guarding the Oracle with great care and zeal."

"But how are you going to guard something that can appear anywhere in the forest? This forest is so immense that not even the royal army can control."

"The oracle remained where it was originally left," replied the old man, "until Josiya discovered it. Only then did it become everywhere-moving. He activated something in the Oracle that caused it to... in Josia's words - "become invisible to all but the initiated. That was Josiya's job, not only to discover the Oracle-lum, but more importantly, to hide it from those who would use its powers for evil purposes."

Maia listened intently, wondering how much sense the story made. How had she never heard of this legend before? It seemed to be such basic knowledge and yet it is not taught or even talked about outside of school. And she thought how strange it was that she could learn about it from a complete stranger, even a beggar.

"How long has it been since you found out about this code?" she asked him.

"It was a little over two years ago that Josiya was killed."

"Kill?"

"Yes, of course", replied the old man. "He was poisoned by Karnomen's workers."

"And those notes, where are they now?"

"All burned." "Completely destroyed?" Maia shouted.

"How do you think I became a beggar?"

"I...I...I don't know," she stammered.

"After Josiah's death, his closest friends were selected, their homes found, and then summarily burned. We all lost everything; the only luck was that his friends could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Every single one of us came under the watch of the Supreme Guard and were brutally interrogated, some even died in the process." His voice dropped to a whisper as he described the weight of those times.

"How did you survive with those codes?" Maia asked.

The old man finally sat down with a long sigh and crossed his legs beneath him. "I survived because Josiya's wife lied to protect me. That's the only reason I'm here. She literally saved me."

"As?"

"She told investigators that her husband only knew me professionally, as an artistic portrait painter and nothing more."

"What about the codes? Did she tell them about them?"

"Yes, but she told them they were burned in a fire."

"Did they believe her?"

"Apparently not... because they killed her."

Maia let the words sink in for a moment. She was surprised by the intense compassion she felt for someone she had no connection to. But the story stirred some hidden part of her heart, and a sudden foreboding descended upon her like the shadow of a cloud. "How do you know they killed her because of the codes? Were you there when she was interrogated?"

"No, I wasn't there", answered the old man, a guilty look on his face. "They told me what she told them when they asked her about me. They wanted to be sure that the codes were either under their control, in their power, or that they were completely wiped from the planet. In other words, if they couldn't control the Oracle, then neither could anyone else."

"Why are you telling me all this?" noted Maia. "It seems crazy that you're telling this story to a stranger you've only known for ten minutes. What do you know, what if I'm Karnomen's scout."

The old man laughed for the first time, and the sound echoed through the tree trunks in the silence of the forest floor, which Maia

it was unnerving. "You, my dear, are undoubtedly made of a different dough," laughed the old man. Besides - Karno-men surrendered. I've seen his scouts and they don't look like you."

His laughter returned, but it was more subdued. "I am an old man with no possessions and all I have are the clothes on my shoulders and my instincts." He shifted his weight a little and stretched his legs. "There is nothing I would be afraid of even if you were one of his scouts. As you can easily see, I don't even know how to find the Oracle-lum or summon it to materialize." His voice softened a little. "The artist sees not only with his eyes. He sees the inner being as well as anything if he is a true artist, and in that vision I see you as trustworthy. I told you this because I felt you were somehow connected to the Oracle."

Maia shifted nervously, averting her eyes. "Why do you think that? It looks like you've come to some- to its logical conclusion."

"I don't really rely on logic", he replied. "My gut informs me, so I follow it. What I know with all my being is that Josiah was an earthly sage of great importance. He gave me this path and I am bound to follow it."

"I'm confused," Maia admitted. "I'm listening to your story and part of me swells with excitement and wants to cooperate, but there's also another part that shrinks in disbelief. This cannot be so. And if so, what role could I possibly have in locating the Dohrman Oracle and further in making it available if it is found?"

"And even if we did find him," she continued, "so what? What would we do with him? Did they ask him any questions about the future? My future? I don't think so. The more I think about it, the less I want to contact the beings who placed this Oracle on our planet."

"And why?" the old man asked in a confused tone.

Maia sighed. "This Oracle helped the leaders of the Church, is that right? Their religion enabled them! And that's not even mentioning the criminal connection with the Royal Families. How many people were killed, how much property was destroyed, how many wars were fought as a direct result of this Oracle? Do you know?"

"No", the man shook his head. "But Josiah wrote that the Oracle always spoke the truth to the questions put to it, but the one who received those answers - the High Priest - could twist the knowledge gained from the Oracle to serve his own purpose."

"Does this mean we have to apologize to the Oracle?" she asked. "It is perhaps not correct to assume that we free? Doesn't the Oracle have a duty to make sure it's not being used in bad faith?"

The old man sighed in appreciation. "That's why I said I wanted to give the Oracle a piece of my mind." He said his words and rose to his feet with a degree of control that surprised Maia. While he looked old and tired when they first met, this was mostly due to his unkempt appearance and tattered clothing; beneath this was a fit body.

"I think it's time for me to continue my search. Thank you for your company, even if it was short. I hope we will be lucky and meet again." With that he bowed slowly and began to walk down the path, deeper into the forest.

As he turned and walked away, Maia was still thinking of what to say. "Wait, I don't even know your name", she blurted out.

He stopped on the road and without turning around said, "Joseph Amenzano."

"I'm Maia", she half shouted. Then, completely without thinking, she slipped off the stone and ran after him, extending her hand in the usual friendly greeting. "It seems to me that after all we've said to each other, we could at least introduce ourselves properly."

"Yes, yes, of course you're right," he said, turning to shake her hand. "As I am old, we sometimes forget these kindnesses. Thanks for the reminder. Have a nice day, Maia."

And he turned a second time to continue on his way, but this time Maia grabbed his arm. "I'll help you if you want", she said. "I...I don't know how, but I will help you." She uttered these words and then fell silent. Why am I doing this? Joseph could not hide his delight at her offer.

"Now I see something good about today, my dear! Where do we start... where do we start."

Maia laughed. "First tell me how you think it would be best to proceed in finding a part of the forest, which one is most suitable for summoning the Oracle?"

He immediately looked up at the sky, as if searching for his answer in the thicket of tree branches above him, but quickly returned his gaze to Maia's waiting eyes. "Josiya wrote that the Oracle moves within the forest, but never near its edge. He prefers its inner sanctum because it is better protected and travelers will never encounter it by accident. So I think we need to travel towards the interior of the forest, but as we go, we need to get off the path and create our own, no matter how difficult it becomes."

"And then what? I assume you have the codes... then you just say them and if you're in the right vicinity from

Oracle, will it magically appear?"

"Something like that," Joseph confirmed. "I'm not entirely sure. Josiya was not quite specific about this procedure. He wrote that the codes had to be spoken out loud and that the Oracle had to hear the codes, which he estimated meant we had to be within about a hundred meters." He then pointed to his head and added with a smile. "The codes are right here."

"My voice is clear and carries well," Maia offered, "I believe I can double that distance, especially in the silence of this forest. Let's hope the Oracle has good hearing."

They both laughed at the idea. "Okay, we have our plan," Joseph said. "Are you ready?"

"We have no food and no water", said Maia. "I guess we should wait a few days before we can add-prepare and gather the things we will need for this journey."

"The forest will provide everything we need, Maio. During the past two years of being a beggar, I have become well acquainted with the art of procuring food. And I must honestly say that I am not going to this forest for the first time - not even to its interior."

He began to walk up the path and Maia followed him, not sure why she trusted him, but there was something in his demeanor, his choice of words, the tone of his voice, or perhaps his eyes, that made her trust him. his proposal. Joseph was gifted with a rare quality: a desire for self-improvement, and it was contagious.

Chapter 2. The Secret of the Forest

"This is where we go astray," Joseph announced. "It'll be an instructive walk if we go down this ravine, but it's a part of the forest I've explored before and it's an ideal place to search because of its remoteness. Travelers avoid it because it is difficult to maneuver and maps, if they exist, never give details."

Maia took one look at the thick undergrowth and steep slope, considering whether she was up to the task. During these brief moments of reflection, Joseph was already moving down the ravine at a surprisingly brisk pace. Maia followed him like a foal after its mother, putting her calculations aside. The descent was not without its mishaps, however, when Joseph found himself in the sharp thorn bushes at the bottom of the ravine, he warned Maia with a startled, shrill yelp.

"Are you okay", Maia asked, huffing as she stopped next to Joseph. She had already started pulling up the hem of his pants to examine the wounds on his leg.

"These are negligible wounds, but quite stinging", he said. "I'll be fine; we just have to pay close attention to the damned thornbush."

"Let me look at the wounds," Maia ordered, bending down to examine the scratches on Joseph's leg. She examined them carefully. "This is exactly why I wanted a few days to prepare," she said with a low tone in her voice. "We don't have any bandages or... or water."

"Well, first of all, I'm fine. They're just scratches. Second, I know there's a stream on the other side of this ravine, so I'll wash myself there as soon as I can. Good?"

Maia nodded. "Is the water drinkable?" She rose to her feet and surveyed their position.

"Yes, it is excellent water. Follow my path as closely as you can and don't fall too far behind."

The forest was remarkably quiet. No animals were heard running around. There was an occasional breeze the chime of leaves, but even that was muted to an almost inaudible level.

* * * *

The wizard paced back and forth in his little wooden cabin, where he had a book open to page 1,285. It was a giant book that he had actually only tried to move once in his life and that was only to protect it from a leak that sprang up in the roof and threatened to destroy his beloved book. He looked down at the open page, moved his lips imperceptibly and looked up with a frown.

"That can't be true", he whispered. He placed his index finger in the text as if he thought it might somehow change the word to his liking. His face frowned again as he slammed his wooden stick on the clay floor, "No one can do that!" The wizard turned and grasped a crystal as long and narrow as a glowing icicle and held it to his heart. He closed his eyes and began to mutter some words, faintly at first, then tossing his ancient head, graced with a belt of long flowing silver hair, back toward the invisible stars.

"It just started!" he shouted.

* * * *

Joseph was right about the creek. Its water was clear with an earthy sweetness that quenched thirst but not the desire to drink more and more of it. Maia and Joseph put their hands into fists and drank freely.

"What makes this water so good?" Maia asked, drying her chin with her sleeve.

"Water mirrors the geology through which it flows. It absorbs minerals and trace elements that have been stored in these woods for many, many centuries. There are underground streams under the entire forest, and most of them have never been touched by human hands... at least not in the past hundred years or more." "Are you saying that these forests were once inhabited by humans?"

"They probably were," Joseph replied. "There are books that say that this forest was once a favorite place-that of our ancestors..."

"You mean our ancestors chose this place to live?" Maia said getting to her feet, wheeling his disbelief with thin hands.

"They really were. The ruins have been revealed...didn't you study that in school?"

"I don't think so," she replied.

"Those people were called Chakobs. They were forest people and they had entire villages in the treetops." Joseph patted his wounds with a water-soaked handkerchief and pointed to some huge trees on the other side of the stream. "These trees, over there. They are the second generation of Acconyan trees, about nine hundred years old, and will live for another three or four centuries if left to their own devices. These... these are the trees that supported our ancestors.

Maia looked in awe at the massive trees and felt that they were truly ancient. "Are they only found in this forest?"

"Yes, as far as I know."

"I'd like to see them up close, can we go there?"

"Follow me," with these words Joseph rolled up his trousers and crossed the stream.

* * * *

It was getting dark and Maiu was tormented by hunger, which increased with each step. "What are our plans for food and rest?"

Joseph stopped his steps and turned to Maia, putting his index finger to his pouty lips. He crouched and motioned for Mai to do the same. Joseph scanned the trees and thick brush ahead, searching for signs of life, while Maia listened to her empty stomach growl in utter silence, not knowing the technique to suppress it.

Suddenly, a voice rang out from deep within the vast forest. It was a man's voice and it was barely perceptible. It was only because they stopped and listened with full concentration that they could hear him. Maia wondered how Joseph could have noticed him while walking.

She crawled closer to him to within a few inches. "What is it?"

"I don't know. Maybe guards. Maybe a traveller. Maybe a beggar. Maybe a hunter. I don't know."

"Guardians!" Maia exclaimed in astonishment. "Why would there be guards so deep in the forest? And actually why would anyone be there guards in the forest? You said that Karnomen had surrendered to the Oracle."

Joseph begged. "Please shut up. We don't know how many there are and they could be close..." The sound of a twig snapping brought their minds to full alert. Instinctively they crouched even lower. Joseph turned to Maia and put a finger to his lips again, but this time his eyes mirrored a sense of danger that Maia couldn't help but notice, and her heart went cold with fear. Several crows flew overhead, breaking the silence with their cawing alarm. More voices could be heard... closer this time than before. Joseph held up three fingers, signaling for them to remain still and quiet.

"You know crows are wrong ninety-eight percent of the time," said a distant voice. Maia thought it was a young man's voice. She looked in the direction of the voice, trying to see through the thick brush, but only saw occasional movement and wasn't sure if it was a person. Whoever it was, he was at least forty meters away and didn't seem to care too much about their secret.

In a few minutes the voices were drowned in the silence of the forest and Joseph slowly rose to his feet. "They certainly were guards, I'm quite sure", he said. "I've never seen them this deep in the forest before."

"Why are they here? Are they looking for you?"

"No, no", said Joseph, smiling softly. "They gave up on me a long time ago. Still, I don't want me here found because they would change their minds about my intentions and knowledge of the codes."

Maia let out a nervous breath. "Why didn't you tell me that Karnomen's hand could be lurking in these woods and you-we can be her target?"

"Maio, I've been searching for the Oracle for two years and this is the first time I've met a guardian. I've heard stories...but never seen or heard any of them. Trust me. If I felt you were in danger for accompanying me, I would definitely tell you."

"Is there anything else you missed or forgot to tell me?"

Joseph shook his head slowly, looking down at his torn boots.

"Okay," Maia said, "let's go. It is a vast forest; I can't imagine we should enter it again. We still have about an hour of daylight... and we need to find shelter and food."

"Yes, yes, you're right", replied Joseph. "We need to focus on food and shelter. I have some provisions in your pocket, we'll be fine."

"Do you have food in your pockets?"

"No food, but I have lighters. I also have a gun that is good for small game. Do you like pheasant or quail?" Maia nodded. "I will find them. There are blueberries in this ravine too...do you think you could pick some?"

Maia turned on the spot, "I think so. Maybe you could tell me what to look for."

"Anything round that isn't red," Joseph replied with a big smile. The ominous consequence of passing guards was lost in the need to find food, and Maia felt the threads of day unraveling and soon dusk would fall with its dark roots winning over the light.

* * * *

The fire provided the necessary warmth, light, and most importantly, at least for Maia, roasted quail that was very tasty. Joseph was a skilled hunter. Using a rather primitive home-made slingshot and a handful of stones, he proved to be an excellent marksman and hunter. This night - the first night in the forest - Maia and Josef dined under the blueberry and quail stars to satisfy their hunger.

"Were you surprised that I went with you?" Maia asked as she finished her meal and leaned against a tree trunk.

"Yes", Joseph replied. "The invitation came out of my mouth before I could even think about it, it worries me a little... being responsible for you." Maia smiled but remained silent. "Why were you out in the woods this morning?" he asked.

"That's personal," Maia replied. "I always think better when I'm in the forest. I think I feel very comfortable among the trees." Her confession made her feel strange. It reminded her that she didn't really know Joseph very well and now she felt better with him than with anyone she knew except her mother.

Joseph noticed that she was opening up to him a little more. "What are you thinking about in the forest?"

"Last night I fought with my father. He is a rude man when the devil's drink takes over him, and he told me some things that were... let's say they had a spiritual meaning.

"What things, if I may ask?"

"They think I'm wasting my life," Maia explained. "I'm not doing very well in my university classes studies, I have no plans to get married, and... and I am too bossy for my age and gender."

Joseph listened, making sure she had finished before offering his perspective. "So that's why you came with me. She wanted to get away from her father and show her independence. And maybe punish him a little. I'm sure your family will be worried about your whereabouts."

"Actually, I don't have a family, just my father".

"Okay, so your father will take care of you, won't he?" The fire released its sparks of light into the canopy of trees in waves of pulsating light, and then suddenly - outside the fire-lit circle - there was a loud click. Joseph turned and looked straight down the barrel of the rifle aimed between his eyebrows.

"But, but, let's see what we have here", said the man with the rifle. Another man with a rifle stepped forward and pointed at Maia. "Looks like the oldest couple we've ever found in this forest. What are you two doing here?"

"We're going to see the Wizard," Joseph replied, his voice shaking a little but not losing rhythm.

"And what Wizard should he be?" asked the young man.

"We have heard tales of a great and wise Wizard who lives deep in this forest, and we come, to find his wisdom. I understand that we look like beggars, but we are true seekers of truth."

Joseph is not only an artist and a hunter, but also an actor, Maia thought.

"Do you have any weapons?"

"No, no", Joseph created a smile. "Unless you count this weapon." He showed the men his homemade slingshot.

In the midst of their laughter, Maia noticed that there were only two of them. She felt that they were not too violent, that only children he barks at his job. She slowly got to her feet and watched the barrel of the rifle follow her.

"We would offer you something to eat," Maia said, "but we've just finished eating. We still have some blueberries".

Men who had not been in the presence of a beautiful woman for a very long time were mesmerized. It was almost as if they were enchanted when they spoke.

"We... we can't", they replied in unison. "And we just finished our own food anyway...but thank you for your offer". As if on cue, they lowered their rifles and relaxed.

"And the Wizard," one of the men asked, looking into Maia's eyes, "how do you know where to find him?" Joseph he knew they were being tested.

"Actually," Maia said without hesitation, "we're hoping he finds us...he's a Wizard after all."

"I see, so until this big magical Wizard finds you two, you plan on wandering around this forest?"

"No", Maia explained. "that would be crazy and I can assure you we are not crazy. My father and I follow our instincts, use our imaginations, and hope that the Wizard is at least a little interested in our search, so that he will find us and at least listen to our questions."

"And how long have you been looking?"

"This is our first night", Maia replied.

"We have heard of the Wizard you speak of, but the story is not a favorable one. I'm afraid the Wizard has a nasty character beyond your imagination." The young man turned to Joseph. "You should be wise, take your daughter and leave this forest first thing in the morning." Joseph nodded.

"Yes, yes, we will. Thank you for your advice. We are but humble people, as you can see; we don't have only a good education and in our circles the Wizard is considered to be someone who is very powerful and wise".

"Believe me," said the man, his voice lowered to the level usual for one who gives confidential information, "if I told you the stories I've heard, you wouldn't bat an eye tonight. I'll spare you the details because you need to be well rested to have enough energy to leave this place. Besides, there are hunters in this part of the forest who will shoot anything that moves. Don't you want your daughter to be killed by a stray bullet?"

"As you say," began Joseph, "we'll leave early in the morning. Thank you again for sharing your knowledge with the poor beggar and his daughter. I just wish I had something to give you for your kindness".

The smaller guard reached out and touched Mai's cleavage where a golden necklace was swinging in a flash.

"It could be something like this". Maia pushed his hand away and stepped back.

"This is from my mother. I can't..."

Alarmed by the turn of events, Joseph placed his hand in front of Maia and pushed her behind him.

"Gentlemen, we don't want to cause any trouble, but as you can see, my daughter will never part with a gift from her mother. I could offer you this instead". Joseph pulled a simple brass compass out of his pocket. "It's the only valuable thing I have. Take her. It is yours." The guards looked at each other and their rifles raised slightly. They seemed to be counting their options.

"Keep that compass, we have a better one. You'll need it to get out of here. Keep heading northeast. If we see you again, that chain will be our reward, and I don't care who gave it to you. Do you understand?" Joseph nodded. "Now go to sleep and pray the Wizard doesn't find you". With these words the two men left, explaining to each other with the muffled laughter that graced their conversation.

Joseph and Maia remained silent, listening to the voices disappearing into the darkness of the forest.

"Was that the guards?" Maia blurted out.

"Yes, yes," agreed Joseph. "I recognized it by their rifles and knapsacks. Only guards wear such good ones weapons and leather knapsacks, especially at their age. They were young enough to be my grandsons."

"And then what am I? Perhaps your forty-year-old daughter?"

"I probably look twenty years younger in this darkness. I accept that flattery and I don't think so they would look at you as a mother."

Maia forced a smile on her face, hoping it would relax her a bit. She had never before had her sights set on her-

her rifle and it left her with an uneasy flutter in her stomach.

"Why did you come up with that Wizard story?" Joseph brushed his pants as if collecting his thoughts and whispered cautiously.

"There are stories that have long been told among those who listened to such things. It was said that one of the priests of high rank was favored by the Oracle. The High Priest decided to kill him out of jealousy. But this priest, whose cunning is legendary, fled into the deepest parts of the forest. It is said that no human can find him because his magic spell has hidden him. The High Priest created the myth of the evil Sorcerer so that people would not want to venture into the depths of the forest and accidentally run into the Oracle or a runaway priest who is probably long dead. These guards were just trying to intimidate us into leaving the forest."

"They seemed to believe what they were telling us," Maia said.

"They believe what they are told to believe," Joseph replied. "Remember these guards are paid for saying the things they say. Basically, they don't care about the consequences of being untruthful."

"Were you telling the truth when you said we would leave at dawn?" Joseph reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a tattered piece of paper.

"And not use these codes?"

"I thought you said the codes were in your head".

"There they are too". Joseph replied with a smile. "I want to make sure I don't forget them as I get older."

Maia laughed. The flutter in her stomach disappeared the moment she understood that the journey continued. This was apparently the real cause of her anxiety, and the rifle barrel was just a rifle barrel.

* * * *

In ancient times, there were mystical beings who somehow - in the minds of men - became entangled between the worlds of angels and men, although they were neither. And only on very rare occasions did there even exist those that were entangled between the worlds of angels and Gods. From this second category, the Oracle appeared on the planet. These exceptional individuals who moved between the angelic and human worlds were often the only ones who were related to the Oracles. They were the ones the Oracle knew were ready to ask the questions that would bring forth True Wisdom.

Chapter 3. In the hands of God

Hugelitod had been a priest since he was a boy. Even as a young child, he had a longing dream to serve God and His creation as if it were God's inspiration. His favorite verse was given to him in a dream while growing up: All I really desire is to be a pure channel of humility. He said this simple verse a thousand times a week and did so for many years until he became a living, breathing priesthood.

As a boy, he was short for his age and tended to be quiet and accepting. Few people noticed him because he was average in his studies, just as he was average in almost everything - even his looks. But something quite different was going on inside him. Hugelitod's deep affection for God was so exceptional that it was noticed by his superior, who suggested to Karnomen that he might be apprenticed to his assistant. This was a turn of events which exceedingly disappointed Hugelitod, for he desired, more than anything else in the world, to be an active priest, exercising his love of the Divine teaching by teaching his companions the truths of the inner life. However, in time, he felt honored to be able to help the High Priest, whom he fell in love with and considered without inhibitions as the closest being to God.

One day, about the fourth year of his apprenticeship, Karnomen's assistant died of a sudden heart attack, and the duty of assisting the High Priest fell to Hugelitod. This meant that he needed to be initiated into the Order of the Sixteen Rays in order to serve Karnomen directly. This was a great honor and Hugelitod was grateful for this opportunity to become a more active participant in the inner sanctum of his High Priest Holiness. Initiation into the Order of the Sixteen Rays was one of the Priesthood's most closely guarded secrets, and was rarely discussed at all except for hushed mentions in dark corridors with one's closest allies.

When the day of his initiation came, Hugelitod was led in ceremonial garb to the beginning of a path in the forest, which he noticed was most closely guarded by armed guards. Hugelitod walked in the middle of a procession of Elder Priests who walked individually along the narrow path. Soon after they began their journey into the forest, one of the High Initiates of the Order stepped forward and walked beside the young initiate, his head bowed in reverence to the Initiate who beckoned to them.

"Are you ready for your enlightenment?" the Elder asked, breathing heavily as he walked.

"I don't know, but if God believes it is, then it must be."

"Do you think God cares whether you are ready or not? He won't admit anything in your favor, either Karnomen. You yourself must believe that you are ready, or you will not pass this test, my son."

"What happens to me if I don't pass the initiation?"

"Anyway, you will be reborn, the question is whether you will be reborn as a devil or as an angel."

The elder fell silent and slowed his steps, forming a simple line as the path narrowed. About five minutes later, another Elder right in front of Hugelitod slowed down and walked step by step.

"What you will experience is never talked about, not even once in your life. Do you understand, my son?"

"Yes, but why?"

"You'll soon understand," noted the Elder. The Elders changed their positions every few minutes, each mentioning a new rule or aspect of Initiation that Hugelitod should consider. It was preparation, but it also scared Hugelitod in a way that surprised him.

The narrow path wound through trees and thick undergrowth. Every mile or so they came to a checkpoint where a guard quietly motioned the procession as if their approval was needed to proceed further. Finally, a group of priests arrived at the great assembly. Hugelitod was sure this was the seventh checkpoint since they left the monastery grounds; the gate was open and allowed them to pass. After another mile or so they came to a semicircle of huge stones surrounding a circle paved with what looked like gold and copper.

Hugelitod, the only person present who had never seen the Oracle, expressed his respect in the only way he knew. He bowed to his knees, bowed his head, and recited his favorite verse:

"Father of all worlds great and small, take this heart and pour it with your grace. Take this body and heal it with your love so it can reveal a part of you to all I meet. Take this mind and make it the highest rung of your ladder. Awaken this spirit and cause it to be united with all other Spirits."

The procession stood silently, waiting for Hugelitod to finish. After he rose to his feet, they bowed to Karnomen, who stepped to the edge of the Oracle, beckoning Hugelitod to join him in the middle. The stones were very huge - perhaps three times the height of a man and as strong as the trunk of a large tree. Their presence quietly surrounded Hugelitod as if he were a seedling in a beautiful garden. The stones - there were three of them - were arranged in a triangular configuration and had strange markings carved into them on the sides, of which Hugelitod could not make out anything; he suddenly felt something mysterious and an unholy mistrust appeared in his heart.

"We are here," Karnomen began, his voice echoing between the stone pillars, "to welcome our newest initiate into the Order of the Sixteen Rays." Karnomen turned to the initiate, placed his hand on his shoulder, and led him to the largest stone, which had incomprehensible golden markings on it. Hugelitod was mesmerized by the study of the stone. His eyes moved over the glyphs looking for something familiar, but nothing reminded him of anything he had ever seen before.

"Will you address the Oracle?" Karnomen asked. Hugelitod nodded. One of the Elders told him about the Oracle, that although it has the form of a stone, it is not actually a stone at all, but rather a mouthpiece to the future. It is a gateway to the records of time, and every event, every thought, every feeling that has ever existed - no matter how briefly - is made available to initiates. He says he just has to ask.

Hugelitod opened his mouth, but nothing came out. No words. No sound. He tried again with the same result. He was suddenly inexplicably mute. He turned to the Elder Priest for some explanation or encouragement, but they were gone. He turned to Karnomen, but he too had disappeared.

Hugelitod stood alone before this great presence; his body writhed in an intense ecstasy for which he had no explanation. His sense of time vanished and he was left in a complete silence that was deafening to his mind. He began to recite something his mother had taught him: Fear covers you, love reveals you. He repeated it over and over in his head, each time bringing his attention closer to his heart, imagining that love was pulsing powerfully and brightly within him.

He began to feel uncovered. Atom by atom it was broken down by some force that knew exactly how to simplify it down to its core essence. He felt as if he were evaporating under the bright sun, and he also felt a growing empowerment as a new perception awakened within him that he had no explanation for. A voice from an unknown dimension, unknown gender, location, tone, or anything that could be identified as personal spoke to him:

"You are in my presence. It is my natural nature to give you whatever you desire. Just wear it - you thrive on imagining, living it, and persevering until you reap your desires. So I ask you, what is your wish?"

While the voice was undoubtedly of mysterious origin, Hugelitod was convinced that it was the Oracle. His mind was clear.

"I desire nothing more than to be the servant of the One Intelligence that fills the universe".

"And if I am this One Intelligence, then do you wish to be my servant?"

"Yes."

"So I accept your service and I am your Lord, you must fulfill my wishes. Is that clear?"

"Yes," answered Hugelitod, "but how can I know for sure that I am serving your will?"

"You will know it when the desires of your ego are removed from your mind and the desires of other people have no influence on your path, then you will know it and only if you wish to know it." Hugelitod understood, but a question arose in his heart.

"If I put your wishes above all other matters, and strive to realize them, what then of the conflicts? Your wishes will certainly not have a human dimension, they will see much more distant connections and broader reactions. You put me in conflict with human perception, and I deviate from the forces that are in power in this world."

"If you desire unity with human power, then that is your choice. You have said that you want to serve the One Intelligence, and if that One Intelligence is perceived by you or others to be in conflict with human power, then so be it. Conflict will ensue. If you do not wish to come into conflict in the service of my Plan, then you are not my servant. The plan is created by the One Intelligence and is also lived by the One Intelligence. Human agency is in conflict with the Plan only as far as human perception sees it this way. In fact, the Plan is going on because the One Intelligence is itself the Plan, and this is true both for the universe and for the individual."

"So there is no conflict? Is that what you're saying?"

"I will focus this discussion on a key point of context," announced the Oracle. "You are in the position of an abused priesthood. Karnomen has grasped this point of power and is the most cunning of his kind. He serves no one but himself and pretends to be the most devoted teacher and human servant of God. If you will my servant, you will come into conflict with Karnomen and he will sense it immediately. He will seek you out to destroy you because he will know that you - as my servant - will destroy him. He will seek his own benefit first, so you must not reveal my plan. So - do you see any conflict in serving me?" Hugelitod nodded as if in a trance.

"But Karnomen is a great person. Why do you say he is not your servant? It makes me wonder who you really are."

"Does the servant ask questions of his Lord, or does he carry out his wishes? I am the Oracle consciousness that was sent to this world by the beings that present its distant future. You are speaking to an intelligence that has evolved in a column of time stretching from one end of the universe to the other. I am the beacon of the One Intelligence that you so love and admire. I am the one who can hear your wishes even before you can imagine them. So if you're asking who I am, it's only because you didn't ask who Karnomen is, and if you want to know, tell him about our conversation. You will see his true self rising like suffocating smoke from an invisible fire."

Hugelitod pondered the Oracle's words. There were times when he thought that Karnomen's ways were tainted by self-aggrandizement, but in reality it was not Karnomen's idea, but the ceremonial rituals and customs of the priestly order. "You put me in a difficult position", said Hugelitod. "If I believe you about Karnomen, then, as you said, I will become his enemy. His influence and power is far greater than mine, so I am doomed. Is this what will happen to your servant?"

"I am the One Intelligence. You are my servant. If you will carry out my wishes, you are my extension. Do you think Karnomen is more powerful than me?"

"No," replied Hugelitod, not wanting to upset the Oracle. Hugelitod waited for a response, but a clean fresh silence fell before him and he felt the conversation was over. The presence he felt was gone and the world around him was becoming real again. The huge monolithic stone was returning to his attention and he realized that he was staring at the base of the stone, his head cold from the metal base on which he lay. He could feel a warm trickle of blood flowing from his head. I must be bleeding, he thought, but I feel nothing. He smiled and then passed out.

Chapter 4. Depicted Fate

For three days, Maia and Joseph wandered deeper into the forest. The guards were the last people they saw. Even the animals were rarer, so they were still hungry. There was plenty of water, and as the crystal-clear streams criss-crossed the forest floor, they occasionally caught a turtle, a frog, or a small fish for their infrequent meals.

The other day they had decided that they were deep enough in the forest that they could try shouting the codes without fear of anyone - especially the guards - hearing them. It's one thing to be caught in the woods finishing a meal and quite another to be overheard yelling out strange code numbers. As they progressed into the interior of the forest, his face changed. The trees were bigger, the undergrowth was sparser, and the light was more filtered, muting the colors of the forest floor to mossy greens and browns.

"How long do you think it will rain?" Maia asked. It started raining early in the morning and now it was almost midday. "Not much longer," he replied as cheerfully as he could. "It's getting a little brighter." Maia could tell no difference in the light, but chose not to say anything.

"What do you think we should try again here?" Maia went first and came to a beautiful open spot in the le- with. "If it was later in the evening, I'd say we stop here and get ready for the night."

"Yes, it's a beautiful place", agreed Joseph. "Let's try the codes again as soon as we catch our breath and rest our legs." As he sat down, he pulled out a compass and his expression suddenly changed.

"That compass is doing something I've never seen before."

"And what?" "The arrow... is not steady. It moves in an arc that is at least sixty degrees. Mag- the netic field is not stable here".

"Do you think it could be the Oracle?" Maia asked cautiously. Ignoring her question, Joseph stood up got to his feet and walked around randomly, looking at the compass every few seconds.

"I don't know... it's possible that the Oracle can cause these anomalies... Let's try the codes and see". Joseph he carefully unwrapped the paper containing the codes and crouched over it to protect it from the rain.

"You know I already remember them?" Maia said, pointing at the paper.

"I believe you, but just to be sure," Joseph replied. "Please read them from the paper." She took the paper without speaking. "Sixteen, twenty, twelve, nine, three, eleven, eight." Maia whispered the numbers like she was rehearsing hers speech at the show. "Okay, I'm ready," she said, still looking at the paper.

"And what are you ready for?", the stranger's voice broke the silence and startled them into full attention.

"Who are you?" cried Joseph, turning to face the stranger.

"I am the Oracle."

"Actually?" Maia said in disbelief. "You look a lot more human".

"For you I am human". The stranger bowed slightly. He was dressed in a white robe that looked very ancient. His face was weather-beaten but handsome, his black hair falling over his shoulders and very well kept. "Are you a Wizard?" Joseph asked.

"I already told you who I am".

"An oracle is not a man," answered Joseph. "I'm pretty sure of that."

"Then I'm not the Oracle". With that, the stranger disappeared as if he had never been there.

Maia and Joseph looked at each other and turned to see if the stranger had changed position, but there was no movement anywhere. They were alone again.

"Hallucination?" Maia asked.

"Have you ever heard of two people having the same hallucination?"

"Maybe we ate something rotten. We had mushrooms yesterday, maybe they were—" "No," Joseph cut her off, "it wasn't a hallucination. We both heard and saw him." Joseph looked at compass in his hand. He was normal. "Whatever data I had a moment ago is now gone."

"He couldn't be the Oracle, could he?" Joseph winced as he considered the possibilities.

"What were you doing before he showed up?" "I

read the numbers," said Maia, "and checked if I remembered them correctly."

"Try again", Joseph asked her. Maia looked at him in disbelief at the thought that the stranger could be summoned by the codes, which would mean that he really was the Oracle of Dohrman as Josiya had written.

"We're wasting time... try again", Joseph repeated. Maia spoke loud and clear with her eyes closed those numbers. "Again, but a little quieter," Joseph commanded.

Despite their efforts, the Oracle remained a memory or a hope. Maia and Joseph dropped to the ground in resignation and let their legs rest. They relived the experience many times over, looking for some key they might have missed. But what they really wanted was to drown out their feelings of regret for letting the Oracle go without asking him a single important question.

* * * *

"I don't know why!" Anton shot back.

"She must have fallen in love and ran away with her boyfriend," suggested the priest. "She is very independent and strong willed".

"She has no boyfriend. He's been gone for three days and nothing! Not a single message. Something bad happened to her, she tells you- I feel it in my stomach!"

"Perhaps you should talk to the authorities," suggested the priest. "They could send a search party to find her".

"I have no idea where she went", said Anton. "Like I said, she didn't leave any message, she didn't take any money or clothes..." His voice began to shake and turned into tears. "That's because we had a fight", he softened. "He wants to punish me".

"Why would she punish you, Anton?"

"Look, Father, I did what I did, but I'm warning you, if you meddle in my personal affairs, you might not like what you find out." The priest sat down and drummed his fingers on the arms of the chair.

"Anton, I've known you for almost ten years. I know you drink too much, and when you do, like many others, you become a bit... aggressive. But you don't have to show it here... in the church... in the House of God. You came here to me for advice, is that right?" Anton shrugged and nodded, trying to compose himself. "So my advice is to go to the authorities and report your daughter missing. First of all. Then when she comes back, under whatever circumstances, make up with her. Tell her that you made a mistake and that you ask for her forgiveness..."

"But I have my pride. I cannot show such weakness, not to my daughter. This is not appropriate." priest from he pushed his chair and stood up.

"You got my advice; it's up to you to decide whether you want to use it."

* * * *

"Looks like he's recovering, go tell him". The young priest burst through the door and ran down the hall; the clatter of his boots sounded like the ticking of a clock in the silence. Hugelitod was lying on the bed with a white bandage on his head showing dark red spots. He was turning his head from side to side, his eyes still closed as if he had a fever.

"My son, it is time to return", said the Elder. "How are you feeling?" Hugelitod first slowly opened his eyes and then looked anxiously into the Elder's eyes. He winced with a headache as he regained consciousness.

"You fell and hit your head on the Oracle", said the elder. "I'm afraid it's an open wound, but it all happened so fast that none of us had time to catch you. One moment you were standing and the next moment you were falling. Do you remember what happened?" The young priest was disoriented.

"Where am I?"

"Here you go, drink it", said the Elder, helping the priest to sit down. "You are in his Holiness's personal home. He asked us to take care of you until you regain your strength."

Hugelitod sipped some water and thanked the Elder who raised his pillows so he could sit comfortably with his head up. "We will check your bandages in a moment, but first his Eminence wishes to speak with you." As the Elder rose from the bed, the sound of approaching footsteps could already be heard in the hallway. Karno-men entered with the other three High Initiates in tow.

"My son, you really look better now. Thank God you survived the ordeal". He cast a quick glance at the Elders present, who discreetly nodded.

"I assume you have any memories of what happened to you?" Hugelitod remembered his dialogue with the Oracle for the first time since his experience. He understood his situation in a split second. He closed his eyes, feigning pain, hoping to gain a few seconds to remember and hide his memories from Kar-nomen's prying eyes. The battle has begun.

"My son, the pain will soon subside", said Karnomen. "Be patient and know that God is watching over every moment of your recovery". The Elders present hummed in agreement. "Our best doctors are watching over your wound so you are in the best care. Even the king's personal physician is on his way to check your injuries."

"I don't remember what happened at all," answered Hugelitod. "Thank you for your kindness and generosity."

"No memories at all?" Karnomen asked.

"I remember standing in front of the Oracle and not being able to speak or address him though I tried. I turned to you for your help because I didn't know what to do and you... you were gone. I think I must have passed out right after that. I guess it was too much for my senses..."

"My dear son," Karnomen chuckled, "we have never left you. You were the one who left us." Karnomen let the words ring out in the room, well intending their double meaning. Hugelitod sensed the interrogation had begun and he was a prisoner. He knew that every movement of his eyes could betray him, and that the only defense

will be his intelligence.

"Did I leave you?" Hugelitod repeated.

"I asked you to address the Oracle", Karnomen explained, "we waited a few seconds, I turned to the Elder when I heard a soft cry within. When I turned back to you, you were lying collapsed on the ground with a gash on the side of your head about four inches long, bleeding and unconscious." Hugelitod reached his head and felt the bandage. "The wound is stitched up and cleaned as best our doctors could, but you've lost a lot of blood, so you'd better rest for a few days, it'll help you regain your energy".

"Now," Karnomen continued, "what did you mean when you said we disappeared?" The trap was set. Hugelitod understood that his entire conversation with the Oracle had taken place in a moment, although his subjective feeling was that it had lasted a long time.

"I... I remember feeling myself passing out and trying to see you... any of you, but I must have missed you. Your judgment, Your Eminence, was correct..." he looked directly into Karnome-nov's eyes. "I left you." Karnomen looked up at the ceiling for a few seconds, considering his options.

"So you didn't enter the Oracle at all... before, during, or after you lost consciousness? And before you answer me, consider the following son. There are two Elders with you in this room who, at their initiation into the Order of the Sixteen Rays, had an experience with the Oracle in a dimension of time that was very different from ours." He looked behind him at the two Elders who nodded in agreement. "It is essential to your entry into the Order - especially as my personal assistant - that you disclose your experience with the Oracle. Do you understand?" Hugelitod nodded but remained silent. He was thinking.

"I'm sorry, but if I was talking to the Oracle, I must have forgotten everything when I slammed head on a stone."

"Amnesia?"

"Your Eminence, I would like to recall a conversation with the Oracle. Really. But I have no recollection of asking him anything or hearing any of his answers. For what reason should I pretend I didn't talk to him?" Karnomen sat down next to the bed, indicating that he was not giving up on this line of questioning.

"The oracle grants my wish," Karnomen announced with a smile. "I ask him a question and he - by some miraculous essence - answers it... truthfully. He can't lie. So if I go to the Oracle and ask him if you realize you've been talking to him, what do you think he's going to tell me?"

"The truth."

"And if his answer confirms my fear that you have spoken to him and want to keep it from me, what do you think I will do?"

"Your Eminence, I'm not sure I understand your concerns. Did I do something to offend you? I apologize for all the trouble I caused you. I feel terrible for passing out and causing all this confusion. I'm really sorry..."

"You are either a very skilled liar or you are telling the truth," said one of the Elders, stepping forward. "You are one of us now and keeping anything from us is not wise... for many reasons. You must decide whom you will trust: the Oracle that rules the forest, or us, the leaders of the Church, who are the channels through which God enters our world." Karnomen placed his hand on Hugelitod's arm and squeezed it gently.

"You will find that we control the Oracle; that power resides in the Order of the Sixteen Rays, not the Oracle. So to side with the Oracle is to lose your connection with the true Divine powers." He paused for emphasis.

"A connection that is uncertain in moments like this."

Hugelitod looked down at Karnomen's bony hand with large veins. His attention was caught by a gold ring with an oval of diamonds, from which carved rays radiated outwards. Although he didn't count them, he was sure there would be sixteen of them.

* * * *

"Do you remember our last resting place?" Maia asked as she trudged through the forest.

"The one with the Wizard?"

"More like with the Oracle," Maia corrected him.

"Yes, why do you ask?"

"Do you think it's possible that the Oracle likes certain parts of the forest? I mean particularly beautiful places?"

"Well, first of all," said Joseph, "we don't know what the apparition was. It could have been the Oracle's emissary or the Wizard v

a disguise or some magical being that didn't feel safe in the middle of the void and disguised itself as a familiar Oracle... I seriously doubt it."

"But the place had a certain magical quality. It looked like an oasis."

"I agree with that," agreed Joseph, "so it makes sense to look for places with similar quality. Let's hope so we will find some before dark".

"You check your compass regularly, don't you?" Maia said over her shoulder.

"I'm not letting go of him at all."

* * * *

Starlight shone faintly on the forest floor, but Maia couldn't sleep, so she studied the stars as the wind tossed the leaves momentarily, removing them from view—long enough for her to see the twinkling of the white dots she loved so much. She was already very exhausted when they made camp that evening, so after making a fire they skipped dinner and went to bed. Joseph was snoring softly, their fire still a little warm. Summer nights were never cold in the forest. Despite her tiredness, Maia couldn't sleep.

Sixteen, twenty, twelve, nine, three, eleven, eight, the numbers spun in her head like a waterwheel in a mill. It was a bit like fishing, she thought. The codes were her bait and the Oracle the fish. She looked at Joseph, who was proving to be an excellent companion. The compass was already half dropped from his outstretched hand, its glass face reflecting the glow of the fire. Suddenly, movement caught her attention and she saw the distinct movement of a dart that seemed to have a life of its own.

"Joseph!" she cried out in a loud whisper. He didn't move, he was fast asleep and Maia knew she had to be physical with him shake to wake up.

She decided to say the codes and see what would happen. She reasoned that when the Oracle appeared, it would immediately wake Joseph up; if he doesn't appear, Joseph can stay asleep. He won't lose anything. Maia lay on her back, watching the stars twinkling behind the wind-blown leaves, and calmly said the codes from memory: "Sixteen, twenty, twelve, nine, three, eleven, eight."

"The codes aren't too complicated, are they?" Maia turned to the side and looked into the face of the most beautiful woman she had ever seen.

"Who are you?" Maia blurted out.

"Shhh!" said the woman. "We shouldn't disturb him". Her voice was soft and melodious. When Maia considered the circumstances of their meeting, she immediately calmed down. "You are a guest of my forest, which I wished him to enter, and I allowed him safe passage into the heart of my world".

"Who are

you?" "I'm only going to say this once because you've tried my patience before, so please listen carefully. I am Oracle." "I believe you, but understand that you do not fit the description of the Oracle".

"I have evolved," the Oracle said matter-of-factly. "Everywhere in your world you assume that evolution is a matter exclusively of flesh and blood living forms, when in fact it is the innate process of all life in all dimensions; and I am no exception".

"Why are you a beautiful woman now and you were a man before?"

"I'm experimenting with my development", began the Oracle. "I found the need to escape the control of elite Priests and Royal dignitaries who chose to use my gifts for their own agendas. They saw my mission - my purpose - and decided it would be better to overthrow it in order to achieve their own human desires. In this process, it was necessary to find allies among those who sought my control, and always when I found one, he was banished or killed."

"But you're the Oracle," Maia countered. "Surely you have great power, greater than that of high priests and kings. How is it possible that they are controlling you?" The oracle sat down near Maia, legs tucked under her, and donned flowing silk robes with a gold-embroidered pattern that Maia had never seen before. Her expression was friendly and caring and you could see the clarity of her personality that Maia was drawn to.

"Part of my evolution was to fulfill people's wishes," replied the Oracle. "Understand," the Oracle continued, "my purpose was given to me by my Creator, and I could not - at this stage of evolution - no matter how hard I tried, function outside of the Creator's purpose. The high dignitaries of priestly politics discovered this deficiency and used it to their advantage. I became a legend to people. A myth. Only a few like you see me - revealing my presence where others are closed in the midst of their fears, struggles and hardships. You are the blessed one, the one I called to myself to achieve my next evolution."

"Your next evolution?"

"Even though I've freed myself from my stone body, I still remain haunted."

"How did

you..." "Freed?" Completed the Oracle of Main's question. "After many generations of service to the priests, a man-age was born who freed me. Its existence was known to me because Karnomen's predecessors asked me if someone could free me from serving the priests. It had long been prophesied that I would be freed from the stone body that kept me, and absurd as it was, it was my own prophecy. Generations came and went and any initiate who stepped closer to my presence and showed even an iota of independence was suspected of being under my influence and most were thrown into prison by the Order of the Sixteen Rays to die there. The priests were afraid that I might be freed directly by one of them, because they were the only ones who had contact with me. This made the Order extremely suspicious and, in this state of constant paranoia, very successful as far as my control was concerned. It lasted a full fifteen generations, during which I offended my Creator a thousand times. In the silence of my pain I begged them to deliver me, but they said that my deliverance would come, but it could not be revealed to me how or when it would happen, because they knew that I was bound to be truthful. The Elder Priests presented me with petitions and asked very specific questions about new Initiates or prophecies I had uttered. During the repeated interrogations, I developed. I discovered a way to answer their questions truthfully but less clearly, at least as far as my prophecy of liberation is concerned. And one day, about a week ago, they brought a new Initiate to me for induction into their elite Order of the Sixteen Rays, but I knew he was the one who would set me free. He is the one who will free me from priestly possession, as promised to me by my Makers."

"How will this Priest free you?" Maia asked.

"That's the mystery I'm trying to understand. He doesn't seem to do anything special and yet after that, that left my presence, I was freed from the stone form in which I was born."

"How long have you been in this form?"

"Five days ago I was freed from the stone monolith that had been my home since entering this world, but Karnomen and his Order of the Sixteen Rays do not yet know this. They still think I'm trapped in their grasp, when I'm actually roaming this forest as I please."

"Then why don't you go away?"

"Hmm, that's my next evolution," said the Oracle. "I am indebted to the one who freed me, and I will not leave this forest until I am sure he is safe."

"Is the one who freed you in danger?"

"That's a story for another time, Maio. Now you have to find this person, because he is also the one who protects." The oracle looked at Joseph and back at Maia. Maia winced in fear.

"Save from what?"

"The prophecy I uttered was not only about my liberation by the priest, but more importantly, the overthrow of priestly politics. This is exactly what Karnomen wants to prevent at all costs. Karnomen has guards all over the forest and you will never get out of this forest without being detected trying to leave it. You need to find the person who set me free. His name is Hugelitod. Although I cannot say how, you will meet and together you will overthrow Karnomen. Such is prophecy."

Maia let the words settle in her mind for a few seconds. Her instinct was to doubt, or even to fight with words. But it was the Oracle. The "Oracle" that whispered to her.

"And now, Maia. There is no fatalism in my stories. They are always spoken in the knowledge that washes the shores of all life and is brought to you by your inner self for reasons that only you and your Creator can understand."

"Maybe..." Maia hesitated, "but your story has such a height, breadth and depth that I don't fit into it because I'm unbearably ordinary. I'm not part of such a huge story, so I can infer that maybe you're not the Oracle." Maia paused for a moment, and the Oracle waited patiently, defenseless.

"If you're a Wizard, would you answer me truthfully?" Maia asked.

"But I am the Oracle, Maia. Don't try to change my identity because you are questioning yourself. I don't know how you overcome your doubts, but it happens..."

"You are the Oracle", Maia almost shouted, "How can you say that! You know everything. You know every answer to every question I can ever imagine." It was the first time the Oracle had stood up and touched Maia's hand.

"When I developed the ability to lower my clarity, my creator did to me what I did to others. I don't know everything, Maio. I can no longer see the details of the future or understand all its meanings.

Your perception of me needs to evolve, so trust what I am in this present time, and then you will be able to accept the help I offer you." Maia craned her neck to see the stars.

"Life", she whispered, "suddenly became terribly complicated".

"I'll help you," offered the Oracle. "I'll help you somehow".

Chapter 5. Tangled strings

The King's Physician was brought to Karnomen's house for an arranged inspection. The morning light shone through a tall, narrow window surrounded by secure metal bars.

"The King's Physician is here to see you, sir," announced a noble-looking man in a blue-gray uniform. Karnomen looked up from his desk and moved to a nearby chair.

"Nice to see you Bartholem, how are you today?"

"Very well, Your Holiness, and you?"

"I'm in a bit of a hurry, I'm a bit tired, but most of all I'm hungry", said Karnomen with a laugh. He turned to the servant, "Can you bring us some lunch and tea? We will eat on the terrace." The servant bowed and left without a word.

"As you know, my personal assistant fainted and cracked his head on a big rock..." "To the Oracle?" asked Bartholomew.

"Yes, obviously, at the Oracle. He is quite disoriented and claims not to know what happened to him."

"Have you spoken to the Oracle about this?"

"Yes, this matter is in process", answered Karnomen. "I want to know your medical opinion on his condition - both physical and psychological. I want him healthy, so do whatever you need to do to get his health back to normal. Maybe it will turn out to be useful".

"So you think he's telling the truth... about his memory loss?"

"It is possible; he hit his head a lot. But I have sent a party to ask the Oracle, and we shall hear the truth tonight when he returns." Karnomen took a sip of wine from the nearly empty glass on his table, before pouring more into his glass and the other for Bartholem.

"And how is our beloved king doing these days?" Karnomen asked, teasing his guest.

"Every day he rests more and continues to grow fat," replied Bartholem with undisguised bitterness.

"So your meds are working?" Karnomen smiled. "Yes, of course, it is wise of our king to listen to his esteemed physician. Your services are appreciated by the Highest of the Highest, I assure you, Bart-holem." Bartholem sipped his wine and nodded.

"It is better to weaken and overthrow a good king for his sins than to let him cause trouble for the Church and its I'm trying to save the world."

"We must drink to that, my friend," said Karnomen, finishing his wine and walking towards the door.

"Shall we go?" The two friends walked down the long corridor to the terrace, chatting amiably in anticipation of the lunch that was laid out in the form of pheasant, butternut squash and fresh blueberries. Karnomen's cook never disappointed his employer.

* * * *

The elder reached out and touched the Oracle, reciting the ancient code of his brotherhood as he did so. It was late afternoon and the sun was beginning to dip behind the trees. There were two Elders, for no one but Karnomen was allowed to approach the Oracle alone. The Church's knowledge of the Oracle was based on nearly 300 years of interaction and constant learning how to mobilize its almost infinite powers of foreknowledge. Every Tall Ever since the Oracle came under their control, the priest had been responsible for protecting the Oracle's wisdom and preserving the writings for his followers and the inner circle of the Order of the Sixteen Rays. These writings filled thirty-two volumes of books, which were guarded by the Order with fanatical thoroughness. The secret document room was built behind the scribe's workshop of the Order's library, ensuring that prying eyes would never see it.

The first volume in this collection was 298 years old and only the high priest had exclusive access to it. It was believed to contain the primordial prophecy of the Oracle, known in the Order of the Sixteen Rays as the Dohrman Prophecy. It was this primordial bond that gave rise to the Order. The Order of the Sixteen Rays was originally a group of mystically oriented men and women who resonated with the spiritual truths of the Oracle and believed its existence to be a beacon of a Higher Intelligence from the distant future. They believed that prophecy and

the teachings of the Oracle are intended to be extended to all people, but that the Oracle itself needs protection from the powerful who would want to use it.

The first person to discover the Oracle was known in the Order as the First Initiate. Very little was known about this man since the High Priest and the Dohrman King banished him about 285 years ago. It was the First Initiate who wrote down the Dohrman Prophecy, but then - before the invention of the printing press - the two handmade copies were later lost in the tumult and violence of war. Only one survived and that one was submerged in the total darkness of a secure tomb inside the secret document room where no hand could touch it.

The First Initiate is surrounded by legend, and in addition to his devotion to the Oracle, he also showed his disobedience to the High Priest by refusing his order to release the Oracle to the Church. The original manuscript of Dohrman's Prophecy was stolen from the First Initiate, but it was believed that a map would be found that would lead the High Priest to the Oracle. From then on, it was the Priestly Policy that became the administrator of the Oracle.

The Elder began his recitation of the protocol that established communication between the Oracle and his human counterpart - in this case Shunal, the Third Initiate.

"I'm in your sphere", noted Shunal. "I offer you my transparency, just as you extend yours. I offer my care as you offer yours. I open my heart to your own in the spirit of all that is holy and good." These verses were handed down from the first initiates of the Order of the Sixteen Rays.

Shunal was the forty-first Third Initiate in the line and was one of the most trusted in Karnomen's circle. There were sixteen original initiates in the inner circle and they were the ones who protected the Dohrman Prophecy.

Dohrman's Prophecy was absolutely unique in all of literature because it chronicled the evolutionary path of humanity about seven million years into the future. The volume was only 2,421 pages long, but the text was so detailed that it described all the details of the human species on its evolutionary path through space-time across the various dimension-lands of the universe.

Shunal had never read the Dohrman Prophecy, but he knew of its existence - the entire inner circle of the Initiates knew that it was the compass they used to steer their plots. It was their most sacred duty to protect Dohrman's Prophecy from those who might misuse the knowledge it foretold. It was the binding mission of his priestly career, and if Karnomen thought Hugelitod could be a danger to this holiest of holy books, Shunal would do anything to protect her and the Oracle.

Shunal turned to face the carved monolith that towered silently above him. He finished his recitation and waited for the Oracle to recognize him. Sometimes it only took a moment and other times it could be ten minutes or more. It couldn't be predicted, but this time Shunal didn't have to wait long.

"Your petition is acknowledged," said the Oracle. His voice was never heard by anyone but the person whose hand she was touching him. "Thank you, All-One Wisdom," replied Shunal.

"Who addresses me?" asked the Oracle.

"I am Shunal, the Third Initiate." "Welcome to this energy exchange, Shunal. May he serve the enlightenment we are all moving towards. What is your interest this time?"

"The First Initiate sends me. He wants to see your communication with our latest initiate Hugelitode. He wants to know if he was successfully initiated into our path."

"Hugelitod had memory loss," said the Oracle. "Which is a circumstance that is not without my interest, but it is as foreign to me as the Divine Intelligence is foreign to the High Priest."

Shunal immediately retreated from the Oracle. The Oracle desecrates our Eminence! He had never heard hostility from the Oracle before; he began to doubt what he heard. He quickly placed his hand back on the stone monolith, its smooth and cold structure.

"Your ears are not deceiving you", said the Oracle. "I am very well aware of Karnomen's true interests and reasons duh why did he send you Your ignorance will not protect you from my openness. Are you sure you are ready?"

Shunal hesitated for a moment, not sure how to proceed. It seemed that the Oracle was deeply angered by something, and he, Shunal, was unprepared for his wrath. He instinctively removed his hand to silence the voice inside him. He turned to the other Elder, who was patiently waiting for him on a stone bench about twenty meters behind him.

"We're done here. Let's go back." The two priests left the Oracle and began their long trek back to the monastery. Shunal was brooding and scared. He was rehearsing what he would say to Karnomen when he returned.

"What did the Oracle tell you?"

"It said Hugelitod was telling the truth, he had amnesia."

"Great, so we don't have to train another assistant."

Shunal was quiet the rest of the way. Something happened that made him sick with an explanation. He promised himself he would be patient. This was not at all a challenge he wanted to face or be a part of. The oracle, for the first time in a while, showed anger or something close to it and he was the recipient. This was not a good sign. This was not a good sign at all.

* * * *

"I have blueberries if you want". Maia opened her eyes with a sudden sigh. "I didn't want to startle you", he said Joseph, "I got up early in the morning at dawn, I slept like a baby, so it was easy to rise with the sun."

"It's okay", said Maia. "I'm kind of slowly waking up today."

"Didn't you sleep well?" he asked, placing some blueberries on the large rolled sheet he handed her.

"I hope it wasn't because of my snoring."

"If I tell you what happened to me last night, I doubt you will believe me. I'm not even sure I believe it myself." She took some blueberries in her hand and then popped them into her mouth. "Thanks for the breakfast, the blueberries taste great." "I'm interested," Joseph said, "I'm ready to hear more about your night dream. What was it about?"

"It wasn't a dream", said Maia. "And before I start telling you, I need your word that you'll forgive me for what I've done." She looked at Joseph with eyes that were still waking up to the new day. Joseph narrowed his eyes a little and looked intently at Maia.

"You have my word, although I have no idea what I'm forgiving you."

"I said the codes at night while you were sleeping. The Oracle appeared and I didn't wake you up. That's why I wanted your word before I tell you what happened. Do you forgive me?" Maia somehow managed to show her vulnerable side in the intonation of her voice, in her gestures and eye movements, and Joseph found it easy to forgive her, especially when she was upset.

"I was a really tired old man at night. I guess you felt it was a mercy to let me sleep. You are forgiven. Now explain it to me, tell me everything!"

Maia relived and described her experience in detail, repeating the dialogue almost word for word. Joseph, mesmerized, listened to her story, interrupting her only twice to ask a question. When she finished, Joseph stood up and began walking around their makeshift camp.

"And the Oracle didn't say anything about how we were to find the man...Hugil...Hugeiliod?"

"Hugelitod," Maia corrected him. "No, it didn't say".

"No advice at all?"

"No, really," Maia replied. "The oracle, as I have said, has evolved into a state of relative independence, and in that state has lost some of its prophetic powers. It told me that my expectations needed to evolve so that I would be able to accept the help he was offering."

"That's fascinating," said Joseph. "The Oracle... he's no longer the Oracle, and this happened on his own accord?"

"Yes."

"And where is Hugelitod now?"

"I don't know."

"And we're supposed to find him without knowing where he is?" Maia nodded while Joseph he didn't stop walking.

"Nothing!" Joseph tucked his compass back into his pocket and sat down near Maia. "All my efforts to find the Oracle are lost. He's not even an Oracle anymore. And when she appears - as the most beautiful woman in the world - I'll sleep it off!" Maia didn't know what to say. She finished the rest of the blueberries, still optimistic about her meeting with the Oracle. She understood Joseph's disillusionment, but she did not share it with him. The only thing she could think of was how to meet that priest in the middle of the forest surrounded by guards.

* * * *

Bartholem walked lightly down the hall. The wine from lunch, considering the number of glasses he had drunk, was more effective than he expected. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He looked a little noble with his flowing beard, which he often used for various purposes, such as wiping his glasses or tugging at him when he was deep-drinking.

thought. He limped when he walked because of his lame leg, but his face showed the lofty brow of an educated man.

Hugelitod was resting on the bed, lying on his side, looking out the window. Bartholem rapped his knuckles on the open door, but the sharp sound elicited no response.

"May I come in?"

"Who are you?" asked a tired voice.

"I am the Royal Physician. I am at your service at his Eminence's command." Bartholem remained at the threshold of the room, reluctant to enter without invitation. It was a formal custom of his training to show respect, and he regarded every Initiate of the Order of the Sixteen Rays as a respectable person. Hugelitod turned to face him and tried his best to raise himself into a semi-sitting position.

"Yes, you are more than welcome, come in! You are very kind to come so quickly." Hugelitod knew a little more about this leading physician than just his name and reputation. He knew that Bartholem and Karnomen were on friendly terms, which was quite strange since it was well known that the First Initiate looked upon the Royal Courts as "Torturing Nails".

"How are you feeling today?" asked Bartholomew. "Better... sometimes I feel dizzy... I'm a little lethargic but overall I feel better." Bartholem hung his cane on a nearby chair and placed his bag on the empty table beside the bed and began rummaging through it; he took out several tools and placed them on the table.

"I'd like to check your injuries, if you'll allow, and then we'll have a little chat. Is that going to be okay?" "Yes, certainly", replied Hugelitod. "Is my injury so serious that I have to be treated by the King's Physician? I don't want you to misunderstand, doctor, but somehow your presence both comforts and unsettles me."

Bartholem smiled, still with his back to Hugelitod as he arranged things on the table. He felt black-life and living intelligence.

"I appreciate your ambivalence," said Bartholem, "but his Eminence wisely indulges in caution. After all, you are his assistant and he wants you to get well as soon as possible. My presence here has one-soul to aid your healing; it should not be taken as a sign that your injury is life-threatening. And now," said Bartholem, turning to Hugelitod, "I would like to remove your bandages, so I need you to remain very still. Can you do it for me?" He removed the bandages with masterly efficiency and looked at the wound with a magnifying glass, looking for any signs of infection.

"You really don't remember how this happened to you?" Bartholomew asked as he examined the wound.

"No."

"And you got hurt directly by a big boulder?" Hugelitod knew that the Royal Families did not know about the Oracle, but there was something about the doctor that made him feel like he knew more than he let on.

"So I'm told," Hugelitod replied, wincing as Bartholem pushed against his stitches.

"Your wound is healing well. I expect you will be able to get out of bed within three days."

"That's good news", Karnomen said as he entered the room with a big smile. "I hope, my friend, that the prognosis is equally positive, as for the prediction of when my assistant will be able to return to work?"

"I would like to do a little more evaluation before I speak of his cognitive abilities, Your Eminence." "I see", said Karnomen. "My good doctor, you can leave us alone for a moment. I would like to share something with Hugelitod. It only takes a few minutes."

"Of course, Your Eminence. I'll wait outside."

"Go to the terrace, there is tea ready for you."

"Excellent, thank you." Karnomen waited until the sound of Bartholem's staff faded into an indistinctly carried rhythm. Hugelitod felt a growing anxiety in the silence. Karnomen seemed to be in good spirits, but he was unpredictable, especially under the current circumstances.

"I'll have the doctor come back in a moment so he can dress your wound." Karnomen moved the chair next to the bed and slowly sat down. He folded his arms and glared at Hugelitod, making his examination both menacing and profoundly thorough.

"You are my new assistant," he began, "and as such you must know that your devotion is essential - not only to me - but to God and the Holy Order that protects His work." Hugelitod summoned all his inner strength, but his head gave way with a dull pulsation to every beat of his heart. "There are angels within us", said Karnomen. "They are not outside of us as the embodiment of some angelic kingdom, they wait at the door of our innermost awareness, and when they pass through, they do so as our thoughts and actions. They are us in every way." He shifted in his chair. "When a future Initiate goes before the Oracle, they are always caught up. It is the Oracle's way of testing the devotee's devotion to see if it will rise within him

angel or demon. Do you

understand?" "I think so."

"Good". "I believe the Oracle gave you a test. I also believe that either you are not aware of this test or you are you conceal from me, just as some have done before you."

"Also some got lost and banged their heads on the Oracle like I did?"

"No," Karnomen shook his head, "but the Oracle is very cunning and approaches each initiate differently, depending on their strengths... or weaknesses." Karnomen leaned back in his chair, took off his glasses and quickly rubbed his eyes. The wine from lunch must have settled in him and he suddenly felt tired. "In your case, your devotion to me, the Church and God was exemplary. I could say that your devotion is your strength and therefore it was this devotion that the Oracle was testing you with." He paused for a moment to assess Hugelitod's reaction.

"So you believe that the Oracle gave me such a message to test my devotion to God and you?" Hugelitod did his best to sound indignant at the implied accusation.

"I suppose that whatever the Oracle told you, it advised you not to be devoted to me and the Church. Isn't that true?" "Your Eminence, why are you making these accusations? I don't understand your reasons..." Karnomen raised his hand to silence Hugelitod's reply, leaning forward and calmly but firmly said.

"My reason is that the circumstances of your meeting with the Oracle are suspicious and I am, by nature, a suspicious person. I am the First Initiate. It is my responsibility as the Protector of God's work on this inhospitable planet. You have shown your devotion in every way and I hold you in high esteem my son. I don't accuse you of any disobedience, as you think. The blame rests squarely on the Oracle... at least for now." Karnomen released his eyebrows. "I have dispatched some Elders to find out the truth about this situation and they will be back before dark. I'm just giving you a chance to tell the truth before they come up with it. If you do, I'll spare you.

If, on the other hand, he returns and confirms my suspicions, the suspicions you condemn while convalescing in my private home, I will not be so lenient." Karnomen stood up and carefully positioned his chair against the wall. "So what's your answer?"

Hugelitod knew he had reached the point of no return. Whatever he decides to do will have endless consequences for his life and quite possibly his death.

Chapter 6. Reunification

"Is something bad going on?" Joseph stopped and raised his hand, signaling Maia to stop. Ner- he looked back sheepishly.

"I don't know... we seem to be lost."

"Did they lose?" Maia repeated. "Look, these look like our tracks, but they're going in the same direction as we... So we go in circles?"

"I'm afraid so," Joseph said, shaking his head.

"And what does the compass say?"

"I didn't want to say it, but our compass has been down for several hours." Maia stepped closer and looked over Joseph's shoulder. The compass needle was completely lifeless, as if it had been broken. Maia began chanting the codes out loud.

"It's not like before", said Joseph. "The compass behaves differently as if it were broken."

Maia continued to chant the codes anyway, hoping that the Oracle was close enough to revealed. She gave up on the fifth renunciation.

"Maybe he's really broken. What are we going to do?"

"I'm going to rest my legs for a while," Joseph announced, sitting down and leaning his back against a large tree trunk. him.

"Let's assess our situation", said Maia. "We got lost. We know there are guards with rifles somewhere around. We found an Oracle that seemed to have transformed into something less than an Oracle, and we're tired and hungry. Did I forget something?"

Joseph raised his hand. "Our compass broke."

"Yes, thank you, and our compass is broken!" Maia sat down next to Joseph with a broken look, which radiated a distinct wave of frustration towards every sentient being within ten meters.

"I can handle the hunger thing, I'll go find some food. At least we'll have lunch."

"It's dinner time," Maia corrected him.

"Okay, then some dinner. Then we can reassess our next course of action. With a full stomach will-

at least put me in a better mood and maybe that will help."

Maia nodded, staring intently into the labyrinth of trees, bushes, and rocks. It was a beautiful day in every other way and she knew it, but that didn't stop her from feeling like her life was suddenly spinning out of control. She felt like someone who opened the door to a whole new story that she was woefully unprepared for. She turned to Joseph.

"Do you have any idea where we are?"

"When we woke up this morning, I thought I had. I'm not sure now."

"When there are no maps, when we are truly lost, how do we determine our next direction? And more importantly, how are we going to find that Hugelitod if we don't even know where we are?"

Joseph let out a long breath and looked down at his big toe sticking out of his shoe.

"Now I'm more concerned with getting out of this forest alive and less with saving someone who you only heard from the apparition."

"So you think it wasn't the Oracle talking to me?"

"I don't know, Maia. Maybe yes, maybe not. All I'm saying is we need to be able to find a way out of here without the guards finding us. That's what we should focus on now. I don't care about the rest until we save ourselves. Do you agree?"

"I guess you're right," Maia said, getting to her feet. "Let's go find some food."

* * * *

Shunal was brought to Karnomen's study. It was late, and Karnomen was anxiously waiting to hear the news, be clear, and then go to bed.

"How was your trip?" noted Karnomen.

"Surprisingly monotonous."

"And what did the Oracle tell you?" Karnomen asked, removing his reading glasses and, with a demeanor that earned him the respect of his subordinates, patiently waited for Shunal to sit down and begin his report. Shunal settled uncomfortably in his chair.

"You must be tired from the long journey and I know it's late. So let's keep it as brief as it is possible so that we can both enjoy a well-deserved rest. Would you like some wine?"

"Yes, thank you, that will be a pleasure, Your Eminence."

"Did the Oracle help you?" Karnomen asked, handing a glass of wine to his friend. "The request was successful. The oracle confirmed that Hugelitod had a blackout before it could be initiated."

"Maybe he wasn't prepared enough", Karnomen muttered to himself. "You have no doubt that the Oracle confirmed?" Shunal sipped his wine, paused, then stood up and closed the door behind him.

"Have you noticed anything about your Oracle petitions lately?"

"What do you mean?"

"Anything unusual about the way the Oracle communicates?"

"No".

"And has anyone else reported anything unusual?" Karnomen looked at Shunal and narrowed his eyes.

"I think you'd better tell me exactly what happened."

* * * *

Joseph and Maia split up and went in search of food. They arranged to meet at a rest stop in fifteen to twenty minutes, then have dinner and set up camp for the night. Joseph looked for something with wings or four legs small enough to fall victim to a small rock, while Maia looked for blueberries and roots. They both looked for any signs of water. There were many streams in the forest, but they had seen none all day, and so they were both thirsty and hungry. Joseph found some quail tracks and was busy loading his slingshot, noting down a tune he had heard a week before at the restaurant. Something caught his attention out of the corner of his eye, but before he could say anything, he felt a rifle butt strike his jaw.

Joseph felt a rush of water immediately followed by a stabbing pain on the left side of his face.

"What's going on? Who are you?" He screamed and put his hand in front of his face to protect himself because he didn't know what was coming next.

"Be quiet!" Joseph saw the flickering of the fire and noticed the vague outline of a man standing above him against the firelight. A man held a rifle at his side. In his other hand he had a water jug that reminded Joseph of his

thirst and the unpleasant taste of blood in his mouth.

"What do you

want?" "I said shut up!" Joseph looked around and saw only one figure. He thought it was

Guard, but it was strange that he was alone, because they always work in a team of two.

"Now listen to me", said the Guardian. "Are you alone?" Joseph shook his head. "Where is the rest of your company?"

"My daughter is picking blueberries and I was trying to find quail. I don't know where he is."

"Is that all? Are you telling me that you and your little daughter went for a walk in the woods and ended up in the heart of an ancient, unexplored forest? What do you think I am, old man? What the hell are you looking for?" The guard pointed his rifle at Joseph and looked very upset.

"I'll explain," said Joseph. "We went for a walk in the forest and got lost. Look..." Joseph exclaims
hl the compass from his pocket, our compass stopped working."

"Be quiet! Stop talking already. I have never heard so much nonsense in my entire life. You're crazy, I know that, and I don't believe you for a second that you'd let your daughter out in these woods - these godforsaken woods to find some blueberries. You are crazy! A complete fool! That's for sure." Joseph was in such intense pain that he barely remained conscious. All he knew was that he had to find Maia before this Ranger.

"Look, my name is Joseph. How about you?"

"Don't worry about it at all, I'm telling you!" The guard was still angry. He stared into the glowing forest, fear flashing in his eyes. He started pacing nervously. "I'll try again, how many of you together?" "I say I'm here alone with my daughter." The rifle clicked into action

and the Ranger brought the barrel of the rifle to Joseph's forehead. Joseph felt cold metal on his brow. His head began to pound even more.

"If you keep lying to me, I'll kill you right here." Somewhere in the distance in the forest, a voice rang out loud enough for the Warden to hear.

"I am Maia, Joseph's daughter. Please trust us. We just got lost and that's all. Nothing will happen to you- breaks." The ranger turned, aimed his rifle into the shadows of the forest, and squinted into the darkness.

"I will kill that person if you don't step forward. You have five seconds to do it."

"I'm coming, please don't shoot!" Maia suddenly swung into the firelight, her hands above her head. "I have no weapons, sir. Please believe us; we are just lost simpletons who mean you no harm." The guard was mesmerized by the sight of Maia. His whole expression changed.

"Are you ordinary people who got lost?"

"Yes", Maia nodded slowly and tried to look at Joseph. "Can I treat my father? Bleeding."

The guard nodded and Maia immediately walked over to Joseph looking at his jaw. "Can I have some water, please?" The guard handed it to his butt and retreated without a word.

"Thanks for coming to my rescue", Joseph said, trying to force a smile.

"The swelling keeps getting worse. Did you do anything to offend him?" Maia briefly turned on the Ranger.

"No." Maia tore off a piece of her shirt sleeve, dipped it in water, and carefully patted the blood from Joseph's face. "Can I give him some water?" The guard nodded, still mesmerized by Maia's presence.

Maia stood up and carefully pulled a stick from the fire and put it in front of Joseph's face like a candle.

"I don't think you need stitches, it's more of a bruise than an open wound. How are you feeling?"

"Hungry, tired, sluggish, but glad to see you." He was handing the chut back to Mai. Maia smiled back. "Print it here," she guided his hand to his injured cheek, standing up and handing the stunner back to the Ranger. "Why did you hit my father? Could you have killed him? He didn't threaten you after all."

"I... I haven't seen anyone in these areas since I started this job, and... and he had some kind of weapon. I thought he was dangerous... a spy or something."

"And who should be here but those who are lost?" Maia asked, her voice rising in pitch.

"Whoever... I thought some crazy people and if they had a gun, I defended myself, that's it... that's exactly what I did." He offered the guard his maia, signaling the end of hostilities. Maia accepted it and swallowed several measured sips, denying her acute thirst.

"What's your name?" Maia asked, handing him back the bottle.

"Camille".

"Thank you for the water, Kamil. My name is Maia and this is my father Joseph. I think we should all agree that these unfortunate circumstances in which we met are the result of a mere misunderstanding and need not create animosity. Do you agree, Kamil?" Kamil nodded. "Father?" Joseph nodded and extended his hand.

"No harm, Kamil, and thanks for the water." Kamil hesitated for a moment, glanced briefly at Maia, and then with

he shook Joseph's hand with an unconvincing smile. The night air was cooling and the three moved closer to the fire to warm themselves. The wind was stronger that night than usual, bringing dazzling life to the fire as sparks of light flew with a deep crackle into the dark mantle above.

Chapter 7. The Era of Light. Tomb of Darkness

The hand turned the next page with great care. The flowing robe was rolled up over the arm to ensure it could not touch the pages. As the Wizard read, a deep respect for the book radiated from him. In the Age of Light, when the earth's universe breaks through the waters in which it was immersed, a new universe is born. The sons and daughters of this new universe will perceive anew. They will dance in the gardens of knowledge and enjoy the fruit of other trees. They will untangle themselves from the past mistakes of their race and live free from the old patterns that have narrowed their heart wisdom. He discovers his gold in the language of light, through which many separate existences live in the elegance of Oneness. The Era of Light will emerge from the many signs of the Creator's creation. These signs will be encoded in a language unknown to all but the Creator and his servants: the Human Oracles. Many will try to interpret these signs, but fail to perceive their meaning. The signs will be drawn in the sand of human thought and interpreted by the imprisoned intellect; they will either be feared by the wounded heart or gripped by the naïve soul. However, the Human Oracle overturns the norm. They will shift the values. It will destroy the frames of self-care that have infested the Earth. And so it is revealed here that as the Oracle of Man becomes human, humans become Oracles of Light. This is the only sign that cannot be misinterpreted. It is the only signal from our Creator that a new universe is emerging from its cocoon, and that the metamorphosis we await comes from a shift that is invisible to all but a select few. An elegant hand touched the white beard for a moment and then wiped a welling tear from the humble master's face.

* * * *

Hugelitoda was awakened by the sound of a voice. His eyes opened but saw nothing in the room. The morning light was just beginning. He rubbed his eyes and focused on every part of the room, even the ceiling and floor, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. "Hi?" He called out to the empty room more as a reflex than anything else. He sat up on the bed and felt something strange happen. All he could hear was the indistinct ticking of the clock. Then suddenly a streak of transparent color appeared directly in front of him, but only for a second. It was as if a blue-black-gold banner was flying in front of him, but it happened so quickly that it was gone before his mind could notice it. What's going on? He tried to get to his feet, but he was still sluggish, although he thought he was better. For a moment he thought that Dr. Bartholem gave some medicine that causes hallucinations. The next moment the color returned and he reached through it and felt something. Something was there, as fleeting as it could be. He looked down at his hand and saw a human hair - long, black and most definitely not his own. He got goosebumps as he looked at him. What's going on? Maybe he's gone crazy. Maybe his fall was harder than he was told.

"Is anyone there?" He asked again. A tingling sensation washed over him. Silence returned to the room, and no further apparitions were seen. Hugelitod lay back in bed, closing his eyes and praying to keep his sanity.

* * * *

King Levernon was the leader of the Royal Houses, a bloodline that reached into the darkest secrets of the human family. He was a beloved despot, and his subjects respected his nobility, if not his precepts. His palace was the jewel of the kingdom, lavish with gold and precious stones that shone in the most unusual places, a living reminder of his wealth and power. There were no other kingdoms that could match his leadership on the world stage.

"I would like to meet with our High Priest next week," said Levernon.

"For what reason, my dear king?"

"I think out of boredom."

"Are you bored and therefore want to visit Karnomen? This is a strange and inappropriate solution to your boredom", said Samuel. Samuel Waters was the Royal Strategist, educated in the highest academies of the land and known as the brightest brain in the royal court. It was Samuel who presided over the royal political

structure and ensured that politics represented and emanated from the people and, of course, enhanced the power and wealth of the king and protected his supreme position among the world's elite.

"You don't trust our High Priest?" Levernon asked, looking up from the book he was reading with a sarcastic smile. The royal library was his favorite room in the palace. Intricate murals by master artists adorned its walls; they showed images of his bloodline in idealized poses on the battlefields and participating in prestigious global events. Levermon enjoyed being in the presence of his ancestors because he felt a connection that, as he often said, "subdued his lust for power."

"It was never about trust, dear king," replied Samuel. "Karnomen circles our people like a vulture, waiting for someone's intellectual curiosity to die so he can swoop in and seduce them to their faith and morals. In doing so, he gains his devotees, who are your devotees anyway. He creates dilution and division. I don't like that about Karnomen."

"So you see him as a rival?"

"He is a rival, at least as far as our kingdom is concerned."

"What about the other kingdoms of the world? Don't they represent more competition than our friend Karnomen, who feeds our citizens with good morals and helps them stay in line and not swerve? Does it not encourage our people to be more obedient to our wishes? I think we should rather focus our attention on the enemy kingdoms that are trying to be as powerful as us every day and in the process are getting closer and closer to my throne."

"My good king," replied Samuel, "you are an excellent student of other kingdoms - their history and political aspirations, but in our time the people are increasingly worried. Something is happening that makes them mistrustful of what is in their best interest, defined in the words of the State. Every day they become more dissatisfied. This discontent in the political and social spheres serves Karnomen's interests very well. People turn to spirituality to escape what you provide. They find help in the worlds of long-deceased Holy men who spoke truth to the mighty and thereby entered the Divine state. These are the new heroes, and these heroes represent, of course, a competitive force for your own position as a hero in the eyes of the people."

"I'm glad to hear your advice on these matters, Samuel. It makes me even more interested to meet Karnomen and learn about his programs. I want to include this meeting in my daily schedule as a beneficial use of my time." Levemon turned the page in his book and finished reading. Samuel bowed respectfully and with deft silence left the king in the midst of his extensive library of dusty books and cold portraits. The library was the tomb of education; through the center with no rays radiating outwards.

* * * *

The morning light streamed through the barred window, illuminating the ancient chamber of the Order of the Sixteen Pa-prs. In this room a small group met to discuss their mission and refine their goals based on the insights received from the Oracle. Karnomen summoned the Order that morning after Shunal's description of his communication with the Oracle.

"Do we understand you correctly, Your Eminence, that the Oracle continues to be untrustworthy?" The Fifth asked Insider. "How is this possible? What has not served us faithfully for 300 years?" Karnomen stood outside the window with his back to the assembled Order.

"I cannot say what caused this change in the Oracle, but I feel it for sure. Something has changed and I believe it it has to do with prophecy."

"And you think that Hugelitod started it somehow? Do you think he is the one the prophecy is talking about?" he asked Seventh Initiate with obvious fear. Shunal cleared his throat.

"We don't know what role Hugelitod played in this. Maybe he's nothing more than a pawn of the Oracle. No one him cannot accuse of disloyalty to the Church or his Eminence."

"However, it remains a problem until we clarify the Oracle's intent," added Karnomen.

"What's the worst that could happen to the Church if the Oracle left us?" asked the Fourth Initiate.

"We have complete control over the prophetic writings. If the Oracle refuses to cooperate, to work for our benefit, I think we should destroy it. What can he do to us?" Karnomen was still looking out the window, smiling at the idea.

"Perhaps you have forgotten something, my old friend. We have a king who would very much like to control the Oracle. We have leaders in all parts of the world who, when they learn of this Oracle, I mean more than mere rumors of its existence - they will wage wars to protect it." He softened his voice a little.

"You're right," he continued, "of course, if we can't control the Oracle, it must be destroyed for the good of our Church. And this applies to all his allies as well. Thanks to Bartholem, we have some options

and now we will be able to apply them." Karnomen turned to face his allies.

"If there are no objections, tomorrow morning I will make one last communication with the Oracle and try to understand his hostility to our Church. Until now, our fears that Dohrman's Prophecy would come true have been based on only one thing: fear. We must be sure of this before we destroy the only channel we have to our own future. Does everyone agree?"

The Order was unanimous in its support of Karnomen; in the desire to clarify the position of the Oracle as an ally or an enemy of the Church. In the past 300 years, it has really been neither an ally nor an enemy; was only a neutral messenger of truth. If this neutrality has been violated, it means, at least for the Order of the Sixteen Rays, that the Oracle has its own motivations. It can't be controlled anymore, and that means it's an enemy to him.

Chapter 8. The Royal Star

The morning brought a chill to the camp where Maia, Joseph and Kamil were sleeping. The untended fire dwindled to embers, changing from fiery orange to purple as the wind caressed it lightly. Kamil was properly equipped to sleep in the forest, while Maia and Joseph slept in the open, the fire being their only source of warmth. Maia woke up first. The morning chill nudged her with a persistence that could only be matched by a mother's. She looked at Joseph's bruised jaw and saw that the swelling had worsened overnight. She decided to look for a poultice to reduce the swelling and prevent infection, but before she left she added a few small branches to the waiting embers. The forest was still damp from the morning dew, and a heavy mist hung in the air, floating among the lower branches of the ancient trees as if they were breathing. Maia knew what kind of herbs and mosses would help in the healing process, but the unknown environment of the forest made finding them a much more tedious process. She was aware of her campsite by bending the branches of the bushes about every ten meters. As she bent down to pick up some moss, she thought of saying the codes.

"Sixteen, twenty, twelve, nine, three, eleven, eight," Maia said more to herself, knowing how her voice carried well in the stillness of the morning air and she didn't want Kamil to hear her.

"I'm here", said the now familiar voice. "I'm pleased you summoned me." Maia turned and there stood the Oracle, looking as before, a deep indigo blue robe covered in gold, similar to the twilight sky. Her black hair was braided in the back like a snake, but in all other respects she looked the same as before.

"It's nice to see you", Maia said, her eyes sparkling magically.

"You too", replied the Oracle. "It's always a great adventure to leave the stone you live in."

"There must be solitude," Maia pointed out.

"I'm not sure what loneliness is, but when I'm with you, it's different."

"Where is the stone in which you reside?"

"I don't know," replied the Oracle. "It's somewhere in this forest, but I can't describe the way to you. Have you thought about the mission I spoke about at our last meeting?"

"I was thinking a bit about something else", said Maia. "We are lost and our first concern is to find a way out of this forest before finding Hugelitod."

"I understand."

"And we also met a Guardian whose intentions we don't know", added Maia. "I hope they will bring us safely out of this forest." The oracle looked deeper into Mai's eyes.

"Don't trust that guard if he trusts Karnomen. If you find trust between them, run and do so without delay." Maia nodded obediently, but still fearful of her situation, she felt the Oracle's words pass her by. "Are you speaking to me as an Oracle?"

"Yes."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yes".

"Why am I here?" Maia looked at the sky with an expression of disappointment. "Why did I just agree to this... journey into an uncharted forest with a complete stranger? I'm putting my life at risk in so many ways and now I've become an aspect of your own story - a story I hadn't even heard of until three days ago. How could my life have changed so suddenly?"

"There is no suddenness; only in linear time. Your whole life has led you here and it seems sudden only to your mind, but in the greater depths of your wholeness you know why you have been brought to this situation and also, which is much more important-

more casual, you know how it will develop."

"How is it possible," cried Maia, "that everything is predestined?"

"Think about it for a moment," the Oracle began, "how could there be an Oracle if everything beyond the current time horizon was not knowable? How could I possibly know the future if the expression of time has already been made and everything in your world that comes into existence already exists?"

"When I speak to you, who hears me?" Maia asked narrowing her eyes.

"I'm pretty much like you. In my wholeness, I am connected to a greater whole, which in turn is connected to a greater whole, and this goes on and on to what you would call the Creator." The oracle pointed to a nest in a nearby tree. "I am like a nest in a tree that has become a tree, and a tree is a nest in a forest that has become a forest. And the forest is a nest on the ground and has become the ground. And the earth is a nest in space, and has become space. And the universe is nested in the Creator and became the Creator." Maia folded her arms.

"So when I talk to you, I'm talking... I'm talking to the Creator?"

"Yes," the Oracle nodded. Maia looked into the Oracle's eyes trying to figure out if what she just heard was true or a lie. She had always been taught not to believe anyone or anything that claimed to be God. No one can claim such a thing without being a liar or a fool.

"And what am I?" Maia asked.

"You're a nest", came the quick reply. "But you wake up like a tree and soon like a forest."

"What about the bird that built the nest?" Maia asked.

"The bird is the mind or intellect. It is a property of the ego. It flies around to gather food and socialize and rarely notices the forest in which it lives. But he returns to his nest and meditates there. It considers what is sustainable in terms of meaning and joy. It is a nest that is a place of solace; the home of the wholeness of the individual." "You said I needed to find Hugelitod", Maia asked, returning

to a more practical line of inquiry.

"How do I find him?"

"That remains a mystery to me."

"But you are the Oracle, you see into the future. Can't you see this?" Ma's voice showed signs of anxiety. She felt her doubts grow and wondered if the Oracle was just a figment of her loneliness and growing exhaustion. She read stories of people lost in the desert or in the forest who had gone mad; maybe he is also falling into such a state.

"My vision is focused on the great story of humanity. I am like a lens that is focused as wide as possible, as wide as the Creator can see, but when I look at a single life, I cannot focus or see the future in the same way that I can see the future of all." The oracle suddenly flickered almost to a transparent state. "I have to go."

"And what imaginary friend are we talking to this morning?" Kamil blurted out with a cynical grin. He was only six meters behind Maia and aimed his rifle directly at her." And where is my cooking pot? Do you really think you can steal it without me noticing?" Maia was so engrossed in her conversation with the Oracle that she didn't notice Kamil stalking her like a predator. At the first sound of his voice she yelped in surprise at seeing him so close, and when she turned back to the Oracle in a moment, he was gone.

"Everyone has imaginary friends," Maia replied, trying her best to sound casual. "As for your pot, I borrowed it to collect some herbs for a poultice to relieve the swelling on my father's face. I didn't want to wake you up with such a stupid request because you were sleeping like a baby."

Kamil frowned at the remark that he slept like a baby, but lowered his rifle when Maia said it jokingly.

"I distinctly heard you say the word Oracle", said Kamil. "He's not your imaginary friend by chance Dohrman's Oracle?" Maia laughed.

"My imaginary friends are not what you care about, Kamil. That's all bullshit anyway. I don't even know what you're talking about - Dohrman's Oracle!" She laughed quietly to herself, but loud enough for Ka-mil to hear. "Speaking of which, Camille, have you seen the Oracle here?" Maia cast a quick glance at where the Oracle had been standing before to make sure it remained invisible. "What I do know," she continued, "is that I need to give this to my father as quickly as possible. Can you show me the way?" She bent down to pick up the cooking pot, knowing that Kamil was mesmerized by her beauty.

* * * *

Bartholem removed the bandages with ease.

"The wound seems to be healing well. Better than I expected. I think the stitches could be taken out today." Hugelitod smiled slightly.

"Whatever you see fit."

"Have you had any memories, of any kind, since your incident with the Oracle?" Hugelitod thought how strange it was that Bartholem knew about the Oracle, and when he knew about it, he was placing a call on it. After all, Bartholomew was not an Initiate, and Hugelitod was well aware of the discord between the High Initiates and the Royal Courts. He decided to play it safe.

"No, nothing."

"I'm going to need to take your shirt off," Bartholem said. "Then lie on your back. How do you take the pain?"

"Average, I guess," Hugelitod said, taking off his shirt as he did so. His body was emaciated from the priest's diet, and Bartholem estimated his body structure with a quick glance of the doctor.

"Weren't you an athlete when you were younger?"

"No, I just worked on my father's farm after he died."

"How old were you?"

"Twelve."

"That's a young age to run a farm," Bartholem pointed out in a friendly tone as he readied his tools to pull out the stitches. "How did you manage the farm and school together?"

"My mother taught me while working and in between. It sounds worse than it really was. I remember that me it was fun. The work was hard, but I always felt rewarded."

"And what was your reward, if I may ask?"

"Yes, no animal died of hunger. No crop perished from lack of care. When the entrance tests for the priesthood came, I passed them. Although I wasn't top of the class, I also passed all the exams at school. My mother always had food and some money on our table. That was my reward."

"What about siblings?"

"I had a younger brother, but he died about ten years ago."

"It's going to sting a bit now," Bartholem announced, "but I'll try to be gentle and quick as possible. Is your mother still alive?"

"Yes, he still lives on the family farm, raising chickens and goats."

"I understand. Now be very still. What exactly brought you to the priesthood; it seems you could have become anything, including this profession of mine." Bartholem smiled broadly.

"I think that living alone on a farm in the middle of nowhere allowed me to study Nature more than other children. And in these observations I saw a certain order of intelligence that I can only compare to a higher power. I don't know if this way of perceiving was an accident or some kind of random chaos." He paused and winced as the stitches came out. "It's interesting that you mentioned that I could be in your profession, because I believe that in a way it was."

"In what way?"

"I gave birth to baby cows and horses, put splints on the broken legs of various animals on the farm, and all—well before most boys shave for the first time."

"I was twenty-two when I first had a medical procedure," laughed Bartholem.

"One day," said Hugelitod, "I was tending to one of our workhorses with a broken hoof when he kicked me so hard that I lost consciousness for several hours. The doctor in our village called it shock coma."

The strange thing was that when I was out for those two hours, I saw everything that was happening around me, I was not in my body, but I could see and hear all the same." Bartholem paused for a moment and reached for the scissors.

"Hold that thought for a moment." He made several cuts with scissors. "Okay, you may continue."

"I understand this is going to sound strange coming from a priest, but after this experience I felt a whole new kinship with... everything. I didn't care if it was blasphemy, apostasy or inability to concentrate. I just felt this sense of connection. That's what brought me here."

"I see," said Bartholem. "It's good that there are people like you in the world." He looked down at Hugelitod's forehead right under his nose, carefully examining the wound. "Well that's it my friend, you can sit down and put on your shirt and walk around a bit if you feel up to it." Hugelitod sat on the edge of the bed and put on his shirt. As Bartholem walked across the room to his medicine bag, he saw the birthmark on Hugelitod's back; half hidden between his shoulder blades. It was shaped like a six-pointed star. It was subtle, but in the vivid light of the morning sun it was undeniably the Royal Star.

"Before you put on your shirt," said Bartholem, "let me listen to your heart and lungs for a moment. It will only take a few seconds." Hugelitod nodded and stood carefully. "One small precaution before you start with

any consistent activity", laughed Bartholem. He placed his stethoscope on Hugelitod's back and carefully examined the birthmark to make sure it was natural and not tattooed as was sometimes the custom in the poorer classes.

"A few deep breaths and we'll be done." It was undeniable. Royal Star. Bartholem pondered what that meant. Is it a coincidence? He didn't like coincidences when they lined up in orderly sequences. It meant that some force - perhaps good, perhaps evil - was at play here, and those who involuntarily shared the stage with it became pawns of that force. He was sure of one thing: he didn't want to be a pawn.

Chapter 9. Chronicles of the Oracle

Relieved, Karnomen settled his aging body into a chair, the same chair supported by fourteen other First Initiates. Karnomen was aware that the chair was carved from a tree that grew next to the Oracle. One of Karnomen's predecessors wrote that the tree fell during a storm and hit the Oracle. His predecessor ordered the tree to be transformed into a chair for the High Priest. Apparently as some form of subtle retribution - something the High Priests greatly valued.

"Your Eminence, the doctor is coming." He announced the messenger and immediately disappeared. A moment later, Bartholem was heard approaching down the corridor; his characteristic gait was well known to Karnomen. Bartholem suffered from polio as a child and walked irregularly, balancing the paralysis of his right leg, which was stunted compared to the left. The drumming sound of Bartholem's staff reminded Karnomen of his own age. Now, at the age of eighty-two, he reflected that the cane would probably be his next sign of decline, his next submission to gravity. Kar-nomen sniffed the air that blew through the open window behind him. The fruit trees were in bloom and their fragrance almost overpowered the coffee he held - their blended aroma was unique; was something that doesn't happen very often at his age.

"How is our favorite son feeling today?"

"He is doing well. I saw him on a walk," remarked Bartholem.

"You work miracles, my good doctor." Karnomen took a long drink from his coffee cup. "Anything else?"

"Did you know she has a birthmark on her back?" Karnomen shook his head.

"Why should I care?"

"Does the Royal Star have any meaning in prophecy?" asked Bartholomew.

"If you mean in general, he doesn't have one, no special one." Karnomen closed his eyes as if trying to remember something important. "Up and down," he whispered. "If you mean the birthmark of a priest who is initiated into the Order of the Sixteen Rays, I don't know." Karnomen sighed with increasing complexity.

"Are you sure about what you saw?"

"No doubt."

"Does he know you've been examining him?"

"No."

"That's good. There are thirty-two volumes of writings from the Oracle. The number of pages is over thirty-three thousand. I'm sorry, but if there are details about the birthmark, my memory has slipped." Karnomen gestured for Bartholomew to sit down and pick up his phone. "Please let Father Richard come to me immediately. Thank you."

"If anyone is going to know," said Karnomen, "it's only him."

"Do you want me to wait?" asked Bartholomew.

"Do you know that Levernon wants to meet me?"

"No."

"He has invited me to the Royal Palace for the next week, apparently for no particular reason other than to discuss the progress of the Church overseas."

"Interestingly."

"Let me know if you hear anything. Perhaps it is time for the king to see his doctor?" Karnomen's smile was perfectly poised between insincerity and disgust. Karnomen admired the king's power and wealth, but his true king was his own line of First Initiates and the future role they would play.

* * * *

"Thanks for sharing your food," Maia said. Kamil nodded.

"It's not much, but our Supply Station was damaged by water and they advised us to use these supplies before they rot."

Kamil looked about twenty-five years old, he was of strong build with a sharply cut face and curious gray-blue eyes. His hair was almost shoulder length, wavy and golden in color with a hint of red. Although his uniform was dirty and ill-fitting, his face was clean and well-groomed; despite the scar on his nose, he appeared unscathed by what can only be a dangerous job. For breakfast they had wheaten bread and blueberry marmalade; also bird's eggs which

Kamil found the day before.

"What about your head?" Kamil asked, avoiding Joseph's eyes.

"It's better, thanks."

"As I said last night, I can take you back to our Depot and from there someone will get you out of the forest within a day or two - depending on the service schedule."

"Do you think you can handle the long march?" Maia asked turning to Joseph.

"Do I have a choice?" Joseph smiled. Joseph had a rudimentary bandage that held the poultice exactly over his contusion. Maia made it out of her shirt and a vine, and although it looked ugly, it served its purpose. Maia replayed her conversation with the Oracle. She felt that Kamil was a good soul who was understandably paranoid about this type of work and environment. This depth of the forest was of course a mystical place; while on the one hand it looked like Paradise, on the other it was a place of utter isolation that could unnerve even the most level-headed of individuals.

"What do you know about Karnomen?" Maia asked.

"I know he is the High Priest," Kamil replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Have you ever met him?"

"No. We move in different circles." Kamil answered with a hint of a smile between chewing hard bread. Joseph straightened his head a bit and looked at Maia, wondering why she was leading the call in that direction.

"How did you become a Ranger?" she asked.

"Well then, my mission is to trust no one I find in these woods, which means not to share information that could be used against me."

"Why did you attack us?" Maia asked feeling hurt.

"Look, I'm employed to guard the part of the forest that surrounds the High Priest's monastery. I was told not to trust anyone. Which I do too. So it can happen that you are attacked, that's just the way it is. And besides," he added, "if you stop lying to me about the real reason you're here, it'll be a lot easier for me to trust you."

"Why do you think we're lying to you?" Joseph asked.

"Only fools would go so deep into the forest, even if they were lost. You are smart enough to make a lining, but you can't find your way out of the forest even with a compass?"

"Let me explain, our compass broke."

"Of course he broke down. No compass works inside this forest! There are rich deposits of iron under our feet - that will knock out the needle of any compass. You had to walk fast for at least two days to get here," Kamil paused and pointed to the ground. "And before you got here, your compass was working fine. So don't tell me you're lost. You chose to enter this forest for a reason - you just don't want to tell me why."

"Is that all?" cried Joseph. "So you don't trust us because our compass is broken?" I don't believe you because you sneaked up on me and without hesitation hit me in the head with the butt of your rifle. So who is more trustworthy? You or me?" Kamil looked at Maia.

"And here is your daughter, if she is what she is, why was she talking to an invisible friend this morning about Dohrman-to the Oracle. Although she denied it, I heard her."

"But I've already explained that to you, he's just my imaginary friend and our conversations are always about supernatural things - fairies, goblins, wizards and, of course, sometimes oracles." Maia shot a quick glance at Joseph, knowing he didn't know about her conversation with the Oracle that morning.

"I don't know what you mean by Dohrman's Oracle", Maia almost sighed as she spoke. "All I want is to get out of this forest and go home. Can we do this?" She reached out to Kamil, gently squeezed his forearm and looked into his face.

"We can do that," Kamil said surrenderingly. "But you must do as I tell you before we get to the Warehouse. You are officially my captives. The Captain of the Depot will be questioning you, so it will probably take an extra day to get you out of the forest."

"Are we your captives?" Maia asked with growing fear. Kamil nodded and stood on the no-

hey "The sooner we start, the sooner you get home." Kamil began the well-rehearsed routine of harvesting the camp like an automaton, while Maia and Joseph looked at each other and considered their next move; they knew they had to do something and very soon.

* * * *

Father Richards was a stocky man in his mid-fifties. He was the Church's leading expert on the transcripts of Oracle prophecies that had accumulated over the past three hundred years. In the Order of the Sixteen Rays, Richards was the Seventh Initiate. His intellect was unparalleled in the Order and for this Richards comprehensive understanding of the secret texts of the Oracle was indispensable to the Order. As he walked down the hall to Karnomen's private office, he wondered if he had done something wrong. Richards had a reputation for bluntness, and sometimes that bluntness rubbed off on some of his colleagues. But if he knew, he was right in all cases of strife. His intellect allowed him to see details, connections, and patterns that others overlooked - not because they didn't care, but because their minds were shrouded in a thick fog. Because he was the custodian of the most important group of documents in the history of the human species, it also gave him a certain seriousness, in terms of his influence in the discussions. There was nothing more important in the entire world that even came close in importance to the Chronicles of the Oracle, and he was fortunate enough to be the custodian of this monumental work. He knocked on Karnomen's door.

"Further."

"Good morning, Your Eminence." The smell of coffee hung in the air when he entered. "Did you want to see me?"

"Yes, make yourself comfortable," said Karnomen. "I was just talking to Bartholem and he mentioned something he noticed while inspecting Hugelitod. I would like to consult with you on this matter." Richards sat down, relieved to hear that his summons was not the result of his tactlessness.

"Would you like some coffee?" offered Karnomen.

"Yes, thank you." Karnomen nodded, leaning forward and pouring a cup of coffee for Richards. They sat at the richly decorated table in Karnomen's personal study.

"It just so happens that our newest Initiate has the Royal Star in the middle as his birthmark your back." Karnomen announced casually. Richards set down his cup and leaned back in his chair.

"King's star", he repeated more to himself. Karnomen studied Richards' face, looking for certain signs of connection. "In volume seventeen, there is a mention that a warrior will be born under the Royal Star. However, I don't remember there being any mention of a birthmark."

"I would like to read it in person", said Karnomen. "Let's go to the Room of Prophecy."

* * * *

The Room of Prophecy was a secret library that contained thirty-two volumes of the collected transcripts of the Oracle. Only the First Initiate of the given time could add new entries; each volume marked the period of office of one First Initiate. In this collection there were certain volumes that were considered by the Order to be extremely important in terms of their depth and accuracy of prophecy or philosophical insight. These volumes reflected the quality of the relationship between the First Initiate and the Oracle, as well as the line of inquiry pursued by the First Initiate. In essence, each volume presented the relationship between the Oracle and the First Initiate.

Volume Seventeen featured 2,819 handwritten pages, inscribed by Jonever Lastin, High Priest; a tenure that lasted eleven years. Lastin was recognized by the Church as a true Saint, although no one outside the Order of the Sixteen Rays had the opportunity to read his authoritative collaboration with the Oracle-hem.

Volume Seventeen was an obvious revelation, for it foretold in great detail a new epoch in which humanity would transform its state of being and, as a collective, begin a process of unification based on an enduring spiritual kinship. Richards turned on the ceiling lights in the Room of Prophecy while Karnomen rummaged through the spacious pockets of his robes for his reading glasses.

"A moment's patience, Your Eminence, while I prepare the book and find the link." Richards glanced quickly at Karnomen and carefully slid the transparent cover from the book's large emerald-colored leather. The Room of the Prophets was a carefully guarded environment, and even the interior of these walls where the original volumes lay - largely handwritten by the First Initiate - was tightly sealed to protect the books from decay. Karnomen put on his white gloves and waited for Richards' signal. The first Initiate was silent

and simple mood. He knew about Lastin's tome, having read it many times over the years, but due to its extraordinary length, he often skipped over sections he found less interesting, which was probably the reason why he didn't remember anything about the King's Star.

"Do you have any idea how long it will take?" Karnomen asked. Richards's white-gloved hands turned the pages with great care and deliberation; he answered without looking up.

"If it's here, I'll find it. I think I know what chapter; it's just hard to read this handwriting so it's slower for me to find the link."

"And what is the title of the chapter?"

"It's chapter fifty-five called Radiant Seeds." Karnomen didn't like that name.

"Are you sure or do you just have a feeling?"

"Both, Your Eminence. If you prefer, I can tell you when I find it."

"I'm leaving to see the Oracle in about thirty minutes. I wish I had this knowledge before I left; I can wait about ten more minutes." Karnomen was musing over the words Radiant Seeds as Richards began to read aloud from the book. "The mark of the one who will lead this change will be the wearing of the Royal Star on his body. It imprints itself in the cock of his wings. This sign is the royal symbol of the embodied hand of the Creator. He who wears this sign will come in the shadows of oppression; united with the animal. But in your fall you will rise, you are chosen by the Spirit that guides the human seeds. This person will have no equal and will bring equality to all. He will not be a master and all the masters before him will perish. He will see wisdom in men, but men will not see his wisdom, so he will remain unknown. Without this man, the rise of humanity would be diminished. In this man are hidden the Radiant Seeds, and they will unite with the Daughter of the Creator, who shall see the new Oracle-lum and lead him to every man, woman, and child..."

"That's enough," said Karnomen, raising his hand. "I would like you to copy this passage for me so that I can study it in detail when time permits. Can you do it for me?"

"Of course, Your Eminence. It will be an honor for me." Thanking Richards, Karnomen removed his gloves and reading glasses and walked the short distance to his private room. He wasn't sure what he just heard. It was still echoing in his thoughts. Hugelitod is a fighter? In what way? His fears that Hugelitod was more than his simple humble assistant were ignited by the powerful fuel hidden in a book that was nearly two hundred years old. Time seemed more illusory every day, as if it didn't really exist.

* * * *

Hugelitod took a deep breath and held it in his lungs. He liked the idea of having a forest in his body. Some quiet part of him believed that this was the best way to absorb the spirit of the forest and the animals that lived in it. His father had told him that breath was a connection to life, and although it seemed self-evident at first, as a young boy, Hugelitod pondered this meaning for several days, during which time he came to understand that breath was more than a connection to life; it is the life force itself. By holding forest air in the lungs, the forest can bring the blood to the heart and the emotional connection with the place or spirit is strengthened. What he really wanted to do was connect with the Oracle and ask him the hundreds of questions that were thundering in his mind.

The bench he was resting on was right next to his favorite walking path, tucked away somewhere far from the monastery, and although it was only a few hundred meters from the farmed grounds of the outer property, he felt like he was in a forest millions of years away.

"I thought I'd find you here", Torem said warmly. Tor was the Second Initiate. He was a tall man with a long bony face and kind eyes that were always framed by metal-rimmed glasses. Torem was a renowned scholar and was a follower to become the First Initiate, although success was never certain as it greatly influenced the Oracle, although in the end it was the First Initiate who made the decision. Hugelitod straightened up on the bench.

"It's good to take a little walk in the woods and get some fresh air."

"I understand you", Torem agreed. "Can I join you?"

"Sure," Hugelitod offered. Torem sat up, placing his hands on his knees.

"It's a beautiful reminder."

Chapter 10. The Path of the Beginning

"What do you mean?" "Naturally," he said mysteriously. "I can see the stitches are out."

"Yes, just this morning."

"And do you feel better now?"

"Yes, much better, thank you."

"I wasn't at your initiation," Torem began, signaling the end of the brief conversation, "but since my return yesterday I have heard all about it", he laughed.

"I can imagine that", confirmed Hugelitod.

"You know, there are stories that the Oracle will entrust one of our new Initiates with a certain mission - something like subversion, I think. The Oracle will want to use this pawn, this new Initiate, to overthrow the Order. You haven't heard of this story because you haven't read any of the Prophecies, but those of us who have read them are a little, shall we say, understandably paranoid about these stories because the Oracle is a portal to the future - to our destiny, and we don't wish , to fall into the wrong hands." Hugelitod nodded in understanding.

"And these prophecies you speak of, can I read them?"

"Perhaps in time", answered Torem with a quick smile. "Reading written writings is in itself a opportunity for lifelong study. You must first be granted authority as an Initiate."

Hugelitod felt a warm affection for Torem, and something within him wanted to divulge the details of his experience with the Oracle and share them with Torem. Torem felt Hugelitod to be the most understanding of all the High Initiates. But something in Torem's tone reminded him that the Order of the Sixteen Rays was of one mind; a mind that is controlled by Karnomen.

"I remember the first week after my initiation", recalled Torem. "I think I was your age and like you I had heard the legends of the Oracle of Dohrman, but I doubted its existence because it didn't make sense to me why God would use anything other than his own voice to speak to the chosen ones. "

"My initiation was an awakening for me. Truths were revealed to me which I felt were so penetrating that they must come only from the mouth of God Himself." Torem's voice was calm and soft and had a rhythm that was original and characteristic of someone speaking from his heart. Torem leaned toward Hugelitod.

"What I want to point out is that the Oracle is not God, although it is easy to think of him as such at first. However, God is not associated with a single monolith. He is free, he is everywhere in space and time. The oracle is associated with the stone, it is a voice of great insight, you can be sure, but it lacks wisdom and therefore lacks power. The real power lies in Karnomen's hands and his relationship with God, not the Oracle. If you serve Karnomen, you serve God. If you serve the Oracle, you serve a vision of our future embodied in a stone monolith and nothing more." Torem paused long enough to shift on the wooden bench and cross his legs.

"None of us in the Order pretend to know exactly what you experienced at your initiation, but we know for a fact that the Oracle is nothing more than a device for predicting the future. We hope you will also come to this understanding." Torem paused with a solemn sigh. "Is there anything you would like to share with me about your initiation? It would be good to clear your mind and seek absolution, my friend. Your standing in the Order can be instantly restored if you simply choose transparency over silence."

Hugelitod felt Torem's power focus on him. He was the second most powerful man in the Church, a man of great wisdom, unsurpassed in his theological wisdom; and now, Hugelitod cannot share with him his faith in the Oracle and what it has told him.

"I'm sorry, but I don't remember my initiation. I wish I could remember him. I wish I could say that the Oracle told me profound truths, as it did you, but I have no memory of the event, none but this one." And he pointed to his injury and then continued.

"I understand your concerns regarding the Oracle's prophecy that a new initiate could subvert the Order of Sixteen Rays, but how do you know that it is I to whom the Oracle points?"

"We are all made of tiny particles," Torem said, "and these particles absorb light, and that light forms an image on the surfaces of our bodies, hearts, and minds, just as the lenses in a camera allow light to capture an image on the surface. The brightest are the places where the light most often falls. The light of truth is a light upon your body, heart, and mind, and there are those among us here in the Order who see the shadows in your words, and we feel the darkness in your heart. This is not lying. You cannot hide this from us." Hugelitod's heart began to beat faster and he felt his face flush. He had no choice but to stand up and feign indignation.

"The darkness you hear in my words is confusion. I am confused by your assumption of my guilt. You are heroes to me, I hold you in the highest esteem, but because I feel accused of something I don't-

I hum, I am doubtless in the dark, and I suppose that is what you feel." He paused for a moment. "Whatever light or darkness you see in me is not due to one event, and whatever changes you see in me since my initiation are shaped by your assumption, so you also have a part in creating this darkness, these shadows in my image."

With that, Hugelitod turned and walked away. Now his only goal was his room in the monastery. He wished the only thing - to be alone and pray for clarification.

* * * *

Karnomen walked the well-trodden path to the Oracle. It was his seventy-ninth trip to the Oracle since he rose to power as High Priest, or, as he was known only in the Order of the Sixteen Rays, as First Initiate. Only the first three Initiates could address the Oracle directly, and only with the consent of the First Initiate. The path was extremely narrow and every moment it was full of tree roots and stones. Many Initiates boasted sprained ankles from their journeys to the Oracle.

Surrounding the oracle was a six-mile-deep perimeter belt of barriers that was multi-level in its intimidation function. This belt was made up of concentric circles with the Oracle at its center. Passing through it was a narrow, very well trodden road with guard posts every mile. This road was the only passage that crossed the perimeter belt of barriers. It began at the northern end of the monastery grounds and continued to the last guard post one mile from where Dohrman's Oracle stood.

The first exclusion level was the natural iron ore deposits that surrounded the area and made compasses unusable. The second level was a thorn bush that had been planted here almost three hundred years ago and which had grown to a depth of almost four kilometers and was so densely intertwined that animals larger than a rabbit had never been seen here. The third level was a stone obstacle that rose to a height of twenty feet and had an inverted slope that made climbing impossible. At the top of this obstacle was carved a furrow that was three meters wide and was filled with mud. This mud was dotted with other thorn bushes that had their own ecosystem of rodents and venomous snakes.

These first three levels assumed that the intruder had evaded the guards protecting the perimeter barricade. If the intruder somehow miraculously got past the first three levels of protection, the fourth level was the icing on the cake; known among the sixteen Initiates as the Divine Barrier. The Divine Barrier was attributed to Petrano, who was the First Initiate eight generations before Karnomen. It was the sacred duty of every First Initiate to protect the Oracle, and it was quite common among them for this responsibility to become a possession.

The Divine Barrier used technology that was designed with the help of the Oracle, although Petranom never credited the Oracle with its invention. Copper pipes twisted into spiral shapes were placed on the ground. Over the course of eighteen years, the property was surrounded by thousands of these copper pipes; however, they were well hidden among the trees and bushes. The pipes were connected by a tangled network of copper cables. A generator was built on site to supply the entire network with electricity. The effectiveness of this network was almost unbelievable.

Anyone who entered the Divine Barrier entered an electric field that was poisonous to the human heart. The barrier created such a powerful current that when you came within ten meters of the copper mesh, your heartbeat became unstable; and there was no way to protect yourself. There was no path to the Oracle that was untouched by this electric field - except for the narrow gate at the last guard post, which was reserved for sixteen Initiates only.

Karnomen and Shunal came to the seventh, last guard post of the Oracle site. None but the Initiates were ever permitted to enter the gates; not even high-ranking members of the Supreme Guard. It was believed among the Guardians that the site of the Oracle was where the most sacred relics of the Church were kept. They knew nothing of the Oracle except in legend and myth, and almost all of the guardians rejected the idea that Dohrman's Oracle was anything more than a mere folktale of the common people.

From time to time there were stories of curious high-ranking guards seeing the monolithic stones in the Oracle's location, but the fear of being caught and damned by the High Priest was a powerful persuasion for any rational minded individual. The High Initiates were very careful in promoting guardians to high ranks, and cultivating their devotion became something of an art form.

"Welcome, Your Eminence. Welcome, Father Shunal", the welcoming ceremony took place. His name was the guard Captain Botner, he was strong, powerfully built, precise in his speech and absolutely reliable.

"Thank you my son, it's been a long journey, would you like some tea for us?"

"Sure, your Eminence, if you wish, rest, put your feet on the dais and I will return with your

tea and water as quickly as possible." Botner raced to his guard house while Karnomen and Shunal walked the short distance to a stage surrounded by tall redwood trees. They sat at a chipped table strewn with copper-colored pine needles, relaxing in the light of the pro-flashing sun on this beautiful but cold day. It was almost noon and both men were hungry after a long walk.

"So, have you decided how you're going to proceed?" Shunal asked quietly.

"Yes, that is one of the advantages of these long journeys", answered Karnomen. "I have time to think." Karnomen was massaging his legs with his hands.

"Today my legs hurt more than ever. I'm afraid I may have to stay over on this trip night, but we'll see how things go."

The robes of the High Initiates had a dark blue-green color and were decorated at the back with six to ten gold-colored stars - the symbol of the Order. However, whenever the High Initiates went out of the monastery, they wore their usual light gray robes adorned with a red sash.

"Is there anything I can do?" Shunal asked.

"No, I'll be fine", said Karnomen, dismissively waving his hand to indicate that the topic was closed. Shunal wondered how else to find out Karnomen's progress in communicating with the Oracle. Remembering his own experience just two days ago, he hoped that Karnomen would find a logical explanation for the Oracle's new and unpredictable behavior.

"Are you going to ask about Hugelitod?" Shunal inquired.

"I will ask him and much more," replied Karnomen. "Don't worry my friend, I will be with the Oracle direct. After what has happened in the past few days, I don't believe we have any other option."

* * * *

"You must distract him with your beauty", whispered Joseph. "If I can take his rifle, we can escape."

"And what then?" Maia replied. "Do you want to kill him?"

Maia and Joseph walked a little behind Kamil. They were on their way to the Supply Station, where Kamil was to hand them over as his captives; this was a fact that greatly disturbed Joseph, for he knew how they would be interrogated.

"Do you still have the codes?" Maia asked.

"Of course", he replied.

"Throw them away. When we get to the Supply Station, they're going to search you, and how do you want to explain the codes? pour?" Joseph suddenly realized that he might have underestimated the degree to which Maia was aware of their situation.

"I don't plan on going to the Supply Station," Joseph snapped.

"I can hear your plotting, you back there", half shouted Kamil. "Keep up and don't be left behind." "Don't-breaks the plot", Maia replied. "We're arguing."

"I don't care what you call it; if you're arguing, you wouldn't whisper to each other, would you?"

Kamil paused for a moment, allowing his captives to catch their breath. His face was expressionless, none no sign of sweat, no heavy breathing.

"I swear," said Maia, "you have the vitality of a horse rather than a human. I can say that." Kamil relaxed his expression a little. "We can rest if you want."

"Where's the next stream?"

"I think about half a mile."

"Then let's go further," suggested Maia. "Let's rest by the stream."

* * * *

The Police Station was small, quiet and thoughtfully arranged. There was no mess or anything that looked out of place. Detective Sorriolo's office was quite the opposite, consisting of a small desk and two chairs that served as pedestals for the wobbly columns of files that took up all the flat space he could find. The columns of files had started growing about two years ago, and since his office couldn't fit more cabinets, they had continued their vertical ascent ever since.

"So you admit that you and your daughter had a fight?" Sorril asked, looking over the transcript of the message that-rou Anton filled in early in the morning.

"Yes", he replied.

"And the last time you saw her was Sunday night and nothing since?" Anton nodded.
"Yes."

"Did she have any enemies, former acquaintances?" "No, he's a loner", answered Anton.
"So you probably have no idea she's seeing anyone." "I said she was
a loner," Anton repeated with increasing impatience. Sorril leaned back in his creaking chair.

"Were there any places she liked to be alone?"
"Sometimes she liked to go to the forest next to her school. That was her favorite place."
"One can get lost in these woods. She could have run into the Supreme Guard."
"No, no, Maia never went that far into the forest," Anton protested.
"Still, I'll contact them and see if they happen to find someone matching her description."

Sorril glanced at the photo of Mai that was clipped to the message. "She's definitely not the type to get her food out."

The detective stood up and shook Anton's hand; thanking him for his information and assuring him that his department would do everything in their power to find Maia.

Chapter 11. Rite of Passage

Bartholem knocked on the door with one knuckle. The sound was sharp but dignified. The High King's Counselor's office bore all the hallmarks of a royal office one would expect, including massive doors that rose to the hall's thirty-foot vaulted ceiling.

"Yes, further," informed a muffled voice.
Even though the doors were huge, Bartholem was always surprised by how easily they opened.
"How is our Royal Counselor doing today?" Bartholem asked.
"I'm doing well and you?" answered Samuel. "It seems like it's been a long time since we've seen each other."

"Yes, I have been unusually busy, and the Doctor's life, as you know, is not his own." Bartholem closed the door and sat down in a chair next to Samuel, who was studying a thick file of important looking papers.
The two men had been classmates at school for eight years and had decided to maintain their childhood friendship in the midst of their careers, which had eroded that friendship to the fragility of nascent ice.

"What are you bringing to my office today?" Samuel asked, putting his papers down. Samuel was renowned for his brilliant political mind, but he was always understated and his face was softened by his love of food. He used to be a jovial spirit with a great sense of humor, but he could turn deadly serious in an instant when talking about any topic.

"The High Priest asked me to come to one of his wards, a man named Hugelitod."
"Pardon my omission, my friend," interrupted Samuel, "but would you like something to drink?"
"A little water will do," replied Bartholem. "You told me about
Hugelitod," Samuel prompted as he poured water into the crystal goblet. "Yes,
thank you, Hugelitod is Karnomen's new assistant."

"Newly recruited, I understand where this is going", said Samuel.

Bartholem was well aware of his old friend's penchant for jumping to conclusions before anyone else
he recognized what was happening.

"So the hideous head of priestly paranoia is about to eat and Hugelitod is the innocent victim?"
"This time it might be justified", said Bartholem. "Tell me more."

Bartholem explained the situation with the King's Star and the immediate interest it had aroused in Karnomen.
He described the unusual circumstances of Hugelitod's amnesia and initiation, which was unexpectedly interrupted by his fall - to nowhere but the Oracle itself.

"Do you believe Hugelitod?"
"No, I think it's withholding information, but it's just a feeling."
"Sometimes feelings are all we have," said Samuel, engrossed in calculating the equation that appeared in front of him.

"I would advise you to stay close to this matter. Maybe Hugelitod will need your service?"
"What do you mean?"
"Wounds can get infected", Samuel gave a sly smile. "A blow to the head can sometimes have unexpected neurological consequences. You must know better than me. Just find a way to visit him regularly

and follow its development."

"Karnomen is as paranoid as he is cunning. His next step will be an encounter with the Oracle. If the Oracle is still the Oracle, then he will answer him truthfully and Hugelitod will be condemned. If the Oracle has been modified or changed in some way and is able to withstand Karnomen's interrogation, then it may be time for the next step." Bartholem sighed nervously. "I don't think that will happen in my lifetime."

"Look, maybe an opportunity is coming our way." Samuel laughed. "Keep your spirits up, my friend. Isn't that what we were hoping for? Imagine what we could do if we had the Oracle under our control."

Bartholem forced a weak smile. He knew in some remote part of him that the changes would be so profound that none of them - including Samuel - could imagine them.

* * * *

"You don't know what they will do to us", whispered Joseph.

"Neither do you," Maia replied.

She patted his bruise with a wet cloth torn from the sleeve of her shirt, which she had torn at the shoulder. The stream was cold and Joseph winced at every touch of the icy cold substance. His left face was fading into a purple hue, and Maia was glad that the current and the rocks in the stream refused to provide Joseph with a mirror, fearing that if he saw his face, his anger against Kamil might increase.

Kamil filled his jug and washed his face. He was still on guard, aware that his captives were both confused and untrustworthy. He felt that they were making a flight, but he kept his rifle still with him, and if they dared to run away, he could easily find them in the forest, for he knew him better than anyone else.

"You still have five minutes", shouted Kamil. Maia didn't answer.

"If he considers us his captives," whispered Joseph, "it is only because he is as suspicious as his superiors, and if they treat us like prisoners, it will be bad times."

"Then we'll tell them the truth, for the most part", Maia replied.

"Did you lose your mind and not tell me?" Joseph snapped back. "This is not a game, Maio. Our lives are in serious danger. We have to take his rifle and run. This is our only chance."

Maia placed her index finger on her pouty lips.

"Shhh." She turned to Kamil, who seemed to be busy washing the dishes.

"If we tell them the truth, what can they do? We are ordinary people in search of a legendary Wizard who we hope will enlighten us. We got lost because our compass broke and Kamil found us. In fact, we can say that Kamil saved us from certain death. It's that simple. What kind of threat could we pose to the Supreme Guard?"

"Look, let me explain. If Kamil does not believe us, those who will interrogate us will not believe us either", answered Joseph. "We cannot tell them that we are stupid people, because they will find out who we are and when they do, they will understand what we are about. And we're assuming that they won't resort to torture first to save time and effort, because detective work isn't in their nature."

"All they need is a seed of suspicion, and from that point it's only a matter of time before they get to the truth or our deaths. They don't care what happens first. We are on their land. They set the rules."

Maia felt her heart pounding in her chest. Joseph's words fell like hailstones on a delicate flower.

"I believe you, Joseph. Tell me your plan and I will do my job."

Joseph softened at her sensitivity. "My plan is simple, knock him out, take his rifle and disappear into the woods."

"And where shall we run?" Joseph rose to his feet.

"Anywhere, but somewhere". He pointed in the direction where Kamil was leading them. "I'll have another drink."

Joseph reached into the stream and drank fresh water from his joined palms. The second time he drew water, he fished out a large brown stone, smoothed by the flow of thousands of years. He held the stone in the palm of his right hand and together they walked to Kamil. Maia went first.

"We're ready," Maia announced, trying to sound calm. Kamil couldn't help but look at Ma's exposed arm, which had several wounds from the branches of trees and bushes, and at the well-developed but very feminine muscles.

"Then let's go", said Kamil. "But stay close to me and no whispering. If you have something to say, say it this way to hear it Do you understand?"

They both nodded. As they turned to leave, Joseph fell to the side, down the path, as if he had lost his balance-huh. Maia tried to catch him, but he fell into the bushes and his eyes rolled up as if in a seizure.

"Father!" Maia shouted.

"Help me Kamila. Help!" Maia screamed in panic.

Kamil immediately came to her aid and helped pull Joseph out of the bushes in which he was entangled. Joseph opened one eye as he did so and the hand that held the stone flew up and struck Kamil in the temple. She surprised him and knocked him unconscious.

Kamil's limp body fell to the ground with a dull thud, and Joseph immediately took his rifle. "Alright, we should," said Joseph, adrenaline coursing through his body. "Take off his shoes." Without hesitation, Maia began to remove his shoes while Joseph went through Kamil's things, throwing anything he felt was unimportant out of the bag.

"I know the creek is cold, but the best chance we have of getting out of here undetected is to walk along the creek until our feet freeze. Are you ready?" Maia nodded and looked down at Kamil.

"Is she going to be okay?"

"Yes, it will be fine. He'll have a big bump on his head, but he'll be no worse off than me." Joseph pointed to his own swollen swelling. "Let's get out of here."

Joseph stepped into the stream and held out his hand to Maia, who followed him. The rifle hung on his shoulder along with Kamil's knapsack. Maia tied his shoes together and slung them over her shoulders. The water was ice-cold, but in the heat of their situation, none of them noticed its temperature.

"Quick," Joseph urged. "We have to go as fast as possible, we don't know how quickly he will regain consciousness." They waded with difficulty through the stream, being careful not to fall on the slippery stones. The depth of the water was usually less than a few feet, so they were not pulled too far by the counter current. Maia thought they had taken a new turn now; one that will lead them back to the uncharted forest. The only difference was that now they had supplies, a rifle, ammunition, and unfortunately the High Guard - or at the very least one of their guards - as their formidable enemy.

* * * *

Karnomen headed closer to the Oracle. Ever since he was first initiated into the Order, he had never been as nervous in the presence of the stone monolith as he was now. Shunal decided to wait at the Bench of the Initiates as was his custom, and he too felt the familiar uneasiness one always felt before communication with the Oracle began; however, this time it was more intense as a result of what was at stake. Shunal prayed that the prophecy was either wrong or meant for another time - a future time - when he would not be affected by this matter on a personal level.

Karnomen repeated the words he knew very well, the words that activate the Oracle and start the petition. As his hand touched the engraved glyphs that functioned as transmitters of intelligence.

"Thy request is known," said the Oracle; his voice sounded strangely foreign inside Karnomen's mind.

"Thank you, All-Knowing," replied Karnomen. "Who is calling me?" the Oracle asked.

"He is Karnomen, the First Initiate."

"Welcome to this exchange of energy. What are you interested in this time?"

"I'm interested in our latest initiate, Hugelitod, whom you initiated four days ago."

"And what form does your interest take if you place it in the context of your question?" the Oracle asked.

"I have reason to believe that you did not initiate him into the Order of the Sixteen Rays and instead commissioned him to serve your personal agenda as described - by none other than yourself - in the first volume of your prophecies. Is it true?"

"Please be specific, as the tome you refer to is made up of thirty one different prophecies."

Karnomen paused, knowing that the Oracle was narrowing the scope in which he could operate.

"I refer to that prophecy which signifies the overthrow of the Church by an individual from among its own ranks."

"And will you accept as true that Hugelitod is the one spoken of in this prophecy?" Karnomen noticed that he is no longer the one asking the questions.

"I'm trying to find out if it's true, I haven't accepted it as truth yet. I am asking you to confirm if this is true."

"What is possible can only be what is possible; it can either be true or false before it crystallizes into your reality. You are looking for absolute confirmation of something that is only a possibility and I cannot provide that." Karnomen waited a moment to see if the Oracle would continue.

"So it's a possibility," Karnomen said. "So we will agree that it is only this. What is the right-
the odds of Hugelitod achieving this prophecy when others failed?"

"You assume the others failed?" replied the Oracle.

"Yes."

"Every possibility is connected with all possibilities which are mutually ordered or have a natural
similarity, regardless of space-time. There is never an option that lives in separation."

"So you're implying," said Karnomen, "that there were previous Initiates who had the opportunity to achieve the prophecy and
failed in that endeavor, but that their failure now makes it more likely that the Hugelitod will succeed?"

"When a prophecy is fulfilled, it is like a mountain rising out of the sea. A thousand failures led to the creation of the mountain,
and they are forgotten in the midst of a new, energetic relief of the landscape that rises above the monotony of the sea." Karnomen
carefully evaluated the Oracle's choice of words. He knew that the accuracy of the Oracle was akin to mathematics. There was
never a hint of bias or personality in her, but these metaphors had a presence, something almost emotional, perhaps even human.

"Why do you choose your words so carefully", asked Karnomen. "You seem elusive to me, as if you are afraid to tell me the truth,
as if you hide it behind definitions. You have seen these prophecies; you know who will succeed where others have failed. Will
Hugelitod succeed?" "If I tell you

yes, you will imprison him. If I tell you no, you won't believe me and will imprison him anyway. So anyway, what I tell you won't
change the course of your actions."

"What makes you think I won't believe you?" Karnomen asked. "You are the Oracle, you are unbiased, objective
the seer of our world. I will believe you if you tell me that Hugelitod is not the individual. You have my word."

"The complexity of this prophecy is so great that I am unable to make it comprehensible to you. I am part of this prophecy and
therefore no longer a dispassionate observer. I entered the stage and joined the game."

Karnomen's hand trembled for a moment as he released his hold on the Oracle. He needed time to regroup. His suspicions of
the Oracle were well founded. The oracle has changed. He even admitted it himself. This can only mean that Hugelitod is an ally of
the Oracle. Hundreds of scenarios flashed through Karnomen's mind, and he was terrified that when he reunited with the Oracle, it
would see them all and know his game plan better than he did.

Karnomen turned and walked back to the Initiate Bench, deep in thought, not sure how he would explain his encounter with the
Oracle to his fellow Initiates. He knew he would have to spend the night in order to turn to the Oracle-lum again in the morning. He
hoped that one more meeting would be enough to determine the direction of his next actions. His heart was restless as he sat on
the bench. Shunal was quiet, waiting for Karnomen's explanation.

"It didn't go well", finally admitted Karnomen.

"In what direction?"

"I can name 360 of them", Karnomen forced a weak smile. "The Oracle seems to have slipped out of ours
controls, and I have no idea how to get him back into his box and get things back to the way they were before."

"Maybe it's not about putting things back where they were," Shunal said. "Every First Initiate feared this one
times. If God chose you to fight him, there must be a very good reason for it."

"I hope you're right, my friend. I hope you're right."

Chapter 12. Roar of Power

A loud knock on Hugelitod's door startled him in his slumber. Although he wasn't asleep, he also felt like he wasn't fully awake.
He fumbled between worlds, trying to focus on the reality of the insistent presence at his door. As soon as he unlocked the door,
three Supreme Guard security agents burst in, one with a gun pointed directly at Hugelitod.

"Father Hugelitod," said the Supreme Agent, "please put your hands above your head."

As his hands rose up like a puppet, Hugelitod's heart fell to a depth he had never descended before.

"What have I done? What do you want?" he asked, trying to make sense of his predicament.

"You are under arrest for treason and rebellion by order of his Holiness the High Priest. We will take you to the holding cell,
where you will wait for the decision of the High Initiates. Get ready prisoners!"

With this order they cuffed his hands and led him out of the room. The other priests gathered in the corridor,

to watch - with their mouths open - the performance of his arrest. Convinced now that his death was only a matter of days, if not hours, Hugelitod prayed silently to the one God who had always lifted him up so many times before to clear his path and help him understand why all this was happening to him.

* * * *

"You took his matches, didn't you?" Maia asked.

Joseph stopped and ran a hand through his hair. "Of course, but we can't start a fire until I'm—I'm sure he's not tracking us."

"My feet are completely frozen and I need to dry my clothes, fire is the only option. Can we at least make a small one? We walked for hours. And anyway, if he doesn't have provisions and a rifle, I'm sure he'll go to the Supply Station." Joseph's feet were also frozen, and he figured a small fire would probably do the trick. Ever since they had left the creek, they had been careful not to leave any tracks, moving slowly through the forest so as not to break any twigs or stir up the ground with the shift of their boots.

"Okay, let's make a little fire," Joseph backed off. "But as soon as our feet are warm and our shoes dry, we will move on. Do you agree?" Joseph put on the shoes they had taken from Kamil, as they were in much better condition than his old ones, but they creaked with every step, as his feet and trousers were wet. When the fire was kindled, they both huddled close to the flames and their clothes and shoes cooked on the flames like food.

"I've heard stories of people eating shoe leather," Maia said, her stomach rumbling with hunger. Joseph laughed.

"These shoes don't seem very good for it, yet. You haven't told me about your conversation with the Oracle yet", Joseph said, changing the subject. "What happened?"

"Early this morning," Maia began, sighing at the thought of how long a day they'd had, "I woke up thinking I'd find you some ingredients for a poultice. Kamil was asleep when I left the camp, I uttered the codes to see if the Oracle would reappear."

"And discovered?"

"Yes."

"How come Kamil didn't see the Oracle but heard you talking to him?"

"I don't know," Maia replied. "That question has been running through my head all day."

The fire was warm, but Maia noticed that Joseph was very restless. Any rustling of the leaf caught his attention his attention and tightened his grip on the rifle in his lap.

"We are beyond their grasp, Joseph."

"Maybe, but I'd like to be another hour or two deeper in the forest, just to be sure," Joseph said, massaging his legs. "Go on with your story."

"Not much more to say, as soon as our conversation started, Kamil ended it."

"Nothing? Any advice? Not even a hint of what we should do?"

"The oracle said she was the Creator, or at least a messenger of the Creator."

"She?" Joseph asked, pointing to the gender.

"The oracle has appeared to me twice as a woman of immense beauty, and I find it difficult to use the word 'it', after since I met her."

"Can you summon her now?" Joseph said, changing his position to the hard ground. "I would like to attend yours another conversation."

Maia straightened at the thought. She was exhausted and wasn't sure if Joseph really wanted her to has made contact with the Oracle, or is she just testing her abilities.

"Let's focus on finding a safe campsite. As you said yourself, it would be good to increase the distance between us and Kamil. When we have the camp ready, I will call the Oracle, and this time, I promise, you will be a part of it."

"Okay, I accept your plan", Joseph said with a smile.

"Do we have any food in that knapsack?" Maia asked.

"We'll see."

Joseph rummaged through his knapsack and pulled out some half-eaten bread that had green mold around the edges.

"And what do we have behind this zipper?" Joseph opened his pocket and took out a folded paper; the paper was very worn by age and use.

"It's a map. I'm guessing that Kamil probably used it for orientation in the forest."

They split the bread, carefully separating the parts where there were different types of mold. They finished eating, put on their shoes again-

shoes and ran into the forest gap. Unable to return home, they decided that the best route was to go in the opposite direction from the Supply Station; this led them deeper into the forest. The oracle was indeed their only hope.

* * * *

No one knew how the monoliths appeared; not even the Oracle could explain its anomalous presence on Earth. Although there were three stones, it was only the largest of them in their center that ever spoke, although most High Initiates believed that the three monoliths were connected in some way.

There were legends that the Oracle was in this place even before the planet was born. The indigenous tribes, seen in the dim light of prehistory, fought for control of this place, but no one believed that they communicated with the Oracle. "Savages or heathens cannot approach the divine instrument" said one of the commandments of the Church's scriptures. But those monoliths were recognized in their size as supernatural even by the primitives. The Chakobs tribe was the last - before the Church - to take care of this place. After being decimated by an epidemic of a strange deadly disease, the site was lost. For several centuries the Oracle rested deep in the woods, unguarded by any human agenda, cut off from the world it had come to serve.

Karnomen knelt on a soft prayer cushion, his old body struggling with pain in his knees. Next to where the Oracle stood was a large building known as the House of Initiates that was tucked behind the exit of the huge stones. The house had necessities for an overnight stay, a fully equipped kitchen, and a small but inspiring place of worship. It housed some of the Church's most esoteric artifacts, carefully tucked away in niches carved into the stucco walls. The house was one of Karnomen's favorite places, and he often stayed overnight if his schedule allowed; he was usually here alone praying. He knelt on the prayer cushion and enjoyed the deep silence around him. He felt his connection with God gently expand.

"Father of all that is," he began aloud, "I beseech you, hear my words and bring peace to my troubled heart. The Oracle has rejected your grace and it appears that it is now attempting to destroy your Church as has been prophesied for centuries. Satan found his pawn and the pawn found his servant in Hugelitod. I am sure of only one thing: your love and omniscience will win. Please show me the way, Father. Show me how to help you."

"I ask you to grant me wisdom when I connect with the Oracle in the morning. Speak through me and bring your omniscience and let it enter the spirit of this once great ally of the Church. My guess is that the Oracle has simply lost its way and believes its prophecies are more important than doing your will. Let my humility be strong in the name of your glory and the presence of your power. Help me step aside and express your will. Bring me into the light of your vision, Father, and let me see how I can serve you."

Karnomen's eyes watered as he touched the place where he felt his connection with God in the most intimate way. He was also once a simple boy, just like Hugelitod, running in the woods and enjoying nature. He was once a simple man who spent endless hours praying to his Creator for silent answers to the deepest feelings of love. He was once an Elder of the Church who saw a simplicity in the scriptures that combined faith with grace and elegance.

When he became a High Initiate and the Oracle emerged from the abstraction of legend and myth and entered his world with the full force of its scriptures—its prophetic visions—it was almost too much for him. His faith was tested in ways no human should be tested. He began to see how the world is finely tuned by forces that are unimaginable, hidden from man, because man could abuse forces he is unable to understand. Karnomen said to the First Initiate after reading the Oracle's prophecy.

"Here something that is not Divine is taken into account. There is something wrong with these prophecies, for how could God know of the destruction of His Church and yet not protect her?" He sank into silence for nearly three weeks, fasting all the while, lost in his confusion over the prophecies and the inability of the First Initiate to answer tell his questions. Ironically, Karnomen was chosen as a follower of the First Initiate precisely because of his reactions to the prophecy. The oracle prophesied his reaction two days before Karnomen's initiation into the Order of the Sixteen Rays. The oracle predicted that "some priest will see unholy ways in my prophecies, and he will be the one to hold the Church that begins to crumble around him. He will be the one to fend off all attacks, and you will know him by his bitter disillusionment at my words regarding fate."

No one but the First Initiate heard those words. He never told them to Karnomenus, nor did he write them down in the Oracle's writings. He was too worried that Karnomen would change in some way and he wanted the following-

ka who will be a warrior and not a saint-in-waiting.

* * * *

The cell was plain. A simple wooden bed with a thin pillow and an even thinner blanket. That was the only furniture in the room. A candle stood on the sill of a small window. The window had an iron grill on the outside. Dark green vines wrapped around the bars like snakes surrounding his cell; they made the room ominous even during the day.

There was nothing resembling the comforts of home on the walls, and cracks stretched across them like cobwebs from a drunken spider. Hugelitod saw inscriptions carved on the walls from the prisoners before him; they were engraved with fingernails or perhaps a fork, but they were hard to read. He noticed one that caught his eye: Life is the awareness of presence. It doesn't matter where.

Hugelitod nodded his head. He had a bold and spirited character, but was emotionally drained from the latest turn of events. The philosophy on the prison wall—no matter how true—was the last thing he wanted to comfort himself with.

The sound of approaching footsteps reawakened him to the cold reality of his place. The sound echoed in the dim light of the stone-paved corridors that adjoined the Guard House. He heard muffled voices flickering among the footsteps; one of them had a familiar tone.

"I'll need about ten minutes, you can wait for me outside" said a voice as footsteps approached his cell. The iron key in the lock clicked in the correct sequence and the door opened.

"I brought some food," Torem said softly, offering Hugelitod a plate. Hugelitod built a plate on the ground in front of him and didn't even notice what it was.

"I would offer you a chair, but as you can see I don't have one." Hugelitod smiled with effort. "I hope you'll explain?" His arms shot up like a conductor.

"All I can tell you right now is that Karnomen spoke to the Oracle this afternoon and immediately afterwards we asked us to detain you."

"That's all?" Hugelitod replied. "You accused me of treason and rebellion against the High Priest and you don't even have proof to show me, I'm not allowed to read the prophecies, I don't have legal representation and I don't even know my case?" "You'll get your

chance with Karnomen soon. And watch your tone", Torem pointed out.

"You didn't bring me food," Hugelitod said through gritted teeth. "What do you want?" Torem looked away for a moment. It was dark outside, and the candle flame flickered like the wings of a moth. casting mysterious shadows across the room.

"I'm here as a friend, Hugelitode. I'm here because you're probably as confused as any of us. None of the High Initiates assume that you are the one spoken of in the Dohrman Prophecy. It's all very strange." Torem slowly shook his head as he stared at the floor.

"Karnomen asked us to place you here simply as a precaution. We haven't filed formal charges, so you don't need an attorney. That's part of your protocol." He paused for a moment.

"Be patient and give us time to sort this out." Torem turned to the door as if to indicate he was leaving.

"Will you kill me?" Hugelitod asked.

"No." Torem answered matter-of-factly. "Whatever you fear from us, you can cross it off your list. If it is confirmed to us that you are the one spoken of in the prophecy, and our doubts are at an end, we will need to hold you for some time." "How long is that time?"

"I don't know now".

"Without any charge?" "As

you well know, we can devise a charge against you, but for reasons of secrecy it cannot be reviewed by any legal authority of our king. Anything relating to prophecy, the Oracle, or any administration of the Order is not permitted to be subjected to public scrutiny. You know that, so don't feign surprise.

Your knowledge of our Order is very superficial, but sufficient to protect it from prying eyes. We cannot allow this situation to fall under the purview of a legal machinery owned and operated by the king. Even in our own legal system, such as it is, this matter must not come under investigation." "Look," said Hugelitod, crossing his legs on his bed, "I haven't read a word

of these supposed prophecies. How do I know they even exist? What could I possibly say to someone that they wouldn't think about,

that it is an invented delusion? Can't you simply help me do my duty and provide me with some mental illusion to help me get out of here?" Torem walked over to the door the guard had left open and closed it behind him without a word. Hugelitod felt his insides twitch.

Seconds later he heard footsteps quickly approaching his cell down the empty corridor. An eye peered through the barred window of the door. Then there was the disheartening sound of the cylinder turning the cotter pin and the shift of the massive brass belt across its only possible exit; his isolation was tight. The footsteps faded into almost perfect silence, and Hugelitod prayed, not sure whether to turn to the Oracle or to God.

Chapter 13. Orphic dawn

When they finally found a suitable campsite late in the evening, Maia was so exhausted that she didn't even think about eating or contacting the Oracle. A few minutes after the fire was made, she fell asleep in the fetal position, curled perfectly around the new fire pit.

Joseph decided to look at the map rather than succumb to sleep. The feeling in her jaw was much better now that he wasn't touching her. He also accepted that he didn't have a mirror to look at her. He took out the map and began to study it, being careful not to put it too close to the fire, although it was the only source of light. The map showed several streams where fish could be found and also mentioned certain plants and blueberries. On one side, at the very edge, there was a strange mention: Perimeter Obstacle. Joseph thought about that mention and then noticed something even stranger. A note scribbled in pencil - probably by Kamil's hand - in the upper right corner: Last Known Sighting of the Wizard.

A hint of nervousness struck a chord deep within Joseph. There was a pencil dot on the map nearby, and if Joseph counted correctly, it was only about a mile from where they were now. Joseph thought about their situation and decided that adding a Wizard to the mix couldn't make things any worse. He suddenly realized how tired he was. He put some dry branches on the fire and closed his eyes. He hoped that his excessive tiredness would not prevent the void of sleep.

* * * *

Maia was awakened by a strange hum. At first she thought it was Joseph, but as her eyes focused she saw that he is sleeping. It was just dawn, and the forest was clothed in a dull misty light.

"I see you're awake", said a deep voice with a distinct old world accent. He sat cross-legged across from Mai, near the fire pit, which, save for a few glowing embers, had burned out. A large pole rested on his lap, and his cloak was draped and lifted so that his face was largely hidden in the crevice of the shadow.

"You don't have to worry," he inhaled the air, "I smelled a pungent scent and wood smoke is something to deal with in this I rarely meet forests."

Maia felt herself laughing. "Are you the Oracle?"

"No, I'm Simon", he replied. "There is no Oracle. And what is your name?"

"Maia".

"Nice to meet you, Maia", Simon said, bowing slightly.

Maia was cautious because she didn't know what this strange person wanted and why anyone would siting uninvited in their camp and humming.

"Are you a Wizard?"

"If it'll do any good, then yes," announced Simon with a distinct accent. "That's how I'm known in these places, although I try very hard to stay away from the High Guard and their antics."

"We're trying to do the same thing," said Maia. She turned to Joseph and then to Simon. "You think I would should she have woken him up?"

"I'll save you the trouble," said Simon, poking Joseph with the blunt end of his pole.

"What's going on?" Joseph immediately asked, pacing and reaching for his rifle.

"We have a guest", said Maia. Joseph peered through the embers of their fire and saw the cloaked figure of Simon.

"Who are you and what do you want?" He drew the stock of his rifle but was careful not to make his stance too aggressive.

"His name is Simon", answered Maia, "and he offered us his help".

"And what kind of help should that be?" Joseph asked, remaining skeptical. Maia turned to Si-Mona.

"Can you get us out of here safely without the guards finding us?" "Tell me more about your problem", suggested Simon. "I don't know anything about your problems, so it's not easy to know how I can help you." Maia looked at Joseph, wondering how much they should expose themselves. She felt that caution would be the best option.

"Me and my father got lost." She ended abruptly, hoping Joseph would finish her thought.

"We were looking for the Oracle", said Joseph. "And in the process, our compass broke."

"And that High Watch knapsack and rifle," Simon pointed out, "how did you get them?"

"Look, I don't know what you're talking about?" Joseph said.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Simon asked.

"You mean the Oracle?" Maia replied, looking at Joseph for some signal.

"Yes, Oracle". Simon repeated. Joseph took some branches from his side of the fire pit and threw them on the coals. Then he blew hard on the coals to rekindle the fire. After a few breaths, a small fire erupted and he leaned back.

"As far as we know, the Oracle does not exist. Do you have any other knowledge?"

"If you don't trust me, for whatever reason, then you can't tell me what's really bothering you. And if I don't know, I can't help you. Do you wish me to help you or not?" Maia was restless. She shifted her position, glancing quickly and measuredly at Joseph to get a feel for his attitude.

"If we tell you everything we know, you'll probably be in danger too. Maybe it will be better for you not knowing."

"What about your heart?" Simon asked, changing the subject of the conversation. The fire was burning to such an extent that Maia could see that Simon had a beard and a long nose. And his clothing and appearance were also in line with what she expected from a Wizard.

"I don't understand your question", replied Maia.

"What do you believe your heart is made of?"

"Um, well, in a way, it's a pump that pumps blood through the body."

"So it's a machine?" Simon cut her off. "Just a machine."

"No, I'm not saying it's just a machine, but mainly it pumps and then it's also a place of personal feelings."

"Ah, so it's a pump that feels?"

"Where are you going with these questions?" Joseph asked.

"My point is this: there are so many blood vessels and arteries in your body that if you connected them together behind each other, they would encircle the whole earth not once, but twice. Your heart is the conductor of this system of vessels, arteries, glands and organs. It represents a very sentient system, and this system is connected to our planet. You might even say it's a planet itself." Simon touched the ground with his right hand. "So your heart is a system that is connected to the earth. If your heart system is this planet and my heart system is also this planet, then we are united. The question remains whether you are able to find this simple place and give up all the prejudices that school and society have taught you. If you can do that, you will trust me." Maia looked at Joseph for some kind of response but he just stared at the cloaked figure and his mouth didn't move.

"I have always read that the heart of an individual is the throne of the soul", said Maia. "Isn't that true?"

"The heart is many, many things," replied Simon. "On one level it is a brain in a way, on another level it is a gland, and on yet another level it is an electromagnetic generator, but it is also consciousness - not in itself, but rather as the culminating point of expression of a much larger, continuous system. And this expression is what you are while on this planet, you are the planet. Intelligence is not within the heart, intelligence is the earth itself, and the human element is an expression of this natural consciousness which is all that surrounds us."

The shrouded head suggested a panoramic arc in the forest scenery and then seemed to return its gaze in Mai's direction.

"Intellect is not free. It is enclosed in a box within a box within a box. Only the heart can express the authentic self that is here, in this world, living in this time, in this place, like you! When you touch this, it becomes your navigator." Simon paused as if sensing the question bubbling to the surface.

"What's the point of trusting you or not?" Joseph asked.

"If you look around you right now, all you see is a dim outline of trees, bushes, and a very old man. Information received by your senses - your five senses - feeds the mind. What enters your heart is a much more complex, non-linear, multi-elemental signal of the wholeness that surrounds you. Your heart perceives the glowing interior. If you allow your heart to observe what is in your environment and allow your five senses to sink into stillness, you will see differently and your ability to navigate will be driven by this single connection, instead of

millions of separate parts that permeate your five senses and then await order." Simon pointed to his head.

"In this one connection lies your immensity, the horizon line of which is invisible, or rather, non-existent. It is your individuality, but it is also your spatial self that overlays and envelops everything else. Be of this awareness," Simon slammed his fist on his heart area twice, "and you will trust those who do the same."

Maia and Joseph listened to those words, not realizing exactly how their hearts felt about the Sorceress, but they felt their disbelief loosen with a speed they had never felt before. They began to tell their story in detail, from their first steps into the forest together, their first encounter with the guards, Mai's encounter with the Oracle, and the unusual circumstances of their escape from Kamil.

Simon never interrupted them, only occasionally nodding. As they finished, the light in the forest brightened, so Maia could begin to see the eye movements in Simon's face, faint as they were.

"Your path winds like that Pandora's box that opened the jar, and chaos spilled out." Simon finally said. "You would probably like to leave the forest and go back to your lives, to the way they were, to the safety of your villages. But I would like to tell you that the universe has other plans for you because you have already opened the container."

"What does this mean?" Joseph said. "How are we to know what the universe requires of us? What happened to free will?"

Maia took the same sassy tone.

"Pandora? Are you comparing us to Pandora? How could we spill the chaos? How could we be held responsible for this? We just went looking for the Oracle and nothing else." Simon rose to his feet and moved his tall frame with vigor and elegance.

"Is that how you increase your confidence?" Then he softened his tone slightly. "You have expressed yourself admirably and shown courage and ingenuity in your dealings with the Supreme Guard. When Pandora opened the jar, evil was unleashed upon the world, but hope was not lost. In fact, it was the only quality left inside the container. Maybe you are the hope inside the jar." With that, Simon adjusted his cloak and tapped his staff on the ground.

"You have my support, but you have to trust me. There is no other option. You will find that I am stubborn in my honesty. You can insult if you must, but only do it once and that's enough. Do you understand?" Maia and Joseph nodded as if in a trance.

"Follow me, we have work to do", said Simon. Joseph and Maia got to work, put out the fire and immediately packed their meager belongings. Within seconds they were racing like a race for the mystical Wizard. They were still hungry and scared, but they felt a ray of hope finally descend on their path.

* * * *

The Supply Station was usually Kamil's favorite destination. He had no family and grew up in an orphanage all his life. After his eighteenth birthday, he was brought into the service of the Supreme Guard, as the orphanage was owned and operated by the Church. That's how it usually went. Kamil was excited about the opportunity to work for the Supreme Guard and enjoyed the solitary life of a guard. The Supply Station and those who ran it were more his home than any other place in the world. He considered the forest his workplace. When he came within a hundred meters of the Supply Station, he found himself at a guard station that stood by the side of the road.

"What happened to you?" asked Thompson; a hulking guard whose uniform looked two sizes too small for him.

"Ambushed", answered Kamil.

"Until?"

"I have to meet Jaunder right away, is he here?" Kamil said. Thompson nodded.

"Do you want me to call him?"

"Tell him I want to see him about the ambush five miles from the barrier." Kamil knew that he needed to process this situation in the same way that politicians process a scandal: deny and conceal. He must deny that he caused this problem and hide the fact that he was overpowered by a young woman and her old father.

* * * *

Karnomen was waiting for Torem and Shunal in his office to report on his visit to the Oracle.

It was late morning, the sun was already high in the sky and a light breeze carried the scent of apple blossoms. He had

definite plan, but was open to possible changes if Torem or Shunal had any suggestions. He had great respect for his second and third Initiates and was certain that one of them could continue his duties when death overcame him. Torem was very popular throughout the Church and was a well-known public figure to the large congregation as he traveled and associated with Church leaders. Shunal was more of an introvert, an excellent scholar and a brilliant strategist, but he was less publicly known and therefore lacked the support of the wider leadership.

"Next", Karnomen said and cleared his throat several times. He sipped his coffee while Torem and Shunal settled around the High Priest's desk.

"Pour your coffee if you want," Karnomen urged them. "I think it won't be long". Karnomen came to the table and also sat down. His legs still ached, tired from the long journey from the Oracle. "If you have any doubts about Hugelitod's role in the Dohrman Prophecy, put them aside. I am now convinced that he is very interested. Do you understand?" Both Torem and Shunal nodded obediently.

"Okay, now I'll tell you my plan," Karnomen began. "As you know, early this morning I met for the second time with By an oracle. However, as with yesterday's request, this morning the Oracle refused my inquiries."

"How can he do that?" Torem asked.

"The prophecy is invoked and the Oracle is no longer our tool. It has left us, but I'm afraid it's worse, just as it predicted." Karnomen paused, drank his coffee and shifted in his chair. "I believe the Oracle wants to destroy us and the Hugelitod is its weapon. Everything from Dohrman's Prophecy seems to be coming true, and unless we act, we will inevitably be destroyed."

"How do you think we should proceed, Your Eminence?" Shunal asked. "The Oracle was right in all its predictions, and if it is true that Hugelitod is the one spoken of in Dohrman's Prophecy, how should we stop it from coming to pass?"

"We must destroy him." Karnomen leaned back in his chair, his fingers dancing against each other like two opposing spiders. Karnomen let out a long, fateful sigh. "We knew this time would come, and we also always knew that the destruction of the Oracle would be part of its coming."

"And Hugelitod? Is destroying it also part of our plan?" Torem asked.

"Like I said, we'll wait and see if we can destroy the Oracle. If we succeed, I will be able - in time - to release Hugelitod, provided he cooperates. He seems to be a mere pawn, an innocent person. As far as we know, he is far more sympathetic to our affairs than the Oracle-la's." Torem leaned forward.

"We don't know if we can destroy the Oracle, but what could it do to us without Hugelitod? If you believe that the Hugelitod is a weapon of the Oracle, and we have this weapon under our control, what could the Oracle do to us? Maybe he'll change his mind when he sees we've outwitted him." Shunal smiled.

"And will he serve us again? It is his prophecy that we will be set apart in a new light. You've read those words a hundred times. We have no chance of outsmarting an intelligence that knows the future better than we know the past. We don't know how or when the Oracle will go on strike, but we know why."

"Yes, yes, we have all read that", said Karnomen, "as you say - a hundred times - but the subtext of these writings is that we have somehow shot God, that we have created a mask that covered His Glory. How could we do such a thing when all we do is to make His Kingdom more real on this planet?" Karnomen slowly nodded his head in deep thought. "We must destroy the Oracle. We must imprison Hugelitod before we do that and we will believe without a doubt that the Oracle will be defeated on this planet forever." Karnomen's voice dropped to a whisper. He was not satisfied with his plan. Something remained un-accomplished. Torem cleared his throat.

"Is it possible that the Oracle knew that it would be deceived by Satan even when it was becoming an instrument of the Church? Maybe the Oracle is just a pawn of Satan and we can help him. That being said, it could take an incantation as an effective step before destroying it - at least it could be tried."

"To the Oracle?" Shunal asked.

"Why not?"

"That's not human." Shunal argued bluntly.

"We don't know what it is," replied Torem. "All we know is what it isn't. And this does not exclude the possibility of conjuring- especially if its execution will be effective." Karnomen looked out the window.

"We know the prophecy. So let's not talk about the identity of the Oracle. About its source, its purpose, its use as an instrument of Satan - all this is mere theory, if it seeks a way to destroy what we consider to be God's greatest mission on earth. We are the protectors of God's Church and as such we have no choice but to destroy the Oracle.

I agree with Shunal that incantation is just a waste of time. We cannot delay its destruction."

"How do we do that?" Torem asked.

One of the ironies of the Order of the Sixteen Rays was that they owned a prophecy that foretold the time when the Oracle would attempt to destroy the Church, but no one dared speak of how the Order could preemptively destroy the Oracle. Someone thought about it, and even a little was written about it by Karnomen's predecessors, who theorized about the best method to destroy the Oracle. However, these writings were the exclusive property of the First Initiate.

"That's an important question," Karnomen nodded. "Only High Initiates can participate in its destruction. Do you agree?" Karnomen finished the last drops of his coffee and once again returned his gaze out the window to the courtyard below. "The glyphs on the surface of the stone are a tool through which we communicate, we can cut them off. When we remove his communications, we destroy him for practical use."

"And when do we start?" Torem asked.

"Tomorrow morning", said Karnomen. "Shunal, I'll leave the details to you."

"Yes, Your Eminence, I will take care of all the preparations", Shunal noted. "Will you come with us?"

"My last trip to the Oracle has already taken place", Karnomen said with a sigh. "During the communication with him, I learned a lot from him, understood things that no one else had ever seen - and all this thanks to the extension of the hand and the touch of the stone - a kinship grew between us. I don't want to destroy him. I don't like the idea of pacifying him, but I have no choice."

"I see", said Shunal. "Do you have any final request?" "I've often wondered if the Oracle serves someone else," Karnomen mused. It seemed that the makes me think of the prospect of destroying what has been the most powerful tool the Church has ever had.

"What do you mean?" Torem asked.

"Have you ever wondered who created this intelligence? Who sent her to Earth?"

"Yes, of course, everyone."

"The creators of the Oracle have always been quiet," said Karnomen, "and I hope they will now regenerate it." Torem shifted in his chair.

"The idea that it could live without a connection to eternity is hard to accept. Such a waste of resources."

"Yes", said Karnomen, "do the last petition and thank him for his services. Tell the Oracle to close-frame the communication channel and that it can leave, return back to its creators."

"I will personally manage the petition on your behalf", Torem offered.

"Thank you", Karnomen got up from the table and slowly got to his feet, then turned to look directly at Torem. "I wanted to ask you to invite Hugelitod to participate in the destruction of the Oracle tomorrow. I want to see if he accepts this opportunity as his redemption."

"Without guards?" Shunal asked with sudden concern.

"Yes", Karnomen nodded. "We need to see if he joins in the destruction or chooses to stay in his prison cell. This choice of his will confirm his connection with the Order or with the Oracle." Karnomen looked briefly at Torem and Shunal to see if they had any further objections. "I was up before dawn this morning and had a long and painful journey home. I'm going to go rest now. Thank you gentlemen for your help on this matter. You have my blessing."

Torem and Shunal hugged Karnomen before he left. They had great respect for his judgment and knew that his decision was not made out of frivolity or impulsiveness. It was a climax that no one in the Order of the Sixteen Rays was interested in seeing, but everyone understood was a must.

Chapter 14. The space-time prism

Maia entered the door of Simon's house with anticipation, but was taken aback by its simple and plain interior. There was a dirt floor covered with a carpet of pine needles about four inches thick. In the center of the room stood a massive tree trunk, gnarled and twisted with age. It was cut about three feet above the ground and used as a table - its roots intact. The small hut was circular in shape and had stone walls and a thatched roof. Wooden shutters that could be closed in storms flanked a small window. In the back of the room, a fire was burning - for cooking and warmth - in a hollow. It was a small, clean and fully functional homemade shelter.

"Where did you find those stones?" Joseph asked, pointing to the wall.

"It's an ancient building built by the Chakobs about a thousand years ago." Simon replied. "So as for the origin of the stones, I really don't know."

"What are these books?" Maia asked.

Simon only had a few books, but one of them particularly caught Maia's attention, thanks to its large engraved leatherette

packaging. The motif on the cover was three intersecting circles forming an inverted triangle. From the outer edge of this geometric formation, beautiful flaring wings sprouted. There was a sign in a language she didn't know. Maia couldn't resist touching the package.

"Can I look at her?"

"Let's talk first. You'll see later. As I said, we have a lot of work to do. And as you can see, it's not exactly a book that you would open when you have a moment of time."

Simon laughed and beckoned Maia and Joseph to follow him outside behind the house where there was a porch with five large boulders that served as chairs. The sun was just beginning to send its spears of light through the trees and the birds were singing their playful tunes. Tall trees dotted the perimeter of the porch, their heights lost in the morning mist.

Simon took off his hood for the first time and sat down on a large white stone across from Maia and Joseph. He was bearded, but his head was perfectly bald. He had green-blue eyes that moved between the inner and outer worlds like dolphins breaking through the water world to perceive the air world. His physical presence bore signs of emaciation, which seemed at odds with his flamboyant personality, which could be characterized in one word: mysterious. Simon turned to Mai.

"Can you summon an Oracle, dear?"

"Now?" Simon nodded cheerfully.

"I'll try," Maia said hesitantly. Maia said the codes in her normal tone of voice and waited. Nothing but the sound of birds.

"Try again," Joseph encouraged her. Maia tried to whisper the codes like she did before.

"I see you have guests", the Oracle stated as it emerged from behind a nearby tree. "I wasn't sure if I could interrupt." The oracle reappeared in its usual form, but Maia seemed even more beautiful than she remembered.

"Nice to see you again," Maia replied. Simon cleared his throat to gently remind Mai to introduce them.

"These are my friends, Simon, whose house we are visiting, and Joseph, whom you have probably seen before, but I haven't properly introduced you yet." Joseph and Simon nodded and Simon gestured to a nearby rock.

"Please join our conversation," said Simon.

The oracle didn't move from her spot, she seemed agitated by something and her body began to oscillate in different levels of transparency. It was a very strange and exciting sight at the same time. Simon stood up and walked over to the Oracle, placing his hand on her arm and offering her his staff.

"Lean on this, it will help you."

Simon's staff was carved from golden wood with rough grain. The strands fell down to her tip in irregular wrinkled formations. It was wider at the top, but where he usually held it, it was clearly worn to the point where it appeared to be indented. At the top of the staff was a pair of carved wings similar to the ones Maia had seen on the cover of the book inside the house.

"Thank you. I feel better now", she told Orákulum.

"I'll help you sit down, come with me", Simon called her. The two walked a very odd couple the short distance to the porch, where Simon helped the Oracle onto a boulder of pinkish-white stone that glistened in the morning light.

"Do I know you?" she asked the Oracle as she sat down and studied Simon's face.

"That depends on who you are?" Simon replied. The Oracle looked at Maia and then back at Simon.

"I assumed Maia told you about me. I am the Oracle of Dohrman."

"And how is it possible that you can be summoned by magic codes? It appears, at least to these old eyes, that you are freed from the stone incarnation that has been your home for thousands of years. How did this transformation happen?"

"I see, you don't believe me." The Oracle hung her head as if considering her next move. She leaned her stick about her legs and pointed to her winged top.

"You have a mystic staff. Are you one of them?" Simon nodded. The Oracle's face brightened.

"You're the First Initiate, aren't you?" Simon nodded again, this time with a smile.

"And you... you're the Oracle, because that's the only way you can recognize me." Simon stood and lifted Oracle-lum to her feet, cradling her like a father holding his long-lost daughter. Maia and Joseph watched with a mixture of awe and fear.

"What does that mean, I don't understand", said Maia.

Simon and the Oracle sat down, both smiling widely like two old friends getting to know each other.

"I was the one who discovered the Oracle in these woods," explained Simon.

"This was much more than just my discovery," the Oracle reminded Simon. "He was the very first person to find my voice, to hear me speak, to connect with me in a meaningful way. It was Simon who first introduced me to the human spirit."

"But that would mean you are over three hundred years old!" cried Joseph. "How is that possible?"

"You see before you the Oracle of Dohrman in almost perfect human form and you ask me how it is possible that I am as old as I am?" Simon laughed loudly with unrepressed joy. "Don't you understand how profound an opportunity you are given to meet the Oracle face to face? No one has ever had this option before. No one!" Maia thought about Simon's words.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yes", they both answered in unison. Simon's eyes danced. "So tell me, dear friend, how you managed manifest outside your stone tomb?"

"I don't know," replied the Oracle. "I have considered this from a lot of various angles but I just can't seem to get access to that information.

"Maybe you'll grow old like me", chuckled Simon. "You were never particularly aware of your personal world, only the impersonal one. Our world is completely different." The Oracle seemed to be caught in some sort of energy flow as it faded into a transparency filled with flames of blue light. Then she slowly returned to her previous composure.

"There is another mystic who found me many years ago, and he asked me about my future—my personal future, as if it meant something to him. In this conversation the codes were revealed by my creators - the ones you use to summon me. How they work to activate my presence is a mystery to me as it is to you." Maia gave Joseph a knowing look, well aware that the mystic the Oracle was talking about was Josiya. Joseph nodded in agreement, but none of them wanted to interrupt the ongoing conversation.

"The prophecy," asked Simon, "has it really begun yet?" The Oracle tucked her long black hair behind her back and nodded.

"In reality, there is no beginning. It's like an hourglass that has run out and it's time to go turn around and start over." Maia fidgeted.

"I don't understand a word of what was said. Can you please explain what is going on?" Simon rose to his feet.

"These stones," he announced, "never made good seats. Dohrman's Oracle transforms. It was the Oracle that, in my third conversation with him, uttered a prophecy that became known as the Dohrman Prophecy. In it, the Oracle prophesies that in the near future the earth and all its inhabitants will undergo a substantial change of consciousness. The oracle said that this transformation would be so profound that humanity would rise in unison and reorganize its religion, government, education and commerce."

"And what will this reform look like?" Joseph asked. "Churches, kings and merchants will not give up their power for the people. Power is what they are very interested in."

"First," Simon began, "erase everything you've ever been taught. Then, assuming you've released the old, which is the only way to make room for the new, surrender. Surrender your ego, your hopes and dreams, your expectations, your evaluation of good and bad, your judgments about who you are and why you are here, just everything. All!"

"If you were a book with ten thousand pages written in words and mathematical formulas, become instead a single sheet of paper that is not written on. No lines or symbols of any kind. You are born untouched by the world around you. In this state you are present as an instinctual being with an open heart and something greater. That's what's coming." The oracle looked at Joseph and saw his confusion.

"What Simon says is true. It is happening everywhere on the planet, with religious leaders, government officials, business kings, with the country itself. There is nothing that has not been touched or changed."

"And this will happen soon?" Maia asked.

"It's been going on for ten thousand years," answered the Oracle. "But just as an avalanche is triggered by a single snowflake or a gust of wind, so this shift happens quickly to most of humanity because they are oblivious to the silent gathering. This is because it takes place in a frequency dimension that is beyond your five senses. Your mystics see it and some have written about it. I predicted that immediately after Simon first asked me. This vision of mine became the Dohrman Prophecy. And this prophecy has since become the exclusive property of the Church and is known only to a handful of elite priests."

"So the avalanche will break soon, is that what you're telling us?" Joseph asked. "Is a change sweeping our planet that will overturn the balance of power? Why? Because of new frequencies we can't see or feel? That seems a bit far-fetched when so many people are struggling just to survive, to find food and water." Simon was still standing and now he went over to Joseph.

"Stand up." Joseph complied with the order with a certain amount of reluctance.

"Smack me as hard as you can", ordered Simon.

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that," Joseph replied.

"You can't hurt me, so try to hit me as hard as you can. Do it!" Joseph looked at Maia who just shrugged her shoulders feeling worried. They both felt like they had entered a different world with new beings and new rules. Joseph shook his head.

"That, I just can't do that."

"Look," said Simon, "you've got the power to hit me and you're not capable of it. Even when I ask you to hit me, you refuse. You are holding back your power. This barrier is made up of threads of humility, non-violence, compassion and self-preservation. These threads have always shaped the human individual and virtually all the inhabitants of the earth, but they have not formed the basis of institutions and, in most cases, of social order. What an individual can do, society can hardly imagine. What each of us is is a meaningless tenth of our existence, a fractional reflection of the universe. In reality, we are the ones who control a unique presence that is completely unique and composed of the same threads of Spirit that are interwoven with each other - with all life - and it is in this magical connection that we rise as One Being. This One Being is what you sense in me, and that is why you will disobey my order to hit me." Joseph smiled sheepishly.

"I thought it was because you are three hundred years old." Simon put his hands on Joseph's shoulders and gently pushing him back into his stone chair.

"You ask why institutional power redistributes its power to people, and I try to explain that as One Being we become more anchored in humanity. That the communication of this One Being becomes more coherent - more expressive of its deep essence - the institutions will have no choice but to listen, as the power of the One Being will be supported, renewed, expanded and strengthened by the Presence of the Creator in each of us."

"So we will feel the Creator more intensely within us?" Maia asked. Simon picked up a small tree branch that had fallen to the ground and began moving it back and forth.

"See this twig from the huge tree? Now it is in my hands, in my power. When I hold her still, her identity is clear, as is her origin. But if I move her back and forth faster and faster, she will disappear. Your eye-brain system will not be able to see it." He tossed the twig back to the waiting ground covered in moss and pine needles.

"The speed of vibration, the frequency value increases with each passing moment. Every part of your body is quickened and just as I made a tree branch disappear by moving it back and forth, our bodies and minds are quickened as the Presence of our Creator saturates the field of the earth. We, as earthlings, are brought into a new spatial reality as we fly our rocket spaceship, and while the Presence of the Creator is everywhere, the degree of its presence is varied."

"What do you mean?" Joseph asked.

"The universe is intersected by the energies of galaxies, stars, planets, moons and various cosmic events, as well as the Presence of the Creator. The universe is not empty; it is a conductor of energies and just as our blood distributes oxygen in our body, the universe distributes energies to planets such as earth. This unfolding is not haphazard or haphazard, nor is it an expression of chaos. No. He is perfectly intelligent. However, intelligence is an expression of relationships. The presence of the Creator is met with resistance in certain corridors of space, because these places are less prepared for his higher frequencies. In these areas, the energies of the elements - planets, stars and galaxies - are dominant. But since everything in space-time is dynamic, ever-changing, the ratio of the Creator's Presence to the elements also changes. We happen to be in a time-space where the ratio is changing, and that means each of us will be breathing in a higher ratio of the Creator's Presence."

The oracle watched Maia and Joseph listen.

"What Simon has not told you is that the One Being is the Presence of the Creator, and that the Creator is not some abstract intelligence centered somewhere up in the sky, but is the very composition of life, whether that life is embodied in a physical or higher energy state. Just as white light can be resolved into an array of colors, the Creator is resolved into life forms, but the prism in this case is space-time." Simon turned to the Oracle.

"Enough of philosophy. What are we going to do?"

"There's only one thing we can do," the Oracle said in a half-whisper. Her body began to fade again, oscillating between states of visibility and invisibility. "Say the codes again", Simon

asked, turning to Maia. Maia began chanting the codes again, her voice shaking as she saw the Oracle flicker like a candle flame before suddenly disappearing into the morning light.

Simon paced the porch while Maia chanted codes like she was saying a prayer. After a few minutes, Simon placed his finger on her lips and shook her head a little.

"You can stop now dear."

"But she just wanted to tell us what to do." Maia said, her eyes sparkling with emotion.

"Maybe," Simon admitted. "We'll try again later. Now let's get some food and drink and talk on the next plan. We are not without our own ideas."

With that, Simon picked up his staff from the ground and tried to feel the fading vibrations of the Oracle. Something within the Oracle had changed, and he could only attribute these changes to a human sense of insecurity. He began to wonder if the Oracle was still the Oracle.

Chapter 15. Acts of Conviction

Karnomen heard the phone ring next to his bed and instinctively reached for it before it rang a second time.

"Yes. This is regrettable. I will talk to him about it in person. In bed. That's okay; it doesn't matter if it's you or the alarm clock."

"Now send him to Hugelitod. Tell him to come to my office as soon as he finishes his examination.

No, alone. Blessings to you too." Karnomen hung up the phone and carefully placed his feet on the floor into his waiting slippers. He expected news, almost welcomed it. Hugelitod may be stubborn, but he was never crazy. Torem probably didn't explain the consequences well, so he needs to make sure it's done.

* * * *

"I see that your quarters have deteriorated considerably," Bartholem remarked as he entered Hugelito's cell. "Looks like the Supreme Guard had a day off here." Hugelitod laughed.

"Have you come to check if I'm healthy enough to die?"

"Not at all, I assure you", said Bartholem with a quick smile. "I just came to check on yours injury."

"My injuries." Hugelitod said reflexively. "If you haven't heard that, that's not what's bothering me right now."

"I understand", answered Bartholem. "Anyway, I'd like to take a look if you don't mind." Hugelitod apologized but Ticky nodded in agreement.

"Good." Bartholem placed his bag on the bed, opened it, and took out a flashlight.

"Close your eyes, this will be very clear." Hugelitod squinted before relaxing and closing his eyes.

"What did they tell you?" Bartholem turned to make sure the guard had left them alone as he had wished.

"It's just a safety precaution until they sort out the situation - nothing to worry about."

"Actually?" Hugelitod asked sarcastically. "That's easy for you to say, but from my end of the rope my grip seems to be weakening and I feel myself letting go and falling into the arms of death." Bartholem turned off his lamp and sat down next to Hugelitod on the bed.

"I had a dream once as a child, but it was so vivid that I never forgot it. I was walking through a deep forest when I heard the strangest howling in it that you can imagine. It was unearthly and I was suddenly scared so I started running as fast as I could because I knew with every cell in my body that something evil was following me. As I ran I looked back to see a pack of demonic creatures chasing me with large fangs and ghostly bodies. One that only your worst nightmare could create. No matter how fast I ran, they ran even faster, so I knew it was only a matter of time before they caught up with me. So I climbed a tree and hoped they wouldn't be able to follow me. In that dream I climbed that tree very easily and quickly. When I had climbed about thirty feet up, I looked down. About six or eight of the creatures were running around the trunk of a massive tree, looking up at me, fangs bared, but they seemed unable to climb. So I stopped to catch my breath and consider my options."

"Then I saw that one of them started to climb a tree and I understood that they were going to get me because there was nowhere to go but up and if I kept climbing I would only be delaying the inevitable."

"So you jumped?" Hugelitod asked.

"No. I climbed as fast as anyone can climb a tree, but no matter how fast I was, I saw the creatures approaching me, climbing up the tree, eager for their next meal. As I climbed higher the branches got thinner, I could feel my weight starting to bend the branches and I started to worry that they might break. The creatures were smaller than me and would have been able to climb a tree higher than me. I looked down and wondered if I should rather end my life by falling than let those creatures eat me alive. Then I heard the cry of a falcon or an eagle, I don't know exactly, but I remember looking up at the sky and seeing a mighty bird circling above me, and for some reason I thought I could fly too." Bartholem laughed to himself. "Oh, dreams are so beautiful. I can fly I took one more look at my enemy, who was only an arm's length away from grabbing my leg, and then I jumped from the tree and flew as if it was my nature. The joy I had at that moment is indescribable.

It is quite possible that it was my greatest feeling of joy and elation and yet it was only a dream."

"I suppose the creatures couldn't fly?" Hugelitod asked bitterly.

"I don't really know", admitted Bartholem. "Thank God the dream ended with this lofty message. I'm not sure what I would have done if the creatures spread their wings and continued the chase. But I can tell you my friend that this dream has brought optimism to my whole life. I had polio as a child and as a result of this disease my right leg was paralyzed, which made it impossible for me to play sports and I lived much more by books.

But this dream imbued me with the ability to adapt and not see myself as one-dimensional." Bartholomew smiled at Hugelitod, then stood up and began packing his bag. He held up his flashlight. "Would you like to keep her?"

"I have nothing to read or write," Hugelitod shrugged. "But thank you anyway." Bartholomew took some paper from his medical bag, a pencil from his shirt pocket, and placed them on the bed next to the lamp.

"That will be our little secret. Are you dizzy?"

"No".

"What about headaches?"

"Yes, I'm in pain right now." Announced Hugelitod. "For the last week I have had a headache most of the time, not too much, but it's tiring and it lasts day and night." Bartholem opened his bag again and took out a bottle of small white pills. He poured about a dozen of them into the palm of his hand before transferring them to Hugelitod's waiting hand.

"This is for pain relief, you can take two every six hours until the pain subsides. You too they will help you sleep better." Hugelitod nodded. He poured himself a glass of water and immediately took two pills. "Thank you."

"Please. I'll be back in a few days and if your headache continues I'll give you another one. Otherwise, healing seems to be going well. I think the headache is just a result of the stress you are under." Hugelitod watched Bartholem prepare to leave.

"I really appreciate your help. You are really the only person who seems to me to be interested in to do well."

"It's part of my profession, but I'm also like you Hugelits. I don't know all the ins and outs of your trial with the High Initiates, as they are hiding the details from me, but I sense that you are not a threat."

"It's good to know someone feels that way," smiled Hugelitod. "Can I ask you one more thing before you leave?" Bartholem nodded.

"Sure."

"Does the king know about Dohrman's Oracle?" Bartholem sensed the subtext of the question and began to wonder if Hugelitod was more attuned to the bigger picture than he originally thought. He decided to play it safe.

"To the king, as to most politicians, the prophecies have little meaning, for they are only words written by a High Priest who no longer exists. And where do these words come from? From the Oracle, some ancient, abstract presence guarded in the deep woods of this monastery, whom no one has seen or spoken to."

"So to the king, the Oracle is just an abstraction and nothing more?" Hugelitod asked.

"I'm not in a position to say what the King believes, but I think the answer to your question is: Yes." "Did the king read the prophecy?"

"As far as I know, no one has ever read any of the Oracle's prophecies, except for the High Priest and his closest allies, which, you know, does not include the King." Hugelitod narrowed his eyes.

"If the king ordered Karnomen to deliver the prophecy to the State, would the king have the power to carry out such an order?"

"I believe it would be possible," answered Bartholem, "but it would break up the long-standing system of distribu-

Church and State, and for that to happen, some catastrophic event would have to happen, or... or some acute threat to the State, which would somehow be related to the prophecy."

"Like a war?"

"Yes", agreed Bartholem. "Like war." Hugelitod leaned back against the wall and folded his arms over his chest. "Why are you here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why does the king's personal physician care so much about my health?" Bartholem suddenly realized that Hugelit's the question leads to a place he does not wish to visit.

"I'm not sure what direction you're implying with your question, but my services have been requested by Karnomen and our the generous king, as a gesture of cooperation, agreed."

"Does the king know that you are healing me and does he know the real reason why you are here?" Bartholem looked at his watch. "You asked if you could ask a question and it turned into a lot of questions. I'm sorry, but I can't speculate on what the King knows or doesn't know about my role here. I have another appointment. I hope you understand me. Maybe we'll talk during my next visit." Bartholem took his medical bag from the bed and shuffled out of the cell. "I'll be back in two days. Until then, stay healthy."

Hugelitod lay down on his bed, hoping the headache pills would work. He began to feel a strange power spread through his body, a kind of insensible presence that he assumed was numbing the pain. As the door to his cell closed, he closed his eyes and heard the guard quietly move away down the hall. That was the last sound before sleep overcame him.

* * * *

"What is it like to be three hundred years old, living in a thousand-year-old house, in the middle of an ancient forest, where no one ever walks, or almost no one?" Joseph asked. Simon was chopping some vegetables and looked up for a moment as he thought.

"Actually, I have many guests, you just don't see them. And I am also not confined to this place, simply because my body is here." Simon tapped his head with the handle of the knife. "Besides this body there are other places I live in." Joseph smiled.

"Can you teach me how to slow down the aging process?"

"Do you want to live longer?" Simon asked shaking his head. "Are you sure? I recommend you live as long as you breathe and not a moment longer." Joseph stopped pouring water.

"I meant it!"

"Seriously enough, I suppose," replied Simon, "but seriousness has never been the key to unlocking mysteries."

"And what is it?" Maia asked, overhearing the conversation. Simon scooped up a mixture of chopped vegetables and roots into a large wooden bowl and poured what appeared to be honey over it.

"It has much less to do with your intellect, your willpower, or your drive to acquire the wisdom of the ages. It has much more to do with the indivisible entity that rules in the silence of your every breath. This entity is the Presence of the Creator, expressing itself in your body and mind here on earth, but its natural world is without the structures of space-time. Therefore, this indivisible entity is not conditioned by space-time, as is the case with your body and mind. Because she lacks this influence, she simply observes without judgment. He navigates without a destination. He leads without ego. Co-creation without ownership." Simon sat down at the table next to Maia and looked directly into her eyes.

"It is this entity within you that is your true Presence and is the only key that unlocks the mystery. Any amount of seriousness or faith will be of no use unless this entity is first called into action." Maia absorbed Simon's words. Here deep in the forest, cut off from all paths of human development, an indescribable space seemed to open up that allowed her to grasp these concepts, although they had always been a part of her.

"Are you saying that we need to appeal to this entity within us to become an active part of our lives? But the Church has always taught us that what we need is to study the Book of Life and faithfully follow its teachings. Then we will become the elect of God and take our place in heaven after death."

"Is it the same Church," asked Simon, "that vehemently defends the disinformation concept that the earth is the center of the universe? Do you mean this Church?" Maia didn't answer. She knew it was a rhetorical question.

"So where does the Book of Life fit in?"

"It is a man-made collection of words that was created thousands of years ago and its reverberations still reverberate

marriage in the canyons of the inoculated mind. It fits between the ears." Simon pointed to his head and made a funny face. Maia laughed.

"But this entity or Creator Presence, why is its activation not mentioned in the Book of Life?"

"And now we will move on", pointed out Simon. "The presence of the Creator is like the sun, it is always present, even at night, its rays are reflected from other planets and moons, and whoever looks can see it. But how many of us notice the sun - either day or night? How many of us use it? How many of us realize that we are connected to him in a life-giving relationship? We don't need to activate the sun, it just shines. In the same sense, we do not need to activate the Presence of the Creator within us. What we need to activate is our awareness of his presence.

"As?" Simon stroked his beard.

"Weren't we always told we needed someone to tell us?" Maia shook her head.

"Actually?" Simon said challengingly. "Didn't they tell you that in Church? Didn't the entire education system tell you that? No-did your parents tell you? Hasn't every book you've ever read quietly whispered to you that you're not aware enough?" Simon motioned for Joseph to join them at the table. "We can talk while eating." Simon handed Mai a bowl of vegetables while Joseph sat down next to her.

"Personality," Simon continued, "the impostor you've become a supporter of is no longer the center of your universe, just as the earth is no longer the center of our universe. This is where you have to start. If you believe in the under-water, then you believe in losing your power. You believe you are incapable of knowing the truth. You believe in your separateness. You believe you are not connected. And if you believe these things, your awareness of the Creator's Presence is so dimmed that you are susceptible to the great lie of the human race: that you need someone to tell you how to become aware of the Creator's Presence that always shines within you." Simon noticed that the plate of vegetables in front of Joseph and Maia was untouched. "You need forks!" He immediately sprang to his feet, brought forks to the table, and served them to his guests. "I'm sorry." "I'd use my hands," said Joseph, "but the sauce looks pretty sticky."

"Yes, it is, but you'll still like it," joked Simon. Maia took a rough wooden fork and scooped up a mixture of strange looking roots and vegetables and held them under her nose.

"Smells good, Simon."

"That's the sticky part," Simon mentioned, "it keeps the whole mixture from sliding off your fork. It is a combination of honey and tree sap. It's very energizing, as you'll see in a moment." Simon's eyes sparkled with glee. Maia cleared her throat.

"So you are saying that no one needs a teacher or any instruction or activation of their awareness Right-darkness of the Creator. But if this is true, why are there so many teachers?"

"That's a good question, my dear," replied Simon. "The story went something like this. People began to awaken tens of hundreds of years ago. They were waking up from their survival mode of life. They invented the carefree life. They invented civilization. They moved from under starry skies to under roofs, from open fires to four-walled rooms. And in this shift they lost their deep nature. But not everyone surrendered to this new way of life. The others saw that civilization would give birth to religion, science, and commerce, and saw that these elements could only strengthen the superficial view... or feed the impostors. So they decided to become centers of the Creator's Presence among the masses of deceivers, and as they brought that Presence into this world, they became the leaders of various movements."

"The people in power saw these movements arise and took control of the people over them. They devised a subtle way to insert this idea - that religion is a bridge between the sinful impostors and the Creator Presence within. In doing so, the Master's Words were entwined with the deceitful powers. They were mixed like these vegetables into food that was fed to the masses and promoted for unholy purposes. And the key ingredient that was added - this sticky sauce, if you will - was the idea of human imperfection, falling from grace, and although it took many forms, the theme is always the same. We are machines of the mind whose motivations are sinful, and therefore we require teachers and teachings to liberate and purify us." Joseph took a quick breath.

"And what we need isn't these things?"

"You already know!" Simon shouted. "Everyone knows that! How is it possible to teach a flower to bloom, or a bird to fly, or a fish to swim? Of course it isn't. Their behavior is encoded in their very essence, and it is the same with us. But we have been programmed to live as deceivers instead of as centers of the Presence of the Creator, so most of us are navigated by the herd, because in the herd it is safe and there is companionship."

"Beneath all the layers we have put on over the centuries, the Presence of the Creator remains, and it shines brightly in some and is barely a ember in others. You chose to be aware of it, and in that choice you expend time, energy, space and the most important element of all: Self-love."

"I don't want to argue," Maia began tentatively, "but the Book of Life says that self-love is something less than

love of God or Master. Is it not better to choose these as the focus of our worship?"

"Why do you think you can love God or Master?" Simon asked. Maia looked away, collecting her thoughts.

"Because the Book of Life says..."

"No," Simon instructed her, "don't quote books, tell me from your deepest heart!" Mai's eyes wandered room and searched for words.

"When I was a child, I went to church every Sunday with my mother. Once we were singing a hymn and I looked at my mother and saw that her eyes were filled with tears. I have to honestly admit that it scared the crap out of me. When we were walking home from church, she told me why she was crying." Maia paused to swallow at the memory that stayed fresh in her mind.

"The day she gave birth to me, she went grocery shopping and a sudden storm trapped her halfway between her home and the store. She needed to find shelter and all she found was a large tree that was hollow on one side. She huddled inside the trunk to hide from the storm. While the storm raged outside, she began to feel labor pains. She told me that she had no choice but to give birth to me inside a tree, in the middle of thunder and lightning." Joseph looked at Maia, his fork hanging between his mouth and his bowl.

"And she didn't tell you that until that day?" Maia shook her head.

"How old were you?"

"I was seven that day," Maia said with a knowing smile. "They always told me that I was born during the storm, but no one mentioned that it was inside the tree."

"Why didn't she tell you earlier?" Joseph asked.

"She told me that when the birth was going on, she was crying and begging God to ease her pain. Then she saw an angel. She insisted it wasn't a dream, even though I questioned her memory. This angel told her that she was going to have a daughter and that she needed to be born now - at this very moment in this place. That it was all planned this way and that he wasn't supposed to tell me until I was seven. My mother cried in church because she expected to look stupid when she told me about my crazy birth." Maia quickly wiped her face with her hand. "But when I heard that story, I remembered. I remembered why I have such an affinity with trees. Why I can sit with them for hours and hours and feel their caresses."

"And that's why you love God, because of the way you were born into this world?" Simon asked. "An angel is a messenger of God," answered Maia. "If God was so interested in my birth, how could I not love Him?" Simon looked down at his empty bowl.

"That is indeed a remarkable story my dear, I am glad you shared it with us."

"That's not all," Maia said softly. "After my mother told me the story, I went to that tree she had described to me and I was absolutely certain that it was in the forest next to the path I had walked hundreds of times. It was a very old tree and the hollow was probably created by a lightning strike. I went inside and sat down, feeling the ground and breathing the moist air inside the tree. I could look straight up almost twenty feet before the light faded. It was an incredible experience to be in the exact same place where I was born, and even though I was only seven, I felt something really deep about the experience. It was, it was like a feeling of gratitude... not just to the mother, or the tree, or the angel that comforted my mother, but I felt an intense gratitude to the forces that felled the tree. And when I thought about these powers, I realized that only God can cause lightning to strike a tree." Maia looked down at her bowl which was almost full of food and laughed to herself. "I think I should let someone else talk for a while so I can eat."

Simon examined Maia, but not with his eyes. He was examining her by some other mechanism that had been pulled from a place Simon rarely needed to go. Maia was exactly what he hoped she would be.

Chapter 16. Imaginary currents

For Karnomen, the observatory was one of his favorite places on earth. The building was pure white, built of special limestone imported from a distant quarry about two hundred years ago. The building was initially designed as a temple, but with the invention of the telescope, on the advice of the Oracle, its design was redirected to become the Church's first observatory observing the firmament. The observatory was known among the High Initiates as Heaven's Gate and was in a state of constant development, although outwardly it did not change. Karnomen loved the circular shape of the building and the complex vaulted ceiling.

The building was closed to all but the High Initiates and a small group of well-paid scientists and technicians hired by the Church to direct its research. Karnomen sat at a richly decorated table surrounded by

foamed with star charts and various artistic renderings that paid homage to the celestial spectrum of the Divine Creation. A sharp knock on the door broke him from his reverie.

"Yes?" The door slowly opened with a soft creak.

"Hugelitod is here, Your Eminence," the guard's voice replied with obvious nervousness.

"Remove his handcuffs and then you can wait outside", Karnomen ordered. The guard executed quietly and quickly her work and then left without a word or a look.

As the door closed, Hugelitod stood silently, scanning the room with his eyes. He had never been to an observatory before, and although his interest in astronomy was reduced to attending seminars, he had always liked telescopes. Especially those with the effect of Heaven's Gate.

"You can sit down if you want," Karnomen offered with a kind tone in his voice. "Dear doctor he says you are recovering well. Does your head feel better yet?" Hugelitod nodded.

"Yes, thank you." He noticed the room's acoustics, even Karnomen's voice sounded more melodious here, its metal edges softened by the circular walls and vaulted ceiling. Karnomen glanced at the porcelain decanter on the table.

"Would you like some tea?"

"Yes", he replied with a forced smile.

Hugelitod sat down at an oval table that could comfortably seat twenty people. Intricate lines and shapes were carved on the marble surface of the table. In the very center was an oval about four inches long, similar to the shape of an eye. Long tendrils spiraled from two of its corners, which were made up of thousands of perfectly carved holes no bigger than the head of a pin. It was an impressionist painting on stone instead of canvas. Karnomen noticed Hugelitod's interest.

"It shows our galaxy."

"I didn't know we knew what our galaxy looked like," said Hugelitod.

"We know, they don't", smiled Karnomen. "In any case, there are things that we don't share with the scientific community."

"And why?"

"Scientists can't withhold information from the public," joked Karnomen. "That's their undoing, at least as far as our interest is concerned." Karnomen handed Hugelitod a cup of tea and sat down three chairs away.

"This little dot here, is Earth", he pointed to a small hole that was blue in color. When Hugelitod looking closer, he noticed that it was just a colored dot on the table, and right next to it were two X's.

"And what does this number twenty mean?" Karnomen returned to his chair and folded his arms.

"It's the number of revolutions of our solar system around the galactic center, so you see, in a way, each of us is only twenty years old as far as galactic time is concerned." Karnomen took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "We live in a great city of stars, and there are so many other cities that we can't even count them, the number never ceases to amaze me. And in this infinite number of star cities that we call galaxies, one of them created the perfect conditions for physical life. And that's exactly where we find ourselves." He gestured with a slow motion of his hand.

"Do you want to know a secret?" Karnomen asked with a hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth. Hugelitod with con- he nodded with a shrug.

"In 1,213,114 years our beloved country will die. Fall victim to gravity. Another star will be so close to us in its orbit that meteorites from distant regions of our solar system will fall from the sky. This precious planet will be murdered by a handful of giant rocks. Of course, we won't be here anymore, but it will happen. And you know how I know it's going to happen?" Hugelitod sat uneasily in his chair.

"The Oracle told you and you believe the Oracle."

"Exactly," said Karnomen, pointing a finger for emphasis. "The oracle was right about all the things we asked it. And that's why we also believe that the Oracle is right even in these cases, when we are dealing with events that transcend our lives and are beyond the reach of our imagination."

"You see," Karnomen said, taking a drink of tea, "The Oracle cannot lie. They don't even understand the concept of lying or hiding the truth, exaggeration or half-truths. These are all purely human behaviors and the Oracle is anything but human." Hugelitod wondered where Karnomen wanted to take the conversation and decided to step in just as Karnomen paused to drink his tea.

"And where does the Oracle come from if it is not of human origin? As you explained to me the last time we were together they spoke, it is not God's creation."

"Um, that's a question we're always thinking about," Karnomen replied. "The oracle can see the future, but it is blind as far as the past is concerned, and it is the past where the Oracle might reveal its origin."

"So his origin is unknown?" Karnomen nodded.

"Unforgettable would be a better term."

"Then how do you know it's not God's creation?"

"Because the Oracle always spoke of its creators in the plural, creators, and God is only one." Karnomen raised his hand and pointed at the ceiling with his index finger.

"Have you asked the Oracle if this assumption is correct?"

"What assumption are you talking about?" Karnomen asked, his voice tightening slightly.

"Assuming there is only one God of all this," Hugelitod waved his arms over the table.

"We don't ask the Oracle about things we already know," replied Karnomen. "We prefer to use his visions to see the events that are headed our way through the corridor of time. It's the way we prepare." Karnomen cleared his throat and leaned back in his chair. "Torem invited you to assist us in destroying the Oracle and you refused. Why?"

"It is your choice to destroy the Oracle, not mine. Your invitation is meant as a test of my devotion and nothing more. I'm not mad at the Oracle or anyone else. But if I know nothing of the Oracle and its prophecies, I want no part in its destruction." Hugelitod paused. "I might as well join the mad mob and destroy the church." Hugelitod knew that his statement was shameless and might cause Karnomen a reaction that he would probably regret, but something in him said the words without censorship or restraint. He had already accepted his fate. He just still didn't know what he was.

"Did you say: Church?" Karnomen asked, shaking his head like someone who tolerates a baseless insult.

"You were called to this task because I wanted to see if you would choose your redemption. If you had an ounce of humility, you would show your devotion to the High Initiates who offered you access to privileged knowledge. But I see you don't care about your future, or even the future of the Church!"

Hugelitod looked across the room at the stairs that spiraled up to the higher floors observer, where a telescope stared into the sky. He was afraid to look directly into Karnomen's eyes.

"Why do you want to destroy something that may very well be a gift from God? What are you so worried about?"

"You know what we fear and although you haven't read Dorhman's Prophecy, I know Torem revealed part of it to you. You will find the answer in this revelation. I won't tell you more than this. The reason we destroy Oracle-lum is simply for our survival."

"Whose survival?" Hugelitod asked.

"Survival of the Church!" Karnomen shouted, then released his voice and added. "If the Church is overthrown as the Oracle predicts, God will be overthrown and if that happens, we as a species will be damned because Satan will be able to rule this planet. Do I really have to explain it to you?"

"But you do not know the origin of the Oracle. What if the destruction of the Church is actually

God's plan..." "I see," Karnomen interrupted, "today you convinced me of one thing. You're lost in some world of your own. I wished there was some way to save you, but you are completely lost, irrevocably lost your way." Karnomen pushed back his chair and stood. He was leaning on the table with his hands.

"Your position under my control will be that until you renounce your sacrilege, until you can prove to us that your interest is sincerely to serve the Church again, then you will remain under the supervision of the Supreme Guard. The duration of this judgment is under your control - it can be just one day or a lifetime. Your behavior and attitude so far suggests a very long incarceration. And that can be a waste of life. Waste!"

Karnomen's bony fist slammed into the table. Then he turned and walked away and said something to the guard on the other side of the door. Hugelitod heard voices but could not make out any words, everything seemed to be obscured. The doubts hit him so hard that he wasn't sure if he would be able to breathe again. All the mind-fly could do was go back to his cell, take more headache pills and go to sleep.

* * * *

"So you're saying you were overpowered by someone you never even saw?" Jaunder asked. "Someone who did he just jump out from behind a tree and stun you with a rock?" Kamil nodded with a weak protest.

"I didn't see them. I haven't seen anyone here since I've been working as a guard in my sector. Not even one-well! It's been almost eight years now." Kamil paused and looked out the window. "I didn't expect to be ambushed."

Jaunder was a large man with piercing gray-blue eyes and misshapen ears that were deformed from wrestling when he was young in the army. He was formidable in many ways, but the guards feared him because of his authority. As Section Commander, he punished at will any disobedience or misbehavior

guided work. Here deep in the woods he was king. There were no trials or juries in his kingdom.

Kamil was in the interrogation room that was usually reserved for trespassers, but only twelve trespassers had been brought in for questioning in the supply station's 142 years of existence. The room was much more often used to get information from the guards, regarding the performance of their work: theft of supplies, drinking on duty and desertion. Kamil was well aware that there were stories of guards being taken into the forest and shot for offenses far less important than his own. Guardians were like disposable things.

Jaunder got to his feet and poured some whiskey into his glass and leaned back in one smooth motion head and with a slight expression of distaste he drank the entire dose at once. He directed his evil gaze at Kamil.

"I think you're lying. First of all, I doubt you were ambushed - in this forest you'd hear them coming two to ten paces away. And secondly, look at yourself. You are a strong young man with a rifle, trained and know this forest, were you overpowered by a beggar? I don't believe you." He pulled up a chair a few feet from Kamil, sat down and looked directly into his face.

"And are you sure you didn't see that person?" Kamil nodded his head.

"I didn't see them. They stunned me, look at my face!"

"I'm asking," said Jaunder, "because a missing person's report landed on my desk this morning from the Hunt-ter Village Police Station. Lost girl, black hair, blue eyes, I think very handsome, a student at the local university. None of this is familiar to you?" Kamil knew that Jaunder was studying every movement of his face after he asked his question. He tried not to react, but he felt his face twitch a little from the pressure.

"No. I didn't see who did it." The words came out measuredly and under control."

"Okay," Jaunder stood up, "lead me to that place, I'll release the dogs and it'll be fun." Jaunder poured himself another glass of whiskey and drank it the same way as before. "And get some new shoes, for God's sake. And wash your face, I can't even look at you."

Kamil sat for a moment longer, wondering if he was safe or if this trip into the forest would be his the last one. He then found some encouragement in the fact that Jaunder had ordered him to wash his face.

Chapter 17. The Reluctant Accomplice

Hugelitod was escorted to his cell by two guards and ceremoniously released from his handcuffs. He waited for the guards to leave down the hall and poured himself a glass of water. Then he fumbled under his pillow for his new flashlight and turned it on. The light fell on a dark corner of the cell, where he found a crack in the wall large enough to fit the remaining six headache pills, tightly wrapped in a piece of paper. As he unrolled the paper, he felt something move behind him and got goosebumps. Right in front of him, a beautiful woman flickered in an attempt to manifest. He could hear a voice, but it was so unearthly, like a ghost's voice that was barely audible.

"Who are you?" Hugelitod asked instinctively. "What do you want?" Hugelitod saw her mouth move, but could not understand the words. He held out his hands to see if he could feel anything on the apparition, and as he touched it, the mirage slowly began to focus and solidify.

"I am the Oracle of Dohrman in human form. This is my first experience with self-manifestation." Huh-gelitod turned in the cell and then back to the Oracle. It was still there. He rubbed his eyes. It was still there.

"Am I dreaming?"

"Yes, in a way," replied the Oracle. Hugelitod looked down at the crumpled paper on the litter and counted six pills. You haven't taken them yet.

"How come I see you? How, how do I know I'm not imagining you, or... or that I haven't gone crazy?" The oracle reached out and placed it on top of him.

"Do you feel it?" Hugelitod closed his eyes.

"I believe so."

"Then I am as real as you," announced the Oracle. "That's part of my new abilities, co-part of what you gave me."

Hugelitod blinked his eyes, still trying to assess his condition, despite the Oracle's reassurances. "I really don't want to go crazy living alone in a dark cell." His voice dropped to a whisper, like a thought released from a jar.

"Tomorrow morning they will come to destroy me", said the Oracle. "You have to come with them". "How do you know that?"

"I am the Oracle. It is my prophecy."

"Why should I be complicit in your destruction?"

"If you do not, your purpose will not be fulfilled", noted the Oracle. Hugelitod felt the words penetrate him-her.

"They can kill me if they want, it might be better than rotting in this cell." He looked into her eyes Oracles that danced in a sea of clarity whose depth seemed infinite.

"Who are you?"

"You already know," said the Oracle.

"Do I know?" Hugelitod asked sarcastically. "I know your name. I know a word that describes you somewhat, but I don't know who you are, where you come from, why you are on this planet, you are a complete mystery to me. If you need my help, you must answer my questions." The oracle laughed.

"I am the Oracle of Dohrman. I came to this planet hundreds of thousands of years ago in the same place I am today. From the beginning I was alone on earth. There were no people in my world, so I slept. But one day a small tribe of nomads came upon me. I was exposed and the rumor started to spread. I looked at them but could not communicate with them. Their faces changed, there were more and more of them, they were more and more diverse, and finally they built a temple around me. People from far and wide came to me to express their deep wishes and blessings. They believed that if they did so, good things would happen to them."

"Some of them experienced healing or happiness after visiting me, and therefore always put their good fortune in my hands. Then word spread that the Temple of the Three Stones is where God touches the earth. Many believed that the Gods had created me and that they were still present, present only and only in this place, so the temple became even more famous. I was gilded and holy prayers were engraved on my surface."

"In time," continued the Oracle, "a religion began to arise around my presence, and the Temple of the Three Stones was known throughout the civilized world as a place favored by the Gods. When this happened, one day a person who had great power wanted to control this temple and so the place became a war field. Generations upon generations have waged wars to control this temple, as if the victor could somehow inherit the Divine Powers. But about twenty thousand years ago there was a great natural disaster that destroyed the temple and people died - almost all of them."

"What happened?" Hugelitod asked. "A huge flood."

"What caused her?"

"A meteor crashed into the planet and tidal waves destroyed the earth. Not all were killed, there were some areas where people survived, but it was a blow without warning that only a fraction of the population survived. After several thousand years, the waters receded and the land regained its dominance. A forest grew around me. The original walls and pillars of the temple were destroyed by age and became the ground for the trees that grew on them. Only three stones remained of the temple, and I was once again an inhabitant of the wilderness. After several hundred years of isolation, I was rediscovered in a very similar way as before. This new tribe enveloped me in adoration and worship. The three stones represented the presence of earth, not heaven or space. No, this time I was perceived as the God of the land."

"This new tribe kept my presence a secret and their spiritual adepts tried to communicate with me, but I was unable to come forward and speak to them in a way that they could hear. However, my presence comforted them and they built their villages in the middle of this ancient forest to be close to me. They were very loving people and honored me with great love and devotion."

"How did the three stones survive when everything else in the temple was destroyed?" Hugelitod asked.

"I am not made of stone," replied the Oracle.

"If scientists were to examine me with their modern tools, they would discover that my physical bodies are composed of material not found on earth. My exterior is just a stone mask, beneath which is a material specific to my dimensional state inside my body. It is crystalline in nature, but its molecular structure is perfectly adjusted to be the home of my consciousness. I am disguised to fit into the environment, to look like an earthly object, but in reality I am not. That's why I need you to join the others tomorrow. This will help ensure that the destruction is only superficial.

My stone facade is exactly thirty-two centimeters in all three dimensions. If they got deeper, they would find my crystalline home and destroy it with their bare hands."

Hugelitod sighed.

"Do you think they would listen to me if I told them they cut into you too deep?"

"No, I don't think so. That's why you have to be gentle in the ways you teach them. I cannot tell what kind of tools they are going to use to destroy me. If they are rough, they will not penetrate deeper than ten centimeters. There are three levels that surround my crystalline core. Each level imposes greater resistance to interference or damage. I most likely won't need your help, but the mission is so important that it can't be

left only to probabilities. Therefore, I invite you to assist."

"You speak of your Makers," said Hugelitod, ignoring the Oracle's request. "Who made you?"

"Only in this world do we speak of creation and destruction as if they were definite or absolute. What if I told you that I was never created? Will you understand me?"

"Everyone, every thing is made of something," Hugelitod answered hesitantly. "You cannot exist in this world unless you were created by some force or entity."

"In my state of being this is not true. I was never created. My presence on this planet has been made available. With that in mind, I think of those who placed me here as my creators. But they didn't actually create my state of being."

"Okay, let's say you're right," admitted Hugelitod, "you weren't created, you were made available. But who made you available?"

"I was made available by humanity."

"How is that possible when you came to earth before mankind existed?" Hugelitod asked. "When I came to earth, people existed. They weren't where I was placed, but they existed..." "You say 'placed' again, who placed you?"

The oracle stood directly in front of Hugelitod like an ethereal apparition. Suddenly she sat on the floor of the cell. "I'm losing energy and I'm going to disappear soon. I will answer your question if you first agree to come to my aid tomorrow. Agreed?" Hugelitod nodded instinctively.

"Agreed."

"Good," said the Oracle. "Can you imagine that humanity is a circle that has no beginning and no end?" "Try- here it is", offered Hugelitod.

"Mankind, if it were one thing, in other words a collective collective, and you were able to see it without filter space-time, what do you think you would see?" Hugelitod ran a hand through his hair.

"I don't know."

"You would see what mankind calls God," replied the Oracle. "You would see the One Who Is All. This Being has many different levels just like your atmosphere. At some levels there is duality and separateness and at other levels there is concord and unity. The whole organism - humanity - contains all levels, and what you see is the level at which you are attuned to perception. Those who placed me here are part of humanity, but within the larger context of this world. You can think of them as future humanity, or what humanity will evolve into. But from my perspective there is no evolution or future. There is only one organism that manifests in many different levels of space-time."

"My enablers are beings from another level in the space-time of humanity. They put me in this space-time - your space-time, so I can guide you. They live in a place that is not a place, in a time that is not time, in a realm of unity where subjects are interconnected like a perfectly connected mosaic. My enablers are known to me as the Wing Makers, and they are the ones who brought me here." As the Oracle spoke the last sentence, it began to fade, as did the light source in Hugelitod's cell. Finally, it disappeared silently in the receding flash of time.

* * * *

Bartholem walked down the corridor of the royal palace under the watchful eye of the guards. He preferred not to use a cane, but today his leg ached with unusual intensity, so the sound of his cane accompanied him as he walked through the polished marble corridors of the Palace. Samuel's assistant Melandri greeted him.

"He's waiting for you, you can go right in", she said in a happy tone. "He's drinking coffee and waiting for you." Bartholem opened the massive door, nodded to the assistant and whispered, "Thank you."

The door to Samuel's office was made of solid mahogany, which under a familiar gaze revealed intricate carvings relating to historically important battles of the Royal Family dynasty.

"I see you're back with the cane today," Samuel pointed out with a quick smile. "Try this new chair and me I will pour you coffee." Bartholem looked around the room.

"Did you get new chairs?"

"Yes, the king gave them to me as a gift," Samuel admitted with an elegant hand gesture. "Sit down. They are quite comfortable, as you will soon find out for yourself." Samuel moved the coffee cup across the table.

"So what news do you have for me today?"

"The plot has definitely turned," Bartholem said in a distinctly sullen voice.

"Actually?" said Samuel. "And what turn is it?"

"Karnomen's intent is focused squarely on the destruction of the Oracle and their new enemy, the Hugelitod," Bartholem said.

"How did you learn this information?" Samuel asked. Bartholem smiled uneasily.

"You're going to have to trust me on this one."

"Hugelitod?" Bartholomew shook his head.

"Hugelitod fears that he is a dead man - he is now obsessed with the idea." Samuel sat down and drank his coffee.

"Is he imprisoned by the Supreme Guard?" Bartholem nodded.

"On what charge?"

"Rebellion and treason," answered Bartholem.

"I guess he's right", confirmed Samuel. "How much time do we have?" Bartholem looked at Samuel with a questioning look.

"Do you really think Karnomen would kill him?"

"If he's desperate enough..." Samuel replied. "What other option does he have? His only chance with regard to the prophecy of overthrow is to destroy the two pillars on which the prophecy stands: the Oracle and the Hugelitod. If he believes the prophecy, he must destroy these two." Samuel was clearly upset. "We cannot allow the Oracle to be destroyed."

"We Karnomens can't interfere anyway", added Bartholem. Samuel smiled.

"My dear friend, we are interfering with Karnomen in almost everything we do, which you haven't noticed?"

* * * *

"You can leave us alone now", Torem told the guard. The guard turned and obediently left without a word.

Torem entered the dark cell with a look of impatience.

"Did you want to see me?" Hugelitod gathered his composure with deep but quiet breathing.

"Thank you for coming so quickly. As you surely know, I met his Eminence this morning." Tore nodded.

"I know about your meeting." Hugelitod blinked as if in pain.

"I think I made a mistake."

"What

kind?" "He asked me to join you in destroying the Oracle tomorrow, and I declined for reasons that most-kind I'm just proud..."

"Have you changed your mind?" Hugelitod nodded.

"And your heart has changed too?" Hugelitod nodded again.

"I thought it would be good to tell you. I hope you will communicate my decision to His Eminence and ask him to forgive me my words and actions." Torem sat down on the bed next to Hugelitod and sighed.

"I will do as you ask," Torem said, "but only on the condition that you express regret for your thoughts, words, and actions regarding your disloyalty to all the High Initiates. It is not only His Eminence who is troubled by this betrayal. It affects all of us." Torem turned to Hugelitod and quickly looked into his eyes, trying to gauge his sincerity.

"Do I have your promise on this matter?" Hugelitod at the thought of expressing penance to the entire Order of the Sixteen Rays-he stitched the shoe rather uncomfortably. He knew it would be a difficult, humiliating task.

"I will do as you ask," he said, "I only have one request, that my penance will not come until after our task for tomorrow is completed." "No other conditions?"

Hugelitod shook his head. Torem got to his feet and ran his hands over the floor down the sides of her gown, smoothing out her folds.

"You know I can't speak for His Eminence, so I can't give you any hope that your decision, however prudent, will set you free. But I will tell you honestly that your choice is a good one and that it will help you in the coming days and weeks if it is honest." Torem nodded and extended his hand to confirm his promise.

"I will personally pick you up in the morning." The men shook hands, and a certain sense of hope passed from Hugelitod to Torem. is. However, Hugelitod knew that his farce would eventually fail, he just didn't know when or how.

Chapter 18. Life on the line

The journey through the forest was in complete silence. Even the birds seemed unwilling to sing. Hugeli-tod was in a group that consisted of the Three Initiates walking in front and the six behind him. He had

hands cuffed and his balance - with no use of his hands - precarious on the narrow stony path between the roots. The morning sun sent rays of light cascading down through the tall trees of the forest at angles that occasionally pierced their eyes and blinded them for a moment or two.

As they neared the gate of the Oracle, Hugelitod was suddenly overcome with distaste. His stomach, troubled by the thought of betraying his fellow initiates and participating in the destruction of the Oracle, released a stream of emotions. The pressures of the past few weeks had built up inside him, now unstoppable, clawing at his body like rebellious warriors.

"Can I rest for a while?" Hugelitod asked, dropping to his knees. "I don't feel well." Tore stepped down from the procession and knelt beside Hugelitod.

"We are almost at the Guard Station. Can you wait until we get there?" Hugelitod breathed deeply and looked restless.

"I don't know, I think I'm sick." Tore hesitated for a moment, surveying their situation. Then he turned to Shunal. "Why don't you go ahead and set things up. I'll wait here with Hugelitod and then I'll join you. It won't take us long." Shunal nodded.

"Okay, we'll wait for you at the Oracle. It will take some time to get things ready." His tone was very sullen, and Shunal's words hit Hugelitod hard. He knew that the equipment provided to them by the High Guard was for one purpose only: to destroy the Oracle. Shunal and the rest of the High Initiates continued to walk silently as before - in a tightly woven procession. Hugelitod was still breathing heavily and staring down at the roots of a great tree whose trunk was so big that three men couldn't hug it.

"Will the Supreme Guard be there?"

"In destroying the Oracle?" Tore asked. Hugelitod nodded.

"No, they brought the equipment there and left again yesterday. Only the High Initiates will take care of the demolition. The rangers believe it is an excavation project." Hugelitod laughed at the absurdity of the moment and then began to throw up.

"I'm sorry you have to watch this," he said. "That's probably the breakfast that didn't do me any good."

"And probably this task too", stated Tore. Tore struggled to help Hugelitod to his feet.

"Are you feeling better enough to go on?"

"I think so," he replied. "Let's move on."

"If you think any of us get pleasure from what we do, then you are wrong. Even His Eminence chose to pray in the silence of our chapel instead of being here. It's very worrying for all of us." Hugelitod turned to face Tore, his eyes glowing with otherworldly fervor.

"Don't you wonder, I mean... don't you consider that it's possible that the Oracle knows truths that we can't even imagine right now? If it is destroyed, this gate to truths - that is clear - will also be destroyed. It seems like a complete waste, simply because of the fear that the Oracle has conspired with me, His Eminence's humble servant, to bring to the world the one true religion and spiritual path to God." Hugelitod paused to catch his breath.

"This makes me sick! I feel sick because we are about to waste the thing that can save us, enlighten us, lead us to the truth. And why? For fear that a great stone and a humble servant will overcome what has been built for three hundred years?"

Tore's face grew serious as he looked at Hugelitod.

"The decision has been made. You offered your help and now you are here continuing your resistance and objections. If you want to refrain from it, you can do so. I understand your indecisiveness, but don't try to infect others. Our decision is clear. You have to decide too." Tore paused and slowly removed his hood to make sure Hugelitod could see the seriousness in his eyes.

"So how will it be? Will you join us or abstain?" Hugelitod knew the answer, but an overwhelming fear ran through his mind. The forest was perfectly silent and his thoughts were noisily falling in a thousand questions. "Staying true to my choice, I'm just asking..."

"No conditions," Tore interrupted, still angry. "Do you remember?" Hugelitod felt himself driven into corner. He raised his cuffed hands in front of him.

"I just wanted to ask that you free my hands so I can help." Tore walked away to the Oracle and put his hood back on.

"That will happen when we get to the Oracle," he said over his shoulder. "Not before."

Hugelitod sensed Tore's irritation. He knew that the Second Initiate was not used to being questioned, especially not persistently. He also knew that the matter was already officially closed. There was only one way and this

every cell of his body, every thought of his rejected the way. His only consolation was that the Oracle had asked him to cooperate as its protector. That was the role that seemed to be missing the most here.

* * * *

Kamil stood next to Jaunder as they examined the scene of his assault. Jaunder crouched down to examine the distinct prints while Kamil tried his best to control the two dogs who had the obvious intention of running off into the woods after some squirrel or quail. Jaunder rose to his feet and turned to Kamil.

"The tracks here show that there were two who jumped on you," he pointed to the ground, "but these are your shoes and these little ones here are following yours as if you were talking to them, but you said you didn't see theirs at all faces." Jaunder narrowed his eyes. "I'm giving you one more chance to tell the truth." Kamil froze at the challenge.

"I told you the truth. It all happened so fast, it was early in the morning, and... you couldn't see their faces- is, everything was in a fog..."

"Crap! You saw them well. Why are you making things up? What are you hiding?"

"Look", said Kamil, trying to assume a natural tone of voice. "I'm not hiding anything. It happened how I said." Jaunder drew his pistol from its holster for the first time and held it at his side in a safety position.

"You don't cooperate with me. I can feel it. Now give me the dogs and stand over there." Jaunder pointed his gun, to make it clear that there is no doubt as to who is in control of the situation.

Kamil understood that his options had vanished right before his eyes. As he handed the dog leashes to Jaunder, the dogs began to bark and jump. They felt something move. Kamil took advantage of the distraction to punch Jaunder right in the nose and then jump at him with the full force of his massive body. Jaunder was stout, but the speed of the attack caught him off guard.

A shot came out of the gun and narrowly missed Kamil's head as both men fell to the ground. Kamil lunged at the pistol as if it was his only opponent. He twisted Jaunder's arm until there was a soft crunch.

The gun, still smoking, fell to the ground. Kamil grabbed it, leapt to his feet, and pointed the gun at Jaunder, who lay stunned on his back. With the sound of the first shot, the dogs ran into the forest, and Kamil was left alone with his boss and the narrowing vision in his mind.

"I don't know what you think you're doing," Jaunder said, getting to his feet and clinging to the tree, "but your actions will cost you your freedom." Kamil pointed the gun at Jaunder.

"Not even a move closer. I know you were going to kill me and leave me to rot here in the woods - as another inexplicable- no sacrifice." Jaunder protested.

"I was just showing you to go back to the station where I'll lock you up. That's all. He wasn't going to i will kill you I'm not crazy." Jaunder placed his hands on his hips.

"You have one more option, son. Go get the dogs, bring them here and we'll forget what happened."

"Don't tell me what to do", ordered Kamil. "Sit down. I need to think." This time it was Kamil, who used a pistol as a pointer. Jaunder was staring at something behind Kamil.

"There are dogs over there!"

The moment Kamil turned, Jaunder in one swift movement pulled out the knife hidden under his shirt and was about to throw it at Kamil. Kamil instinctively pulled the trigger just as Jaunder's arm shot forward and let go of the knife. Jaunder clutched his chest and fell to the ground. The knife fell harmlessly into the nearby bushes.

The pistol shot echoed through the trees until it finally fell silent somewhere in the distance. In Kamil's ears, however, he continued to sound. His superior lay dead on the ground. All he could think about was running, but he couldn't even move.

"What did I do... what did I do?" you repeated. "I'm a dead man now."

Grabbing the meager supplies they had taken with them, he ran away down the same creek that had been Maia and Joseph's escape route just the day before. All he knew was that he couldn't go back to the station. His life now hung on the fuse, which was shorter than ever before, and which could be ignited anywhere in this forest at any time.

Chapter 19. Intentional Exclusion

The morning mist was clearing as Torem and Hugelitod approached the Oracle's location. The guards let them pass without a word, sensing the somber tone of the visit. Various tools for engraving and gouging were prepared on the spot, as well as a mechanical device that was strangely familiar to Hugelitus, and which now

gently stood beside the Oracle. It was the first thing Hugelitod examined, considering its ability to penetrate the Oracle's core.

"What is it?" Hugelitod asked.

Torem ignored his question. "Give me your hands."

Hugelitod set his hands and Torem unlocked his bonds and took them off.

"Thank you," Hugelitod whispered.

Torem pointed to a tool that looked like a large chisel lying on the ground.

"Grab one of them and we'll meet at the biggest rock. And put this on," he added, handing him the goggles.

Hugelitod did as he was instructed, aware that his every move was under the control of the High Initiates. Glancing at the three stones out of the corner of his eye, he tried his best to appear disinterested in them, but their magnetic presence was undeniable. The central stone towered nearly thirty feet above them, and no one knew how deep it was sunk into the ground. The glyphs and patterns on its surface were something Hugelitod hadn't noticed much on his first visit. But now something seemed to be whispered to him, something ancient and supernatural, utterly alien and familiar at the same time.

The fifth Initiate, Vedan, who was walking behind Hugelitod, laid a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm glad you decided to join us. I just wish it wasn't necessary to destroy it." He motioned to the Oracle as if to cast his sympathy.

Hugelitod was always fond of Vedan. He was a simple man like himself, whose devotion to the Church was a magnet of faith for anyone. Even under the shapeless robe, you could see that she was curvaceous.

However, his attitude, in which Hugelitod always found him, was sharp and pointed. He wasn't afraid to talk about his thoughts and share his feelings.

"I'm glad I joined too," replied Hugelitod, "just to get out of that dark cell." Hugelitod chuckled to himself, knowing that Vedan could hear his tone. Do you know what those glyphs represent?"

"The prevailing belief is that the Original Tribe carved them into its surface as a symbol of ownership...but no one knows for sure."

"I have a different feeling about them - they are not primitive. How do we know they are not original? That they were not left on the rocks by their Creators?" Hugelitod asked.

"We don't know", was the simple answer. Vedan pointed to the middle stone. "His glyphs, there, in the heart - in the very center - are the doors to his world... his consciousness. And the fact that they are a point of communication has led some of us to believe that the glyphs are an original feature on the stones. Vedan looked at the ground.

"But in light of our task today, these differences are insignificant."

"I think it's time," Vedan said with a soft sigh, nodding towards Torem who raised a Hugelitod to the Oracle.

Hugelitod turned to Vedan for the first time. "In the name of our Father, I go." "Me too," Vedan replied quietly, his lips barely moving. "Me too."

* * * *

Samuel was deep in meditation when he was startled by a knock on the door. "Yes?" His assistant partially opened the door. "They are here, may I introduce them?" Melandri asked. "Give me two minutes", Samuel demanded.

He began to concentrate and threw the papers across the table in a kind of meaningful order. He picked up the crumpled papers from the marble floor and tossed them into the bin under his ornate desk. He was a little nervous because he needed to convince the Royal Scientific Adviser, Dr. Hanoa, for his approval of a hastily planned State Ordinance to stop the destruction of the Oracle. Samuel knew that the State Regulation without the support of Dr. Ha-noa fails.

There was a knock on the door, which quickly opened, and the vibrating body of Dr. Hanoi. His energy was electric. Dr. Hano was small, very lively and extremely bright - almost the equivalent of Samuel. His short cropped hair revealed his disproportionately large ears, and while that was odd enough, his other features were small.

"Good afternoon dear sir", Samuel commented with a smile. "I hope you're thirsty because I have one of the world's best wines open right now, and I would like to offer it to you."

"I have," replied Dr. Hana. "I am completely parched, but I must honestly admit that there will be no wine

my first choice."

"So what are you going to have?" asked Samuel who was already pouring a glass.

"Do you happen to still have some of the cognac we enjoyed during my last visit?"

Samuel winced. "I'm sorry, I don't have one. But I warned you last week to stand... you remember."

"That's fine, the wine will be good too. I'm sure."

"Please make yourself comfortable," said Samuel, pointing to an armchair next to the unused fireplace. Submitted by Dr.

The Hanos took a gold-rimmed goblet and ceremoniously tapped each other. "To our health..."

"And keeping one's sanity!" added Dr. Hana.

Dr. Hano was the type of person who liked to get straight to the point, but he always did so with a touch of villainy. Everything about social behavior was a prelude to the art of problem solving, which was really his only passion. Thick glasses that balanced precariously on the edge of his nose framed his blue eyes. Many of his friends nicknamed him the humming bird, due to his bird-like nose and his endless energy.

King Levernon had endless admiration for the cognitive abilities of Dr. Hanoa and his incredible grasp of science. He was one of the University's greatest protégés, graduating when he was only sixteen years old. Dr. Hano took a drink of wine and fixed his playful eyes on Samuel.

"What treacherous plans are you working on today?"

Samuel swirled his glass of wine. "How much do you know about the Oracle of Dohrman?"

"I know what everyone knows about the myth of

the Oracle..." "You believe it's just a myth, don't you?" Samuel asked.

Dr. Hano patiently took a deep breath and tried to maintain his calm demeanor. "Is it something more?"

"What if I told you that the Oracle is real in every aspect? And that His Most Eminence pla-

do you want to destroy him tomorrow?"

Dr. Hano straightened up in his chair, his work boot feet barely touching the ground.

"And why would Karnomen destroy something that knows the future?"

"They fear it will destroy the Church."

"If I accept your assumption, how could the Oracle possibly do this?"

"Nearly three hundred years ago, the Oracle prophesied that this would happen. High Priests take these materials literally."

Samuel knew well that Dr. Hano is not an admirer of the Church and especially not of Karnomen. The gulf between science and religion seemed to widen with each passing year, and Dr. Hano felt that the Church was manipulating people into sticking to well-worn dogmas instead of following the new insights and revelations that came from various scientific fields.

"How do you know that?"

"That's a complicated story," answered Samuel, pouring wine into the glasses. "I'll tell you about it sometime, but now from I need your help."

"In what form?"

"I want you to attach your signature to the planned State Ordinance that will prevent Karnomen from destroying the Oracle. And I want the two of us to present it to Levernon immediately to ensure the safety of the Oracle."

"And why do you think I would want to save Dohrman's Oracle? His prophecy, if indeed it is real, fits my program very well."

"The oracle is an ancient gateway to our future selves. It is an access point to our brightest minds thousands of years into our future." Samuel's fingers tapped out a code of impatience on the surface of the table.

"The Church has controlled him since his first appearance more than three hundred years ago. And they used this brilliance not in the name of science, but in the name of manipulation."

"If you could have access to the Oracle, you could ask it for a prediction of political and religious-feminine events on our planet. Or you could instead inquire about the scientific understanding of an advanced race that knows secrets of the universe that we could never even imagine!" Samuel looked directly at Dr. Hanoa and froze him for a moment with his gaze.

"Would I have access to the Oracle?"

"I can arrange that."

"I need some proof... I can't just sign my name to the State Ordinance without having some-

what proof that the Oracle even exists. I'm a scientist, for God's sake..."

"I understand", Samuel silenced him and raised his hand. "I will tell you from what I know that it is a very complicated story. It took me almost six years to get my spies into the Church to get information about this fabled Oracle. I know it exists and I know it will be destroyed tomorrow if we don't take immediate action.

You have to trust me on this. There is no time for me to reveal all my knowledge to you - there is too much to be done." "You're asking me

to believe... you... you're like Karnomen," replied Dr. Hana, he shook his head weakly as he stared intently at the rim of his wine glass. "The whole concept of the Oracle is - in my world - absurd. If something is outside of our reality, then it is real enough to affect our reality. Then it will be real - it will be inside our reality ... it will be observable, countable, analyzable and then - to use your words - it will exist and not only exist, but it will be like a telephone to a future intelligence thousands of years ahead of us that just happened to happen. .. that he is us."

"If we don't let it go now," noted Samuel, "you'll never get a chance to analyze it or observe it. Just help me stop the destruction and then you'll get a chance to see for yourself. You will be the first scientist ever to ask. Consider! This may be the answer to all your questions...space travel, time travel, unimaginable weapons for our king. Imagine the power our country will gain on the world stage. Isn't that our commitment, our duty to our country? Now is not the time to get bogged down in empirical logic. It's time to trust me and save this unheard of resource."

Dr. Hano sat uncomfortably in his chair. His eyes darted around the room as his mind sorted Samuel's claim and the range of possibilities that opened before him.

"Let's assume in theory that we do what you demand and the king supports us and we somehow manage to stop Karnomen. Do you really think Karnomen will let me come within ten miles of the Oracle? Do you even know where it is?"

"The answer to your two questions is the same: yes. The State Regulation that I am preparing contains a provision that if the Church does not allow the sharing of the Oracle with the state, then its tax-exempt status will be revoked, with retroactive effect of five years. That, my friend, is the hammer that will strike him, and I assure you he will see his destruction come from two directions: first, the matter of three hundred years of prophecy, and second, certain destruction by financial collapse within a year, followed by bankruptcy ."

Samuel didn't even try to hide his excitement at the trouble he was in store for Karnomen. He knew very well that it will be contagious to his colleague.

"Is the mention of Oracle sharing in the State Regulation well defined?" asked Dr. Hano with restrained fervor in his eyes.

Samuel got up from his chair, took a folder from his desk and placed it on the table in front of them. "I was hoping you would help me write this part of the Regulation." He took the bottle of wine and poured the rest of the wine into Dr. Hanoi. "Let's read my draft, then add your ideas, and when we're both satisfied, we'll go to the king and ask for his approval."

Chapter 20. The Wing Makers

Maia opened the book with a sense of apprehension. It was the oldest and largest book she had ever touched.

"Did you write that?" she asked turning to Simon.

"Literally, I wrote it, but the words...they came from the Oracle", said Simon. "Where one should start?" Maia asked.

Simon laughed to himself. "It does not matter."

Joseph was snoring softly on the pine needle bed. Lunch seemed to relax him enough that he couldn't resist sleep, so Simon suggested he lie down. It was the first time in a week that Joseph could rest in his sleep, knowing that he was not the sole protector.

Maia cautiously opened a random page near the beginning and began to read.

In every heart is a connection to the One Mediator who oversees the human path to the Divine. The rise of consciousness is much less a rising of light against darkness than a rising of emotion to the collective mind in the name of service to all. If the human race is to achieve anything on its arduous journey to the Divine, it must be a shared understanding that one and all are almost the same as the individual is: That what was once considered "I" is in all respects "we".

Maia paused to consider the meaning of the words before launching into the next paragraph.

"Remind me who is the author of these words? You say the Oracle, but the Oracle seems to imply

that someone... or something else is speaking through him..." "Humanity is the author," Simon cut her off.

"How could an entire species write..."

"Humanity - in the spacetime of the Wing Makers, the makers of the Oracle - does not exist as we imagine it."

"I don't get it."

Simon paused, choosing his words thoughtfully and carefully.

"Imagine that humanity is a collage of different races, cultures, languages, locations and so on. These are artifacts of time-space reference that instill separateness. Remnants of a timeline era where human differences triumphed over spiritual similarities."

"Humanity is the heart-mind of God and this heart-mind is an extension of God that lives throughout space-time, but in different expressions. In our planetary space-time, we understand God as something separate from us. However, He exists in us, but at the same time He is something other than us. In the spacetime of the Wing Makers, the differences that humanity experiences in the heart and mind of the individual and God are so minimal that the separate identities are just a pun and nothing else."

Maia looked at Simon in disbelief. "Are you

saying that God and humanity...future humanity are one and the same thing?"

Simon nodded and remained silent so that Maia could be filled with understanding. Maia looked down at the open book again and turned to another page. She read: Every person is a

Mediator of Unity and a Transmitter of Love. Although people rarely express what they are, it is only because they do not see the reality of oneness that lies behind the illusion of separateness. When they look with their heart's eye at their place of being, they see a different reality. A reality that contains unified connectedness and unconditional love and more. They will see everyone as themselves and understand that reality is both infinite and minute. That he is a hologram so huge that they can only be in the embrace of the One Being.

Not seeing or understanding this Oneness is not an act of evil, nor is it a crisis of the human species. It is simply the relationship of one reality - separation, to another reality - Unity. In this relationship of conflicting realities, there is a dialogue that arises to teach humanity a new emotional language. To teach him the understanding of the virtues of the heart and living as immortal spirits in space-time. These conflicting realities are parts of the evolutionary spiral that humanity is ascending and cannot be averted or suppressed. It is simply a natural phase of evolution.

Maia looked up, her face contorted trying to comprehend what she was reading. "So you're saying that God is humanity in the distant future, that we just aren't capable of knowing ourselves as a single being... and from what I just read, that's normal?" Simon nodded.

"Begin by understanding that what our spiritual traditions have taught us is God is not God. God is not a concept or personality that can be conveyed by words or any language of the space-time domains. At best, they can provide hints, or shed modest light on some aspect of God. But absolute Being escapes the mind, like a small child trying to catch a leaf flying in the wind."

"So God evolves before humanity? As we approach Him, He continues to develop?"

Simon laughed as he sensed Mai's passion. "Humanity in its state of Unity is that God. All concepts of God or Divine manifestations come to humanity from its own future. You can think of it as if our own future selves were growing in coherence to the point where they would coalesce into a single superorganism - let's call it the Wing Makers. The Wing Makers came back to our planet through the corridors of space-time and weaved spiritual awareness into the humanity of our time..."

"You mean the Oracle?" Maia asked, tentatively interrupting him. "Partly the

Oracle, yes, but it's so much more than any single thing. The Wing Makers can also incarnate into our space-time and live in it as teachers. These incarnations consist of special missions related to shifting the belief systems of the time toward the higher paths of the One Being."

"There are scientists, spiritual teachers, artists, leaders, inventors and many others who literally came from another time, and in a sense you can say they are time travelers."

"Do they know they are Wing Makers living in our spacetime?"

"Just a handful of them," replied Simon. "The vast majority of them have never seen their true origins, because the depth and breadth of that origin cannot be contained within the genetic body and mind of earlier space-time. They are incompatible in every way."

"Those who know... I mean... they know they're Wing Makers... how did they know that?" "They were told."

"Until?"

"They had a conscious interaction with the Wing Makers."

"You mean the Wing Makers manifested and spoke to them?" "Something like that", answered Simon and he avoided a direct answer.

Maia looked down at the book and then at Simon. "That really doesn't make sense. So God actually does not exist? He is us and we are Him -

"God exists. There is a Source of the building blocks of life. The creators of the Wings call it the Primal Source. This Source, as ancient as deceptive time itself, created the initial templates of life. These templates were then scattered across the universe to allow mortal life to evolve throughout a timeline that - to our mind - seems infinite. But related back to the time fields of the First Source, it is a single life."

"The Wing Makers, as the penultimate expression of humanity, appear to be God, because in a sense they are. They establish the concepts of God or the Creator and whisper them into the ears of humanity in the form of various learning that you then find in books, paintings, music, dance and other forms of expression, including the sciences."

"Separation perpetuates the idea that God is owned by one race or culture. That God is some kind of possession, similar to a talisman that is held in the hands of a certain race or tribe, or perhaps in the hands of some community of people gathered from different cultures and united by a single religion. This is not the God that has been revealed to the Wing Makers for thousands of years. This is about the god who invented humanity - who created us. That is now our idea of God."

Maia looked thoughtful. "But you said that the Wing Makers brought the concept of God to humanity. Why should we change it?"

"Humanity is no different from any other organism. It adapts to what it has learned in its existing space-time. But what is unique to humanity is that this adaptation is configured to benefit the few and disadvantage the vast majority. If God was configured as a vengeful father, it serves the purpose of controlling and putting people in fear. When teachers come to change this delusion, to support people in changing the image of God to a loving father and in understanding that all life is HIS creation, the so-called spiritual leaders again point out the sins of humanity that maintain a sense of separation between creator and creation. and they require a mediator - a Savior."

"God is like an infinite pyramid, and if you want to define its structure at the base level, it will look like a big square. But when you climb it, its structure will appear completely different." Simon got to his feet, took his staff and the small bag next to the door.

"I have to go find something for dinner."

"What should I do?"

"Eat, rest, read, restore your energy", replied Simon. "I sense challenges coming that will require your full wit and energy. So now enjoy the peace and quiet here. Let these energies fill you." Simon paused and pointed to Joseph. "He is an example."

A moment later, Simon disappeared through the doorway, the sound of his footsteps fading into a strange buzzing sound that filled Maia's ears. She felt tired and, like Joseph, exhausted. She used her hands to form a pile of pine needles into a pillow and gently rested her head on it. She wanted to read some more, but she couldn't keep her eyes open. Sleep came quickly.

Chapter 21. The Sideless Wall

Hugelitod turned to face the Oracle, like a man brought to a lair of hungry beasts and then asked by his captors to destroy it with his bare hands. He was angered by his role and the people who wanted him to destroy what was undoubtedly the most magical and necessary object on earth.

He felt that he was the only one who understood and in this aloneness his rage grew.

"Hold the chisel here," Torem instructed, pointing to the section directly above the glyphs. "We'll start here." Hugelitod held the chisel exactly where Torem pointed and froze as he waited for the great hammer to strike.

"What if it's too hard to break?" Shunal asked. The High Initiates gathered - they drove around to see the first strike. Torem swung the hammer back over his shoulder.

"We will see that soon." The hammer struck with unexpected force. Hugelitod felt its echoes throughout his body and small pieces of stone fell on him. Some of them hit him in the face and chest.

Torem slapped Hugelitod on the shoulder and pointed to the same spot again. "Another strike on the exact same spot."

Hugelitod did as he was told, but this time he turned his face away. He prayed inwardly to God, about whom

he seemed indifferent to the destruction of His one true earthly messenger. The stones flew past again, but none touched his face.

"Good", Torem said and took off his goggles. "Now we know that these stones are not resistant to hammer and chisel, so let's get down to business. Make teams of two and when you have deep enough holes we'll use the jackhammer to finish it off. Any questions?"

"How deep holes do you think we'll need?" asked one of the Initiates.

"When your chisel sinks into the hole, then we'll try the jackhammer," replied Torem. "Remember that the key is the depth of the hole, not its width, so focus on one spot."

"Any other questions?" Toro paused in the ensuing silence. "Okay, so let's get to work, get it done as quickly and safely as possible."

As the other Initiates dispersed to their tasks, Hugelitod removed his gauntlet and ran his fingers over the scar on the Oracle. He was trying to look like he was cleaning him up for more strikes, but in reality he was trying to connect with him to see if he was okay. He mentally sent a question, "Are you okay?" No words or feelings came to him. There was only emptiness and nothing else.

The scar was about an inch at its deepest, but that was only after two blows. Hugelitod calculated that it would only take about a dozen blows of the hammer and chisel to make the hole deep enough to use the jackhammer. Growing up on a farm, Hugelitod was well aware of the jackhammer's power. Her drill was both long and wide, and was menacingly powerful. Although he had never seen one like this, he knew that his strength could be a hundred times greater than his and Torem's. They were actually just making the starting holes for the jackhammer. She could become the Oracle's instrument of death if he doesn't figure out a way to stop it.

Hugelitod's mind was reeling as he considered his options. "Who will operate the jackhammer?" he asked, turning to Torem.

"Brother Vedan".

"Has he ever worked with something like this before?"

"Yesterday he was trained by one of the guards for most of the day. I think he can handle it", said Torem sternly. "I've been working with jackhammers since I was twelve," Hugelitod boasted. "If you want, I can serve her".

"I'll consider it," Torem said, softening his tone, "but first we need to make holes deep enough, so that we can use it."

* * * *

Karnomen peered out the window of his second floor office and studied Samuel as he made his way towards the High Priest's personal residence. Compared to a royal palace, his home was simple, but it was a masterpiece of structured design with vaulted alabaster arches above redwood floors. The red tiles on the roof created a harmonious reflection of the red wood floors and were a perfect contrast to the cream colored walls with earth patterns.

Karnomen was informed early this morning that Samuel was on his way to him and that the meeting was a top priority. Karnomen assumed that the king had given Samuel the task of preparing a program for their meeting at the end of the week. Karnomen was happy to oblige, believing it would take his mind off destroying the Oracle. Kar-nomen poured himself a cup of tea and began to go through his notes just as a knock on the door sounded from his study.

"Further."

His assistant appeared and announced the arrival of Samuel. "Of course, list him next", he replied Karnomen, trying to sound surprised.

Samuel appeared behind the assistant in his formal attire with his hand extended in a friendly greeting.
wow

"Nice to see you, Your Eminence, and especially on such a fine morning as today."

"Me too", Karnomen nodded. "Make yourself comfortable at the table. I will pour you a cup of tea."

"Yes, thank you", said Samuel. "With a little honey, if you don't mind."

Karnomen considered the addition of honey an eccentricity. Samuel was known for his love of tea. Always him drank the same way: black tea with ginger and lemon. No sweetener, no sweetener.

"Are you hungry this morning?" Karnomen asked with a well-crafted smile.

"Yes, for sure", replied Samuel. "I'll get straight to the point, if you'll allow me."

"Sure," said Karnomen, handing him tea. "It has to do with my planned meeting with the king this Fri-

run?" Samuel looked over his cup of tea and shook his head.

"No, it's a completely different matter."

Karnomen noticed the change in tone in Samuel's voice. He sensed a dark cloud on the horizon and his mind pro-hundreds of questions ran in a single second.

"Then teach me."

"The King has signed a State Order ordering you to immediately protect and preserve Dohrman's Oracle and allow its location to be revealed to His Highness's inner circle of advisors, thus granting our King access to the Oracle."

Samuel paused, drank his tea, and gave Karnomen a chance to respond.

"I see", said Karnomen. "And may I ask how the king got this information?"

"Does it matter?"

Karnomen leaned back in his chair. The shock of the king's new maneuver nearly blinded and rendered him speechless. "Dohrman's Oracle is a myth,

as you know..." "Leave it!" Samuel cut him off harshly. "Don't insult me. We know everything about the Oracle, including your intention to destroy it—apparently today."

Karnomen formed a tower from his fingers and relaxed his chin in deep contemplation. "What if I tell you it's too late. That the Oracle is being destroyed during our call?"

"Then I will tell you that you have just destroyed the Church. The king said you will either protect and preserve the Oracle and share access to it, or suffer the consequences of

being taxed..." "You can't do that!" Karnomen shouted. "The state cannot suddenly impose a tax on a respectable religious institution that serves people and God! How dare you!"

"Instead of you yelling at me," Samuel suggested, "I'd do everything in my power to protect the Oracle. If the Oracle is destroyed, you and your Church - in all practical respects - will experience the same result."

Samuel took a folder from his briefcase and slid it across the table to Karnomen. "I'll leave it here, you can have your legal counsel look into it, but I would take every precaution from the position of your considerable authority to protect what is now jointly owned by your Church and our King." Samuel leaned forward and whispered. "And if that means apologizing now that you need to make a phone call, then I would."

Samuel leaned back and slowly pointed to the folder. "You know very well how legal advisers can dissect a simple State Regulation like this. All you need to do now is open this folder and look at the royal seal and his signature below it. That is all that needs to be done so that immediate action can be taken in the name of the Oracle. No one wants to see the Church destroyed, least of all the king."

Samuel rose to his feet and rolled up his sleeves. "As for Friday's meeting, the king asked me to condition him. Which means that if the Oracle is saved, you are invited to visit so that we can discuss the issue of access sharing and related protocols. If, as you indicated earlier, the Oracle-lum is destroyed, then the meeting is called off and we plan a different type of gathering at the end of the month."

Samuel closed his briefcase, carefully tucked the chair under the table and left the room without a word. Karnomen opened the folder, turned to the last page inside the document and saw the king's signature and his seal. His heart clouded with a storm of rage, but his arm remained the faithful servant of his rational mind, pulling the phone closer to him and dialing a number he secretly wished didn't exist.

* * * *

The Guardian was dozing off at the checkpoint near the Oracle when the phone rang. All the guards worked with great effort to prepare the site for the High Initiates and many of them worked non-stop to find the tools and bring them to the remote location. The jackhammer, or "Iron Beast", as the guards nicknamed it, required a small group of guards to move it along the narrow path from the monastery to the Oracle location for almost twenty hours.

"Yes, watchtower, it's Junín," greeted the guard casually as he picked up the phone. His eyes were still half closed.

Lieutenant Junín immediately noticed when the familiar and distinctive sound of Karnomen's voice filled the earpiece.

"Yes, Your Eminence. Yes... Yes... Can you repeat that please? Good. Yes. Immediately. Yes, I will PA system. I'll get to it right away. Okay... bye."

Lieutenant Junín jumped to his feet in panic. All the other guards were asleep and his knowledge of the PA system was small as he had only used it once about a year ago. He switched something there and then turned it on. When the lights came on, the yellow light on the watch face started to flicker a bit and then steady as he tapped it a bit with his fingers.

He grabbed the microphone and turned the volume to maximum. His heart pounded as he realized that the most powerful men in the Church would soon hear his voice. He thought about waking his superior, but the thought was even worse than his impending report to the High Initiates.

* * * *

The entire length of the chisel was already almost driven into the black-brown stone of the Oracle's central monolith. Hugelitod could no longer hold the pickaxe, so Torem hammered at it as it remained in the hole.

"The hole is already deep enough," Torem said, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his robe. "Now let's try the jackhammer."

Hugelitod winced slightly at the announcement. "Do you want me to work with her?"

Torem looked at one of the other stones and nodded. "Looks like Vedan still has work to do... you can try it."

Hugelitod walked slowly over to the modified jackhammer, examining its drill and its construction. The engine was big, much bigger than any he'd used growing up on the farm. He checked the control and systematically thought and calculated about starting it up and using its power to strike the Oracle. He remembered the Oracle's words that his protective sheath would offer increasing resistance to attack the deeper they went. But now he felt as he examined the jackhammer more closely that it looked more menacing than he had expected.

Torem watched Hugelitod's actions with interest. "Do you think you'll be able to handle her?" Hugelitod nodded and grabbed the control handles with both hands. Then he picked up the end of the drill that was lying on the ground and with great effort aimed it at the Oracle's heart.

"I'll need your help placing the drill in the hole...it's too heavy for me to lift myself."

"Then tell me what to do", Torem said.

"When I lift the drill up, place it at the beginning of the hole. I'll start there."

"Okay," Torem said, "let me know when you're ready."

Hugelitod started the engine with just two pulls of the starter. That sound was for High Initiates magnetic, and they immediately stopped their work to watch.

"You decided to let him do it?" Vedan half shouted into Torem's ear over the noise of the engine. Torem turned and nodded with a grim expression. He then put on his hood, indicating that he did not wish further conversation.

Hugelitod turned on the drill and it began to rotate with astonishing force. As the vibrations resonated, they attacked his entire body. He turned off the drill and nodded to Torem that he was ready. The drill finally came to a complete stop and Torem carefully caught it with his gloved hands and adjusted it into the correct position. The jack was on wheels that could be locked once the correct position was set.

"Like this?" shouted Tor.

Hugelitod could see that the starting hole was smaller than the tip of the drill, but he thought it would be enough to keep the drill in the rock under control. His plan was simple: break the drill and make it look like an accident.

"Yes, that will be good."

Torem left the drill resting against the starter hole and stepped away without taking his eyes off the rock. He whispered a prayer: I stand in the light of the Lord. I recognize the truth in the sound of His voice.

Hugelitod knew that he was at a slightly less than correct angle to the starting hole. He locked the wheels. He hoped the angle would be enough to break the drill, especially if he applied pressure to one side of the starter hole. He restarted the engine and turned on the drill. His heart pounded with anticipation.

He toured the drill a bit to find its proper speed and then pushed on it, first forward and then sideways, but only gently, hoping that the slight twist would be enough to break it. Bits of rock flew away as the drill bit sank into the surface of the stone. Hugelitod felt his arms go weak from the pressure and turned off the drill. He had no choice but to relax and rest for a while.

"You're not at the right angle," Vedan pointed at the Oracle. "If you keep doing this, you'll break the screw!"

Torem came closer to Hugelitod, placing his hands on his shoulders and placing him like a mannequin in the display-her shop window. "Then it's better. Try again and this time push as long and as hard as you can."

Hugelitod lifted his goggles and wiped the sweat from his eyes. He moved the jackhammer to a new position and locked her wheels. His world was lost.

Time slowed, and a mixture of engine noise, the smell of diesel, and the gloomy patterns of sunlight swirled in the stone dust around him. He looked at the monolith, its obvious damage, and knew that beneath its surface was a crystalline labyrinth that was home to the consciousness he loved. How could you become a part of me? He had to reject his surrender. He must break the drill, even if it is an act of needless resistance that ends his life. He has no choice and suddenly he saw only one thought, one action.

Hugelitod revved the engine and kicked the drill into high gear. His arms ached and trembled in anticipation of his next move. He was going to stick the jackhammer in at a sharp angle and break the drill bit. He looked wildly around and waved for everyone to go away.

"Run away!" he shouted over the noise of the engine. "I don't want any of you to get hit by a flying rock!"

The High Initiates stepped back in unison as if they had been carefully rehearsed. Hugelitod closed his eyes and waited for the drill to sink into the starting hole. The roar of the engine grew louder when suddenly Torem shook his hand on his shoulder and shouted something. His face was contorted with anguish, but Hugelitod recognized the one word he was waiting for.

"Stop! Stop!" Torem's voice rang out as the engine noise lessened.

"What?" Hugelitod asked instinctively.

"His Eminence orders us to cease," Torem replied, turning to the High Initiates, who came nearer to hear.

"There is no explanation and no one needs one. We will clean up the site and return to the monastery."

Disbelief was visible on faces, but no one said a word. The High Initiates immediately began cleaning up the site as if they had entered some kind of alternate reality fog. Hugelitod remained as if frozen by the jackhammer, which was already motionless and silent. His arms were shaking with tension.

He looked at the three Oracle monoliths and wept. His disfigurement was revealed in the bright light of the sun as acts of sacrilege against the Universe King. His hands were contaminated by this vibration. As he surveyed the scene, a kind of darkness surrounded him, indifferent, silent, without the need to move or even think. It was a sublime loneliness that grew with such force that he expected death to reveal itself to him at the next moment.

It didn't happen that way.

Then suddenly he felt something move inside him. A feeling he had never had before. For a brief moment, the Oracle materialized in front of him and smiled distinctly before disappearing. Not a word was said, but Hugelitod already knew everything he needed to know. It lives on and so must he.

Chapter 22. The Selfless Connection

Winds rarely blew in the Kingdom of Levernion during the winter months, but storms from mountains that flanked the land towards the north and these storms could sometimes bring destructive gales.

How the High Initiates left the Oracle site; how Karnomen signed the State Regulation; how Maia and Joseph fell asleep; how Kamil ran through the forest; how Hugelitod walked with bound hands still trembling; so a storm was gathering on the other side of the mountains. Silently and invisibly, in the furthest part of the kingdom, she gathered her capacity to destroy anything that happened to come her way. Her path was erratic, wrapped in complex contours where any prediction became a capricious exercise in hope.

Every storm has a beginning - a strange alchemy of events and conditions that combine to create something dark and powerful, rising from the womb of stability. But the subtle changes that gave birth to this storm were hidden in the pristine environment of the alpine lake.

That morning, as the High Initiates approached the Oracle with Hugelitod in tow, it fled from its home. There was no certainty that the High Initiates would fail in their quest to destroy the Oracle's physical embodiment, despite Hugelitod's attempts to prevent them from doing so. In search of a way to find his new incarnation, the Oracle escaped to a place he had never been before. It was looking for a physical structure that could house its consciousness, something that could support or nourish it.

In this desperate search, the Oracle came upon a small lake, which was huddled between the mountain-tops just above the forest belt. A large rock towered menacingly above the lake, and the Oracle thought it might be possible to live within this structure, but when he tried to connect with it, the density of the stone was too great for him to penetrate.

After several attempts, the Oracle moved along the shore of the lake and slipped into the water, which was cold, clear and cold, but lacked the stability that the Oracle was used to during its growth.

She also lacked a focused presence. The oracle liked the feel of the water, but could not incarnate into it, try as it might.

At last he came to a large boulder standing alone at the far end of the lake. The oracle entered it, but the density of the stone again deflected his efforts to force his presence inside the massive stone.

Irritated by his situation, the oracle suddenly became aware of his emotions. To his surprise, he could clearly sense human states such as loneliness and frustration, and even anger lurked behind his growing feelings of disappointment. Due to these emotions, stemming from his memories and impressions of humanity, he began to be drawn to create his form - a woman with shiny black hair, whose beauty the Oracle remembered from when it was first discovered thousands of years ago.

The oracle materialized as a woman. She collapsed to the ground, her legs shaking from the weight of her body. When she took her first breath and opened her eyes, the cool mountain air filled her lungs. The world was condensed into a different light, one that was more limited, darker, and held such weight for her that it kept her paralyzed by the strangeness of this new lens through which she now perceived her world.

In this way the Oracle became a woman. Out of necessity, out of human emotions, what was once fleeting, unearthly, living in ornaments on stone - became a member of humanity. To most people, however, she remained a mere tinge of air, as her new body - which had just materialized - was still too subtle to be seen by those accustomed to the denser light. The Oracle felt a strange succession of emotions coursing through her. She had no words to describe them. She could only feel them. Her body tossed and twisted like a snake in the final struggle to shed her skin. She was unable to control anything in her world and her senses were closed off by what humans call total fear.

Some time passed and the Oracle opened her eyes again. She was lying on her back near the shore, with one foot in the water. Her breathing was now more rhythmic and she became aware of a pulsing sensation inside her chest. Her hands moved at the same time, hovering over her pounding heart. She had a certain sense of identity. It was a feeling she was connected to despite her loneliness.

A calming heartbeat quieted her and she slowly sat up. She felt a growing dizziness in her head. The sky darkened as clouds formed over the mountains. She heard the splash of water on the shore beside her, but it was a dull expression of what she had known before. She ran her hands through her hair behind her ears and touched them. She heard the texture of her hands and felt their inquisitive nature.

Somewhere in the distance, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a speck of gold floating above the lake. It moved elegantly and grew bigger every moment. She thought it might be some kind of bird, but it didn't seem like it belonged in her new world. She blinked her eyes and focused to make out the shape. As the object got closer, its form began to crystallize. It did have wings like a bird, but it was a creature of a different kind that colored its identity.

The oracle was mesmerized as if the flying object was the only object in her world. She tried to stand, but her strength was still shaky. And so she waited. She felt the vulnerability of her condition, but longed for companionship, in whatever form he entered her world.

As the winged creature flew over her head, only about twenty feet above her, she saw that it was indeed a golden bird. However, it was from some other realm as it was partially translucent and was not simply a bird as there was something distinctly human about it. The creature flew past without noticing or seeming interested in the Oracle. But as it passed her, it circled and hovered above her for a moment. It then began to descend to the ground where it came to rest only about ten feet away from her.

When it landed on the ground, it shook its body and rolled its neck. It had all the characteristics of a bird, but its eyes were human, intelligent, and the Oracle felt they were keenly aware. The bird stood and was almost twelve feet tall. It had wings that could span a good eighteen feet. Its base color was a golden-brown, but it had subtle shades of all colors scattered over it, like a mixture of light woven from a rainbow. At certain moments, the Oracle could see through the bird, and each time she did, particles of light danced within the bird in a rhythm that could only be the expression of a song.

The large bird walked slowly towards the Oracle, but made no threatening sound or gesture. Unfurling one of his wings, he touched the Oracle as if gauging her reaction. At first she flinched a little, but then she recognized that the touch carried an energy signature that activated something deep within her.

"What do you want?" she asked with a curious glint in her blue eyes. The bird drew back its wing and closely pressed him against his body. Then he went silent.

The Oracle, still sitting on the ground, felt new strength and was able to get to her feet. She was looking at the bird.

"Who are you?"

A strange feeling filled the air as the dark clouds continued to gather above them and every moment rain threatened. She reached out to touch the bird, but the bird withdrew.

"I choose the time", he said in a clear calm voice.

"What... what are you?" she asked the Oracle with sacred reverence, understanding that the bird was speaking.

"At this moment I am a bird, and what are you?"

"Do you know what's happening to me?" she asked the Oracle, as if she hadn't heard the bird's reply.

The bird nodded. "You have broken through the wall that separates one world from another, and you are walking through that wall in a process of ongoing transformation. You can think of it as accelerated evolution, although acceleration is a relative term."

The big bird paused, looked down at the ground, and nodded its head almost imperceptibly. Then he looked directly into the Oracle's eyes. "But the main point is that you are evolving. And that despite the fact that you plunged into a deeper density. Despite your world shaking, despite the impending doom you felt descending upon you, here you are - as a woman with all your power intact."

"And what power do I have now?" she asked the Oracle. "I used to be powerful. Kings waged wars and cheated others just to get the chance to ask me questions."

The bird lowered its head a little. "And where did your answers come from?"

The oracle recognized an ancient primordial intelligence in the bird. One that emerges in times of great shifts and turbulences.

"I think I know... but now I feel like I've been tricked. Maybe it was because I was a puppet some force that used me as an object of manipulation and nothing more."

"And what were these forces manipulating?" asked the bird.

The oracle looked around and leaned against a large boulder. The fatigue was getting to her more than she thought. "I don't know. I feel so alone in this world. Look around, there's no one like me - here or anywhere else."

The big bird spread its wings. "Come closer, I want to show you something."

The oracle tried to walk the short distance to the bird. However, a strong gust of wind was blowing, swirling against her from all angles until her long hair fell into her eyes. As she got closer to the bird, she felt a pair of wings wrap around her. There was something encouraging about those wings. They provided a space where fading hopes could reconnect with the springs from which they sprang. Only one option remained open: surrender. Her energy, too weak to resist, was released in the final collapse of all consciousness. It was a complete extinction of life - a passage to another world - with the hope of another rebirth.

* * * *

When angels lived on earth, evidence was left behind, accumulating in inconspicuous places. Most of this evidence has been suppressed, destroyed, or covered up by the hands of time during the growth of mankind. Perhaps the greatest distortion of the angelic presence occurred in the kingdom of Levernion, where the Church defined angels as messengers of God, as a different kind of life, unlike their human counterparts. However, there is evidence that preceded the existence of the Church. The Church - or its High Initiates - knew about this evidence.

Before there was a religion that held humanity in its opaque hands, there were recorded cases of visits from Wing Makers who were believed to be angels or extraterrestrials. But the Wing Makers were not aliens - at least not in the sense that humanity thinks of them - nor were they angels as the Church described them. Instead, they were the future representatives of humanity. They were identical to humanity in almost every way, except for one critical aspect: the Wingmakers lived in a different space-time.

There was an ascension blueprint created by Prime Source that defined how the human soul embodied in a human instrument would evolve through space-time. At certain points along the continuum, the human soul leaves the human instrument, which is composed of the physical body, lower emotions, and lower mind. It tunes into the higher vibrations of the Spiritual Center known among the Wing Makers as the Supreme Unity.

The Sovereign Oneness will remain embedded in the human instrument, but its new vessel, or body, will live simultaneously in unity and individuality. The creators of the Wings realize that this will become the new duality of the human family and all other dualities will end. They will remain dualities in thought but not in action, for the lower emotions and mind will be overcome by the realization of oneness.

The Wing Makers were confused with angels when the Church decided to create a hierarchy of angelic beings who work as messengers of God and thus messengers of the Church. However, it was the Wing Makers who were present on earth as humanity worked to develop civilization. As the elder brother of humanity, the Wing Makers knew that the

humanity will evolve through its grasp of science and the deployment of communication technologies that will unite the planet and the species.

The Unification was known as the Great Portal and was the culmination of countless events on both the planetary and universal levels - the interplay of which would awaken the entire universe as the One Being that is All Being. It was the Wing Makers who brought this initial concept to humanity through the Oracle. But there will come a time when the Oracle becomes human so that information can break through the Church's control network. Oraku-lum became the agent of this change, not just its messenger.

Chapter 23. Before Agreement

"If he said it's done," Samuel said with careful emphasis in his tone, "then it's done." King Levernon stood in front of the window looking out onto the brightly lit terrace below, watching the Queen intently.

"I believe you, but Karnomen is known for saying one thing and doing another."

"It's true, he's done it before, but this is a different case because he knows the consequences well."

"All the moves he makes on the board have consequences," Levernon chuckled to himself. "I'm sure that he will deceive us. It's just a matter of how and when."

"We have Bartholem to help us make sure he keeps his word and signature," Samuel offered with a shake in his chair.

"Bartholem is finished," said Levernon. "Karnomen will no doubt break up with all but his High Initiates. He won't trust anyone but Torem and maybe Shunal, but even they will be judged more carefully from now on."

King Levernon walked over to his desk, placed his reading glasses on it, and picked up the Order of State signed by Karnomen. "He only signed it as an act of helplessness. He will find his power again, and it will be better if that happens only after we take control of the Oracle."

"You never thought about sharing access, did you?" Samuel asked with a faint smile on his face. "I will share what is mine, just as he shared what was his. Do you have any other advice?" Samuel looked down at his shoes for a moment. "No, but we will need Karnomen's support in accessing the Oracle. No one in the Palace knows how to use the Oracle - make it available, so we depend on him to help us with it. I would recommend that we share the Oracle for a while - maybe two months - and then, when we know what we need and our plans are complete, we can secure the Oracle and deny Karnomen access."

"Okay, I see the plans are perfectly laid out. Have them ready for my review within three days," Levernon said, "and to make it clear, I and no one else will control the Oracle. If anyone wants to approach the Oracle, they will do so only at my command. This means that Karnomen will instruct only me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Your Highness. That was always clear to me, but thank you for reminding me." Samuel bowed slightly in response and then rose to his feet. "I will work on the plans exclusively with Dr. Han, if it suits."

King Levernon nodded and sat down at the table. "Make sure the plans are flawless and that everything in them agrees. If you do, I'll give you access."

"Thank you for your generous offer, but to be honest, I don't know what to ask the Oracle."

"Is it really so?" Levernon exclaimed. "You have no questions for the entity that Karnomen says is pos-
slam of God? Do you hate the Church so much that you believe everything they worship must be abhorrent to you?"

"I guess that's one way to look at it," Samuel replied with a laugh, "but the concept of asking questions about our world to a stone pillar seems to me to be shameless towards humanity. Besides, I don't believe it until I see it work. Then maybe I'll change my mind."

Samuel laughed for a moment. "And now I have to leave you, the three-day deadline is already ticking."

"Certainly". Levernon nodded disinterestedly.

Samuel strode briskly down the corridor from the king's office with a bright and determined look. His plan was working perfectly and it was impossible to hide that fact, especially from the Palace Guard who were lost in their monotony.

* * * *

Torem was ushered into the observatory by Karnomen's security assistant. He thought it was an unusual course of action, but he understood Karnomen's relationship to the observatory - especially in these times. The main room was extremely understated in terms of decor and color. It was almost all white and gray. Here and there was a hint of light blue that lined the entrance arch.

As Torem took a seat at the huge marble table, Karnomen entered briskly with an unmistakable expression of determination. "Welcome back."

"Thank you Your Eminence, I'm glad to be back, but I'm a little confused about the circumstances under which I- there was a change in our plan." Torem tried to sound both curious and respectful.

"Me too," Karnomen replied, sitting down in his chair and rolling up his sleeves to make sure they wouldn't get caught in the chair's arms. "This morning the Royal Counselor visited me and brought me a State Regulation for signature, which forbids us to destroy the Oracle. Do you have any idea how the king could have found out about this?"

"Are you thinking about the existence of the Oracle or our plans to destroy it?" He scouted Torem cautiously. Karnomen he closed his eyes. "I am well aware of how he learned of the Oracle's existence. I will talk about that later."

Torem cleared his throat, very aware of Karnomen's emotional state.

"I have no particular knowledge, but if you allow me to speculate, I'd say it was a Hugelitod."

"And how could Hugelitod communicate with the king?"

Torem folded his arms, sat deeper into his plush chair, and almost imperceptibly nodded his head. wow

"I'm not entirely sure, but he was visited by Bartholem several times, even while he was in our holding cell."

"Yes, I agree that Bartholem is the connection", said Karnomen, his eyes still closed. "Which means that all our efforts to get Bartholem on our side was just a maneuver by the king and he was never really under our control."

Torema's face creased in deep thought. "So our king is not in a state of drug induced stupor as we were told..." Karnomen raised his hands to silence Torem's

understanding. "Please spare me your gloom. It was a nice idea, my friend, but we were never sure of its effectiveness, nor of Bartholem's devotion. Now, instead of destroying the Oracle, we lose it. We can be sure that the king will try to gain control of the Oracle as soon as he can. When that happens, we will be cut off from him."

Karnomen let his words hang in the room. Soft echoes bounced off the vaulted ceiling and clouds plague interior. He opened his eyes and looked directly at Torema.

"You find a way to punish Bartholem. I will handle it with Hugelitod."

"How severe do you wish the punishment to be?" Toro asked.

"I'll leave that up to you," replied Karnomen. "Just make sure the punishment is obvious to everyone around him. I want it to be clear - a clear sense of retribution from the High Initiates. So that there is no doubt about its originator. I want him to be a precedent for all our enemies. Satan's puppets are everywhere in the royal palace and they need to know that we can strike back if necessary."

Torem nodded his understanding and remained silent for a moment, considering his options.

"What about Hugelitod? What do you intend with him?" "Did he help you as he promised?"

"Yes, but with some hesitation...at least at first", replied Torem. "But for his honor I have to say that he was working with a jackhammer and almost broke the main stone. Your call came at the right time."

Karnomen fidgeted in his chair as the deadline approached. He knew that the threat posed by Samuel was real, and the thought that he might lose the Church bothered him. That responsibility will damn him to eternal Hell if he loses the Church during his time as First Initiate. Karnomen straightened his back and grabbed his robe as it was getting too tight around his neck. Torem averted his eyes and pretended to be looking out the window on the far side of the room.

"If you feel that he really helped you, then he will be rewarded with a lesser sentence. Regardless of what it looks like, his initiation is going ahead as planned."

Torem leaned forward and looked at Karnomen to make sure he took his words to heart.

"I believe that Hugelitod has reformed in a way... maybe not completely, but something about him has changed. I believe he helped us. I believe he deserves your leniency."

"We will find out when he repents", answered Karnomen. "But if Hugelitod didn't tip off Bartholem, he's got a much deeper and more far-reaching problem here. One of our Initiates did it. And that requires a completely new plan." "I'd like you and Shunal to start an investigation into our inner circle and find out

whether there is a need to demote someone from the status of Initiation. Perhaps at the center of this mystery is a mere misjudgment and nothing more. If so, Hugelitod can be rehabilitated. I'll be without an assistant for now. I can't trust anyone new. You all have your own important tasks to do now, and the last thing you would need is to take care of an old person."

Karnomen smiled softly. Torem felt that at that moment his heart was encouraged and he felt good he was aware of the responsibility that rested on Karnomen in this trying time.

"What about my assistant? I can leave it to you if you want. I am sure of his devotion, and he is- his service record is impeccable. I will transfer him to your service today."

Karnomen shook his head and raised his hand. "No, you need an assistant. My time here draws to a close with each sunset. You will be my follower and I need you strong and capable. Your asis-tent will stay with you. But thank you for your offer."

Torem felt an electric current run through him, as if some unknown force was charging him. The words "you shall be my follower..." were Karnomen's first speech regarding his replacement after his death. Torem would be the next leader of the Church and the responsibility of his future role had already fallen upon him, especially as he looked into the worried face of his teacher.

Chapter 24. Facet of a prism

The oracle opened her eyes to see a field of grass and flowers that dazzled her with their beauty, color and light. She was still in the comfort of the large bird's wings as she slowly became aware of her new surroundings. Noticing she was now able to walk, she stepped out of her host's huge wings to feel the ground beneath her bare feet. She was unclothed and the sun caressed her body with a brilliant light that warmed and energized her with its favorite joyful chorus.

"Where are we?" she asked, turning to face the bird.

"We are on earth, in another dimension, which will be the home of humanity in the coming age."

"And when will this coming age occur?" she asked the Oracle.

The bird shifted a little and spread its huge wings.

"It could be tomorrow. It may be in some future so distant that it cannot be determined."

"How is this possible? How is it possible that there is such a vast span of time?" the Oracle asked pleadingly. "Time, as understood by mankind, does not exist. Time is a collective creation of humanity, not an individual. The individual does not exist in time, but humanity believes - with its brain - that it does. The human species is trudging along the path of its ascension, using time as a signal beacon, as its performance appraisal, and as its goal. To us they are only signs of illusion and little more. They are necessary building blocks for understanding the prison into which humanity has unwittingly entered. However, time is not the key that leads out of prison. Only the heart can unlock that door. Just the heart."

"And why is the heart the only key?"

The great bird straightened its head, looked down at the Oracle, and pointed its wing to a spot on the far horizon.

"See that moon?"

"Yes," answered the Oracle.

"The shape of the crescent moon is the same as the shape of the heart when it is first formed in the human embryo. The heart lives between the two worlds of the individual's external and internal reality, where the individual has the shape of an oval disc."

As the bird explained the process, the crescent moon began to demonstrate this, as an illustration to the bird's explanation. As if he was in sync with his words. It floated a short distance towards them and became an oval disc that floated on its side and had three levels.

"The heart," continued the bird, "collects cells that activate and transmit a pulsation that becomes a single rhythmic wave. It is an accurate metaphor for the humanity contained within a three-week-old human heart. The heart is centered in unity and transmission. The whole of humanity develops in the same way. That is why the heart is the symbol of humanity."

"In contrast, the brain begins to build its architecture in duality, which is its way of seducing the human spirit to live and manifest from this cranial system that measures and analyzes, compares and infers, balances the values of good and evil. This system of duality has become the home of the spirit, not in every individual, but in the majority of humanity.

"Before the architecture of the brain develops in the embryo, the crescent of the heart beats, and with this beating an electric field is created, which becomes the initial home of the individual. There are many ways to say that a person is

first the heart, then the brain, then the body. The heart is the true home of the human spirit not only because of the order of development, but because this order is a reflection of the inner meaning of human development."

"This is how Primal Source works. Nothing is hidden in randomness or chaos. The geometry of creation always has meaning, and when science uncovers this geometry of creation, it will also seek its hidden meaning. But that meaning is seen and felt with the heart, while science searches with the brain. That is why science rarely understands the geometry of creation."

The oracle noticed that the animation of the bird's description had disappeared and the crescent moon was once again on the distant horizon. She looked at the bird and saw that his eyes were watery as if he had been crying.

"Are you sad?"

"I am anxiously expecting," answered the big bird. "I wish humanity to return to its heart, to live from here and express the unity of its true home."

"How does all this relate to my question, why is the heart the only key to humanity?"

"If humanity can live from its heart, if it can travel from its head to its heart and manifest itself from this sacred place, it will be able to live in this new dimension, just as you are now. He will be able to work as a loving extended family and enjoy the blessings of the spirit that this wonderful land extends to all who come to dwell upon it."

"And if they can't? What will happen?" "You have a prophecy. You already know that."

As the words left the bird's mouth, a vision of vast destruction appeared before the Oracle. She saw huge floods, strong winds, fires licking the sky and epidemics consuming part of humanity. She looked away and looked into the bird's eyes. "Why are you showing me this?"

"You are looking with a human-encoded brain", said the bird, "look instead with your natural heart and imagine the shift from one dimension to another as a smooth tangle where the shift is modulated by feelings of lightness, flow and rhythm. Observe how the earth as a whole extends its care and consideration to all creatures."

The oracle looked again and the images of destruction remained, there were wars and chaos, angry mobs pounding on doors, homeless people wandering the desolate streets with a look of hopelessness written on their faces.

"It doesn't work... I tried to imagine it, but I couldn't. Please stop it. I don't want to watch it anymore."

"Then close your eyes and listen to my voice", suggested the bird. "Listen to your breath. You can hear it flowing through your body?" After a while she nodded.

"Yes, I can hear him."

The field they were on was completely silent and the sound of her breathing was different than when the bird was talking. He was the only sound she heard.

The bird's voice was only a whisper. "Follow your breath into your heart and allow it to settle here. Until then happens, imagine that the breath is your soul or spirit. Can you do it?"

"I'll try," she replied.

The oracle breathed deeply, imagining that the air was her soul and that as she breathed in, it accumulated in the space of her heart.

"Now," continued the bird, "try to add one feeling to your breath, just one feeling. Bring him a sense of understanding."

"What's that feeling?" she asked the Oracle curiously. "I know understanding as an analytical concept, but not as a feeling."

"Understanding is a feeling. It is not a matter of the mind. It is realizing the importance of love in your life and that love matters more than anything else. Bring this feeling into your breath and allow it to activate your heart, like a hopeful fire that is kindled in the wilderness with great care and conscientiousness."

Closing her eyes, the oracle focused on the words, then on her breath, then on the feeling of understanding. She felt a change happen somewhere inside her, but she couldn't describe it. She had the sensation of moving to a place without time. It was a place of forgiveness she had never visited before.

"Now imagine the new humanity", whispered the bird. "Imagine that he is doing the same thing as you, that he is moving from the dual reality of the brain to the oneness of the heart, and with every breath he brings a sense of understanding. Hold this image in your heart for a brief moment and then open your eyes."

The oracle did as she was told and slowly opened her eyes. What had previously been empty fields of flowers and grass was now filled with people of various ages working in a symphony of mutual interaction. The energy of one flowed to the other and then to the next, as if there was kindness and intentional interplay woven into their every gesture and attitude.

In every geometry of mutual interaction there was a center of love. It didn't matter if it was a negotiation

about interacting with people, animals, plants or the earth. All life seemed to work with kindness and purpose guided by love. It was a place of deliberate decision where trust and hope could fully develop without being constrained by controlling interests.

The oracle looked at the bird with a sacred glow in her eyes and gently pointed a finger at the new scene before her.

"Did I do that?" The bird nodded.

"So the heart can create?" she asked. The bird nodded again.

"The heart is the creative center of the soul. It is the heart that creates the coherence, connection and focus of the energies of the Primordial Resources that are capable of transforming energies on the earthly level."

"And what of the mind, which is not also creative?"

"Yes, it also creates," answered the bird, "but it is not a creative center, because it creates in duality. The center can only create in unity. It always strives for connection and unification so that it can transmit feelings of awareness of the Prime Source. When the mind is properly conditioned, it becomes connected to the heart and expands its intelligence and awareness. "The space-time you are in will occur

when humanity walks this path from head to heart and reconnects the mind with the oneness that flows from the heart rather than the duality that arises from the ego-personality. This is a time of great transformation. Earth and humanity are the key players who are on the scene, who are in the process of transforming each other into a new dimension of being."

"And what is my role in this matter?" the Oracle asked.

"That depends on you", answered the bird.

"Will I still be an oracle on earth?"

"That's up to you too."

"But I'm human now", she said and suddenly stepped back. "Look at me, do I have a human body with all its limitations or not?" The bird nodded.

"Yes, you are both human and remain Dorchman's Oracle, but that..." "How can I be both?"

she interrupted him. "How can I remain an Oracle when I'm human now? I have no special insight into the future. I lost this gift the moment I entered a human body."

The bird spoke in a measured tone. "You stand on the threshold of being one or the other. The choice you make is not permanent. There are no right or wrong choices in this matter. It is purely your wish to serve in the way you consider the highest expression."

"What if I can't decide? How do I know what it's really like to be human? It looks like it means being full of hardships and disappointments and losses and separations and fears and... and all of that is pushing and shoving its way into your heart."

"Yes," admitted the bird, "it's all that, but it's also the creative ground on which amazing things take place—those that are creating this new domain that you are witnessing right now."

"What happens to the Oracle if I decide to be human?"

"It will cease to exist."

"Then how will you communicate with humanity?"

"We are like water that lives in multiple states of being. We can easily move between countries and its inhabitants even without an oracle. Don't base your choice on our needs."

The bird approached the Oracle and touched her shoulder with its wing. She immediately felt an electric current start to flow through her and was flooded with thousands of images and sounds that she had no way of understanding. She was mesmerized by the beauty that danced within her and entered every atom of her being.

She revived her for a message that appeared orderly, more intelligent than her own knowledge, and loving without measure.

"I have brought you under my guardianship", said the voice. "I am not the God that the Church described to you. I am not even Primordial Source as you imagined me to be through the Wing Makers. I am the unity of all systems and only that. I am not made up of concepts of words or light or sound or any materialization. I am simply unity. That's my only status. This is my only world. Because I am this, you are also this. There are no exceptions in my world, because I couldn't exist otherwise. Whether you're a woman or an oracle-lum makes no difference to me. You are simply woven into my world with care, regardless of your mission or intended purpose. You are contained within me, and therefore you are my wings, thanks to which I move and fly."

"The systems of my materialization in any space-time are the divine expression of my love for life. Life is a rhythm. Life is calm. Life is the cause. Life is the expression of my life through you. There is no direction

by which you could turn away from me, because I am contained in all your actions, in all your deeds, in all your words, in all your feelings, everywhere in you."

The oracle listened. She began to feel her body differently as she felt herself moving to a place that was dark, ancient, cold and very familiar at the same time. She closed her eyes to stay focused on the voice because it was all she wanted to experience.

"You served not because it was your creator's wish, or because it is a good thing. You served because you need to find me in the performance of your service. Every life feels this need, and regardless of the way in which it seeks me, I understand that it is his love for me that inspires him to seek me. Even if, in this search, he is inept, misbehaves, naive, ill-informed, slanderous or evil. Search is the foundation of everything. He is the center of my unity."

"You will find me again and again, but not on this field. Look for me in the faces of those who come to you - who seek you for friendship, guidance and support. So you will find me and our reunion - and though it will be subtle for you in the density of stone - it will be the same for me. It will be the same for me."

With that the voice ended and the Oracle opened her eyes to see the familiar darkness of her home. She was once again Dohrman's Oracle seated beneath a stormy sky, the gloom of which was accentuated by the lightning that thundered its signature blue light between the three stones. The hammer and chisel holes were gone, and the miracle of that night marked a new passage in the life of the Oracle that no one could have expected or wished for.

Chapter 25. The Gift of Storms

Maia awoke to consciousness as a flash of lightning flashed and there was an instant rumble of thunder. It was like God's revenge. The electric charge was palpable. She was just dreaming, but a rude awakening shattered her dreams with a single, swift and powerful strike from the sky.

"Did you hear that?" she turned to Joseph, but he was already gone.

"You slept so soundly," Joseph said from across the room, "I didn't want to wake you." He paused and smiled just as another bolt of lightning struck nearby. "Besides, I thought the thunder would wake you up anyway. This... this is no ordinary storm."

He stood by the window and turned his head in the direction of each flash. Maia could feel the excitement in his voice. Lightning and thunder continued to flash through the trees, oblivious to the calamity they were causing.

"Where's Simon?" Maia asked.

"I don't know", answered Joseph. "He was already gone when I woke up."

"How long have you been up?"

"About fifteen minutes, I think."

Maia went to look in the portico at the back of the cabin to make sure Simon wasn't there. But she found nothing but wind-whipped trees and rain-soaked boulders. She was worried about his absence because he was their only chance to succeed in their mission. There was no mission without Simon.

Between the thunder and lightning there were flashes of light so bright that you could see as far into the forest as in the afternoon sun. Simon walked quickly and effortlessly through the trees. He picked his way like a bird dancing through the branches of trees. He stopped for a moment and then turned to the left. He saw the figure of a man leaning against a tree, trying in vain to stay dry and safe.

"I'm Simon," he announced to the figure huddled under a tree. "Are you lost? Do you need help?" The dark figure stood in a threatening position.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"I already told you, I'm Simon. who are you Are you a guard?" the man asked menacingly. Lightning right there lit up the forest and revealed Simon as he was; an old man with a large staff, cloaked.

"As you can clearly see, I'm not a guard", Simon laughed. "But you are."

"I'm Kamil", he answered, trying his best to sound firm. "Yes, I'm lost."

"How could the guard get lost?" Simon asked, coming closer to Kamil.

"I lost my map, my compass, my necessities... everything." He shook with exhaustion.

"Follow me, we'll get out of this storm", Simon set off before looking over his shoulder and showed his staff. "Come, I have food and shelter. You don't want to tempt those lightning bolts for long, do you?"

Kamil did not object and followed Simon, limping like a lame obedient dog. Always in the distance and without a word. But a long train of thoughts was growing in his mind. Who is this person living in the deserted woods where no one dares to go? Is he the legendary Wizard? If so, what will he do with Kamil?

Kamil was only concentrating on his concern when he suddenly felt a sharp knock on his head and looked up.

"Oh!!"

"I'm everything you're afraid of," Simon announced, his face inches away from Kamilov's. He looked uncompromisingly into Kamil's stunned face. "And now I'm the one who saved you. So let your fears go, or please leave... now." At the last word, Simon pointed his staff to the path behind them, as if pointing the way away.

Kamil looked at the path they had come in and then back at Simon's energetic yet fatherly face.

"I'll follow you and try to keep my mind on...other matters. But could you go after-smaller. I have a pretty cut leg."

Simon looked at his leg but couldn't see much in the darkness.

"I will go slow and steady. I suggest you do the same."

He slammed his staff into the ground, grunted a little, and walked into the forest with a noticeably slower pace. Kamil followed right behind him, secretly wishing that the Wizard couldn't read his thoughts. He also secretly wished he was spa-dream.

* * * *

The storm lashed the kingdom of Levernon with ugly persistence, and no one felt its contempt more than Huge-litod, who tossed and turned on his bed in the dark and empty monastery cell. Even the guards left at night.

The total darkness of his cells was filled with light from lightning, so that he could see even the tiniest cracks in the ceiling.

He thought about the headache pills he had stashed in the wall and resisted the temptation to take them, numb his pain and somehow fall asleep. However, he was so distracted by the thunder and lightning that he remained watching the play of light above him on the ceiling. He knew that the storm in all its fury could not harm him. The monastery prison was built of massive limestone and the prison cells - of which there were nine - were half underground. They were essentially bunkers and were used that way during times of war.

He wondered if the storm was part of God's retribution on the High Initiates for trying to destroy the Oracle, and a part of him wished God would strike them - punish them for their harshness - both to him and to the Oracle.

Hugelitod longed for the Oracle to reappear and advise him on what to do next and give him courage. However, when he thought of the Oracle, he only felt a sense of loss. It was as if he had disappeared from the earth and his memories of the past and future were nowhere to be found.

There was, however, a glimmer of confidence. She leapt from somewhere in his heart into his mind and in that moment he saw the image of the human Oracle, the woman he had seen before and her wondrous beauty. Was it a dream? Could his blow to the head on the Oracle stone have caused all of this? He told himself that everything is a chain of cause and effect, that everything springs from some event that sets life in motion. Perhaps the blow to the head by the Oracle was this event, and his life has become a mixture of illusion and reality, and he is unable to tell the difference between the two.

He suddenly became serious as a wave of emptiness washed over him that he couldn't stop. His body began to shake and tears flowed out, giving way to uncontrollable crying. It was his darkest moment. Even the lightning suddenly stopped. The night was completely dark again and only the sound of raindrops could be heard, the companion of his cries.

* * * *

Torem walked the streets of Levernon as rarely as possible. The morning air was still heavy from the night's rain. He did not like the noise and smell of the unknown. He was only interested in women, because there were none in the monastery. His blue eyes followed their shapes with interest.

The path eventually led him to a thatched house built of mud, wood, and stone. Debris lined the curb and there were pools of standing water everywhere.

Torem jumped around the deeper puddles, knowing that the shallower ones were impossible to miss because they were everywhere. For he knocked at the door of the house, and was at once ushered in, as if his host were waiting outside the door for his arrival.

"Greetings, Your Holiness, I am very glad to see you again," replied the host, bowing to the floor. He barely looked at Torema's face.

Torem nodded and handed the man a small package. "I need your help. All the details are inside the spo-medically with money, for your services."

"Yes, of course", said the man, taking the package from Torem and placing it on the narrow table in the corridor. "I will read everything and take all necessary precautions, I assure you."

The man was slim, well-dressed with intelligent eyes and a tiny beard that was scruffy

adjusted. His face showed a subtle sense of uneasiness that he tried to mask, which he couldn't, at least not with Torem.

"Anything else?" asked the host. "Would you like something to drink before you go?"

Torem shook his head, turned and walked out the door. The man closed the door tightly, locking it and staring at the package.

"It's God's will, not my own", he said aloud and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a golden pocketknife and cut open the package with the skill of a surgeon. Detailed instructions and the amount of money to last him a year were scattered across the table in a haphazard arrangement that mirrored the smile that slowly appeared on his face.

* * * *

Kamil opened his eyes to a bright and penetrating light. "I think he's coming around," said Simon.

Joseph and Maia huddled around Simon as Kamil, exhausted and sluggish from his journey through the forest, opened eyes and saw their faces.

"You again", whispered Kamil, looking at Maia. "How did you get here?"

"I didn't notice you were bleeding last night", replied Simon. "The rain washed it all away, but I think you're not—he collapsed not so much from fatigue as from loss of blood."

Kamil looked terrible. He had lacerations all over his legs, and his face was scarred by Joseph's wounds. his name in his fist, was largely swollen and bluish.

"I see you went through the thorn bush", said Simon, looking at his wounds and torn pants. "That's why—water why did you faint Blood was gushing out of you."

"It was dark", whispered Kamil, wincing in pain, "I got lost... the bushes really tore me apart."

"Why did you follow us?" inquired Joseph.

Simon raised his hand and turned to Joseph. "Now is not the time for contradictions. Let's let him rest and try again gain strength. There will be time to clarify later."

"I didn't follow you", Kamil said, his voice cracking with exhaustion. Maia leaned forward with a glass of water.

"Here, have a drink."

Kamil drank the water greedily and then tried to sit up, but was gently pushed back by Simon.

"Now rest. We will wash you, bandage your wounds and change your clothes. I hope you like the robe."

Simon forced a smile. "Be patient with yourself, it will take a day or two to get back on your feet. In the meantime, you will be in our care."

"If you weren't following us," asked Joseph, "why are you here?"

Simon stood up and grabbed Joseph by the arm and forcefully dragged him to the other side of the room.

"As a guest in my house," whispered Simon, "to whom I have kindly provided food and shelter, he thinks—you that you should listen to me. Can you do it?"

Joseph nodded with embarrassment. "Yes, sure. You are right. It's hard to relax in his presence. He was testing us." "It doesn't matter now. It's different now than before", Simon whispered intensely.

Joseph just nodded and Simon released his grip on Joseph's arm. Joseph sensed something undeniably dark about Kamil's arrival. It was something he couldn't explain - not even to himself, but he was sure that Kamil was the messenger of change. Changes he didn't want to be a part of.

Chapter 26. Illusion of Repentance

Some people are loners, but hate being alone. Hugelitod was such a man. In the seclusion of his cell he was cut off from all human contact. Even the guard bringing and taking away his tray of food never spoke to him, not even when he said "thank you" or when he tried to bring some politeness to this situation, which was anything but polite.

He had nothing to occupy his mind, body, or emotions, and his boredom grew with each passing minute. He had some paper from Bartholem, but it remained blank - just more creased from being kept safe from the attention of the guard. He had no words to express.

All the thoughts running through his mind were exactly the same: "Why did this happen to me and what can I do about it?"

Hugelitod heard footsteps and a muffled voice in the corridor. The guard opened the door and motioned for him to stand up and turn around. Hugelitod did as he was told and immediately felt his arms being grabbed behind his back and around his wrists.

they put handcuffs.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked in sudden agitation.

The guard remained silent as she turned him toward the open door and shoved him into the hallway. It was at that moment that some part of Hugelitod wanted to die. It was a strange sensation to be out of control of anything in his life and the desire to die was a symptom of his darkest night that was still etched in his psyche.

He was escorted across the grounds of the monastery. His eyes were fixed on the pavement of the road and he silently prayed that no one he knew would see him. He was pretty sure that his promise to beg for forgiveness did not contain such a disgrace.

He noticed that they were walking along the path to Karnomen's office and understood its purpose and purpose. Karnomen will again attempt to gauge their devotion and examine his commitment to the Oracle. Hugelitod decided to reject the Oracle. He will atone for his sins and accept whatever punishment the High Initiates sentence him to.

The oracle brought him only pain, isolation, suffering and humiliation. If the Oracle is as powerful and all-knowing as it thinks it is, then that means it has left him and he will react in kind. That was his only option.

Hugelitod was so lost in thought that he barely noticed when they entered Karnomen's office. He felt his handcuffs come off and then he also smelled the smell of black tea that always accompanied Karnomen. After his handcuffs were removed, he was ceremoniously pushed into a chair and told to be quiet until he was questioned. Karnomen entered the room and immediately dismissed the guards with a wave of his hand.

"I can offer you tea if you want," Karnomen announced as he sat down at his conference table across from Hugelitod. Hugelitod nodded as if afraid to speak without being prompted. Prison habits became part of him.

"I'm short on time," Karnomen began, "so I'll get straight to the point." He handed Hugelitod a cup of tea over velvety smooth table. A small hurricane of hot vapors was coming out of the tea.

"The King has demanded that we share access to the Oracle with him. He also knew of our planned destruction The oracle. Tell me what part you played in this knowledge of the king - and you have only one chance to tell the truth."

Without any hesitation or hesitation, Hugelitod answered. "I have no part in it."

"You never mentioned our plans to anyone?" investigated by Karnomen.

"Your Eminence, the last time I spoke to anyone other than you or Torem was Barthol visiting me in my cell to check on my injuries. And if you check the records, you'll see that it was before you told me about our plans the day we met at the Observatory."

"I asked Barholem about the Oracle, but he wouldn't talk to me about it."

"What did you ask him?" Karnomen asked.

"I asked him if the king knew of the Oracle's existence."

"And how did he

react?" "He told me that the king only knew of the Oracle's existence as a myth and nothing more."

"And that was the extent of your conversation?"

"Yes."

Karnomen drank some tea and had no expression on his face. "Torem praised your role in yesterday's quest."

Hugelitod relaxed a bit as Karnomen changed the subject. He hoped that his answer had calmed the High Priest and some measure of trust was restored between them.

"I'm glad I could help in any way."

"For what reason," Karnomen asked, "did you change your mind?" Hugelitod straightened up.

"Your Eminence, I have sat all week in an empty cell quite alone, with only my thoughts. I had the opportunity to examine my situation from all possible angles. I came to the only possible conclusion: I made a mistake and I ask for your forgiveness."

Hugelitod paused to gauge the impact of his confession. Karnomen did not respond. He stared into his cup tea, as if his thoughts were elsewhere. Hugelitod cleared his throat, hoping to get Karnomen's attention.

"I am unable to tell what is real and what is an illusion. It's like a powerful wizard entered my world the moment I banged my head against the Oracle and this... this wizard... or dark spirit started playing with my perception of reality."

Hugelitod paused as Karnomen's eyes lifted to look directly at him. There was silence in the room Unpleasant to Hugelitod. He sat back in his chair to avert Karnomen's glare.

"So you've changed", Karnomen finally stated. "Will you ask the Order of the Sixteen Rays for mercy?"

"Yes, I will."

"And will you be honest and follow our judgments?"

"Yes, I will."

"Absolutely?"

Hugelitod nodded. "Yes, I will."

Karnomen took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "If that is true, then there is hope for you, my son." He smiled slightly and looked down at the surface of the table. Then he turned to Hugelitod. "Do you want to ask something?"

Hugelitod waited a moment for his thoughts to clear. "You said the king wished to share the Oracle, which was apparently the reason you ordered us to end the no- by him the Oracle?"

Karnomen nodded.

"And the king learned it from Bartholem?" Karnomen nodded again.

"And you fear that King Levernon will not share the Oracle with you?"

Karnomen stared at Hugelitod, stunned by his insight.

"Your understanding is admirable. Why do you ask me such things? What do you want to know?"

"I can help you."

"As?" Karnomen asked. "How can you help?"

"Bartholem trusts me. If he were allowed to visit me again in private, I could have a chat with him and perhaps learn something of value... something about the King's plans."

For the first time since their conversation, Karnomen came to life.

"And what would our excuse be? Bartholem will know that we doubt his devotion to us. No- will trust us."

"We can tell him that my headaches are getting worse," offered Hugelitod. "He's a doctor, he'll be interested... he will want to help me, to meet me intimately."

Karnomen rubbed his chin, wondering deeply whether the proposal was important enough to spend his time on. He considered the fact that Torem's plans to punish Bartholem were already in the execution stage and he would have to delay their execution. He also knew that, despite all his admissions of guilt and change of heart, he still could not trust Hugelitod.

Karnomen rose from his chair and looked down at Hugelitod.

"You must prepare yourself to repent to the Order, and perhaps then we can arrange Bartholem's visit under the pretext of your deteriorating health. In the meantime you will remain in your cell, and if it helps you, you can take it as part of your penance for your wanton act of disbelief and disrespect towards me and the Church."

"Thank you for your understanding", Hugelitod replied with a gesture of prayer and bowed his head. "How long will that take, your Eminence?"

"We can hold a ritual of penance the day after tomorrow, but I'm warning you that any light punishment will be lifted if we even slightly sense that you're not treating us fairly."

Karnomen turned and went to his favorite window, looking down at the garden below.

"If the light punishments are canceled by the High Initiates, their replacement is terrible, so I won't even talk about it. I'll just advise you to be wise and avoid it at all costs. You have a talent that makes the Oracle try to get you, just like me. But don't turn your back on me or you'll lose my trust. Because I am God's vehicle on earth, I can execute His justice against any enemy of the Church, which certainly includes you."

"Yes, Your Eminence, I understand," Hugelitod replied in a suitably serious tone. "I'm just an ordinary person who got lost in the supernatural. In an entity that fooled me with its reality when the only reality I ever knew was this." Hugelitod spread his arms.

"I am not an agent of the Oracle or any other power rivaling the Church. All I want is to return to my Church."

As Hugelitod spoke, his eyes filled with tears. "If I've ever made a mistake, I have to fix it, I understand that, but I don't want to be separated from the work I love. The Church is my life...and my only desire is to return as soon as you allow."

Hugelitod wiped a welling tear from his face before clasping his hands together on the table in front of him, wriggling his fingers nervously. He hoped his emotions wouldn't open up any further.

Karnomen crossed the room and placed a hand on Hugelitod's shoulder.

"Sometimes the choice itself is a new beginning. You made the right choice. Now everything depends on repentance. If you show your true feelings like you did to me now, you will get a light punishment."

Karnomen went to the door, opened it, and motioned to the guard that he could take Hugelitod back to the cell. One the guard stepped in and began to handcuff Hugelitod, but Karnomen shook his head.

"Bring him back to the cell with respectful treatment. Treat him well."

The guard immediately removed the handcuffs and freed himself. Hugelitod nodded gratefully to Karnomen and walked out of the office to the guard walking a few paces behind him. To the casual observer, Hugelitod looked like a free man walking the landscape, but he was well aware that his entire future rested in the hands of the Order of the Sixteen Rays, and that they would be the ones to decide his fate.

Chapter 27. Ruined Innocence

Maia changed the garment on Kamila's thigh just above the knee. She did it with great care and sensitivity. "The-behold the wound is deeper than the others", she said with a soft sigh. "Does it hurt?"

Kamil gritted his teeth, exhaled slowly and nodded.

Simon and Joseph went to look for food, as Simon asked Joseph to accompany him. Joseph was skeptical of Kamil's motives and believed that leaving Maia alone with Kamil was reckless and potentially dangerous. But Simon insisted and Maia assured them both that they felt perfectly safe.

Kamil stared at Maia mesmerized. "I saw your photo."

"How is that possible?" Maia replied.

"You have been reported as a missing person in Hunter Village", he replied. "All guard stations they have your picture and name and they are looking for you."

"Actually?" Maia said enjoying the attention she got. "And if they find me, what will they do? I'm old enough to take care of myself, I don't need anyone to decide where or who I belong to."

She continued to bandage the wound and avoided his eyes. She was tearing off some new bandages from the robe Simon had given her.

"I don't know what they'd do with you, but if they find out you're so deep in Supreme Guard territory, they might shoot first and ask questions later."

"Okay, well, thank you for your warning," Maia said. "Isn't it too tight?" Kamil grimaced a little, but remained silent.

"No, it's good."

"How did you get here," Maia asked, "if you weren't trying to catch us?"

Kamil looked away for a moment before looking back into Mai's eyes.

"It was only in self-defense, but I killed a man...otherwise...otherwise he would have killed me."

Maia straightened up and stopped her nursing.

"Did you kill someone?" she stuttered, putting her hands over her mouth as she did so. "When? Where?"

"When I returned to the station, without my rifle and gear, my supervisor saw that something had happened. I had to make up a story about being mugged. If I told him that I caught you - a young girl with a father - and that you overpowered me, took my gun and food, I would be thrown out on the street and out of a job. And even in the best case.

"So my superior interrogated me and ordered me to show him the location of the ambush... the place where I lost you. When we came back to the place, he saw the tracks and understood that my story was made up. He pulled a gun on me and I jumped at him. I wrestled the gun from his hand...but he pulled a knife on me and I shot him. It was just... mere instinct. I didn't mean to kill him, it was... it just happened."

Maia was quiet, watching the scene in her mind. She thought about what to say, but her mind was completely blank, as if her mind had suddenly stopped working. Her instinct was to sympathize with Kamil, but another part of her, probably the bigger part, felt it was a moral sin of the highest order to kill someone, regardless of the circumstances. This inner conflict immobilized her. She leaned against the wall, her hands still covering her mouth as if holding the words in them.

"I'm only telling you this because... I believe... for some reason, that I can trust you", Kamil said almost in a whisper. He grimaced as he shifted his position on the floor. "I ran away because now I'm the most wanted man in the Supreme Guard. The fact that I found you and Joseph is immaterial to me and to you."

Kamil ran a hand through his tousled golden hair and sighed. "I didn't want this job. I hate her! AND whatever you think of me, I'm not a murderer..." He crossed his arms as his voice trailed off.

Maia slowly slid down the wall to a sitting position.

"I believe you. I believe what you say when you explain it to me, but that doesn't change the fact that you killed a man, doesn't it—who, who was with the Supreme Guard..."

"Commanding Officer!" Kamil interrupted her.

"Commanding Officer," Maia repeated softly, sensing that Kamil's sudden outburst was more regret than anger.

take
"Why did you become a guard if you hate the job so much?"

Kamil leaned against the wall and stretched out his legs, which were tied with bandages. Many of the bandages showed bloodstains. The robe Simon had given him was a beautiful purple color and gave his upper body a noble and educated appearance, while his legs, bound in bandages, looked like the legs of a beaten prisoner.

As Maia looked at him, she noticed this paradox and wondered what it meant. It looked like would be two different people in one body. Sinner and Saint.

"When I was eighteen, they took me from the orphanage," replied Kamil, "to a training camp where we they learned how to be guardians. All the guards come from the orphanage. That's just how it goes."

"Nobody asked me if I wanted to do the job. No one cared if I wanted to work alone in the woods, day after day, week after week, year after year. They knew I had no one. That I don't have a home. I have nothing... nothing at all. So they put a rifle in my hands, gave me some provisions and a map, and told me to look for trespassers on my territory and if I found any, to catch them and bring them to the guard station."

"After eight years you were the first intruders and I screwed up royally. Not against a state spy, or a military operation, but against ordinary people - a young girl and an old man. But as if that wasn't enough.

I had to explain all this to my supervisor, who is a drunken jerk who likes to make his subordinates feel their worthlessness. Things got worse when he discovered that I hadn't been ambushed - that my captors had escaped. I didn't follow the rules.

"The commanding officer of our station was known to kill his subordinates, just for fun. Rumors circulated that certain guards had disappeared after making some sort of clerical error or bad judgment. We are orphans. No one even knows we exist here in the woods. And if they do, they are afraid to talk about it."

Maia looked at Kamil with uncertain but curious eyes.

"When they find you, will they kill you?" Kamil nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Yes."

"And those who helped you will also be killed?" Maia asked.

"I don't know", answered Kamil. "It is possible. If not killed, you can be convicted of aiding a murderer and thrown into prison. I'm not sure which is worse."

"You're really honest," Maia replied sarcastically. "However, I think you'd better hold your tongue—would regarding the sharing of this information. What do you know, maybe we are informers of the Supreme Guard."

"If I've learned anything in these woods," Kamil declared with a raised index finger, "it's that I can read people and like I said before, I trust you."

"Why?" Maia whispered. "Why do you trust me?"

"I can't explain it, but I trust." Kamil looked at the door. "Are they good hunters?"

"I don't know," she said, pulling her legs together so she could rest her chin on her knees. "Why did you follow us?"

"He didn't follow", answered Kamil. "A better question is how Simon managed to find me in the middle of a terrible storm, in total darkness and a downpour? How did he do it? Who is this?"

"What interests you about him?"

"Is he a Wizard? I mean... I've heard stories about him in this forest. Some of the guards claimed to have seen him... even talked to him, but no one ever found out where he lived..." Kamil looked around the cabin's interior as if it was the first time he had really examined it. "Now I know why."

An awkward silence followed. Maia was still struggling with Kamila's confession. She sensed in Kamil something raw, unsettled, but deeply alive, even powerful, and quite possibly it was the solution to their difficult situation.

"Can you help me up?" Kamil asked. "I need to go outside... get some fresh air."

Maia nodded and stood up. She put her arm around his chest under his arm.

"Okay, stand up slowly, lean on me before you get to your feet."

Kamil stood up, leaning on Maia, unsteady as a newborn foal. He grinned at the pain in his legs, as the blood rushed down.

"Are you okay?" Maia asked, alarmed by his pained expression. "Perhaps you should wait until he returns—those of Simon and Joseph. They will help you more than I will."

"Wait, I'll lean against the wall", suggested Kamil. He looked at her, studied her for a moment, and as he breathed in,

he smelled her breath.

Maia moved Kamil from her left side to the wall behind her. "Wait a moment. Let's see if you can stand before you try to walk."

"I'm fine", said Kamil. "Just a little exhausted... wait a minute."

During the short time that Kamil closed his eyes to calm down, Maia cast her gaze on him as a man and nothing more. He was tall, thin, broad shouldered and down to earth handsome. He had shoulder length hair that was a mixture of gold and brown with a slight hint of a big river. There were good reasons to be attracted to him. However, the circumstances of his arrival have not allowed it until now. But now she began to be attracted to him.

"It suits you well", said Maia. "I mean the robe."

"I've never worn a robe before. And I actually like it, it's very comfortable, although I'm sure I'd look better with other shoes."

Maia laughed at his attempt at a joke.

"I think I'm ready to go out," he said quietly. "My head is better and I can feel my legs." "After-do you need help?" Maia offered.

"Thanks, I'm fine. Sorry for my confession, but I really needed to relieve myself..." Kamil smiled for the first time and a hint of embarrassment spread across his face. "I'm grateful for your help - with bandages and all."

Kamil limped through the door of the ancient cabin and entered the dense forest where there were no paths. His thoughts were with Mai and the strange circumstances that had brought them together. In all his life deep in the secret vault of the ancient trees, he had never seen anything as beautiful as her. He knew that the moment they found Jaun-der's body, the manhunt had begun. And now he felt that reality had somehow drifted away from him, as if the two worlds could never meet. All he wished for in the silence of these tall trees was to spend more time with Maia and put an end to his past.

Chapter 28. Virtues of the Heart

"Throw it a little higher," Simon whispered, looking over Joseph's shoulder. "It needs more time to he could float naturally in the current."

"I know what I'm doing", Joseph said without thinking. "How many trout have you caught in this stream?"

"I don't know," replied Simon, stroking his chin, "I think around thirty thousand. And you?"

Joseph ignored his question with a shrewd smile and cast the bait further upstream as Si-mon advised. A speckled trout the size of a human foot immediately attacked the lure as it floated over a deep hole on the far bank of the creek. Joseph gave a short tug to pull the trout out, and in no time the two men were putting the trout into a gray-brown burlap sack.

Simon always carried four bags when he went out for food: one for blueberries, one for fish, one for rabbits or birds, and one for mushrooms and roots.

"Should we catch one more or do you think that will be enough?" Joseph asked. "I think it will be enough, although I don't know how much Kamil eats... he's a big bachelor." Simon replied.

"How did you find him?"

"I saw him." Simon replied.

"But how could you find him at night, during a storm? Did you know he was going to be there?"

"The world is big, isn't it?"

Joseph nodded.

"Although the world is so big and there are so many paths in it, sometimes it happens that people find each other", explained Simon. "The intersection of their paths is shaped by an energy that does not come from physical paths. When this energy blends, you are drawn by it, like water flowing through the grating of a riverbed or canal."

"But what, or... or who, creates this energy?"

"Higher Self", answered Simon. "You are a field of energy, just like anyone else. You are still the source - the who it creates energy - even when you don't know it."

Joseph sighed. "What's going on? I mean everything? Every thing since I stepped into this forest has led me to this exact place." He pointed a finger at the ground below him to emphasize his sincerity.

"And you're telling me that my Higher Self planned this trip?"

"Which seems so improbable that some part of you - which is your whole, which I call the Higher Self - is able to control your reality through the formation of an energy field that can then ex-

to pan in space-time and prepare the conditions to attract your physical self?"

"No, I understand. I totally understand that here," exclaimed Joseph, pointing to his head, "but the problem is, if it happened unconsciously, then I don't want my Higher Self planning these challenges for me.

My life is so complicated that I'm in over my head. I've had this preoccupation with the Oracle for many years, and now - when most people my age are content sitting on their porches reading - I find myself being pursued by the High Watch."

"Ah, but you also find yourself in a situation where you are talking to the Wizard, who is the First Initiate, who discovered the Oracle, and who is the author of the Dohrman Prophecy."

"That's true," Joseph admitted, "but I'd still like to know what trouble my Higher Self has in store for me in the future..."

"Why?" Simon interrupted.

"So I can get ready!"

"That's what your intuition serves you for," replied Simon.

Joseph gently touched his bruised face.

"Yes, the insight of my intuition has weakened."

"Maybe it's your confidence that's faltering?" Simon suggested.

"Maybe," Joseph admitted, his tone softening. "But how can you trust your intuition? It's so inaccurate. She's... she's moody!"

"When you first came into this world as a physical structure, you were mostly a beating heart," Si-mon began. "And as that heart beat out its rhythmic pattern, the body began to form the brain, the limbs, and all the other organs that must function in this world. However, what was even before your heart began to beat was the rhythm of your mother's heart and the energy field it generated with each pulse. That is what brought you to animality."

"Intuition was the first form of your intelligence that began in your heart and is completely based on rhythmic patterns. It is non-linear. It bends and flows. You have to behave the same if you want to trust what is inside you, the oldest and best functioning organ of your body. It is your best source of perception of what is coming. Not only does it bring about readiness, but more importantly, it brings about the understanding and appreciation that you create from your Higher Self."

Simon got up from the ground they were sitting on and gave Joseph a hand to help him to his feet.

"I should be the one helping you," Joseph remarked.

"Your gratitude is enough", said Simon.

Joseph smiled. "Thank you, but before we go, you still haven't answered my previous question. Why is all this happening?"

"Do you mean what concerns you personally, or do you mean the entire planet?" Simon asked.

"So I ask this," said Joseph, "the world is divided into good and evil, and it seems that the side of evil is winning."

"Actually? And on what basis did you form this hypothesis?"

"You know, you don't read the newspaper or listen to the radio. You don't talk to people on the street," Joseph explained, "but people are frustrated that their lives are being directed toward meaninglessness. The kings of this world are ruthless in their methods of control and maintenance of the status quo."

Joseph leaned against a tree and crossed his

arms. "Time is speeding up, people are anxious, conflicts between groups of people are increasing, everyone seems to be getting more and more angry. The Church, the State, the merchants and the scientists seem to be out of harmony at all, nothing fits together... there is... there is no harmony..."

"Joseph," interrupted Simon calmly, "there are rhythms that beat throughout the universe, and these great rhythms entrain or influence the smaller ones. And like a chain reaction, they trickle down with finality right to you and me."

"The heart that beats inside you listens to these rhythms and the information they contain. It recognizes when these rhythms change and life reforms or adapts to these new energies and experiences. Attunement then continues down to the finest particles that shape your presence in this world."

"Do you understand?" Simon asked, looking directly into Joseph's eyes for confirmation.

Joseph nodded distractedly, as if his thoughts were elsewhere.

"I get it, but it's so abstract compared to the world beneath my feet." He looked at Simon with new interest. "I could cast that adaptation into mundane realities if I knew my voice mattered. If I knew that the evil in the world is balanced with the good, and that the indifferent—the unthinking sheep—

the center of the herd - they will be activated to stop the perpetrators of evil. But I don't see any of that."

"Any process, especially one of this magnitude, seems to run unevenly. Sometimes it goes back, sometimes it goes forward. You can see it as the polarities of good and evil, or the middle ground as you mentioned, but it's all part of a larger whole. And it is this whole that adapts and reconnects with an even greater whole or unification. And that takes some time."

"How long?" Joseph asked. "Will I see it in my lifetime?"

Simon shook his head. "Does it matter if you see it? You need a certificate to live in the world at your feet? Will this affirmation change anything in your life?"

"I guess so," replied Joseph. "It would certainly boost my hope."

Simon took his large staff and leaned on it, as if tired of standing in one place for too long.

"Then believe that the whole of the universe is in the hands of an intelligence that guides it flawlessly into a grander light, to higher dimensions of existence in which humanity will one day be free in all respects."

"So it's all about freedom?"

"It's all about love," Simon replied mysteriously.

"I hate to seem like I'm repeating myself," Joseph replied, "but these concepts are abstractions, which are suitable for fairy tales or religious books, as far as I know."

"There's nothing abstract about love," replied Simon. "But I'm not talking about love as humanity has defined it. Love is a total of human virtues, the six virtues of the heart: gratitude, compassion, forgiveness, humility, understanding, courage. These virtues blend together to create an atmosphere of love. Love is a state of consciousness. When you live in the six virtues of the heart, you increase the frequency of love."

"Love, like everything else, is a continuum of human expression. From the clumsy, selfish expression of an individual, obsessed with his own glory, to the master who has perfected his expression to the crucible of his heart. You can define this entire continuum as love, but its manifestations are very different."

"Love as a state of consciousness is simply living in the manifestation of the six virtues of the heart."

"Yes, but how many people are saints?" Joseph asked. "How many people can really live in this state? From my experience - no one. That's the amount."

Simon shook his head and threatened Joseph with his staff.

"Try asking me a rhetorical question one more time and get ready to go your own way!"

Joseph looked down at his shoes to avoid Simon's anger.

"Excuse me, but what about this - what you just did - is this outburst part of the six virtues of the heart? It doesn't prove is that just what I said?" Joseph turned his eyes to Simon as the last word left his mouth.

"I'm not a saint", admitted Simon. "I'm a wizard, I thought you knew that." A gentle smile appeared on his face as he spoke. "Part of this state of consciousness is the belief - the feeling of certainty - that everyone, even those who are foolish, is trying their best to be decent or good and to do good. It often happens that we do not succeed, some more, some less often. But love is a state of consciousness, not a state of perfection."

Simon relaxed and returned to his characteristic leaning on the stick.

"Emotions are alive. They move and change and you have to be willing to let go of your tolerance limits, sensitivity, rationality and everything else that keeps you balanced."

"During my outburst," Simon continued, "I was aware of my emotions, my words and my tone. In that realization, I knew you would see it as a rejection. But I wanted to do it this way.

It was completely conscious. And now you're giving me feedback that it was too radical. Maybe it was, but I relaxed and adapted. I forgave myself and changed my emotional state."

"In my interaction, I practiced love through understanding and forgiveness and a little bit of heartiness, which allowed me to be sensitive. You see that in expressing your state of consciousness, the virtues of the heart are intertwined. This shows how your state of consciousness reflects your state of being. Your state of being is your spiritual center. The place where you leave your signature on this space-time world. Not in the form of actions or material creations, but as a vibration."

"And what does this vibration do?" Joseph asked.

"It predetermines your space-time to a higher pitch. This tone or vibration is equality, which is centered in love and expressed through the virtues of the heart from which love expands. If only one person lived this way and everyone else on earth were godless barbarians, then it would be possible for a tone of equality and a higher dimensional understanding of love to apply to everyone. It doesn't mean that everyone will notice and embrace this new vibration, but the possibility of love on this planet will open up."

"Everything - I mean every single evolutionary step in the rise of mankind - that started a single human be-

one who has chosen to express the virtues of her heart. It is not brought here by some heavenly messenger, nor is it ordered by God. It is the free will of a single person who made a choice - who simply chose to express the wisdom of their heart. When one has done it, the other can follow. It soon becomes possible for the next, and so it goes on and on, because these virtues are transferable, because they are not based on criticism."

"And these are all vibrations I can feel or hear?" Joseph asked, still looking confused.

"Are you saying it's not abstract, that it's for me?"

Simon took a large branch that had fallen in a storm and separated three small twigs from it. Then he placed them as the bows of the wheel, and left his hand as the center from which the bows came forth. "See these lines?"

Joseph nodded quietly.

"There are three branches and six ends. Let's just say that in the middle, where my hand holds it all together, is love. Each of these endings represents one of the six virtues of the heart." Simon pointed in turn to each end with his free hand, reciting the virtues as he did so. "Gratitude, compassion, forgiveness, humility, understanding, and courage."

"And now look, love lives here - in the intersection - where each of these virtues is concentrated in the center. But love moves outward along each of these branches, and in doing so creates the character of one of the virtues. Love can move outward symmetrically or asymmetrically, but it is always love that wears these virtues and expresses itself through them."

"This love, with its six characteristics, can be brought into anything and everything. When it is expressed from your heart with authentic care, it changes everything. It is the vibration of equality that is the atom of love's existence. This vibration is what weaves together the polarities that separate us - not through some magical belief or chanting of a mantra, but through our expressions. By how we express ourselves."

Simon dropped the twigs to the ground, took his pitcher, and poured a little water into the fist of his hand.

"See this water?"

"Yes," Joseph whispered, raising his eyebrows skeptically.

"Our best scientists," explained Simon, "studied water and told us its chemical properties and physical characteristics. But they cannot explain to us what it is. Scientists do not understand something as simple and widespread as water. And water is a metaphor for life. It can transform into different states. It is very malleable. It flows in different ways or remains fixed. When he has time, he can overcome even the biggest obstacles. Water and life are allies, and as I hold it in my hand, I fill it with my vibrations."

"As?" Joseph asked.

"Because I decided I could do it", replied Simon.

"So we're back to faith..." "No,"

Simon cut him off. "Not by faith, by choice. I hold this water in my hand and before I drink it, I fill it with love. Not because I believe it will change her, but because it is a practice I have chosen to do. It's a decision."

"Okay, but didn't you choose to do this because you believe that... that this practice will strengthen the water and bring you better health and well-being?"

Simon shook his head and smiled.

"The vibration of love that I create throughout my life is not something that I keep within myself or express for my own personal gain. Its beauty is only useful when it is shared with all things. This is because, as I said before, its innermost core is a tone of equality. If he was denied something, he would shrink."

Joseph watched as Simon brought a handful of his hand to his mouth and gently poured water into it.

"Did you learn all this from the Oracle?" Joseph asked.

"No, it came from me."

"As?"

"I listened to what was in me and practiced what I heard. Then I observed the results and made decisions about how to navigate based on that information. If you do this often enough, you will learn how to cultivate the vibration of equality and become a craftsman of love."

"Is it really that simple?"

"I didn't say it was easy," Simon corrected him.

Simon picked up two of the sacks and slung them over his shoulder.

"We should go back, I'm sure Maia and Kamil are hungry."

Joseph picked up the remaining sacks.

"So it's all about choice? Is there nothing magical or supernatural about it? Is it just a choice?"

"No, it's not just a choice", laughed Simon. "The choice is only the first step, but then it's about how in yourself you secure love and learn to express it through the virtues of the heart."

"Look around you, Joseph," Simon advised him, "do you see the landscape of this forest, or do you see the landscape your heart in this forest?"

"I don't understand?" muttered Joseph, shaking his head.

"It is your choice to see the present environment as trees and bushes, streams and lawns, but the energy within you that is you cannot be seen or heard. It is felt. So you must first feel the world with your heart and only then look at the world around you. In exactly that order."

Simon turned and walked back the way they had come, humming a song to himself.

Joseph shook his head at the mysterious figure of Simon walking away without a care in the world.

"He is a mystery within a mystery."

Joseph stepped forward to keep up with him. He wondered what it would be like to see the world through the lens of his heart. He silently hoped he knew how to do it.

Chapter 29. He Denies the Truth

Hugelitod was accompanied by a strange fear throughout the day, which led to the ritual of penance. He had heard of those rituals from the rare conversations held between peers, heavily supported by truth serum - red wine and strong walls, behind which whispered tales of degraded priests. It was rumored that those who conducted these ceremonies were High Initiates who wore masks to conceal their identities. They were known as the Faceless Guardians of the Church. Hugelitod felt anxious at the mere thought of standing before such a stern group of judges in a few moments.

The room in which he waited was a small vestibule adjoining the monastery's courtroom. It had two doors, one at each end, and a small bench to sit on. A single candle provided a flickering light that waxed and waned in the currents of cool air that circulated between the rough-hewn stone walls. Hugelitod paced back and forth, chanting his planned explanation and penance. He had never been in this room. It was hidden under the Great Temple, the Holy of Holies. It was accessible only from a spiral staircase that wound deep below the holiest of holy temples.

Because the waiting room was so small, Hugelitod was getting dizzy from the constant turning while walking, so he decided it would be better to sit down and keep his head clear. Just as he sat down, slowly and with a chilling creak the door opened and a solemn voice commanded, "Follow me."

Hugelitod stood up, his stomach rising from the dark room before him. As he walked through the door, a courtroom opened before him with a single candle providing light in an otherwise completely dark and spacious room. The steps of the gilded stairs could be seen, the light illuminating their indistinct golden outlines. The steps were arranged in a crescent shape and rose several feet above the floor.

Hugelitod was led to a simple wooden chair in the middle of the room and told to wait quietly. He did not recognize the voice of the priest who accompanied him. His head was covered by a hood, and in the dim light Hugelitod doubted he would recognize his features anyway.

The door closed behind him and the darkness in the room seemed to deepen. He was here alone, exposed to whatever sound the room emanated. A small growl made his stomach rise uncomfortably for a moment. He heard his heart beating like a strained drum and wondered how long

the Faceless Guardians will prolong his torment as if his penance were not enough.

His eyes were almost useless in the dim light of the room, but his ears were attuned to any sound with laser-like concentration. He began to wonder if he was alone. He thought he could hear faint breathing. He studied the ghostly apparitions before him. They looked like chairs and he squinted to catch any movement, but he wasn't sure if his eyes were deceiving him.

"Is anyone here?" he asked tentatively. "We

await your repentance," replied a cold unknown voice. "Isn't that why you came here?"

The voice bounced off the walls of the room with unexpected force, especially since Hugelitod didn't recognize it. He tried to see with all his might the owner of the voice.

"Yes, it is. I'm sorry, but I didn't see you."

"He didn't see because you weren't looking."

Hugelitod was surprised at the tact with which the voice spoke. He expected his judges to be High Saints cenci and he would recognize any of them by their voice.

"I didn't watch because I was told to wait. So I apologize once again."

"Do you always do what you're told, Hugelitod?"

His heart was beating even faster as he felt traps being set for him and he hadn't practiced how he would react to such an interrogation. He thought he would simply be asked to show repentance in his own words. He had his speech well prepared, concise enough, thorough in repentance. Hugelitod settled in his chair and looked in the direction of the voice.

"No, I don't always do what I'm told. That's why I wanted to find out if anyone was here instead of quietly waiting... as I was told."

"Do you know who I am?" asked a voice.

Hugelitod shook his head and whispered, "No."

"I am the Faceless Guardian of the Church. I don't exist and yet I'm here. How is that possible?"

"Are you from the Order of the Sixteen Rays?"

"If I were, wouldn't it be the Order of the Seventeen Rays?"

Hugelitod staggered from this unexpected encounter. His whole attitude suddenly seemed to be caught in his legs in slow death.

"Forgive me for not knowing who you are. How should I address you?"

"Only the High Initiates know who I am," said the voice, ignoring the question. "I live as an ordinary priest, but it is I who the High Initiates use to judge the penitent priests of the Order. Can you imagine why his Eminence is doing it this way?"

Hugelitod accepted the challenge. "I think it's because you have some skill... something that makes you unique- unqualified. If that is so, why do you remain an unknown priest?"

"You are here to repent of your acts of rebellion and treason as ordered by his Eminence. I am here to witness your repentance and establish its authenticity. You asked me two questions, but you did not repent. Do you want to ask more questions or are you ready to start?"

"I'm ready to begin," Hugelitod replied, his throat feeling like a desert.

"Do you know why the room is dark?" asked a voice after a long pause.

"So I can't see your face?"

"If I wanted to hide my face, I would wear a mask or just sit behind you. But I don't mask, and as you can hear, I'm right in front of you."

"Do you wish me to guess further, or may I begin my penance?" Hugelitod asked with a slight note of displeasure in his voice.

"The room is dark for one reason," the voice continued. "By the providence of our Creator, I am able to see the energy fields that surround all living forms, and when the life I am evaluating is in a dark room, I can see with greater clarity the subtle colors of your energy field. It is the color of your energy field that informs my judgment regarding the authenticity of your repentance."

Hugelitod's heart leapt as the words were spoken. The voice belonged to the Truth Denier. Hugelitod had heard of their existence, but his knowledge was limited to vague references in ancient Church literature. They were considered mere myth and nothing more by religious scholars.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Why do you think?"

"It looks like you want to put me in even more trouble than I'm already in - although I doubt that's possible."

Hugelitod cleared his throat louder than he intended. His frustration was obvious.

"Are you a Denier of the Truth?"

"Have you heard of us?"

"Yes, but I didn't know you were real or that you still existed."

"I am more than a Truth Denier, the voice announced, his tone cold and clear. "I am the one who will free you from your sins."

Hugelitod waited for his next speech, though hundreds of questions were on his tongue.

"His power to free you from your sins is absolute. You don't have to convince anyone but me." "You know the circumstances of my situation?" inquired Hugelitod.

"I don't need this information, just your repentance."

Hugelitod waited a moment to see if the voice would continue, but silence filled the room with such an so that he couldn't help but ask the question that was weighing on him.

"Are you here alone?"

"There are others, but you are only listening," answered the voice. "My judgment is final, so only concern yourself with me. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

"Do you acknowledge your sins of rebellion and betrayal of the Church?"

Hugelitod paused, knowing that his emotions, thoughts, and very soul were exposed, he decided to speak as honestly as he could. "I acknowledge them, although I am not responsible for them. I don't understand the forces at play. I feel like a pawn on a vast chessboard in the hands of some intelligence I don't understand, but for some reason I've allowed it to place me on the board according to its plans."

"Are you not in control of your actions?"

"Not fully."

"If you're going to speculate, can you tell me who or what is controlling you?"

Hugelitod pondered the question, but his mind was blank.

"I would like to speculate. I wish I could give that force a name, but I can't. Maybe I'm just at a loss for words. Maybe I lack experience. Maybe... I'm just not smart enough."

"And what have you learned on your path of betrayal and rebellion?" asked a voice.

Hugelitod closed his eyes and tried to make something invisible appear in the darkness of his mind.

"I love my Church and I am devoted to my co-priests and his Eminence. I learned that the alternative to express this love is life in pain."

"Could the power you point to be the great tempter, Satan?"

Hugelitod felt the conversation open up for the first time, but he needed to be careful not to get caught up in it too quickly.

"I don't know... it's possible. Satan is elusive in his approach, he watches for weaknesses and when he does, will use them. It is possible that my weakness was captivated by him and I fell victim to his manipulation..."

"If you can't define the force that is manipulating you...then why do you agree that it could be Satan? Are you saying that the Dohrman Oracle is controlled by Satan and that our High Initiates are unaware of this fact?"

Hugelitod fell into a trap, it wasn't the opening he thought.

"I really don't know what the power behind the Oracle is, but I accept the fact that the High Initiates are experts in detecting the workings of Satan, and if they are convinced that the Oracle is not under the influence of Satan, I am confident in their judgment and will join them."

"You are an interesting person," said the voice. "You're telling a victim story and you know more than you're letting on. You are telling one part of the story, and yet there is another part that you are hiding, and it is this part that you must tell before you repent."

"Others have sat before you in this chair, fiddling with the hands of truth in the same way as you. Those who have achieved absolution have realized it by allowing themselves to become an instrument in my hands. Those who failed... resisted."

Hugelitod sensed that a crossroads lay before him. The only place he could hide and conceal the full truth was his prison cell. He had only one option. Denying the Truth will not grant absolution without full disclosure.

Hugelitod swallowed hard and closed his eyes.

"I had a conversation with the Oracle," he revealed. "But I don't know if it was real or just an imagination. After my head injury, I felt like I might be hallucinating..." "You're playing the

victim again," the voice said, every word laced with disappointment. "You are now a victim of your own head injury. You can't get absolution until you tell me the truth, without hiding behind a victim. There is only one door that can set you free, and you can walk through that door when I open it. Until then, however, they will remain closed in infinity. And you will be like a person looking for numbers between one and two. Are you drawn to this fate?"

"No," Hugelitod muttered. "No, it doesn't attract."

"Then he told the truth without embellishment."

"Really? I wish I knew her," Hugelitod admitted in a faint whisper.

"Somehow the oracle put the idea into my head, and I don't know how it did it, that the Church would be destroyed and that I might be the one to do that destruction. It suggested that Dohrman's Prophecy - the part about the destruction of the Church - was happening and convinced me to play a key role in it."

"What was this persuasion like?" asked a voice.

Hugelitod shifted unconsciously in his chair.

"Please don't think I'm crazy," his emotions wavered for a moment as he took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. "What I am about to tell you is going to sound crazy, but I have conversed with the Oracle, not only in his location, but also in my cell.

"Did the oracle visit you in your prison cell?" asked a voice with obvious concern.

"Yes."

There was a long pause as silence filled the room like water rolling against the dam's dam. Hugelitod thought he heard whispers, but he felt dazed and dismissed it as a play of his imagination.

Streams of damp, cool air gathered at his feet and he felt a distinct chill begin to cover his body.

"Perhaps your original assessment was accurate after all," the voice noted.

"That I'm crazy?" Hugelitod almost laughed, but then controlled himself.

"How many times have you spoken to the Oracle?"

"I spoke to him once in his locality - during my initiation - and once in my cell."

"Was it just a voice in your cell, or did you have some kind of lucid dream where you felt you were in the Oracle-la location?"

"No. No...." Hugelitod corrected. "The oracle manifested in my cell as... as a beautiful woman. It looked completely real, but it was slightly transparent. Our conversation wasn't too different from ours now, except I could see it clearly."

"And what were you talking about?"

"During my initiation or in my cell?" Hugelitod asked.

"Let us begin your initiation."

"She... The Oracle told me to be her servant. That I should listen to him and carry out his request, and in doing so I become an extension of his One Intelligence."

"It said you will be an extension of the One Intelligence if you become a servant of his will?"

"Yes."

"Go on," the voice urged. "It

told me that the Karnomen, and the priesthood in general, are... that their motives are tainted or misguided..." "In what way did the

Oracle say they were tainted?"

"I don't know... I don't know... it was a short conversation where the Oracle mainly wanted me to serve of his plan, but did not elaborate on what plan it was."

"Did you agree to serve the Oracle?"

"At first I agreed, but by the end of our conversation I was less sure."

"You went along with the plan - which at its core - assumed that his Eminence's intentions were spe- false or misleading?"

"I know it sounds unforgivable," admitted Hugelitod, "but the Oracle was very irresistible... perhaps even hypnotic in its appeal..."

"You're playing the victim again. Stop!" a voice ordered.

Hugelitod lost the ability to speak. Every time he tried to explain his situation, his attempt was thwarted. All they cared about were the facts, he thought. But the story is more than just a collection of facts. "Tell me about your conversation with the Oracle in your prison

cell."

Hugelitod took a deep breath and breathed out without a word. When he emptied his lungs of all atoms of air- ugh, he imagined his breath bringing him new energy, a new direction to tell his story.

"The oracle knew that the next morning was about to destroy him," he said in a low and cautious voice.

"It asked me to join the High Initiates and thwart their efforts to destroy him."

"So the only reason you agreed to destroy the Oracle," the voice asked, "was to protect it from destruction?"

"Yes," Hugelitod confirmed softly, his embarrassment evident in his tone.

"Despite your willingness to listen to this nonsense and carry out the orders of what you believed to be a higher intelligence, you happened to be hallucinating. Did it occur to you that you should just share your hallucinations with his Eminence?"

"Yes."

"And why didn't you?"

"I was told not to trust his Eminence."

"Did you trust your hallucinations more than the Eye of God in our world? What does that say about you?" "That I'm a gullible fool."

"The way you condemn yourself is admirable, but it does not absolve you of your decision to listen to the demonic voice. Your head injury does not exempt you from sharing your unstable condition with his Eminence. These are your sins and your punishment must be in accordance with them and you must undergo it."

Hugelitod sensed a shift, as if the Truth Denier was satisfied with his penance and was preparing to deliver judgment.

"Did the Oracle mention how it was able to visit you in your cell?"

"No," replied Hugelitod. "She said it was the first time...she called it self-manifestation."

"Besides recruiting you to help prevent her destruction, did she say anything else during your meeting?"

"She told me about her past. How she became the Oracle on this planet. She told me how her consciousness was contained in the crystalline structure inside the stone and that the stone was just a facade. She told me that its creators were humans living in a distant space-time and that they placed the Oracle on our planet to help guide us."

"Did you believe everything you were told in that meeting?" asked a voice.

"No."

"Which part or parts did you believe?"

"I believed that the Oracle was real... that it wasn't just a figment of my mind."

"Do you still believe that?"

"No." Hugelitod stated with sudden and unexpected force.

Hugelitod felt the Truth Seer's gaze fall on him like a searchlight. The tomb-like room returned to silence for a moment as his last word echoed into oblivion.

"Did Doctor Bartholem give you any medicine?" noted the voice.

"He gave me something for a headache."

"And did you take the pills?"

"Yes."

Then there was a long silence that filled the room. Hugelitod has finally found a way to let loose and let the information flow without censorship. He was tired and cold, but he was full of hope that his confession would bring him absolution.

Suddenly the shuffling of footsteps was heard, and he tried to see something in the darkness, which the candle could not illuminate. However, his efforts were in vain. Then he heard a whisper. Weak and silent, as if hidden behind handfuls of palms. Whispers echoed off the stone walls in the otherwise quiet room.

Then silence returned. Hugelitod didn't mind the darkness, but the silence seemed torturous in itself. He did his best to clarify his situation and the circumstances of his faulty decisions.

"We have concluded our judgment, Hugelitod," a voice announced with modest kindness. "You secured your dis-sinny, but it has the following conditions."

The Truth Denier paused and took a deep breath. At this breath, Hugelitod's heart leapt from his chest to the heights of heaven.

"You will be released from your cell," the voice continued, "but you will be restricted to unskilled labor beautifying the monastery grounds. Your position as secretary of the First Initiate and your position in the Order of the Sixteen Rays will be suspended and undecided until you complete a special task."

"What do you want me to do?" Hugelitod asked with interest.

"First you should understand that we know that Bartholem planned this unpleasant event, as the king's agent. We believe that was his goal, to sow the seeds of discontent in the Order and use you as his pawn.

We know that it was he who told the king about the existence of the Oracle and its impending destruction. Bartholem pretended to be an agent of the Order, when in reality he planned to destroy us."

Hugelitod let the words of the Truth Seer sink deep into him. However impossible it may seem, there was something true here. Those pills weren't for pain, he thought.

"We want you to kill Bartholem," the voice stated with conviction.

Hugelitod's heart thumped heavily in shock at the announcement. His entire body stiffened as he tried to imagine himself performing this task. He was completely incapable of such an act and was shocked that anyone could even imagine such a thing, even under these circumstances.

"We understand that this is an arduous task, but the sins you have committed demand it. We want this task completed within seven days. Once it's done, you can resume your role as a priest and be free to come and go from the monastery. All will be forgiven and you will continue your role in the Order. You have

any questions?"

Hugelitod sat glued to his chair, his body still, his mind overwhelmed by the nature of the task expected of him.

"I... I just can't do such a thing."

"It is my judgment that you can carry out and if you want absolution, you can carry it out. Bartholem is a tool of Satan, just as he is a pawn of King Levernnon. If we don't eliminate him, he will continue to try to eliminate us."

"Don't we have another way... to... how to solve this?"

"We could have hired someone to take out Bartholem, but I chose you. Absolution requires a re-balancing of the scales, and you are the only person who can bring balance to this situation without incurring divine retribution. That's my verdict. You can't discuss the terms, Hugelitod. Either you accept these terms or your absolution will be revoked and you will return to your cell to await the arrival of your own death.

"What is your decision?"

"Do I have to decide now?"

"If you don't decide right away, we know your answer. This offer is valid only once.

It will never be repeated, nor will any minor offer regarding your development reach your ears.
purchase. What is your answer?"

"Is there a plan I should follow?" Hugelitod asked, his voice sounding distant. Somewhere between the yellow-gray stone walls of the courtroom, hidden in the darkness behind the folds of the plush hood of his dark blue-green robe, a smile broke out at the thought of an absolution so perfectly planned that perhaps God himself should admire it.

No, there will be no divine intervention in this decree, thought Karnomen.

Chapter 30. Ancestral Legacy

The oracle awoke to the dark anonymity of the monolith's interior. The stability of his tomb-like abode was familiar, but unsettling. The Oracle's recent revelation regarding his sovereignty stood in stark contrast to the dim shadows that covered him now. It tried to remember why it had returned. What caused the transformation to fail, to slip back into the old ways of living in darkness and seclusion, when it had already touched humanity with such clarity.

I was a woman! The Oracle thought. I was already freed from this cold monotonous nest and now I am wingless again, I am again a tenacious structure of cold stone. Have I missed my chance or am I securing my release?

I will now remain between two worlds, conveying messages as an intermediary who belongs nowhere. I will be a ghost without a will. An exhausted life that draws from the deep well of Divinity to give others to drink. I will be an outcast of the most remarkable manufacture, who will find himself in the sharp light of royal interest.

However, the oracle felt different in the stone and explored this difference with its consciousness. It extended its consciousness into the outer shell that surrounded it. No one knew that underground of the Oracle site, twenty-three feet below the surface of the forest floor, there was a hollow tube connecting the three stone monoliths.

The tube was created from an alien substance that looked like metal but was much harder. It was connected to the bottom of each stone, like a metal tube that penetrated the interior of the honeycomb in which the Oracle concentrated its consciousness. If one could look down with x-ray eyes, one would see that the tubes form a perfect equilateral triangle - with rounded tips. This was the symbol of the Oracle in the Wingmaker world, and all who worked on its development, who trained it, allowed it to enter the earth, and still watched over it, knew this symbol as the symbol of the Oracle of Dohrman.

Once the Oracle entered the connecting pipe and examined its abode, it noticed that its battered and broken stone shells were fully repaired as if the drilling had never happened. For a moment the Oracle thought that it was just a dream or that it was shifted in time and none of his experiences of the past few weeks existed.

The gold medallion that wrapped the "headstone" at its base was engraved with alien symbols that no one could decipher. The assumption that the medallion is made of copper was wrong. This substance was the same substance that formed the triangular shaped connecting tube. It was a Metal of the Gods that had unknown properties. One of these properties was the ability to control the energy space-time in which it is located. The original creators of the Oracle in a sense impregnated specific aspects of their consciousness into

metal medallion. The locket then radiated these aspects of them. It was the nature of this special substance that had never been disturbed by time or affected by human action.

That aspect was healing. The healing field that was instilled in the huge medallion that wrapped around the main stone was triggered by anything that threatened the Oracle's physical structure. The oracle was sealed in indestructibility. Invisible sensors were installed in the stone lining, which activated the medallion's healing programs. The repair was always perfect as the Oracle's original appearance was re-evoked by the locket's special powers.

The Oracle was unaware of this miraculous protection granted to it by its creator. The violent act of the priests was his first experience of intentional destruction caused by human forces. It had always been a mystery to the Oracle why the hands of Nature seemed to ignore him. While the trees and temples around him fell victim to wildfires, windstorms, earthquakes, and ever-present decay, the Oracle remained unscathed as a beacon of his original self, untouched by time.

While his outer form remained unchanged, what was inside transformed a thousand times. With every-dou a new transformation.

The oracle grew further away from its creators and closer to humanity. It felt itself wandering more, flowing out of its stone prison, leaning out. The hope of becoming human became the Oracle's obsession. And it was because of this concern that the Oracle lost its ability to communicate.

One of the most unusual things about the underground complex below the Oracle was a small, almost insignificant metal pipe that protruded from the triangular structure. Its direction and length were unknown, but it rose beneath the forest floor, beneath the roots of the trees, like a tendril that stretches and wraps around. Its purpose was a mystery to all but one person.

* * * *

King Levernon entered Samuel's office unannounced and went straight to the large window and opened it. "Karnomen is on his way... and it seems with Torem in tow."

Levernon was a shrewd man who could skillfully assess his opponents. It was probably the greatest pleasure of his life to outwit his adversary, to spread his power over him like a wave spreading over grains of sand. This was usually done at great human cost, as most of his opponents were heads of state. But his team of advisors provided him with the best possible insights to make his strategic moves like a chess master.

There wasn't a time when he wasn't calculating his moves with great care and deliberation. Bartholem was one of his most amazing moves on the board. Eight years ago, Bartholem's wife suffered from an illness that Bartholem was unable to cure. The state of her illness gradually worsened until it was necessary to call a priest to administer the Last Anointing.

Bartholem turned to Levernon in desperation and asked if he, the king, could personally ask Karnomen to preside over the ceremony of the Last Anointing.

He believed that it would help his wife and hopefully prolong her life if the Eye of God personally took care of her. Karnomen, out of respect for King Levernon, agreed and came to Bartholem's house at midnight one moonless night.

Levernon remembered the story that Bartholem had told him as if he had been there in person. Barthole's dying wife was an unfortunate possibility, but a real one in Levernon's mind. In any dire situation Levernon encountered, he always figured out a way to use it to his own advantage. The king could not waste even suffering.

After Levernon convinced Karnomen to give the Last Anointing to Bartholem's dying wife, Levernon called Bartholem and told him to speak to Karnomen in person after the ceremony. He ordered Bartholem to pretend to be angry with Levernon. "You can blame me for your wife's illness. Tell Karnomeno that I caused her by ordering you to care only for me. If it weren't for that, your lovely wife would be healthy."

Bartholem did not understand the meaning of this deception, although he repeatedly demanded an explanation. He was so absorbed in his wife's illness that his interest was weakened. Levernon kept repeating that it would clear up in time and only urged him to make his anger convincing. He wanted Bartholem to tell him everything that happened afterwards: "word for word", his employer - the king - told him.

Karnomen swallowed the bait like a vulture swooping down on a fresh carcass. When Bartholem confessed to his Holiness that his wife was dying because of his commitment to the king and that he despised the king for his self-centeredness

ness, Karnomen saw his opportunity. He sympathized with Bartholem and suggested that they could meet again to discuss his anger and how he could "release it for higher purposes."

"You cannot keep this anger, my friend," Karnomen advised, "it will destroy you. Your lovely wife will be fine, don't worry. I took care of her soul with tonight's ritual. When her time comes, heaven awaits her. You need to take care of your anger now so you can enjoy the time you have left together."

"Thank you, Your Holiness," replied Bartholem. They met again in about two weeks, a few days after Bartholem's wife died of her illness. During this next meeting, the two discussed a number of topics. Many of them involved King Levernon. Levernon told Bartholem very precisely what to play with Karnomen. He never explained the logic of the thing or its ultimate purpose to Bartholem in a way that he could understand his king's wily tendencies.

"Agree with him as much as you can," advised Levernon, "especially when he speaks ill of my politics or me personally. Let him know that your anger remains and that you feel powerless to release it or to quell its flames."

The king insisted that Bartholem must befriend Karnomen and that he must remain open to any suggestions Karnomen might make. Levernon knew that Karnomen would try to use Bartholem to further his own agenda. When he trusts Bartholem, he becomes a great spy for the king.

My father was a good teacher, Levernon thought as he returned the window curtains to the position she dictated gravity to heavy velvet.

"I suppose we'll meet in the King's Chambers," said Samuel. "Unless you'd rather meet here."

"No, the Royal Chambers are ready," Levernon replied. "Is everything ready?" Samuel nodded and leafed through the files behind his desk.

"I don't expect any problems... for us."

"That's good," said Levernon. "Let's be fair, but let's push them into a corner they'll never get out of."

This is without a doubt the highest form of entertainment."

Samuel smiled and recognized the inflated ego of his king before he "killed". He knew that Levernon would try to squeeze the Church for its past interference with the Royal Family. Despite the fact that Karnomen was merely following in the footsteps of his predecessors, Levernon made him responsible for every unpleasant and painful move, as if Karnomen represented an adversary that was thousands of years old. The king will crush him, Samuel thought as he walked out of his office and followed the king's magnificent robes fluttering down the hall like a monarch butterfly looking for a flower.

Chapter 31. Relying on the Stone

Maia, with Simon's help, prepared a meal of steamed fish meat. Simon was singing a strange song in a language Maia didn't recognize. As he did so, he chopped mushrooms and added a mixture of roots - some of which looked more suitable for horses than humans. The cottage Simon lived in was remarkably clean and well-maintained. Considering how long Simon had lived in it, it was an absolute miracle. But everything about Simon could be said to be miraculous.

"How do you do it?" Maia asked, knowing her question was vague. However, she was curious how Simon will respond.

"I assume you're asking about my longevity?"

Maia nodded and glanced towards Kamil who was sleeping. Joseph was on an errand to refill their water supply, so there was peace and privacy to allow Simon to talk about what was on Maia's mind.

Simon stopped cutting for a moment and closed his eyes as he tried to access a very old memory.

"When I first discovered the Oracle, I was a young man..." Simon paused and sighed at the memory for those times. He thought that maybe they were someone else's memories.

"I left my parents at home when the war stretched out its mighty hand in search of more blades of its wheel with which to crush the village of Anterbury in the south..." "You were in the war?"

Maia shouted.

"I ran away. The only good thing about the war was that it led me to a mission I could not have imagined."

"Did you come to this forest?"

Simon nodded in agreement. "In those days, Dohrman Forest was owned by the Royal Family. When the war started, those who were against the regime - like me, fled to the sanctuary of this forest, but were either killed by the royal

patrols, or starved to death. Whoever was found in the forest was shot on sight because it was assumed that he was an opponent of the regime. The King's soldiers were always happy to enforce the King's Edicts, as they received two gold bars for every dissident killed. The forest was therefore quite... deserted."

"But then how did you find the Oracle in the middle of all this?"

Simon returned to his slicing, looking down at the blade in his hand. He remembered that this knife was his only weapon and source of survival as he made his way deeper into the forest hoping to remain undetected. Paranoia saved me then.

"I slept in the trees at night. I was too afraid of being found. I knew the soldiers wouldn't even bother to wake me up if they found me sleeping. The prospect of being shot through the heart with an arrow in my sleep... didn't help my sleep much. One night I wanted to prepare a tree for sleeping. It was the kind that had large branches extending from the trunk in a semicircle at the height. I was putting some support branches across them when I heard a noise."

Simon stopped cutting again as the thoughts began to flow back.

"The noise was caused by a small patrol searching the forest. It was the first time I had seen them since I entered the forest a few weeks ago, but I was very aware of their practices with dissidents."

"What happened?" Maia asked, searching Simon's eyes as if she expected to see the answer there before hearing it.

"The problem was that I left my shoes down at the base of the tree." Maia took with her the confession la.

"I could have climbed much better with bare feet," Simon replied to Maia's questioning eyes, "but I was already high in the tree and there was no time to climb back down and get my shoes. I could only hope that the soldiers would go another way, or that they might pass by unnoticed in the evening light. But all the soldiers - and if I remember correctly, there were five of them - had torches."

"What happened?"

"They came under the tree I was on and found my shoes. They noted that they were well made and that it wasn't the kind of shoe that one would throw away. The soldiers immediately alerted and split up to find the owner of the shoes."

"Did they look up?"

Simon's eyes sparkled as the memory continued to grow in his mind.

"No. For some reason, the idea that someone could climb trees in the depths of the forest, at night, didn't occur to me." Simon laughed. "I would be safe as long as I didn't make any sound that would give away my position. However, the soldiers remained at the base of the tree, thinking that the owner of the shoes might return."

"How long did you have to be quiet?"

"That was the problem," Simon frowned mysteriously. "I wasn't."

"Did they catch you?"

"I thought my best bet would be to climb a little higher so that if they looked up, they wouldn't have a chance to see me. But as I climbed up, a few pine cones fell down. You can imagine how loud their fall was in the absolute silence of the evening forest."

"Did they start shooting at you?"

"One soldier said they would shoot an endless volley of arrows if I didn't get down from the tree, so I thought it would be better to be shot on the ground by a prisoner I could see than to be shot from a tree and fall to the ground like an animal. As I danced down the tree, I half expected to be shot from behind at any moment, but another part of me didn't care at all. I was cold, tired, hungry and angry at everyone and everything. It had been two weeks since I burrowed deeper into the forest.

I was hopelessly lost and knew that I was going to die. It was just a question of which side it would come from. An arrow would simply mean a quicker end."

Simon paused and looked across the room to make sure Kamil was still asleep.

"The truth is... I've always been sick of soldiers, especially those of the Supreme Guard. But, thank God, the soldiers that night were not typical soldiers."

"Why?" Maia asked.

"Put your hands up so I can see them," said the soldier. Simon began to re-live the experience. It came as flash, before he could answer Maia's question.

"What the hell are you doing in that tree?" demanded the soldier. "What kind of idiot are you?"

Simon began to turn to look at the soldier. "Leave your hands behind your head and turn to face the tree. All you need to do is answer my question, you understand!"

Simon nodded. Why didn't he kill me already?

"Where are your friends hiding... are there more of you?" inquired the soldier, pointing upwards with his bow and arrow.

He was small, as these soldiers tend to be. Often, those who have a weaker constitution, who have a less athletic figure, are sent to dissident patrols, because it is assumed that dissidents are poor, unarmed and weak.

Simon shook his head, not sure how to respond without an arrow in his back.

"I'm alone."

"I don't believe you!"

"I'm alone."

"You're a complete idiot, that's for sure... telling me such fucking lies." The soldier kicked his boots on the ground. "Where did you get those shoes?"

"They're mine," Simon replied.

"They are too luxurious for a common man," muttered the soldier more to himself. The soldier thought that when his companions returned, they would search the surrounding bushes. He did not want to shout while chasing the dissidents so as not to reveal their position. That was the prescription. Dissidents are always in groups. He had his bow pointed at Simon's back and was only ten feet behind him. "How the hell did you get into this world?" asked the soldier.

"I was born in a little village called Lenton," he replied. Simon wasn't sure why he was answering.

Maybe he felt lonely and it was nice to have someone to talk to, even when he was about to kill him. "Were you there?"

"Shut up," came the curt reply. "This is what needs to be done now. Shut your fucking mouth and we'll quietly wait for my lieutenant to come back. Then we'll shoot. Until then, keep quiet, if you say a word, I'll start shooting sooner. Just be facing the tree and be completely still."

Simon was stout, broad-shouldered, and because his shirt was two sizes too big, his figure towered over the soldier in all dimensions. The soldier stuck the handle of his torch into the ground. It was close enough to Simon that he could feel her warmth. Simon's own shadow seemed to be hugging the tree that only moments ago he had hoped would provide him with safety and sleep. He wondered what the tree would think of this strange encounter. It's easy to be a tree, no doubt, he thought.

Simon's hands were growing tired in their position and his knife, tucked tightly in his trousers under his shirt, became his new obsession in the silence of this wait. If he wants to live to see tomorrow, he must do something before the other soldiers return.

His body began to tense, his muscles ready for the action he was mentally rehearsing. He looked back briefly back at his captor, looking for some advantage to exploit. The soldier stretched his bowstring.

"I told you to stay calm. Do you want me to put that arrow in your neck, or do you prefer the heart?"

Simon closed his eyes and in one motion jumped to the left in a flawless roll. As he turned, he grabbed the po-torch and threw it at the soldier. The sound of a flying arrow whizzed past him and Simon immediately scanned his body mentally for any pain. But he didn't find any.

It all happened so quickly that the soldier could only follow the path of his arrow as it headed into the dark forest. As he reached into his quiver for another arrow, he saw Simon drop the torch and just managed to turn before it hit him in the shoulder. The fire jumped to his shirt and quiver of arrows. In the resulting chaos, Si-mon grabbed his shoes and ran into the forest as fast as he could. The soldier was writhing on the ground, trying to put out the fire, screaming at the top of his lungs. Simon heard more voices in the distance and guessed that as he ran away from the epicenter of the area they were searching, the other soldiers had run back. He also knew the other soldiers had torches, so he kept an eye out for any signs of light.

Simon ran as fast as his strong legs could carry him away from the screaming soldier. When he was far enough away, he crouched down and hid behind a huge boulder several hundred meters from the incident site. His lungs were burning and his legs were bleeding. He put his hand over his mouth to muffle the sound of his labored breathing. Through the dark fingers of the trees he could see a torch nearby and heard the sound of a soldier breaking through the thick forest undergrowth. He watched as the scouting soldier passed only about twenty meters away without noticing his position. He suddenly realized that his legs felt something strange. In the darkness of the forest, his hands instinctively reached down to feel the ground. But it wasn't land. Am I dreaming?

"What was that?" Maia asked, pulling Simon back from his reverie.

"It was some kind of hard metal, and it had something engraved on it..."

"Oracle..." Maia's mouth opened wide at the realization.

Simon nodded. "I leaned on the Oracle. At that time, however, no one knew about the Oracle. It stood in this forest in complete seclusion for thousands of years."

"What happened next?"

"I remember thinking I had discovered something magical. I looked up in the darkness and saw the vague outline of something huge - a stone monolith towering over me - like a tall tree. When I looked around, I saw two more."

"Are there three monoliths?"

"I felt like a small animal among these stones," Simon continued. I got goosebumps and I know I wanted to run. The soldiers extinguished their fire and regrouped, and I thought they would spread out to look for me. I was worth two gold bars, but what's more, I embarrassed them and they will want revenge. I heard, however, a distant voice repeating a single word over and over again."

"What word?"

Simon rubbed his eyes as if he was tired. "The voice said: Stay."

"And you think that voice belonged to the Oracle?"

Simon nodded. "Every muscle, every thought, every feeling in my body was telling me to put on my shoes and run away as fast as I could. But I sat there, in the shadow of some ancient formation - perhaps man-made, perhaps something else entirely - and I discovered it. I couldn't run. If I ran away, I would never find her again. I had no choice, it was a new moon and whatever was left by the evening sun was long gone."

Maia brushed her hair behind her ears and glanced briefly at Kamil, who was still sleeping.

"What happened then, did you leave traces behind?"

"That's exactly what I assumed," replied Simon, "but the forest floor was dry and since I was barefoot, my tracks were undetectable, especially that night. My captor was so absorbed in the fire that he did not even notice in which direction I fled."

"So where did the soldiers go?" Maia asked.

"To my surprise and great relief, they went in the opposite direction. Back to your base camp, apparently. I think my captor was badly burned, so he decided that his healing was more important than my immediate death. After they left, the forest became quiet and dark again, and I found myself so tired that I took my boots, used them as a pillow, and fell asleep on the ground for the first time in two weeks that night. What I didn't know was that I was sleeping on a gold medallion, the circumference of which, I later measured, was a full hundred and eighteen feet."

"My God!" Maia breathed out.

Simon nodded. "I had strange dreams that night, and when I finally woke up in the morning, the sun was on was beginning to share its light. It was the first opportunity to see what I had actually found."

"How did it look?"

"The monoliths were covered with strange markings, and the gold medallion I slept on was only around the largest of the three stones. The stones were arranged in a triangle shape and I couldn't even imagine how they got there. Due to their enormous size, there was no technology on earth that could move those stones, let alone place them vertically into the ground. No, I knew I had stumbled upon something from another world. The locket was also covered in complex symbols, but the symbols seemed to have astrological connections, as I recognized one of the symbols."

"Were you an astrologer?" Maia asked.

"I've studied her, but I can't say I'm one of them," Simon replied, frowning a bit.

"How did you first connect with him?" Maia asked.

"The next evening I was sitting in the middle of the triangle, on the very edge of the medallion. There were some strange markings, and in order to see them better, I tried to clean them of the dirt and debris that had settled on them. I went deaf while doing this. I didn't hear anything. Even when the forest is completely silent, there are still sounds... a background hum that travels through the forest. When this stops, you will find what silence really is.

"The next thing I found out was that I was going blind. I lost all sense of perception. It was like something was turning off my senses one by one. Then I lost the sense of touch... the sense of being in the physical world. Then fear flooded my body as all I could think of was that I was dying. And because I had just discovered such a stunning creation, I didn't want to die."

Kamil moaned a little and Maia excused herself for a moment to check on him. She returned in a moment. "It's in okay," she whispered. "Go on."

Simon understood Maia's instruction and lowered his voice. "Then I felt like my body was melting. I had no sensory perceptions. Nothing but darkness. The only thing I knew, and I don't know how I knew it, was that I was somehow breathing. I could feel my breath and that was comforting for some reason. Every time I

he breathed in, I felt it might be my last breath, so I held it in, and when I couldn't take it any longer, I breathed out. It could have been so... I don't know how long... I had no sense of time at all.

"But somehow I felt a certain presence out of this emptiness. I felt like she was circling around me trying to- she was trying to find her way into my space and my time."

"Were you afraid of this presence?"

"More than can be described," Simon admitted. "But at the same time, I was seized with curiosity. Feelings of exploration continue- they trotted along and it seemed to be getting closer as I began to feel the words seeping into me."

"What do you mean?"

"The words were in some foreign language," Simon replied. "I couldn't understand their meaning, but at least I knew there was an effort to communicate. I heard a voice speak, and I guessed the words, but my mind did not take them."

"Like what did it sound like?" Maia asked.

"I don't remember that," Simon answered without thinking - disturbed by his reverie. "But then I understood that the intelligence is not trying to find the usual language. The words were energy vehicles, similar to vibrational capsules of information that allowed me to be raised into the vibration of the intelligence I encountered... so we could communicate."

"She was preparing you?"

Simon nodded. "Yes, something like that. It was very similar to being tuned to a different key. But we haven't spoken yet that day. I was only retuned. The first communication came many months later and happened by accident."

The shuffling of working feet began to be heard around the cottage. Maia and Simon looked out the small window and saw Joseph struggling to carry four jugs of water slung over his shoulders. His shirt was wet from the water pouring out. They rushed to his aid and their conversation ended unexpectedly, like fire engulfed in water.

Chapter 32. Heaven's Law

Karnomen and Torem were ushered into the King's Chambers, a magnificent and spacious room with a ceiling that vaulted thirty-six feet high. It was engraved with intricate rays that criss-crossed the ceiling, filling it with all manner of snakes, dragons, gargoyles, and every other creepy creature imaginable.

It was a good reason for one to look at the earthly plane.

The two guests were told that the king would join them shortly. In between, they were served tea and a small plate of biscuits spread with honey. Both Karnomen and Torem were hungry after their journey. Thanks to getting up early in the morning and the necessary preparations, they forgot about breakfast. As the servant left them, the men quickly took their tea and biscuits and sat down. They hoped the king wouldn't come for at least a few minutes so they could eat.

"I'm afraid my legs aren't serving me well today," Karnomen announced. "Too many stairs in this palace and too many years of this body is not a very good combination." He tried to smile, but somehow it got lost in the much more necessary sipping of his tea.

Sitting next to Karnomen, Torem reached out and touched Karnomen's forearm. "I don't like to hear that your Eminence. Is there anything I can do to ease your pain?"

"You can settle our matter with Levernon. That will ease my pain." Karnomen chuckled to himself and took another cookie.

Torem smiled in understanding. Karnomen told him that he was to come with him, only a day before. It was a test of his courage to face their enemy. Karnomen was preparing him.

The two sat at a black marble table that was inlaid with white alabaster in a very elaborate geometric pattern. The table was not large, but eight people could sit comfortably around it. He was like an island in the sea; in a room whose emptiness was interrupted only by massive columns at all four corners.

There was a porch along one wall and a huge barred window along the other. On other walls were portraits of the Royal Family going back eighteen generations.

Suddenly the door opened noisily and Levernon strode in, glancing at the table with his piercing eyes. "Excellent, I see the tea and biscuits came in handy."

Karnomen was caught with his mouth full, so Torem stood up to speak as a substitute. "Thank you- we eat for your hospitality, Your Highnesses. We are honored to be your guests."

It was customary for the First Initiate not to pay respect to the King as they considered themselves equals. But King Levernon despised this custom.

"As you can see," Karnomen added, still chewing, "they are delicious."

"Either that, or you are very hungry after your journey," Levernon said, sitting down across from Karnomen and pouring have some tea Samuel closed the door behind him and joined the small group with a simple nod.

"Please tell me, if you would be so kind, what are your ideas with the Oracle?" Karnomen asked, moving his empty plate full of crumbs towards Levernon.

Levernon looked at Torem before looking directly into Karnomen's eyes.

"This meeting is only to clarify what has already been agreed upon. My plans with the Oracle are such that I want to understand the future - the future you have been voraciously consuming for hundreds of years. Have you ever considered the disadvantage you have placed our country in by denying me access to this information?"

Great, he's angry, Karnomen thought. So he will perhaps be more hasty. Karnomen looked at Torem and cleared his throat.

"Despite what you may think, the Church did not share the information received from the Oracle with anyone. Access is strictly forbidden to all but me and a handful of carefully selected High Initiates whom I trust. As for the disadvantage of our state, I have seen no signs that our state - the most powerful on the planet - suffers from a lack of access to the Oracle."

"I imagine," Levernon interrupted, "I'll take on the Oracle in its entirety—" "You said we'd take on—"

"Yes, we," Levernon interrupted, his hands raised and the corners of his mouth reflecting his large ego.
"We will share it, don't worry. I only want to save the Oracle from those who might try to destroy it."

He thinks that Hugelitod is still a threat. Karnomen sat down in his chair, the pain in his legs subsided briefly she pointed at his face like a passing shadow.

"You don't have to worry about anything from us. There is no hidden threat in the Church, I assure you. What's more, we have developed multiple defenses to protect the Oracle. Those defenses are impregnable and have never been breached."

"Not even the army?" Samuel asked.

Torem leaned forward to speak, but Karnomen was quicker to react.

"Except for a select few that I have chosen, no one knows about the Oracle."

"We know that," Levernon replied. "Are we among the chosen few?"

Karnomen laughed and made his bony hands into a turret.

"How do you know we didn't use Bartholem to inform you? How do you know we haven't planned every aspect of this co-ownership with the help of the Oracle, in the name of getting something even more important to us?"

Levernon tapped his fingers on the black table, but the marble muffled the tapping of the unconscious attack of his fingers. His mind worked feverishly with the possibility of what Karnomen claimed.

"And tell me, what should be this value that attracts you?"

"In a word... non-dependence," Karnomen said slowly, as if savoring every syllable. Levernon nodded his head. "The Church is the state religion! I own it. Have you forgotten this fact or are you crazy?"

Levernon waited for an answer, but Karnomen remained silent, mesmerized by the mystery of his impossible statement. Levernon looked at Samuel as if expecting his insight into the matter, but Samuel did not speak.

"So you're offering me the Oracle in exchange for the State of Church Independence? Is that what you suggest?" He asked Levernon and his face was contorted with disbelief.

"And before you answer, let me remind you that it is within my power to simply take the Oracle and nothing for do not offer in exchange. Why should I offer you independence?"

"For the same reason that I, as the supreme leader of the One Church of our world, can give you access to the power of Heaven."

Levernon laughed and smacked his chin. "You forgot something important in your calculations. I don't believe in your authority. What's more, I don't believe in an afterlife, so I don't really care if you decide who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. Because to me they are just two sides of the same fictitious coin."

Karnomen smiled and played with the handle of the teacup with his fingers. "You are no different from anyone else. Whether you believe in the afterlife or not, you fear it. And in this fear you are mortal and vulnerable. You are no different from

an uneducated person. But I can offer you new power - unsurpassed power - if you follow my wisdom."

Karnomen paused for a moment to read Levernon's face. He could see his flamboyant depravity whispering to him all kinds of reasons to end this conversation and simply get Karnomen to sign the papers that Samuel had no doubt designed so that ownership and custody of the Oracle would be transferred. To enable legal theft.

"My Church has ruled the Oracle for many years. We used this approach to prove the afterlife. We know exactly how it is structured, what laws it governs, and how one can apply its knowledge to prevent the horrors of the warped spirit world."

"So what exactly are you offering," Samuel asked, opening the folder with a hint of disinterest in his eyes he looked down at the legal document and pretended to read.

"We'll sign your piece of paper," Karnomen said, looking at the folder, "and you'll sign ours. Our is an agreement between the Church and King Levernon and his successors, whoever they may be."

"And what's in that deal?" Samuel asked.

"The Council of High Initiates will be granted sovereignty and their lands will be returned to them. In exchange, the Oracle will be offered to the state and the land it sits on will also be handed over, including the entire security system that is part of the land."

"More importantly, though," Karnomen continued, staring into Levernon's eyes, "I will forgive you of your sinful nature and grant you an easy and honorable afterlife. Without this pardon, I can assure you, with all the wisdom that is instilled in me by our Creator, that you will wish that the afterlife was indeed just a fictional story."

Laughing, Levernon pushed back his chair, rose to his feet, and pointed a finger at Karnomen maliciously.

"Are you damning me to hell? My bloodline has ruled this land for longer than your Church has existed. We have brought reason to this world through the civilization of mankind. We have tried to unite the entire human species into a single State so that we can be more efficient and harmonious. These are the sins for which you damn me—are you going to hell?"

Karnomen followed his cup of tea with his eyes, mesmerized by its pastel colors and slant a distorted reflection of his own face.

"How many lives have you wasted, my dear king? In the wars you started Didn't you kill more people than you clothed? Didn't you burn and loot more villages than you built?" Karnomen let his softly spoken words float through the room like clouds of smoke rising into the sky. "The Book of Life warns against these acts of sin against humanity. There are the highest penalties for them. The perpetrators of these depraved acts will face the worst torments in the afterlife. And they are not, unlike this life, temporary."

Levernon tucked his chair firmly under the table and both Torem and Samuel rose to their feet, thinking that Levernon was about to leave. Levernon put his hands on the back of his chair and laughed. It was as if a voice in his head had just told him a joke.

"You really think I should agree to your banal contract? Even if your God were real, and if your heaven and hell were real, what kind of God would he be to let a murderer like me buy my way to Heaven? What kind of God would that be?"

"By signing this agreement," replied Karnomen, "I can intercede for you. This is the way God always works. He understands that those who exercise power in this world can err. When they repent through actions like this, they can be forgiven if I ask on behalf of the petitioner. So it is written by God Himself that this is the only way of salvation for those who exercise power."

Samuel cleared his throat. "Can I see the deal?"

Torem opened the document briefcase he was carrying and moved the brown colored folder across the table. Samuel he took it and opened it. The subtle movements of his head revealed the incredible speed with which he read words.

"And what would you do with your independence and your lands?" Levernon asked sarcastically. "They were building God's army and waging war against the State?"

Karnomen grabbed the table and held onto it as he stood up. "We're done here," he said, turning to Samuel. "You have everything written in our proposal, everything is there, including our intention with independence and with land. If you look at it, you will feel the difference. Believe it or not, your future will be brighter if you sign this agreement. You can think of her as your salvation."

"That's it, are you going to leave without signing our agreement?" cried Levernon angrily. "You don't understand what power do i have I can destroy your whole Church - take it apart brick by brick if I want to!"

"Oh, I understand your power very well," Karnomen countered. "But you seem to be onto something in your calculations

he forgot. We have the Oracle. We know what your decision will be, because this agreement is your only hope for your eternal rest in God's light. Anything you say to us in this room under these circumstances will be extinguished tomorrow. But you will have to look in the mirror of your actions every day for the rest of your life and you will have to consider how you will be judged when you stand before God. If you follow my wisdom, all these burdens will be lifted from you."

Levernon glanced at Samuel who was still reading the agreement. "So what do you say to that, my illustrious mentor?"

Samuel looked up from the folder, closed it and placed it neatly on the table. "We will study it in detail and then give it to you we will return Perhaps there will be benefits from our mutual cooperation."

"How exactly will this work?" Levernon asked in an incredulous tone. "I will sign this agreement, and you will tell your God what an orderly king I am. God will forgive me and I will be able to rely on heavenly grace after death?"

Karnomen sat back in his chair. "My legs are tired," he said, pointing to his legs as he sat down. He stretched out his arms. "Please join me. Sit down or I'll feel like a lonely invalid." Vulnerability itself is very powerful. Levernon stood defiantly.

"I accept the fact," said Karnomen, "that you don't believe any of it. Why should you? You are the most powerful man on earth. You are God in this area. No one can move you, touch you, or change your ways. What should you need from God?" Karnomen paused as the other men - including Levernon - sat down and settled into their chairs for more comfortable seating. "You are the one who defines our world, the one who sets the order to which all others must conform or be punished." "Where are you going?" Levernon asked with interest in his voice. "That I understand you," Karnomen replied calmly. "I would not have tried

to approach God with this arrangement if I thought it would fail. She will succeed.

The question remains, do you believe in your infallibility as much as those who serve you. If you believe that you are the real God, that in this immeasurable, unchartable universe you are the highest man and therefore God, then there is nothing I can do to convince God to forgive you. You have to be willing to be... human. It's the only thing that isn't exchangeable or transferable." Levernon let out a breath, trying to control his anger. "You don't understand me if you think I believe I'm God. My bloodline consists of both kings and high priests before your Church was invented. We didn't need intruders like you. You simply climbed on the

back of your Messiah and ride him like a horse. You hope it will take you to a land of prosperity and power. Whether I believe in God or not, it doesn't matter. God, if he exists, doesn't need my faith any more than I need yours. I want the Ora-kulum under my control. It's that simple. You brought all this religion into this thing like it was something that mattered. And yet that is secondary. I want the Oracle! If you understand this, then you understand me." Levernon settled into his chair as silence filled the room. Torem cleared his throat and felt his first opportunity to

tost in the emerging dialogue.

"The oracle is yours. We understand your desire and do not oppose it. We also understand that you should be the owner of the Oracle and its lands. All we ask in return is sovereignty. The agreement describes this settlement in great detail, as Samuel is sure to see. This independence will benefit both you and us. If the Church is sovereign, we will no longer be accused of being aggressors, or of participating in the continued expansion of the State. Going further, it means that the power you accumulate will be seen by all as yours, yours alone. The power of the State will be mundane and under your sole control." "Yes, but that's a problem in itself," Levernon pointed out. "Then it won't be perceived that God is on my side." Karnomen sighed almost inaudibly, but his expression showed irritation. "To think

that God is on one's side is nonsense. God does not choose sides, he brings himself into people. He brings his wisdom for ever-increasing

sharing with his flock. If he is interested in any earthly institution, it is of course the Church, because his attention is solely to the salvation of the people of the world, not to the expansion and protection of a specific State."

"And that's the problem we're trying to solve, right? You can take the Oracle by force and we are powerless to stop you. But with our help, your development with Oracle will continue much faster. With this agreement, you will also gain a new relationship with the Church. We will continue to support the Royal Courts of your Kingdom. This is all included in the agreement. I think you would do well to read it before you succumb to the fear of loss."

"Don't lecture me," Levernon replied curtly. "We simply reached a dead end. I'll take a look

on that deal of yours later when I want, but now I want to see the Oracle..." Karnomen looked

tired. He spent the best part of his life as a leader of the Church, trying to stay one step ahead of Levernon. He considered Levernon to be an Ungodly Power Trader who sought to bring his power closer to god, but only when it suited his own agenda. In cases where this was not the case, he was a raw enemy with all the ruthlessness of the devil. Karnomen knew that once Levernon controlled the Oracle, his Church would be redundant to the royal agenda. The creation of a sovereign State in which the Church would be protected would enable the Church to defend its interests in other parts of the world. This was Karnomen's final move on the board, and he wanted to make it before handing over the reigns to Torem. Karnomen's face was expressionless as he rose from his chair. His eyes were fixed on his hands, which were helping his tired body up. Torem immediately stood up and helped Karnomen with the chair. He held his arm and helped him to an upright position. It was always very difficult to keep the darkness at bay whenever he visited the Palace.

Levernon winced and raised his hands in protest. "At least tell me your answer before you go." Karnomen turned his back on the king and walked slowly towards the door. The impatience of power, he mused. "When you've read the agreement and are ready to discuss it, we'll meet at the Oracle site. Then I will make a proper introduction."

"Even if I basically renege on your deal?" Levernon asked, leaning back in his chair. Karnomen stopped at the large door and let Torem open it. He turned to face Levernon. His body was slightly hunched, his head was hooded, and his stance, while expressing weakness, had a snake-like cunning.

"Your desire to use the wisdom of the Oracle trumps any interest you may have in the matter of this agreement." Karnomen pointed his walking stick at the folder in front of Samuel. "We will wait for you to hear from us at your discretion. Thank you once again for your royal hospitality. The cookies were really, really delicious."

With that, Karnomen and Torem walked silently through the door, leaving the massive door open to the morning light in the adjacent hall. Sunlight streamed through the barred windows in the hall and fell onto the sumptuous ruby red checkerboard carpet. Only Karnomen noticed this sign as he felt a warm, optimistic light embrace him.

Chapter 33. Instrument of Guilt

"There's one wound, just above the knee, that worries me," Maia whispered. "It doesn't heal. I think so we should sew it up."

Simon looked at Maia with his deep eyes that saw a river of life so long it could hold seven lives. "How about you and Joseph bring some more water. I'll take care of Kamil."

Simon suggested, his hand waving towards the door like a sign hanging in the wind. "Run now before it gets even darker."

Kamil was sleeping on the floor and his forehead was wet with sweat. Candles were burning in the room, trying to replace the setting sun. Simon watched Kamil sleep and waited for Maia and Joseph to leave the cottage. Their voices finally faded into the great silence of the forest.

"Camille, can you hear me?" Simon knelt down next to Kamil and lightly shook his shoulder. "Camille, wake up. I need to talk to you."

Kamil's eyes moved and then opened with the glassy expression of a person lost in a feverish state. He groaned a little as he turned his head to look at Simon. He tried to focus his eyes in the dim light.

"Is something wrong?"

"Drink some water," Simon motioned. "I have to ask you something."

Kamil drank the water that Simon handed him and then nodded that he was done. "What's wrong with me... I feel so exhausted... so tired."

"You have a nasty fever," Simon replied. "Your condition is deteriorating and we need to find out why." Kamil tried to focus his eyes, but they closed with the effort. All he could do was groan at Simon's announcement.

Simon held Kamil's hand and squeezed it tightly. "Do I have your permission to try to do something about it?"

Kamil nodded weakly. "What should I do?" he whispered.

"Just listen to my voice, just my voice," replied Simon. "You have to imagine what I'm going to tell you. It will be

it requires your full concentration. Do you understand?"

Kamil nodded and squeezed Simon's hand in agreement. "Where's Maia?" "She went to fetch water with Joseph. He'll be back in a moment." Kamil visibly calmed down when he heard those words.

"Close your eyes and listen carefully," Simon said, pausing to take a deep breath. "Take a deep breath, Kamil, and when you breathe into your body, don't just feel it as air, feel it as life itself. Like energy that enters your blood and that moves through your body with complete ease.

Do you understand?"

Kamil nodded and took a deep breath, coughing at first, but then he controlled himself and took a long, concentrated breath.

"Okay, that's it," Simon looked down at the young man, watching his face that was filled with concentration.

"Sometimes," he said with calm authority, "life forces us to make decisions that bring life on the one hand and death on the other. You made a decision like that and a person died because of it... by your hand. Release this act, Kamil. Release him now. It was self defense and you are innocent. There is no need to replace one death with another. Do you understand me?"

Kamil felt Simon's grip on his hand tighten a little more and electricity began to flow through his arm. trick energy. For a moment he felt like he was imagining it all.

"I see," said Kamil. "But I hated that man so much, and I... I took his life, and I'm sure God..."

"Kamil, life in our domain is not perfect. It can be full of chaos and inconvenience. But that's why we live here. To set ourselves free to think, feel and act our way, to be a creative force... not just puppets in the hands of someone or something outside of us. And through this expression of free will, we are drawn into stories that we do not fully control. They are similar to mosaics of experience, made up of hundreds or thousands of minds. You didn't write the murder story, although you acted it out. Forgive yourself Kamila. Forgive yourself."

"I don't feel guilty," Kamil whispered, trying to look Simon in the face. "But that it doesn't change the fact that I killed a man. How can I forgive myself for such a thing?"

Simon tilted his head back and closed his eyes. He knew he could cure him, but until Kamil forgave himself, the cure would be temporary or perhaps unwanted.

"I was once in the same position as you," said Simon. "I found my forgiveness slowly and it was a journey of suffering. The forgiveness you need takes a lot of time. There is no magic potion to bring it on. All I want from you is to give yourself more time to learn how to forgive."

"Why?" Kamil asked. "What is the point of forgiveness? Even if I do, what difference will it make? I'm damned to hell. Sooner or later they will find me and kill me. There will be no forgiveness... so even if I somehow forgive myself, those in power will not forgive me." Kamil put on a weak smile and closed his eyes. "I really need to sleep..." he mumbled softly. "If I die, please bury my body. Find a nice tree as a tombstone. Hide him... say some nice words..." Kamil trailed off, his words fading into silence.

Simon understood Kamil well.

In the solitude of his cabin, Simon began to sing a little song he had learned from his father. A song that filled the room with a fervor of restlessness. The words called upon the Creator to make His purpose clear to the one who sings - for the veils to be lifted so that he may see the radiant horizon.

Simon was confused about Kamil. The veils were opaque and multi-layered. He knew that Kamil was the one who could change everything, the one prophesied by the Oracle. And instead, Kamil lost his will to live and left the door open to the other side, where the entities of the dark essence can come back at him with the insidious tool of guilt.

Chapter 34. Temples of the Beginning

It was a beautiful, sun-drenched morning as Hugelitod walked the grounds of the monastery with garden shears and thick gloves. It was the day after the ritual of his penance. It was located outside, in the middle of the extensive but carefully maintained gardens that lined the eastern boundary of the monastery. The taste of freedom was an intoxicating medicine that flowed through his body, bringing him an unstoppable sense of joy. Every tree, every flower was a stark contrast to the dull gray of the walls of his recent prison cell. Even the indescribable

the role of his atonement with Bartholem remained boxed up in a deep undisclosed corner of his mind and could not dampen his newfound enthusiasm for freedom.

As Hugelitod walked towards the inconspicuous building that housed the tools for tending the monastery's garden and lawns, he took a deep breath of fresh air infused with the scent of pine needles and the softer scent of jasmine. The lawn in this area has not been maintained. It was hidden behind a grove of red pine trees that seemed to point towards the sky like guardians. Hugelitod walked around the building looking for an entrance. She was much bigger than he thought. The stories about the mysterious garden house will be true, he thought. At the back he found a wooden door with a strange knocker - a snake coiled in a circle that looked like it was eating its own tail.

He picked up and dropped the bronze circle. He let it fall once on the metal plate. The sound was shrill and bounced off the nearby tree trunks. He was greeted by the creaking of the door and an old monk, slightly hunched at the waist, suddenly appeared from behind the shadows.

"Good morning, Hugelitod, I'm waiting for you."

The voice was instantly familiar to Hugelitod, but the monk was not. "Good morning... I came as early as my legs carried me."

"Ah, it's a fine day for running around," said the old monk, beckoning Hugelitod to enter.

Every possible gardening tool imaginable surrounded the room and smells in the room they reminded Hugelitod of a strange alchemy of grass and cold steel.

"Said you grew up on a farm," said the monk, pulling off his hood to reveal a face that was clearly burned by the fire. Although he was cured, patches of skin remained on his face and neck, which looked like fragile plastic from the severe burn. Even the top of the head, which was mostly bald with an archipelago of islands of strange flecks of something akin to hair, confirmed the unpleasant reality of a burnt body. But beneath the first impression of his disfigured face lay kind eyes like those of a sea turtle.

"Yes, he was growing up," Hugelitod replied, trying not to glare at him too much.

"So I assume you know many of these tools."

Hugelitod whirled around, surveying the careful organization of the room. All the tools were clean and stored neatly along the two long walls. The mowers were placed against the opposite walls, all in precise rows. Their steel blades shone in the incident light.

"My name is Doriah, I take care of this building... I even live here."

Hugelitod nodded and extended his hand in greeting. He was careful not to press too hard. "Nice to meet you-you." Laughed Hugelitod, looking around. "It's bigger here than I expected," he added, "but I didn't know anyone lived here."

"Yes, I've been an administrator for about... well, I think about over twenty years."

"Your assistant told me you wanted to show me something?" said Hugelitod.

Doriah smiled and guided Hugelitod to another door with his hand. "We can go ahead and talk."

Behind the door was a simple kitchen with a small table and three chairs. A tiny square window tight under the ceiling was the only source of light in the room.

Doriah sat down with a sigh and motioned to a chair for Hugelitod. There were two cups of tea from which it was smoking "I made tea, offer yourself, please."

"Thank you," Hugelitod said with a bow.

"Do you recognize me?" Doriah asked.

Hugelitod hid his surprise at the question behind a sip of tea. "No, I don't recognize you, but your voice sounds familiar."

Doriah laughed. "I am the Denial of Truth. We met yesterday, but under completely different conditions." Huge-litod gave a little gasp and immediately understood that he was in an unusual situation. The innocence of today suddenly changed to what he believed to be a dark and sinister plot to murder Bartholomew.

"I... I didn't know you lived here? Why did you call me?"

"As my assistant told you, I want to show you something."

Doriah rose to her feet a little unsteadily. "Follow me," he said, putting on his hood. "You can take your tea if you want. You'll get a little cold when we go."

The stairs descended steeply and Hugelitod was surprised by his sudden appearance. A moment ago they were still outside the kitchen door, from where they entered a dimly lit windowless corridor. When Doriah came to the alcove, he set something in there and a panel in the corridor swung open to reveal a staircase. He lit a candle and the two began to descend the ancient stone staircase that had been worn smooth. On

in some places the steps were so worn that they were concave in shape.

"I'll explain it all to you in a moment," Doriah said, looking back. "Watch out for those stairs... they're del-wider than normal and slippery in some places."

Hugelitod was glad he hadn't taken his cup of tea, because that would have only made it harder for him to navigate. As he walked down the stairs, he noticed that even the walls were made of stone and that they were perfectly hewn. The walls were written in strange glyphs that he had never seen during his studies.

"Who made it?" Hugelitod whispered in sacred reverence.

"I'll get to that in a moment," Doriah replied. "Fascinating, isn't it?"

Hugelitod wanted to agree but was unable to speak. He felt as if he had stepped into another time, or was transported to another planet.

He reached for the inscriptions. They were intricately carved reliefs with exquisite detail that only a flamboyant artist could express in stone. Such an artist who is meant for the thoughts of God. The walls were covered in this mysterious language from floor to ceiling. It was encoded in wavy lines and begged to be deciphered like the ardor of a new love.

Hugelitod barely noticed that the staircase ended as he entered the spacious room without a word. Its walls, rising twenty feet up, were the same as those around the staircase. They were filled with the elaborate glyphs of a lost civilization. Crystals protruded from the walls of this amazing room, arranged in an approximate circle pattern.

"Where... did this come from?" Hugelitod asked, still whispering in awe.

Doriah laughed like a man who had seen God and was now able to lead others to their heavenly home and observe their first encounter with the divine.

"Have you ever wondered why the Church built the center of its activity here?"

Hugelitod, still surveying the room with holy awe on his face, shook his head. "I suppose that it is because of this beauty?"

"This land has a rich mythological history. The priestess queen bequeathed it to her son. But he was not destined to be king because he had three older brothers. At his mother's insistence, this prince was firmly oriented towards religion instead of kingship. As he studied the various religions of our world, he discovered some little-known texts about the life and teachings of our savior. These texts convinced him that our savior was worthy of confession with all its attendant requisites. And so a religion was born and the first High Priest was born who did not have the rank of royalty."

"Are you talking about Primorian?" Hugelitod asked.

"Of course," Doriah nodded. "Primorian was the first leader of our Church, whose young prince set out to found a religion based on half-decomposed texts that were preserved by the devout followers of our messiah."

"The young prince, Constapo, gave this forest to Primorian and told him that he could build a Church on these lands. He had only one request, that Primorian establish Constap as the highest authority in the Church's Holy Books."

"Sir, I studied the history of the Church," said Hugelitod, "and there was nothing in it about this prince, nor any similar name. Are you sure of these facts?"

"This good prince was killed by his father, King Dohrman the Third, after he discovered that these lands had been donated to establish a religion that would rival the Royal Courts. See, at that time the Royal Family was in the position of both King and Priest and they literally considered themselves Gods. Their religion was state-sponsored deification and worship. This was done through the carefully controlled development of myths and legends that glorified their programs of expansion, as if the spirit of the universe privileged their own Gods."

"When Constap's plans were discovered, he was executed and his existence erased from the historical record. But before the king discovered his plan, Primorian discovered this temple as he and his followers explored the grounds. Shortly after this discovery, the Oracle was also found. Our religion began in secret. Only Constapo knew the plans and gave Primorian the authority to build the Church and prepare the materials - including our Holy Book, which are based on the teachings of our savior. The teachings of the Oracle came later.

And this teaching of the Oracle, while in some ways similar to that of our savior, is much more detailed and eloquent in describing other worlds or other dimensions of existence."

"It is as if our savior explained the fact that these other worlds exist, and the Oracle made clear what they are, what their influence is, and what their purpose is. Our Lord spoke to ordinary people, while the Oracle spoke to our First Initiate, hence the difference in their teachings."

"And for what reason was the Oracle's teaching concealed?" Hugelitod asked.

"It's very complicated," Doriah replied with a long sigh. "A man named Simon Atme-en discovered the Oracle. It was Simon who made the first contact with the Oracle in our age. Before that, it was the Chakobs people who built this temple, but as you can see... their language was very different from ours."

"Simon had a natural affinity with the Oracle that seemed to be mutual. According to our earliest writings, it was Simon who authored the first collection of Oracle teachings - at least as far as our language is concerned. This happened around the same time that Primorian established the Church and its teachings, liturgies, rituals, symbols and holy books."

"Did Primorian know about Simon?"

"Yes, yes, of course, but not before Simon had written the first volume of the Oracle's teachings. Simon had few followers who would study and practice the teachings...we called them Gentiles. But they were of course mystics who were taken into the deeper waters of truth. I'm sure they were well aware that if the King or any of the Royal Family learned of the Oracle's existence, they would lose their wisdom, and what's more, the Oracle would most likely be misused."

"So what was Simon doing?" Hugelitod asked.

"It became known that the Primorian had developed a new religion. Simon felt that his discovery of the Oracle and a way to communicate with it would be best protected and maintained by Primorian and his new Church, as the savior's teachings were loosely connected to the Oracle's teachings. But what Simon didn't know was that the Holy Books had been modified by Primorian to satisfy Constap in accordance with their agreement."

"What modifications were these?" inquired Hugelitod.

"I'm afraid there are too many to mention," Doriah admitted with her hands up.

"But the effort was to create a need for followership in the townspeople. To make them obedient to authority, which recorded both the hands of the Royal Family and Primorian's feathered religion."

"Why did the king allow Primorian to finish the Church when he was so angry with his son that he had him executed?"

"The king had other sons... and he wanted to show them what would happen if one of them betrayed his trust. Kings at that time taught lessons against protests within their family because the family had access to the king. King Dohr-man the Third was a cunning man, and regardless of how he had behaved with Constap, he understood that his people needed to have their own religion that would be their own... people. And so he thought it wise to have a Church. Furthermore, Constap's agreement with Primorian forced Primorian to revise the texts of the Holy Books to the satisfaction of the Royal Courts."

"Can you give me one example of this revision?"

Our savior has been declared the Universal Savior," answered Doriah.

"But it is!" This was the first time Doriah was silent, as if his silence meant "no". Hugelitod he leaned forward and stared in disbelief at Doriah. "That's blasphemy. I can't believe you're saying that!"

"There is no such thing as a Universal Savior," Doriah said forcefully. "Teachers who came to this planet are part of a collective. They do not work as isolated teachers, although theologians and historians like to portray them in this light. They are all connected. There never was and never will be a Universal Savior. And I am well aware that this opinion is blasphemy. But we agreed with Karnomen that I will tell you the truth."

"Karnomen believes that too?"

"Everyone in the Order believes that," Doriah said. "You will believe it too if you have the opportunity to study spirituality of our First Initiates."

"I'm confused," Hugelitod said with a distressed sigh. "How does all this relate to my obligation to atone? Why are you showing me this... this temple?"

Doriah leaned against one of the walls and folded his arms. "To enable you to understand."

"What understanding? I have never been so far from understanding in my life as I am now!" Hugelitod lowered his voice, but his power was unmistakable.

"Okay," said Doriah.

"Good?" Hugelitod asked. "How can this blindness be a good thing?"

"When you're confused, unsure, lost, and have nowhere to go... that's when the universe moves. The engine may appear to misfire or even stall. But really, the universe is just rearranging itself to show you the cracks in the wall. This is your crack in the wall." Hugelitod could not suppress his laughter. "Is there a crack in the wall? What is this wall I'm trying to see through?"

"It's not the wall that's important, it's what's on the other side," Doriah replied calmly.

"And what is it?"

"A deeper version of the truth," Doriah said quietly. "Right now, you're taking your world so seriously that you've gone astray. Po-you realized that you don't understand anything. Many years ago, as a child, you understood that you are not just a body. You have discovered that you are also energy - a non-physical substance that flows through your physical body. Her miraculous powers are connected to your intention and you have watched this energy manifest in your life."

"And one day you woke up to the fact that you are not so much energy as you are consciousness. This consciousness is the center of your identity, the core that expands and evolves to become something infinitely greater than you."

Hugelitod listened but did not understand the words. It was as if he had lost his ability to understand anything have Everything he looked at and heard felt alien.

"What happened to me? I don't understand how I became a part of all this."

"Then you suddenly realized you weren't even conscious," Doriah continued, ignoring Hugelitod's doubting moans. "Rather, you are part of a larger unified mind. Minds that oversee the horizons of space-time. Everything that happens in this realm takes place in this unified mind, which is part of an immeasurable mosaic that has nothing to do with the life or consciousness of the individual."

"After living in this realization, you are like a snake shedding its skin again. You will be reborn with the understanding that you are not this Great Mind. You are simply a harmonious wave of light flowing in utter bliss. You are not the universe, nor the occurrence of anything, nor the consciousness of one mind. You are without direction, without purpose, without duty. You are simply one who experiences boundless joy. In this state you live in eternal gratitude."

"Then the impossible will happen and you will understand that you are not this harmonious wave of light living in bliss. No, you are absolute consciousness. You rise in awareness and fall in ignorance. You contain all things within you. You live and you die. You know and you don't know. And every time you reach a base of understanding, you jump into a position where you lose your certainty."

"And you want to know what accompanies this uncertainty?"

"What?" Hugelitod asked, his mind suddenly focused and alert.

Doriah cleared her throat and took a deep breath. "As I still conscientiously peel the onion of who I am, why do I do it? Why do I care about who I am? Why am I trying to find out the truth when the truth keeps escaping my grasp and becoming something else? Why am I looking for salvation when I can never be delivered? Why am I looking for understanding when that understanding is never permanent? Why does this certainty always turn into uncertainty?"

Hugelitod sat down on the temple floor, his frustration evident in his demeanor. "So what is she like? response? Why am I doing this?"

"Why do you think you're here?" Doriah asked.

"You mean in this ancient temple?"

Doriah nodded, his eyes possessed by a nameless power. Hugelitod shrugged and shook his head.

"I don't know."

"Have you heard anything from me that reminds you of the teachings of the Church?"

"No."

Doriah smiled at Hugelitod's bitterness, which clearly radiated from his body's energy signature like the aurora borealis.

"This is because the Church has an external teaching and an internal teaching. The Church within the Church."

Doriah sat down across from Hugelitod. "Those of us who have been fortunate enough to encounter inner teaching live in a different understanding. This understanding cannot be shared with those of external learning. It would undermine everything the Church was building."

"So the top leaders of the Church don't believe the doctrines they preach?" Hugelitod asked.

"We believe other versions. There are similarities, but they can only be found on the surface." Doriah looked directly at Hugelitod, his eyes sparkling like crystals behind him. "So my question is still the same, why are you here?"

"I thought the question is, why am I doing all this?" Hugelitod whispered with growing indifference in his voice.

"Those are different angles of one triangle," said Doriah.

"Okay, I suppose this is to discuss my atonement... to go over the details of it..." "No, it's not like that. Go deeper!"

"No, I understood... the moment we walked down that staircase that there was something else, some other plan at play."

"When you look at these walls, what do you see?" Doriah asked.

Hugelitod studied the walls and pondered their meaning. "I see the language of people who felt these words - let them be theirs whatever the meaning - it was important that it be preserved. I imagine they were prayers to their God."

"Those are the words of the Oracle," Doriah corrected. "They are his teachings several thousand years old."

"Did you decode them?"

Doriah nodded.

"Then I imagine there is something for me to learn?" pitched Hugelitod. "That's why I'm here. But why are you showing me this if it has nothing to do with my atonement?"

"Because you need to understand why you should concern yourself with putting off the mask and joining the inner Church. Just so you will have the motivation to make your atonement. So I'll leave you to explore this temple for the rest of the day..."

"Are you going to leave me down here?"

"Are you afraid?" Doriah asked in surprise.

"I spent the past week in a dark cell and today I was really hoping to enjoy the sunshine, the wind..."

"Do not underestimate this temple, Hugelitod, nor the wisdom of my instructions. There are many chambers in this temple and each of them is worthy of your exploration."

"But I can't even read this language..." "It doesn't

matter!" Doriah raised her voice. "What you don't understand, this place is the source of the Church, it all started here. You will learn just by being here. Listen and stay open to everything within these walls. When you're ready to leave, I'll look for you."

With that Doriah stood up, using the wall behind her for support as she did so. "There's a lamp over there. I suggest you take her before I leave with the only light in this temple. I also recommend that you consider why you are trying so hard to be a spiritual person amidst the gravity of thousands of levels of darkness."

Hugelitod watched silently as Doriah ascended the worn stairs, a candle in hand that revealed the outline of his hunched body. Hugelitod was alone in a strange world, and even then, if it had been the source of his Church, it was nothing like the river in which he had spent most of his life in passionate study. There was only one thing he could think of doing: cursing God. But he defended himself.

Chapter 35. Dreams of the Heart

Queen Samaria was one of the most beautiful and influential women to ever grace the earth. She was in every way worthy of a statue. Her body was superbly proportioned, she had a wise mind and very often had a silent influence on the king's plans. She lived in her own sanctuary, which adjoined the royal chambers. The King often visited her and asked her advice on matters of State, hoping that their discussion would evolve into a less ostentatious activity.

The queen was the daughter of General Ontra, who was known as a great military strategist. He came from a noble Court that had produced military leaders for hundreds of years. Apart from the Royal Courts, the Court of Ontra was a unique center of power, and Levernon knew that a silent alliance was an essential part of his overall strategy. The fact that General Ontra had a beautiful daughter made this King's endeavor a subject of popular interest.

As Queen Samaria walked through the corridors of the Royal Palace, she overheard her husband talking to Samuel in the Royal Chambers. First she listened and then she entered the room with a favorite femininity. "I saw that God's Eye had left our humble palace."

Both men rose to their feet and bowed.

"You missed him by only a few minutes, my dear." Levernon said. "And he signed it?" Samaria asked.

"No, he didn't sign," said Levernon, sitting back in his chair. "Instead, he plans independence."

"For your Church?" Samaria asked nonchalantly with an innocent expression on her face. Levernon nodded.

"For my Church."

"And what does he offer us in exchange for this independence?" Samaria asked.

"Undeniable ownership of the Oracle and support and guidance in its use," Samuel replied.

"His motive," Samaria paraphrased skeptically, "is that without the independence of his Church we will not have his support in accessing and using the Oracle? Is that right?"

"In every way," answered Levernon. "Here Samuel almost convinces me that this is the right move. Do you agree with that?"

"Who am I to argue with your most learned advisor?" replied Samaria, turning and

she left the room with a seductive sway of her hips. Her bare feet left no trace of her departure. But both men immediately felt the loss of her beauty in the room.

Levernon stood to leave. "I agree with your advice, but before you arrange our next meeting with Kar-nomen, I want you to write me all the possible negative consequences of the Church's independence in a separate report. I don't care if they hit me tomorrow or a hundred years from now. Report them all. And... I want a separate report to mention all possible modifications to this contract that serve our own interest. Do it with the utmost importance, I'll give you two days to do it."

"One question before you go," Samuel said.

Levernon nodded and it was obvious that he was in a hurry to leave.

"I think it's time to put together a team for this project...do I have your permission to pick someone?" Samuel asked.

"If you remain in charge of the Royal Courts, you have my permission. But I don't want a wider circle than this one."

"And what about Bartholomew? It turns out that he is still useful to us in this matter."

"He's the only exception," Levernon replied, changing his tone to seriousness. "Give to each of your ty-him to know that this is the secret of all secrets. Escapes of any kind will meet with a single penalty."

"Yes, thank you, Your Highness," Samuel said, bowing slightly. "I completely understand your feelings."

Samuel watched the king leave the royal chambers in a swift movement. The king was easily charmed by his eagerness for pleasure, and Samuel both pitied him and envied his relationship with the queen. She was twenty years younger than him and wanted nothing to stop her power from growing as the only State Sovereign - including her son. Samuel was well aware that the Court of Ontra wanted control of the State and Samaria was their best hope to achieve this. Now, with the Oracle on the board, much more was at stake.

Samuel awoke from his reverie just in time to see the king's cape disappearing around the corner. He walked in the same direction that Samaria had gone just a minute before. The fate of power is always ugly when compulsion comes into play, Samuel thought to himself with a small smile.

* * * *

Maia knelt down next to Kamil and pressed a cool poultice made from the underground ginger root to his forehead. She watched his eyelids tremble, as if there was fear hiding behind them, waiting to take hold of his soul. She could feel his body heat even from a few feet away. And the fire of death too, she heard him say. He seemed angry and trying to drag him through his charred gate.

Maia placed her hand on the gold chain she always wore around her neck. She held it in her fingers and instinctively examined it as a measure of reassurance. Her mother gave it to her and told her never to defile it. So the chain never left her body unless she was cleaning it. He became her mother's radiant agent, and she rarely accepted any challenge without touching him for comfort. Maia quietly raised her arms and removed the chain from her neck. She fiddled a little with the clasp, which she hadn't used in months, then took Kamil's and gently placed the chain in his open palm. She formed a golden mound in its center, then closed his fingers over it and placed his fist over his heart.

Simon watched out of the corner of his eye as he cut the vegetables for dinner. "He was asking about you," Simon announced. Maia turned to Simon.

"He wanted to know where you were," Simon continued. "He reassured himself that you only went to get water and that you'll be back in a little while."

"Simone," Maia asked hesitantly, "why do I love him? It doesn't make any sense. Five days ago he was going to hand me and Joseph over to the same person, whom he then killed himself in self-defense. I should hate him!" Her voice cracked and faded into a quiet sadness. "I should hate him."

She stuttered with tears, her body writhing in silent sympathy for the one she feared for.

Simon put the knife down and walked over to Maia, taking her hand and connecting it with Kamil's. "Hold his hand and stare into his with your mysterious eyes. When you find that connection, tell him you love him." Simon whispered, but his intensity was carnal.

Maia closed her eyes and took a deep breath to balance herself. She felt Kamil's hand pulsing in her own. She heard Simon go to the table. She knew Joseph was out checking the food traps. She also heard the soft crackle of fire behind her.

Maia closed her eyes. "I found my love in this wilderness," she whispered to herself. "Your voice touches me like a long-term companion. Stay with me so we can discover this life together. i love you i love

you. I love you." Maia leaned forward and kissed Kamil's lips. However, his face remained trapped in a feverish battle with the nightmare. But Maia didn't mind. She followed Simon's advice and found her connection. She hoped that it would grow stronger in her heart so that Kamil could feel it too. For her, the walls parted and it was someone else who was worried. She lost her fear. He was consumed by love.

Chapter 36. Orphans of the Multiverse

Although the lantern felt icy cold in Hugelitod's hand, his fear of the darkness of the temple was a far greater discomfort than holding the lantern. As he turned it on, a cone of light shot out into the darkness that enveloped the outer edges of the underground temple complex. He suddenly realized that the temple was composed of many chambers branching off from the main room in which he and Doriah had been talking.

The air smelled of the earth he loved, but the cold began to attack him. He put a hood over his head to keep out the cold, although he didn't like the loss of peripheral vision. The memory of the sunshine faded in his heart with each passing minute, and he longed to climb the stairs and return to the garden where he had worked that morning.

The walls sparkled with a strange mixture of crimson and turquoise. In ancient times, the walls had been painted, but the paint had peeled off to transparency, except for a few sporadic remnants of paint that held fast to the stone walls.

He slowly made a circle, watching the light dance on the wrinkled stone surface. He was drawn to one chamber where his light caught a symbol he knew. He approached the entrance, which was arched, perfectly smooth, and only about eight feet high. A relief of a human ear was carved above the entrance arch. It was very precise and it was solitary as if to indicate that the room was meant for listening. Hugelitod passed under a strong archway and reached forward with a hand holding a lantern that illuminated the surprisingly large chamber.

In the center of the chamber was an oval-shaped stone platform about twenty feet long. The platform rose proudly to a height of about ten feet, and its base had a wide circumference that formed a plinth that gradually arched upward to support the oval platform. The curved plinth could be climbed up with little effort, and Hugelitod could see that there was something up on the oval platform, but he was unable to see what from floor level.

The table top was clearly the focal point of the room. The walls were smooth. Hugelitod noticed that there was not a single hieroglyph. Then Hugelitod suddenly realized that there was not a single straight line in the chamber. Each edge was blunted into a curve or arc. It was a toroid.

He leaned against the support post that held the stool top and began to climb it. Finding proper footing and balance, he grasped the top of the board with both hands and pulled himself up high enough to see what was on it. Lines were carved into the surface that ran at right angles across the board. Directly on these grooves were stone tablets. Hugelitod counted eight of them. Each plate had detailed hieroglyphic inscriptions and appeared to be carved into them.

At the far end of the platform was a bullet point. Hugelitod slowly found his way to look at her. He used the top plate as his source of support. When he reached the other side, he noticed a protruding step that allowed him to get up onto the platform. As he did so, he sat down in an indentation that appeared to be suitable for one person per seat. Considering it was stone, it was quite comfortable, though cold to the body. His flashlight shined on the plates and he noticed - to his surprise - that they were almost transparent, due to their thinness. What do they want me to find here? Hugelitod thought. How does any of this have to do with the Church and her destiny?

Suddenly his flashlight seemed to go limp as its battery died. He banged on the base of the lamp, hoping it would turn it back on, but instead, inky blackness spilled across the room in mock response. His fear grew as he wondered if he would be able to trace his steps back to the stairs in this complete darkness.

"Why?" he asked aloud in a melancholy tone.

His voice sounded perfectly clear in the chamber, startling him. It had a strange quality to it. It was as if his ears they were reactivated by the sound of his own voice.

"Father," Hugelitod spoke aloud, "why do you tear me away from the humble church as I have always known it and show me this heathen world of oracles and secret temples? Doriah was right, why do I try to be a spiritual person, to cultivate my faith, when the things I believe in are obviously imperfect."

Hugelitod noticed the way his voice sounded in the chamber and without the distraction of sight or any another sound, his voice seemed to be a presence in itself.

"Father, I've been walking in my sleep and I don't want to do it anymore. At the beginning of my journey to faith, I thought I knew you. Who you are, why you are, what you are and even where you are. And now that I've come this far, it's as if all my understanding and faith have flown to the stars. I am left alone, I can only console myself with mistakes and that, father, is a bitter cup for consolation."

Laughing to himself, Hugelitod waited in the silence of the chamber, half expecting God to respond.

And then he heard it. A falling blade of silence, so strong it seemed to make his heartbeat the center of the universe. It was the beckoning of a deep dark valley that pulsed in a rhythm that was simple and natural. A low hum unbound by time or space, the sound of which grew louder, brighter, and more piercing. Hugelitod squirmed in his stone seat, ten feet above the ground, tormented by the buzzing sound that flooded his heart.

"All is not clear," said a voice that appeared in the midst of the buzzing. "I am not born of fairy tales or magic, faith or the high cross of old. Your doubts, whose eyes are like those of a buzzard filled with mortal sorrow, will not find me in this world. You may be born in faith, you may be different from others, but your faith is a clear invention and nothing more."

"It's not enough to love me. The dawn prayers among the pine needles touch me, but that is not enough either. Even starlight appears dim and insignificant from a large enough distance. While you offer love, devotion and faith - you cloud yourself, buried in the garden, with a blank hypnotic stare into the faces of my weakest creations."

"If you persist in your belief, you will tarnish your intuition. Our convention is based on intuition - the instinctive recognition of all the original rays that shine at the center of your being and guide you. You tremble like a moth lost in the light as you place your faith in the divine nectar of the heart center where all windows open outward into eternity."

"I came here to explain one thing to you. My history is legendary and my story relates to many people. Some of them have already turned to dust, some are yet to be born. Until my symphony is heard here, my history and my story will be chained up and introduced among men as a nuisance beast that serves the needs of both the powerful and the weak."

"There are eternal purposes, purposes that I have empowered to guide all life - from the stars to the amoeba, from the invisible angels to the little children whose nails make paths in the hard earth. This is the path you are on, Hugelitod, and every step you take is part of my eternal purpose, which unifies and coordinates your entire life in a corridor of precision guided by my hand."

"As my oceans mirror the skies, as the wandering waves cast their weapons upon the shore, I am here in this os-blinding darkness. Do you see me?"

Hugelitod was enchanted. He was too ecstatic to speak and too caught up in a little animal soul too reluctant to believe what he was hearing or, more importantly, who he was hearing. But suddenly his eyes caught a kind of luminous form, something akin to a shimmering bright flower floating in the sea of darkness before him.

"I see a flower, is that you?"

"Do you believe the world needs saving?" asked a voice.

Hugelitod took a deep breath, his face glowing in a glassy blaze of golden light. "I believe that evil exists and that this evil, if left to its own devices, will destroy the world. So yes, I believe the world needs to be saved-dream."

"My eternal purposes," noted the voice, "remain hidden in the vessel of time, for they are clear as the sun's rays, yet life-giving. They await their translation by the hands of time. I endured both godly worship and hateful vengeance. And for a simple reason. Because I must reveal the eternal purposes. If one could see them, understand them, appreciate their trajectory, my presence would rise like a changing light in the hearts of all life."

"When termites mine the white mortar of a wall, the wall becomes unstable and may eventually fall. Termites eat mortar because they are programmed by their instincts. This is the way evil behaves. It's a program. The truth is clouded by time to challenge my image; it is kept behind the veil to nourish the faith; it is nestled in the books to keep the eyes looking down."

"And why?" Hugelitod asked. "Why should the truth be clouded and your image challenged? What purpose does it serve?"

"It allows humanity to be human," replied the voice with perfect eloquence. "There is much joy and sorrow in that magical body, and these experiences cannot be spun like some factory products. They require indirect light and the reaching hand of evolution. From this desert floor, mankind can rise to heavenly states as rich and varied as myself."

"Living on the heights of breath without fear of death is where I lead all my life. But living in this state, understanding the value of free will, is a process that has many twists and turns. The equations contain states of bliss and hidden transformations that evade the eyes of time, like the universe awakening to itself."

"The intention is to live when the central creation of my work reveals my convention not as a memory but as an activity. Not like reciting poems, but like building a carpenter. If you find a tree without branches, you will find that it has a curved root system in the ground. It is the same with my covenant with humanity. He waits until he can sprout new branches above and below and thus reveal the higher truths to all who pass through time so that they can understand them."

Hugelitod watched the flower floating in front of him. He was diving and surfacing as if he were wading through the sea. "So what I? What is my purpose? Why are you even talking to me?"

"Those who hear my voice are forever changed. This applies to you too. The prophet's reward is his springs, where the scourges of sin do not reach and where faith is worn into a new knowledge of my world and its plans. You will teach these plans to those whose love is fear. Be gentle and know that outside of their world is not inside. They wrestle in the mirror with its leaping flames, shamelessly bringing poison to peace. They are the ones that nibble the walls until they fall. Remember that. And when the walls fall, there will be no locks. There will be nothing guarded to imitate the real and pure for which I mature in the time and space that is the temple of our union."

The voice trailed off, as if sensing that Hugelitod had a question.

"Everything I thought was true," said Hugelitod, "has been taken from me, and in its place some other powerful truth is coming at me from every possible angle. I am asked to kill a man in the name of the Church as my atonement. How can I accept such a thing? Is this something you tolerate?"

The shimmering flower continued to float silently in front of Hugelitod as if calculating its answer.

"Shaking your belief system is preparation for questions that are simple to answer. If you accept the programming to believe or disbelieve, the great bell will toll the death knell because it will mean you are a fragmented being. You will fall into the crucible of devotion and recitation, where the shards of humanity will be caught by the wide gaze of the eyes, but the vessel will remain unseen."

"To see this whole, you have to be ready for expansion. It is a treasure that is poured upon you like a sea of diamonds, and in its collective light you will see the folly of your previous path. You will see that the light of your soul was not really brightened by fire, but by some strange stray current of human ingenuity."

"In your world there are huge mirrors or labyrinths whose purpose is to imprison or expel the human soul. The burden of truth is the millions of eyes of ignorance that drop the iron words of the mind into the innocent hearts of children. Repetition of delusion is a wall that surrounds you. But you were blessed with a fateful burst of heaven's harvest. You are the chosen prophet whose shattered mind is healed by my words. In my words."

"There is never a good reason to take another's life as revenge. Anyone who asks you to atone in this way is only testing your resolve. You can play their game if you wish. But the husk of your heart was peeled away by my voice, and you will never be insecure again, unless you take the light of your soul into the strongest winds of men and wastefully display it here."

Hugelitod cleared his throat, signaling his need to speak. "Who is to blame for the ignorance of the human race? Who erected these walls of which you speak, and why? And why are they part of your eternal purpose? What purpose does it serve to keep people blind to the truth?"

"Every year that humanity has walked this planet has strengthened the secret defects of the soul through separation from my voice. As the human soul became entwined with matter, it became a vessel full of mud, and its support of my form, my essence, was lost in crawling through the mud-covered landscapes. In the midst of this separation, in the trough of everyday existence, my creation succumbed to partial truths and swelling delusions."

"I do not blame anyone for these conditions, for humanity has been commissioned to descend into these worlds of great density and chaos to leave a soul imprint that will awaken the One Heart. Humanity is my parchment and the story I write on it is expanding, ascending, purifying, illuminating and awakening all beings to my purposes. The ignorance of mankind is like a current of wind that plunges into the wall of a hurricane to find itself transformed into calm. Ignorance is always a necessity for enlightenment, as you will soon understand."

At the last word, a pulse of energy descended on Hugelitod, wrapping around his body and mind like a snake of pure energy. The deepest sense of all the truths he had ever sought flowed into his mind as if he were their true vessel—their true home. And then it happened. He realized how long his inability to remember had driven him. As he buried himself in the simple sleep of the dark marble tomb. Lost but always seeking to be found.

A vibrating hand reached out and sharpened him, restoring an ancient distant memory in him that he was invulnerable to any human curse. He was no longer among the children of his flock. He saw the entirety of the multiverse, which was constructed to contain the One Heart in an ever-expanding spiral. The flapping of wings in the

with a sacred gesture, a primal swarm of light, and the sacred stirring of the unifying song surrounded him perfectly, and he wept. Tears were the only reflex his body knew.

Hugelitod saw that there was no way to falsify the truth. The truth always endures. It lives intact in the primary circuits that swirl in the unknown. Nameless cannot be summoned. The blameless cannot be cursed. The Transcendent cannot be seen by the human eye or human instrument.

Hugelitod opened his awareness chamber and saw that the flower had disappeared. He was completely calm and his heart - for the first time in his life - was alive in his mind, every pulse of it. It rushed out and revealed itself with a grunt. He waited, listened to his rhythms, knew he had no orders. He just felt the notes of his personal symphony and understood that he was touching the same vibration in all life. Whoever he meets now, he will perceive in a new way.

Chapter 37. Flower

Faint eyelids opened to the unfocused world. Kamil recognized parts of the room, bright lights, crackling fire and then a familiar sound.

"He's awake," Maia said excitedly. "Camille, can you hear me?"

He slowly turned his head and his new reality began to assert itself. "Maia?" asked Kamil and his the voice was skipping from disuse.

"Yes, it's me," she said with a bright smile. "My wish was granted, you are back in our world."

Kamil tried to smile. "I guess I should thank you for that," he swallowed hard.

"Nah, drink some water," Maia said, handing the bottle to his mouth. "You had a nasty fever for almost two days. We weren't sure if you could make it."

"Sometimes I heard you talking to me," said Kamil, drinking some fresh water from the stream. His head was caught in a sort of spiral wind from the simple effort of lifting it up to drink. He sank back onto the pillow, which was still damp from his fever.

Maia brushed her hair out of her eyes and smiled at him. "I know that this change was not due to a wish, but mine the desire was so strong that hardly anyone could resist it, not even God himself."

Kamil smiled. "Thank you." Even in his blurred state and helplessness he was able to see Maia's eyes that were full of faithful energy - the kind that makes a person new.

"Are you hungry?" Simon asked standing behind Maia.

Kamil nodded. "Yes, I do." He turned to Maia with a confused expression. "Two days?"

"Yes, you were really infatuated with that fever," she said, placing her hand on his forehead with an unconscious tenderness to feel his temperature. "And now the temperature seems to be almost normal."

"I'll bring you some food..." "No, stay with me a little longer," Kamil said, his eyes sharpening. "I feel like I miss you, maybe that it was two days, as you say, but to me it seems as if it were longer."

Maia returned to her sitting position and coughed as if some wood smoke had entered her lungs.

"I'll bring the food as soon as it's ready." Simon replied in the background, his voice quiet and soothing.

Kamil closed his eyes, stretched out his hand to take Maia's hand, which she joyfully held out to him. "I want to give you this back," he said.

Maia immediately felt the gold chain in Kamil's warm hand.

"Thank you for lending it to me. I was very aware that it was yours, and my fingers never stopped touching it. Not once."

Maia laughed and knelt a little closer to him. Her blue eyes studied him curiously. "I'm glad it happened."

"I'm not a man who has experience with women," said Kamil, "so forgive my question, but it means what if a woman like you gives a man like me her necklace?"

For a few seconds, Maia felt her mind empty of all words. Secrets must come slowly, she reminded herself. "It was a gift from my mother. You have a special meaning to me, and I wished that a part of me was with you, even though I was sleeping across the room."

Kamil's lips smiled faintly and his eyes remained closed as if he didn't want any disturbance from the outside world. "After my fever, my weakness, and all my wounds, my heart feels strong when I look at you. And in my mind I go out and find a flower for you - a beautiful yellow flower with a bright green stem - and I'd like to give it to you, if you'll let me."

Maia's face was flooded with sudden warmth. Is it possible that he has the same feelings for me as I have for him?

"I'm sorry to be so ahead of myself," Kamil said, his mouth looking tired and his eyes struggling to open.

"I'm afraid I'm still delirious with fever and feel very tired. I don't want to offend anyone, but I have to sleep... it seems impossible to resist..."

Maia stroked his wavy hair, which was tangled from his restless sleep. His breath returned to state corresponding to dream visions. His hand, strengthened by the sinews of the spirit, did not let go of the golden chain.

Chapter 38. Heroic Heights

Even from a hundred feet away, Joseph knew an animal was trapped. It squealed as only rabbits can when he feels the prison scalpel. Joseph quickened his pace, concentrating on securing the animal for their dinner.

As he passed a bend in the remainder of the road, barely visible to even the most experienced trackers, he heard a sound click on your left side. Joseph stopped and instinctively crouched. His heart pounded in his throat.

"Don't even move," commanded a stern voice. "I've got the barrel of a rifle pointed right at your head."

Joseph cursed his bad luck. Guardians!

"So the mysterious Sorcerer is finally caught," the guard announced to his partner as the two approached at a shuffling walk, rifles pointed at Joseph in unison. Joseph slowly rose to his feet with his hands raised. His whole body was flooded with fear.

"Old man, what is your name?" the older and taller man asked.

"I don't have a name anymore," Joseph replied politely.

At this the guards instinctively raised their rifles and pointed them directly at Joseph's head. His silent they ignored the answer.

"We are looking for a young man, blond with curly hair, tall, in uniform, like ours. Did you see him?"

Joseph shook his head. "I haven't seen anyone like that in years."

Lowering his rifle to his side, the older guard approached Joseph and studied him with his black eyes. "As did you come to this bruise?" he asked, pointing to Joseph's face.

"I fell in that night storm," Joseph said, trying to hide the panic in his voice. "I hit my head on some fallen branches."

"Are you here alone?"

Joseph nodded. "Yes."

"Where do you live, old man?" asked the younger guard.

Joseph heard a squirrel chattering somewhere in the distance, creating even more chaos in his mind. One of his biggest problems was the shoes he was wearing - they were Kamil's and he had just told them he hadn't seen him. "I'm still on the move, mostly sleeping in trees, setting my traps, and that's how I survive."

The guards looked at each other, laughed and shook their heads. "What are we going to do with him? He probably doesn't live anywhere."

Joseph slowly lowered his hands and lowered his pants a little. He hoped they would cover his shoes better.

"Keep your hands up," the two guards shouted.

"We're not done with you yet," the older guard said, his face darkening.

Joseph quickly complied, unnerved by their angry reaction. Various scenarios played out in his mind. He could run away, he knows the forest here better than any of the rangers who are clearly out of their usual range. But the undergrowth in this part of the forest is not thick enough to hide it. He's also old, so running away would probably just mean getting shot in the back.

He might make up a story about finding shoes floating in a creek after a storm. That would probably make him it ensured a one-way trip to the nearest station and a series of interrogations that would not end well for him.

Playing the lone wizard, he might be able to scare away these two guards and their kum-gentlemen. But he had no idea how to do it, except to act like a fool.

"Perhaps I could conjure up the person you are looking for," Joseph said.

"Shut up, old man," ordered the young guard. "We don't believe in wizards, so don't waste your breath."

Joseph suddenly felt frozen as the guards took away his hope of his escape strategy through the crazy-news.

The older guard turned to his colleague. "Go take care of that rabbit. I can't think because of his screaming, and remember, it's our lunch, so gut it."

"I'll be right back," replied the younger guard, eager to prove his usefulness.

As the young guard raced to the captured rabbit, the older guard walked around Joseph wondering what to do with him. If they had to escort him to the station, it would delay them a lot. It was four days away from the nearest station, and they would have to give up the search for Kamil. A tough choice.

As he circled Joseph, he scanned Joseph's clothing for a clue. He was chewing on a long, thin blade of grass. As his eyes slid down to Joseph's shoes, they caught on something that brought an understanding smile to his lips.

"If you have never seen the man I described to you, how come you have his shoes on your feet?"

Joseph said nothing, instead looking listlessly down at his shoes.

"Don't make a fool of me, grandpa," the guard scolded. "You know where it is, right?"

The rabbit screamed in a kind of alien cacophony of sound and defiance, then the muffled poetry of bleeding that transformed into a plume of silence - which was welcome to the ears - and painful to the heart.

For a few seconds there was silence between the two men as they adjusted to their new presence. Joseph knew only one thing: he must not reveal where his friends were. He knows these guardians - in the realm of ancient trees - where there is only one law, and he cannot risk their judgment regarding Maia or Simon. If he could somehow direct them to Kamil, only Kamil, he would like to, but the possibility seemed thousands of miles away.

With each passing second, Joseph felt his world become strangely less and less important. The golden web of hypnotic light amplified his disinterest in the world, as if his soul was seeking an exit from his body. His diminished world created a mental peace and acceptance of impending sacrifice. It must be what deer feel when wolf jaws bite into their necks, Joseph mused.

A noble devotion settled in him as he found his last strength to lead the guards from their path.

"I found his body two days ago. It was swimming in a swollen creek about two miles away. PUSH." Joseph pointed behind the guard.

The guard narrowed his eyes in disbelief. "Was he dead when you found him?"

Joseph nodded but remained silent.

"Why did you lie to us when we asked if you had met that person?"

Joseph smiled and chuckled softly to himself. It's very complicated.

"You think this is funny, grandpa? The man we're looking for killed the lieutenant of our guard station. Who- anyone who stands in the way of his capture will suffer a fate not unlike this rabbit."

"I know," Joseph replied with a reasonably serious tone in his voice. "I can show you where I am found his body if that helps."

"The problem is that I don't trust you," said the older guard. "I feel like you're one big lie."

The younger guard returned, his hands showing unmistakable signs of regurgitating a rabbit. "You found out about it anything new for the guy?"

"He's just lying. Look at his shoes."

"Jesus, it's Kamil's."

"I'll give you one more chance, just one," the older guard offered with a sly tone. "If you show us where you live- you are... your home, we let you go free. We need to make sure you're not hiding this man."

"I told you," replied Joseph, "I live nowhere and everywhere. One night I sleep in a tree and the next in a cave. I have no home in this forest, I hide no fugitive. I took these shoes to the man you are looking for. He died...about two days ago in that storm - he looked like he had been struck by lightning."

"Indeed," said the older guard, "and why do you think so?"

"His head was burnt to a coal," Joseph improvised.

"I've been working in this forest for almost eighteen years," said the older ranger with a frown, "and anyone who's had any experience with lightning has always said the same thing, that it destroys shoes, it goes right into the shoes and stains them. Take them off."

The younger guard nodded with the luscious pleasure of a captured vice. Joseph's breathing became shallower as you did he took off his shoes and obediently handed them to the guard.

The guard examined them and then tossed them to the ground. "If Kamil was struck by lightning, those shoes look remarkable - they are perfectly normal. Another lie, grandpa?"

"Maybe he killed Kamil," the younger guard whispered out of the corner of his mouth to his colleague.

"I'll give you a chance and you'll repay me with a lie," said the older guard, turning his gaze on Joseph. He was looking for some signs in Joseph's face that would seal his fate, or some key that would reveal the bitterly cold traces of Kamil.

Joseph hung his head a little. He stood barefoot in front of two rifle barrels that seemed eager to be used with just a tap of your finger.

"Grandpa, are you so indifferent to your life that you hide this murderer from us? Confess, where is he?"

Joseph didn't know how to answer so he remained silent but shook his head slightly as he watched the ground in front of him. Fresh green ferns with shades of brown fluttered in the wind like decorative waves caressing the ground. Soft mosses and golden lichens etched the delicate path as markers.

Then another level of his world dissolved and his size shrank so much that he barely felt like a human. Jaws are unpredictable. He could feel the tension rising in the guards as they whispered amongst themselves. But his soul was already reaching out, toward the powerful beckoning, the pulsating rhythm that formed around him. Then he lost awareness of his surroundings.

A blinding sound was the last memory of his body as it slowly fell down, taken in by the crying ze-me particle. Joseph pulled out before his body touched the ground. He heard the calling of his name growing louder until he could hear it quite clearly.

"Joseph, the booty is the winner. You have no other boundaries to contain you. We will take your hand from this frozen stream and move it to the top of earth's fragmentary ways. There you can run triumphantly across the sun-drenched meadows, where the composed soul can again counsel kings and be the shining spark that illuminates the upward path of humanity."

Joseph's soul felt as if it had stuck itself somewhere. Perhaps some part of him remained somewhere, where he could not return again. But the voice that called him assembled a new world for him, which was created from the Orphic impulse that caused his spirit to rise so high from the human mask that the heroic heights of the One Heart became its final wandering.

Chapter 39. The Royal Plan

When Karnomen entered his study, he was greeted by the scent of leather, which blended boldly with the ever-present aroma of ginger tea. His desk was filled with a low column of blank parchments, next to which was a remarkably carved wooden box with gold-trimmed edges, brass hinges, and a padlock. As he neared the completion of a book that chronicled his communications with the Oracle over the course of twenty-eight years, Karnomen requested that the entire book be brought to his study for final revision. He also wanted to add a volume regarding his decision to give the Oracle to King Levernon.

Each page has been handwritten with meticulous care and attention to detail. Typically only two copies were made. One was placed in the archives of the monastery's writing office, where it was scrupulously protected by multiple levels of security. The second set was stored in a secret chamber hidden in the underground temple and protected by the administrator of the Truth Forsaken - Doriah.

Karnomen's volume will be the thirty-third in the complete set of records of the wisdom and prophecy of the Oracle of Dohrman. He knew it wouldn't be the last bond, but some part of him wished he would be the last of his line. What more could we extract from the Oracle? What we know is already too much.

Karnomen sat down in his chair and with a gentle chill in his heart put on his reading glasses and began his appendix to the thirty-third volume. There was not an iota of doubt in his body that he would die after the do-date was completed and the deal was made. The oracle told him of him with irrevocable finality that he often wished he could hide from himself. But he had learned to see this peculiarity as a powerful exhilaration when communicating face-to-face with the Oracle, especially after twenty-eight years of inventing questions.

Much of what he knew was personal in nature and would never be included in the volume. His predecessor, the High Initiate Abaddon, had told him that recording the truths the Oracle explained was a mundane but necessary task. Separating personal from universal truth is an art. He was warned to see to it that only universal truths were recorded in the Dohrman Prophecy. Let the personal ones be left to the private protocol of the First Initiate, which is automatically bequeathed to his chosen follower.

After Karnomen read this protocol of his predecessor, he immediately understood what framework to give to his questions to the Oracle - those related to the defense of power, the leadership of the Church, protection from enemies, the choice of a follower and, for Karnomen, most important of all: "what a task should I finish before I die?"

Of course, Karnomen had adapted the question to include a determination of the time and nature of his death, but in retrospect this proved to be an ill-advised choice. Now, almost every minute of his waking life, he felt that every success he had ever had was a step toward the picky scythe, a gliding through the air. He was still watching the completion of his tasks and waiting for the time when they could fall down from the sky

clairvoyance and realize his incorporeal transplant of God and return it to the distant heavenly worlds. He was waiting for this secret sign of fate.

* * * *

Bartholem entered Samuel's planning room with a mixture of interest and foreboding. He knew that his best friend was a master strategist, but he also knew that Samuel often stretched his reach beyond what he understood and the Oracle was a case in point. He was a mystery, but apparently not so much to the Church, which had been his guardian for three hundred years, but to the Royal Administration, for whom he could easily be an enemy. It must be the enemy, thought Bartholomew. The spear of the gods, the usurper of human wisdom, carving his way to supremacy, institution after institution.

It was a pleasant day. The assembled team was small but influential. Bartholem felt that he did not belong here - an old doctor living alone, whose influence was only in medicine, who always only tried to understand the affairs of the state. But Samuel insisted that he must be present on this assessment team.

Hafara stood at the end of the large rectangular table like a stopped pendulum, unsure of where to go next. He was a large and imposing man in every aspect. He ran the Royal House, which oversaw the development of military technology. He was an associate of Dr. Hanoa, who was also present here. He was drinking tea, legs crossed, absent-mindedly perusing the morning paper.

Samuel was running around the room with folders in one hand and his reading glasses in the other. "Good morning Bartholomew, nice to have you join us."

"Yes, well, I'm not sure I can bring anything to this discussion," Bartholomew admitted, "but it's nice to be in your presence again, my dear friend."

Through the windows shone the distant hills bathed in the first rays of the sun, and the sky had a lavender hue which softened the horizon.

"Thank you for coming so early," Samuel announced. "I decided to limit this team to a handful from Královská Správa. Each of you must sign a document that I will hand out to you that stipulates that this entire meeting and any future meetings must be kept strictly confidential. You must not talk about our conversation with anyone who is not present in this room right now. Except for our king, of course. Is that clear?"

A low murmur echoed through the room as the three visitors nodded. Hafara sat down and quickly signed his document without reading it and moved it across the table to Samuel. Interest could be seen in his eyes, which were similar to those of an owl. Dr. Hano and Bartholem looked at the document stoically, undisturbed by its perfect legal appearance and the polite threat of death, then signed their documents in unison.

The three invited guests waited patiently for Samuel to pick up the legal documents from the table and check the signatures with a quick glance. Then Samuel placed them in a folder labeled: Oracle Assessment Team.

Samuel, as he stood, took three folders from the clipboard on the table and handed one to each guest. "As each of you knows, we are in final negotiations with Karnomen regarding the acquisition of an artifact that the Church has hidden from us for nearly three hundred years. This artifact is known as an oracle, which is well hidden and guarded on their property, somewhere deep in the Dohrman Forest, probably within ten miles of the monastery."

"Karnomen submitted an agreement, a copy of which is contained in your files. This agreement allows the existence of an independent Church State and in return the Church will provide free access to the Oracle - as a result, we will own not only the Oracle, but also the land on which it is located, including the security system..."

"Excuse me," Hafara interrupted, "but what do we know about this security system? And more pressingly, why would we enter into this deal without proof that the oracle is valuable to our agenda? The fact that he serves Karnomen and his Church does not mean that he will be useful to us."

"Levernon has already decided to sign the deal," Samuel announced matter-of-factly. "If we find that the oracle will be unnecessary for us, the agreement will be canceled. We have at least thirty days before the deal is officially sealed. During this time we have several opportunities to assess the value of the oracle and determine the direction of our activities."

"As for the security system that protects the oracle, we know nothing about it, but that will change when prove we are going with our first introduction to the oracle locality."

Dr. Hano cleared his throat. "If Levernon has already made up his mind, what is the role of this team?"

"It is up to us," Samuel explained, "to judge the value of the oracle during the thirty days that will follow - vat after signing the agreement."

"When is Levernon going to sign the deal?" asked Bartholomew.

"He'll sign her tomorrow... if this team doesn't have reservations."

"That's a bargain," Hafara said, looking through the documents in his project folder. "I don't have any worry. But I still have some questions about the possibility of our success."

Hafara leaned back in his chair and gestured with his enormous hands. "Assuming our assessment is positive, that we find this oracle cooperative and helpful, who will have access to it? Who will be responsible for its protection? The Royal Administration is made up of many different interests and agendas - not all of which are compatible. Will everyone have equal access to the oracle?"

Before Samuel could answer, Dr. Hano added his own interest. "That's one thing I agree with, but an even bigger problem is what if the assessment isn't clear or fair. For example, when an oracle-lum answers certain questions and is deaf to others. Perhaps his insights are perfect in the realm of religion, but they may be blind or foolish for science."

"It's no secret that I doubt the validity of the oracle. I honestly think the whole thing is a romantic fairy tale and nothing more. To me, it seems more likely that the Church trades its mythical oracle for independence because it knows that the oracle is either flawed or recently useless. We have proof that they planned to destroy it. Why? Why would Karnomen do such a thing when it is so valuable that it can be used as a ticket to statehood?"

Bartholem leaned forward and rested his cane on the chair. "As you know, I spent eight years in the company of Karnomen and many of his High Initiates. I know from this experience that there is no doubt that they believe in the wisdom of the oracle. They have such respect for him that when they talk about him, it feels, at least to me, like they are talking about God."

"To your second point, the destruction of the oracle was planned because the oracle itself prophesied that it would use one of the high initiates of the Church to destroy it. I believe that Karnomen intended to destroy the oracle-lum because he felt that the oracle's co-conspirator was a new initiate named Hugelitod. It seemed to him that the prophecy was coming true..."

"Gentlemen," Samuel slapped his hand gently on the table, as if patting an unknown dog. "We have enough evidence that the oracle is real and that Karnomen is not fooling us. He is aware of the consequences of wasting our precious time, so let's agree on something. First, the oracle will be valuable to all branches of the Royal Administration. Second, everyone in this room - including the dear doctor - will be granted access to the oracle of primacy. And thirdly, once this team has made its final and unanimous decision, we will enforce our recommendations as to who in the Royal Administration - apart from the King and this team - should be given access, how often and with what protocol."

Samuel's face twitched a little and he took a deep breath. "Can we agree on this assumption?"

A silent chorus of nodding heads greeted Samuel's question. "Okay, now go on. Let's start with this assumption. Let's take it as the basis of our plan. Is there anyone among us who has any objection to this?"

Samuel looked at each of his guests who were silently shaking their heads. "Then the king will sign the agreement and we will set, as expediently as possible, a date to visit the oracle and the location where it resides. The official sealing of the agreement will take place after thirty days from our first visit. But with the legal delays, it is quite possible that it will take longer."

Hafara looked up from his reading of the agreement. His face was apathetic, tired of words wrapped in legal jargon. "There is nothing in that agreement that specifies the transfer of ownership. In fact, I see nothing here to prevent the Church from using the oracle after it is assigned to the King. This is either an unheard of oversight or a planned omission. In any case, this is unacceptable."

Samuel's polite diplomatic tone masked his dismay at the thought that he, with his considerable intellect, could overlook such a mistake, his face flashing a wary smile. "My dear friend, I have taken the liberty of creating a list of those items of the agreement that are stupid, unnecessary, statistically indeterminate, or otherwise neglecting our needs. This list is contained in your project folder. It is titled Appendix B. I would like each of you to study this list because what the King will sign is a provisional agreement that is contingent on the outcome of these items, which I expect will take us at least thirty days to review. That's why there is a deadline for our assessment."

Hafar flipped through Appendix B as Samuel explained to him. "That's a good list, Samuel. I'm sure you are he captured everything here. I assume our lawyers will take care of making the official agreement."

Samuel nodded with a look of pleasure on his face. "Yes, they will."

Bartholem squirmed in his chair after reading the list in Appendix B. "I think the Karnomen are guarding every word they wrote down from the oracle. Keep in mind that they have been drawing wisdom from this... this technology for three hundred years and writing down every word. This collection is invaluable to the High Initiates, and although

I got very close to Karnomen, he never told me a single word about her. If we ask him to hand over all their documents, he will deny their existence and we will be in a stalemate."

"Then what do you propose?" asked Dr. Hana.

"Take her off the list of our conditions," Bartholem said.

Samuel raised his hand to silence further discussion. "There is nothing in Appendix B that is unacceptable, including the directive to Share Previous Documents. I appreciate your insight Bartholem, but if our assumptions are accurate, Karnomen's approval of our list will not be necessary. If our assumptions are, say, too optimistic, then this list is immediately set as non-negotiable."

"The King is well aware of the legend of the Oracle of Dohrman. It has ancient writings that mention its existence. This legend was the subject of his interest...or more accurately, a quiet inexplicable obsession. Make no mistake, our king wants us to deliver him an oracle with as many of these conditions intact as possible. If our assumptions turn out to be accurate, he is willing to throw Appendix B into the fire."

"Why is his obsession so strong?" Hafar asked. "Legends are often false pearls that turn to dust the moment you squeeze them a little. It is rarely the case." Hafara rounded his fingers, showing the crumpled pearl.

"The house of Levernon has a long history," replied Samuel, "and there are many stories—passed down from one—
nth generation to another - which speaks of an oracle.

If the oracle is all it believes it to be, then it will transform our State with its knowledge and insight into the unification of all contending states under our constitution and under our control, which has been the central aim of the House of Levernon for several centuries: to unite and consolidate so that the world could live in peace."

"With the exception of the Church," added Dr. Hano sarcastically, "because they will have self-government."

Samuel denied the comment. "Any other questions or comments?"

"Just one," said Dr. Hana. "Karnomen mentioned, why are they trying so hard for independence?"

"Not too much, but he suggested that with independence from the state, the Church would be able to expand more easily into other countries - in other words, the expansion of the State would hinder the expansion of the Church."

"You know what else is hindering the expansion of the Church?" tossed Hafar.

"Religious leaders who have slept through time. They can blame our dwindling numbers on our military expansion if they want, but what they really need to do is take a good look in the mirror and make some changes - something they haven't done in hundreds of years."

Samuel looked at Bartholem and approved of his malice in an instant reflex, through the channel of his eyes to his best friend, whose eyes were hoping for a glimmer of empathy, which they duly received. "Yes, yes, your perspective is widely shared, I'm sure, at least in the Royal Houses."

Each of the Royal Houses fulfilled a specific role in the Royal Council. Each House controlled one Seat in the Council, which had fifteen members. Houses that were important to Levernon were: Royal, Planning, Financial, Legal, Military, Foreign Relations, Technology, Land Ownership, Food Production, Mineral Ownership, Oil Ownership, Science, Health, Labor and Education.

In most cases, the members of the family had accumulated expertise over generations and had developed the necessary skills, relationships, desire and cunning to be chosen by the king who ruled all the Houses. Some of the Royal Houses have worked in their chosen field of expertise for over two hundred years. During this time they projected complete control over their Seat in the King's Council.

There were also Houses that were held by recognized experts for only one generation, or, rarely, only a few years. Houses that required vivid genius and creativity tended to be short-lived - Samuel and Dr. The Hano were shining examples - individuals of humble origins, possessing brilliant minds that literally catapulted them into the leadership of the Royal Houses.

Hafara sat bolt upright, his eyes clouded with some distant thought. "Why did you call the oracle technology in the first place?" he asked, turning to Bartholem.

"I don't know what else to call it," replied Bartholem. "It's considered alien, from another planet... so I assume it must be some very advanced technology."

"Hmm," Hafara muttered to himself. "Alien, of course."

"I think speculation is an inappropriate pastime," said Samuel, "I think we should focus our time on what we really know and base what needs to be done on that. We'll meet here in two days at the same time if it's not too soon for you. Be prepared to discuss our protocols regarding our initial meeting with the oracle. Then we shall be able to lay aside our speculations and dispose of the matter - whatever it may be - as we see fit."

Samuel gathered some files in front of him and stood up. "We're done for now. Thank you once again for your participation and remember that I have your signatures."

With that, Samuel turned and strode out of the room. It was obvious that he was running late for some other meeting.

Dr. Hano shook his head gently. "That person is involved in everything."

"It's always the Planning House," Hafara muttered in a tone that danced between admiration and envy. "It always is."

Chapter 40. A Million Questions

Hugelitod had no light, so he slid down the high slab in slow motion. Although he was careful, he happened to trip over a lamp with his foot, which fell to the ground. As soon as it touched the floor, a dazzling and confusing light filled the chamber. Relieved, Hugelitod bent down and picked up the lantern as if it were a small defenseless bird.

As Hugelitod entered the corridor, the beam of his lantern illuminated another chamber with an arched entrance about twenty feet away, and above it was a figure that looked like an eye without a lens. An empty eye, Hugelitod thought, or perhaps a blind eye.

His body was still buzzing from the previous experience in the ear chamber and he wondered if his body and mind were capable of receiving any more ethereal stimuli. But curiosity guided his feet unerringly, and he found himself led to the entrance to the chamber of the empty eye.

As he walked in, he noticed that the chamber was shaped differently than the previous one and that it was much larger. It was rectangular in shape and in the middle of the chamber stood a tall, relatively thin monolith made of copper or some golden colored metal. Could it be gold?

Near the top of the monolith was a black figure roughly the same shape as the empty eye above the entrance, only larger. The monolith was at least ten feet tall, about three feet wide, and appeared to be only ten inches deep. It was attached to the patterned stone floor via a base of semi-transparent precious stones, joined in an intricate mosaic. On one side were engravings with a geometric pattern of four interconnected seven-pointed stars. One was at the top, two in the middle and one at the bottom.

In front of the monolith was a stone plinth that seemed suitable for a person to stand on and stare directly into the eye. The pedestal was also covered with carvings depicting a complex numerical system, or perhaps some mathematics. That this ancient tribe could master mathematics?

Tentatively, Hugelitod stepped onto the pedestal and shined his flashlight on the eye, which was revealed to be carved as a beam of light illuminated the back of the monolith, inviting Hugelitod to look down and view its interior. Suddenly it happened that the shape of the eye took the form of an open mouth, and he remembered the strange experience of his mother's lips reciting a prayer for him. The memory instantly gave him goosebumps and he stood still for a few moments like a stone structure as he relived the experience of his mother's voice.

If it's a mouth, then I should probably talk about it, he thought. Or to listen to her... no, for listening was the chamber of the ear.

He turned his attention to the geometrically arranged engravings and noticed for the first time that they rose slightly from the monolith. It was like they were a big button. Hugelitod felt his hand move towards the cluster of stars. Then he began to touch the points of the star, as if guided by some stirring memory hidden so deep within him that when he tried to remember it, he jumped in fear. Don't think, you told yourself.

The panel of geometric shapes suddenly sunk in as Hugelitod removed his hand from it. The front of the monolith was suddenly smooth, as if the panel had never existed. Am I dreaming or hallucinating?

He stood on tiptoe and shone his flashlight down along the monolith. The angle was too sharp to see all the way to the bottom, but it was obvious that it was hollow. He tapped it with the outside of his knuckles to confirm his hunch, but instead of a hollow metallic sound he heard a melodious sound. Leaning closer, he whispered out loud without thinking, "What are you?"

His voice echoed down the golden shaft as if he was being taken to a very distant place. Then, in the perfect silence of the chamber, he listened carefully as his voice - a mere whimsical whisper - traveled away to some cluster of wisdom that had disappeared somewhere in space. And when he couldn't hear him anymore, he asked again with more force. "What are you?"

A voice like the voice of the earth answered. "I am the Oracle and I am at your service. Who am I talking to?"

The rounded sound entered his ears like beautiful music that had been mysteriously encoded. Hugelitod was speechless. He tried to move his mouth to answer, but it was as if his face was paralyzed and his tongue had left him.

"I suppose it is you, Doriah," answered the Oracle into the silence, "for it is you who came to me—he descends from my temple."

Hugelitod's thoughts raced. Does the oracle think I'm Doriah? I have to explain who I am. But his efforts to speak were futile. His lips were tightly clamped by some invisible force, and his sense of fear began to rise uncontrollably.

"Do you have a question for me?" the Oracle asked with complete composure.

I have a million questions, Hugelitod shouted inside his mind, but I don't have the language to express them! Hugelitod searched for a possible explanation as to why he was suddenly mute. Maybe he missed some protocol or ritual? He shined his flashlight on the wall of the chamber, looking for something he had forgotten to do. There were various carvings on the walls of the chamber, but none of them indicated any act he was supposed to do, or signs of any ritual. Then he remembered the Oracle in the forest, and that it had glyphs that one had to touch. But he had already activated a cluster of stars and it seemed to open a channel. He just couldn't talk.

The only thing left to touch was the carved mouth at the top of the monolith. He held out his hand and he kept the flashlight pointed at the hole as if he was afraid something would grab him from inside.

"I can't hear your question, Doriah. Please repeat it," the Oracle's voice echoed melodiously up the shaft monolith as a glittering constellation of sounds - right up to Hugelitod's skull.

Hugelitod touched his mouth, ran his hand over the edge of it, and felt a jolt of electricity shoot through his arm and then throughout his body. He yelled loudly in shock.

"Please excuse me, Doriah, but I did not understand your question," the Oracle's voice replied innocently.

Hugelitod found his voice, but the sting of shock left his body and mind reeling. "Here is Hugelitod, who is talking to you," he revealed.

"Hugelitod?" replied the Oracle with obvious surprise. "Is Doriah with you?"

"He was, but then he left me alone inside this underground temple. I came to this... this monolith and only now have I figured out how to speak to you."

"Memory is a wonderful thing. Do you have a question for me?" scouted the Oracle.

Hugelitod noticed a pleasant slowness in the Oracle's voice—calm, open, and strangely different from their previous encounters. "Do you remember our previous meeting?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the Oracle.

"You tasked me with overthrowing the Church, remember?"

There was a hint of disappointment in his question, but mostly it sounded like righteous anger.

"Yes," came the terse reply.

"Why? Why me? How could I do such a thing?"

"This requires you to understand the larger scene from which this prophecy comes. Are you willing to listen to my explanation?"

"Yes, of course," cried Hugelitod. "This question has consumed me since my initiation. I will be happy to to listen."

"You are like an innocent accomplice," the Oracle began, "who has discovered the imperfections of your world and accepted them as life - the way things are. Secret meetings, dark places in holy books, unfulfilled promises of light, veiled emanations. And every encounter in which you forgave, you will forget and return to the monotonous, ever-repeating creation of the already known."

"You came to my world and found me as a mercenary scout looking for his enemy and instead discovered that his enemy was his salvation." "You're my salvation, aren't you?"

interrupted the Hugelitod Oracle with obvious cynicism. "Because of you, I was almost deported to prison for life. Even speaking to you now may jeopardize the leniency granted to me by my fellow initiates."

"And yet here you are, in my temple, talking to me again," the Oracle pointed out. "I said I would listen," Hugelitod admitted, "so I do. Please continue."

"When I was discovered by the first people of your civilization, I found a man who was honest and tried to use my wisdom to benefit all who would listen. I provided him with the first volume of the Dohrma-nova Prophecy as it is known today. This volume was stolen by the original First Initiate of the Church and withheld from the public. This man whom you call Primorian then turned to me and offered to write

the wisdom I brought here to spread. I offered my cooperation on the condition that he would share the wisdom, but his sharing was limited to a narrowly selected, inner circle of priests."

"This elite group of priests became known as the Order of the Sixteen Rays. Each successive leader of the Order made the same promise to share knowledge gained from me, but instead, they created handwritten tomes and locked them away in secret cellars. None of these documents have been made available to the public. I understand the rational behind this secrecy, but it remains the dark side of Church leadership. And as I prophesied, that will change one day."

"You are the catalyst for this change, Hugelitod," the Oracle's voice carried up the shaft of the monolith with a distinct tone of approval. "You cannot appease the Church. You were born to share me with the public. I am like the quiet center that all mankind seeks, in order to find coherence in the storm of ideas that swirl like dry raging winds. The will to seek him is overcome by partial truths, and this is a great defilement of Church and State that will be exposed."

"The High Initiates believe that knowledge is too vast for the anxious minds of ordinary citizens to comprehend and care for. They advocate restrictions, bans and purges. They do this because they want to be providers of salvation and cartographers of the Abode of Truth. Their actions, however, belie their ambition and instead prove themselves to be the pimps of humanity, leading it into a wheelbarrow of fear and ignorance."

"I do not pretend to understand the limitations of humanity. But my mission is to offer what is Real to those who seek it, regardless of their skin color, their creed or their place of residence. When my truth falls on deaf ears in your civilization, I let it go. But anyone and everyone should at least try. If someone in power takes this truth and abuses it, that's okay too, because those who debase the truth will be cut off from the human family and then cry for generous hands to bring them back."

"There is no one to negotiate. There is no one who plays dice with the Real One. What is Real is not given for interpretation or abuse. If the paths to the Real remain undiscovered, who is to blame? is it me Is it the Church... the state? Is this a human race willingly surrendering to half-truths?"

The oracle paused for a moment. "Hugelitod, are you the one who has rejected your innermost calling?"

A great distance surrounded Hugelitod as he listened to the Oracle. He felt abandoned by everyone and everything. He felt an abyss of unknown depth and width in front of him, which was like a divine mirage that beckoned him to jump and promised him nothing.

"As for you," said Hugelitod, "I know something of your ways, but you offer no plans, no strategy, or even the probability of success. And you are the Oracle. How is that possible?"

"My knowledge of the future is limited to results," replied the Oracle, "I need not know the process by which results descend into manifestation. So I am not in a position to explain to you or anyone else how you should proceed in this or that matter. I can only tell you that this or that exists at this or that time.

The process must be predicted within yourself. This is why you were chosen for this task. You have a suitable interior or spiritual center that can recognize the process by which the Church will be reformed and that will cause the knowledge of the Real to be shared with people who seek it."

Hugelitod sighed as his lantern began to falter like a smoldering fire in the rain. "But isn't what you dictated in Dohrman's Prophecy too prophetic? Do people really need to know what the future holds for them? Can this knowledge not create apathy and a certain fatalism at the level of the whole species?"

"What I have brought to this planet for the past 4,200 years is the path to the Real. Yes, there are prophetic parts, but those prophecies that serve the purposes of the Church are irrelevant to people. Those prophecies that bring a sense of wholeness and purpose to the human race can be shared. I am not saying that the thirty-three volumes of the Dohrman Prophecies and the three volumes of the Chakob Prophecies should be published and disseminated in their entirety, but there are parts of these writings that focus on the Real and these writings cry out for publication."

"From these powerful writings may arise a new guide as a guide for all true seekers of awakening to be able to maintain their awakened state. That they may find the abode of Truth in themselves and in others. These seekers will become the new teachers, and in time the religions of the world will either have to conform to their path to the Real or be swept away to other shores."

"I have existed on this planet for thousands of years. I have seen many wars waged for my knowledge. I allowed the Church to keep my existence secret. I did so because I was tired of watching innocent people die because of someone's ambition to have power over me and justify war and the madness that goes with it."

"The Real is unknown in this world," the Oracle claimed, "not because of the indifference or unbelief of human beings, but because the few who have glimpsed the Real are filled with fear. Their fear comes from

from the belief that when humanity experiences the Real, it will transform itself into sovereign beings and free itself from the unnecessary control of authorities—the same authorities that cover the Real with the thanksgiving gifts of the unreal.”

“I don’t understand,” said Hugelitod. “You want me to compile a new book based on the writings of thirty-six volumes. As? Unless Karnomen himself ordered this, I don’t see how it could be done. I don’t have access to the original materials, and even if I did, it would take me years to read all the pages and create this... manual you’re talking about. I have just received my atonement, which is the condition of my release. The moment I move in the direction you demand, I will return to the dark and silent realm of my prison cell to waste the rest of my life.”

“I cannot tell you how you will accomplish this,” answered the Oracle quietly, “but it was my prophecy three hundred years ago that you would. You can ask Doriah for help.”

Hugelitod, who was about to ask another question, stopped at the Oracle’s comment. “Doriah? The very man who made my atonement conditional upon my murdering an enemy of the Church? Do you mean Doriah?”

The oracle paused, as if calculating its answer in light of the new information Hugelitod had given it. “I can only tell you that I trust him and regard him as a friend to our cause.”

“Then why don’t you ask him to make that book,” asked Hugelitod, “and reform the Church? He certainly has access and power that I certainly don’t have. Even Karnomen seems willing to follow his advice.”

“I can’t say why, but I know you are the person. Doriah is one of those aiding this reform. There will be others who will help you with your task, but they will be outside the Church. Doriah is more on the side of the people than on the side of the Church. You will see.”

“I’ll see...” Hugelitod repeated absentmindedly, his voice fading into broken silence. Running away from here and never looking back would probably be best for me, Hugelitod thought. I can sneak out at night, hide somewhere in civilian clothes in some butcher shop or hardware store. No one will chase me.

“Hugelitod, are you still there?” the Oracle asked, snapping him out of his reverie.
“Yes.”

“No one but you creates your imagination. Regardless of your confusion, your dislike, doubt and fear, you are the one who will reform the Church and all religions on this planet. Doriah can help you, but you need to convince him of the integrity and steadfastness of your mission.”

Hugelitod laughed and raised his hands, shaking his head in disbelief. “I am not able to convince you of any of this not even himself. So how could I convince the Truth Seer?”

“I don’t know, but you’ll find a way. I know that for sure.”

The shimmering voice of the Oracle remained quiet as if to signal that the conversation was over. Hugelitod watched as his flashlight also went silent or dimmed and laughed to himself at the absurdity of this situation. He felt that if he uttered a single word, he would immediately become a lost soul in the incredibly complex maze that surrounded him.

After being imprisoned in a prison cell, further depths were now revealed in the shadow of his freedom, in the grasp of his atonement, and in the disillusionment of his impossible, Oracle-ordered mission.

Hugelitod carefully stepped down from the pedestal he had used to address the Oracle and backed away from the golden monolith - which was obliterated by darkness. He was making his way to the main temple room. He used his hands to guide him, well aware that every word carved in stone found its way into him. Every word is delivered to him - by God, by the Oracle, by the temple itself - and is the cry of their world. But there was an undeniable quickening in his heart—a new, mercifully different spirit had descended, and the whole fabric of his world had been opened.

Chapter 41. A Skyward Protest

Maia looked into Simon’s blank face. His eyes were half closed as if squinting into some distant future. He had already been sitting for about ten minutes in a wooden chair that was assembled from carved branches and deer antlers. He suddenly opened his eyes wide as if startled by an unusual sound.

“We need to summon the Oracle,” he said without addressing anyone, but then focused directly on Maia. “After-use those codes dear.”

Maia nodded, knowing that something important must have happened to Simon when he was asking her to summon the Oracle. She closed her eyes for a moment to remember the numbers in the correct order, then looked at Kamil who was sleeping peacefully and said the codes. Her voice had an undeniably clear tone, like a milky glass firmament.

She waited. However, nothing appeared in the room but an indifferent space saturated with the scent of pine needles carried by the wind.

"Try again," Simon said with undisguised urgency in his voice.

Maia repeated the numbers with the same result.

"Are you sure these are the right numbers and in the right order?" Simon asked.

"Yes, I'm sure."

Simon frowned, his eyes lost in thought. "Let's go outside where we last contacted him, perhaps there is something disturbing here."

"Is something wrong?" Maia asked getting to her feet.

"I don't say this to scare you," Simon began, "but Joseph didn't come back, even though he should have. When I looked for it," Simon pointed to his head and then to his heart, "I found nothing. You couldn't feel him."

"Couldn't you smell him?" Maia repeated. "What does this mean?"

"I'd rather think it means nothing, but I'm inclined to think otherwise."

"You're starting to scare me," Maia said, following Simon out onto the simple porch.

In a moment, Maia was repeating the codes to summon the Oracle, but there was no response, except for the strangely grave cry of a crow.

Simon moved quickly from place to place, stroking his long silver beard, immersed in the unknown feeling that Joseph is dead. "I think we need to wake up Kamil."

Maia looked up at him with an obvious look of concern. "Do you think Joseph is dead?"

Simon nodded. "I pray I'm wrong."

"Me too," Maia said softly. The feeling of sadness that hit her was unexpectedly palpable to Maia, and though she couldn't put a form or a name to it, she knew it was real. Misfortune entered their world obediently like a cloud of darkness spiraling toward a ray of light with a single thought. Turn it off.

* * * *

King Levernon burst into Samuel's office and slammed the door behind him. "I don't throw away the terms of the agreement-go to the fire," he cried, "and I am not possessed by the Oracle!"

Samuel ducked his head as if to avoid the blow. He knew the king's temper well, but was rarely his target. Taking a deep breath, he gathered his composure and intelligence, then rose to his feet in deference to the royal crown. "Is that what Hafara told you?"

"It doesn't matter how I found out," Levernon said, his voice still angry but noticeably calmer. "Never... never again share any insights you think you feel about my personal desires with anyone in the Royal Houses. Do you understand?"

Samuel nodded without protest, his eyes fixed on Levernon's. Levernon raked his combative hand hair and looked down at Samuel's desk where there were piles of folders and scattered documents.

"Now I'll let you get back to your work." The king made an arrogant face, turned and walked out of Samuel's office like a big kid.

Chapter 42. Son of Completion

Doriah walked down the stairs with growing anticipation. He had left Hugelitod in the underground temple for over three hours, and his curiosity about Hugelitod's discoveries had grown so much that he couldn't wait any longer. Some part of him was surprised that Hugelitod hadn't knocked on the door by the stairwell yet, eager to get out of the temple. But he also knew that Hugelitod was no ordinary priest.

As Doriah came into the main room of the sanctuary, he saw that everything was shrouded in darkness. He carried only a candle - a tribute to the ancients who built this temple. The flashlight seemed disrespectful to Doriah, but even with his modest candle he could see the outline of Hugelitod sitting on the floor, hands tucked into his robes and hood pulled over his head.

"It's cold down here after a few hours," Doriah said with a flash of humor. "Did you have a chance to pass him?"

"Sit with me," replied Hugelitod. "I have something I need to ask you."

With some effort, Doriah placed the candle on the floor and slowly sat down on the cool cobblestone floor. He took a quick look at Hugelitod's energy pattern and found that it had been amplified, clarified and vibrated to a potential he had never seen in any human before. It could only be caused by something very deep.

"Do you have a question for me?" Doriah asked, removing his hood to reveal his disfigured face.

"It is possible that you sympathize with the Oracle," Hugelitod began in a whispered but intense tone, "and hide that before the Order of the Sixteen Rays?"

Doriah wished he had kept his hood on so he could better hide his surprise. "Why me?"
are you asking such a strange question?"

Hugelitod shifted into a more comfortable position. "In the chamber... with the golden monolith, the High Za-Saints with the Oracle?"

He figured it out, Doriah shouted in her mind. He knows the entrance to the temple!

"Did you connect with the Oracle from this chamber?" asked Doriah, the tone of his voice in strange contrast to her-
him with an inner feeling of sacred reverence.

"All my life I have gathered ideas and assumed truths," answered Hugelitod, "from those I trusted. I felt that the Church, more than anything else, was focused on bringing God's wisdom to people. And when I could serve her, my life was fulfilled. My life had meaning."

"But then I met the Oracle... and now I see things differently. I understand that we are actually connected by rituals, ceremonies and words that are long dead and losing the meaning they once had. We judge others and know nothing about ourselves. We have broken the truth into so many parts that no one can put it back together."

"Why are you telling me this?" Doriah asked, sensing that Hugelitod was renouncing the Church.

"No, why don't you answer my simple questions?" Hugelitod almost shouted, his voice echoing in the vast shrine of glyph stones.

The uneven light of the candle was the breath of movement of the ancient inscriptions on the walls. The glyphs seemed to they twist like snakes. Hugelitod closed his eyes and hoped he was beyond the reach of their malice.

"Well, first of all, these are not easy questions. I will speak plainly to you," Doriah offered, "but first you must understand something about me."

He took a deep breath and released a sigh, then pointed at his face. "These burns are from war. I grew up in Santorman at the height of the Eight-Year War. This was before planes dropped bombs like mailmen. It was a face-to-face fight that took place in the streets that were awash in chaos, and every war move was measured in feet, if not inches.

"The only sanctuary in the whole city was the church. It was a beautiful pristine structure of white marble and teak wood, where colored glass windows rose to a great height...where the sun shone in rich colors..." A smile appeared on his face for a moment. "I grew up poor, so we had no church or shrine. There was nowhere to hide. Anyway... one day I was waiting on the street for a friend to bring me some food..."
"How old were you?"

"Nine...almost ten," Doriah replied, his tone suddenly saddened. "A group of soldiers came to me and started torturing me... for no reason. They didn't even care whose side I was on, they just wanted to hurt something that was innocent," he sighed, "as if I was innocent. I saw all kinds of suffering and hardship..."

"But the gist of the story is that the soldiers, not liking my explanation of why I was on the street and also partly due to their inebriated state, decided to douse me in gasoline and then take turns to see who could throw a lit match accurately enough to set me on fire."

Hugelitod's eyes squinted in pain as his imagination painted the words with a coloration unfit for any mind to see. He reached out and touched Doriah's sleeve. "You don't have to tell the story..." "It's okay, it's been a long time, and if it was too cruel for the human heart to bear, then
day I would have died... which apparently did not happen."

"And what happened?"

"It happened that a priest happened to witness the terrible event, just as a match fell on my hand and I was consumed by fire. I saw a growing light, heard laughter, and then felt a robe wrap around me like a baby. Then I felt the smell of acrid smoke and burnt hair filling my nostrils... and... and then a sharp pain as the light began to reveal its hostile nature."

"That priest was my savior, sent by some power or intelligence to protect me - to give me another life. I spent the next year under his care. I healed and also studied this new world, which I had previously considered the babbling of weaklings."

Doriah shook her head at the memory. "When I finally got out of pain and could use my eyes again, I could only see in dimly lit rooms. My eyes became super sensitive.

The priest who saved me removed my bandages and I was able to open my eyes for the first time in three months. I looked at him, but all I saw was a strange mixture of light. There was nothing physical."

"At first I was scared. Everything was reduced to particles of light that flowed like leaves in the wild currents of some unimaginably vast sea. I was just a little boy and it was like I was blind in a way... which I was. I could not see forms or material structures of any kind. And when I tried to see in the daylight, all my eyes could see was a blinding white light.

For three years I did not leave the church or the priest. The priest felt that I had been given a gift from God and wrote an Order regarding my destination. After the war ended, they sent a representative to meet with me... Doria's eyes clouded as he remembered the event that changed his life.

"He only needs to be in low light, so he stays mostly in this room," the Priest explained as he came down the hall behind the closed door.

"It will only take a moment," said the Deputy, "but I would like to speak with the boy alone."

"Of course," said the priest, bowing gently and opening the door. "Doriah, our guest has finally arrived. You may address him as Reverend Father. He has traveled a long way to meet you, so please be polite and honest with him."

The young boy, who had just turned thirteen, nodded and looked through the narrow slits of his eyes. "Yes, of course I will."

The priest stepped back from the door and allowed the Reverend Father to enter the room. Then he pointed to a chair. "Please sit down and make yourself comfortable. I'll leave you here to talk and I'll prepare some lunch for now. I'm sure you're hungry along the way."

The Deputy looked back at the Priest and smiled. "Thank you for your hospitality." Then he took off his cloak and sat- he was sitting on a chair. The door closed and the room went dark.

"It is an absolute miracle that this church has remained intact," said the Reverend Father suddenly after a long silence. "He is very beautiful."

"I can only feel the beauty," said the boy, "but when I was younger I saw as you do, and I often he secretly wished I could go in and see her."

"Why couldn't you come in?"

The boy turned away as if recalling some unpleasant memory.

He was small even for his age of thirteen and his body was - from the waist up - unclothed. But no matter how hard the Reverend Father tried to see the boy's disfigurement in the darkened room, his eyes could only see the shadow of the outline of his figure. you.

"I guess I didn't feel worthy," said the boy.

"And now how do you feel?" asked the Reverend Father.

"I'm not sure," the boy said casually, "but I hope so."

"Father Daniel explained to me that you see angels. Is it true?"

The boy shifted in his chair as if nervous in the presence of the distinguished guest. "Everyone is an angel," answered the boy. "It's hard to explain and I know you'd like to know the difference in what I see... unlike others, but I don't know how to put it into words. After my accident, my eyes began to see light shapes that keep moving. Right now, while you are sitting motionless in your chair, I see a kaleidoscope of moving colors.

I don't see you as a person with a head and shoulders and arms and legs... I see you as... a dancing light and no matter how hard my eyes try to chase the familiar, I'm unable to see it."

"Do you see any differences in the shapes of the light between different persons?" asked the Reverend Father. "Oh yes," said the boy. "Everyone is different, even insects and plants."

"Actually? Can you even see insects this way?"

"I see everything this way. Is it bad?"

The Reverend Father crossed his legs and sat up straight in his wooden chair, which creaked under his weight. "No, of course not."

"I was worried that you would come and find that I was cursed or possessed by some demons, so I am very happy to hear what you have to say. Thank you," said the boy, tapping his chair with a small stick. "I can't smile or express laughter, so when I feel happy, I use this wand to let others know how I feel," explained the boy.

Reverend Father laughed at the boy's sensitive voice and rapped his knuckles on his chair in response.

"You're the first, besides Father Daniel, to do that," said the boy, tapping his wand. "But I admit I can see your happiness, or any other emotion, simply by watching your light pattern and its colors."

The Reverend Father sat quietly for a few moments. "What do you see now?"

"I see a golden light with a hint of pink and green," the boy replied. "Those are good colors. These are the bars of love."

"Where I come from," the Reverend Father began after taking a deep breath, "we have a great prophet. AND this prophet spoke of you. Or at least I believe it was about you."

"Did the great prophet speak of me?" the boy asked incredulously. "What did he say?"

"That you will become a priest and fulfill the great task of the Church."

Unbeknownst to him, Doriah's left hand tapped the floor of the shrine room, imagining that he was holding a wand. He was snapped out of his reverie by the sound of Hugelitod's voice.

"This great prophet, I suppose it was the Oracle?" Hugelitod asked.

Doriah nodded. "The oracle predicted that I would be the next Truth Denier. I suppose the Hon Father wanted to verify that my abilities were authentic. The day after our meeting I left my home where I had spent three years and traveled with the Reverend Father to my new home." Doriah raised his hand with the index finger pointing up. "Have you lived here the whole time?" Hugelitod asked.

"I look a lot older than I am," Doriah replied with a soft laugh.

Knowing that the Eight Year War had ended twenty-six years ago, Hugelitod calculated Doriah's age and was shocked to realize that they were only two years apart.

"Now back to your original question," said Doriah. "I'm the only one accessing the Oracle from this temple... besides you," he added with a small smile. "The High Initiates believe that the golden monolith is nothing more than a place for prayers to a pagan God. They don't even like this place. They seem a little too... ancient."

Doriah stared at the candle flame that danced just above the floor. "Regarding your second question, I sympathize with the Oracle because what it brought to this planet, to its people, is kept behind bars like a prisoner in solitary confinement. In a way, even Karnomen wishes it were different, but if he did all those fixes to the Church's belief system, it would unravel everything, every basic premise would collapse. That's why there's a fear that people wouldn't know what to do or what to believe..." "You mean who to believe, don't you?" tossed Hugelitod. "How could anyone give the Church a second chance if

it was found that she was deliberately hiding the truth? Her followers would abandon her and with them their money and support.

Karnomen would be the one to destroy the Church."

"Karnomen is a big man," Doriah defended him. "It's not about one person, it's much bigger. All of them the religions of this planet are bound by this delusion and so are the leaders of the states."

"Yes, but our Church is the foremost religion on this planet, and therefore the main burden of responsibility rests on us. science because we have the Oracle."

"What makes you think our Oracle is the only Oracle?" Doriah asked, looking Hugelitod in the eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"The oracle said access to it cannot be controlled by a single source," Doriah replied.

"But we have access here, in this temple, in this chamber," Hugelitod pointed into the dark corridor. "So access is not controlled by a single force. Are you saying there are other Oracles on the planet?"

"This is a very large planet, many different cultures, different belief systems that have been worked by hands that are centuries old. And we often forget that. The truth is still dissolving and man is still awakening. The creators of Oracle are well aware of this fact. It is inconceivable to me that they would feed just one mouthpiece to their future, in one small corner of this expanding planet."

Doriah fell silent for a moment, as if waiting for Hugelitod to say something.

"The oracle made this strange remark," Hugelitod finally offered, his voice cracking a little, "that I should create some sort of guide..." "The oracle told you... now... here in the chamber?"

Hugelitod nodded.

"So the prophecy is here," Doriah whispered more to himself.

"You'll need access to the original materials," Doriah revealed, as if it suddenly dawned on him that he would play a role in the Oracle's plans. "And the Oracle knows full well that copies of these tomes are stored in this temple..."

Doriah frowned like a person caught between two preoccupations and only having to choose one of them.

"I don't know if I will be able to help you with this... it will be very difficult for me to do anything that would hurt Karnomen or break his will. I owe him my life - literally. When I came here, my health deteriorated

so much so that without his help I would have died. He was my mentor after I recovered. He trusted me enough to let me be the caretaker of this temple... he is my closest friend and supporter."

Doriah fell silent, the scowl still evident on his face.

"I embodied the voices that seem to have planned my entire life," Hugelitod said quietly and without emotion.

"It seems to me that I was sent to this world for this one task and somewhere, buried deep inside me, everything is set and it is clear. But as I live here and now, I see only mud and darkness. And I also know that there are chasms ahead of me that are impossible to cross. If I don't have your support, what chance do I have?"

"I'm sorry," Doriah said, his hands fidgeting nervously in his lap. "I don't think I will be able to help you without Karnomen's approval. I understand and believe in your mission, but my conflict is so strong that I simply cannot change my allegiance for this one thing alone. I need to pray about this, but for now my answer is no. I'm sorry."

"Is your devotion to Karnomen so strong that it compels you to tell him about our conversation?"

"I don't know," Doriah said, pulling his hood up as if he was suddenly cold or eager to leave.

"I don't know. I am sorry, but I must go and meditate on this matter. Give me time until tomorrow afternoon to answer you. I will escort you out now."

With that Doriah stood up with some effort and Hugelitod stood up reflexively as well. The rest of the way out of the temple was eerie silence. A procession of two men surrounded by a thousand ghosts.

When they reached the tool room, Doriah slowed and turned to Hugelitod. He shook his hand with an expression of friendship. Hugelitod grasped her and felt the soft, smooth skin of Doriah's hand. He felt that she was thin and vulnerable, so he gave her a gentle, friendly shake.

"Remember one thing, of all this," said Doriah. "Your atonement was never required of you. This was all part of your initiation. We would never ask you to take someone's life - it was only to test your loyalty to the Order.

"The problem you face is the same one we all face: how do we tell the truth to the people without losing their trust in our institution?"

"Maybe it's time," Hugelitod retorted, "that our institution is allowed to be one Church—no outer and inner church—one Church that simply shares the truth of who we are, why we're here, and where we're going. Doesn't everyone at least deserve to know this?"

Doriah stared at the floor, averting his gaze from Hugelitod's piercing eyes. "You talk about transparency, as if there was a staircase leading up and anyone could simply climb it to Heaven without hindrance. As I said a moment ago, the truth is dissolving and people are waking up, but those two processes are happening - at least to our eyes - painfully slowly. But who can say that all this is not part of the plan - to gradually mix the human and heavenly worlds?"

"And who says, Doriah, that the pace cannot be quickened. That humanity is not ready for a more direct, more intensive publication of the truth? Who says that? Karnomen? Levernon? Who? I believe that the Oracle was brought to this world for a reason and that its knowledge and wisdom can be shared regardless of the consequences. The moment we edit the truth, we edit human destiny, and I don't want to be a part of anything that withholds or limits the truth."

"You talk like we're taking away people's right to God and the Heavenly Realm," Doriah replied with unusual intensity as he walked to the front door. "No one is prevented from connecting with what is within him.

Doors open when people are ready to open them. And everything lies in them." Doriah turned and spread her arms. "All this? This is theater. This is the stage on which we all meet in the carefully scripted play called life."

He put his right hand over his heart, clenched it into a fist, and gently pounded his chest in a monotonous rhythm. "This is the measure of all things and it is not found in this theater... it is right here. How could you or the Oracle redirect people to this? In mere words? Believers do not believe in words, glittering ceremonies or rituals handed down from ancient languages...they believe because their hearts told them to. They resonate with a part of the truth that they are ready to accept."

"Perhaps they are ready to accept more," Hugelitod said quietly, gauging the extent of Doriah's reaction. "Maybe that they need a spirituality they can use - something that will not use them but glorify them."

Doriah shook his head. "Do you really think that humans are ready to become gods? Where I come from, I have seen and experienced every possible form of human depravity. Darkness will not leave people just because the Church glorifies them and anoints them with the truth. The smile of an enemy, or the spirit of his predecessor whispering encouragement to them, inflames their rage. They flutter between good and evil like the wings of a moth, obscuring its path to the light. When the light is found, they cover it."

"People are animals, just like angels, but the sorrow of their animal life is not a bridge to Heaven, it is their limit-
I seek knowledge of the truth.

Until mankind loves itself more than it fears itself, until it sees the State of Heaven as its home, you cannot pour out the truth and expect people to drink it. People will laugh at the Oracle. They say it doesn't exist. Who is the Oracle to tell us how to live? Why did God send a stone to tell us what to believe?"

"These are all facts that the Oracle does not understand. That is why religion is left in the hands of human leaders who have insight into the readiness of their flock, who have a sense of readiness and timing, and who also have sensitivity to social needs."

Dorah opened the bolt on the large antique door. "Come back tomorrow afternoon and I will answer your question. God be with you," Dorah turned and walked away. He left it to Hugelitod to open the door and disappear into a world of sunshine and ancient trees.

Chapter 43. Frowning Gods

Bartholem unlocked the front door and turned on the light in the entrance of his house. He hung his staff on the wall, unbuttoned his cloak, opened the wardrobe and with great care hung it in it. Then he closed the door and reached for his staff, but his hand only felt the cold wall. He looked down and thought that his staff must have fallen off the hook, but the room suddenly went dark and he felt a sharp pain on the back of his neck that shot through his entire body in a second and he felt the sickening sensation of falling into the swirling heavy darkness.

Ten minutes later Bartholem, languid and in pain, opened his eyes to the darkness. He could feel a warm trickle of blood running down his neck. He was sitting, one arm and both legs tied to the chair, and a black hood was on his head from the neck up, which was pulled tight around his collar. "What... what's going on?" he asked. "Wh-is...who... who's here?"

"You were a very naughty boy, Dr. B, and those who use my services want me to write a little greeting - let's call it a symbol of their disappointment in you."

It was a man's voice with a local accent and a common man's dialect.

Bartholem tried to move his free hand, but found it pressed against something he assumed he gave that there is a kitchen table.

"Have you ever been to a tattoo parlor, Dr. B? Oh wait, I forgot, you're the Royal Physician, so- that I suppose...not."

The voice laughed and pulled something on Bartholem's wrist, pinning him against the table like a vise.

"Look, I don't know what you want, but I have money, I can give it to you..." "Dr. B, isn't what you're offering a bribe? Because if it's a bribe, my employers told me to ce-
lou made this thing... well... let's just say a little less pleasant."

Bartholem remained silent for a moment. He had a headache and suddenly felt like throwing up, but his curiosity was piqued she couldn't stop. "Who are your employers?"

"That's something that someone in your position might ask, and it happens in most cases. My employers wanted me to hit you like I did now and then tell you to shut up. But in your case, Dr. B, they actually told me to make sure you recognize who they are. But be patient. I have some work to do first, and when you see it, I tell you, you will have no doubt as to the identity of my employers."

The sound of metal instruments on the table increased Bartholem's anxiety.

"I warn you," said the voice, "that I am not a professional at this, but you may be pleased to know that I have done it a few times before."

"He was doing what?" shouted Bartholomew.

"Tattoos, of course. I thought I made that clear a while ago. I guess you didn't listen well, Dr. B?"

"Tattoo?" Bartholem asked incredulously. "You... you're going to give me a tattoo? Why?"

"That's a good question, if you move it will hurt a lot more. Of course you're a doctor so you know that.

You can think of me as your surgeon. And I don't want to brag too much, but as my patient I have to tell you that you are in good hands. It's not a pun. Unfortunately, I don't have anything to suppress the pain... it seems my employers forgot to put it on the to-do list."

Bartholem heard the clinking of hand tools on the table and what sounded like a glass or bottle from which the person was drinking.

"I must commend you on your choice of liquors, Dr. B. I've tasted a few - I don't even know their names, but they still taste great. Oh, don't worry at all about my powers being impaired by a little alcohol...I drink all the time and I've gotten used to the shaky hands and blurred vision."

The voice laughed again and Bartholem heard him take another swig from the bottle and then set it down hard on the table.

"Actually, if you wanted a sip too, I'd split with you - maybe it would help with the pain, but this dirty hood would get in the way, and I'm afraid you wouldn't like it."

Bartholem shook his head at the offer, glad that his expression of distaste was not visible to his sadistic assailant.

"Okay, so are we clear on the main points?"

Bartholem nodded, his hand shaking like a calf before branding.

"Dr. B, everything will be fine. Maybe you'll like the tattoo, if not the method of doing it. Now, before we start, I always ask my clients if they have any questions. I'm a great companion - or so the prison guards always told me. Feel free to ask me anything that comes into your large and apparently clever mind... we'll make the time go by faster and we can both have a good time."

Bartholem dismissed the natural question: What were you in prison for? Instead, he tried his best to gain at least some balance. "As the Royal Physician, as you know..."

"But, Dr. B, you're not going to threaten me, are you? Because if it's a threat, my employers were pretty specific about how I should respond," the voice dropped to a whisper and Bartholem could smell the alcohol through his hood as if his assailant had come right in front of his face. "But unfortunately I don't remember the exact details of these instructions, so I guess I'll have to improvise. Generally speaking, when people threaten me, it triggers something in me... and... let's just say it's not my best side."

"It wasn't a threat," Bartholem defended. "I just wanted to offer you my services if you let me go unharmed."

"Oh, yes, we're back to bribery," laughed the voice. "Dr. B, I see your memory is weak..." A sharp, stabbing pain flooded Bartholem's arm as the attacker began, and Bartholem tried his best to keep your hand still.

"Since you have been so kind as my host," continued the voice, "and shared your good liquors—oh, how I love the sound of that word... liquors... I am willing to overlook your amnesia. It means you must be old."

"Now, Dr. B, remember what I said about movement. You move your hand! Calm down! What I'm doing here is a work of art and I would be really angry if my work was damaged because my canvas is moving.

This is permanent! You don't want some deformed tattoo on your body, do you? No, definitely not, you want something you can be proud of... well, or at least something you can secretly look at and admire. I bet it will, Dr. B, I bet you will. In a week or two, you'll look at your hand and a tear will fall from the corner of your eye, and admiration for this artistic tattoo will flood your heart. And let's not exaggerate, you'll be thanking me for this masterpiece in a few months. Maybe I'll leave you a number on the back so you can send me a thank you note."

Pain shot through Bartholem's arm again, then again and again. For almost the entire hour that the trial was going on, Bartholem knew that the Church was branding him for his treason. Some part of him was relieved that it was already happening and that it would soon be over. It could have been worse... a lot worse.

The attacker continued his one-way conversation, stopping only to change tools or drink.

"Dr. B, I think I'm done and I have to say it's one of my best works. I think my employers will be very pleased. Now hold on while I take a picture of your new addition. I like to put all my creations in an album, and with that hood, I'm sure your privacy won't be violated."

Bartholem felt the flash of a camera and then heard the sound of harvested tools. His hand throbbed and he felt his attacker wipe it with a damp cloth and the familiar smell of alcohol filled the room. Bartholem welcomed the cool sensation in his sore hand.

"I apologize for the trouble, Dr. B, but I really think you'll like it...eventually. That's the way it works.

I'll untie your hand here and then disappear. Then untie yourself and stay in the chair for a while. I also turned off your phone so don't worry about it. I suggest you take a shower and maybe calm down a bit. You can have a glass of some of your wonderful wine and think about what you did to deserve this."

"Oh, I almost forgot. If anyone, I think that includes the dear king, decided to take any form of retribution, I was told that I had the right to return to your house with a different set of

machines and pick up your creation. I remember those words exactly as they were written in my instructions because I was... intrigued. I like the idea of picking up my art, especially if you don't follow the rules. And the number one rule is, no retaliation - not against me or against my employers. R-do you understand?"

Bartholem nodded. "I understand. No retribution." "No form of retaliation." "No form of retribution," Bartholomew echoed.

"And one last thing... I have a pretty big backpack and the tattoo tools are, as you can imagine, very small, so I'd take some of these almost empty bottles that I've got and put the tools in them. I hope you don't mind. I don't think you would drink from them anyway and it would be a shame to throw them away. I have your permission to take them, Dr. B?"

Bartholem nodded. Anything, as long as it falls out!

"Great. Well, except for the initial difficulties with you, you have become one of my favorite customers. Thank you for your patience and I sincerely hope you enjoy my tattoo."

Bartholem felt the binding on his wrist loosen and he immediately released his hand from the table. He heard the attacker move through the house and then the back door closed with the muffled sound of glass bottles clinking in the background as the attacker ran down the stairs.

Bartholem struggled to untie the hood with an aching hand and fingers that had lost coordination. When he finally managed to pull off his hood, he squinted into the yellow light, debating whether to look at his hand or dislodge himself from the chair. But the pulsation in his hand was like a magnet to his eyes and he bowed his head in surrender.

Tucked between his veins on the back of his palm was a small but decisive mark. It was a Royal Dragon with a sword cutting through his head enclosed in a circle of sixteen stars. If he saw it on someone else's hand, he would admire its detail and artistry. But that she was on his own hand, he could only avert his eyes and shudder.

Chapter 44. The New Universe

"Do you understand me?" Kamil asked loudly. He took both of Maia's hands, holding them in his own, his eyes looking into hers. "You are in danger if Joseph has been found by the High Guard. It means they are close. They will try to trace his path and it will lead them here. You must leave."

"I'm not leaving without you," Maia said firmly, her eyes filling with the glassy evidence of tears. "Where should I go?"

Kamil turned to Simon. "You must know a safe place to take Maia. I'll go see Joseph. If anyone knows how to avoid the guards, it's me... and if they find me, at least you'll be safe. Please let me do it."

"Your leg... you can't run with it," Maia said, "you'll be easy prey."

"Maybe, but I'll find them before they find me..." "And then what?" Maia asked defiantly. "Will you surrender to them?"

"I can track them," Kamil replied, "and I can make sure they don't endanger you and Simon."

"And if so? What then?" Simon asked.

Simon folded his arms and looked out the glassless window of his cottage. "The rangers rarely travel to this part of the forest. I only saw their tracks a few times. If they are here, then only for the reason to find Kamil. If they found Joseph instead," Simon turned to Maia, "he wanted to protect you and lead them astray. If they didn't believe him, they could kill him and try to follow his tracks. The path he used is indistinct - almost non-existent - but if they are experienced trackers, they can find this place."

"That's another reason to attack them," said Kamil. "Simon, while you take Maia somewhere safe - away from the path Joseph used to check the traps - I'll lie in hiding and see if they follow Joseph's path. When I see them, I hide and nothing more..."

"What if they have dogs?" Maia interrupted. "They will find you."

"They will be on the trail of Joseph."

"Before they find yours!" Maia breathed out.

"We don't have time to discuss this," Kamil replied, his voice irritated and strong. "I have to go. I'm the one they're looking for. I have to sort this out. If I find them going this way, I'll turn them... I... I don't know how, but I'll turn them away from your path. There is no other option. If they found this place, they would never stop until they found you. Simon, if you have anything of value here, take it with you, but please leave now."

Simon continued to look out the window, thinking deeply. He had only one thing of value, but it would never-disappear from here, thanks to its weight and delicacy. The first volume of the Oracle - the original handwritten version he created 308 years ago - remains here, but he places it in a well-hidden underground chamber he built many years ago for food and compotes.

Simon carefully closed the book and tucked it under his arm. "Give me a moment to secure this."

"Do you need help?" Maia asked.

"It's fine," Simon replied. "Gather your things, everything you want to take, and we'll leave in no time a few minutes. Kamil's plan is the only option, although I very much wish we had another one."

Simon turned and walked out onto the porch where his secret storage room was waiting to receive Dohr-Man's Prophecy, Volume I.

"If they catch you," Maia whispered, "you have to promise me you'll do whatever they say. Don't contradict. Don't try to be a hero. Stay alive. Please stay alive. Do you promise me that?"

Kamil pulled Maia into his arms and held her softly. There were so many desires that flowed through his mind, but none of them could be realized. He had only one path ahead of him and he knew very well that it could end in his death.

"I will do anything you wish."

"I don't know how," said Maia, "but I will find you." She looked into his eyes with a lover's strength. "Even if the forget this face, this touch, have no doubt that I will find you."

Kamil laughed. "I will never forget you, Maia, but I am the one who will find you," he said gently. "Don't have fear. I know this forest like no other. I'll be fine. Stay with Simon. I trust him."

Maia nodded in agreement and then kissed Kamil as an offering to God to protect him. The sound of Simon returning broke their embrace and they reluctantly parted with the muffled touch of their fingers, denying their entwining hearts.

Simon cleared his throat politely and placed a small bag on the table. "There's some food in that bag, you might need it. We'll go about six miles northeast. There you will find a group of thorn bushes. When you find them, walk around their perimeter to the west - don't try to get through them. I'll leave a trail for you when you get to the bushes. Good?"

Kamil nodded and kept looking at Maia.

"If the guards were tracking Joseph, they'll be coming from this direction," Simon pointed in front of the cabin. "When you follow the path ahead, when it splits, go left. It's a deer trail, but I used it for trapping and I'm sure Joseph went that way. Keep a safe distance from the road and listen carefully with your ears. I will wait outside, but please go quickly."

"Oh, I'm glad to see your hearts have joined together," Simon added, walking out with a bag over his shoulder, "but hurry your goodbyes."

Maia turned back, her eyes fixed on Kamil's. "Because I might not see you for a while, something I would like to tell you... something that I already wanted to tell you yesterday and the day before yesterday, but I didn't..."

"I love you too," Kamil said, his eyes never wavering. They were looking for the deepest part of Maia, like an oblique sun rays entering the calm sea.

Mai's eyes were laughing and one of her hands found Joseph's compass on the table without looking away. She moved closer to the door and stole one last look at Kamil. They examined each other. Maia moved her lips softly as she walked in the door. "I love you," she then quickly turned around and almost bumped into Simon as she ran outside.

"Let's go," she said, slowing her walking pace and waiting for Simon to catch up and lead their way.

Kamil ran out the door, holding the small bag of vegetables that Simon had left for him. His heart was full of fear and joy at the same time. In a way he felt like a lost man, unbaptized and floundering in a tangled wasteland. But another part of him was pounding with ecstatic rhythms - which sounded powerful from some subterranean source he had never felt before. And then a memory came over him that stopped him in his tracks. Joseph was wearing my old shoes!

Chapter 45. Doors in motion

The brilliant sun poured its warm rays through the tall pines, searching the uninhabitable realm of earth and stone. It was early morning and there were only a few crows and red squirrels in the forest looking for food, which the slow-walking Hugelitod could hardly think about. Later in the day, he learns of Doria's decision. He was well aware that Doriah's help was the key to his mission arranged with the Oracle. If Doriah wanted to stop him, all he had to do was tell Karnomen about their conversation in the temple and all of Hugelitod's new-found freedom would disappear. I'm so vulnerable.

Hugelitod stopped and closed his eyes as a ray of sunlight crossed his path and touched his shoulder with its warmth. The scent of pines and earth washed over him like the holiest wish of a distant god, and his thoughts turned to the ancient underground temple. Why is Doriah hiding the true purpose of the golden monolith? If she tells Karnomen about my plans, I can tell Karnomen about Doriah's secret access to the Oracle, and Doriah will lose her position in the Order. He might lose everything. That's the only influence I have, the only hope I have, if Doriah chooses to interfere with my efforts to help the Oracle.

Hugelitod turned and walked back to the monastery grounds, where he immediately began his work. He prayed to the golden flower floating on the sea of molten coal that Doriah would join him. That was the only clear part he could see.

* * * *

The knocking was rude. Samuel lifted his head, which had fallen on the table. His eyes slowly focused as he s- he roared at the drunken bottle he still held in his hand.

Suddenly his memory returned. He worked long into the early hours of the morning and drank Tropan while doing so, a liquor which it was known as a stimulant, but it was also known for its ability to knock out those who drank too much of it.

A hellish pounding on the door reawakened him to a new level of consciousness. Only a man with a stick can do these- what noise "What is it?"

"Here Bartholomew, I need to see you," came the muffled reply.

Samuel's head was spinning, or the room was spinning, it didn't matter because the result was the same. He was in a daze. His door was locked and he had to somehow get through the space of his office to let Bart-hole in. "Wait a minute, my friend. I am in a miserable state."

He thought he heard a sigh on the other side of the door. He leaned both hands on the table top and he tried to stand up. "Now for the hard part," he said to himself with amusement.

"Quick!" pleaded Bartholomew.

Samuel looked at his watch to see what time it was. "It's not even seven yet, for God's sake." Then, with a deep breath and great uncertainty, he began to shuffle towards the massive double doors at the far end of his office - an office that seemed infinitely large at the moment. He finally reached the door and turned the key in the lock to open it.

Bartholem rolled in like a man plagued by insomnia with only one desire - to argue. "I said you that it will happen," he shouted. "Look at that!"

Bartholem raised his left hand a few inches in front of Samuel's head. Samuel staggered back and his arms groped for some source of support but found nothing so Samuel fell. Bartholem rushed to his aid and apologized profusely. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, old friend. I didn't mean to startle you."

"Okay, your intentions belie reality," Samuel laughed, soothing Bartholem's concern. Samuel sat on the floor and tried to pull himself together. Then he motioned for Bartholem to close the door.

"I understood from that that something was bothering you with your hand. What is this?"

Bartholem closed the door and came to Samuel with his cane, clattering on the marble floor and holding out his hand. Samuel took the proffered hand and brought it closer to his face. He studied her with great interest. He s-squinted his eyes as he tried to interpret the message.

"What exactly happened?" Samuel asked as he got to his feet and leaned against a nearby chair. "And I want to hear the whole story."

Bartholem sat down and explained the previous night's events in minute detail while Samuel listened. At times Samuel's eyes closed as if he were calculating some astronomical numbers, but Bartholem never doubted that his attention was focused on his story. When he finished, he patiently waited for Samuel's reaction.

After a very long silence, Bartholem couldn't wait any longer. "So what?"

"First of all, I would like to apologize that you had to endure this humiliation," Samuel replied, holding his head in his hands as if he was deeply depressed. "But Karnomen is daring and we knew something like this could happen...at least you're okay."

"Yes, but I'm wearing this brand for the rest of my life... what will my patients think? what are you what will people think when they see it? It is a royal dragon with a severed head!"

The Royal Dragon was the most revered brand of the Royal Houses. If only more insulting could be created- a more left-handed sign, so it had not yet been depicted in any literature known to Samuel. "The king will understand..."

"I don't care about the king - of course he'll understand... he'll probably have a good laugh about it," Bartholem joked. "I deal with everyone else. They'll think I'm a spy... or... a dissident. I will be reported to all the authorities..." "Calm down," said Samuel. "We'll arrange it. There will

be some trouble, that's for sure, but there will be some time authorized to ignore those reports. Besides, do you think you could wear a glove when you go out?"

"I still have a medical practice!" wailed Bartholomew. "I have my patients. I can't put on a glove. They will be to think that I am afraid to touch them, or worse, that I have contracted some contagious disease."

"It's not that big," Samuel remarked. "Maybe you could hide it with some heavy makeup."

"With makeup?" protested Bartholomew. "Do I look like a person who wears makeup?"

"It's the back of the hand, for God's sake. It's not your face. Don't exaggerate."

Bartholem let out a long sigh. "I feel so humiliated ... tired, and ... and guilty."

"Guilty? Guilty of what?" Samuel asked.

"I never wanted to betray Karnomen. He treated me well."

"He treated you well because you served his purpose," Samuel corrected him. "Remember that. And now that you don't serve his purpose, look how he treats you."

"I deserve it," Bartholem said, his voice barely audible.

"Karnomen made his retribution. It's gone. His message was delivered. Your service to the king is fulfilled. End of story." Samuel got to his feet and had a little better balance than before. He ran to his bar, poured himself a glass of water and drank it down greedily. "The thing to remember, my friend, is that we have the Oracle, which is largely due to you. You can have anything your heart desires if you simply ask the king for it. How many people can say that?" Samuel smiled with depraved grace. "Pin?"

Bartholem looked down at his shoes and tapped his cane on the arms of the chair. His long sleeves - which he had chosen on purpose - covered most of his hands, but he looked unkempt. He lamented deeply over this state of clothing. "I'll put a bandage on it when I go out," Bartholem said quietly. "To those who ask, I tell them it's a chronic skin rash."

"From your description," Samuel said, "I'm sure we'll catch the guy who did this..." "You heard me," Bartholem said with sudden force. "No score editing. As you said, the end... the end of the running. We're all going to pretend it didn't happen, we're just going to let it go."

"That will probably be for the best. We have the Oracle," Samuel asserted. "That's the best form of revenge."

"Levernon signed a deal?" asked Bartholomew.

Samuel nodded. "Tonight."

"So that's why I found you here and not at your house," replied Bartholem, waving his index finger at Samuel. "Tropana? Don't deny it. I can tell by your eyes."

"In my defense, I needed to see a lot of legal documents. In addition, I'm not addicted to it, I only use it when I really need to stay awake."

"Addiction starts from the first drink, you know that," Bartholem scolded him. "As your doctor, I order you to stop. It will kill you."

"Everything will kill you," laughed Samuel. "Life is a slow poison, remember?"

Bartholem smiled and felt better near his best friend of thirty-five years. He missed these philosophical discussions they used to have when times were simpler and they were focused on wordplay instead of the drama of the Royal Houses.

"Didn't you once say that where there is sadness, there is also clarity?" asked Bartholomew.

"Sounds like something I could have said," Samuel admitted with a big smile.

"Then I suppose that clarity will be the Oracle," said Bartholem. "I just hope we are ready to that sadness or disappointment."

"Why do you say that?"

"Something is not right. Karnomen would never give up on the Oracle. Never."

"He negotiated sovereignty with it, which in itself is a very good reason."

"He was trying to destroy him. He thought the Oracle was a threat... that it would somehow destroy the Church when she possessed it. In the hands of Levernon ...

Bartholem's voice trailed off into silence. Now that he has a tattoo of a royal dragon with his head shielded, he has to be more careful about what he says, especially when he talks about Levernon. Samuel swallowed two pills with a glass of water and walked over to Bartholem's chair and sat down next to him. He rolled up Bartholem's sleeve with his fingers. "Don't get me wrong, but that tattoo on your hand... looks pretty good on you."

Bartholem rolled his eyes and let out a deep breath of conspiratorial displeasure. "You always have a good sense of humor, don't you?"

"That's certainly more effective than the truth," Samuel remarked with a wink.

"You still plan to attend the swap meet, right?" Samuel asked in a more serious tone.

"I'm not sure if I'm able to meet Karnomen now."

"Isn't your interest in the Oracle stronger than your fear of meeting Karnomen? And besides, your presence will make Karnomen nervous. Roll up your sleeves and show this thing off with no holds barred. That will spoil Karnome's joy. Come on, you know I'm right."

Bartholem nodded as he considered the idea. "Maybe ...

"At least come with me and keep me company," said Samuel.

"I'll think about it, but I suppose it's a long way to the Oracle."

"If Karnomen can handle it, so can you," Samuel shot back, his eyes blurring.

Bartholem knew his friend was right and the prospect of seeing the legendary site of the Oracle gave him a sense of adventure he hadn't felt in a long time, if ever. "Okay, I'll go if you'll take me, although I've never felt like I was contributing anything."

"Great!" Samuel said with a big smile. "I'll send you an arrangement later in the day and repeat what I've already said I said - that you have already contributed. You are on the easy way, my good man!"

Chapter 46. Winds of Prayer

Kamila's leg hurt more than he expected. At Simon's cabin, his attention was so focused on Maia that his pain was reduced to a subtle mind cloud, but now that he was alone in the forest for twenty minutes, sneaking through the dense undergrowth like a fox, the true condition of his leg was revealed, throbbing with pain. Fortunately the pain was dull, but unfortunately it was constant and attacked him every time he put weight on his leg.

Regardless of his condition, his interest was focused on the guards of the Supreme Guard. He knew very well that their motivation to catch him would be very high. Most, if not all, of them will be reassigned to the vicinity of the crime scene and then spread out looking for any sign of his trail. Nature had swallowed his tracks in the recent storm, so he knew they would have to deploy a full-circle search pattern that would reduce their security - something he was grateful for.

He just found a fork in the road and went left as Simon had advised. He rested for a few seconds about every thirty feet, listening for any sounds that might indicate human presence. It was a procedure he had learned in his first year of training. Kamil smiled as he remembered that he had used this same technique to find and capture Maia and Joseph.

Suddenly, to his right, he heard a distant, crunching snap of a twig, which penetrated the vault of forest silence and froze his steps. There was a large tree nearby, against which he leaned and looked cautiously around its rough trunk to see what made the sound. His heart pounded as he watched. It could have been something as innocent as a squirrel or a falling acorn, but it sounded like a twig breaking - one that took a lot of weight.

Kamil looked for any movement. His ears listened to the softest sound. And then he saw it. A huge male with antlers that were four feet wide. He was studying the forest and was clearly upset about something. His nostrils quivered with air. He was stout, but through the tangle of branches Kamil could see only fragments of his majestic presence: a whipping tail and a taut, muscular neck that moved his sensory radar.

There was complete silence in the forest. Even the wind, with its thousand voices, hid in its shell, as if tormented by the silence. Kamil knew that the male probably couldn't smell him, and if he stayed hidden, the male would be able to escape. Deer, especially deer of this size, are very shy because they are hunted by rangers for food. There were also wolves here in Dohrman's forest, which Kamil had never seen, but their howls could occasionally be heard.

Suddenly there was a loud gunshot and a moment later Kamil saw the male fall forward, his front legs collapsing but his hindquarters standing still struggling for balance. The buck tried to get up and run, but in doing so a second shot filled the air and the deer fell. Kamil immediately understood. The rangers, apparently the same ones who found Joseph - were watching the deer from the other side.

Kamil crouched down to the ground and listened. He heard voices in the distance, about a hundred yards ahead down the road. He adjusted his position behind a tree to make sure he couldn't be seen. He slowly looked around the huge tree trunk. He saw two figures walking around the fallen deer and talking excitedly. They were too far away to hear what they were saying, but Kamil reassured himself that there were only two of them.

It was dark before Kamil could estimate the distance that separated him from his pursuers. His secrecy was the only thing keeping him alive, and he didn't want to lose that fact. Apart from a blunt knife, he had no weapons, and his mobility was a severe handicap, making it impossible for him to both fight and flee.

The rangers built a fire and fought to prepare a venison dinner. The fire crackled loudly and the veil of background noise allowed Kamil to get close enough to the guard camp to hear their conversation. He recognized one of the voices, it was a guard named Sothmen - a bold unpleasant person, with a reputation for stubbornness and stubbornness. Kamil could not recognize the younger guard's voice.

At first, Kamil planned to just track down the guards and try to uncover their plans, but as he listened to them, it began be clear that they killed Joseph and are following his trail. The big male was a gift of the forest that they couldn't resist.

Kamil was getting even closer - literally centimeter by centimeter. The fading light worked in his favor and he knew the men would be drowsy after they stuffed themselves with venison. He had to be patient, although the smell of meat didn't help him much. In fact, during the course of the fever he had not eaten for several days, and his stomach was announcing its distress in every way available to him.

After the guards finished eating, Sothmen ordered the younger guard to keep the first watch while he slept. Kamil could hear them debating the need to keep watch, but the food was attractive to other animals and Sothmen's position eventually won out.

An hour later, Kamil moved little by little behind the younger guard, who sat staring into the fire, his rifle resting on his lap. Occasionally the guard threw a branch onto the red coals to keep warm, but otherwise it was quiet. Kamil watched with interest as the guard's head dropped from time to time, a sure sign that he was sleepy.

Kamil approached like a cat. He was only a few feet behind the guard, holding a large rock in his hand, and if the guard turned, he was completely vulnerable. Sothmen snored. To his left, about twelve feet away, Kamil noticed a ragged deer, its tongue hanging from its mouth and empty eyes staring out like polished agates.

Kamil returned his attention to the nape of the guard's head, and as it sank down, obeying the mighty call of sleep, Kamil took it as a sign, lunged forward, and delivered a powerful blow from the side of his head. The young guard collapsed and fell to his side into Kamil's waiting arms. Kamil cushioned his fall as best he could, his eyes fixed on Sothmen. To Kamil's relief, the snoring continued. Sothmen was blissfully unaware of the ambush just eight feet away.

Kamil placed the young guard's limp body carefully on the ground before walking lightly towards the snoring So-thmen, holding the young guard's upturned rifle in both hands. He quickly struck Sothmen in the temple with the butt of his rifle. Instead of knocking him out, Sothmen jerked open his eyes and reached for his rifle with a hoarse growl. "What the..."

Kamil struck him again and this time Sothmen lost consciousness. He quickly took away their rifles and knives. He rummaged through their knapsacks, took their compasses, maps, cartridges, and anything they might use for navigation or pursuit, and put it into one knapsack. Then he removed their shoes, carefully placed them on the fire like pieces of wood, and watched them to make sure they burned. Without their rifles and boots, the guards would have no choice but to return to the nearest station, which was at least four days' walk away.

Kamil did two final acts: he took a large uneaten thigh bone from a plate near the fire and threw it into his stolen backpack. He then left the campsite in the opposite direction of Simon's hut, deliberately leaving his tracks. Kamil danced on the remains of broken fir trees and was glad that he was not seen. Golden, transparent beams of light streamed at impossible angles through the towering trees, like flying dreams returning triumphantly. The shadow of the large winged creature passed through the shafts of light, gradually refracting them as it approached Kamil's position.

Maia wanted to reach out her hand to Kamil and shout a warning, but her hand lay limp beside her and her voice could only crackle in a whisper and without meaning. Her frustration grew as she watched the shadow advance towards Kamil who unconsciously danced in the forest clearing as if summoning his God. She felt like a stone being dragged by the current of a mighty river. A stream of magical reality flowed through her, but she was unable to affect it. I have to save you, was her only thought.

Suddenly, her world shifted to a barren field. The figure was lying in the middle of a large clearing with only boulders here and there and stubble of pale colored plants. The wind carried the words of the prayer, but she was unable to understand them. Something was watching - talking... it was so close she could feel it breathing.

Maia went to the fallen body, fearing that her fear that it was her beloved Kamil would be confirmed. As she looked at the body, which was unclothed and lying on its stomach, she recognized the shimmering red marks of a huge claw, dug into the shoulders. The body seemed lifeless, and above it were high canopies of golden-brown rays,

which hid him from the fierce sun. Maia suddenly understood that it was a holy place and felt strangely unwelcome.

Again, she had the feeling that something or someone was examining her and looking for flaws in her normal body. She felt movement at her feet and looked down. The unconscious body moved and groaned now, and as she leaned in to help, his head slowly turned towards her. Maia screamed when she saw her mother's face.

"Child, you must be still and quiet."

Maia shivered in disbelief that it was her mother. "Why do you say that?"

Her mother sat up and yawned as if she had just woken up from a deep sleep. "My child, look over each other...slowly."

Maia tilted her head and noticed that the rays of the canopy turned into snakes that lashed out with their forked tongues and slowly descended towards them. Fear gripped Maiu, she wanted to grab her mother's hand and run away.

"They won't bite you if you stay calm," her mother said coldly. "If you get up, if even a little you move, he hits you with all his might. Be still, my child. Be very calm."

Maia froze, her face tense. "I'm afraid," she said through gritted teeth.

"Baby, you are with me. You don't have to be afraid of anything," said the mother, her eyes shining with motherly love. "I have served you and always protected you, so I know better than anyone who you are, why you are here, and what you will leave behind in this world." Maia felt

another presence and wanted to turn around, but remembered her mother's warning to stay in calm down

"You will go through many paths, but it is not because you have erred in your devotion to God or been punished by him. Remember that, my child. You are loved. You are loved more than you can imagine. We watch you from beyond the fabric of another world and are never indifferent to your steps. Even then, if there is darkness in your world, it was not meant for you." "Look up, my child," her mother said, looking up herself and pointing. "You need to wake up

there is someone who needs your help."

"Where?" Maia looked up to see that the snakes were gone and only the starry sky remained.

"There, look," said the mother loudly.

"I see no one but stars." Her mother

stood up, her face next to Maia's. "You must open your eyes, child. Open your eyes. Open your eyes. Open your eyes..."

As the words were repeated, one reality replaced another, and Maia awoke from her dream, sat up, and opened her eyes like powerful searchlights. She turned to Simon, who was sleeping leaning against a tree trunk, oblivious to the large snake that was crawling towards him with cunning stealth.

Maia could see the snake very well in the moonlight, its scales emitting a greenish-gold glow even even in the dull silvery light of the moon.

The snake stopped and seemed to study Simon with interest. He probed the air with his copper tongue as if testing its energy. Maia knew little about snakes, but she recognized the characteristic hood of a cobra, and given its enormous length, this had to be a king cobra.

Her attention immediately focused as if she had been training for it her whole life. Her first impulse - to run - immediately vanished when she saw where the snake was heading and sensed its intent. Without moving her head, she observed Simon's staff and formed a plan. In no time, she jumped to Simon's right side, grabbed his staff and swung it at the snake, who was now in his signature attack stance and hissed in utter disdain.

Simon was startled by the surrounding noise and woke up. He yelped when he realized the situation they were in. With your back leaning against a tree, he slowly stood up. "Maia, step back slowly."

"And I'm supposed to let the snake attack?" Maia said like a warrior whose long awaited battle had just begun. "He wanted to kill

you!" "He feels threatened," Simon whispered loudly, enunciating each word with special care. "Back off and he'll leave us alone." The cobra rose

about five feet off the ground. Her hood spread like a sail. She stared into Mai's with her eyes and swayed slightly as if searching for her weakness. Then a bone-chilling growl that only a king cobra can make filled the air. At that moment, the cobra struck and missed Maia by only a few inches as she ducked back. As the snake braced itself for another strike, Maia, her body only controlled by instinct, struck Simon's staff with astonishing force and speed. The force of the blow was aimed directly at the snake's head and was fatal.

The cobra sank to the ground in a tangled pile of scales.

For some inexplicable reason, in the midst of the peaceful aftermath, Maia heard her mother's voice echoing in her head: Spring up from within! Spring from within! That's what Maia said on many occasions. Whenever Maia needed to do a difficult task, her mother told her, Be boldly different. Don't draw from the outside. Come from within. Come forth from within, my child. The well of your spirit is much deeper than the most brilliant claims of men.

Simon held out his hand and it took Maia a second or two to understand that he wanted her staff, which she silently handed back to him.

"It's been used for many things over the years, but I think this is the first time it's been used to handle royalty cobras." Simon's words were a mix of tones of soft relief and a smile.

He knelt down to examine the snake. He poked at it with a stick to make sure it was dead. "It's not exactly a breakfast I would think about while sleeping, but we'll make it. Have you ever had a snake before?"

Maia shook her head, still vacillating between the two realities she had just experienced. "What's a king cobra doing in the forest?" Simon recognized

Maia's low, distant voice—part shock, part guilt. "We're close to the perimeter of the Oracle site," he replied. "The High Guard created elaborate defenses to protect it from intruders." Simon pointed to the dead snake, still kneeling beside it. "These were brought in as part of the protection, though I've never seen one this far."

"Before I forget," said Simon, getting to his feet. He looked at Maia, "thank you for saving my life."

"You should thank my mother," Maia mumbled, still staring at the lifeless body of the cobra in shock. "She warned me in a dream She saved us both."

Simon narrowed his eyes but remained silent, breathing in the words in the cool morning air.

"She saved us," Maia repeated in a distant whisper. She sat up and felt numb as the adrenaline began to circulate in her blood.

Simon leaned his staff against a tree. "I'll start making breakfast, we have to leave early today." "Is there a place we're going... the Oracle?" Maia asked.

Simon took a deep breath as he lifted the snake and placed it on the ground like he was untangling a piece of rope. "Yes, we need his advice, and I suspect he will need our help. We had to run anyway, so it seems like a logical place to go."

"Why?" Maia asked. "Why is this a logical place for us to go? They obviously guard it well." "This part is not guarded by guards. They leave it to the defense system." "What defense system?" "That's a rather complicated subject, but there is a way to get to the Oracle..." "Have you ever done this before?" Simon nodded. "Many times." "Unobserved?" "Unobserved," Simon repeated confidently, adding some small branches to the embers of the fire, coaxing them to pro-arousal with your breath.

"Think of the Oracle as the center of a great circle. The circle has only one entrance to its center and that is the way from the monastery of the Supreme Initiates. This road is over seven miles long and very narrow with checkpoints every mile."

"The rest of the ring is protected by various security systems, but the guards are not protected, as the defenses are impenetrable. We've already met one of them," Simon pointed his knife at the snake, its full length now visible in the growing light of the early morning rays. Maia estimated that it must be fourteen feet long even without the head that Simon had removed.

"I understand why he came so far from the perimeter border. His stomach is completely empty," stated Simon. "Apparently they've exhausted their food supply, so they've had to expand their hunting grounds. No challenge here is harmful to these hunters." "Does that mean we'll meet more of them?" Maia asked, her voice shaking.

Simon continued to prepare the snake and the fire. "It is possible. We better make some arrangements. They don't hunt people – unless they're completely desperate."

"Didn't you just say they were desperate?" Maia pointed out.

Simon started to speak but then stopped. Instead, he turned his attention to the sliced pieces of cobra and placed them—skin side down—directly on the coals. They began to sizzle and squirm in the heat and almost immediately began to smell delicious. Simon took a large leaf from a nearby plant and placed all the unwanted pieces of the cobra on his

top and then wrapped it. "I'm going to bury it. I'll be right back. Watch that snake—I mean the one on the fire." And he laughed as he went away.

Maia put on a small smile and moved closer to the fire for warmth and also to take care of their breakfast. She hadn't had a chance to think about her dream yet. She touched her pendant, searching for the memory of her mother's face, but found it elusive. Was it really her? Did she help me? I need a visible sign...my faith is so weak.

Maia closed her eyes for a moment, trying to relive the dream, but it slipped away, even if the darkness didn't mean it for you." Intended, she tried to arrange. Her mother said something that confused her, what a strange choice of words, Maia thought.

Chapter 47. Heart Shaped Contempt

"I don't care! He is my personal doctor!" Levernon shouted. "Who does he think he is? I'll get his head! He does he really think that the laws do not apply to him?"

Samuel let Levernon scream and simply nodded in agreement every time Levernon looked at his direction. After a few minutes he finally calmed down.

"We should post guards at his house," said Levernon, sinking into his chair. "Those sadistic par-chants."

"We cannot reveal that we are planning any revenge," Samuel said after a long pause. "Bartholem specifically asked me..." "So what, I'm going to look

incompetent because you promised something to Bartholem? No, you explain to him that the world doesn't work that way. Bartholem is like a father to me, I'll put him on an island if I have to...I'll...I'll send an army to his door, but I won't be intimidated by a poor crook working for Karnomen."

"I want you to plan our retaliation, with all the resources you use to secure the Oracle. I want him to show that he cannot intimidate or even touch the Royal Houses without consequence."

Levernon fell silent, his eyes deep in thought and his brow furrowed into fierce canyons. Then his face changed into a wide smile.

"We will use the Oracle against him. We will create a new religion based on his teachings. This new religion will be under my control. We will unleash the wisdom he keeps to himself, and all his predecessors will turn in their graves as we reveal the full story to the people. I will become the new Messiah, the one who will make this new knowledge available to people."

Samuel's mouth hung open as if a drawbridge had dropped to contain the crowd of fools.

"This is revenge!" said Levernon sensually. "That's what I want you to work on. Is that clear?"

"That's a wonderful and brave vision," Samuel agreed, closing his mouth and looking down at his shoes. "I'll start planning right away tomorrow, after our swap meet."

"Okay," said Levernon, getting to his feet convincingly. "Meanwhile, I'd like to give Bartholem a small one a gift to repay him for his dedication."

"What do you mean?" Samuel asked, standing near the door and about to leave.

"I'd like him to be the first to use the Oracle - at our swap meet."

"I'm not sure, sir, if he'll see it as a gift," Samuel replied. "She's just nervous about coming with us."

"I understand, but it is a gift from his king. She can't refuse him."

Levernon leaned forward and took an apple from the fruit bowl on his desk and took a bite. He waved his hand to signal that the meeting was over. Samuel bowed and left the royal chambers. He wondered how he could possibly persuade Bartholem to be the first to ask the Oracle something. Moreover, in the presence of Karnomen. He won't even do it for a king.

Samuel walked the halls of the Palace rehearsing how he would communicate his failed endeavor to Levernon. "I told him that you gave him this gift as a token of gratitude and as a symbol to tell Karnomen how little his corrupt act had touched the Royal Palace. I told him that it might be the greatest honor of his life to address the all-knowing Oracle. She can ask him any question - from the personal to the universal and anything in between."

"And he refused?" the king asks.

"Yes..." Samuel mumbled politely, "it's not that he refused, he just felt that the honor was too great for him to accept and insisted that the best gift you could give him would be to rightfully address the Oracle

first." Yes, that's the tone I need to use to convince Levernon, Samuel thought. Bartholem will be my debtor...again.

* * * *

Hugelitod walked briskly towards Doriah's secret residence, an innocent looking storage facility that hid an ancient temple. A mysterious sign was pinned to his door last night. It had a code on it that took him a few moments to decipher: "4 p.m. D." He was due to arrive at Doriah's at four o'clock in the afternoon and he wanted to be punctual.

He had just finished a long day in the gardens surrounding the monastery social center. This center was the only place where visitors were allowed access, and its perimeter border was heavily guarded to ensure that no one could slip past it and enter the Order's private sanctuaries.

There were two types of priests who lived in the Monastery of the Supreme Initiates: research priests who were invited guests, and most of them were on religious leave to study and meditate on the esoteric texts of the Church, or to work in the observatory. Then there were those who were members of the Order of the Sixteen Rays. They were a small group compared to the first. They had separate quarters, offices and conference centers that were reserved for the Order. Even the assistants of the sixteen High Initiates were an Order unto themselves, in the sense that they were carefully selected, lived in separate quarters, and generally stayed together, bound by the demands and secrecy of their work.

Priests who were invited to the monastery for study and contemplation were often unknowingly candidates for the Order of the Sixteen Rays. They have been examined by High Initiates for their potential to join the support staff. Once a priest was accepted into the support staff of the Order, his eligibility to join the Order was assessed.

The process of joining the Order was slow and tedious, as there were only sixteen positions and they rarely became vacant other than by death. There was one instance a few years ago where a Number Twelve initiate resigned due to health reasons and decided not to return to their responsibilities, but the vast majority remained in their positions until their deaths.

Since his liberation, Hugelitod has remained alone. The invited priests were wary of his standing in the Order, and his imprisonment was something of a scandal. There were rumors that Hugelitod lied to Karnomen, or worse, that he was possessed by a demon of madness. Many assumed he was destined for exile as a monastic servant, so to them Hugelitod was simply a gardener and someone to be avoided.

The high initiates behaved no differently, avoiding him whenever he walked by by avoiding eye contact. Hugelitod was a great unknown, and even though he had received his atonement, he remained in their eyes on probation. It was up to Hugelitod to seek them out individually, apologize and restore their trust.

Hugelitod was about to knock when the door opened and behind it stood Doriah, partially hidden in the deep shadows of his hood. He motioned for Hugelitod to come inside. "I made lemonade, you must be thirsty working in this heat. Follow me, we're in the kitchen."

Are we? An alarm went off in Hugelitod's guts at the choice of the word.

"Thank you," Hugelitod said, wondering why he couldn't think of anything else to say.

The two entered the kitchen area, just like before. Here, to Hugelitod's sudden dismay, sat Karnomen at a small table. He was sipping tea, looking as casual as only a Supreme Initiate can look under difficult circumstances.

"I'm sorry to shock you," Karnomen said, reading Hugelitod's face with his sly look, "but when Doriah was explaining his dilemma to me, I couldn't help but wonder why you're so adamant, so... intransigent about subversion. It seems like one day you're with us and the next against us.

I'm having a hard time keeping up with your cycle of devotion and betrayal. So tell me where are you today?"

Hugelitod had his heart in his throat. He suddenly felt hot under his robe and felt a thin trickle of sweat running down his face down the left temple.

Doriah motioned to the chair. "Sit down. We are just starting a friendly sharing."

Hugelitod did as he was told, remembering to show his respect for Karnomen, so he did he bowed before sitting down. Friendly sharing? How friendly can that be? Hugelitod thought.

Karnomen cleared his throat, reminding Hugelitod that his question was not rhetorical.

"Why... why are you... here?" Hugelitod said hesitantly, his eyes darting between the two men. He ignored Karnomen's question.

"I'm not in the mood for distraction," Karnomen said. "I will ask. You will answer. Do you understand?"

Hugelitod nodded and focused on Karnomen. "Sir, I don't want to betray anyone...least of all you...I just don't agree with Doriah, and probably not with you, on how to bring the teachings of the Oracle to the public.

It is the wish of the Oracle that I do this. It is not my own wish."

Karnomen held his teacup in both hands near his mouth and blew gently on it. Hugelitod followed as waves of breath skate across the surface of the captured tea.

"You say that is the wish of the Oracle..." stated Karnomen. "How do you know that? You only talked to the drugged up images of the Oracle. You know very little about the Dohrman Prophecy and now you suddenly believe you are the chosen one."

Doriah didn't tell him about my experience at the temple. Doriah, who was behind him in the kitchen pouring lemonade, put on a table of coasters with two glasses and pieces of chocolate. "Can I interrupt you with refreshments?"

Karnomen nodded and for the first time since Hugelitod entered the small, dimly lit room, he set down his cup of tea and reached for the chocolate. His bony hand was like a vulture's beak.

Doriah sat up and placed both hands on his knees. His face looked like a mosaic of thinly stretched skin and was like a mask. The face was framed by a monk's hood, which further accentuated his - already mysterious - presence.

"I had an idea that might be a way to solve this dilemma," Doriah suggested. "How about we approve Hugelitod's work for... say, the moon. Then we'll see what working with this spirit masquerading as the Oracle accomplishes."

"In a few days the Oracle will be owned by the king and we will lose our right to use it. Hopefully it would what Hugelitod accomplished may have been opening a new access point..."

"You don't believe in these inventive fantasies, do you?" Karnomen interrupted him.

"It doesn't matter what I believe," answered Doriah, pointing at Hugelitod. "He believes it and tells the truth. It can't hurt to take a look. If we let him, we will be clear. Whatever he creates with the help of this .

"If we find that the work of Hugelitod and his allies is blasphemous, we will simply stop the experiment. But if we find out that he somehow gained access to the Oracle - in some new way - then maybe that could be our option to continue accessing it." Doriah shot Hugelitod a look as if to silence any reaction from him.

Karnomen leaned forward and took another piece of chocolate from the tray. "I will consider it only under these conditions. First, you will personally supervise this experiment - what do you call it. Second, you will make sure that anything created in the form of documents will be secured for review by the Order. Hugelitod may not keep any copy for himself. Third, if we declare the writings blasphemous, Hugelitod will agree to stop his obsession with the Oracle. Fourth, you have two weeks to do it."

Karnomen shoved the chocolate into his mouth and stood up. "I have nothing else to do. Are we done?"

Doriah nodded. "We're done."

"And what about you?" Karnomen asked, turning to Hugelitod.

Hugelitod also nodded. "Yes sir, I agree. Thank you."

"So I'm clear with you two," Karnomen added. "I don't believe any of it. I don't believe you ever contacted the Oracle, except perhaps during your initiation. I don't believe for a second that what you saw and heard - what you call the Oracle - is really the Oracle. But as Doriah said, which is true, it's a harmless experiment and if you agree to let go of your obsession after two weeks, then I'm happy. But trust me, you only have two weeks to sort it out in your head. No more! You are lucky to have found Doriah's support in this matter. He has a lot more patience than I do."

Karnomen reached for the chocolate one last time. "Thanks for the refreshments," said Karnomen. "This chocolate is delicious."

"I'm glad you like it," said Doriah. "Take some more for the trip. Maybe you'll have some left over at home."

Karnomen placed his hand on Doriah's shoulder and then left. "If there's one thing I'm not, that's it gluttonous, but thank you anyway." Karnomen raised his bony hand as he left. "Two weeks."

His footsteps faded into silence and then there was the sound of the door closing. The dead room gave space to a ticking clock that echoed like a heartbeat from somewhere Hugelitod could not locate.

Doriah looked at Hugelitod and sighed. "Why do you think the Supreme Initiate has one of the unmost advanced observatories in the world?"

Hugelitod's face creased as he pondered the strange question. "What does that have to do with what just happened?"

Doriah remained silent, relentlessly waiting for Hugelitod's answer.

"I think you played the whole thing into a car by telling the High Priest a half-truth and now I why does he have a big telescope you ask? Who cares?"

Realizing he hadn't had any lemonade, Hugelitod took a quick drink to quench his parched throat. He was irritated. He was angry at everyone for thinking he was crazy or so clouded in his mind as to believe apparitions that pretended to be the Oracle. "You really got it around your finger, didn't you?" he said with a contemptuously cold voice.

Doriah remained silent, staring at Hugelitod as if pondering something strange, or how to disguise the truth.

"I don't know why he has an observatory," Hugelitod snapped. "It seems like a waste of money. I don't know, maybe it's his hobby, has a passion for astronomy. And what should it be? What's the point?"

"Do other religions have observatories?" Doriah asked.

"I don't know... I don't think so. Why are you asking me that?"

"The universe has a root... its beginning that exists even before its creation. And this root, like the root of a plant, is nourished by something that allows it to grow and expand. Science is working to explain it, but the root and whatever feeds it is so mysterious that science cannot measure it. So our Church is being asked to provide answers."

"And we tell people that the root of the universe and what sustains it is God, the Creator. And scientists say that is unknown. They have theories, but only theories. Karnomen and his predecessors know that this will be the final story to be told. They know that the root of the universe is the key to reconciling the Creator with his creation."

"Why?" Hugelitod asked. "Why should something so distant from us care about what we believe?"

"Because science and religion compete as storytellers," answered Doriah. "If science comes before religion, if they are the ones who tell the story of the Creator, it will be without the ingenuity of a divine being. God will be reduced to elemental forces - and he will be plural. In the world of science, everything is moving towards plurality, regardless of their claims of "singularity". But if science is able to hone its way to the root, it will see that there is only one causal force behind all the layers of plurality."

"Did the Oracle tell you, or is it your opinion?"

"Almost everything I believe comes from the Oracle," Doriah replied without missing a beat. "And this one causal force always eludes the tools of science, but it is already known to religion, and has been so for thousands of years.

But we need to become the tellers of this story - the ones to uncover the root and explain it to people in terms they can understand and believe. The observatory is simply our way of saying that science is also a tool of the Church. When we are ready to tell this story, it will be much more about science than about our religion. We are alchemists who mix these two ingredients into something understandable and engaging."

"Why are you telling me this? How does any of this relate to our conversation with Karnomen?"

"I just want you to know that Karnomen rejects your stories because deep down he is a man of science. This is a fact that everyone around him overlooks. It understands that these entities of the underworld, or even the heavenly worlds, cannot interact with us without driving us insane. It assumes you already fall into that category."

Hugelitod was ready to interrupt Doriah and begin to fight back, but Doriah raised his hand. "I told him you're just sane. Calm down. But his next conclusion was that you had unwittingly fallen into worshiping the hallucinogens you had received from Dr. Bartholem. I don't think you'll ever convince Karnomen of your story unless your story takes science into account."

Doriah paused, letting his words die. "You would do well to remind the Oracle of this matter if this experiment is to go beyond the two weeks Karnomen has set for his assessment."

Hugelitod shook his head uncomfortably. "I can hardly believe that Karnomen is a man of science more than of religion. It's actually impossible to believe. He is the Eye of God, the Supreme Initiate, the leader of the Church and ..."

"The Oracle has a way of changing you. Of all people, you should know that the most." Doriah sighed and let her words die. "There are other things about Karnomen that you won't understand - other influences that make his personality very complex..."

Doriah pulled back his chair, signaling that the meeting was over. "We start tomorrow. Get a good night's sleep and I'll meet you here after your breakfast - a light breakfast. You have a lot to learn."

Chapter 48. Shining Eyes

The only way he could keep himself moving was thinking about Maia. With each step he knew her safety was getting better. Kamil had covered at least two miles from the guards he happened to meet, but now he needed to slow down. His bandages were almost torn from walking through the pathless forest. He was guided only by the moonlight and the sharp edges of the forest found his body on many occasions.

He reached down to feel his leg. The wound was wet to the touch, with a silkiness that could only be blood. He hesitated and looked around for a place to camp. He was hungry and exhausted and disoriented in the darkness of the weak moon. He knew he had to fix the bandage and rest for a while.

Suddenly he was caught by a black spot out of the corner of his eye. Something moved. His breath stopped. He felt a wave of fear wash over his chest and tighten every muscle. The pine needles provided a blanket to the ground that dampened the sound. Whatever he saw, he must have been a perfect tracker. He listened with every cell in his body. Kamil thought he heard a faint snorting sound. Wolves? Wild dogs? Pin?

The game was still in his pack and he was bleeding. Any wild dog would be able to smell him a mile away. He remained silent, unsure if what he heard and saw was real. His fingers gripped the rifle he was holding with fear and slowly adjusted it into position to fire. The last thing he wanted to do was shoot and draw attention to his position, but the other options seemed even less appealing. A few faint growls filled the forest and he realized it wasn't a stray dog or a single animal. He was surrounded by a pack of wolves.

Kamil had heard of guards who had gone mad in the forest, completely alone, with little food, no company, with a stunted heart that had never been loved, and everything was against them, so they went mad.

He had heard these stories, but here, in the middle of a tangled forest, in the dark, surrounded by a pack of hungry wolves, bleeding from a body that was completely exhausted and damaged, pursued by people who would most like to put a bullet in his back and harden their revenge, he began to laugh. He felt the hand of madness reach him and release the most absurd expression: laughter. Only a madman can find humor in this twisted arrangement.

As he leaned against the tree, his laughter continued to spread uncontrollably, counterpointed by snarling, fur-covered maws that seemed to grow louder and closer. A strange symphony of sounds flowed through the forest, and Kamil in the middle of it all had the impression that it was some kind of music that he had never heard before, and his laughter grew even louder.

Then a gray blob moved in front of him. It was bigger than he expected. The wolf stood on its forelegs, only a few feet in front of him, baring its fangs and snarling with such ferocity that Kamil's laughter immediately turned to anger. It was a rage he had never possessed before. Pure, deep, concentrated, primal, and when he expressed himself, even wilder than a wolf. At that moment, Kamil was no longer human. Some other force seized him and he approached the great wolf without fear, growling in return with a sound that was not his own.

From behind he felt the first soft bite on his calf. It was deep and sharp. The pain only fueled his fury and he slammed the butt of his rifle directly at its source. He heard a loud alien bark. Then more wolves appeared, their eyes radiating terror and glowing green in the moonlight. Kamil moved to a clarity that almost shocked him. He knew what was coming next, how the wolf pack would close in and tighten its grip. He remembered stories of rangers who, when encountering large droppings or hearing howls at night, mistook wolves for the harmless presence of a stray dog or coyote. It wasn't about wolves. Or even if they were wolves, they never attacked humans.

But Kamil was face to face with hungry wolves who, like him, were creatures of flesh, blood and bones and who simply wanted to survive. And the taste of blood in the air raised their hunger to a fever pitch. Whichever way Kamil looked, everywhere he saw glowing eyes floating through the tangled darkness, he could even see the increasing amount of foam around their great jaws - a sure sign that they were about to kill. Kamil's fury made him not afraid of them - not one bit. The wolf pack was outnumbered and they sensed he was hurt.

With no other way out, Kamil fired his rifle, hoping it would scare them off, which it did. The wolves scattered in all directions as the rifle shot filled the air like a bolt of lightning. He knew it was temporary, but it was nice to have some space between him and the wolves. He knew they would track him and wait for him to make a mistake, fall asleep, or die. The wolves will be as relentless as the guards. Unfortunately, the same sound that distracted the wolves could have summoned the guard.

He leaned against a tree with his legs stretched out on the ground in front of him and opened his backpack. He took the venison out of it and began to eat as voraciously as if he were trying to destroy the evidence. Within minutes he had gnawed the bone completely and tossed it into the woods with the faint hope that it would momentarily attract the attention of the wolves. He then found a flashlight that he stole from the guards. He turned it on and let a beam of its light penetrate the dark forest. Nothing moved and he s

thankfully he found no glowing eyes staring at him. Perhaps the rifle shot had more effect than he dared to hope.

So far he walked in the dark because he was afraid to use a flashlight. But now he had to deal with the wolves, who had become his new enemies, potentially even more dangerous and even more threatening to his life. With guards, he expected to be brought alive to trial and then executed. The High Watch sought out the trials because their drama was a welcome distraction from the mundane life of the Guardians, and they provided revealing stories of what happened when a Guardian misbehaved.

He tried to stand up, but a rush of pain shot through his entire body and made his stomach heave so that he almost vomited. His leg was even worse now. The wolf bite was on the same leg as his thigh injury, and he could now add his leg to his growing list of challenges. If he cannot run or climb a tree, he will become an easy target for wolves or guards.

He looked in his backpack and found a first aid kit at the very bottom. Holding the flashlight in his mouth, he rummaged through the bandages and pulled out what he thought would be good for something. After washing his wounds with iodine, he bandaged them as best he could. He drank some water and tried his best to imagine where he was. The forest was completely foreign to him. No roads or signs. Nothing. He tried to visualize his way from the ranger camp, but try as he might, he was unable to visualize the way back and direction to the meeting point Simon had suggested.

Maybe he was just so exhausted he couldn't think straight. But whatever the cause, he was lost prices.

He knew the wolves would be back soon. It was at least three hours before sunrise. Since he wanted nothing more than to fall asleep, he forced himself to get up and go. He decided to pick a direction as best he could and go as quietly as possible. Without light. He navigated like his wolf pursuers: absolutely silent. He could almost hear the wolves' thoughts: The man's death is not far off. We will be patient. We will win.

But Kamil remembered that he still had a rifle and no wolf would pursue an armed man for long. There are other prey in these fertile forests that are less difficult and dangerous to catch. Then he saw it, flashes of light somewhere in the distance that broke through the tree branches like startled fireflies looking for him. The guards heard his rifle fire, but these were coming from a different direction than the one he came from, meaning they would have rifles and boots.

Kamil's heart started pounding again as he considered his options. He saw two lights and from their wobbly movement he could tell that the guards were running. The lights were at least half a mile away, and if he could find a place to hide, he might be able to avoid them if they didn't have dogs. Then suddenly a growl erupted not more than ten feet away from him. Kamil looked around and saw a flash of bared fangs. Wolves again, or guard dogs? Does it matter? He thought.

Something large leaped at him and out of the corner of his eye he prepared to fire, but the beast was too fast and knocked him down into the bushes and bit his hand. All he could do was close his eyes, fire his rifle, and hope that the wolves would startle. This time, however, they remained standing in a small circle, watching him. Then one of the wolves stepped forward and bit his other hand, and then another wolf jumped on his face and sought his throat. Kamil spun on the ground like a wild man on fire. Then a shot went off from his rifle. This time he hit one of the wolves.

Everything slowly emptied as his world began to swirl into nothingness. He heard human voices shouting in the distance - hostile he was sure, but his last conscious thought that night was that they were his saviors.

Chapter 49. The Moving Labyrinth

"What are you doing?" Maia whispered, watching Simon's strange expression. His eyes were closed and he was deep in thought. His lips moved softly. But what was most disturbing to Maia was that he seemed oblivious to their obvious danger. They were a stone's throw away from the watchtower that loomed above the small trees where the clearing had once been devoid of trees.

"Soothing the birds," Simon replied in a low, calm voice.

"Can you do that?"

"When you spend as much time in the woods as I do, you'll be surprised at what you can do," Simon replied. "The Supreme Guard uses the bird population as an alarm system for each of their towers. This is the last watchtower and there are the largest number of birds - so it is harder to keep them calm."

Suddenly, a couple of crows to their left started cawing. Maia tensed and crouched.

"That's good," said Simon. "That's what birds do," he laughed. "We'd have a problem if everyone started making a chorus of noise."

Simon turned and ran past Maia in a low stance. "Come with me."

Maia crawled on her hands and knees for about fifty feet until she finally reached the large tree Simon was leaning against. "Is something bad going on?"

"Nothing bad is happening. I just want to see if anything has changed since my last visit."

"How long is it?"

"About two years," Simon replied, huffing softly. "We'll go at night when it gets dark."

"What about Kamil, shouldn't we wait for him?"

"No. We need to do it tonight. It's new, we have to take advantage of it. If Kamil has done his job well, he will be here before long, but I don't want our task to depend on it. That would be too many variables."

"What do you mean, too many variables?"

Simon sighed and stared at Maia with a sympathetic yet realistic expression. She looked down, unable to look into his eyes for more than a moment. She remained silent and thought of Kamil.

Looking for a distraction, Maia opened their duffel bag and drank some water. Then she offered to Simon. "Why are we doing this, Simon?"

"That we're trying to talk to the Oracle?" he asked between measured sips of water. Maia nodded.

Simon looked up at the sky, which was largely hidden behind the branches and leaves of the trees. His hood partially covered his windswept face with strong features. "In the infinite realities of which this is only a small part, there is one constant: the desire to be needed. Not because you have something that others lack, but simply because you are part of the whole and you know it. You know that everyone else is like you: they are your peers.

Therefore, there is mutual respect and gratitude. That is equality."

"When the Oracle first dictated his original prophecy to me, I asked him when it would end..." "You mean the Oracle itself?"

"No, the Oracle's service to this planet... to our species."

"What did it say?" Maia asked. "He

told me that he cannot predict such a thing because it has to do with his personality. His creators did not give him the ability to answer such questions. But I persisted in asking this question from different angles until I got the answer. However evasive, its fulfillment is what I have been waiting for... for a very long time."

"What?"

"It told me that in time it would collapse and a door would open to allow him to become human."

"What does this breakdown mean?"

"All systems go down at some point, Maia," Simon replied. "Entropy. The oracle can see this coming change, not so much for himself, but rather for humanity as a whole. And it will be this shift that will touch him in its own way."

Maia furrowed her brow, looking confused. "Shift?"

"The equality I talked about earlier - that constant in the universe - is not everyone's perspective. There are those who are not satisfied with being equal and instead desire superiority and place their value and contribution above others. Respect and gratitude are not what they desire. Instead, they crave worship, power, fear, and privilege."

"Those who seek unity and equality clash with those who seek power and privilege. It is precisely the intersection of these two paths - two very different belief systems - where they collide. Displacement is what happens after that collision."

"But wasn't this always in conflict?" Maia asked.

"Of course, but not when the dynamics of the planet - and the entire universe - are also changing. This is what creates the intersection that makes collision and subsequent displacement possible."

"When you said you spoke to the Oracle as a person, I knew it was a sign that he was becoming human, signaling that the time of the shift was coming. I felt it, but I was looking for confirmation. When we were outside my cabin and the Oracle manifested as a woman... that was confirmation for me. We are in the middle of the intersection, at the point where the collision will happen. I don't know for sure, but I want to find out what the Oracle has to say about it."

Maia frowned and looked at Simon. "I still don't understand the shift. What is it? How can that change anything?"

"Maia, a profound change is taking place, but people don't really see it, or feel it...yet. They probably attribute it to natural cycles - natural corrections and do not see anything significant in it. But the Oracle said that this would be the time when equality would prevail. It will be a time when brotherhood drives out slavery. A time when the corrupt in power will notice the power of equality."

"As? How can something like this happen? I mean, who is behind this?"

"They're all for it," Simon said mysteriously. "It is the culmination of hundreds of thousands of years, since man and woman they first entered this planet as physical beings who were planned."

"Until?"

"Us," Simon replied. "By humanity. It is not imposed by some external force. It is our collective will as a sentient species to become a force of unity. A collective consciousness that ascends through infinite realities looking for other species anywhere in the universe that have done the same. And if we don't find any, then we will refine them."

Maia looked at Simon with a certain amount of uncertainty, as if examining his sanity. "And there you have it all from Oracle?"

"Yes," replied Simon.

"Why would anyone want to prevent that?"

"They manipulated the most fundamental law of the universe of all realities - the free will of sentient beings. They rejected the unity of equality because they desired personal power more than the creation of collective intelligence. In this lust for power, they have divided the human spirit into a patchwork of inefficiencies. They have trapped humanity, like someone who clips the wings of a bird to make it unable to fly."

"After this structure of imprisonment was ingrained in the human species, it continued from generation to generation - in a mixture of heredity and culture - like a perpetual motion machine. Except now the time has come when entropy has reached that machine and..."

"So the collision will happen soon?"

"Yes," Simon nodded, "but it's not like it's going to happen in a single event that happens in one day. It may take fifty years. Perhaps less, but these shifts beckon us both deeper and higher at the same time. They stretch humanity. They create a scope in the human spirit that can reach far back into the monarchies of power and find our collective voice here. Not a physical voice speaking words, but an inner voice that speaks as a collective vibration of the one. And that's because he understands that each of us is a part of the One Being, which is not controlled by any thing, nor by any external force."

"Not even God?"

"Not even by God."

"It scares me," Maia admitted softly. "The crash that happens before this shift, what will it look like?"

"That's what I want to ask the Oracle," said Simon.

"But it's not the end of the world, is it?"

Simon shook his head and gave a friendly smile. "It is the birth of a new world. Everything that ends heralds a new beginning. This new beginning is the promise of our new awareness as a collective. The oracle explained it as waking up from a prison you hadn't noticed before and then one day you wake up and see the prison bars and the guard at the door."

"We're in prison and we don't even know it?"

"It's like living in a labyrinth structure that we've become so used to that few, if any, people seek an escape. The borders of that labyrinth touch other dimensions of being that are so foreign to us that they make us afraid, but these border worlds are our future. They are much more rarefied and thus require some preparation before we touch them and before we experience them in a way that is useful to the individual and does not throw them off balance. But until one finds a way to leave the labyrinth, preparation is not possible."

"And how does one do that - leave the maze?" Maia asked.

"It's different for everyone, and it's intentionally so because it requires each of us to rely on our own perception and sense of navigation. Everyone must wake up to the reality that the maze exists and then work to map the maze to understand its structure, its purpose, and remain open to the possibility that most of what they believed will be discarded as redundant, untrue, or simply outdated. Once an individual has a map, even a vaguely conceived map, it means that he has begun his preparation. When he begins to navigate out of the maze, he reaches the border of a higher world, which is a world of awareness, not a world of objects or ideas."

"This awareness is the new world of equality and unity. It does not live for images, sounds, feelings, calculations or polarities. It is not fueled by faith or piety. It is not open to devotion to external personalities, not to who they are. It doesn't matter if you pretend to believe in God or a spirit, or if you demonstrate your holiness by abstinence. That doesn't value your intellect. It depends only on the manifestations of the heart - the coherence of its virtues pouring out from the center of your being."

"It's like there's a world outside of this maze and we're living in both places at the same time. In the world of consciousness where we are the One Being. And in the structure of the labyrinth where we are billions of fragments divided by nationalities, creeds, social status, gender and hundreds of other things that are just weights on the bowls of importance inside the labyrinth."

"As One Being, we can look into the maze and see fragments of ourselves and call them back home. Some listen more carefully than others, but the voice calls. He was always calling, and this voice can help you find your way out, too."

"Why can't the fragments look out of the labyrinth and see the world of awareness?"

"They can!" cried Simon. "There is nothing to prevent it except our belief in what is illusory. Faith is the most powerful article of the human spirit. By faith you can lead the masses to believe that the labyrinth and its fragments are the most important part of the entire universe. And that what is outside the labyrinth is, shall we say, mentally deranged, satanic, or evil and nothing more. So it's better not to talk about those things at all, or you'll be banished as a social outcast."

"But there are those whose bravery or courage requires them to explore, research and reach out of the labyrinth into the world of awareness and live without the uniform of divided humanity. They simply allow the virtues of the heart to guide them. They do not care about specific religious beliefs, rituals, regulations or incantations. They know that their faith is their most precious energy and they invest it inside, in the central part of themselves, because that is where they connect with the One Being."

"How will what you say allow people to find their way out of the maze?" Maia asked. "It seems to me that the real world should be accessible to us. In other words, if we are supposed to wake up and get out of the labyrinth that separates us, then there should be someone who just turns on the light, wakes everyone up, and shows them the exit. Isn't that the purpose of the Oracle?"

"We live in an expanding multiverse," Simon replied. "There are worlds within worlds within worlds. The structure of the labyrinth stretches across the worlds. There is no one exit door that everyone can walk through. What concerns The oracle told me that it is not the destiny of any outside force to save humanity or awaken us to the reality of our oneness. It is our own plan - as One Being - to inhabit polar densities, survive and evolve. In this evolution we gradually become aware of our collective soul."

"It may seem like a slow awakening - indeed it does to me - but its timing is not measured by a single human life, but rather by the collective life span of our species."

Maia shrugged and sighed. "I still don't understand why the One Being isn't able to wake up faster. What causes humanity to squander its unity in the name of individual expression? Why does it end up with one part trying to kill or manipulate another? It's such a terrible waste."

"You're right about that," Simon admitted, "but the human family has been manipulated by their gods. This manipulation was a penetrating channeling of the fears and beliefs of the human family into the waiting stomachs of those who - in a very real sense - feed on humanity. These self-proclaimed gods fear that the One Being might eventually overshadow them. They wish the human family to be divided into fragments of fear and faith because it provides

them with sustenance and work..." "Are you saying that God is responsible for our fragmentation?" Maia asked with obvious irritation in her normally crystal voice. "I don't understand that. Of all the things I've heard from you, this is the most confusing. First - God is one. We are one with him. So the One Being must be God. Is that right?"

"Which God?" Simon asked rhetorically. "A God of Vengeance? A God who punishes humanity for its sinful nature - the same nature that God, through His omniscience, equipped us with? A God who demands worship from His imperfect, sinful creation? A God who clothes himself with religions that incite holy wars and inquisitions? A God who destroys what disagrees with him? That God, Maia?"

Simon paused, reading Mai's face as frustration grew. "What we call God, what we are brought up to believe, serve and put our faith in and fear, is manipulation and deception. Most of our prophets, messengers, messiahs have lent their voice to this fear-inducing Triune God - Father, Son and Spirit. The Triune God is considered the Creator of all things. He is not. This is a supernatural being that has enormous power compared to humans, but the Triune God is not the Creator of all that is."

"Just as the human instrument is the deceiver of the soul, and just as the physical world is the deceiver of the real worlds, the Triune God is the deceiver of the Prime Source, and his Heaven is the deceiver of the Great Multiverse, which the Prime Source both created and inhabits."

"The old definitions of God must be reformulated. The ecclesiastical savior tried to clarify this message, but remained caught in old patterns, like a puppet that guides itself but whose strings cannot be completely removed."

"So many levels of manipulation," Simon said, shaking his head. "This facilitates the reign of confusion."

He looked around for a moment, his eyes sparkling with a clear spirit filled with sadness. "There is a brotherhood of co-creators between man and God... you have heard of them as angels. They became opponents of each other. As the evolutionary trajectory on earth became clearer and the human vessel emerged, so in the angelic realm some of their leaders came to believe in humanity's destiny as a spiritual collective. Some even believed that this collective - the One Being - could one day be even more powerful than the angelic realm and could replace it."

And on this point of concern - concerning the fate of human consciousness as a collective being - the pro-angels split. One side wished to nourish humanity and provide it with guidance, and one side wished to be nourished by its energies."

Maia listened carefully but seemed hesitant to ask another question for fear that her reality was unable to withstand more of the disintegrating power of Simon's words. She felt she needed to protect her remaining beliefs, and one of them that was particularly dear to her was on the subject of angels.

"It will be too late if we try to get to the Oracle site tonight. We should try to rest now," Simon suggested as if reading Maia's mind. It was late afternoon and the air was warm, a little stuffy, with a light breeze that blew obliquely through the dense pine forest, like a breath of heaven with a thousand levels. Each level was a different breath or a different soul.

Chapter 50. Asmodeus

Shunal walked into the Supreme Initiate's office with a slight foreboding. Karnomen asked him to visit the Oracle site and prepare it for their exchange meeting with Levernon. The journey, as usual, took a mysterious turn. Shunal was eager to share this turn with Karnomen and Torem, who were waiting to hear from him.

"Welcome back Shunal," Karnomen said as Shunal knocked on the half-open door. "You must be unfather-in-law Sit down and join us, I'll bring some refreshments."

"Thank you," Shunal said, bowing slightly in respect. It was Karnomen's custom to offer refreshments to the leaders returning from the Jednodenka - the term the initiates gave to their fourteen-mile round trips to the Oracle. The path was still crossed by tree roots, which made it slow and tedious. The journey was not without the risk of sprained ankles and bruised shins. If one avoided it, his heated legs gave rise to a strange expression on his face that accompanied his return.

"Yes, sit down, that's a great idea," Shunal agreed, sinking into the soft, red velvet cushion of the assigned chair.

"Anything interesting to report?" Torem asked, peering through his reading glasses and drinking from a cup of coffee. you.

Shunal nodded and smiled nervously. "Of course, but I will wait until our Honor is seated."

"No," Karnomen offered, "don't wait for me. I can hear you well."

Taking a deep breath, Shunal looked at Torem and then at Karnomen, who was pouring something into a pair of crystal goblets. "The oracle is without a single blemish."

There was a long, sloppy pause in the room that startled Shunal, who wasn't sure if he should stay quietly and wait for a response or repeat your words to make sure they have been heard.

Karnomen brought two glasses and placed them on the table. "My chair, as you may have noticed, is made from a tree that fell on one of the Oracle monoliths... I think it was the left one... anyway, it doesn't fit. It happened long before our time, but according to our Saint Abaddon, it left a great scar on the monolith."

Karnomen handed the glass to Shunal. "This gash also healed quite magically. I'm not entirely surprised with your find, though I suspect the damage we caused was worse than that from the tree."

Shunal couldn't help but look disappointed. "Aren't you surprised by that?" he asked. He was sure his news would be seen as a miracle or some type of divine intervention, but when he heard Karnomen's story, he almost seemed to expect it. Shunal spun between Torem and Karnomen like a weather vane driven by an indecisive wind.

"His Eminence told me just before you arrived," Torem said, hiding a smile behind his thin lips. "It sounded impossible to me, but now you're here to confirm it."

"We have bigger matters to worry about than the Oracle's regenerative powers," Karnomen said ominously.
"Our friend Hugelitod seems to have no shortage of imagination. He claims again that the Oracle communicates with him-is..." Shunal

squirmed in his chair and bristled like a cat, but Karnomen stopped mid-sentence and raised his hand preemptively.

"Dorlah will verify his honesty," Karnomen continued, "but like us, she doesn't know if they're hallucinations or some psychic phenomenon that we cannot imagine."

"And what are we going to do about it?" Shunal blurted out, unable to hold his tongue any longer. "Hugelitod is still a threat to be reckoned with."

The role of the Third Initiate was Protector. Each of the sixteen initiates was assigned a role based on their abilities, personality, and interests. These roles became embodied in individuals over time, and Shunal, the Protector, was the most eloquent of threats to the Church. He was a voice of distrust and in some cases paranoid when it came to demons.

"Yes, yes, we have to take that into account," replied Karnomen, "don't worry. I ordered Hugelitod to work with Dorlah. I want Dorlah to counsel him and see if he can keep his mental balance. But it's possible that Hugelitod is a lost cause."

"How does Dorlah work with him?" Shunal asked, his eyes narrowing skeptically.

"Hugelitod is convinced of his connection with the Oracle. While I believe it is nothing more than his mental imbalance - into which we put him through suffering at his initiation, the Oracle is said to have asked him - as he claims, to write a book based on our inauthentic texts. In other words, a new book based on the teachings that Hugelitod assumes were imparted to him during his meetings with the Oracle."

"That's what the world needs," Torem noted in his deep resonant voice, "another book."

"His mental imbalance is searing if he can hear the Oracle speaking to him," he opined Shunal. "He can be possessed. Have you considered this possibility, Your Honor?"

"No," answered Karnomen. "I didn't think about that because every time I talk to him, he's transparent and completely clear. He is not aggressive. There's something else about it and as our good friend Dorlah suggested, it's best to keep an eye on him for now."

"How long are we going to keep an eye on him?" Torem asked.

"I gave Dorlah two weeks before we reevaluate Hugelitod's state of mind. The good news is that we he is not trying to deceive by hiding these hallucinations from us."

"I agree," Torem nodded. "That's much better."

"I respect your point of view, Your Eminence," Shunal said, "but does it make sense to let Hugelitod roam the grounds freely? If they hear voices, no matter how harmless those voices may be, isn't that a potential danger?"

"We are only days away from sovereignty, my dear Shunal," said Karnomen, "which means that Hugelitod is not our focus. We have all worked hard over the years to achieve this independence. When this happens, a whole cascade of new activities will capture our attention. So now let's enjoy our success. Hugelitod is in good hands with Dorlah and I'm sure it will have a better effect on him than a prison cell."

The three men continued their conversation into the late afternoon. They discussed the details of their exchange with Levernon with a strange mixture of exuberance at independence and undertones of sadness at the loss of the Oracle to King Levernon and his Royal Houses. They knew the text that confirmed them to exchange their ownership of the Oracle for their independence. It had been several years since, at Torem's suggestion, they began to think about the idea. It was Torem who proposed the text and interpreted its meaning to divert interests. It was an extract from the third volume recorded by the Church's revered First Initiate - Asmodeus - almost 248 years ago.

This verse was clear and surprisingly direct, for in those days the Church was just learning how to deal with the Oracle.

Book III, The Great Purpose 12:3-9
Asmodeus: Whom do you serve?

Oracle: I serve individuals who seek the truth that has been hidden from them and who long to reacquire themselves with it. This desire must be pure and strong, destined to different kinds of loyalty - a loyalty that is not tied to personality, but to what binds you as the One. If you come to me with this desire, I will serve you.

Asmodeus: Is there anyone you would refuse to serve?

Oracle: I will not serve the powerful who seek my knowledge to expand their material power or their enjoyment. I will not serve anyone who wishes my knowledge to deepen, widen, or increase the barriers to universal Oneness.

Asmodeus: If such a person as you have just described seeks your knowledge, by what process will you know their intent?

Oracle: I know them by their names. It is not a process.

Asmodeus: Do you have knowledge of all persons on earth, for all time, who are improperly motivated? AND is there no one on this list who would be able to pass your inspection?

Oracle: This list is at my will within my ability and there is none of those on this list who can come to my knowledge.

Asmodeus: What if this person cheats and impersonates another name? Do you still know her?

Oracle: All names are on this list, even the fake ones.

Chapter 51. The Blue Man

Kamil opened his eyes, not realizing that what he could feel was water dripping on his face. His vision was bathed in the gray morning light that flickered through the passing branches. He immediately felt pain in his body and his memories began to bloom in the damaged fragile lines of his personality. He was lying in a makeshift mobile bed and was being dragged along a forest path. He tried to sit up, but he was tied tightly. His head and body ached with every jolt on the road. His bed was tilted at about a thirty degree angle and was being pulled by someone he couldn't see. When the thought of asking came and he tried to open his mouth, he found that the ability to speak had left him.

Where are you taking me?

The question faded into oblivion as the sand sifted through the celestial hourglass. Instead, a lipless voice spoke to him. "You are being taken to a lair of animal people who know nothing of my will. My power is within you, and the animal people who now control your life will have to fend for their own if they seek your destruction.

Because you are my seed and I will protect you."

Kamil's attention was driven as if by holy order to the room with the large table. Around the table were seven beings he didn't recognize, though he thought they looked like angels, except they lacked wings. They were larger than humans, with energetic threads of light pulsing through their bodies that were mysteriously, blue-sapphire transparent. They motioned him to the table. He sat down between two of them as if there were only one free chair, and suddenly realized that his pain was gone - that he had come to the table without pain - and Kamil laughed with happiness.

"Your world will be returned to its little frame, don't worry," said the being next to him. "We are not angels or gods. We are you, but in a different field of time. Every man is a new Adam and every woman is a new Eve.

We are the ones who call you to the Tree of Knowledge, and in doing so we feed your thirst for equality and unity."

Some part of Kamil heard the sound of his bed being dragged and felt the tremors on the way, but his larger self was too fascinated by his host to notice and be led away from such a magical room. He turned to the being that spoke to him. "Why do you look so familiar?"

"I am your father," the being replied. "Your real father."

How is that possible? Kamil thought.

"We look different only in the appearance of space-time, but what is at your core is also our core, and in that shared presence we are the same in all fundamental ways. My fatherhood is the same for every Adam and Eve on your planet."

The beings at the table nodded in unison. Their bodies were connected by ethereal threads that Kamil was only beginning to recognize as he focused his mind on the other beings. He could see that each of them was different and this difference was concentrated in her eyes. It was their eyes that mirrored their unique understanding, and now Kamil felt like he was in the presence of a single being that inhabited seven bodies.

"You see there are seven of us," said the being, "because we live in seven universes and each of us evolved within the space-time of our universe. We are the ancients, the Firstborn. We are the original beings who first walked the planetary spheres and learned what life among plants, animals, minerals and air required in biological systems to reach the thousands of degrees to our realm. Our breath mingled with your own, and though you do not remember us, we are an inner force that you feel, a pulse of attraction to know the ultimate answers of life and death. Our awareness has become the beacon of all soul-bearing life within this seven-fold Supreme Soul. We are its central point to which everything is connected in an eternal journey.

"Though there are only seven of us, we oversee the seven universes of the Prime Source, our Creator. We do not know how many universes are before us and behind us, for these veils have been drawn by the Prime Source so that we may focus on our worlds of creation, evolution, ascension and unity. If there's one thing we've learned in our nearly endless existence, it's to never assume that the multiverse is only made up of seven universes. It is better to understand him as unrecognizably large. No matter how high you climb, no matter how deep you dig, there is always more to appreciate and understand."

"Our power extends to all life and all matter. We do not evaluate or control space-time because it is the will of Prime Source that life must evolve in the shelter of free will. However, this free will only applies to the inner worlds, it does not apply to the outer ones where you are manipulated, where you are servants of men who are servants of gods who are servants of even greater gods. And this line of slavery diluted your free will without your consent or knowledge. Therefore, an Oracle has been placed on your planet - as on all sentient planets - to provide a release from this slavery to the hierarchy of the outside."

"Our gift to you is a transformed language. You will find that your thinking will continue to change from here on out. For we have touched you with our presence, and a great emptiness has descended upon you, so that you will no longer be blind. You will see what others only grope for, and you will remember our presence within you."

Kamil sat at the table and watched the beings speak to him. Then the room fell silent and he felt the need to speak. "I don't believe in God...I never felt him like someone who liked people. He leaves the guards alone to trudge through the forest alone. What you just said that I will remember your presence - that I will be changed...does that mean I will believe in God? Because I feel no connection with him."

The blue being that claimed to be his father turned towards the center of the table. With a simple nod of her head, she magically activated an image that seemed to float above the white surface of the table. It was an exact hologram of Kamil when he was a young boy, as if a memory had been resurrected with perfect accuracy. He was only five years old, maybe six, but Kamil recognized himself, although he had never seen any pictures of his childhood. There was something familiar about the hair and the movements. The boy was running across a meadow of tall grass, alone under a dark night sky that was pierced with stars.

Kamil marveled at the scene, but remembered it only vaguely. He watched as the boy, huffing and puffing after a long run, suddenly stopped, laid down in the tall prairie grass, and looked up at the stars. His eyes darted from one constellation to the next in sacred reverence. He was pointing his little fingers at the sky and counting. Then he quickly realized the futility of the effort and just watched. Out of the corner of his eye watching the boy, Kamil saw a vast field and a sky that was tiny compared to the unimaginable depth of space. He could sense some of the boy's sense of wonder.

As he looked at the boy, he found, without understanding how he was doing it, that somehow he could control the image hovering over the table. He could feel a part of him flowing through the boy's body. And suddenly it was Kamil himself, a grown man, looking at the stars from a boy's body. The stars were so bright and there were so many of them that he was immediately fascinated by them.

And then suddenly he heard himself say. "That's God." It wasn't his voice, it was a child's voice. Uncorrupted, pure. The words rose calmly into the sky, covering nothing, as if she herself were the evening star, the one who comes alone and is the messenger of the first heavenly light.

His mind was reeling. He was in three places at once. He was lying on a makeshift bed somewhere, his body too damaged to remain conscious. He also sat at a table with seven beings who called themselves the Firstborn. Then he was in his boyish body when he was a little boy staring at the sky on a clear summer night. He didn't know how that was possible, but he already knew that it was possible.

The boy continued to gaze at the defenseless sky, pierced by the light of endless fields of stars that seemed to embrace both man and boy. It was a strange feeling that Kamil had never experienced before. He wondered where his parents were. Why did they leave him alone in the cold immensity of the vast universe. And then he felt something along his spine for the first time. An electric current that ran down the length of the spine. Goosebumps went up all over his body as if the current was touching every cell, every atom in his little body.

He heard one more word come out of his mouth. "Love." He was a small child who grew up in an orphanage on the outskirts of the village where most of the children were from the unknown consequences of the war. He didn't know what love was. He had never felt her and now he was staring up at the stars and the word had somehow formed in his brain or heart or just somewhere in his body. Strong enough to make the sound that came out of his soft mouth. His whole body was shaking with the electric current that was reflected in his limbs - it was an unmistakable presence.

Without warning, Kamil suddenly felt his attention drift away from this scene and once again realized that he was looking down at the panorama of his childhood self, who was lying on his back, watching the starry sky that accompanied him.

she was in a connection that only God can bring about. He knew God or some manifestation of him. He had just forgotten about it, and now the memory - so distinct and clear - was unleashed in him like the seed of a hurricane.

The scene faded and he returned his gaze to the blue Firstborn. However, he immediately discovered that he was alone at the table. The room was empty and in the absence of anyone else his fears grew. He was alone in a place he knew nothing about. The wall across from him suddenly began to fade into transparency, revealing a deep, mysterious universe filled with stars, planets, and distant galaxies. He watched in amazement as each planet and star gradually disappeared, dissolving into the deepening darkness, as if a storm of shadow and pure emptiness roared through the universe, swallowing everything in its path.

Kamil was mesmerized by how an inscrutable wave of darkness took over the horizon and seemed to press into the room where he was, the watcher who could only wait. To his surprise, Kamil felt no panic or restlessness. The whole room disappeared and he was in complete darkness. There was only a sound like the wind blowing. It was rhythmic and born from the lungs of the universe before the beginning of time. He felt that an unknown intelligence was breathing above him - on him - through him. That breath was power. A force that pulled Kamil to breathe in the same rhythm and speed as the breath that was above him. He felt a subtle insignificance and was completely at peace, as if he had enveloped himself inside the void that unconditionally nurtured him for all time.

He felt every thought, every feeling, desire, perception, idea, everything that had poured into his being over time - all the lives he had ever lived or would live - were being taken out of him and purged. He was emptied of all experience, stimuli, knowledge, manifestations, desires. Everything was taken from him as this huge, all-pervading breath continued through him and around him. He was pure consciousness, separate from everything he believed himself to be.

I'm dead

That thought left him as the last particle of the Existence of his identity, like the last smoky vapor from a burnt-out fire rising into the infinity of the sky. He was emptied. That breath was his, and he could only move as a particle of his vast breath that seemed to fill everything - created and eternal.

He breathed inside the void. There was no exchange. No energy. No need for balance because duality did not exist.

In this void of his being he saw a spark of light. At first he thought it was the light of his creation, but then the light began to take form as it slowly merged into a perfect line without beginning or end. It was a line formed by a brilliant golden light that hung in front of him. Little by little, the line became a circle, the circle a triangle, and then a square. The light kept changing into complex geometric shapes. The geometric shapes began to change into mathematical equations, all of which were formed from the original line of light that kept changing its shape before Kamil's awareness. He watched the shapes become very complex, and from every angle he could see how they were filled with mathematical symbols that he had no reason to understand, but nevertheless understood now.

I am this, he thought. I am composed of this, only this. That's under all the membranes I wear.
I am the codes. I am the language of symbols. I am an unborn meta-form that exists in all places, at all times.

Then the light became a sphere, a pyramid, a cube, and continued to expand into even more complex shapes. It suddenly became a crystalline form and colors began to mix into it. Crystals of all complexities, colors and shapes flooded his vision, one after another. They changed so quickly that they began to come alive. Suddenly they were alive. A rainbow of colors spread above him, and the crystalline patterns changed into small floating organisms that seemed to rise and fall in the water meadows. Leaves of grass, small flowers, ferns, pine trees, and then an abundance of other flora appeared in front of him with blinding speed.

Then for a time there appeared the image of a majestic tree embracing everything above and below. Its canopied heights afforded no shade. A snake crawled down from the thick branches with surprising speed straight to Kamil. He stopped in front of him, his eyes shining with intelligence. Then the light snake became a horse. Jaguar. A whale. The light form changed its forms into different animals so fast that Kamil could not keep track of their forms. He searched for a voice inside him to tell—whatever that voice was—to slow down, but he found he didn't have the strength to speak.

Images of animals continued to flash before him. He recognized them all, but some he didn't know by name. Butterfly, chimpanzee, salmon, stegosaurus, crow, antelope, crocodile, eagle, dolphin, gorilla. Then a small hummingbird flew to him, pulsating in the changing light of aquamarine and shades of gold. He was so close that Kamil could see his coral-like eyes and the power and intelligence they commanded. They were the eyes of the future looking back at him - in flawless forgiveness.

Kamil lowered his eyes, he felt a breath of love enter him. He was without body, mind, emptied of all things, and love came to him, so powerful, unbound to any object, releasing itself into him, with a whisper

a voice so ancient that somewhere inside he began to cry. "You must wake up," said the voice of love, "for those who await you in the underworld."

The hummingbird hovered before him as if to shed some more light, to complete its revelation, but then it twirled and turned, as if it had begun to change its shape, like all the creatures and objects before it, but this time the transformation was deliberate and methodical.

Feathers of light swept down, one after the other, his eyes widening and becoming transparent. The wings stopped moving until they became limbs with palms and fingers. And in the final movement of the repetition, the hummingbird's legs sank down like tree roots groping for something solid to stand on. Kamil watched in amazement as a human form appeared in front of him, looking exactly like him, composed only of light.

He couldn't resist reaching out and touching the light body, but when he did, it retreated as if shy. A voice that sounded mysteriously familiar filled his entire being. "You are my shadow. Shadow cannot cause action. You are the result of my desires, my intention, my wishes and my will. So when you try to reach me, you will find that I am always reborn, that I am hidden in the eternal birth of the creation of which you are a part, but always as a temporary effect. If you seek to know me, to touch my being and to feel my presence, then you must be prepared for the transformation of your emptiness."

Isn't that what I just experienced? Kamil thought.

"No," replied the light body. "It doesn't matter if you experience this as a transformational event. You must call it forth through the surrender of your will and allow the intelligence that is both within and without, here, here and here, there and there, to be your progression." The light body pointed to his heart, stomach and head and then up and down.

"To see it in this person and this animal, in this plant and this stone, in this star and this planet. It is the happening that unites us, not the understanding."

"You must see and feel the universal intelligence and let it guide you, inform you, inspire you, free you from the old ways, always building on the shoulders of what you felt and thought to be true. And for so long, until it all fades away and you come face to face with your true self: me."

"Then you will know yourself as you are, living in this vessel." The light body pointed to the emerging image of an exhausted body, resting in blood-soaked clothes, lying on a makeshift bed, death circling around it with its hungry eyes. Kamil knew that the damaged body was him, but he felt as if he was watching someone else sink into mournful surrender. "You will see that all the pretenses of your vessel, wandering in the illusory worlds of your desires and wishes, were nothing but the source of the unreal. You live, breathe and exist in these confusing conditions. I am this presence. I am the breath that flows through you. But I am not bound by time or space because I am endlessly moving from one body to another. I watch and always wait for our re-union in the flesh of your body and the light of my own."

Why? Kamil was interested. Why are you watching this? Why do you care about our world when you have... this?

"To learn," answered the light body. "To experience myself diminished in the underworlds of mortality, in beautiful and shameful emotions, in thoughts curled inside thoughts seeking a mouth. I live through you, just as Primal Source lives through me. My world, even now, you cannot see. You have no eyes for what I really am and the realm in which I exist. That beauty is imperceptible to your senses.

But within this magnificence, there is still a desire to explore polarities. And so we dive into your world, amid the ashes and barren plains, our souls rushing to fill the vessels. We come as waves to fill the blossoming hearts of children, and with each generation we raise the vessel of humanity a little higher. We bring closer to our world as it is written in our codes."

Who wrote these codes? Kamil thought. Who is behind this grand plan?

"The Original Source is the only answer I can offer, because this Source is the original source of everything we know and experience. We cannot say that it is the highest, because none of us has measured its origin. When we try to do this - to feel what is behind the Prime Source - we believe that it is a form of intelligence that is so immeasurable that the entire multiverse is just a group of atoms flowing somewhere in its universe, in which everything gathers in the diversity of life. Indeed, we know of no limitations. We believe that there is more to inherit than this," the light body gracefully spread its hands, palms up, "and as we unite, we surely seek this inheritance, for it calls us."

Kamil's world began to fill with the image of his body, damaged and lying on a makeshift bed, surrounded by pine trees that etched the pale gray sky. He felt a movement as if gravity had suddenly awakened and he was being pulled into his unconscious body.

Some part of him wanted to protest, the light body laughed and reminded him, "You have to wake up."

Kamil's eyes tentatively opened like shutters pulled back by a powerful hand. The bed stopped. He heard a voice but it was his own body that whispered in a tone that seemed strangely distant. "Water. Water." It repeated.

A large head appeared above his face, smelling of alcohol and tobacco. She looked down at him with disdain. "Water? Water?" parroted a whiny voice. "What a grumbler. What do you think I'm... a doctor or what?"

Kamil felt a shower of saliva on his face. He closed his eyes. "Here's your rotten water," claimed the big head. "Now shut the hell up, we're trying to make some lunch here."

Kamil wished, more than he had ever wished for anything before, that he could return to the room with the Firstborn. He was laughing at the sky and somehow knew he was visible to his father. That was enough for him. Then cold rain began to fall, cleaning his face and wounds. Kamil opened his mouth to drink from the heavens. He thought he heard his father speak. He felt as if the Darkness had won. "But just as empty rooms focus on distant sounds, so the Darkness focuses you on my voice. Listen to her well, for she serves you. You are not alone."

With that, Kamil's face scrunched up in some kind of divine agony and his teeth clenched. He was brimming with desire walk away to find Maia and Simon. But the voice found him again. "They're with Vesta and they're safe," he announced.

Kamil tried to ask before he passed out. "Who... is Vesta?"

In my world, the Oracle is known as Vesta.

Kamil closed his eyes. Of all the hidden corners of the earth where words provide light and wisdom, the Oracle was the most protected. How could Maia be safe? But this single piece of information deprived Kamil of his last remaining strength and he had no choice but to lose consciousness. He fell into a deep sleepless sleep.

The two guards didn't notice. They were voraciously consuming their food and had their backs turned to Kamil. From somewhere from the heights of heaven, beyond the limits of human possibilities, a whirling ray of light descended to earth. It brought information codes that were reserved for holy purposes. The light penetrated the clouds, the branches of the trees - and its photons were the bearers of silence. Through the region of the temples they entered Kamil and the life currents of his body. They restored him, as the body of him who healed his garment, which he uses to fly.

Chapter 52. Awakening the Sleeper

Maia raised her eyes to the top of the main monolith, estimating its full height. The trees and the Oracle were shrouded in a mist that diffused the sparse light of the moon and stars that provided a small but constant brightness to this and that lonely place. "Why are there three?"

"I've always wondered that too," Simon said.

"You never asked?"

"You may find it hard to believe, but I never thought of asking the Oracle that matter, when he is capable of answering any question of life and death," Simon remarked, and then added, "A young girl like you will find work coming on some important matter."

"Maybe that's important," Maia said in her defense.

"I didn't mean it otherwise. I really wish I had asked him that."

Maia walked around touching him with her hands. "What do those marks mean? You asked the Oracle about that, didn't you?"

Simon held up his hands in an embarrassed smile. "First, the Oracle seems to know very little about its situation, so I've been inclined to refrain from the subject. Second, during the time I had access to the Oracle, however limited, I focused on information that I thought people would be able to use in their lives - to improve them. I may have asked him these questions when I first discovered him, but that was a long time ago and I didn't write them down. So they are gone."

Maia blew air and pressed her nose directly to the surface of the largest monolith.

"Before you ask me anything about his smell," Simon interjected, "no, I didn't ask him about his smell."

Ignoring his preemptive explanation, Maia scraped her fingernails into the stone. Then she bent down and sniffed where she had scratched. "It has a strange smell... I like it."

She went to the smaller monoliths and did a similar type of evaluation. When she was done, she turned to Simon. "Can we talk to her now?"

Simon nodded as if waiting for her permission to begin a dialogue with the Oracle. "Yes, let's begin."

Simon stood in front of the largest monolith and motioned for Mai to stand behind him. "When I make a connection, I will do it myself..."

"Will I not be able to hear or be heard?" Maia interrupted.

"Unfortunately, only one at a time."

"Then you have to ask her about Kamil and Joseph," Maia pleaded, gesturing with her hands. "Finding out how they can- they say if they are safe, if they find us..."

Simon reached out and gently grabbed her arm. "Good. I will find out everything I can about Kamil and Joseph, but I doubt the Oracle will help us with that."

Maia frowned and Simon could feel it even in the darkness of the night.

"The oracle," Simon explained, "in my experience, has never been attuned to the events of today or tomorrow. It was as if calibrated to a greater distance, to an impersonal future - measured in years and centuries - not hours or days. But I will try, Maia, to find out what will become of our situation and especially of Kamil."

Simon looked at the monolith. "I might be out for a while. I've never done it in front of anyone else, and when I'm connected to the Oracle, I lose track of time. If I don't respond for a while, be patient. If anything startles you or if you hear anything, take my hand off the Oracle. Good?"

Maia nodded. "Good."

Simon reached out and touched the surface of the monolith where the meta-language glyphs were gathered as a portal to another realm. A tingle immediately began flowing through his hand, flowing into his head and then circulating around his brain as if searching for the right connection. Then Simon opened his inner eye to see the large face of the owl-like creature staring at him with its glowing golden eyes.

"Who seeks my advice?" asked the owl.

"Are you... an owl?" Simon breathed. "Where is the Oracle?"

"I am the Oracle of Dohrman. My question remains unanswered, who is addressing me?"

"I am Simon, your First Initiate."

"Ah, Simon," the owl's voice softened. "I recognize your voice now. Nice to hear your petition."

"Why are you... in this form?"

"As I became more human in my appearance, I found that I was seduced - perhaps even possessed - to be human. And so I experiment with other life forms. Owls frequent this forest, so I thought I'd try inhabiting their form. It's really just an illusion of your brain. I can change into something else if that makes you more comfortable... maybe you could suggest something."

"No, the owl is fine," Simon replied in agreement, "you just never had the form when I called you before."

"I see," said the owl. It was large and imposing - as large as a man and it stood before Simon in the gray haze of his mind's eye. "What is your interest this time? How can I serve you?"

Simon's surprise caused chaos in his mind. The Oracle was different. Something was wrong, but he couldn't figure out what. "Do you remember when you visited me a week ago?"

"Of course," replied the owl.

"You were just about to propose a plan when you lost your ability to manifest and disappeared. I want to hear your plan, the whole plan. That's why we're here."

"I see," said the owl. "Who's with you?"

"Maia."

"Template..." the owl whispered to himself, but loud enough for Simon to hear.

The great owl shook its feathers as if changing its position to feel better or to find a new line of thought. "There is so much I should tell you, Simon, but I'm afraid there isn't enough time. Tomorrow I will be offered to the service of the king..."

"Will King Levernon be your new guardian?" Simon asked with sudden and deep anxiety.

"That's right. My services have been exchanged for independence. Karnomen had this concept in his mind for many years. This is all part of the changes that are coming."

"But the king will use you... for evil purposes. He will require your skills to build weapons, or established global dominance, or..."

"He can require these things from humans or extraterrestrial sources, he doesn't need my help to build weapons or dominate his world."

"So what does he want to do with you?"

"Same as anyone else," said the owl, tilting her head to the side. "Understanding the future so they can to understand the present."

"I think you're underestimating the king's goals," Simon said. "King Levernon and his Royal Houses will want more than understanding. They will want to use your insights, your knowledge of the future, to build their power. That will be their only interest."

"There is an individual in the Royal Houses who is not on the list. They are not all the same."

"On what list?" Simon asked.

Maia watched Simon reach for the Oracle and saw him fall into a trance, as if caught in a multitude of whispering voices - each of which spoke the most sacred truths. She waited patiently for a while, and then, without wanting it, her hand reached out. Slowly, without Mai's conscious consent, her left hand gripped Simon's arm above the elbow.

Maia immediately felt an electric current wash over her and her eyes immediately closed. She saw a light coming towards her like a comet. She knew he was going to bump into her and so she was preparing for his intervention. But as the comet approached her, it was gentle and she felt a gentle current run through her body. Her every cell felt nourished by this infusion of light. She had the feeling of dissolving in tenderness, in the embrace of an unknown landscape that communicates its message of hope to her.

"Welcome, Maia," said the Oracle. "I summoned you."

"Where's Simon?" Maia asked, looking around in her new world.

Maia found herself standing on a bridge looking at a small pond with beautifully colored fish swimming in it. Beautifully scented willows surrounded the banks of the pond, and the sun's rays warmed the earth with calm constancy. She looked for Oracle-lum, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"Simon is talking to another part of me. He is also with me."

"Are you talking to both of us?"

"I believe I can speak to every person on this planet if they will listen," said the Oracle.

"But where is Simon? And where are you?"

"Simon is in his mind. And as for me, look down."

Maia looked down into the water, under the small bridge, and saw a golden colored fish floating on the crystal blue surface of the water. It was bigger than the other fish and seemed to be looking right up at her with its big bulging eyes. "Are you a fish?"

"I am."

"I think I liked you better as a woman," Maia said reflectively, then covered her mouth with her hand. "Sorry, no-I wanted to insult you..." "It's

okay," said the Oracle.

Maia felt a hand on her arm. She turned and saw the Oracle exactly as she had seen him before. Lustrous jet black hair, clear blue eyes and features that seemed unfettered by human standards of beauty. "Is it that much better?"

Maia hugged the Oracle. "Yes, I like you better this way." She grabbed the Oracle's shoulders with her hands as if to she wanted to make sure it was real.

Maia looked around at the dreamscape they were in. She had no sense at all of the human body standing in the in the dark forest in front of the monolith, holding Simon's hand.

"This is my world that I created for you," the Oracle said as if reading Mai's mind. "I am able to move into certain parts of your brain and make subtle changes in them that allow me to create scenes, much like you create dreams in your imagination."

"Why... why did you summon me?" Maia asked without thinking. Her mind was still waking up to the new world.

"Because we need to talk and her ability to respond to codes, as you've no doubt gathered, is gone."

"Camille! Joseph!" Maia suddenly shouted. "Can you tell me anything about them? Are they safe? Are they okay?"

Oracle leaned against the railing of the bridge, looking at the pond and the trees on the other side. "I can't see Kamil..." "Is he alive?" Maia

asked, dreading the answer.

"I don't know, although I wish I did."

The oracle closed her eyes for a moment. "I don't feel him. It is not visible to me. I don't see him in any of the future displays I watch. It's confusing."

"How is that possible?" Maia pleaded, panic in her voice. "How can he be invisible?"

"It's like he never existed," the Oracle announced matter-of-factly. "There is no record of him."

"Why? What does this mean?"

The Oracle wrapped her arm around Maia to comfort her. "I don't know, but that doesn't mean he's dead. Just that means his fate is not written in the Records I read from."

"Why? Why aren't his records written down?"

The oracle paused and her face contorted like someone who had just been cursed with blindness. Her eyes squinted in pain and she gripped the railing of the bridge to keep her balance. "I can feel him now. He's not one of you, which is why I haven't seen him in the Records."

"What do you mean? What are you saying?"

"He is abandoned. No, no... he was found, but by his evil enemies. They want to kill him. Their hatred... is so strong."

The oracle opened its eyes as the vision passed. She was staring straight into Maia's waiting eyes, her eyes having a vibrating fierceness that is common in fools. "You have to find him. He is the one who makes all things possible... or impossible if he perishes!"

"What did you see?" Maia shouted. "Tell me what you saw!"

Still looking into Mai's eyes, the Oracle relaxed her expression into a distant invincible gaze as if a powerful presence was speaking through her. "I will tell you only one thing, and you listen carefully to my words and follow them with complete conviction. Do you understand?"

Maia could only nod, unsure of what her approval would bring her. But she was well aware of the depth of the Oracle's mood.

"Once every few generations, a person is born into this world who is coded to transform human energies. They are known as the Zygote of Unity, the Human Portal, and they are the ones who establish the higher frequencies on this planet for all of humanity to attain grace - the Effortless Gift. There are transmitters who share other realms - perhaps through words, images, sounds, or simply their presence. When they do, others can also identify with these realms viscerally and feel them as something real - not just a myth."

"These human portals have incarnated on this planet for thousands of years. Simon is one of them. But it is prophesied—for a time when one of them will come in utter humility, grow unseen, and reveal to human sight—cause the opaque to become transparent—begin the Era of Transparency."

The Oracle's eyes glinted with deep respect as she spoke. "The inhabitants of this planet are Awakened Sleepers who are conditioned to live in fear, to be closed to their deepest hearts, and to greedily pursue material products. Human Portals incarnate on this planet, not to be a part of it, or to save humans from their sinful slumber. They incarnate to form channels through which Living Truth can flow to this planet without censorship or distortion..."

"Okay, but what does this have to do with Kamil?" Maia interrupted her. "Are you talking about him?"

"Channels that were created in the past have been diverted, dammed, or in some cases completely destroyed. Living Truth was considered too dangerous by those who saw the earth as a treasure chest of resources that they could manipulate, control, and gain power through. So they conquered the Living Truth and decided that instead of it, it would be better for humanity to have herds of Awakened Sleepers - each herd in its own territory, in terms of both geography and belief systems."

"Since humanity arose on this planet, thousands of Human Portals have incarnated. Almost all of them tried to the best of their ability to open new channels through which the Living Truth could flow into humanity.

Some were killed, some imprisoned, a handful went mad, but many - about 60 percent - succeeded in their mission. But later in the hands of the powerful, their missions were twisted into prison bars. Kamil, one of the Human Portals, is known in my realm as the Great Portal. He alone is able to bring together those ready to form a new world. New countries. Kamil is the core of this new country. I'm sure of it, Maia. He is no ordinary guard.

He is the guardian of humanity, not the guardian of the Supreme Watch. And they now know he is not one of them. They will kill him. They will kill him soon."

"How... how can I help him? Say!"

The Oracle shook her head almost imperceptibly. "I don't know if I can do it." She grabbed Maia from behind head in your hands. "Calm down. Relax. Relax. Close your eyes."

The oracle stepped back a few feet before closing her eyes as well. Maia remained still and then began to feel movement. Something inside her trembled, slowly at first, but then suddenly she was flying across the endless gray sky, looking down at the dense forest of trees below her. All sensations intensified as her eyes flew open and she felt the sensation of flight, cool air and wind blowing through her brown-grey feathers.

Her vision was clear and focused. As she looked down, each branch of the tree seemed to be carved into relief. Her thoughts were stilled. She was no longer Maia. She was something composed of feathers, whose eyes could see a mouse flickering a hundred feet below her, half-hidden under a fallen branch. Maia turned her head and spread her wings to embrace the currents of air that carried her. She felt a wonderful freedom as a memory knocked on her door within, urging her to seek something human, something damaged, something surrounded by thickets and murderous thugs.

Maia became a tall shadow floating among the soft clouds, searching for this person without knowing why. Her powerful eyes sensed movement below her and she swooped down, shimmering pillows of air - emanating from the pines below her - gently bracing her as she approached for a closer inspection.

Two people were pulling a cart with another person lying on it. His legs were strangely colored red and black. They walked down the path and Maia suddenly felt the need to find their destination. She moved forward, following the confused trajectory of the path that wound around the tall pines as if she were hopelessly lost.

Maia flew with a bold decision, not knowing who she was or where she was flying. All she knew was that she had to follow a line of human steps that would answer a question that was buried in some part of her that had disappeared. After some time, she noticed a cluster of small buildings that were placed behind a large gate. She saw that people were walking towards this camp and decided to return to the person who was being dragged through the forest. There was something about him that attracted her.

She turned, but as she did she was pulled in another direction. The wind current on her wings quickened and she was pulled to a new location in the forest. Her journey passed quickly, guided by this new living wind. After what seemed like a very short time, she saw a person lying on the ground in a small clearing. Maia swooped down to investigate as the wind suddenly died down.

He was an old man and for some inexplicable reason Maia felt like crying. But being a bird, there was no way to express the emotions she felt inside. I know this man, she thought. is that my father
She circled the lifeless body and wished she could make sense of her feelings. Then the wind picked up again and the sky changed from day to night in no time. She was carried by a fresh current and was rising upwards. Her wings stretched out in an elegant curve, gliding across the sky like a fast-moving cloud.

Maia flew into the black funnel of the sudden night, trying to detect her target. She knew only one thing: the wind was coming. Suddenly she saw something below her that caught her attention. A light shining in the abyss of the forest, but the wind carried it away. Then she felt her control begin to dissolve into the fear of union - union with something that had been pulling at her for thousands of moons.

She was so close to the treetops that she could count the pine needles. She dived under their canopy as if quartering the rodents, but saw no movement worthy of her capture. Then just fifty yards ahead she saw a tiny heat wave of two vertical figures. They were big. She wanted to stop, but could only sail on, dodging tree branches as she approached the figures standing in front of the huge rock.

Her wings tucked in a respectful cue to approach to be more aerodynamic and like a bullet she was closing in on the smaller of the figures - akin to a black hole - bracing herself for a collision that would surely kill her and her target in the remaining time. But then, inches away from her goal, everything slowed into perfect motion. Her heart beat calmly, her claws gripped the air tightly, her eyes closed against the impact and her round head stretched out proudly.

The wind died down, as if it had forgotten its purpose, and the large owl disappeared into Mai's head. Maia passed out and as she fell to the ground, she pulled Simon away from the monolith and almost caused him to fall as well.

"What happened? Is everything okay?" Simon asked, pulling himself together before helping Mai to her feet.

Maia stared speechless for about ten seconds. She was gathering her thoughts as if she had just woken up -
la from a hellish nightmare. "We have to go."

"What do you mean?" Simon asked.

"We have to go," Maia repeated in a distant but powerful voice.

Then she fell silent again as if someone was whispering something to her and then her mouth began to tremble and she fell to her knees and sobbed. Simon immediately knelt down next to her and wrapped his arm around her to quiet her. "What's going on? Why are you crying?"

Maia tried her best to speak between uncontrollable sobs. "Joseph - he's dead! Kamil ... is caught ... The Supreme Guard caught him. He is hurt..."

She was so upset that Simon decided to just hold her and give her time to get her feelings together. He was calm and repeated one sentence: "We'll find them, it'll be all right." We will find them. We'll find them..." Simon smiled uneasily as he felt Maia nod her head in agreement.

He remembered the dream he had last night. He walked down a path that led to an ornate gate that was locked as if it hid some deep secret. Beyond the guarded gate the path continued, but he had no key. Somehow he knew that the path led to a goal that was essential to him - and essential to everyone. He must go on. Suddenly, without warning, the characteristic rumble of a landslide filled the air. The gate was overwhelmed by dirt and large stones and demolished. Nothing remains but ruins. The gate that prevented him from continuing his journey was destroyed, but the path was impassable and his destination seemed even more distant as the path was destroyed by destruction.

His dream ended here, but he remembered the lingering feeling of frustration that was an unwanted but unmistakable mood. He prayed that his dream was not prophetic.

Chapter 53. Ouroboros

Hugelitod grabbed a coiled snake made of solid brass and knocked on the old wooden door. He was a beautiful day, and the birds seemed to enjoy the beautiful morning too, for the joyous birdsong rang out through the forest.

Hugelitod felt a pang of embarrassment—mostly as a result of realizing how vulnerable Doriah was. He knew Doriah trusted him with access to the Oracle in this temple. But why does he do it? Why did he keep it a secret from the rest of the High Initiates while she trusts him? It could be his fateful decision if they found out that he was hiding this fact from them and for what purpose. Was Doriah his ally or an overseer who wants to keep Hugelitod under his thumb?

The door creaked and slowly opened. Doriah hid behind them to avoid the sunlight that suddenly flooded into the storage room. "Please come on," said Doriah. "The pine tree smells beautiful today. As the dew evaporates on the low branches, a beautiful fragrance is released."

"Yes, I agree," Hugelitod replied, not noticing the scent until Doriah pointed it out to him. His mind was deeply focused. He imagined their plan for today. Hugelitod walked into the room and extended his hand. "I will follow you."

Doriah locked the door and then went into the kitchen. He closed the door behind him as Hugelitod entered. "I don't want any interruptions," he explained.

"I have water prepared for us in the temple."

Doriah took an already lit, large, light-yellow candle from the kitchen counter. Then the two of them walked down the wood-paneled corridor behind the kitchen. As before, Doriah pressed the same series of levers in the dimly lit corridor and opened the panel leading to the temple. "Up to you," said Doriah.

They descended in silence into the gaping entrance hall, the cool, earthy smell of which Hugelitod remembered well. wall. "Do you have any questions before we begin?" Doriah asked.

"I have a million questions," Hugelitod replied. "There are so many of them that they trip over each other trying to find them way out through my mouth."

Doriah laughed and motioned to a spot on the floor where they could sit. "Why don't you start by asking which seems to be the calmest?"

They both sat down on the stone floor and Doriah placed a candle between them. They looked at each other as if they were playing chess on the floor.

"Why are you getting into this?" Hugelitod asked. "You could have apologized and refused to help me. You could have exposed it to Karnomen as a plot to overthrow the Church. I need to understand your intent in this whole thing before I take the next step."

Doriah listened patiently before letting out a long, deep sigh of relief. "This temple has been my home for the past twenty years. Almost immediately I came to the Oracle and it told me to keep this access of mine private. To hide him from the High Initiates..."

"Why?"

"That's just the Oracle," Doriah replied with sudden power, as if surprised by Hugelitod's rhetorical question. "It knew it was being used in exchange for independence for the Church. That he would end up under the control of the king. That's one thing. The second, more important reason is that the Oracle knew that the scale of the shift that would happen on this planet was not just a task for itself. It requires a team of hundreds or perhaps thousands. The breadth of the framework for change is so profound that just one way of expressing it cannot succeed."

Doriah paused and slowly rose to her feet. "Come with me. I'll show you something."

Chapter 54. Shadow without substance

The gate opened loudly as its guard saw his fellow guards approaching. They were pulling something that looked like very hard. "What do you have there?"

"Tell Greenstone we found him," boasted the round-headed guard. His face was covered in sweat, and both guards looked completely exhausted, though their faces showed pride in coming back with the ultimate prize. Kamil will give them a high reward and maybe even permission to enter the nearest town where they can waste their money on women and booze.

"Alive?"

"He was on his last move when I found him," the guard chuckled, wiping his forehead with a grass-stained sleeve.

Nathanael Greenstone was a powerful figure in the High Guard. He was summoned as soon as Jaunder disappeared. He was sixty-two years old, tight-lipped, and the commander of the Supreme Guard, who was tough as nails. He fell directly under Shunal, and although they had little in common, they tried to control their natural antipathies and develop an acceptable level of mutual respect in their relationship. Their relationship was otherwise distant and uncomfortable.

Nathanael was a reader of mystery novels. Whenever he went to the battlefield, he always took a collection of new books with him. He viewed those he commanded as a conduit useful for one thing only: keeping Dohrman's Forest and the monastery safe. Providing intellectual stimulation for his voracious mind was the last thing he would expect from his subordinates. They were here - above all else - to protect the Church's most sacred property.

He had heard legends about the Oracle, but he didn't believe them. He knew the Church was guarding something, but he assumed they were holy relics and perhaps some important books or manuscripts. If they weren't mystery novels, he wasn't interested in them.

Unlike his colleagues in the Supreme Guard, Nathanael had parents and was educated at the prestigious military school - Sorath University. Nathanael was one of her best students when it came to war strategy, but he withdrew from his studies just before completing them. After getting uncontrollably drunk one night, he slept with the underage daughter of an admiral who was one of his instructors and until then one of his biggest supporters. This single act of his proved to be enough for his recall. The admiral ensured that his military career was extinguished and his life was like a small fragile tree standing in the path of an avalanche.

Somehow word had gotten out that Nathanael was available and the Church had offered him the position of Director of Security under Karnomen's predecessor, His Holiness Hadar Abaddon. It was supposed to fulfill the role of overall protection of the monastery. He took the position after lengthy discussions with his unbelieving father, who argued that his son, who was also unbelieving at the time, would be at odds with his employer. But the money was too much of a temptation and he finally gave in to their offer.

Nathanael was stout and well built. No fat on his body ever found refuge because when he wasn't reading he was active in every way a man could be. He loved hunting and spent many hours hunting in the forest. He also liked to run. For this hobby, he built a running route under his leadership, which he designed and created ostensibly for the health of his men, but actually it was for his own passion.

He saw his role as very important, but never believed in setting an example for his men, believing them to be naturally inept. This was no fault of their own as they were war orphans who simply lacked a male role model growing up. This was something he didn't want to fix, as this absence made them easy to control.

A knock on the door interrupted his reading. "Yes, what is it?"

"They found Kamil, he's here...alive," announced his assistant.

"About time," Nathanael said, putting the book down and carefully marking the place where he had been reading. "Is he in jail?"

"The doctor is examining him. According to Connors, he was badly bruised."

"Is he conscious?" Nathanael asked, putting on his shoes.

"I don't know, sir."

"Well, I hope he's alive enough to stand trial."

Nathanael put on his jacket and walked down the stairs to his private quarters, humming a tune. He was glad to have Kamil in his care. He will be a good example for his men. These drones need reminders, he thought, and a little fun went a long way to help their morale.

It seemed to him that today would be a good day.

Dr. Jessop wasn't really a doctor at all. He was a qualified mechanic, but as someone who was shown to be able to fix almost anything, he was taken as a doctor by the guards. The doctor knew how to put bandages on wounds and bruises, manage bones, and solve all sorts of special problems associated with being in the woods, often lasting for weeks at a time. These were, for example, lice, foot rot, food poisoning, infections and various insect bites-earth

The doctor was small and mild mannered. He had worked at the supply station for almost ten years and was well liked by the guards. He never seemed to complain when someone got sick and it made him feel good to be called "doctor". But he preferred his role as a repairman of mechanical things like gates, rifles, electric generators, refrigerators or malfunctioning toilets.

Nathanael knocked heavily on the infirmary door. It was a double berth inside a small main annex hostels. "What is your assessment, Doctor?"

The doctor looked up and looked through his round glasses. Perhaps his most notable feature was the large mustache that hung around the corners of his mouth. He was not unlike a Zen master. No one knew why he wore it like that, but since he was a doctor, no one dared to ask him or make fun of him.

"He's dehydrated... he's lost a lot of blood," the doctor explained. "Otherwise, he is in extraordinary condition when I take v ask what happened to him."

The doctor straightened up and massaged his lower back. "His legs are injured...severe wounds...perhaps some animal...a large animal."

"Jaunder's dogs, I bet," Nathanael said. "They still haven't come back. They wander after tasting this one poor bastard."

"Can you wake him up? I want to ask him a few questions."

"Sure," replied the doctor. He went to his first aid kit and took out a small bottle of liquid. He put a few drops on a cotton swab and then moved it to Kamil's nose where he held it for a few seconds. Kamil coughed almost immediately and turned his head away. His eyes fluttered open like the wings of a moth. He winced as he felt as if his head was suddenly dizzy.

"I suppose he's not dangerous - rabies or something?"

The doctor pointed to Kamil's legs. "Even if he wanted to... he can't even take a step. No, he won't threaten anyone here. And if he has rabies, he shows no symptoms, that's for sure. But I'd rather keep a safe distance."

Nathanael unconsciously stepped back and examined Kamil for the first time. "The way it smells, that will be an easy thing to do," Nathanael laughed to himself. He barely knew all of his subordinates, and this was especially true of the rank and file guards, whom he rated as the lowest of the low. He considered them all scum. But who else should do their thankless work for a few bucks?

Kamil raised himself on his elbows and looked around the room. He tried to focus on the voices he heard. "Where am I?"

Kamil had eyes similar to those of a raccoon, his already broken body, hardened in the alchemy of blood, mud and grass - you- it rained miserably and hopelessly weakly.

The doctor handed him a glass of water and looked at Nathanael, who nodded in agreement. "Here, have a drink," he said doctor. "You are in the infirmary at the Third Supply Station. I am the doctor and this is Commander Greenstone."

Kamil drank the offered water. It tasted of rust and iron, a taste that some part of him remembered. The puzzle slowly began to be completed. He knew the infirmary and also knew Dr. Jessop. He had heard of Commander Greenstone, but could not quite understand why the Commander was interested in him. Then it all came back to him - a jumble of memories that framed his week-long transgression: killing Jaunder, his escape, stunning the guards, burning their boots, the wolves, and his capture. It all came flooding back in a powerful flood of memories.

He will be put on trial and then killed. He heard a clear inner voice: There is no loss in revealing the Firstborn. Remember, you are undivided. You are uncovered. What you are becoming in this realm has already begun. Slowing it down - hiding it - is impossible.

A second wave of memories washed over Kamila, which were more subtle. Blue bodies, starry skies, Mai's kiss, the Oracle, and the sense of emptying his identity as a human being. "Thank you," Kamil said, handing the empty glass back to the doctor.

"I'll start with the simple questions first," Nathanael said. "Did anyone help you kill First Lieutenant Jaunder?"

Kamil shook his head and stared at his bare feet. He felt dirty, but somehow he didn't care. I'm both- lazy country. I am protected.

"Did his dogs do that to you?" Nathanael pointed to his lacerated legs.

Kamil shook his head, but didn't come up with any explanation. I'm not Kamil. I'm not this person who sitting here What a fool I was.

"Why did you kill him?"

Kamil looked into Nathanael's eyes for the first time. "He killed himself when he started attacking me."

Nathanael recognized Kamil's madness. It wasn't the first time he'd seen a guard fall prey to insanity. Loneliness accumulated in a certain way and then attacked the individual without warning. "So you're saying in your defense that First Lieutenant Jaunder committed suicide? And you just happened to be there when he pulled the trigger?"

"No, my defense is that Jaunder was going to kill me and I killed him in self-defense," Kamil explained. Suddenly his head started spinning.

Dr. Jessop handed him another glass of water. "Drink, you're dehydrated."

The doctor put his hand on Kamil's forehead. "I'm shocked he doesn't have an infection," the doctor added, looking at Nathanael. "I can't imagine how that's possible with all those wounds."

Kamil drank another glass of water and handed it back to the doctor, who refilled it and handed it to Kamil with two white tablets. "Take them, they will help your head."

Kamil drank water, emptied the glass, but refused the tablets and remained silent.

"And why the hell did Jaunder want to kill you?"

"Because he's a sadistic, frustrated person who takes his anger out on defenseless guards... men, who have nothing...not even these clothes are owned by any of us."

Nathanael sighed and stepped closer to Kamil. He apparently hoped to intimidate him with his presence. At his side was a pistol holster - one of his prized possessions - and his right hand rested on its rosewood grip.

"You are snarling weasels, the lowest form of humanity on the planet, but you, you have sunk even lower. You killed a security officer who you think wanted to kill you. What proof do you have? Do you have any bullet wounds you can show me?"

Kamil shook his head.

"So that's your statement against First Lieutenant Jaunder... who happens to be dead and a decorated officer of the High Guard."

Nathanael drew his pistol and held it carelessly in his hand. He began to walk around the wooden bed with a sheet on which Kamil was sitting. He kept a safe distance from Kamil. "Did First Lieutenant Jaunder have a pistol in his hand?" Kamil nodded.

"How is this one?"

"It was a pistol," Kamil said, looking at his dirty, clenched hands that looked like desperate warriors.

Nathanael raised his pistol and pointed it directly at Kamil. "Did he point the gun at you like that?"

Kamil looked at Nathanael with an emotionless expression.

"Did he pull the trigger like that?"

Nathanael thumbed the trigger, his hand steady and bulletproof eyes staring menacingly. Doctor Jessop he stepped back and thought he'd better disappear.

Kamil suddenly felt pressure in his body. Spontaneous energy coursed through him and he rose gingerly to his feet.

"Sit down, boy!" Nathanael ordered, concern evident in his voice.

Kamil remained standing as if he did not control his movements.

"Then sit on that ass! Sit down!" Nathanael looked back at the doctor. "Go, call Monsey... go!"

The doctor ran happily out the door and didn't need to hear another word. In a moment the muffled scream of the doctor calling Monsey's name could be heard.

"So this is how it happened with Jaunder?" Nathanael said looking at Kamil. "You know I can have you right now kill in self-defense and no one will care."

Kamil turned to Nathanael, still standing, his unkempt hair half hiding his face. "Your weapon is unusable. Your judgment will never come. let me go There is no need to do anything else."

At that moment Monsey ran in and slammed the door behind him. He was aiming a rifle at Kamil. "What's going on?"

"He is mad," said Nathanael. "They talk nonsense."

"Maybe we should just shoot him and that'll be it." Monsey said with nervous eagerness.

"You didn't answer my question, boy," Nathanael said. "Did you hear First Lieutenant Jaunder pull the trigger?"

Kamil felt powerful. It was a feeling that was in odd contrast to the fact that two men were pointing their guns at his head, but he had no other word to describe it. "I don't remember," answered Kamil quietly.

"What are you going to do?" Monsey asked.

Nathanael looked at Monsey with a look that clearly said - shut up.

"Once again I tell you to sit down."

Kamil remained standing as if he had not heard the order.

Nathanael's irritation rose to a fever pitch. "I don't want to deprive my men of the fun, so I decided to issue the order. You are guilty of the crime of killing an officer of the Supreme Guard. You freely admitted that you did. I will summon a group of marksmen to take care of this matter in the name of our glorious traditions."

Nathanael turned to Monsey. "Handcuff the prisoner and take him outside to the yard."

Monsey was the Second Lieutenant on duty at the Third Supply Station after Jaunder died.
"Do you want to gather men?"

Nathanael nodded and turned his attention directly to Kamil. "We're having a farewell party tomorrow night - which gives them plenty of time to come back. We'll give this madman a proper send off. If everyone is a little tipsy, it will be better. A cold-blooded killer like this deserves a slow death."

When Kamil was handcuffed, Nathanael came to him and pushed him down hard on the bed. The force was enough to break the bed and Kamil fell to the ground.

Nathanael crouched down to him, a smirk appearing on his sharp face, gently hidden behind a stubble of three-day-old beard. He brought his face a few centimeters from Kamil's ear. "Have you ever been shot at by a group of drunken idiots?" he whispered. "It's not much fun when the bullets rarely hit anything vital at first. For the first few minutes you're just bleeding and wishing a bullet would finally hit your brain to end your suffering. And there's also something about that laughing group of your former colleagues laughing at you as you lay on the ground dying. This is a real psychological blow. But the good news about this whole thing is that I'm coming to your rescue and I'll catch you when I see you're seconds away from hell. I will follow you like I am now and I will take this gun and end your worthless crazy life."

Nathanael slowly rose to his feet, surprised at his anger towards the man. He watched Kamil's face, expecting to see a reaction - some crack in his fortress, but Kamil simply stared ahead with an expression of determination.

"Take him out into the yard and tie him to a post," growled Nathanael.

He watched as Monsey grabbed Kamil by the shirt and pulled him to his feet. "Out!"

Kamil walked past Nathanael and stopped for a moment. His eyes were devoid of any madness. The cool assurance of a kingly attitude shone from his face. "My body will soon leave, but not by your hands. My spirit behind this surface is seamless, and where I walk, I walk in such a way that you can follow..." Monsey smacked Kamila hard with the butt of his rifle right between the shoulder blades. "I said get out!"

Nathanael's insides quivered with confusion. Kamil's remark had a strange dark combination of words that came from invincibility. Nathanael gritted his teeth, searching for a more reasonable explanation for the guardian's dubious existence. He decided that he had never before seen a person so indifferent to his impending death. This can only cause madness.

Kamil was taken to the yard, his hands were handcuffed behind his back. The courtyard was a large open area with dining tables and three wooden posts that were usually used to tie dogs, but Kamil now fell on the totem pole even lower than the shaggy crossbreeds that the guards used for hunting, companionship, and occasionally tracking down beggars. who came across the protected areas of the Dohrman forest.

A dog collar was placed around Kamil's neck and a chain leading to a metal eye bolted to the side of a wooden stake. He had exactly five feet of freedom in all directions. His ordeal was watched by a small crowd of guards and staff who stared at him like butchers watching a lame bull.

The Third Supply Station usually housed two dozen guards, two officers, and eight support staff per day. The other twenty guards on duty trudged through the forest, watching over their assigned territory to ensure its safety and protection.

At the top of the main supply building where food and provisions were stored was a tall wooden column that rose sixty feet into the air and at the very top was a red siren. It was rarely used except to declare an alert. Two hoots meant that a storm was approaching and that the guards in the field should take cover. One honk signaled that the field guards were to return to the Station.

Without warning, a deafening screeching rang through the air - sharp and shrill. A siren was calling the guards back to supply station. It was a signal to return. Stvány was found. The show is about to start.

Chapter 55. Heart of the Night

Maia and Simon walked past the almost new campsite. A deer carcass was smoldering behind the circle of stones that had been used as a fire pit border. Footprints were evident everywhere, and crows were hopping nervously in the branches above them. A few brave ones flew towards the deer, like dark-glistening gobblers unable to heed caution.

"They were barefoot," Simon noticed as he studied their tracks.

Maia mined something out of the ashes with a long stick, then curiously pulled out something charred that was mostly unrecognizable. "It looks like shoes - like guards' shoes."

Simon stood still, his eyes darting around the camp, and then a grim vision came to him. "Kamil ambushed them. He burned their shoes and took all their weapons, leaving them with no choice but to return to the station. They won't be able to track us."

"I agree, but let's move on," Maia said. "The sooner we find Joseph's body, the sooner we can help Kamil."

Simon surveyed the camp with disdain, as if the vile human presence had caused the animism to flee the place, leaving only the shells of its former life. He nodded in agreement and turned to follow Maia.

* * * *

Kamil felt the sun beating down on him. He stood and sat in the yard without food or water for eighteen hours. That afternoon he began to hear the excited voices of men as teams of guards returned and heard the news of Kamil's capture.

"Is he alive?" he heard them call from the gate and then laugh with amusement when they were told that it was planned-for a party and that they would be hosted by none other than Commander Greenstone.

Although Kamil hadn't eaten anything for several days, he wasn't hungry. Only thirst remained. He was trying to catch a glimpse of someone he knew, hoping to get some water to drink, but they weren't looking at him. And if they did, there was no sympathy in their eyes. Only fear and contempt.

Perhaps it was dehydration or the persistent rays of the sun that caused a memory to flood into Kamil's consciousness. It was a dream he had when he was a little boy. He was playing outside, red clay dripping from his leaky shoes as he ran with his horses across the muddy field. Just as he was about to enter the orphanage through the back door, the nun grabbed his arm and pointed to his dirty shoes with a scornful expression. Her expression was level. Kamil took off his shoes, but his socks were also stained with red clay, so he had to take them off too. When he looked down, it became apparent that his feet were also full of red clay. He tried to brush the clay off his feet, but noticed that his hands were also coated in the silky, brick-red soil. He could only shrug and walk away, defeated and rejected. The nun called to him, but Kamil knew he was too dirty to go inside, so he decided to go to the barn where the animals were kept.

When he entered the barn, he saw a large drum. He was only about three feet tall, but averaged at least eight feet. He touched it lightly with his hands and a deep resonating tone came out from within. The side of the drum was covered with mysterious symbols that he didn't know, but which gave the drum some kind of presence or sacred purpose. For some inexplicable reason, Kamil felt it was okay to touch him with his dirty hands.

He began drumming a rhythm on it, and as he did so, he felt his entire body become an extension of the drum. He looked down at his hands, which were red - his entire arms. He was like a liquid statue being shaped by massive hands he could not see. He was simply a vessel, a machine made of clay. He continued to beat the drum, listening to its deep resonance. He felt a song rise from his heart. At first it was quiet and mostly just singing, but then the singing took shape into words.

I am the clay of the earth I
am the blood of my race I
am lower than the soil I
am higher than the universe
I am never alone I am
always of the light I am
the love that is sewn
In the heart of the night.

In his dream he repeated the song over and over. Kamil was in a deep trance when the nun shook him and woke him up. He yelled at her for waking him up and felt he needed more time with the drum. More time to become what he always was. More time to study your thoughts.

Kamil repeated the words when he awoke from his reverie, but his mouth was too dry to sing or even speak. So he simply slapped his hand on the pole and let his heart sing the words. He felt them and believed them to be true.

The evening air - in a flawless blend of light and dark - hung over the courtyard, which was overlooked - as if from a perch - by Nathanael's second-floor visiting office. Nathanael stared down at the man who would die by his hand tonight. He wondered what made Kamil so rebellious. So perfectly mad, as if he knew something Nathanael couldn't figure out. Absurd, you muttered. I doubt he ever saw the interior of the school.

Nathanael buttoned up his shirt and admired his well-groomed appearance in the dressing mirror. He was depressed that he had to stoop to such a low thing as dealing a mortal blow to a life form that should never have been born.

The phone rang and a new problem arose. He communicated with Shunal, who was finalizing his preparations for the king's visit to the "Holy Place," the term the High Watch used to describe the location of the Oracle. The king's visit came as a surprise, but Nathanael reassigned several of his best officers to provide security details for the visit.

"Hello," Nathanael said in a deep, friendly voice, for he was sure it was Shunal.

"Yes, sure, I did, Your Honor...

"I'm leaving tomorrow

morning..." "Security at each Site has been doubled..." "Yes, there

will be an escort to the Seventh Site..." "Ah, ah... yes, I'll

just call Field back to meet for the royal visit. They will be transferred in the morning."

"Sure, Your Honor."

"Yes, we found him..." "I'll

take care of him. You don't have to worry about this thing. I'll take care of him..." "Yes, you too..."

"Good night."

Nathanael hung up the phone with a bitter smile. He does not stand for the supervision of his superior. And he really liked keeping Shunal in the dark as much as he could. Kamil was his problem and it would be better if Shunal and the High Priests were completely ignorant of the harsh realities of his world.

Nathanael looked through the window at Kamil, who was sitting leaning against a stake with his legs stretched out in front of him. Nathanael actually grieved for Kamil. It wasn't pity so much as pure sympathy that such a hopeless creature could exist in his world. He could only imagine the dark thoughts running through Kamil's twisted mind.

As Nathanael watched the distraught prisoner through the window, he saw one of the guards - a man he did not recognize - walk up to Kamil and carry him a glass of water. Nathanael leaned out of the window and quickly opened it. "Stop it!" he ordered in a commanding voice.

The guard walked on as if he were deaf.

Nathanael looked around the yard to see Monsey talking to some other guards but now looking up at him with a hand behind his ear. Nathanael simply pointed at the guard who walked over to Kamil. "Stop him!" Nathanael articulated the words, pointing at the guard.

Monsey jumped into action and ran to the man carrying Kamil's glass of water. He must have run about two hundred feet across the yard and knew Nathanael was watching. Monsey ran up behind the guard, grabbed his hand, and spilled the water just as he was offering it to Kamil. "What the hell do you think you're doing? This man is dead. No one will give him anything until a bullet or Commander Greenstone orders it!"

The guard turned to Monsey. "Take that hand off my arm."

Monsey reluctantly did as he was told, not sure if the strange guard had even spoken or if he had only heard the words in his mind. He fell into a trance the moment his eyes met the guard's. His whole being cowered in the presence of the strange man. The guard was tall and his face radiated calmness and something else - a certain kind of authority that can only come from the complete absence of fear.

Monsey felt a shiver run down his spine as he looked into the guard's eyes. His mouth fell open and he suddenly felt dizzy. Somewhere in the distance he heard Nathanael yelling at him. As he turned to Nathanael, some part of him understood that he should take this unruly guard to Nathanael's office for questioning. But the only thing he remembered was feeling a flash of heat. His world shrank into a solid vise or darkness before falling to his knees in an uncontrollable blackout.

Kamil watched Monsey pass out and his benefactor - a man he had never seen - walk freely into the two-story dormitory, where Nathanael watched everything from the window. When the stranger entered his dormitory, Nathanael was as if hypnotized. The whole event was watched in dismay by a small group of guards and Na-

thanael instructed them to protect his quarters. Most of the guards were in the dining hall where they were having dinner. But a few of them were already done and smoking cigarettes outside, they can't wait for the party to start.

Two guards armed with rifles ran after the villainous guard who seemed oblivious to their presence. As the guard entered Nathanael's lodgings, he walked up the central staircase and down the dark hall to Nathanael's chambers. Nathanael stood at the end of the hall, pistol drawn and aimed at a strange person walking straight towards him. There was a power in that person that could not be named, but Nathanael felt it was similar to what he saw in Kamil.

Nathanael pulled the trigger on his revolver. "Stop immediately!"

The guard slowed and then stopped about four feet from Nathanael, eyeing him with interest. Nathanael's hunting pistol was almost touching the guard's chest.

"Put your gun away," the guard said in a firm voice.

Nathanael fought back with all his conscious power, but could only watch as his hand dropped, as if he were a mere observer inside his body, devoid of will of its own. His face turned red from his effort and sweat formed on his forehead. "What are you doing?"

The guard reached out and took his gun from him. Nathanael stared at it in disbelief, like a disembodied spirit. No- offered no resistance. What is happening to me? Was his only thought that crossed his mind.

The two guards chased the wayward guard up the stairs, but stopped at the beginning of the corridor and worry appeared on their faces. "Do you need any help sir?"

The guard turned, holding Nathanael's gun. "We don't need your help. You may go."

The two guards nodded in unison, confusion appearing on their faces, but then turned and walked away without a word.

The guard looked down at the weapon and handed it back to Nathanael, pointing to the room behind him. "Let's go come in and let's talk."

Nathanael backed away slowly, his eyes never leaving the guard's face. It wasn't fear he felt. It was much more the shock of losing control of my actions. He seemed unable to make any decision that conflicted with his strange uninvited guest.

As they entered the room, the guard closed the door behind them and leaned against them. He looked at Nathanael with his eyes, which explored the caverns of his senses. "You may speak freely."

Nathanael felt the grip loosen and his mind return to control. His first reaction was to notice the weight of the gun in his hand. He immediately lifted her in the direction of the guard. "Who... who are you? You look like a guard, but you clearly aren't."

Nathanael had heard rumors of aliens visiting their planet and had done so for thousands of years, but he had never taken the rumors seriously. However, now, this person had such a captivating presence and ability as someone from another world. "I'm asking you to release Kamil,"

said the guard.

"And why should I do that? You're crazy like him!" "I'm only

asking you once, but it must be your own decision. Just answer me so I don't waste my time with you."

Nathanael pulled the trigger on his pistol and smiled with a crazed expression. "Here's my answer."

The gun made a clicking sound, but no shot went off. He fired again with the same result. He kept the trigger pressed, but the result was still the same. Then he opened the gun and saw six cartridges in it - everything seemed to be in the right position. He raised the gun again and pulled the trigger a few more times. The gun made the same hollow click each time.

Frustrated, Nathanael threw the gun to the ground and stared at the guard in astonishment. "I will not let Kamil go. He murdered one of my lieutenants and must be punished. Who the hell are you?"

"Kamil is not who you think he is. He is under my protection and you will not be allowed to punish him. If you try, it will be the end of your life. Is this really what you wish for?"

Nathanael stood still and looked as if God had just told him that the world would end in a few minutes. "Who are you to say such things to me? Why don't you answer my questions?"

The guard approached Nathanael. "Look at me intimately. Make your own judgments."

The guard stopped about ten centimeters from Nathanael, who had to raise his head due to the difference in height. As he did so, he suddenly felt a tremor. He was neither his body nor standing in his bedroom. He was pulled into some other dimension, some other world that he had no words or feelings to describe. The guardian he was looking at transformed into an incomprehensible light of blue glowing atoms that swirled formlessly in the deep darkness of inner space. He knew now that it was an intelligence that surpassed his own.

"Are you God?" Nathanael said at last.

"I am not the kind of God you believe in. I am the one who designed you, but I am not your creator. I am the one who frees you from the mold that binds you to a single tiny room in your mansion. You still live in this room. Because of your desires and the ignorance they bring, you know nothing of the other rooms of your mansion. Instead, you are in league with those who imprison you."

"If you release Kamil, you will continue this life in a new angle that will free you from the one room you live in. I promise you that, but you have to decide for yourself, that's the only way you can be freed. If you keep trying to kill Kamil, you'll die in this room - this poor little room - and then you'll come back. You will return disgraced in every way, vexed by your shadows, and you will never be spared pain and suffering."

"You make it seem like the decision is easy... like I can take your word for it," Nathanael said. "But How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"You can't know that. That's why you have to decide for yourself. I can't prove it to you, because if I could, it would make your decision impossible."

"Show me another room so I know your promise is true."

"First you have to show your resolve and then be patient. You are not one to command creatures until you will not listen to your heart and do its will. That is a sacrifice that must be made. It's not possible otherwise."

Nathanael returned to his human form without warning. He was standing in his room. Alone. She gave in to him knees and he fell to the floor with dizzying speed. His body and heart ached. It lay on the floor torn like a piece of paper that can never be folded again. He clung fearlessly to his heart, ran to its shores, and hoped to find forgiveness there. He hoped that the promise of this great spirit that had consumed him would pick him up like a grain of sand into its ocean.

Chapter 56. The Gate

Doriah led Hugelitod down a slowly descending corridor that passed the chambers he had explored two days ago when he first discovered the secret access to the Oracle in the temple. Hugelitod was in awe of the vastness of the underground temple.

"How long do you think it took to build?" Hugelitod asked.

"Twenty-nine years according to the Oracle."

"A whole generation..."

"And there's more, as you'll soon see."

Hugelitod remained a comfortable distance of about eight feet behind Doriah. "Why did they build it underground? Dream-did they live to hide from their enemies?"

"That's partly related to what I'm about to show you. Be patient. We're almost there."

After a few minutes they came to a part of the corridor that seemed to have been dug out not too long ago. Around the whole-around the perimeter of the tunnel was a strong partition that jutted out several inches, uneven, and about two feet wide.

Doriah stopped and raised his left arm. "I have one favor to ask of you, which will seem very great strange, but you have to trust me that it is necessary."

Hugelitod looked around nervously. He tried to stay calm and relaxed. "Okay, what is it?"

"I need you to show me your back."

Hugelitod scowled and stepped back. "Why?"

"Trust me. I will explain when I find what I believe is there."

Hugelitod suddenly felt in danger. Should she really trust Doriah? "Tell me what you're looking for or not you're trying to find, and if it makes sense, I'll do what you ask of me."

"I want to see if you have a certain birthmark."

"Is that all? Why is the birthmark so important to you?"

"Please?" Doriah demanded, arms outstretched. "It only takes a second."

Hugelitod undid the top two buttons of his robes, removed his hood, pulled his robes down to his waist, and turned around. Doriah held the candle near the mark, which he immediately saw with his eyes.

"The heat from the flame is nice, but don't put it too close," Hugelitod said, trying his best to sound casual.

"I'm done, thank you," said Doriah. "Let's move on." "You said you'd tell me what you were looking for and why. I heard no explanation," remarked Hugelitod when buttoning his robe and putting the hood back on his head.

"You will hear soon. First I want to show you something. We'll talk when we get there."

In about two minutes the corridor ended and opened into a large room with high rounded walls. At first Hugelitod was confused because the candlelight showed no floor. It was like they were inside a silo or something. The vaulted ceiling was twenty feet above them and the light was enough to illuminate him, but when he looked down, the candle - for all its brightness - failed to make the depth of the room visible.

To get to the bottom of the great chamber they had to walk along the perimeter of the room where there were stairs carved into the rock that descended down the room like a giant corkscrew. They descended about fifty feet, exactly two and a half revolutions around the circular chamber. There was no railing, so Hugelitod stayed close to the wall, still touching it. Doriah walked slowly, making sure Hugelitod was comfortable with his speed. As they neared the bottom of the stairs, Hugelitod finally looked up from the stairs to see a strange apparatus emerge from the darkness in the middle of the floor.

It looked like a semi-circular gate that was intertwined with interconnected, gold-colored tubes. At the base, the pipes were as thick as a human wrist and then spiraled upward to a height of nine feet, tapering to a delicate apex like glowing needles. They were slightly elliptical in shape, and when Hugelitod looked at them more closely, he could see that they were irregularly shaped and had tiny holes running through them. There were at least a hundred of these vertical tubes. At the base the tubes opened into a circular crystalline base that was hollow and about ten feet in diameter. The whole apparatus was placed on a pedestal which extended about three feet above the floor. The floor itself was all gold or some metal alloy that reflected a beautiful golden glow into the chamber.

Hugelitod could barely speak as he examined the strange structure. "What... what is it?"

Doriah cleared his throat and paused for a moment, as if collecting his thoughts. "It's a gateway to another time..."

"A time machine?" Hugelitod exclaimed, not trying to hide his shock.

"You can call it that, but it's not really the kind of machine where you can set data and travel to the time and place taken. It is aligned to a specific time and set of coordinates. He never deviates."

"What time and place is it set for?"

"You have to listen to me with an open mind for a few minutes. I will do my best to enlighten you, but you may need to try it first before you fully understand it. So be patient."

Hugelitod was already shaking his head. "No, don't try to force me to try that machine, whatever it is. There is something about it that seems dangerous to me... even menacing."

"No one will force you. Relax," said Doriah, sitting on the floor and leaning against the pedestal. "This gate is ancient - quite possibly as old as humanity itself. The passage we used to get here was sealed by the original builders. About fifteen years ago, we discovered that the end of the corridor was not solid, simply by using a simple sound refraction technique."

"When we found this room, we had no idea what it was for. We asked the Oracle, but it was unable to recognize her. About twelve years ago I accidentally stumbled upon the answer. However, I discovered that it is a gateway to a new dimension that is not part of our universe. The entities I met claimed to be..." "Are you talking about angels?" Hugelitod interrupted him.

"No. I'm talking about beings like us who are just more intellectually advanced and who have been around for a very long time time worked with our race."

"For what purpose?"

"If you listen to their words, they are our patrons or benefactors. They even go so far as to they say they watch over us like good shepherds, but I don't believe them."

"Why?"

"Because they created this gate. They need a way to interact with us and this gateway is their itself, how to bring those in power into their dimension and program them there."

"I don't understand that," Hugelitod complained. "Why... how do they do it?"

"They knew that the Oracles would be owned by the most powerful on this planet, so they placed these gates nearby, hoping that the powerful would find them, learn to use them, and enter their realm. Once they appear in their network, they can instill their thoughts in them and then these human foot soldiers will return to earth and do their bidding."

"Why the gate and all the secrecy? Why don't they just come in spaceships and take over the planet if that's what they want?"

"They don't live in our dimension. They are not physical beings. The realm they exist in is very different from ours. They have no interest in life on our planet, they just want to make sure humanity never unites into an uncontrollable force."

"Why should a superior race care about us and our planet?"

Doriah half smiled at Hugelitod's obvious naivety. "They care because they believe that our planet and theirs the inhabitants are theirs."

The stark words hung in the cold air, whose heights seemed to stretch into infinity as if under a cloud-shrouded starry sky.

"Why are you showing me this... and telling me the whole story? I came here - to this temple - for a specific purpose, which is to work with the Oracle... and now I'm facing some strange alien technology that you claim can transport a person to... I don't know... just some alien intelligence. The whole thing just keeps getting weirder and weirder. I get little bits of truth, little doses, but never the truth..." "You are not alone, my friend. I can't give you the whole story, but hear me out.

Give me a chance to explain
pour what I know and believe to be true. Good?"

Hugelitod nodded reluctantly. "Good."

Doriah sat up, looking for a more comfortable position on the hard metal floor. His eyes seemed to be studying the glistening skin on his hands. "I trust you, Hugelitod. I sense your role in this unfolding story and have proof that you are an integral part of the Dohrman Prophecy."

"By those who are supposed to overthrow the Church. Is that what you mean?"

"No. The oracle said that someone with the Royal Star would be born and reform the Church. Not that he will destroy her. But the prophecy says that there are two who will be born - one who will reform the Church and make it even more powerful, and the other who will seek to destroy it. The question is, which one are you?"

"I'm not trying to destroy anything, especially not the Church."

"I believe you, but you have understanding for Karnomen, who is not sure. However, whichever of the two you are - however - if you are one of them - you are a threat to Karnomen. I'll explain a bit."

Hugelitod felt the floor suddenly disappear beneath him and he free-falled again into the widening jaws of a mystery that grew deeper and more confused. "So I have a birthmark on my back and that somehow means I'm one of two people born with it. Karnomen tries to find out which one I am, but since he has no proof, he assumes that I am the one who will destroy the Church. Okay, I get that... at least I think so."

Hugelitode's tone was stern, bordering on anger. As he spoke, he paced back and forth, nervously stroking his beard.

"Then I found access to the Oracle in this temple - something only you and I are aware of. We agreed that we will do the Oracle's bidding and see what the Oracle is able to create in cooperation with me.

If this endeavor is successful, it will prove to Karnomen that I am the good one and that the bad one is not - somewhere else, and it has yet to be found."

"And today I came in and I thought we were going to discuss how I was going to work with the Oracle and prove my story to Karnomen and suddenly... here we are... talking about aliens and their strange agenda to take over the planet. Is that all, or something else?"

"I'm sorry, but there's a lot more," Doriah replied quietly.

"Then tell me everything you know."

Doriah let out a lone, contrite breath. "This machine," he thumbed back over his shoulder, "is the curse of our Church, of our entire species. I found him. I'm the dark one, although I don't have a birthmark. Maybe it fell off me, or it just forgot to materialize, I don't know, but I'm the one who opened that gate of darkness and let the destructive forces flow in. The entities that use me - us... the First Initiates, control the Church. Karnomen is simply a puppet. They are the true source of power because they know how to manipulate with such cunning and stealth that we are like docile children in the presence of the Spartans."

"The Oracle is a technology that is agnostic, neutral, of a lineage where human freedom is the only vital component of our continued evolution. This technology," Doriah pointed behind him again, "represents the line of human imprisonment and enslavement of the species into one permissive herd, one school."

"I opened this technology. I shared her with Karnomen and he became easily manipulated. He is unaware of the hypnotic powers of this cunning race. They began to understand how they could use religion to control the Royal Houses that the Karnomen ruled using their Divine Right power, which was backed by these entities. They also understood how they could manipulate other countries using the same, identical template. The story continues even deeper, as what humanity is - what it will become in the distant future - is known to us through the lens of the Oracle. We know what humanity, or at least part of it, will evolve into. And it's beautiful in a way we can't imagine. But here, at this time, we are drawn and strained by beings who believe they can still rule the earth and control its future."

"I don't understand," Hugelitod interrupted. "How is this possible? Why can't we just destroy this... this machine?"

"It's too late," Doriah sighed. "We are already infected. It's like a virus... this power has spread. It is a global issue because these beings want our planet and wish the human herds to be in conflict and dis-functionality so that their supremacy is never challenged. They are already here."

Hugelitod looked at Doriah in astonishment. "What do you mean they're already here?"

"I left that machine on because I was hoping that you, or someone like you, would eventually come and be the one to meet this race of beings and convince them to stop their plans..." Doriah held up a hand to stop Hugelitod's impending explosion. "I know, I know, it's not likely, but I'm so desperate."

"What does the Oracle say about this whole matter?"

"The Oracle knows about it conceptually. The entire Dohrman Prophecy is indeed about this matter, but I'm not sure the Oracle really understands the gravity of the matter. Karnomen did not discuss it with him or ask questions about it. He uses the Oracle in the name of these Cold Gods..."

"Why do you call them that?"

"It's the closest description I'm capable of as far as defining them. Twelve years ago, when I first traveled there - to the dimension they exist in - I had no idea where I was or who they were. They seemed as surprised by my presence as I was by theirs. They are cold, calculating beings, with extremely powerful minds and psychic abilities. They can dress up their commands in spiritual garb and pretend to be our Gods. At that time I almost fell victim to their manipulation - myself! I almost became their disciple. They offered to cure me, to make me whole, and I was tempted. But there was something strange about them that I knew was not human or humane. These beings wanted access to the Oracle. They wanted to destroy him, not just the one you know, but all seven."

"Are there seven of them?" cried Hugelitod.

Doriah nodded. "They saw the seven Oracles as humanity's salvation... our hope. They also knew about Dohrman's Pro-century, for Karnomen gave them the details..."

"I've heard so much about the Dohrman Prophecy, but no one has ever explained to me what it actually is. Can you tell me?"

Doriah looked away for a moment, as if pondering his next move in the mystery of his innermost being. "Dohrman's Prophecy is about the spread of religion on a global level. It is the separation of humanity from religio-feminine clutches of any kind. It is a time when humanity will step out of the dogma of faith as defined by man into the light of Living Truth as created by God. This is the part of Dohrman's Prophecy that consumes the Cold Gods and Karnomen. But it's much broader than just religious."

"It also heralds all-encompassing changes in government and science. But these changes will not happen simply because one day everyone will awaken to their true nature and connect with the Living Truth. It will happen because there will be those in humanity who slip out of the grip of the Cold Gods."

"What do you mean?" Hugelitod asked.

"The Cold Gods were not present on this planet only twelve years ago when I activated this machine. They encoded their presence into the very building blocks of humanity, into the very creation of man. In doing so, they decided to create a weakened humanity - one that would not be able to break free from their cunning grasp. This grasp is so comprehensive that only a handful of people have ever considered its breadth."

"According to Dohrman's Prophecy, there will be people who will describe these Cold Gods, summon them, identify them and reveal their purpose. However, there will be two people specifically who will have the sign of the Royal Star. One of them will become an ally of the Cold Gods and strengthen their control over humanity by reforming religion - not in a Holy Books way, but rather in a way where the Church unites the world's most powerful Royal Houses and brings them under its control. The Church reformed in this way will truly be an extension of the Cold Gods precisely to places where no one would expect them."

"The second bearer of the Royal Star confronts the Cold Gods and makes a deal with them using his own consciousness as a sacrifice. By doing so, he will close the Cold Gods' path to humanity and allow him to enter a new trajectory and achieve unity of spirit and mind, giving humanity the power to rise above the Cold Gods and re-experience the universe as the palette of his creation. The template for this new trajectory is the spiritualization of humanity through the application of science. Individuals will be able to gain their natural abilities to perceive and manifest the vibration of unity. They will be able to feel that they are part of a web of consciousness that is whole and unified. They will seek the higher dimensions, not for the sake of conjecture or grandeur, but to bring the human soul under the powerful lens of direct perception."

"No more middlemen, unloaders, guards or inspectors. No more hierarchy of good and evil that would she sought our reorientation and nourishment. We unravel. No more saviors. We... we will solve it ourselves."

Doriah paused, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Finally we'll figure it out. But the two who wear the King's Star are the symbol of our struggle. They are the condition of humanity's great effort to transcend from separation and confinement to unity and freedom."

"And there is no indication in the Dohrman Prophecy as to which of the two I am?" Hugelitod asked.

Doriah hesitated. "The oracle said that the First Bearer would come from the Church."

Hugelitod sat down as if his legs could no longer support his weight.

"So I'm the First Bearer?" Hugelitod whispered distantly.

"That's what we're worried about," Doriah nodded. "But the Oracle is so interested in you that we feel your birthmark may just be a coincidence. Why else would the Oracle invite you to work with him the way it did if you were a pawn of the Cold Gods? I'm just not sure."

"If Karnomen is under the control of the Cold Gods, why would he fear me if I am the First Bearer?"

"The First Bearer, according to Dohrman's Prophecy, will gain control of the Church. He will become the High Priest."

"As?"

"The prophecy on this matter is not clear, but it is understood that the First Bearer will not achieve this status through the standard process, but rather through some bravura move that results in the death of the First Initiate."

"Like... that... I... kill... Karnomen?" Hugelitod asked, his shock evident in every word.

A deep silence followed. One in which nothing could remain hidden. It was just a breath. Heartbeat. Mr-eye candy.

"Does Karnomen know what you're telling me here, showing me this... machine?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I hope you are the Second Bearer. I hope you meet the Cold Gods and end their rule."

"What does the Oracle say about the Second Bearer?" Hugelitod asked. "Will he also rise from among the Church?"

"It only mentions that the Second Bearer will be of humble origin. It says nothing about the Church."

An eerie silence filled the room as the two men searched their minds for an explanation or some glimmer of grasping their combined purpose.

Hugelitod moved beside Doriah and leaned against the pedestal of the menacing machine. "Does Karnomen know about my ma-Territorial sign?"

Doriah nodded. "Bartholem told him. I wanted to see him in person."

"So I'm lost. Karnomen won't let me live. Both Bearers are enemies. The first Bearer kills him and The Second Bearer kills his Church. There is no way to reconcile, so why am I still alive?"

"You assume that Karnomen will not lay down his life to expand the power of the Cold Gods. That's a bad premise." "You're saying that

Karnomen essentially wishes for the First Bearer to succeed?"

"Karnomen is under their curse," answered Doriah. "His fate is bound up with theirs in such a way, which I haven't even begun to understand yet. We are all connected to them in some way."

Hugelitod turned to Doriah. "I do not wish to be one of those King's Star Bearers either. I don't want to be a part of any of that! I have to leave this place. If I go... if... I just go away somewhere... to some dark place in the world, maybe that's the best thing I can do. Maybe that applies to you too. We can't-we can't just leave this whole stage..."

"And then what? Let someone else do what we came to do? Who should it be? Do you expect the Cold Gods to simply end their plans because you run away? They find someone else, and then another, and another. They never stop. Remember, they are Heartless Beings seeking to take control of this world. Where will you go to avoid being touched by them?"

Hugelitod listened intently to Doriah's words. "But if I am the First Bearer, I will only help their sub-water plans. I don't want to be that person."

"Then don't be her! Meet them, but as a saboteur. Uncover their scam and figure out a way to stop it. Become the sand in their engine. Shut down their machine once and for all. Make them believe that you are on their side - their devoted disciple. Convince them that you will do their bidding, observe their plans and together we can find a weakness in them. Hopefully we can beat them." "Is that your plan?"

Dorah nodded cooly. "I see it as the only way forward." "What about Karnomen?" "He's giving us two weeks to show him something. In two weeks we can tell him it's not working...your spiritual guidance. You can make up and write something weird to show that your mental state is compromising. He will believe it and when he sees it, he will calm down."

"So I'm going to look like a fool, like a lunatic?"

Dorah gave a sly smile. "Maybe this will be the best role for you, in all this chaos. Maybe I'm a little jealous of you."

"Trust me, there's nothing you can envy about me."

Hugelitod rose to his feet, adjusted his robes, and pointed to the machine behind him. "How does it work?"

"Later," Dorah said, slowly getting to his feet. "Now you need this conversation to settle into you. You have to spend it. If you agree with my plan as it is, we will begin tomorrow."

"Who but you and Karnomen used this thing?"

"No one."

"Do the other Initiates know of her existence?"

"They know of its existence but assume it cannot be activated."

"Even Torem doesn't know?"

Dorah shook his head.

"Why did you tell Karnomen?"

"Because he was my confidant," said Dorah. "I felt I owed it to him. He was the priest who visited me when I was a small boy healing wounds in a war-torn city. A boy who was waking up to the new reality that we are all made of. I felt Karnomen deserved a chance to see this next dimension. To meet those who claim to be our Gods."

"He wasn't afraid?"

"Not a bit. Based on my description, he wanted to go right away."

"How many times did you use it...before you told Karnomen?"

"Three times."

"When was the last time?"

"About eleven years ago..." "And Karnomen? How many times did he go?"

"I don't know. The truth is that he can come and go in this temple whenever he wants. I know bring-to name ten times he used this machine."

"You told him about this, but not about the Oracle remote access technology. Why?"

"I think it was for selfish reasons," Dorah admitted. "I wanted to have access to the Oracle so I could he could teach according to his ideas."

"But somewhere in this temple you keep all the copies of the writings?"

"Yes, but those are other people's questions at other times. I wanted to ask my own questions."

Hugelitod took a deep breath and began to whirl around the chamber. He tilted his head back like a small child.

"I don't know if I can stomach this. It's so weird... too weird..."

Dorah reached for the candle. "You know," he said quietly, "I haven't been able to be near an open fire for many years. Even the smallest flame of a candle terrified me. Even now, when I walk in the temple with a candle in my hand, I am intensely aware that it is fire. And it was the fire that burned my body and almost killed me. But this fire also brought me to the Oracle and the Cold Gods. They are worlds apart, but knowing both extremes gave me something that I could never have achieved by reading books, meditating, or praying."

"I feel you're trying to tell me something," said Hugelitod, "but I don't know what it is."

"I suggest you try looking at this gate as a fire. Don't be afraid of him. Don't look at it as something that will kill you. See it as something that revives you into a new understanding of yourself. With this attitude, we will have a chance."

Hugelitod smirked with a sly expression on his face. "You really think I'm crazy."

The two began to climb the spiral stone staircase. Hugelitod kept looking down at the gate every few steps before taking one last look to see

only a glimmer of light on the sharp, needle-like points of the copper-of pipes. They looked like stars or galaxies, waiting to be swallowed by the darkness.

Chapter 57. Spirit Alchemist

It lay there quietly and didn't move a bit. From seventy yards away, the purple inkwell of Joseph's chest forced her attention. Maia turned to Simon. "It's Joseph," she whispered, pointing at him with tears.

Simon comforted Maia, knowing her observation was correct. It was Joseph, and they now had the sacred task of burying his body. It was something Maia insisted she had to do. Simon, although initially against it, resigned after only a few seconds when he saw Maia's strong will.

They walked the remaining distance to Joseph in silence and then began the dreary task of preparing the grave. Using only sticks and their bare hands, they began digging in the soft dirt under a large grove of pine trees about thirty feet from his body. Maia filled her mind with memories of Joseph. She suddenly thought of her father. It was the first time since she entered the forest that the memory of her father hit her hard. Her heart was so sensitive and vulnerable. She looked down into the grave they were making, their clothes stained with dirt and their hands covered in dark brown soil. All this caused her to suddenly discover that her love for her father was unconditional. It started as a small fire in her heart, but with each deepening of the digging in the earth she felt it grow within her, until at last she uttered the words like a little girl, "I love you, father."

When their task was done, they carried Joseph's body to the grave and laid him gently there. Maia found some wild blue flowers and placed them on Joseph's chest to cover the bullet wound. They covered the body with a pile of dirt and put stones around it as decoration.

Maia felt different now as she looked down at the shallow grave. A sense of great loss opened up in her heart, but instead of feeling empty, her heart felt as if a new love had entered it, after she had forgiven her father without knowing it.

Simon picked up his staff, placed it at an angle to the ground, stepped on it with his foot and broke it in half. Maia sighed when she saw this. "What are you doing?"

Simon took the part at the top of which the bronze wings were spread. The staff was now only three feet long and its new end was chisel-sharp. He stabbed it into the soft dirt. "He deserves a tombstone. This will come in handy."

Maia smiled, feeling the beauty and perfection of their open grave. She went to the spot where Joseph's body had died and placed some more flowers on the ground. "Farewell my dear friend."

Simon followed her, watching her sensitivity with interest. "We think we're above it all," he waved his hands like a conductor. "Diamonds and separations, but we're just hoarding our anonymity before we leave this world. All the time - every time we come into this world - we have a body that is unable to contain what we really are. What other option do we have... but to leave him here."

Maia heard the words but didn't understand them. And so she let them flow through her like a breeze. She knew they weren't meant for her.

Chapter 58. Self-Crowned Power

Kamil watched Nathanael march across the yard. He was followed by a small group of curious guards, whose faces were frowned upon. They looked like an angry mob.

Monsey regained consciousness, confused and seething with irritation. "What happened?" he shouted, looking at Kamil as if he had something to do with his sudden memory loss.

Nathanael stopped and turned to the group of guards who followed him like curious puppies. "Go away."

The guards dispersed with a chorus of chatter and headed for the edge of the courtyard, from where they watched everything. "What happened?" repeated Monsey.

"Go away." Nathanael said looking down at Monsey.

Monsey rose to his feet, which were a little shaky. But he started to march, following the same direction as the guards before him. He hoped that one of them would be able to give him an explanation of the strange event.

As Monsey left, Nathanael looked at him. "Send a doctor here."

Monsey nodded. "Yes, sir."

Nathanael fixed his hawk eyes on Kamil, pointing at him and speaking. "You and I need to talk. I'll let you out of here, arrange for the doctor to look at you, fix you up as best he can, and then escort you to the gate with some provisions and let you go. Then I don't want to see you anymore. Do you understand?"

Kamil listened with rigid eyes, his heart pounding and his breathing shallow and rapid. Dehydration was so serious that his confusion was like a thick fog that engulfed him.

Nathanael spat on the ground and loosened his collar. When he talked, he marched. He was whispering the whole time, but his voice was strong. "Damn, I don't have a religious bone in my whole body," he continued, "but something just happened to me that I don't know how to explain. I'll be damned if I don't take it into account. That's it! Any questions?"

There was already a commotion outside the dining room and the guards were coming out loudly, booze in one hand and a rifle in the other. "So this is the bastard who tricked us, burned my shoes, took all my supplies, and smashed my face in with the butt of my own rifle? I've just walked eight miles through the woods with a splitting headache so we can settle our scores together now!"

Sothmen had no shirt. His legs were wrapped in the dirty rags that had once been his shirt and the right side of his face was badly bruised. His eyes were imbued with black poison. When he came within ten feet of Kamil, he turned to Nathanael. "Sir, am I allowed to strike the prisoner?"

"It is rejected. Go away," Nathanael hissed.

Sothmen stopped and looked at Nathanael in disbelief. "It is my right!" "I said, leave,"

Nathanael stood against Sothmen in an intimidating position. The two were equally tall and similarly built, but Nathanael's rank won out.

Sothmen paused, stunned, then took a long drink of his beer. He looked down at Kamil. "I'll come later with a bullet with your name on it. I will come, be sure." He turned and left. The whispers of guards gathering in the distance could be heard. Nathanael began to look nervous for the first time.

The Doctor's path crossed with Sothmen's. "He's in a bad mood... be careful," Sothmen whispered to the doctor in a slurred voice.

"I'll stop by later and take a look at the bruise," said the doctor.

"I'll be grateful, doctor, but now go and take good care of that murderer. Oh, yes, protect Kamil, whose the custom is to kill and raid his own kind!"

Sothmen's voice was sharp, loud and scornful. Everyone heard him. The courtyard was noisy as the guards talked among themselves, speculating what had happened and who the strange guard was.

"I'm here as fast as I could," explained the doctor. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm about to release this prisoner and I want you to fix him as best you can. Can you do it?"

"Sure, I will," replied the doctor, "but the men are expecting the party tonight. They won't like that very much, if you know what I mean."

"How long will it take you?" Nathanael asked, ignoring the doctor's comment.

"Can I work on it in my office? It will take less time... maybe twenty minutes or so."

Nathanael nodded and followed his men with his eyes. There were about thirty of them outside and most of them had rifles and pistols. They finished their dinner and carried bottles of beer. They watched Kamil's story unfold in the middle of the yard as if it were a theater. Nathanael had a strange feeling that the others were watching too.

Nathanael looked at Kamil, who was already half dead, wondering what he was doing. How could a ghost that is no longer here listen? Maybe Kamil hypnotized him. Perhaps none of this actually happened. But something inside him told him to go ahead with his plan. "I need to talk to the men, can you get Kamil into your office?"

"Probably not," replied the doctor.

Nathanael bent down and removed the cuffs from Kamil's wrists. "I'll come to your office when I'm done. Don't let him out of your sight. I will send Monsey to help you."

"Understood, sir."

Nathanael took one last look at Kamil - the embodiment of a weak, dirty and languid human-age, dissolved in the powerful stench of death. He was absolutely disgusting in every way. Why would anyone want to save him?

Nathanael walked over to the guards who were discussing outside the mess hall. The soft crunch of their boots on the patio tiles contrasted with their rough voices, which complimented the strong beer they were all drinking. He knew that they had come for the sole purpose of taking revenge on one of their own who had committed a heinous crime. Most of these men disliked First Lieutenant Jaunder, but they didn't care. They wanted a party - the authority of his office permitted the injury of another. It was a habit hardened by time. A custom whose order was supported by the ranks of the guards. These guards had no education, no love, no families. All they had were rifles.

Nathanael raised his hands and the group fell silent. "The High Priest's representative visited us tonight and asked us to release Kamil."

There was a shout in the group and some of the guards called out restlessly. "Why? He killed our First Lieutenant."

"I was not given a clear answer. I can only say that Kamil is not considered responsible for the death of First Lieutenant Jaunder. He is free for tonight."

The group became unruly and whistled. Nathanael raised his hands again and whistled sharply and loudly. All eyes turned to him again as order was suddenly restored. "I know you're looking forward to the party tonight, but that doesn't change. The bar stays open all night - and I pay. So drink and enjoy."

There was general excitement at the Commander's words as many of the men shouted enthusiastically.

Sothmen stepped forward and raised his hand. "And what will happen to Kamil, sir? You expect us to continue with him? We all know he is a murderer and a cunning bastard. Who among us will trust him?"

"She's leaving tonight. He will be expelled from the Supreme Guard for attacking you and your colleague. It ends. As for me, I hope I never see him again."

Several men shouted in agreement, but Sothmen looked unconvinced. "How does the High Priest know that Kamil had nothing to do with Jaunder's death? How can they know? Did God tell them?" laughed Sothmen.

Some other men were also laughing and looking at Nathanael for an answer.

"They didn't tell me that," Nathanael said, pointing to the compound's entrance gate. "But for your comfort I will tell you that we will send Kamil out into this forest with only a small meager provision and no rifle. He's already in such a state that I doubt he'll last until morning. He is ripe for death. We'll let the forest come to him. Karnomen cannot hold us responsible for that."

Nathanael looked directly at Sothmen. "You and your colleague will receive extra portions of food and a bottle of whiskey from my personal supply. I will also write a commendation to both of you and see to it that the reward for Kamil's capture is doubled so that you and your colleague, as well as those who brought Kamil in, will be rewarded equally."

Nathanael offered his hand to Sothmen. "Is it valid?"

Sothmen placed his glass on a nearby table, wiped his hand on his pants, and shook his hand. "It applies. Thank you, m-no."

"Alright guys, back to the party. Remember, those of you on duty tomorrow, drink in moderation." He was laughing, but inside he was quietly swirling in fear of what was happening to his world. Everything was collapsing, imploding into a new stage on which he was only a part actor. A helpless pawn of forces he did not understand.

Chapter 59. The Last Barriers

The doctor and Monsey were like crutches supporting Kamil's semi-conscious body. They went to the doctor's office. They put him on a new bed. The remains of the destroyed bed were still in a heap on the floor.

The doctor looked wide-eyed at Monsey and pointed. "Who is that?"

Behind Monsey, a tall guard was approaching Kamil with a glass of water. He ignored the two men as if they weren't in the room.

"That's the same guy who dropped me off in the yard," Monsey replied, stepping back carefully.

The guard lifted Kamil's head and gave him a drink of water. Kamil drank most of the water, some spilled on his shirt. "There is nothing else you should do here," said the stranger. "You can leave us here. Thank you for bringing him to the safety of this room."

Monsey and the doctor suddenly turned their heads and looked at each other. Their faces were blank. Then they shuffled out of the room.

Kamil moved and then sat down. Color returned to his face and his eyes flashed with alertness, as if born into the promise of silence that only a ghost can offer. He rose to his feet and looked around. He was looking for a clue. Then he realized he was in the doctor's office and he was alone. He heard a voice in his head. You must leave this place. Back to Maia. Go, quickly. Brown!

Kamil could hear Nathanael raising his voice outside and Monsey contradicting him. He knew he had to leave through the back door and that he only had seconds before she saw him. Unseen, he jumped into the cool night air and carefully closed the door quietly behind him. He had nothing but his clothes on, and even those were torn to such an extent that they were mostly tatters hanging on him as decoration.

He was surprised that he felt so good. He didn't remember eating or drinking anything or taking any medicine, but since he woke up in the doctor's office, he could only assume that the doctor had done something to re-awaken his energies. He looked down at his feet. His wounds were almost healed and he felt no pain - anywhere in his body. He quickly ran to the outhouse, which was about a hundred feet behind the doctor's office. The building was dark and used mostly as a laundry.

Kamil opened the door and in the dark, using only his hands, found a clean uniform that he hoped would fit him. Then he carefully crept out, keeping away from all the lights. He heard Nathanael's voice in the distance but only understood every other word. "His... condition... will slow him down... dogs... must be close... find him... he may be armed."

Kamil understood that they didn't know he could run so he used this to his advantage to put as much distance as possible between himself and the doctor's office. He held the new clothes under his arm and ran as fast as he could to the far end of the compound - opposite the entrance gate. It was about eight hundred yards through a fairly dense forest. It was nice to run and feel the power of my legs beneath me.

A line of chain link fence appeared in front of him that was about twenty feet high. There were three lines of barbed wire stretched across the top of the fence, but there were several tree branches that extended over the fence. He knew that if he could get hold of one of them, his escape would be possible.

He was startled by the sound of barking dogs. Kamil knew that his scent would be easy to track - even for a human if he got close enough. The dogs in the distance sounded excited and their cries grew louder and louder. It meant they were released. Kamil knew he had little time. He found a tree with cut branches and figured it would be enough to get over the barbed wire and down the other side. He looked over his shoulder and saw the light of the lanterns bouncing in the night air.

Kamil was climbing the tree just as the first dogs noticed him and ran towards him with bared teeth and vicious growls. He pulled his legs up quickly and climbed the tree, while other dogs ran down below, barking and jumping incessantly. Kamil climbed to a branch overhanging the fence. He took a quick look at the lights bouncing in the distance and knew the men would be with him in seconds.

"I see him," someone shouted, and then immediately a shot rang out. He saw the flash of a rifle and the bullet hit a branch above him. He had to jump, there was no time for a slow crawl. Kamil stood on a branch and ran over it. He carefully avoided branches that he might trip over. He jumped the moment he heard more bullets hit the tree. He landed on the hard ground and rolled over his shoulder. He quickly checked his body. No pain.

Kamil ran into the forest. As he ran he had a strange premonition that something was going to happen - some kind of change was about to happen in his consciousness. A high-frequency sound entered him from the space above him, and he felt his mind retreat into a kind of ghostly state, separated from him by a chasm of space so deep and so wide that he feared he would be lost. But he ran on.

The silence of the night was filled with the sound of rifle shots, but Kamil saw it as a dream and had no fear. He ran with the same joy as when he was a little boy. The forest dissolved into a web of light. The light within him was like a spider crawling on this web. He felt oneness with everything. Every leaf, every branch, every grain of clay was visible to his senses. Not only visible, but mutually felt. The forest literally came alive in his mind. It was lit. His mind was so clear and focused that the rifle shots in the background were lost in the splendor of the forest. Somehow he knew the bullets wouldn't hit him. The forest protected him.

He ran like this for almost an hour. At that time, he could float above the trees and look down on himself as if he were a watcher creating order out of chaos, creating a path no one could follow. He trusted the forest to guide him exactly where he needed to be.

His body slowly succumbed to the fatigue of running and so he slowed down. His vision dissolved and a forest of living matter became again, the matter of Nature, which became scattered in the darkness of the starry night.

Chapter 60. Cold Gods

Hugelitod stood still as Doriah made some adjustments. "How did you figure that out?"

"It wasn't too hard," said Doriah. "It just wanted to experiment a bit. An apparatus like this actually asks for it."

"Maybe you. He's yelling at me - go away."

Doriah laughed, but his attention was focused on the lever panel built into the base of the gate. The two men arrived early to discuss their plans and both agreed that Hugelitod should go over to the Cold Gods.

"The way it works," Doriah explained, "is that there's a whole spectrum of sounds, and you'll feel them digging into your skin when a certain frequency of sound touches you. It will only take a few seconds and then you will lose consciousness, which is why I need you to lie down."

Doriah swung his hands to the ground and Hugelitod followed his instruction and laid down on his back. "I'm getting really nervous about it," Hugelitod said. "Remember, you promised me you wouldn't do anything until I said I was ready."

Dorah nodded. "Of course. There is something else I want to tell you, so listen carefully."

"After you pass out, you will wake up in a room that will be very different from this one. She will be very bright and you will be in a new body..."

"What do you mean, in a new body?"

"Your consciousness will be teleported to another dimension and once there you will need a body. your hosts, Cool Gods, they will give you a body. They have them there ready and waiting for people to enter them..." "What body type is that?"

"They are synthetic bodies. They are similar to ours, but have significant differences. One of them is that there are many hem stronger. Likewise, the thought process - and indeed all the senses - seem to be... more powerful."

"You mean I'll be smarter and stronger in this new body?"

"Yes, that's one of their attractions, so watch out for that. These bodies also have the ability to communicate with each other through telepathy, so your thoughts will be read by others and you will be able to read theirs. At least I was able to...partly."

"Then how could I be a saboteur if they can read my mind?"

"When you're in their world, do whatever they ask of you. Otherwise they will look at you as an enemy-le. Any plotting will be done here and only here. Do you understand?"

Hugelitod nodded. "If they kill me, what will happen to this body?"

"I don't know, but I don't think you have a chance to find out. You have to play with them. No resistance. No mutiny-no thoughts. And no lies. He senses a lie before you can hide it, so you need to be transparent."

"What if they ask me what my plans are? I will have to lie."

"We have no plans for that very reason."

"I was nervous even before we started this... debate. And now I'm completely terrified."

"If you don't want to

go..." "Give me a minute," Hugelitod said. "How do I get back?"

"They'll send you back when they're done with you and you'll re-enter your body the same way you left it. Remember, they want you to be theirs. They're probably already expecting you, so play the part. Play someone who wants to expand the power of the Church. Who would want to lead the Church. Show them this aspect of you."

"But you just said I shouldn't lie. And I don't feel these things."

"Yes, but you can tell them that you are Karnomen's assistant and that you have the Royal Star on your back. Then see-see where the conversation goes."

"Who will I talk to?"

"I've never met their leader, but even those who will interrogate you are brilliant creatures, so be careful Proceed slowly. Trust your senses. Try to listen to them and talk as little as possible."

Dorah looked at the control panel. "You can do it. Are you ready?"

"We better do it now or you won't be able to stop me from getting out of here."

Hugelitod barely finished his sentence when Dorah flipped the switch and the gate activated. Dorah stepped back and watched in amazement as the gate lit up and a low frequency sound filled the chamber. The sound moved quickly on the scale as it found the correct frequency for the Hugelitod. Then he found it and persisted in it. Dorah watched as Hugelitod's eyes closed and his body relaxed into the void.

He prayed for a safe journey. He knew that Hugelitod had become an instrument of the gate and that now the suppressed notes of humanity could be heard in a new dimension. In a dimension he looked into once and never cared about again. Hugelitod heard a click as Dorah activated the gate and then heard a sound moving up and down the scale. He felt his body like an instrument that the machine was playing. It was an indescribably strange feeling. Then it seemed to him that every atom of his body resonated with this sound and aligned with it into a complex, coherent geometric pattern. He saw geometry crystallizing into an endless pattern that stretched across the universe and touched everything material. Then he felt it.

He suddenly felt a sense of acceleration and felt himself being pulled out of his body and the part of him that remained conscious saw a barrier like a great vault stretching between the worlds. That frequency of sound rushed before him and entered the vault. He followed her as an obedient child follows its mother. He watched as it flew through another universe and approached another barrier through which the sound once again pierced like a drill and he followed.

He had no sense of slowing down, nor of reaching his destination when he remembered the flashing. His eyes opened to a white nondescript place and he realized he was lying inside a white coffin-like box. He heard a voice in the background. He imagined he was dreaming. That he is at the airport and hears the information regarding the arrival. He lost it for a moment consciousness.

Then he opened his eyes again and was looking through the glass window that was only a few inches above him. He tried to move his limbs, but they were bound. An object that appeared to be a floating eye appeared above him as an unblinking witness. He suddenly had the strong feeling that he was a new addition to the vast museum. He felt that the eye was a custodian welcoming an object of high value into his collection. The sound of air being released brought him to greater awareness and he noticed a strange smell that reminded him of butter or kerosene. He instantly felt stronger and more alert. The top of his transporter chamber opened and the tethers holding his limbs slid away. Hu-gelitod sat down and tried out his new body.

It was the color that caused his first sigh. He was some kind of animal with olive green skin. He couldn't grasp the essence of his body, but it was more animal than human. He knew that. He had six fingers and his thumb was almost as long as the other fingers. The arms were powerful, but shorter than a human's. They seemed to be very flexible and to his surprise had good coordination. Another gasp came as he realized he had a tail. Although small, a tail nonetheless.

Savliel was the Director of Synthetica, the laboratory that oversaw all the new arrivals. The frequency of newcomers to his world was very sparse, despite the fact that his race, the Anunnaki, operated over three hundred gates on various planets throughout the universe. Savliel was one of three employees in Project Synthetica. They had two primary goals: First, to anticipate the New Arrivals and make sure their synthetic bodies were compatible with their consciousness. Second, returning Incoming to exactly the same place they came from.

It was already evening and Savliel was performing some routine checks when a warning blue light began to flash on the retina of his eye. He and his other colleagues, the Directors of Synthetica, had warning systems built into them so they were alerted to the initial state of the new Arrival. Despite the enormous size of Synthetica, it only had three Directors. This was partly due to the rarity of the new Arrivals and partly the result of perfect technical automation throughout Synthetica.

"System activation on Earth Three," Savliel spoke into the automatic recording system. "Initial scanning shows that this is the new Candidate. The rating calculation shows a match." Savliel moved the sliders on the control panel and watched the holographic image of a human body overprinted in synthetic. As he moved the slider, the human body disappeared into a synthetic one. "I locked him up."

A large monitor screen materialized and Savliel watched from a distance as the automatic wall opened and extended a rectangular enclosure that was eight feet long onto the prepared pedestal. The pedestal then moved to the center of the room and lowered to a height of about three feet. Savliel looked indifferently at the monitor. "View LVS." On the screen flowed a number of different technical information, which were arranged in color diagrams. "Show harmonic ratios." Immediately, two color spectra appeared for comparison, and small circles within them showed subtle discrepancies in the spectral data that Savliel found interesting. A three-dimensional image of Hugelitod's physical body that Savliel had ordered appeared on the new monitor. He opened the sealed glass case and turned a knob that made a distinct clicking sound. "The candidate's indicators show presence. Escalation protocol invoked."

"Activating the Medium now," Savliel said, remotely guiding the oval-shaped object to hover precisely above the white-colored enclosure. "Medium and Candidate are in merge mode, merge complete. Display the Candidate."

The monitor switched to an image looking down on the olive green face of a synthetic Anunnaki. A ritual tattoo of synthetic - four intersecting triangles - was placed on the chest, forming a diamond shape in the center. Savliel watched as his eyes blinked open. "Magnify." The camera zoomed in on eyes looking around.

Savliel's attention was drawn away from the screen by a low ceremonial tone and a flashing orange light. He turned the knob. "It is ready for inspection."

"Room?" a deep voice asked.

"It's one-nine-five-one."

"Time synchronization?"

"Within two minutes."

"Anomaly?"

"None... except for the ones I sent."

"Go ahead and let him go. We'll be down in five minutes."

Savliel pressed a button on his control panel. "Candidate Released."

Turning back, Savliel looked at the closer image of the Candidate and zoomed in further. Synthetic tattoos always reminded him of a headless body. It was a fitting symbol of contempt for his race. He watched as the Candidate sat up and began examining his strange new body. Savliel wondered what a strange feeling it must be to wake up in a human body. I'd rather die sooner, he assured himself.

Hugelitod climbed out of the transporter's cab and began to survey the room's circular walls, the high ceiling, and the ubiquitous gold that punctuated every line of the room. The floor consisted of interlocking triangles spilling out into discord from a single golden equilateral triangle. It seemed like the perfect depiction of order descending into chaos - or vice versa. It depended on the point of view.

Physically and emotionally he felt great - strong and strengthened. In fact, he had never felt better. But behind this euphoria, he knew he was an outsider in a strange world that could crush him for a single mistake. The floating eye retreated somewhere into the invisible. As he looked around the room, he became acutely aware that there was no door.

"Hello?" Hugelitod said, trying to speak. "Is... there... anyone?"

He placed his strange hands on the walls, touching the substance that reminded him of alabaster. The sensation was incredibly gentle. Although the surface looked smooth, almost like glass, when he touched it, he could feel its pattern and fine wrinkles. Looking closer, he could even see these wrinkles undulating in a pattern that repeated itself on and on. He knew that his human senses would only see alabaster and feel its smoothness and nothing else. He began to understand the temptation Doriah spoke of.

The walls partially reflected the image of his new body and he stared at the dull reflection. He wondered what the creature was. His mind was completely immersed in this reflection when he heard the sound of footsteps. He turned to see a powerful looking creature. He assumed he looked just like himself. It had prominent jaws and large eyes that swiveled like a lizard's. His physical size was a good seven feet with a constitution that reminded Hugelitod of a gladiator.

"I am Gulhab," said the creature. "You can take me as your host. Welcome to our world."

Hugelitod cautiously opened his mouth. "I... am... Hugelitod... I..." "It may take a few minutes for you to master the communication skills," Gulhab said, "but you'll be back soon, I assure you." Gulhab walked around Hugelitod and appraised him with an arrogant attitude. "Are you an associate of Karnomen?"

Hugelitod nodded and tried to speak. "I... am... his assistant."

"So you're a High Initiate?"

"Yes."

"And why is Karnomen sending you?"

Hugelitod could form words in his mind with great ease, but his mouth was difficult to control as his tongue and vocal cords were out of sync. "I came... I... of... my own... will."

Gulhab's eyes turned upward to the ceiling for a moment. "And for what purpose have you come?"

"To experience... your world."

"We are not interested in explorers. You will be sent back immediately."

Gulhab gestured to the hidden camera and a door appeared in the wall, behind which a corridor could be seen. Another creature, even larger than Gulhab, entered the room and stood next to the door.

"Wait," said Hugelitod. "I didn't come... I... just to investigate. I seek... your advice."

"In what context?" Gulhab asked, turning on Hugelitod to assess him.

"Dohrman's Prophecy."

Gulhab came up to Hugelitod and looked at him carefully. Hugelitod held his stance with conscious effort, despite feeling intimidated by Gulhab's larger presence.

"Do you know the Oracle?" Gulhab asked.

"Yes."

"Do you have access to it?"

"Yes."

"Did you talk to him?"

"Yes."

"So what question remains unanswered that cannot be answered by the Oracle itself?"

"What is the... role... of your race in human affairs?"

Gulhab looked up and then fixed his gaze on Hugelitod. "Did Karnomen tell you about us?"

"No."

"And you accidentally tripped over our gate and figured out how to work it?"

"Another priest helped me."

"Doriah?"

"Yes."

"I see," Gulhab paused.

"Tell me, Hugelitod, what interests you so much about the Dohrman Prophecy that you risk your life to did he know?"

"I told you... I want to know your role in it."

"We are done. You are merely a wayward assistant who has traveled a great distance to waste our time-PULL." Gulhab looked up again. "Savlieli, please return Hugelitod to Rasaforma."

"I'm sorry, but your journey was meaningless," Gulhab said, looking directly into Hugelitod's eyes.

Then he went to the door and motioned to the guard.

A strange feeling of anxiety arose in Hugelitod and took possession of him. "I have the King's Star," he said.

Chapter 61. Seductive Light

Anmael ran his finger through the hologram in front of him. He was the eldest son of Anu, king of the Anunnaki. Anmael was his follower who was to lead the race. His father engineered the relationships they had with other races for the sole purpose of exporting the power of the Anunnaki as the alpha race of the known universe.

The power they held was - in his father's terms - the Philosophical Overlord of the galaxy. Central to this power was the doctrine that the Anunnaki were the Gods of the subordinate races of humanity. In whatever forms mankind has inhabited the worlds of space and time, the concept of God has always been woven into the human body and mind. The Anunnaki were called by many names in the ancient cultures of the galaxy, but were rarely seen and indeed never understood. It suited his father that way.

Anmael was alerted that the Country Candidate had arrived in Synthetica. He usually enjoyed watching the inspections, not-for they often provided insights into the nature of an evolving culture, race, or - in some cases - an entire species. This understanding was critical because it provided a rich source of information through which the species could be controlled. Since his birth, he has followed eighty-nine inspections in person and another 2,074 on record. He worked with Karnomen for many years to secure the country from the betrayal of the succession. Very few planets that fell into the hands of the Anunnaki ever understood that they were under their control. And if they did, the Anunnaki almost always succeeded in maintaining that control and oversight.

However, there was a prophecy that Anmael and his father, Anu, feared. The human race on earth will be visited by its future self, and in this visitation seven Oracles will be constructed on earth. This Oracle will be the mouthpieces to the future of humanity known in the universe as the Wing Makers. This Oracle will enable them to speak to their younger selves and assist them in their quest to break free from their state of separateness so that they can become a species that achieves wholeness. Equality. Unity.

He watched the Candidate answer the Inspector's questions. Anmael liked the way Gulhab worked - direct and purposeful. Just when he thought the Candidate was rejected, he heard the code he'd been waiting hundreds of years for: the Royal Star.

Anmael zoomed in on the hologram and replayed the section once more. He watched Hugelitod's eyes carefully. "We'll see if you're the one we've been waiting for. We'll see," Anmael whispered.

His finger pressed the button. As he waited, his curved, three-inch-long claw circled gracefully around the knob.

"Yes, Your Highness," Savlieli said. "How may I serve you?"

"Bring Hugelitod to my dormitory. I want to transpose the gate data to our frequencies and I want to see its image before it arrives."

"I understand, Your Highness. I will execute."

Anmael decided to wait before telling his father about the new Candidate from the land. The challenge of thwarting the efforts of their future enemy - the Wingmakers - was an exciting prospect. Something Anu was undeniably looking forward to, but Anmael wanted the project for himself. It will be his ticket to the royal throne, to the status of being the God of their universe. It was his destiny that only his father could prophesy.

Hugelitod stared. The polished golden walls provided a mirror-like reflection that mesmerized him. He froze in the widened concentration he was mesmerized by as he watched his new body and wondered what kind of creature he would become if he stayed in it.

He was waiting in an extravagant anteroom outside the office that housed the prince of this world he was supposed to meet. He was accompanied by Gulhab, who had already entered the office a few minutes ago and had not yet returned.

Hugelitod wondered what would happen if he simply went out and wandered the streets of this world. Except for his tattoos, he felt he fit in here, even though he was smaller than anyone he had met so far. He couldn't imagine how that race could create such a technology to attract people from another world and place them in a body. It was Divine, and he wondered if these were the Cold Gods Doriah spoke of, how could they overpower them?

A section of the wall - about the size of a door - dematerialized and Gulhab walked through it. "Follow me," he said, waving his mighty arm.

Hugelitod complied and entered a spacious room whose huge windows immediately caught his attention. From the office there was a view of a beautiful turquoise bay, which was lined with golden towers glistening in the dim light of an orange-clay colored sky.

He immediately had the feeling of a tour - powerful and unrelenting. Hugelitod searched for its source. Sitting in the massive chair was a being that was nine feet tall, with dark green skin, a commanding demeanor, and piercing golden eyes that watched him with predatory interest. He wore a white tunic with a gold stripe and a strange mark on his right shoulder. Hugelitod felt vulnerable as he looked at the creature and thought that he might never return to earth, lost in his mind.

Gulhab bowed and slowly retreated. "If you need me for anything, Your Highness, I'll be outside."

The wall closed and Hugelitod was alone with his new investigator.

"Come closer and sit," Anmael said, pointing to a gilded armchair with red cushions. "You are a brave person when you came to this world. Do you know who I am?"

"Yes... Gulhab told me."

"What did he tell you?"

Hugelitod sat down and looked out the window. He tried to avoid direct eye contact. "He said you are Anmael, Prince of the Anunnaki."

"Yes, that's right, that's how I'm known in my world. But my question is, do you know who I am in your world?"

Hugelitod shuddered at the strange experience of watching Anmael speak and then seeing him stop and finish the rest of the sentence in his head. The words: ... in your world - were not spoken, they were delivered psychically. Hugelitod sat uncomfortably in his chair and tried to regain his composure. "I don't know if you are even known in our world, but my studies were apparently insufficient."

Gulhab was right about his communication skills as he found it much easier to express the thoughts that were in his mind.

"Will you agree that few on your planet have not heard of the Son of God?" Anmael asked.

Hugelitod nodded. "You say your father is God?"

Anmael stood up and walked over to the wall full of windows. "What you see - what you suppose you see - is a world of mountains, storm, water, buildings, life. Now watch - I can change the view with just a thought."

The scene outside instantly changed to a scene of endless silky black punctuated by swirling galaxies and silver starlight. "Who but God could do such a thing?"

Hugelitod stood up and went to the window. He hesitantly touched the glass, as if he was afraid he might fall into it abyss. "This is shocking. Then this is heaven?"

"No," Anmael replied. "This is our world, the world of the Gods. Heaven is a world of people, at least the good ones. We are completely separate. Very different. Gods have power and abilities that humans cannot understand. Humans have faults and weaknesses that we Gods can hardly imagine."

There was a long silence as Anmael stared off into space. He was surprised that Hugelitod wasn't more talkative. Other Candidates hardly controlled their language in his presence. They asked everything possible about his Godhead and his power.

In the middle of the room was a column of golden light that was about nine feet in diameter. Anmael stood in it and beckoned Hugelitod to join him. "You'll like that. Don't worry."

Hugelitod stood inside the beam and immediately felt warmth and a sense of ecstasy, connection, clarity and most of all - oneness. The feeling of being part of a powerful group.

"Despite what you may have heard about us from your friend Doriah, we are not distant or untouchable Gods. My father and I love humanity and care for it, nurture its faith and place it in the light that is our light."

"Do you like the feeling?" Anmael asked.

Hugelitod felt indescribably better, in all the ways an individual can feel: satisfied, hopeful, happy, even blessed. Hugelitod nodded at Anmael's question and closed his eyes to soak up the experience to the fullest. He tuned into the spell and wished it would never end.

After what seemed like ten minutes, he opened his eyes to see Anmael who had moved quietly to his chair and seemed to be waiting for him.

"Get out of that light for a while," Anmael said. "I want to show you something."

Hugelitod reluctantly stepped out of the beam of light. A beautiful three-dimensional object began to materialize in the beam, which was composed of a large downward-pointing triangle, intersected at the bottom by a small upward-pointing triangle.

"This is what we call the Royal Star - the object we have ascertained adorns your back between your shoulders, exactly where we planned him to appear."

"You put it on me? As?"

"We didn't put it on you, we coded it into you. Or rather to your ancestor, more than four hundred generations before your existence."

"As?"

"I'm afraid that if I tell you, you won't understand a word of my interpretation, so I won't waste my time. What is important for you to understand that you are the original Candidate for our mission on earth. You are one of our chosen ones."

"And what does that mean? What am I chosen for?"

Anmael pointed at the beam of light again and the symbol disappeared. "What were you experiencing in that light?"

Hugelitod was immediately overwhelmed with hundreds of words to describe his experience, but in the end he chose only these-different. "Blessing."

"And when you step out of the beam, do you remain in that blessing?"

"No... not really," Hugelitod replied as if he hadn't noticed his disappearance until Anmael pointed it out to him.

"We want you to bring this light to all of humanity."

"But you are Gods, surely you can bring this light to mankind without my help."

"That would require us to incarnate as humans and we don't do that. You have experienced our method of bringing our chosen ones into our world and activating their spiritual mission on the planet they are incarnated on. Each of our chosen ones will find our gate because it is encoded in it. It is impossible to resist our call."

"So there are others like me?"

"There have been hundreds of you since we decided to cultivate human life on earth. But you, you are a very specific Candidate. You remove the veils that shrouded our reality and prevented us from revealing our true selves.

You will bring this light to humanity and we will make you our greatest instrument of this change. Isn't that what you want?"

"What changes?"

"Karnomen is old and will soon die. You are the only Initiate who can take over the Church and reform it with our permission. It is your destiny to bear our mark. If you oppose this mission, you will find no other. This is the way we made you."

"What do you mean I can't find any other mission?"

"Did you ever see a goldsmith who took a beautiful gold ring that had been set aside by its owner and melted it down a shapeless piece of metal?"

"Yes, I know," replied Hugelitod, understanding Anmael's intention. "You are threatening to kill me."

"No, I'm just explaining how you were designed. You will kill yourself if you are unable to do what you are meant to do. This is true for all people who have the mission of the Chosen. They will find a way to destroy themselves - some cleverly devised disguise for their own suicide, but in our eyes, we really know what it is. On a deeper level it is... your last breath."

Hugelitod felt a pull in his head that came from some unknown force. He wished he could return to the beam of light that was only a few feet away and forget the weight of their conversation.

"You know how seductive that light is," Anmael said. "You can be its bearer and bring it to humanity as such in a way that has never been done before."

"And what kind of way is that?"

"Humanity is enclosed in a box - in a bounded infinity. They listen to their Oracles, their masters, their teachers and follow them blindly. You must replace this with our offering, and free humanity from the spell of lower minds. Once that is done, we can bring light into your world. The real truth about who your Gods are. When humanity knows this, it will live in the light of blessing and in the light of our love." Anmael laughed, but Hugelitod sensed it as a superficial mask.

"There is something about the brilliance of a diamond," said Anmael, "especially compared to the dullness of a common stone. Do not wish to be a mere stone, Hugelitod, for if you do, you will find your death in a thousand ways. Join us."

Anmael gestured to the beam of light. "Without. Feel that light and imagine every person on earth feeling that light. Imagine how it will change your world. How order and cohesion will reign over it, how it will be as one body under the control of its Gods. Is this not what your Masters envisioned?"

Hugelitod stepped into the beam of light and stood there with his eyes closed. He felt the blessing of the eternal elixir. It was a sense of connection with a superior intelligence and understanding that he could relax into that intelligence and allow it to guide him, to be him, to live for him. It was complete and utter fulfillment. It was the essence of surrender.

After a few minutes he stepped out of the beam of light and opened his eyes. "How do I bring this light to earth?"

Anmael laughed at the question. "Everything has a center, even light, even the Gods. We are waiting to be reintroduced to our creation on your planet. We have guided you, our creation, to our center to perfect you as stewards of Earth and potentially other planets in the distant future.

"In our world we have a saying: he who controls the center controls the whole. Light is our center. We wish it to be the center of humanity as well. You will bring our light to the earth, to its people, but not like this ray of light, because it is too intense for human bodies - it would destroy you."

"What can replace this light?" Hugelitod asked.

"A new center must be created on earth."

"I don't understand."

"The church is the center. Her power is our power. This power is the basis for light to enter your world. We will gradually bring the light into your world, increasing its intensity as your human bodies adapt to its power. We will do it through you. You are the one to lead this change. You must immediately replace Karnomen. That is part of your mission."

"Replace him?"

"Don't feign your innocence. You know exactly what I mean. You are the new High Priest. We chose you."

"I can't just replace Karnomen," replied Hugelitod, "and take over the leadership of the Church. My Co-Initiates will not accept me. There are others who are more deserving in their eyes."

Anmael stepped into the beam of light and beckoned Hugelitod to enter as well. Without hesitation, Hugelitod entered and immediately a sense of empowerment and connection began to flow through him.

"You will be given powers," said Anmael, "which will make it evident that you are our chosen one. Maybe Karnomen will even step down when he sees your power. He will know that you were in our presence. If he chooses to cling to his power, you must remove him. We give you only ten of your earthly days to make this change. Then everything will be taken from you and your mission will turn to dust and you will be like a common stone - dull and lifeless."

"What abilities will I have that will be so obvious to the Initiates that they will support me in the position of High Priest?"

"We cannot say for sure what abilities will penetrate your physical body. You will discover them when you return to earth. But they will be revealed, for you are our chosen one and we activate you for our mission even now as you stand in this light. Close your eyes."

Anmael stepped outside and the beam of light changed color. Patterns of codes, symbols of geometry began to flow through him, penetrating Hugelitod's body and mind. He felt peace come over him and for a moment he almost lost consciousness. Then it was over and he felt authority come powerfully into him. It was as if a mark had been placed upon him - a mark of power that mankind had not seen for a very long time.

Anmael pulled Hugelitod out of the light and put his arm around his shoulders. Then he walked with it to the far wall of his office. As they got closer, a door materialized. "Ten days you will know how to work with our gate. Don't tell Doriah because the Gods don't trust him. He is a pawn of the Oracle and nothing more. This makes him the enemy of our world. Let him pass through the gate to us, and we will do our best to strengthen him for our cause. But he is not the Candidate and can never be fully trusted. Do you understand?"

Hugelitod nodded, unable to put his agreement into words. His mind was overwhelmed, absorbed in a way presence and absorbed the brightness that his destiny embraced. He suddenly felt exhausted.

"Come back to us in five days and give us a progress report," Anmael said. "Don't let your Gods down."

As they entered the hall, Gulhab bowed to Anmael.

"Restore our friend to fullness," Anmael said before walking back into his office.

Hugelitod followed Gulhab down the corridors to a room where an automated transport cab was waiting to take them back to Synthetica. Gulhab walked silently forward, occasionally glancing back at Hugelitod who looked like someone who had lost his reality. Gulhab felt sorrow for a man who must return to his ma-

poor body and small world and fight primitives who have no idea who their Gods are or where or how they live.

Chapter 62. Offspring of Darkness

Kamil walked for more than two hours without knowing where he was. He was completely lost, with no way out. He heard the whisper of water nearby, followed by its bubbling sound. The creek was about fifteen feet wide. He slid down the steep bank and almost fell into its calm waters. He needed water to drink and bathe. Before taking a drink of water, he put down the uniform he got from the laundry and took off his torn clothes.

The night air was cool, but the water was even colder. He waded through the stream until he found a pool that was about four feet deep. He immersed himself in it. It felt good to wash the dirt and blood off my body. He took some gravel from the bottom of the creek in his hands and scrubbed hard. When he was done, he examined his legs and confirmed that his wounds were healed and only a few scars remained.

Kamil remembered the voice he heard in the doctor's office urging him to find Simon. He put on his new uniform and buried the old one in the sand, in a shallow hole he had dug under the bank. Kamil knew he should be tired, but he felt strong and cold after his bath. So he decided to run again and increase the distance between him and his pursuers. He wished they would forget about him completely.

* * * *

Doriah was half asleep when he heard Hugelitod choking. The gate was still active for the full fifteen minutes, what was gone But Hugelitod suddenly regained consciousness on this side, choking and panting.

Doriah jumped to the rescue and shut down the gate. "Are you alright my friend?"

Hugelitod nodded but was still coughing. Doriah took a bottle of water with him and now offered it to Hugelitod. His mess- but the doe was so strong that he could neither hold it nor drink.

"I'm so dazed..." "A side

effect of using the gate," Doriah assured him. "It will take a while. Glad to see you back."

"How long have I been gone?"

"About fifteen minutes."

Hugelitod finally calmed his coughing enough to take a quick drink of water, but then started coughing again.

"Any other side effects you forgot to tell me about?"

Doriah laughed. "You probably haven't slept well in a few days and your sense of time will seem oddly off."

Hugelitod's eyes were glassy from coughing. He tried to sit up with Doriah's help.

"Get some more water," Doriah urged, "and then try to stand up. It will be good if you take a little walk and you will feel your body again."

Hugelitod drank some more and then stood up with Doriah's help. For the first time, Doriah stepped back and looked at Hugelitoda. He sensed some new presence. He bent down, picked up the candle and blew it out.

"Why are you doing this?" Hugelitod asked in the complete darkness of the chamber. "I can't see."

Doriah didn't answer, but Hugelitod thought he heard a sigh.

Chapter 63. Touch of Eternity

Maia woke up with a start. She had the feeling that she heard something, perhaps the snapping of a twig, perhaps the crackle of the dying fire. She slowly sat up and looked around, scanning the forest hidden in the cloak of darkness. She looked at Simon, who was sleeping comfortably against a log.

She listened with every part of her body and then heard a soft crunch about twenty feet to her right. Her experience with the snake unsettled her, and from that night she always slept with a sense of unease.

Their campsite was surrounded by white pines and thick undergrowth that made it impossible to see her beyond ten feet.

Then she heard a small voice, similar to the praise of the Creator. One she had been waiting to hear since she was a young girl. "If I were a man with one fault, it would be that I have no way of telling you what's in my heart, but I have a flower for you and I'll let it speak for itself."

"Oh, Kamil, it's you," Maia breathed, jumping to her feet and running after the voice she heard. They embraced without barriers in the thick undergrowth and let the leaves touch them as if they were enveloped by the arms of the forest.

"I missed you," Kamil said.

Maia stepped back to look at him, then took his hand and dragged him to their camp. "I have to get on to see you," said Maia. "Are you really okay? Is that really you?"

Kamil was laughing, his eyes shining in a way Maia had never seen before.

In the midst of the commotion, Simon woke up from his sleep and rubbed his eyes. He wasn't sure what was going on. But then he put his things together and smiled. He nodded at Kamil. "How did you find us?"

"I ran and smelled the smoke from your fire."

"Did he run?" Maia asked with interest. "How can you run with your legs?"

"More importantly, what are you running from?" Simon asked. "Should we pack up?"

Kamil shook his head and turned to Simon. "That's a long story, and I'm not sure I can explain it at all," Kamil said, "but if someone is chasing me, they're somewhere far behind me, and I doubt they'll be able to track me."

Kamil hugged Maia and kissed her freely. He pulled out a yellow star shaped herb from his shirt pocket and handed it to Maia. "Sorry, it's a little wrinkled and late."

Maia was still in a bit of shock. She absorbed Kamil's new found health, freedom, energy and presence. The transformation was so radical - so different from her vision - that some part of her wondered if Kamil was real. She tried to come to terms with what the Oracle had told her about Kamil. She wouldn't even be surprised if his path deviated from her own. His mission - as the Great Portal - can easily separate them from each other, because it will absorb him.

Kamil took Maia's face in his hands. "Let's go for a walk."

Maia, like a young girl, subservient to her father, turned to Simon. "You don't mind, Simon?"

"Absolutely not, everything is fine," said Simon, waving a dismissive hand, "you have my blessing. I will go to sleep again, but expect a full description in the morning. Take a hot stick with you in case you want your own fire."

They walked together into the starry night, among junipers and white pines. They held hands and Maia wondered, if it is the same Kamil. He looked so different.

"You'd tell me if I was in a dream, wouldn't you?" she asked.

"Of course."

"I feel that I am."

"You're not dreaming, Maia. I'll tell you everything I remember. Let's find a quiet place where we can talk." Kamil held the burning stick like a torch. "And we'll use that stick for a good cause, too. It's a little chilly tonight."

They had been walking for about five minutes when they found a grove of white pine trees sprouting from the ground. Kamil made a pile of pine needles and bordered it with moss. He placed a red ember of a burning stick in the middle and lit a modest fire by blowing gently on it.

Maia watched him with great interest. It was like she was seeing him for the first time. "I spoke with By an oracle and she mentioned you."

"I didn't know the Oracle was a girl," laughed Kamil, adding some larger branches to the emerging fire.

"Don't you want to know what she said?"

Kamil shook his head. "I want to hear everything, but first let me tell you something."

Maia moved closer to Kamil, who sat down by the fire. "Since I met you, I see everything in my life changing. There are so many changes that I can't keep up with them. But now I have found a way to step out of the door of my heart and into this larger world. I don't know if I deserve this expansion, but it came to me without me asking for it."

Kamil paused and searched Maia's eyes. "I got used to feelings that I couldn't even imagine two weeks ago. I would argue that they don't exist. And now I'm here and I feel it... these emotions that have a thousand voices. But when I listen to them carefully, they all tell me the same thing... love her."

Maia held her index finger to Kamil's lips. "Shhh. You don't have to say it with words. Maia kissed him and then they laid back together, entwined like vine and tree. They didn't have a single thought, they didn't speak a single word. Instead, they were joined in the warm velvet of one body and one mind. They entwined into each other, as if in a deep magical connection of worlds. They shared each look, each touch, with a weightless soul.

They were the chosen ones - they became the only manifestation that melted the shadowy earth into a golden soil, where nothing was from calculation. No whiff of shame to blindly obey. They were coiled in each other until the other was gone. Everything revolved endlessly in their united loneliness, shining in that restless movement of lovers who penetrate to the divine partner who created them. So deeply hidden. So rarely found.

Chapter 64. Side effects

An uneasy feeling grew in the darkness of Hugelitod's chamber. "Why don't you answer me?"

"Since I found this gift within myself," Doriah explained, "to see the energy fields of living beings, I never saw anyone who didn't have one."

"What do you mean?" Hugelitod asked.

"You have no energy field," Doriah whispered with a long sigh. He struck a match and lit the candle he still held in his hand. A warm glowing golden light spilled over the carvings on the walls.

"Perhaps you have lost your gift," said Hugelitod.

"No, I see my own... you've changed. What did they do to you?"

Feigning dizziness, Hugelitod sat down on the ground. "I was interrogated by a creature called Gulhab. He dismissed me as unworthy... actually his actual words were - you're just a wayward assistant who traveled a great distance to waste our time."

Hugelitod cleared his throat for a moment before smiling at the memory.

"Did you mention the Royal Star?" Doriah asked, a look of concern on his face.

Hugelitod shook his head. "I had no chance at all."

"This is bad... this is very bad," Doriah whispered, lost in his worries. "You have to go back and explain sorry you have the Royal Star. It will change their reaction, I assure you."

"I'm not going back, Doriah," Hugelitod replied, his eyes serious and blazing with determination. "They want you back, not me."

"Do they want me to come back to them? Did they use my name?"

Hugelitod nodded and remained silent.

"I still don't understand how you lost your energy field... it's so weird..." "Maybe it's just a temporary thing. Another side effect. I'm not worried about that."

Doriah came over to Hugelitod and placed a hand on his forehead, then grabbed his wrist and felt for a pulse. "The time- Well, at least you have a pulse. Maybe you're right. Maybe it's just a side effect and your field will come back soon."

"Why do the Cold Gods want me back?"

"I guess they feel in you a much more capable ally than in me."

"I am neither an ally nor more capable. You have the Royal Star."

Hugelitod continued to cough, his body shaking uncontrollably. "I need to get back to my room," he said between coughs. "I don't feel well."

Doriah held out a hand to help him to his feet. "I'll help you up the stairs."

"While you rest," Doriah said, "I'll think about our next course of action. I don't think I want to go back there."

Doriah helped Hugelitod up the stairs, all the while wondering if he could believe Hugelitod's explanation. It was all so weird. His staggering, coughing, no energy field, and being rejected by the Cold Gods... it was all so strange. Maybe I was wrong, Doriah thought. Maybe I'm the one they want.

* * * *

Kamil was looking for blueberries. The morning light was still weak, but it blossomed every moment. He bent down as he felt a shadow run over him in it. He looked up and saw a couple of crows flashing above the treetops, shouting their cawing like the trumpets of evil. Maia was somewhere else, but he couldn't remember where. Her absence comforted him in some strange way, for he felt a foreboding. His stomach rumbled as he felt a pair of fierce eyes staring at him. He couldn't sense where they were.

He yelled a warning at Maia, but his voice was empty and he could only keep silent in frustration.

Everything around him slowed down. The perfect silence became heavier and heavier until it caught everything in its presence. It was like the feeling of being in a photograph without borders. Then he heard the sound of the rifle clicking into readiness-

but before he could turn around, he felt a sharp gash on his back that exploded inside him, and he fell face down to the ground.

He tried to raise his head, but all he could see was the legs of some mysterious being kneeling in front of him. "It's time to return. In this world your work is done and now another calls you."

Kamil tried to speak, but his mouth was covered in blood. But his mind was clear. "Why do I have to leave? I only wish for one thing, to stay with Maia."

The creature was strangely bright. She looked sadly at Kamil. "The portal you're restoring is like a bridge that spans dimensions. The pillar in this world is complete, but the pillar on the other side rests in the secret realms, waiting to be brought into reality. Your soul will not radiate knowledge until you are there. There is still more to be done, but not in this world."

"What about Maia?" Kamil asked with a solemn thought.

"Maia will be under our protection, as she always has been."

"You promise me that?" Kamil sent his thought with all the strength he could find in himself, from every gathering- another piece of eternity that kept growing inside him.

The light being stood up. "You have our word."

Kamil knew this being of light, but could not think of a name, form, or identity to define it.

"Until the last tenderness of her breath? Promise me that." Kamil insisted again. Those were his last thoughts before he slipped into a new world where he walked even deeper, as if carving his way into the spark that floated above the last sky.

Kamil's eyes blinked open. Maia looked at him. She was lying on her side with her head cradled in her hand.

"You had a dream," she said softly, stroking his hair gently.

Kamil sat up and grabbed Maia's arm with sudden intensity.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

Kamil remained silent and remembered his dream. He stared blankly into the depths of the forest, like someone whose fate had been revealed by otherworldly hands.

"Did you have a bad dream?" Maia asked, sitting across from him and watching him. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Kamil's eyes filled with tears as the whole memory seeped into his heart. He pulled Maia to him and held her tight.

"Everything is fine, Kamil. It was just a dream. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. I promise you that. I love you."

Kamil felt as if the demon had grabbed his soul and dragged it deeper into its lair. Everything he could do was to hold Maia, but he knew the sacrifice was necessary. "I'm fine. I think it was just a bad dream..."

Kamil looked around. "No relics of Simon?"

"No," Maia replied. "Can I go take a quick bath? I know there is a stream not far from here."

"Sure, I'll get some breakfast and then we'll go to Simon's camp and wake him up and eat together."

"And then straight to the Oracle," Maia said with a smile. "That?"

"Straight to the Oracle," he said, mirroring Mai's glee. "Go ahead, I'll take care of putting out the fire and find us some food. I'll meet you here in fifteen minutes. Good?"

"I'm craving a mushroom omelette," Maia said with an embarrassed smile.

"I'll see what I can find," replied Kamil. He stood up and helped Mai to her feet before giving her a tight squeeze. He wanted her to come with him so he would never lose sight of her. He considered going after her, but he knew what would happen. Nothing can change the bright rays of his soul. Not even the embrace of the arms of the one he loves, her slim form pulsing against his body, can save him. His body was shaking.

* * * *

It was early in the morning when Sothmen and Monsey filled their flasks with fresh water and cooled their faces in the stream with cold water. They hoped it would clear them up.

Monsey pointed about twenty feet downstream. "Do you see them? There are traces."

The two men quickly moved to the spot.

"He is alone. He's barefoot," Monsey pointed at the footprints with his rifle. "I bet that bastard was taking a bath."

"Okay, and let's look here," Sothmen said, digging a torn uniform out of a pit in the sand. "Either he undressed naked, or he got a new uniform. Let's go."

* * * *

Hugelitod didn't sleep all night, but he wasn't tired. He felt a little ashamed that he had lied to Doriah. But he had no choice if he wanted to think about his next course of action without interference from others. And that was what he wished for. All night he thought about only one thing: which way should he go?

Doriah told him he had no energy field, but he felt great now. However, there was a quiet part of him that he listened to less and less. This part wanted to run as fast as his legs would allow him.

But there was nowhere to hide. It was clear to a larger part of him that he knew too much and believed Anmael's warning that if he deviated from his mission he would die. And all that he was will be lost.

He was unique. He had the Royal Star. The gods of mankind chose him to bring their light to earth. How could Doriah understand that? Or Karnomen? They were potential obstacles that he would have to deal with. But he finds a way to turn them into his allies. If they love the Church as much as he does, how could they resist?

He wondered what his abilities would be. How the Gods equipped him to prove his origin and worth. In his entire life, he never dreamed of fame or power. And now she was here, in his own body and mind. He felt himself awakening, like a rearing giant rubbing his eyes in the morning light. Unification reigned in him. Something overcame his doubts. His small-mindedness. His belief in the path of humility. And he liked it.

Chapter 65. From Gold to Stone and to Light

Maia took off her torn blouse and pants and put them in the water to give them a good wash. She sang a tune to herself and was happy to find Kamil in such good health. She was only interested in one thing.

She couldn't explain how he could leave the guard supply station and how his body could be healed so quickly. She felt like he was hiding something from her, like he thought she was too fragile to handle the truth.

She was in love and that was the main thing that mattered. It didn't happen the way she imagined it would. He wasn't as educated as she expected him to be, but there was something about Kamil that could never be learned from books. There was something natural about him. His spirit radiated from the depths of the earth, compressed into a massive body and simple knowledge.

It was still early in the morning and the air was warm from the first rays of the sun. The heat created a fine mist that hung over the stream and its banks. Maia finished washing her blouse and pants, wringing them with all her might.

Then she hung them on a low branch near a standing tree that overhung the stream like an umbrella. It took her a while to submerge herself in the cold water, but she finally did. She tilted her head back and wet her hair.

She didn't have soap, but Simon taught her how to make a substitute from animal fat and wood ash. She used this soap, along with a fine grind of sand from the stream. It wasn't ideal, but it was enough.

The morning was perfectly calm, although she could hear some crows cawing in the distance. When she scrubbed into clean her body, a faint scent of pine wafted towards her.

Then she heard it. Shot from a rifle. A single shot rang out in the distance - maybe a hundred yards. Kamil! Mai's heart skipped a beat and her body snapped to attention as her mind considered what to do. She picked up her dress from the branch and clumsily put on her pants and then her shoes. Her mind whirled in a thousand different directions. It could have been Simon, she thought. Or perhaps a hunter tired of crows. Or a warning shot. Chance.

Something in her heart felt fear so cold that she couldn't move for a moment. She started running, holding the basket in her hands. When she got to where she heard the gunshot, she slowed down. She watched and listened for some signs. Then she heard voices. She stopped when she saw movement about fifty feet to her left.

At first she was crouched behind a tree, then quietly climbed it to get a better view of the scene. They were voices she didn't recognize, and if they fired a rifle, she must be as careful as she wished to find Kamil and Simon. She quickly climbed to a better vantage point, where she saw two men - guards, she judged by their uniforms.

They were looking at the ground and poking at something that couldn't be seen. She thought she heard them say, "we'll let him."

Then the two men looked around and Maia pressed herself tightly against the branch, pressing her body against the rough textured bark. She was silent except for the steady stream of tears that dripped from her eyes. She knew what happened. She wanted to scream. She wanted to go back in time and change that morning. She wanted to change the world and remove guns, hatred and pettiness, abuse from it. But she could only cry, silently and alone.

She tucked her shirt under her. Her lean, muscular back was still wet, beads of water running down the valley between her shoulder blades. They flowed like a stream, down the crook of her spine. There, in the middle of her back,

was the only inhabitant of otherwise fair, fair skin - a birthmark. Two asymmetrical triangles, locked in each other's embrace, like an hourglass that emptied more time than it could hold.

Maia stayed on the branch and cried softly for about twenty minutes. The two guards left almost immediately after she arrived. But she was afraid to leave the tree and look at Kamil's body. She was pulling on her blouse when she heard rustling downstairs. She looked over there. She was afraid that the guards might be walking around, so she froze.

Simon looked up with a serious face and sad eyes. "You can get down, kid. They have already left. I followed them for almost a mile to make sure."

Maia was still in shock, but Simon's soothing voice was all she needed to hear. She quickly climbed down and then sank into Simon's arms like a small child to its father. He stood there with her in silence for a few minutes before gently tapping her shoulder. "It's time," he said.

The two carefully walked to where Kamil's body rested, like a statue that had fallen face down. His face was turned away from them. His left hand was outstretched as if holding a torch, and on the ground beside his hand were scattered raspberries in a jumble of clusters. Simon stopped about ten feet from the body and left Maia to continue on her own. The sun had finally come out and the fog was lifting to bring in more light. Kamil's hair was disheveled. Maia knelt down to run her fingers through them. She took a small note from his head as if he was being rude.

His eyes were closed and Maia thought he looked calm.

She turned to Simon. Tears rolled down her cheeks. "From today I will no longer believe in God! There is no God to let Kamil die at the hands of those murderers!"

Simon nodded almost imperceptibly. He stood and listened. He knew there were no words he could use to calm her down. The forces that flowed through Maia were primal, mysterious, and powerful, and Simon knew they could not be contained by her or anyone else.

Maia turned back to Kamil, wishing she wouldn't scream in his presence. "Nothing's holding you down... not even me," she whispered, her voice cracked in strained tones and irregular breathing. "I'm suddenly so lost..."

Maia sobbed as Simon came closer and touched her arm. "We should go back to the Oracle, but we'll bury him first. I'm going to find a suitable place to honor him. I won't go far."

As Simon pulled away, Maia turned and grabbed his arm. She stared into his large green-blue eyes. "I want to go with you."

Chapter 66. The Claw Behind the Door

As Karnomen walked across the monastery grounds, he felt a breath of cool air. He felt a pair of eyes watching him. He looked over his shoulder to see his ex-assistant walking briskly about thirty feet behind him. "Ah, Hugelitod. Are you on your way to Doriah and your spirit friends?"

Hugelitod smiled wryly and walked with Karnomen down the cobbled path. "Do you have a moment, Your Eminence?"

Karnomen's face contorted slightly as he looked up at the sky. It was as if he counted his time according to the position of the sun. "I only have a minute. In two days the king will be here with his retinue, so you can imagine how busy I am. What do you need?"

Hugelitod leaned toward him. "Is it true that there are seven Oracles on earth?" he whispered.

Karnomen almost sighed, but controlled his reaction, making it look like he was just distracted by the sunlight. He gestured to a bench that was in the shade of an apple tree only ten feet from their path. "I need some ne-chat to rest my legs, let's sit here for a few minutes."

The two sat down on the bench, and Karnomen's expression seemed distant. He stared straight ahead, haughty and slightly tired. He hardly noticed Hugelitod.

"Perhaps it is true," said Karnomen after a long pause, "that there are more Oracles, though I do not know if there are seven. I know of one and that will cease to be our concern very soon." Karnomen looked at Hugelitod indignantly. "Why are you asking me that?"

"If you wished, how would you like to destroy them?" Hugelitod asked.

Several priests passed by, bowing in reverence towards Karnomen. He in return offered them zero. Karnomen's eyes narrowed in confusion. "Why do you ask me such things? What happened to you?"

"Do you know the answer?" Hugelitod insisted.

Karnomen knew something had happened to Hugelitod. He acted like his equal - something that even Torem never allowed himself to do. Karnomen glared at Hugelitod with the intention of intimidating him. "You'd better mind your own business. The Oracle, the real Oracle, is no longer our focus. And all others that may exist on this planet are equally insignificant. Trying to destroy them would be a waste of time and energy. I suggest you seek out Doriah and begin your day's work."

Karnomen tried to get to his feet, but his body remained sitting as if paralyzed. He looked at Hugelitod with fear and tried to speak but could not make any sound.

Hugelitod stood directly in front of Karnomen, looking down at him. "Oracles are a threat to our supremacy. You've just made your position clear. You fear them and lack the intellectual capacity to destroy them. I have a plan to silence them and bring new power to the Church. You will either stand aside and let me carry out this plan, or you will guarantee to carry it out under my direction and let me act as your Second Initiate.

The choice is yours. I'll give you a minute to decide."

Karnomen seemed to freeze in place. Only his eyes seemed capable of movement. They watched Hugelitod with intense fear.

Hugelitod saw his new power take hold, akin to a great snake rising against a weak mouse, trapped in a corner of a doorless room. All he could think about was his manipulation and then it reached everyone and controlled him. Especially to those who manipulate others. They are the easiest victims. Karnomen was proof of this theory.

"You gave the Oracle to Levernon - why? So that you can retire here in the comfort of your independent life state? Levernon can use the Oracle against us in ways you can't imagine. But I do."

Hugelitod put his hand behind his back. "That's our little secret. If you tell anyone, if you try to conspire against me, I assure you that your last days will be counted on one hand, and during these last days you will lose all your senses, one day at a time. The sixth day will take the form of the punishment of our Gods, the Anunnaki, and will cut your soul into a thousand pieces."

Hugelitod took a few steps back and bent at the waist to look directly into Karnomen's eyes. Nemi-lost stared at them. Do I have your approval?

Karnomen was released from Hugelitod's control, but he heard the question roaring inside his head with an authority he had never felt before. He knew quite undeniably that the person in front of him was no longer human. The King's Star, the prophecy, was coming true right before his eyes, and he had no choice but to connect with it. He understood that. A certain part of him, small as it was, even longed for it.

Karnomen nodded his head. His voice sputtered as he regained the ability to speak. "You have my word. I appoint you Second Initiate, but you need to convince the Order of your merits. I won't be able to convince them without something that clearly demonstrates your... authority."

Hugelitod laughed. "The very fact that you're naming me Second Initiate is all the demonstration they'll need. But if they refuse to accept me, I will take care of their opposition. I'm not afraid of that."

Hugelitod stepped back with a slight nod. "I will now leave you to your busy preparations." He paused for a moment and then approached Karnomen. "I expect this announcement by the end of today. Summon the Order tonight at seven o'clock. I'll meet you at the observatory. I prefer this room."

Karnomen sat on a bench and watched as the most powerful man went harmlessly on his way like a simple priest. For several minutes Karnomen considered his options until he finally understood that he had only one: to follow Hugelitod. Death suddenly seemed far away.

Chapter 67. Inside Forgiveness

The forest glowed in the twilight. The shadows became shepherds watching over the fading light. The fragile leaves were draped in jade-colored, velvety moss. The mottled clay resisted the tracks of any creature. Maia felt that this was a place that reflected her mood, except for one thing. Fireflies, similar to galactic dust, fluttered among the branches, stirring up hope with their unlearned ways.

That morning, Maia and Simon buried Kamil's body and walked in silence towards the Oracle for the rest of the day. They were happy to increase the distance between themselves and Kamil's killers. Simon found a good campsite and offered to prepare their meager provisions. Maia wanted to be alone and decided to find a place where she could collect her feelings and thoughts.

Her body was stiff and her mind was obsessed with the senselessness of Kamila's killers. Under the pine canopy, in the spreading forest, a mist rose from the ground like a veil. She heard the rumble of thunder in the far distance and felt that rain would be a fitting companion to complement her mood. The massive trees around her loomed in the last sigh of light. She sat under the biggest pine and listened to the crickets, watched the fireflies and wondered why the world had gone mad.

Then she slammed her hand on the ground. "Why are you so indifferent!" She screamed. "You don't care so much about human life that you don't want it to die?"

Her tears flowed unceasingly as she felt the cruel cutting by an indifferent God. "All my life I was told to trust you, to trust you, to love you, to surrender to you. And now, for one day I experienced love and you, you take it away from me..."

Maia grew despondent as she continued to pound her furious fists into the hard ground. "I hate you Bo-that! I hate you! I hate you!"

Through her tears, she could see the world staring back at her angrily - it was ordinary, indifferent, as if indifference oozed from every leaf, stalk, branch and stone. Her body relaxed and her breathing calmed. She lay down on the ground as if her will to live had disappeared. Distant thunder echoed again. The air was stuffy and humid.

Maia heard soft footsteps. She opened her eyes to see Simon's purple robed body towering over her. He was carrying something. You sat down next to her. "I washed his shirt. It's not perfect, but it might be worth keeping if you want it."

Maia sat down and leaned her back against the tree. "Thank you."

Simon has embraced his new surroundings. "You picked a good spot."

"I think it actually chose me." Maia wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her chin in the valley between her knees.

"It will be a better camp than the one I chose."

"Can I take his shirt?" Maia asked quietly.

Simon handed Kamil's shirt to Maia. "It's still wet and a little wrinkled."

Maia took her shirt and placed it on her knees. Then she rested her chin on it. It was wrinkled and she was on it she felt comfortable. "Thank you for washing her, Simon."

He nodded. "You know, it's perfectly normal to feel hatred under circumstances like these. But remember from-letting go... to anyone, including God, when you feel you are ready."

"How can I be prepared? I feel so angry and depressed. How can I just let it go? The guard murdered my darling, so I hate the guard. The ranger works for the Church, so I hate the Church. The church works for God, so I hate God. In a way, everyone is guilty."

"It was allowed."

"What was allowed?" Maia asked raising her head.

"Kamil's death. She was on leave."

"By God? The church? Until? Who allowed her?"

"The best answer I can give you is that Kamil allowed it. And not for a reason, because he had to, no-not because it was predetermined by some higher power, but because he chose you."

Maia looked confused. "Are you saying he died because of me?"

Simon let out a long sigh and wished he could go back in time and rephrase his words. "Maia, you are not an ordinary woman. You are the one who will protect us. The one who sees through us. You're the one I've been waiting for to bring us together. When He clears the way to Oneness for all of us who are ready. Kamil's deepest part knew it.

He was here to serve you. He was not the Great Portal. He was the one who opened the door to the Great Portal. Large The portal is within you and is being assembled in your womb right now as we speak."

Mai's face contorted. "Are you saying I'm pregnant?"

Simon nodded.

"How do you know that?" Maia asked with tears in her eyes. "How would you know?"

"I just know," Simon announced. "I can't explain how I know."

"Is it a premonition?"

"If you like to call it that, then it's a premonition."

There was a long silence. Somewhere in the distance thunder rumbled to the staccato chirping of crickets.

"Simon?"

"Yes."

"If what you're saying is true, that I'm supposed to bring us together and all the other things you mentioned, how am I supposed to do it the way I am? There will be some transformation that will give me a special power or... I don't know what. I feel so incapable..."

"Maybe those powers are growing in you."

Maia looked at Simon and smiled. She hoped his hunch was right. "I forgive God. I wish I had never said those things... I hope she forgives me."

"My dear Maia, there was never a time when God needed to forgive you. You're always the one in need forgive yourself."

"If that's true, how can I forgive myself?"

"This is a complicated matter. First you need to understand that the Original Source, our Creator, is also us.

Imagine that the Prime Source is alone in the universe of its mind - not the universe as we have it now, with planets and stars. In this meta-universe, the Prime Source was a single cell of consciousness that split into two cells. The first cell remained an observer. She remained the one who observes and learns from her creation. The other, the new cell, continued to divide into innumerable forms and experienced a dimensionality or field of vibration that is material, concrete. This cell continued to sink into polarities and separateness."

"This second cell is still connected to the first. They are a single being, they have the same composition and the same genetic core. But as the second cell divides into a multitude of forms in a multitude of vibrational realities, so these forms evolve through space-time with different perspectives, different abilities, ideas and beliefs.

These differences further separate them, so that the separation is felt even more intensely."

"In this separation within the second cell exists humanity, along with many other species and beings. Even if I take only our human family, within it this separation happens again and again. It will happen as long as there are people who are suspicious of anyone who acts or looks a little different than themselves. And now - if in this cascade of separation you will be able to roll everything back to its origin, then we all come from the same source - the Primordial Source. Everyone is the Original Source, even if a tiny atom of his total Self."

"However, within this tiny atom of Primal Source that you are... that I am... resides the truth of who we really are. It does not live or exist anywhere else. The virtues of the heart, such as understanding, compassion, and forgiveness, must work from this perspective, because without this perspective or context, we cannot really understand, we cannot truly feel gratitude for the oneness that we are. Without it, forgiveness is just a concept you can use mechanically. Of course, it will still have some positive effect. But it will only dampen the fires of guilt and judgment, not cause the transformation of these energies into frequencies of love."

"In the context of who you really are, you can feel yourself moving away from Original Source. How have you moved in this incarnation of yours to inhabit realities where everything is separate, locked in identities that reveal only a tiny part of your divine nature. This is where the fear comes from. This fear then inhabits the vibrational realities of separateness and separation. This is why we slip into a prison suit every morning and exist in separateness, manifest separateness, manifest separateness, live separateness."

"How can one change that?"

Simon sighed. "You must exist in separateness but manifest unity. You do this by understanding who you really are and then applying that understanding to everyone. You must not allow the image of separation to override the basic reality of unity in the way you express your heart intelligence."

Maia listened intently. "Why did Primal Source want to split?"

"Creating out of solitude is a powerful thing. He probably wanted to create a multiverse in which his material forms could interact with each other. By this interaction they will expand the Presence of the Prime Source in the continued expansion of spacetime. The Prime Source will be the maintainer and observer, but will also give creative power to its other half-guilt, the Dimensional."

"Dimensional?"

"That's what I call everyone who is part of the second cell," answered Simon.

"So fear is a virus that invades another cell or at least makes us smaller than we are?" Maia asked.

"There are very powerful beings among the Dimensionals. Among them are also those whom our religious books seriously - but I must add erroneously - called our Gods. These powerful beings have learned how to respond differently to this fear, to be its causative agents and to allow it to flow into the Dimensional populations. They learned how to feed on it - to make it their ally. In a sense, fear became their engine, although they themselves remained beholden to fear itself."

"That makes the prison walls even higher, but that doesn't mean escape is impossible. That's the situation you're coming to, my dear.

You are the person on the chessboard that will create a passageway to Primal Source, at least for those who wish to make that journey."

"But how do I do that?" Maia asked. "How do I create a gateway to the Primal Source? That doesn't make sense to me. You are a much better candidate for that than I am."

"It's not about knowledge or experience," Simon said. "It was never like that. It's about the heart. About how his intelligence is drawn and then expressed through your dimensionality - not just your body. Words, gestures, actions are all part of it, but only a small part. It has much more to do with the invisible parts of you.

With higher vibrational aspects. And you cannot see them with your eyes and can only perceive them vaguely with your mind. However, it is in these levels that your true potential lies."

"How do I make sure I use this power? Am I just not doing mechanical steps?"

Simon nodded encouragingly at her question. "Make sure that your faith is committed to the idea that life is intelligent, meaningful, active, free, creative, unconditioned, and eternally supported by Prime Source. Surrender to the reality that this life will rearrange itself so as not to fail your faith. But it's really about getting to know your faith very deeply, looking into its eyes and really understanding what you believe and why you believe it."

"No one wants to know who he really is, do they?" Maia said, holding Kamil's wrinkled shirt to her chest as if hugging the subtle creature.

"It's not that people don't want to know who they really are," replied Simon, "it's about peeling back the layers, revealing the baits, putting off the masks and rejecting the tempting promises of charlatans... it's a difficult process, you- li Dimensional, who was raised in limitations from birth. The divine muscles are soft from disuse. Humanity wants to awaken, but its desire to awaken has been systematically weakened."

"Do you really believe that I can help strengthen this desire in humanity? I have no practice in any of this.

Actually, I was never a good student. I am a simple young woman. I am much more comfortable with trees than most people. How does that qualify me for anything?"

The wind picked up a bit. Trails of dry lightning filled the sky and for a split second it blazed - into their trees bounded rooms - silver glow.

Simon's nostrils quivered. "I think the rain is coming. So I will be brief with my answer. You're talking about themselves in terms of separateness. Not only separation from the Original Source, but also from itself."

"By myself?"

"Yes, you said you were one term - what is called Maia. But you are a collective of lives, experiences and vibrational realities all synchronized in the symphony of our creation - happening right now. Your identity as Maiy is one of the windows in the room in which your greater Presence lives. But this room is very large, it has hundreds of windows, and each window brings new light, new information into the room of your Presence.

This Presence is different than Dimensional because this Presence is your Primal Source."

"I don't understand Simon."

"Each person is his or her own Original Source. Just as Primordial Source divided itself into the Observer-Creator and the Dimensional-Experiencer, so does each of us divide, but on a much more microscopic level. We imitate our Creator far more than many can imagine. And that's just one example."

"Okay, well, let's just say that I'm more than just this little sliver of a person. So how do I bring this Presence, as you called it, into your Dimensional Self?"

"Only life itself can do that. But your life is one that demands a greater self - your Presence - to came to the fore."

"So it extracts life itself?"

Simon nodded. "Yes."

"So I have to wait?" "Life keeps calling you."

"In what way?" "Life

keeps beckoning you to connect with it through your heart intelligence and its virtues of forgiveness, compassion, understanding, humility, gratitude and bravery. Life is a partner for your development. He is not a passive observer, rather He is your Presence. This Presence enters your human consciousness and urges you to apply what you know - not the facts and words from your head, where they have been placed by other individuals from your world, but the virtues that you instinctively know in your heart."

"The way you respond to the Presence of Life determines the effectiveness and depth of the Presence in your life. you."

Maia beamed. "So when I decide to forgive Kamil's killers and the Church, I activate this Presence and draw it more into my Dimensional World. Is that what you're telling me?"

Simon nodded. "Yes, but it must be done in such a way that you are genuine. Don't rush it, don't procrastinate. It's a balance, and when your heart is ready, it will let you know. You'll know it when it happens. Just like you did with your father when we were burying Joseph."

"How do you know that, Simon? I never mentioned it."

Simon rose to his feet and stretched out his arms. "Just a hunch," he laughed. "How about we have something k something to eat before it starts raining?"

Maia and Simon walked the short distance to their camp and ate a meager meal of boiled roots and some sort of wild berry tea. Simon promised that he would catch some river trout in the morning and that they would have a royal breakfast. As they finished eating, it began to rain softly, but the thunder remained in the distance: an indirect blow, Simon observed. They sat under an ancient white pine whose tough canopy held back the rain. Maia listened to the soft chimes of the rain and Simon's soothing voice enveloping her soul like an invisible, smoldering Presence that spoke through him and gave her hope.

She knew that the spacious place called the heart was her home. She understood that everything could be cured in this place. In the morning they will continue their journey to the Oracle. When her eyelids began to droop, she heard Kamil's voice somewhere inside her. He was saying something she couldn't understand. All she wanted was to dream about him. And so she let it go. She felt the arms of sleep wrap around her.

Epilogue

There was something before our universe was created. The power of the formless. Ever-present is the force that all other forces follow. It is encoded in every creature. All are infallibly guided by this power to the place of their eternal presence. The root of the supreme light is our incarnation, so the supreme light is the root of this power.

Although called by many names, that force remains nameless and transcendent to all dictionaries and languages. I have indicated its extent in this work, but it is only an indirect observation of the otherwise imperceptible quality of eternal presence. It is only a humble symbol to leave words on paper in the midst of this power that knows no words.

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to this power for connecting us and holding us in its eternal presence. And gratitude to each of you who have manifested your interest in the echoes and shadows of this power that I have tried to coax into words.

In today's world, it is very easy to think of yourself as an island of reality in an ocean of illusion. When teacher Anne Sullivan first met her new student Helen Keller, she had no idea of the depth of isolation in which Helen Keller lives. Helen was unable to see or hear (and therefore not speak) for seven years. She lived completely without communication, her mind untouched by a single concept of her world. Anne Sullivan had given up perhaps a hundred times in the first few days of trying to communicate with Helen. But in the end, her love and understanding took her further than an easy termination.

Anne Sullivan needed a bridge - a simple concept that would ignite Helena's mind. It came in the form of water. She let Helena touch and feel the water and then write the word "water" on the palm of her young hand. Helena suddenly understood the concept of water and communication was born in her mind. Helen's mind literally lit up from this initial understanding. She understood that there were concepts that made communication possible, which eventually led to her understanding of love.

In a sense, we are deaf and blind to the subtler frequencies that surround us every moment of our days. We are not aware of the higher dimensional worlds that are composed of and guided by an ever-present force. We lack the concepts that allow us to experience this power, so our conscious selves are unaware of the breadth and depth of our true reality. Individuals of our world like Anna Sullivan are looking for ways to ignite our minds and hearts through concepts that allow us to imagine these forces.

Not as something institutionalized or owned by some nation, culture or organization, but as something we can feel right inside us.

Teachers use words to describe the nameless power of Source. They realize that their students can capture a part of its substance and realize its presence in themselves and in everyone. That force, which in some of my earlier works I named Source Intelligence, is the essence of all structures and orders.

The writings of Dohrman's Prophecy and the Collected Works of the Wing Makers provide individuals with a conceptual framework for practicing using each moment in a way that draws you closer to the power of Source. The key word in the previous sentence is "use", because in every moment of your life you are present as a possibility. The ability to step out of the normal consciousness of human embodiment and follow your heart intelligence. In the world of our time, that is the only way to touch what this world is. How to feel that power.

If you thus use the moment - the situation of your daily life - to embody that power and project it through your heart virtues, you find your way. In finding this path, don't expect any miraculous "aha" experiences as your reward. Don't feel left out if you never experience this power in its purest state. Because - as Homer already wrote - the journey itself is the reward. There is no good or bad in experiencing or not experiencing this power while inhabiting the human body. Some experience it, some don't. So it's simple.

One experience is not better than the other.

Each of you was born with an imagination. It is this imagination within you that can stretch out and measure what this power is. He can sense her presence, even when she remains invisible. That's enough. It fills you up. There is no prize to be won. There is no goal to reach. It is enough to imagine this unifying force of everything in everything and live your life as if you were a part of this force. Because that's exactly what you are.

May love accompany us in all our endeavors,

James

"If the doors of perception are cleansed,
everything will appear to man as it is - infinite."

William Blake

