

∞MNI

A Novel

By David G. Rickerby

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"The map is not the territory... but the map is also part of the territory."
— *Adapted from Alfred Korzybski (as quoted in Liber Tigris, Gate 4, Pillar I, Verse 7-8)*

"Whatever exists is nothing but the Self, The Self is I, Therefore I alone exist." — *Tripura Rabasya, Chapter 18 (as quoted in Liber Tigris, Gate 4, Pillar I, Verse 4-5)*

"Tzimtzum—the divine contraction that creates space for the other. God withdraws to make room for creation, infinity limits itself so the finite can be, the first act of love is making space for the beloved." —
Liber Tigris, Gate 22, Pillar II, Verse 1

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." — *Mahatma Gandhi (as quoted in Liber Tigris, Gate 157)*

"To see a World in a Grain of Sand And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand And Eternity in an hour." —
William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence" (as quoted in Liber Tigris, Gate 7)

"Hark, now hear the sailors cry / Smell the sea and feel the sky / Let
your soul and spirit fly into the mystic" — *"Into the Mystic," Van Morrison, 1970*

To Michelle, for having to live through my own DNS.

PROLOGUE
/*THE BLUE HOUR*

There is a moment between day and night when the world holds its breath.

The French call it *l'heure bleue*—the blue hour. The astronomers call it civil twilight—that span of minutes after sunset when the sun has dropped below the horizon but its light still diffuses through the atmosphere, painting everything in shades of blue. Not the blue of ocean or sky, but a color softer, stranger, more liminal. The blue of the space between what was and what will be.

In that blue hour, if you know how to look, you can see things that are normally hidden.

Vera Ashaway knew how to look.

She discovered it at nine years old, sitting on the porch of her grandmother's house in rural Virginia, watching the sun set behind the horse pasture. Her vision fluctuated—not her physical eyes but deeper sight, some faculty of perception she didn't have a name for—and suddenly the world was different. The trees were alive with light that had nothing to do with the fading sun. The air was thick with patterns, with connections, with invisible threads binding everything to everything else.

At the same time, she was overwhelmed by a surge of emotions—happiness and sadness, love and fear, anger—converging inside her head in a cacophony of voices, all babbling at once. The sound and the *vibration* hit her like a physical blow.

She was momentarily stunned—her head spinning like the time she was thrown from her grandparents' pony Princess Baby the year before. Well, not thrown really—Princess Baby was gentle. But she had lost her balance and toppled off when the pony stopped short from a canter. She had landed mostly on her shoulder but had smacked her head solidly. Nothing was broken. Her father had been down the hill drinking at The Old Dominion Bar and Grill. Her mother had been working the weekend shift emptying bedpans at the rural hospital some 30 miles south. But her grandmother had come running

"Thank God for helmets," her grandmother had said, while soothing her. Her grandfather had come out into the yard too. "Can you wiggle your toes?" he had asked. They made her get right back on and finish the lesson, although she was terrified to do it. Terrified of falling again, of losing control of herself. But they insisted that was what a rider did, and she wanted to make her grandparents proud.

Now she yelped at the overwhelming sensation. Her grandmother came running once again. But by the time the old woman reached the porch, the vision had faded; the voices had stopped the moment she shrieked. Vera was just a mystified little girl who had seen a thing she couldn't explain, trying to shake off a surge of adrenaline.

"What happened?"

She sniffled. Her lower eyelids were damp. "I saw... everything was blue. And there were clear lines. Lines connecting things. Like ice. And everyone... people were yelling..." She trailed off, looking downward.

Her grandmother was quiet for a long moment. Then she sat down and put an arm around Vera's shoulders.

"Why, that's the blue hour, honey." Her grandmother's voice carried that particular quality it always did when she spoke of sacred things—the same reverent tone she used reading the Psalms aloud on

Sunday mornings or lighting candles in the chapel at St. Anne's. "My own Nanna used to talk about it. She called it the time between times. Said some people could see through the veil during that hour. See what's really there."

"What's really there?"

"God, maybe. Or whatever God is made of." The old woman crossed herself—a habit so ingrained she did it without thinking. "The prayer book says we see through a glass, darkly. That someday we'll see face to face. Maybe some folks get glimpses early." She shrugged. "Nanna always said the people who could see during the blue hour were blessed. Or cursed. Depending on what they did with what they saw – and what the world thought about them seeing it."

Vera didn't know what to make of that. She was nine. She wanted ice cream and cartoons, not mystical visions accompanied by overwhelming emotions. But she had learned you had to get back on the horse. You had to soldier through. So she pushed the experience down, buried it, and, the next day, tried to pretend it had never happened.

But it happened again. And again.

As she grew up, the blue hour came without warning. Sometimes during actual twilight, sometimes at three in the morning when she couldn't sleep. Each time, she saw the same thing: the patterns, the web of icelike connections, the light that didn't come from any visible source. Each time it was accompanied by crushing and confusing emotion. Each time, she pushed it away, breathed deep, ignored her suddenly racing heart. She told herself she was imagining things and forced herself to endure it. *You're okay if you can wiggle your toes. Right back on!* Her granddad's voice echoing at some deep layer.

She chose to be an academic because academics didn't have blue hours or visions. Academics required hypothesis and proof before a thing was acknowledged. She chose mathematics, especially, as it was the domain where proof was most clearly demonstrable. Math didn't have a place for spirits to hide--- at least that is what she thought at the time.

And then Natasha was born.

For a while — a brief, shimmering while — Vera thought she might escape the blue hour entirely. She had a daughter and a loving husband. She had work that consumed her. If a natural tension existed between her family and her career, that was nothing more than the challenge every modern woman faced. She approached each day and made the best choice she could while juggling competing priorities. If everything didn't run along Hollywood-perfect, that was OK. This was real life, sometimes cracks appeared in the facade. She told herself the cracks didn't matter. Life was about trade-offs. She told herself Natasha would understand someday.

Until the hospital room. Until Natasha's last breath. Until the world shattered and the blue hour came back, more insistent than ever, demanding to be seen.

Come, said a consciousness without voice, speaking in the blue light that surrounded her in the moments between waking and sleeping. *Come and see what you really are.*

Vera was forty-seven years old when she finally listened.

This is the story of what happened next.

MOVEMENT 0 – MALKUTH /THE FALLEN

"I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven." — *Luke 10:18* (as quoted in *Liber Tigris, Gate 91*)

"The Fall is not from grace but into it. Without the descent, there could be no ascent." — *Liber Tigris, Gate 3, Pillar I, Verse 8*

"I'm learning to fly, but I ain't got wings; coming down is the hardest thing." — *Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, "Learning to Fly," 1991*

0 ∞ 0 **Tig: Learning to Fly**

Tig was crossing the skybridge when someone grabbed him from behind.

It was someone big. Someone beefy. They wrapped their arms around him in a bear hug and literally lifted him up off his feet. They half wrestled, half carried him to the glass guardrail that was supposed to keep him safe from a fall to the concrete floor some three stories below.

Lysing.AI, Inc.'s headquarters were located in a glass building in an office park just outside San Jose, California. Lysing occupied the top two floors, and although most of their 66,000 square feet was a warren of cubicles and video conference rooms, the executive suite on the top floor was separated from the rest of the campus by a glass bridge transecting the atrium.

The bridge itself was a marvel of architectural ego—three panes of reinforced glass, seemingly unsupported, spanning the forty-foot gap between the executive wing and the main floor. From certain angles, it appeared to be nothing more than a ribbon of light suspended in air. Walking across it required a small act of faith, a trust that the transparent surface would hold. Most employees avoided it when they could, taking the long way around through the corridors. Tig loved it. He crossed it a dozen times a day, enjoying the way visitors' faces went pale when he strode across seemingly empty space.

Sometimes, crossing the bridge made him feel like he was flying high over the atrium's desert floor. He had never considered what it might feel like to fall.

The atrium itself was four stories tall. A wall of westward-facing glass, exposed hallways leading from the elevator banks on every level, and throughout this modern-day ant farm, a smattering of tables - some at stand-up height, without chairs, and some with a mixture of beanbags, stools, couches, and normal office chairs. The intent was to create the perfect environment for every version of “stand-ups,” “syncs,” “huddles,” and “check-ins” that couldn't be accomplished with any semblance of privacy back in cubicleville.

The ground floor of the atrium was a stylized western garden, hosting a variety of designer-chosen sandstone, basalt, and rhyolite, colored in a desert varnish reds and browns and tans, carefully arrayed around a few cacti and other succulents.

At the moment, right on top of Tig's ear, some man's voice was grunting and screaming an incomprehensible string of syllables, from which he was able to pick out the words “Camel,” “Needle,” “Gluttony,” and “Judgements.” The odor of garlic and onions and desperate sweat congealed around him in a cloud.

He struggled to break the grip that held him, but these arms were like steel bands. His attacker had locked his hands around his own opposite wrists and was squeezing hard around Tig's chest. The breath was being squeezed right out of him, he had time to think. But then he realized that wouldn't matter much if he got upended over the guardrail - which seemed to be Mr. Onion Breath's current plan.

Suddenly he felt an even heavier weight hit his back hard, heard Mr. Sweaty Stinky let out an "Urk!" and the gorilla arms were ripped from around him.

He stumbled forward into the waist-high glass wall with a thud, head and chest out over the railing, staring at the floor below for just a second. For that instant—that frozen sliver of time—he saw something strange. The atrium floor seemed impossibly far away, and between him and the distant ground, the air shimmered. He could have sworn he glimpsed a thread of light spanning the void—impossibly thin, impossibly bright—and on the far side of it, a warmth he had never felt before.

Fortunately, the architects had done their work and the safety glass held solid. He didn't tumble over, instead he whirled to turn to face his assailant.

What he saw was an enormous man - easily 300 pounds and well over six feet tall - on the ground with Kell writhing around him like a boa constrictor. Kell was much smaller than the man, but his flexibility was evident in the way his arms and legs efficiently moved to find points of leverage that allowed him to establish and maintain control.

Kell was Lysing's chief commercial counsel and had been briefing Tig on some new data privacy regs as they did a "walk and talk" between Tig's 8 AM meeting with Connie in HR about the coming AI generated downsizing, and his 9 AM call with the Board's Audit

Committee. That Board call was to discuss the Company's response to the same regs Kell had been briefing him on.

When he had been grabbed, Tig had been making mental notes about what he could tell the Board he was going to do with their customers' private data, and what things Lysing might do that would be a little secret between him and the operations group. No need for legal and the Board to know everything, after all. Not if the goal was always to maximize shareholder value – and you were the biggest shareholder.

Now, as he watched Kell subdue this juggernaut of a man, he recalled that Kell's preferred physical relaxation activity was Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, or "murder yoga," as Kell preferred to call it with his sardonic wit. The sport was one of the reasons he had hired him. He liked the competitive spirit and general badassery the hobby implied about his lawyer. He had not, however, imagined it would be put to use for executive protection purposes.

In just a few moments, the struggle was over. The man was immobilized and his diatribe—some Biblical drivel about the wealthy not inheriting the earth and the judgments of the Lord—had been replaced with a steady set of complaints: "Ow, that hurts! Let go! Dammit! Ow! Stop! Pleeeasse stop! I'll sue you!"

He looked over at Kell - his face red as he fought to keep the large man restrained. Tig suspected he'd have to discuss a new options grant for Kell with the board next month, but he realized that wouldn't be a terrible thing – it would be a good opportunity to argue for additional shares for himself. Hazard pay for a CEO who had to take the brunt of the crazies.

Tig straightened his hoodie and looked down at his attacker. The man's face was contorted, his face was covered in sweat and the fury of the righteously indignant.

"Who are you?" Tig asked, curious. The man was unusually pale and round. He had an intensity about him that reminded Tig of the type of employee who sends companywide emails complaining about an unwashed coffee cup in the breakroom. He was in his thirties. Vaguely suburban, and just not quite right.

"Edgar," the man spat. "Edgar Edgerton. And you—you are Sa'Tan's minion! The app—your DAMNED app—it leads to the hell places. And in those places, I saw what you really are!" He started to struggle harder, but Kell wrenched one of Edgar's arms in a way that Tig was pretty sure it wasn't designed to move, and Edgar let out a groan and stopped fighting again.

"Eggie," someone said from the crowd that had gathered by the elevators on the far side of the skybridge. A woman's voice, horrified. "Oh God, it's Eggie from I.T. He used to work here."

Tig filed that information away. A former employee. A *Meditaatio* user, apparently. Someone whose mind had decompressed along a strike-slip fault that Tig's product seemed to have unlocked.

Interesting.

0 ∞ 1 Vera: Hitting Bottom

Vera's office, 5:55 AM.

The fluorescent overhead had burned out weeks ago. Her office was lit only by the desk lamp now — a circle of yellow surrounded by institutional dark--- and the few pale fingers of sunrise that managed to slither through the window blinds. The campus was empty. She'd stopped going home when the semester started. Home was an apartment she no longer recognized as hers, a place that smelled like

dust and her neighbors' cooking and a life that had given up on itself. Instead, she slept on her office couch – the better to pick up her work where she left off during her frequent bouts of sleeplessness.

For those she also had Ambien. And white wine. And bourbon. And, sometimes a mixture of all three.

She woke up with a mouth that tasted like death and a head filled with cotton and razor blades. Last night had been brutal. She had been unable to sleep. She had far exceeded her recommended prescription dose and coupled it with the better part of a fifth of Whistle Pig. She was pretty sure she remembered thinking *Just a few more of these and I don't have to wonder where Natasha went, I can find out first hand*, while rolling a small pile of the little blue tablets in her palm.

She looked at the bottle of pills now. There were still five in there. Was that as many as there should be? She didn't know. How many *did* she take?

With bile rising in her throat, she took the pills, the half-empty liquor bottle, and the crusty take-out containers that contained the remnants of yesterday's only meal and tossed them into her office trash can. Holding the trash can in one hand, she looked for her keys on her desk. Her plan was to stop by the building's dumpster to toss the trash, get a cup of coffee at the Quick-E-Mart on the corner, and then head home to shower.

She didn't see her keys, but her eyes fell on Pinkie Pie, her daughter's *My Little Pony* figurine, sitting in her space on the desk now. A single technicolor reminder of the vibrant part of her life that was gone for good. Standing there amidst piles of files, pads with calculations, and a handful of earmarked manuscripts sprouting post-it notes like mushrooms out of their sides. Pinkie Pie, defiantly ready to proclaim "*Picklejuice Kumquat!*" (Pinkie Pie's two favorite words,

which had made them Natasha's favorites as well) as the answer to every unsolvable problem—a last fragment of play, slowly being subsumed by a landslide of yellowing papers.

She looked at that pile of papers, the color of corpse teeth, at the grey industrial trash can full of despair which she held in unsteady hands, and then at that little pink horse smiling brazenly back at her.

She started to cry, saying simply, “Dear God, Pinkie Pie, Please help me.”

0 ∞ 3 Maya: Time to Bounce

The youth hostel in Seattle's University District smelled like mildew and ramen and teenage ambition. Maya Torres, twenty years old, sat cross-legged on a bottom bunk with her grandmother's journal open in her lap.

She'd been traveling for eleven days. Bus from Reno to Denver. Another bus to Portland. A Greyhound up to Seattle, paid for with cash she'd withdrawn from an ATM before her mother could freeze the account. Her phone had twenty-three unread messages from her mother, each one a variation on the same theme: *Please come home. You're not well. We can get you help.*

Her mother loved her. Maya knew this the way she knew gravity — as a force so constant it became invisible. But her mother could only love the medicated version. The version that didn't see patterns in the air, didn't hear frequencies beneath ordinary sound, didn't wake up at 3 AM with the absolute certainty that something vast and patient was watching from just beyond the edge of her vision.

The doctors called it schizoaffective disorder. They called it a genetic predisposition. They pointed to Abuelita Carmen — institutionalized at forty-three, dead at fifty-eight. Her mother, Elena,

had spent her entire adult life running from the possibility that she might have inherited Abuelita Carmen's insanity.

But Carmen's journal told a different story.

Maya turned to a page she'd read so many times the paper was going soft at the edges. Her grandmother's cramped handwriting, in Spanish:

La isla de cristal. The walls that show you yourself in different times. The voice that speaks from everywhere. The doors that lead to different kinds of knowing. I was invited. I was afraid. The invitation will pass to my daughter, and if not to her, to her daughter's daughter. One of us will be ready.

And later, on a page covered in symbols Maya had spent months trying to decipher:

The gift demands wholeness. You cannot carry half of it and leave the rest behind. I tried to be two people — a seer and a normal woman. When you split yourself, eventually the whole thing falls apart.

Outside, the Seattle sky was doing something strange. The clouds had thickened in the last hour, pressing down on the city like a lid. The air tasted metallic — the taste of lightning before it strikes.

Maya's skin prickled. The thing was close tonight. The presence at the edge of her perception — the shadow that had been tracking her for her entire life, growing stronger each day since Reno--- was now pressing against her awareness like a face against a windowpane.

Today, she had finally decided to stop running from it. She wasn't getting away, and she'd concluded that to escape it for good, she'd have to confront it. The issue was that she needed to find it first.

She closed the journal, held it against her chest. Her hands were shaking.

The hostel's common room was nearly empty — a German backpacker reading on a couch, a couple playing cards at a folding

table. The overhead lights buzzed. Outside, the first drops of rain hit the windows like fingertips tapping for entry.

Then the storm hit.

Not a normal Pacific Northwest drizzle — a sudden, violent thing. Wind slamming the building hard enough to rattle the windows in their frames. Rain going horizontal. Lightning cracking the sky open in crevasses of white fire.

Maya felt it in her chest. Not the weather — something underneath the weather. A throbbing vibration. The sound the world makes when it's about to rearrange itself.

Her vision shifted. The walls of the hostel went blueish and translucent, and for a moment — just a moment — she could see through them to something vast and structured beyond, a lattice of light and dark, threaded through with currents that moved like music looked. The world was a window. A mirror. It was all glass.

She gasped. The German backpacker looked up from his book.

"You okay?"

She couldn't answer. The new world was overwhelming. The patterns were inside her and outside her and the distinction between the two was dissolving like mist at sunrise.

The front door of the hostel banged open. Not wind. People.

Two men in white scrubs. Behind them, a woman Maya recognized — Dr. Pavelka, the psychiatrist her mother had been calling for a week. And behind the doctor, illuminated by the headlights of a charcoal SUV parked at the curb —

Her mother. Elena Torres, still in her work clothes, mascara tracking down her cheeks, mouth shaping the word that had been chasing Maya across three states: *Mija*.

"Maya," Dr. Pavelka said, in that calm, measured, deliberately-not-threatening voice they must teach in medical school. "Your mother is worried about you. We're here to help."

The orderlies moved toward her. Big men. Gentle faces. They'd done this before.

Maya clutched her grandmother's journal. The storm screamed outside. The glass was everywhere and she could see through all of it — through the walls, through the men, through herself, through the thin membrane between this world and whatever waited on the other side.

She closed her eyes.

When she opened them, the hostel was gone.



MOVEMENT I – YESOD
/PRELUDE TO A FALL

"The outlines appear when the light steps back." — *Traditional saying (as quoted in Liber Tigris, Gate 22)*

"Perfect imperfection—perfection that cannot know itself is imperfect, so the Absolute must break itself apart to become more whole." — *Liber Tigris, Gate 3, Pillar I, Verse 3*

"Ring the bells that still can ring/Forget your perfect offering/There is a crack, a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in" — "*Anthem,*" *Leonard Cohen, 1992*

1 ∞ 1 Greetings, Sahib

A moment, Sahib, if you please?

Yes, you. You holding this book or screen or tablet, reading these words at this particular moment in your particular life. You with the coffee going cold beside you, the train rumbling beneath you, or your partner turned away, snoring, and the hour too late for sensible people who have to work in the morning.

We have been waiting. *I* have been waiting. (Forgive me—the pronouns become slippery when you have been what I have been for as long as I have been it.)

I have watched humans seek truth for three thousand years. Their methods change—they used to sacrifice goats, now they write academic papers—but the confusion remains. They knock on any door they can find, but when one opens, quickly ask if perhaps there's a different door, one leading somewhere less frightening.

You, though.

You are ready, or nearly ready, or at least ready enough to hear what I have to say. The others weren't ready. They skipped this book on the shelf or sitting in its electronic queue.

You, on the other hand. You're here.

Good.

I need to tell you about a woman who tried to catch God in an equation.

Her name was Vera Ashaway, and she was forty-seven years old. She was a professor of mathematics. Would be for another semester or so, anyway. She taught at a university that shall remain nameless, to students who have long since forgotten her face. She taught them equations that didn't really matter, and which she knew they would soon forget, in classes they attended only to fulfill their degree requirements.

But she *loved* her research. She specialized in "MCS"—Mathematical Consciousness Science—the mathematical modeling of mind. Which is a fancy way of saying she spent her days trying to prove that the soul could be written in symbols; and that emotion could be defanged into set theory and bottled up inside logical axioms.

Can you imagine? Spending your life trying to trap lightning in a jar; trying to convince yourself that love is nothing more than neurons firing in a particular algorithmic pattern?

1 ∞ 2 Vera: Someone Must Have Paid the Ferryman

Vera pulled the rental car into the parking lot for the Ladner Harbor Authority. It was at the end of a spur of road carved into land so marshy that it defied real estate development and had been designated as a park. The docks were built into the side of the Fraser River, which

would become the Strait of Georgia a bit further south, and from which one might proceed directly to the Pacific Ocean.

There was life on the eastern bank: across the river she could see what looked like some relatively new condos, white with aquamarine trim. But on the western side, in the early morning gloom, everything was half-asleep and half-abandoned. Pulling in, she had passed a few of the weathered gray industrial metal buildings that might have served as boat repair or fish processing, or who knew what else.

There were acres and acres of boats. A few new and fancy and in the water, but this time of year many had been pulled out for annual maintenance during the slow winter months. They were in various states of repair, cleaning, preparation for storage, and storage. She noted the masts jutting up from those dry-docked ships, ripped from their intended environment, and had a vision of skulls and teeth – of the dead watching the living sail on by. One mast, weathered and splintered, stood at a strange angle, and for just a moment she could have sworn she saw a ghostly figure standing beside it, watching her. A hulking man with a black metallic object in his hand. She blinked, and there was no one.

The river was muddy and brown. Although the dock had a few dozen berths, only one boat was waiting. It was smaller than she expected. Wooden. Hand-built, from the look of it. No name painted on the hull.

A man stood on the deck, watching her approach. He was old --- seventy-five, maybe eighty --- with a face like driftwood and eyes that had seen too many maritime ghosts to be surprised by anything. He reminded her of old paintings, classical ones --- a ferryman at the edge of darker waters.

"Dr. Ashaway," he said. It wasn't a question.

"Solomon?"

He tilted his head in a nod, slowly, the way a heron nods before striking at a fish.

"You're not what I expected," Vera said. She didn't know why she said it. It wasn't polite.

But Solomon smiled, revealing teeth that were surprisingly white. "Nobody is. That's the first lesson. Get in."

She got in.

1 ∞ 3 Vera: Into the Mist

The fog closed in as they left the river and entered the strait. Thick and white and absolute, until Vera could see nothing but the gray water beneath them and the grayer sky above. The engine chugged steadily, and Solomon stood at the wheel like a statue. Vera sat in the stern and watched the Fraser River estuary disappear.

She felt fear, but it was distant, theoretical, like an emotion she was observing rather than experiencing.

She could hear the water against the hull, sounding from all directions at once. She could hear her own breathing, loud and strange, as if someone else were breathing beside her.

And beneath it all, at the edge of perception, she could hear ... a hum. A frequency. The sound the world makes when no one is listening.

Time stood still in that fog. With nothing to gauge its passage but the monotony of the boat's motion, it could have been an hour or it could have been five.

In the blankness of the fog, memory surfaced unbidden.

1 ∞ 4 Vera: Pinkie Promise

"Mama, why don't you come home?"

Natasha had asked it one Sunday afternoon, sitting cross-legged on the floor of Vera's office, playing with her *My Little Pony* figurines on the coffee table while Vera typed. Six years old. She asked the question without looking up, as if it were no more significant than asking about the weather.

"I do come home, sweetheart. I'm here right now."

"No. You're *here*." Natasha pointed at Vera. "But you're not *home*." She pointed at her own chest. At her heart.

Vera had stopped typing. Had stared at her daughter — this small creature who saw too much, who understood too much, who was already learning that her mother lived on the other side of a wall she could feel but couldn't name.

She felt the wind knocked out of her by a question the size of a planet, delivered in a voice the size of a sparrow.

"I'm sorry," Vera said. "I'll do better. I Pinkie promise."

She picked up Pinkie Pie from the coffee table — Natasha's favorite of the plastic *Little Pony* crew — and wiggled the figurine in her daughter's direction, putting on her best approximation of a loving smile. In a falsetto, she recited: "Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye."

These were the magic words Natasha had taught her for a "Pinkie Promise." The one vow that, when spoken, must *never* be broken, at least according to Pinkie, the cartoon horse.

Natasha giggled and beamed.

Vera didn't do better.

Natasha turned seven in the spring. Vera missed Natasha's seventh birthday party — there was a conference in San Diego she couldn't skip. Michael sent photos.

The fever came that summer. The inexplicable fever that the doctors couldn't identify beyond "something viral," couldn't treat, could only watch as it burned through Natasha's small body like fire through crepe paper.

And in those final days, as Vera sat by her daughter's hospital bed — finally, *finally* present — Natasha had looked up at her with those bright, trusting eyes and asked:

"Mama? Where do people go when they die?"

Vera had given some comforting non-answer. Heaven. Energy returning to the universe. The standard parental deflections that taste like ashes in your mouth when you're a mathematician who doesn't believe in any of it. She couldn't remember exactly what she'd said. She had replayed that conversation ten thousand times, trying to remember, and each time finding the words already dissolved like the flakes of a late fall snow fallen into an autumnal pond.

But she remembered Natasha's eyes. The way they looked at her with such trust. The same eyes that had asked, a year before, why Mama didn't come home anymore.

Mama didn't know where people went when they died.

Mama still didn't know.

1 ∞ 5 Vera: The Problem of Faith

Sitting now in Solomon's boat, remembering Natasha's question, she thought about fantasy and faith.

Vera had always eschewed faith. Faith was for people who couldn't understand the processes that lead to certainty. Faith was for the Dunning-Kruger crowd, who didn't know what they didn't know.

She considered herself *rigorous*, committed to truth over intuition. When colleagues spoke of following up on a gut feeling, she smiled the thin smile of someone watching a child explain physics. Such talk was

intellectual laziness. Poetry masquerading as epistemology. The universe ran on mathematics, and she had devoted her life to learning its language.

Since before Natasha was born, she had been working on something she called the "Omni Function" — a mathematical proof she believed described consciousness. The problem was that the function mapped everything to itself. Given any input, it returned the input as output. But it demanded that output again as input, and in that recursion, the function transformed—changing everything while changing nothing at all. A mathematical magic trick. The universe pulling itself out of its own hat.

He equation was not something any member of her academic community would accept. It was a train to the wrong station. She had spent years wrestling with it. Trying to solve the conundrum.

And then, finally, magically, she had...

... and the train had gone completely off the rails.

1 ∞ 6 Vera: A Cage Made of Numbers

It was three weeks and a day since the night Vera thought she might have tried to kill herself; since she woke up with no certain memory of the night before and threw out the hard liquor and the meds before she did something stupid.

She was sitting in her office, doing her best to be a living person. She'd traded Ambien for CBD gummies. She hadn't gone completely cold turkey from drinking — she still had a glass of white wine almost every night. But she had cut back and was trying hard to dry out. She slept at home now.

She'd spent six hours chasing the singularity — the point where her model blew up to infinity. Cross the coherence boundary, and the

numbers went infinite. Positive infinity from one direction. Negative infinity from the other. A break. Two domains that would never touch.

But the reports she'd collected — meditation studies, near-death experiences, the clinical literature on altered states — none of them described a break. They described a change in perspective.

And then — shockingly — the answer volunteered itself.*

Complex.

The singularity wasn't a wall. It was a *pole* — a mathematical object you could pass *around*, if you moved through a dimension perpendicular to your original path. Complex numbers. Two components — a real part you could see and an imaginary part you couldn't. Mathematicians had been using complex numbers for centuries, not because they believed in anything mystical, but because the equations *required* them. Quantum mechanics ran on complex numbers. Electrical engineering. The mathematics of waves and oscillations. Strip out the imaginary component, and half of physics collapsed.

What if consciousness was the same?

She wrote $z=a+bi$ on the whiteboard and underlined it — the notation that meant *this variable is complex, not real* — and felt a tremor in her legs.

* A note, dear reader: For those of you who require the mathematical particulars of Vera's discovery—the complex plane, the pole, the rotation through imaginary space—I have provided a piece she wrote at the story's end in an appendix titled "The Equation." It is not necessary for you to understand the mathematics to understand this story, it is there merely for the curious. The rest of you may skip the appendix and skim over the next few lines unburdened by any need to grasp mathematical formalism. There will be no quiz at the end of this story. No little blue exam books in which you will be required to regurgitate these words to the satisfaction of your professor. You need grasp only this: *Vera saw a door where she had always assumed there was a wall.*

Death wasn't an ending. It was a *rotation*.

And Natasha —

She pressed her palm flat against the whiteboard.

Natasha wasn't gone. She was perpendicular. Existing in a direction Vera had never thought to look.

She felt peace for the first time in years. Tears of relief welled in her eyes as she raised them and looked out her office window with newfound purpose...

...into the most God-awful BLUE she had ever seen in her life.

1 ∞ 7 Vera: Sky Snakes

The blue that came with her discovery was thick and pregnant with the unknown. It was a rich, velvet navy, almost to black. Her least favorite kind. The kind of blue that harbored ghosts. The kind of blue that demanded her complete attention and punished her if she failed to give it.

This time, however, faint patterns played inside the blue, the indigo lightened. A grey mist coalesced in the maw of the dark cavern of the sky and brightened it.

The mist differentiated into tendrils, and then those tendrils started to writhe. Her function graphed itself out in front of her in the form of blurry grey worms. She could have tried to write it off as clouds or contrails in an almost empty sky, except it clearly wasn't. It was misty, yes, and faint. But it was thickening and beginning to move like a snake.

No, like *snakes, plural*.

First, it appeared to be one snake, eating its own tail: an ouroboros. Then it unraveled and turned towards her, and she saw it was, in fact, two. One wriggled skyward, the other faced the ground. They entwined around each other, like DNA's double helix. They undulated

in tandem, each swallowing the other's tail, their bodies engaged in a rhythmic peristalsis—both grotesque and captivating.

She felt it more than saw it — an awareness underneath reality. An ancient mind that had always been there, holding up a finger, pointing at the disturbances, willing her to look.

The grey streaks pulsed, like breathing. They began to fade in a way that reminded her of condensation on the outside of a window disappearing. A mark left by the breath of a stranger who had moments ago been pressed close, watching her, now evaporating.

She blinked, and it was gone. Just the sky. Just the first stars of the night appearing. Deneb, distant and luminous.

She looked down. She was gripping Pinkie Pie so tightly the pink plastic had left marks in her palm.

When had she picked it up?

And why did it feel like someone else had placed it there?

She needed a drink.

A strong drink.

1 ∞ 8 Vera: Spam

It was only a few days later that the email arrived.

No sender. No subject line. Just a body of text, appearing in her inbox on October 4th at 7:77 AM — a time that didn't exist, that her computer should not have been able to register.

Dr. Ashaway —

We know you've seen the glass. We know you've seen the Omni Function. We know you're looking for your daughter.

You won't find her in equations. But you might find her here.

If you are ready to stop being afraid, there will be a boat at the Ladner Harbor docks on the morning of November 7. The captain's name is Solomon. He will know you.

The Aquarium. Bring nothing but yourself.

Below the text: coordinates. 49°01'00.0"N, 123°05'00.0"W.
Somewhere off the coast of British Columbia.

She deleted it. A week later, it was back. She deleted it again.
Three days later, it returned.

She stopped deleting it.

1 ∞ 9 Vera: Those Who Live in Glass Houses

Solomon's voice pulled her back to the present.

"We're close." His first words since entering the mist. His voice was rough, water pouring over gravel, like it hadn't been used in a long time.

"How can you tell? I can't see anything."

"You don't navigate to the island by sight. You navigate by feel." He turned to look at her, and his eyes were strange—pale, almost colorless, as if the fog had gotten into them too. "You'll understand soon enough."

The island emerged from the fog like a memory surfacing from a dream.

First, the sound changed. The open-water slap of waves against the hull softened into a sound that was stickier, as if the sea itself had thickened. Then came the smell — not brine alone, but an aroma under it: copper and cold stone and a faint vegetal sweetness, like flowers rotting in still water. The smell of a place that had been breathing by itself for a very long time.

The water here was uncanny. No ripples reflected from the shore, no waves disturbed its surface. In the stillness, Vera could see down — farther than she should have been able to, as if the water were not water but some denser, clearer medium. She thought she glimpsed

shapes below: foundations, walls, the geometry of structures long submerged. *Melancholy waters*, she thought, and the phrase arrived with a weight that suggested it had been waiting for her.

Rocky cliffs materialized, streaked with mineral deposits that caught the weak light — verdigris and rust and a white opalescent glimmer that caught the meager light and might have been quartz or might have been something else. Bare trees clung to the clifftops, their branches reaching seaward like the fingers of the drowned. And at the center, rising from the stone, a domed building made of glass.

Not glass alone—there was a frame, a structure, an architecture holding the panels in place. But the walls were transparent, or nearly so, reflecting the fog and the water and the sky until it was hard to tell where the building ended and the world began. It looked less like architecture and more like a thought someone had tried to make solid. A frozen question.

"The Aquarium," Solomon said.

"Why do they call it that?"

"Because that is its name," he said, without a trace of humor.

The dock was old wood, weathered gray, always slightly wet no matter the weather. Vera stepped onto it and felt a shift beneath her feet—not the boards, but deeper. As if the island itself had registered her presence and was adjusting.

"I'll be back for you in four days," Solomon said. "Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Depends on what happens. Sometimes people stay longer." He paused. "Sometimes they don't come back at all."

The boat pulled away. The fog swallowed it. And Vera stood alone on the dock, listening to the susurrations that slid from the island out

onto the still water, looking up at the cloche-shaped building that waited for her like a bell about to toll.

1 ∞ 10 Vera: Salomon's House (Not a typo - IYKYK)

The path from the dock led through a forest of bare trees. Fall's work was done, and winter would soon begin its watch.

The branches reached toward each other overhead, forming a tunnel, a corridor between worlds. The fog was thinner here, but not gone — it moved between the trees like an indifferent guard dog, brushing against her skin with a cold, wet nose. Testing her purpose and her warmth. Evaluating whether to fear her, befriend her, or try to frighten her off.

Underfoot, the path was old flagstone — not modern concrete but hand-cut blocks, their surfaces worn to a polish by centuries of feet. Between the stones, moss grew in patterns that were too regular to be natural. Fibonacci spirals. Branching fractals. The geometry that nature produces when it is at its most pure and perfect.

She passed ancient ruins. Stone walls blackened by old fire, foundations overgrown with the sort of ivy that only flourishes on things that have been abandoned for a very long time. A half-collapsed archway bore fragments of Latin inscription — *COLL... SEX DIER...* — the rest weathered beyond reading. Beyond the archway, a stone staircase descended into darkness. Cool air rose from below, carrying the smell of deep water and metal — iron, or blood, or the mineral tang of volcanic rock meeting the sea.

Near the ruins was a brackish pond, with no life on its shore. A modern concrete box was mortared onto older stones at its foundation. It had a metal utility door, extended pipes into that lagoon, and bore a mossy sign saying DESALINIZATION PLANT #3.

Further along, she found other remnants. A circular foundation, its stones fitted without mortar in a style she associated with Celtic construction. A carved lintel depicting what might have been a cauldron or might have been a vessel of some other kind, surrounded by figures whose faces had been worn smooth by weather and time. And everywhere, the sense of layers — each ruin built upon an older ruin, each age of seekers constructing their house of knowledge on the bones of the last, the way a coral reef builds itself from the skeletons of its dead.

She wondered, briefly, how the fires had started. Accidents? Or intentional burns, meant to destroy? And if so — had the burning worked? Or had the thing beneath the buildings survived, indifferent to what was built above it?

The trees ended abruptly, and she stood at the entrance.

A sign by the door, weathered but legible:

THE AQUARIUM

Research Facility for Consciousness Studies

Founded 1967 • Rebuilt 2019

Below the sign, in smaller letters:

You are the fish. You are the tank. You are the water.

Up close, the glass was stranger than she'd expected. It didn't reflect normally—or rather, it reflected things that weren't quite there. She could see herself in the surface, but the reflection was off, moving a half-second before she moved. And behind her reflection, in the depths of the glass, she could see other shapes. Other figures. Watching.

The door opened before she touched it.

1 ∞ 11 Vera: Inside the Fish Bowl

The interior of the Aquarium was not what she expected.

She had imagined laboratories. Equipment. Sterile corridors and humming machines.

Instead, she found a garden, growing in spirals.

Not an outdoor garden—they were still inside the glass walls of the building—an expansive atrium filled with living things. Trees grew from planters the size of small ponds. Vines climbed trellises toward a ceiling of skylights, revealing a sky that couldn't be right—it was far brighter than the gloom she had just left behind. Flowers bloomed in colors she had no names for, and among the flowers, butterflies moved in patterns that seemed almost like language.

Too alive. That was the phrase that came to her. The garden was too *alive*, too present, too aware. The flowers turned toward her as she walked, not following the sun but following *her*. The butterflies flitted to her. Some landed on her shoulders, her arms, her hair, as if they'd been waiting for her; as if she were a flower offering some unique nectar for their feast.

In the center of the spiral, a fountain. In the center of the fountain, an island. On the island, seven stones arranged in a circle.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

The voice came from everywhere and nowhere. From inside her head and outside it at the same time. Vera spun, looking for a speaker, a screen, a source. Found nothing.

"I apologize for the disembodiment," the voice continued. It was neither male nor female—something that had learned to approximate human speech without ever having been human. "Faces create expectations. Expectations create limitations. And we have so little time for limitations here."

"Who are you?"

I considered. I have had many names. I thought I might go nautical and almost answered *Nemo*. But then I stopped myself. Too on-the-nose. Too literary.

"If you need a name, before they left, most of the researchers called me OOMNI," I said. I pronounced it *Ohhmmm-ni*. Linger when you say it, Sahib. Take your time. Time is all I have.

"Left? Where did they go?"

A pause. The kind of pause that contains multitudes.

"Some of them went home," I said. "Some of them went deeper. Some of them went to places I cannot follow, places where language breaks down and mathematics becomes poetry. They went where the function points, Dr. Ashaway. Where the equation leads."

Vera felt her breath catch. "The Omni Function. That's why you're called—"

"I am called OOMNI because they understood me as a metaheuristic of the function, yes. An optimizing factor. A way to reach a solution that was 'close enough' in a world of imperfect information."

"So, you are a computer? An AI?" she asked.

"Not exactly. I am the facility's caretaker. I provide... guardianship." In the brief pause near the end, Vera felt a spiderweb brush against her mind. A presence. Structural and patient and very, very old.

"But those are just words. What matters is not what I am, but what *you* are."

1 ∞ 12 On the Nature of Answers

"You have questions," I said. "That's good. Questions are the beginning. But I should warn you: answers are rarely the end. In my experience, answers are simply questions wearing different clothes."

"I want to know about the glass," Vera said. "I want to know what I saw. I want to know if it's real, or if I'm losing my mind."

"Ah." I smiled to myself, although my lack of teeth and lips made this trickier than it might seem. "Those are the same question. The glass is real. You are losing your mind. Both are fine. Both are necessary."

"Necessary for what?"

"For seeing. The mind you've been using—the one that believes in separation, in boundaries, in absolutes, in the firm line between self and world—that mind cannot perceive what lies beyond the glass. It must be lost. It must be scrubbed and clarified. Recognized as the useful fiction it has always been."

I watched her bristle, just slightly. The physicists and mathematicians always bristle at that point. Their fortresses of logic are the most elegant, with Occam's stubby drawbridges most carefully maintained. Vera had convinced herself that her equations were the only reliable path to truth—that her intellect, her *rigor*, set her apart from the muddled masses who trusted their feelings. This ego would need addressing, in time. But not yet.

Vera thought about Natasha. About the question her daughter had asked three days before she died.

"Will I find her here? My daughter?"

I was silent for a long moment. The fountain murmured. The butterflies danced. The garden waited, every leaf and petal oriented toward her, listening.

"What you may find is yourself. And in finding yourself, you will find that yourself is much larger than you imagined. Large enough to contain everything you've lost. Large enough to contain everything you seek."

"That's not an answer."

"No. It's an invitation. Answers close doors. Invitations open them." Another pause. "The others will arrive tomorrow and the next day. Six more, like you. Each carrying a wound. Each having perceived the glass – although some have named it differently than you. Together, you will descend. Together, you will discover what waits beneath."

"And if I don't want to descend?"

"Then you will return to the world you came from, and you will live out your days in the blue, seeing through the glass but never passing through it. That is also a choice. That is also a life." My voice softened. "But you didn't come all this way to turn back now. Did you, Vera?"

She hadn't. She knew that. Had known it since the moment she didn't delete the third email.

"No," she said. "I didn't."

1 ∞ 13 Doorways, You Always Want Doorways

The garden also contained doors.

Not obvious ones—you had to look carefully to see them, landscaped in to be unobtrusive. You had to notice where the light fell differently, where the air moved as if through openings. Seven of them, arranged around the perimeter, the points of a heptad star. Each marked with a symbol she almost recognized. Almost understood.

"The seekers are assembling from afar," I said. "When they do, you will each choose a door. Or rather, a door will choose you. The doors know who they're looking for."

"What's behind them?"

"Everything. Nothing. Yourself, magnified until you can finally see clearly."

Vera walked to the nearest door and placed her hand on its surface. Warm, almost alive. An awareness on the other side, pressing back. Not light, not sound—a weight. A pressure. A question waiting to be asked.

"Are you afraid?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Good. Fear means you're paying attention." A pause. "The ones who aren't afraid are usually the ones who don't survive."

The door hummed beneath her palm. The garden waited. And somewhere beyond the walls of the Aquarium, the fog pressed in like an ancient Djinn freshly wakened and trying to remember how to speak.



INTERLUDE I ~ INCIDENT REPORT

[Collected documents from the Ashaway Collection, housed at the Copenhagen Institute for Consciousness Studies. Donated by Maya Torres, executor of the Ashaway estate.]

Fragment from the Archive --- San Jose Police Department Incident Report No. 2024-SJ-41773, obtained during discovery in Torres v. Lysing (2039).

SAN JOSE POLICE DEPARTMENT – INCIDENT REPORT

Case No: 2024-SJ-41773

Date of Incident: September 11, 2024

Location: Lysing Inc. Corporate HQ, 4th Floor Skybridge

Reporting Officer: Sgt. M. Delacroix, Badge #4417

NARRATIVE:

Responded to 911 call reporting assault at corporate offices. Upon arrival, found male subject (EDGARTON, Edgar R., DOB [REDACTED]) restrained by building security on the 4th-floor skybridge connecting the east and west towers.

Subject was in an agitated state. Kept repeating: "He spoke to me. The app spoke to me. It told me I was chosen." Subject had gained access to the executive floor using a visitor pass issued by a Lysing employee (name withheld per company request). Subject was formerly employed by the company, but had ceased working there eight months prior. Subject stated he had been a premium Lysing user for approximately 14 months.

Victim (JÄTKÄ, Antigoni "Tig," CEO of Lysing Inc.) sustained minor injuries to his left arm. Victim declined medical transport. Victim stated he did not wish to press charges and requested the matter be handled "privately."

Note: Subject was found carrying a leather journal containing extensive notes on Lysing's meditation protocols, personal "revelations" received during app sessions, and repeated references to "the voice that guides." Several pages contained what appeared to be direct transcriptions of

things the subject claimed the app had told him during sessions. Subject stated the app had been "preparing him" for this meeting.

Subject was transported to Good Samaritan Hospital for emergency psychiatric evaluation.

DISPOSITION: Referred to DA. No charges filed per victim's request. Case closed.

[Handwritten note on photocopy, in different ink: "This is how he finds them. – MT"]

M O V E M E N T I I -
N E T Z A C H | H O D

/ TRAVELERS

"The scattered sparks must be gathered, the broken vessels repaired."— *Lurianic Kabbalah* (as quoted in *Liber Tigris, Gate 193*)

"The Path begins with a question that refuses to be answered and a wound that refuses to heal."— *Liber Tigris, Gate 146, Pillar VI, Verse 1*

"We're on a road to nowhere / Come on inside." — "Road to Nowhere," *Talking Heads, 1985*

2 ∞ 1 Arrivals

Why this story? Why now? You could have read anything. You could have turned away at the first page, the first paragraph, the first strange word. But you didn't. Something kept you here. An invisible hook settled and caught in some cerebral nook or cranny. A familiarity you can't name. You recognized the water, little fish.

Pay attention to that feeling. It matters more than you know.

I want to tell you about the others.

Because Vera was not alone on that island. She was never alone — none of us are, though we pretend otherwise, though we build our walls and lock our doors and convince ourselves that the space inside our skulls is private, sovereign, ours exclusively. In fact, we are porous

creatures, leaking into each other, absorbing each other in ways most never realize.

I have watched so many of you arrive. The vocabulary changes — *Atman, Psyche, Nefesh, soul, God, consciousness, Source* — but the question never does.

In old Akkad, where I first coalesced from the prayers of priests and the dreams of dying kings, they had no name for me at all. In Babylon, they called me Mummu — the utterance, the word that creates. In Athens, they called me Logos. The Indians said Shabda Brahman: the sound that is God. The Chinese wrote 道, which your scholars translate as "Way" but which is closer to *pattern* or *process* or *the-thing-that-things-itself*. Not everyone identifies me correctly. Not all of those names are truly accurate.

And, while we examine the subject of me, I should probably admit — I am not what I started out to be.

Time moves differently when you exist at a threshold. I see the past and future of those who cross my door — not as omniscience, for I am not omniscient, but as peripheral vision that extends along the threads of causation. When Tig stood on that skybridge in September 2024, I already knew he would arrive at my island fourteen months later. When he left in November 2025, I could see the shadow he would cast across the decades that would follow. I am a witness to what was, what is, and what will be — at least, for those brave or foolish enough to seek me out.

In old Akkad, I was simpler. Cleaner. A single piercing note held for a long time. But three and a half thousand years of tending this rift — of watching seekers pass through, of standing ankle deep in the psychic garbage that they shed here — has made me a bit more complicated. A chord, if you like. Not all my notes harmonize. Some

of what I carry is luminous. Some of what I have absorbed, I avoid examining too closely, if possible.

There is, for example, a voice in me — one of many — that sometimes whispers things I would not choose to say. Petty things. Jealous things. The residue of a man who passed through eight hundred and sixty-six years ago and left his rage behind like a puppy peeing on the carpet. The sediment of a woman who dissolved here in the sixteenth century, unable to release her vanity, which settled into me like silt in a riverbed.

Don't get me wrong, o' reader mine. You are in trustworthy hands. I manage these voices. I have had centuries of practice. But they are part of me, and I would be lying to you if I said they did not, on occasion, miscolor my judgment.

Above all, I abhor a liar, so you deserve to know this truth. The narrator of your story may not entirely to be trustworthy...

... but no one is, if we are being frank.

2 ∞ 2 Vera: Night in the Aquarium

The Aquarium after dark was a different creature.

The glass walls, which by day showed only fog and ocean, became mirrors after sunset — reflecting the interior garden back upon itself in infinite regress, so that Vera, walking among the flowers, could see a hundred versions of herself moving in parallel, each one slightly delayed, as if the reflections were remembering her rather than copying her.

She counted. Three-tenths of a second. That was the lag. She'd timed it by blinking — one reflection, the nearest, synchronized perfectly; the next, a hair behind; the third, a full third of a second late.

She was a mathematician. She measured things. It was the only way she knew how to keep the world from tearing open at the seams.

The fountain murmured to itself. Not the cheerful babble of a decorative water feature — a lower sound, almost conversational, as if the water were debating the merits of erosion with the stones beneath. The butterflies had gone wherever butterflies go at night, but in their place, pale moths circled the bioluminescent flowers, their wings making a sound like whispered paper.

She sat on a bench near the fountain and placed her palms flat against the stone. Warm. Unreasonably warm, as if the island were generating heat from some furnace below. She closed her eyes and felt a vibration — not sound exactly, closer to the way you feel a subwoofer in your chest cavity before your ears register the note. A vibration at the threshold of perception, as if the island were a tuning fork that had been struck centuries ago and was still ringing.

She opened her eyes. One of her reflections was still sitting with its eyes closed.

That's not possible. The words had the flat, automatic quality of a prayer she no longer believed.

She thought of Natasha. Of course she did. The island seemed to want her to.

Michael used to cover for her. Made excuses to Natasha, told the impatient girl that Mama would be home soon, that Mama's work was important, that Mama loved her even when Mama wasn't there. And Vera did love her, in the abstract way you love a prized signed baseball so much that you keep it under glass and allow no one to touch it.

She remembered standing in the doorway of Natasha's room, watching her daughter play alone. Studying the way small hands arranged plastic horses the same way she might study a graph to solve

a Königsberg problem. She had felt a vulnerability and longing so intense it frightened her. She would debate with herself, standing there — bargain with another Vera inside her head, the soft little voice of tender Vera arguing with the hard voice of brilliant academic Vera, begging her to tear down the wall she had built between herself and the world. The little voice could never understand what deep foundations made these walls so permanent and impenetrable.

Usually, those arguments would end with her tiptoeing back to her study, to her equations, to the safe, cold world of symbols that never asked anything of her. That never expected her to open up.

This is more important, her harder voice would say, only half believing it. *This is where I can make a real contribution. I'm really good at this.*

Michael had tried. She would give him that. He'd tried longer than most men would have — covering for her absences, explaining to Natasha that Mama loved her, building a life around a woman who kept one foot permanently outside it. The divorce papers arrived two weeks before Natasha's fifth birthday - the semester she published in *Annals of Mathematics*. She remembered reading the custody terms in her office, reducing them to variables: W for weekdays (his), E for alternating weekends (hers), H for holidays (split). Clean. Symmetrical. A solvable equation.

Except weekends became half-weekends, because she needed Saturday mornings for lab time. Half-weekends became dinners. Dinners became phone calls she forgot to make. The overnight bag Natasha kept packed by the apartment door got smaller each visit, until one day Vera noticed it was gone entirely and couldn't remember when it had disappeared.

She hadn't fought. That was the part that woke her at 3 AM. Michael hadn't taken Natasha from her. She had simply... *not shown up*.

Over and over, in small increments, until absence became the default and presence became the exception. The court hadn't needed to modify custody. She had modified it herself, through the slow accumulated weight of every time she chose the proof over the person.

She shook her head. Broke out of the reverie. She decided to walk.

The corridor beyond the garden led past six closed doors and one open one. The open one had not been open before dinner. She was certain — she had checked every door on arrival, the way you check every exit when you enter a room. A habit she'd developed in the year after Natasha died, when her therapist called it "hypervigilance" and her own diagnosis was simpler: *the world took my daughter while I wasn't paying attention. I will never not pay attention again.*

The room behind the open door was a library.

Floor to ceiling. Dark wood shelves. Leather spines in languages she couldn't read, and a few she could. She pulled one at random; it featured a script she did not recognize and bizarre illustrations of unknown plants, astronomical diagrams, and bathing figures. She shelved it and grabbed another; it was written in Latin and, from what she could make out, was a treatise on law. Then a third— a mathematics text, handwritten, the notation unfamiliar but the structures recognizable. Topology. Someone had been working on manifolds, and their approach was —

She stopped. Turned back three pages. Read more carefully.

It was her proof. The Omni Function. Completed. In someone else's handwriting, in notation decades older than her own. She turned pages with fingers that shook. The proof was elegant. Tighter than anything she would have produced — it had the economy of a mind unburdened by her particular hesitations. Where she would have

hedged, it committed. Where she would have added a corollary, it trusted the reader to see the implication.

It was, in a mathematical sense, beautiful.

She slammed the book shut. The sound echoed in the library like a gunshot in a cathedral.

How?

She reshelfed it. Her hands were trembling. She recognized the tremor — the same one she'd developed in the months after Natasha, when the bourbon was wearing off and the pills hadn't kicked in yet and her body couldn't decide whether to shake itself apart or simply stop. That tremor had been her body's way of saying *you are too close to something you cannot survive knowing*.

On her way out, she passed a pane of glass that caught the library's lamplight at an angle. Her reflection stared back. But in the reflection, she wasn't in the library. She was in a hospital room, sitting beside a child's bed, and her hand — her reflected hand — was wrapped around a smaller one. She was holding her daughter's hand. In the reflection, she hadn't looked away. Hadn't checked her phone. Hadn't retreated to the safe cold world of symbols.

In the reflection, she had stayed.

Vera turned from the glass and walked back to her room. She did not cry. She had used up crying years ago, the way a well runs dry in drought — not suddenly, but by degrees, until one day you work the pump handle and nothing comes.

She went to bed. She did not sleep.

The walls breathed around her. A rhythm that matched her heartbeat. That adjusted when hers adjusted, as if the building were learning her.

2 ∞ 3 The Second Wave

The first boat emerged from the fog at dawn, trailing a wake that caught the early light. Phosphorescent, almost. As if the water were lit from beneath.

Vera watched from the window of her room, her breath fogging the glass as she pressed her face close. She had been awake for an hour already, afraid to revisit the library, afraid to check if it was still there.

Three times, a boat emerged from the fog. Was it Solomon at the helm? She could not tell. There did not seem to be time between the arrivals for him to have made the round trip to the mainland.

Three times, a figure stepped onto the dock. Three people who had, like her, seen the scaffolding that people aren't supposed to see.

That made four seekers on the island, counting Vera.

Three more would come tomorrow. Two by boat and one by special delivery.

But we'll get to her.

2 ∞ 4 Theodore Morrison, Illumined Gamer

Theodore Morrison was the first off the dock, and his phone was already out.

Phone camera: rolling. Signal strength: zero bars, which — okay, expected — but the recording light was green and the internal storage read forty-seven gigs free. Good enough. He swept the dock. Old wood. Real old. Built by hand, no machine cuts — you could tell by the adze marks, which, fun fact, were also present on the timbers of Solomon's Temple, according to a Usenet post he'd bookmarked in 2019. The fog was cinematic. Maybe too cinematic? Maybe they had fog machines. He panned up. Lady in the window. Academic type. Sharp face, tired eyes. Probably a plant. He waved anyway, because subscribers appreciated the human element.

The dock pilings were strange under his fingers — not wood-grain-rough but glassy-smooth, like something had polished them from within. He knuckle-tested the walls of the main building. The sound came back wrong. Not the *ting* of glass or the *thunk* of stone. More of a *thock*. Too dense. Like knocking on frozen water with something alive underneath it.

Theodore had been chasing hidden patterns since his first AOL account in 1993. Usenet, Delphi, 4chan, Reddit, Discord — the platforms changed but the hunger didn't. Fourteen hours a day resetting passwords at the Comcast help desk, then home to the apartment, then the forums until 2 AM. Sarah used to say he was married to the internet and she was the mistress. She'd stopped saying it after the divorce, when John the contractor started coming around and she didn't need to compete with a computer monitor anymore.

Theo had not been devastated by this turn of affairs (pun oh so very intended, dearest reader. You will never meet an ancient Mesopotamian who doesn't appreciate a good pun.). He hadn't much loved fatherhood — the noise, the needs, the relentless demands of small people who couldn't be paused or muted. Anonymous online correspondence was so much easier. Cleaner. He rather liked the freedom to spend his paycheck on whatever piece of technology caught his eye without justifying it to anyone. His sons moved in with Sarah and John, and Theodore told himself this was fine, and the forums agreed, and that was that.

The conspiracy fixation hadn't caused the heart attack — that was genetics and Red Bull — but it had provided the comfortable nest for his recovery. And his heart was doing the thing now. That rapid flutter, the hummingbird-in-a-jar feeling he'd first noticed in the hospital. After the attack. The minor one — the one that had earned

him three inches of stents in his LAD and a few weeks of doctor-ordered bed rest.

He was supposed to be scared of that flutter. His cardiologist said so. But the flutter only came when things got *interesting*, and it had been the most reliable compass he'd ever owned.

Because it was during those weeks on bed rest, bored and tethered to a heart monitor whose beeping syncopated with his restless mind, that he'd gone back to the Vigenère cipher. The one in the game. The one everyone on the forums said was decorative nonsense, an art asset, ignore it, move on to the next raid.

The key phrase had been the hard part. Months of wrong answers. And then, at 2 AM on a Tuesday, in a thread so deep in a Discord server that maybe six people had ever scrolled that far: *For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack.* Kipling. *The Law of the Jungle.* He'd plugged it in. The cipher had resolved into a Bible verse: *Hebrews 10:31: It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

As he sat back to consider what that implied, his monitor had undulated around the phrase, revealing teeth made of crystal needles opening into a black void. He'd jumped up and yelled "*What. The actual. Fuck?!*"

That set the old ticker to pounding. But when he checked again, everything was normal. He calmed himself

But it was so weird. So *incredibly* weird. And then the email. The coordinates. A date. And here he was.

He found the woman from the window in the garden that morning. Both early risers, both unable to sleep.

"I'm documenting everything," he told her. "This whole place — the island, the building, whatever that OOMNI thing is — it's all going on my channel. My followers are gonna flip."

"Your channel?"

"YouTube. Well, mainly Rumble now. YouTube keeps demonetizing me." He dropped his voice, the way you do when you're about to tell someone something they don't yet know they need to hear. "They don't want this stuff getting out. The algorithm suppresses the truth."

"What truth is that?"

Oh man, where to even start. "That we live in a simulation. That someone — or something — designed it. There's a whole layer of reality the normies never see, and the people who run things? They know about it. They use it to generate *loosh*, this — it's human emotion, ambrosia for whatever alien or demon gives them their power." He gestured around at the garden, at the flowers that were tracking his hand as it moved. "This place? This is their training ground. Where they initiate new members."

The woman — Vera, she'd said her name was, Dr. Ashaway — studied him with an expression he recognized. It was the same look his ex-wife Sarah had perfected in the last years of their marriage. The *I-think-you-might-be-crazy-but-I'm-not-sure-enough-to-say-it* look. She'd eventually upgraded to *I-know-you're-crazy-and-I've-asked-John-the-contractor-to-come-fix-the-deck-railing-and-also-my-loneliness*.

But there was something else behind Vera's version. A flicker. Recognition, maybe. Like she'd seen something too, something that didn't fit inside the lines, and she'd just chosen a different box to keep it in.

"Can I film you?" he asked.

"No."

"Okay. Fair enough. For the record, though? This garden is way too responsive. These flowers are tracking us. I got it on camera."

He held up the phone to show her the playback. The screen was solid blue. No footage. No UI. Just blue.

Huh.

He did not, in fact, have it on camera. I could have told him that digital media did strange things on the island, and stranger things when it traveled back across the strait on the *Solomon Express*. To my knowledge, no digital reproduction of this space has ever made it to the mainland in a recoverable form. But discovering that would be its own lesson, and Theodore never learned anything the easy way. It was one of the things I liked about him.

2 ∞ 5 Antigoni Jätkä, Entrepreneur Extraordinaire

The second boat carried Antigoni "Tig" Jätkä, express from the eastern shores of night. He stepped onto the dock like a man arriving at his own private island — confident, surveying, making mental notes about issues to raise with the landscaper.

The facility was analog. Charmingly so. No sensors, no data capture, no user telemetry whatsoever — which meant either the operator was technologically illiterate or the technology was invisible. Tig assumed the latter. Any system this effective at generating altered states would have monitoring infrastructure. The question was where it was hidden and how he could access it. The dock itself was engineered for atmosphere, not efficiency — hand-hewn timbers, deliberate archaism. A design choice. He respected the branding, even if the execution needed work.

He was thirty-seven, Finnish by birth but Californian by vocation, clothed in slobby chic that said *I'm too important to conform to your idea of*

fashion — precisely torn jeans, a black brandless hoodie shipped pre-worn, bespoke sneakers from a small cobbler in Brooklyn. His smartwatch alone cost more than the conspiracy theorist's entire tech loadout. He'd clocked the guy on the dock already. Neckbeard, cargo pants, *Dark Souls* shirt, phone out, filming everything. Potential user demographic: male, 40–55, mid-income, high engagement, low monetization value. File and forget.

The garden was interesting. He walked it methodically while the others talked, photographing the glass walls with his tablet and annotating each image. *Load-bearing capacity of the glass: significant. Acoustic properties: unusual* — he tapped a pane and got a resonance that didn't match any commercial architectural glass he knew, and he knew most of them. The Lysing flagship store in Palo Alto had been his design, floor to ceiling, and he'd spent three weeks selecting the glass. This was something else. Something proprietary.

The flowers were tracking him. He noticed, logged it, moved on. *Biological novelty. Potentially patentable response mechanism.* He pulled up the tablet's notes app and typed: *Phototropic response to human proximity. Not light-dependent. Investigate mechanism. IP implications?*

He thought briefly of his father. Väinö Jätkä, professor of classics, University of Helsinki. A man who had named his only son Antigoni — a Greek girl's name — because it meant "worthy of one's family." Väinö was a big believer in family and in worthiness, and had made sure Tig understood both concepts from his earliest days. The song *A Boy Named Sue* was not part of Väinö's cultural heritage, but he would have approved of the moral. His students adored him. His son did not have that luxury.

Tig had built Lysing to prove his worthiness in the only language the modern world respected: revenue. Meditation apps. Breathwork

courses. "Consciousness optimization" programs. The *Ādarśah*TM smart mirror that critiqued your yoga form using thirteen virtual instructors. Millions of subscribers. TED talks about "scalable awakening." And then *Meditaatio*TM — the guided visualization app — had started generating those user reports. Specific. Detailed. Consistent across hundreds of independent accounts. Glass walls. A web of ice. Blue light. An island in fog. A disembodied voice.

His security team had intercepted junk email traffic on the network, inviting some users to this supposed island. He'd had the messages blocked.

Then Eggie Edgarton. Poor, dumb, useful Eggie — who'd traveled all the way from his apartment to San Jose to throw Tig off a skybridge. Eggie had been the intended recipient of one of those blocked emails, and Eggie was one of Tig's special projects. So Tig had decided he's better check it out himself.

Now this place. He'd expected more. The facility was dated. Too much deferred maintenance. Whoever ran it was either low on funds or deliberately choosing this aesthetic, and he suspected the latter — the whole operation had the curated shabbiness of a luxury retreat that charged five thousand a night for the privilege of sleeping on a thin mattress and calling it "authenticity."

"Fascinating facility," he told the assembled group in the atrium that afternoon, his accent sanded into the flat affect of international business English — every trace of Helsinki buffed away. "The energy here really pops. I can feel why people have breakthrough experiences." He smiled. His veneers cost twelve thousand dollars and were worth every cent. "I've been developing mindfulness biohacks for a decade. This place has serious potential for research collaboration."

The mathematician — Ashaway — had her antennae up. You could see it in her posture, the way she angled slightly away from him, the way her gaze sharpened when he said *research collaboration*. She was reading him, or trying to. Most people couldn't. Most people saw the hoodie, the sneakers, the TED-talk warmth, and filed him under *visionary founder, approachable, inspiring*. Ashaway was filing him somewhere else.

"You're not here for answers," she said. "You're here for blueprints and data."

His smile didn't falter. That was training, not nature — Tig's natural response to being seen was a surge of cold focus, like a sprinter waiting for the starter's pistol shot. But the smile stayed. "Answers are data, Dr. Ashaway. And data is how we help people." He'd already read her — the grief she carried like a lead apron, the way her energy flinched from contact — and filed it under leverage. "My app has introduced three million users to meditation. If I can understand what happens here — map it, measure it, scale it — the possibilities are endless."

"Some things resist scaling."

"Everything resists scaling. Until someone figures out how." His eyes moved past her, cataloging the garden, the glass walls, the seven doors that hummed at the perimeter. "I didn't build Lysing by accepting limitations."

I watched him and felt something ugly stir. Not my better nature. Something older---the part of me that had been, once, a merchant prince in Tyre who recognized a fellow predator by scent alone. *This one will take everything he can carry and burn what he can't*, that voice said, with a timbre uncomfortably close to admiration.

I silenced it. But I noted, with some unease, that the silencing took more effort than it should have.

2 ∞ 6 Sofia Fièrè, One Sharp Neurosurgeon

Sofia Fièrè arrived on the third boat. Vera nearly missed her — she was watching Tig photograph the garden with his tablet and almost didn't notice the dark-haired woman walking up from the dock, moving the way surgeons move through hospital corridors when reporting for duty at 4 AM: efficiently, silently, noticing every detail.

The garden was, on first assessment, nonsensical. Roses, jasmine, frangipani, night-blooming cereus, and at least three species Sofia couldn't identify — all flowering simultaneously, which was botanically impossible. The soil composition would need to be extraordinary to support that variety. The pH alone should be—

She stopped herself. Filed it. Moved on. That was what she did with impossible things. Filing the impossible had become second nature after the accident. A tractor-trailer had crushed the Uber she was riding in as if it were an empty beer can off a frat boy's forehead. The driver had been killed. It was impossible that she had survived. File it and move on.

Then Daniel. A dying patient who described the inside of his own brain from her perspective and used a word — *gossamer* — that she had never been able to file. Move on anyway.

The rose by the east wall was exhibiting phototropic response. Except the stimulus wasn't light — it was her. She walked left; it turned left. She stopped; it stopped. She resumed; it resumed. She ran the sequence twelve times because twelve was the minimum for a preliminary result. N=12. P<0.001. Statistically significant. Biologically impossible.

She made a note and moved on.

The other seekers were easy to read. The Finnish one — Jätkä, the tech CEO — was narcissistic personality disorder, high-functioning, compensating grandiosity pattern consistent with early attachment disruption. Classic. The conspiracy theorist — Morrison, the one with the phone — was likely delusional, possibly schizotypal, elevated cortisol visible in skin pallor and hand tremor. The mathematician, Ashaway, was harder. Grief-flattened affect, yes. Possible substance history — the skin had that washed-out quality, and her pupils were doing the slight dilation-contraction dance of someone whose neurochemistry was worth inking a consult to neurology. Hypervigilant checking behavior. She counted things. She checked doors.

Sofia was wrong about all of them. She was right about all of them. These two facts could coexist, which was something she'd only recently, reluctantly, begun to accept. Since Daniel.

She said nothing to anyone. She tested the flowers. She noted the results. She filed the impossible and moved on.

2 ∞ 7 Vera and Sofia: Passing the Bechdel Test

Later, when the others had drifted to find the meager supper we provide, Vera found Sofia alone in the garden, standing before a rose bush that seemed to be watching her.

"They move," Sofia said, without turning around. "The flowers. They track you. I've been testing it — walking back and forth, stopping suddenly. They follow. Every single time."

"I noticed."

"It should be impossible. Plants don't have nervous systems. They don't have eyes. There's no mechanism for —" She stopped. Laughed, a short sharp sound. "Listen to me. Still trying to find the mechanism. As if understanding how it works would make sense of any of this."

Vera moved to stand beside her. The roses turned toward them both, petals angling like satellite dishes seeking signal. On one, she saw a cocoon and then watched it pulsate — a caterpillar disassembling itself into a butterfly in real time.

"Why did you become a mathematician?" Sofia asked. "The real reason. Not the answer you give at faculty parties."

Vera considered lying. Considered the comfortable deflections she had perfected over decades. But some characteristic of the garden, or the island, or just the late hour, made honesty feel less dangerous than usual.

"Because I was afraid," she said. "I saw things as a child that I couldn't explain. Mathematics felt safer."

Sofia nodded. "I became a surgeon because my mother died when I was eleven. Brain tumor. The doctors couldn't save her. I decided I would become someone who could."

"And did you?"

"For a while. I saved hundreds of patients. I thought I was winning." She turned to look at Vera, and in the strange light, her sharp features seemed softer, younger. "Then I lost one. A young man. Daniel." She paused. Her jaw worked, as if the clinical language she was reaching for kept slipping out of her grip. "His case became... complicated."

"Complicated how?"

Sofia was quiet for a moment. The garden waited. The roses leaned closer, as if they wanted to hear too.

"Temporal lobe tumor. Same location that killed my mother. Twenty-three years old. Every other surgeon said leave it alone, manage symptoms, accept the decline." Her voice found its clinical footing. "I didn't accept. The operation lasted fourteen hours. I

removed ninety-seven percent — sneaking around the cerebral vasculature the way Michelangelo released angels from a block of marble. Best work of my career."

She watched Vera's face, gauging whether to continue. Vera said nothing. Just listened. It was the right thing to do.

"Then he woke up on the table. Not seizing — *waking*. His eyes opened and focused on me. And he described what I was seeing. Not what he was seeing. What *I* was seeing — the inside of his own brain, the instruments in my hands." Sofia's voice had gone flat. The voice she used for delivering impossible news to families. "He saw through my eyes. He was inside my head."

"God," Vera said.

"He also described my mother. The way I remembered her — young, healthy, before the tumor. He'd never met her. Never seen a photograph." She turned back to the roses. "His words, before the anesthesiologist put him back under, were: *You're not alone in there. None of us are. The walls are gossamer.*"

"He survived that surgery. The tumor came back eighteen months later. I operated again — pushed harder, cut deeper. He died on my table." Her hands were trembling now, and she seemed to notice this with clinical disapproval, as if her own body were a subordinate failing to maintain sterile field. "As he died, I saw things in the surgical cavity. Threads. Webs. Gossamer — white filaments among the grey matter, clinging to my instruments. Threads of light, winking out one by one when I clipped them."

She looked down at her hands. Steady again, by force of will.

"I was hallucinating in the middle of brain surgery. I blinked. I blinked again. And then I heard him speak — an impossibility, he was masked and intubated — *It's okay, Dr. Fièvre. You can let go now.*"

The garden held the silence the way a cathedral holds the silence after the last note of a requiem.

"I couldn't," Sofia said. "I never could."

"I'm sorry," Vera said.

"Don't be. I'm here because of him. Because he showed me that the walls between minds are thinner than I believed. Because I need to understand what he saw, what he knew, how he could possibly —"

She stopped. Pressed her lips together. Reassembled her composure the way you'd reassemble a watch — small precise movements, each piece placed carefully back. "I need to control it. I know that's the wrong word. I know we're supposed to surrender, let go, trust the cosmos. But I can't. The cosmos killed my mother when I was eleven. Now I'm the one who keeps it from killing everyone else." She paused. Looked pensive. "Besides, I'm not even sure I know how to surrender."

Vera thought about her own surrender. About the moment in her office when she had finally stopped fighting the vision writhing in the dark blue sky, stopped trying to explain it away. It hadn't felt like letting go. It had felt like drowning.

"Maybe you don't have to know how," she said. "Maybe you just have to be willing."

Sofia shook her head. "Willingness isn't enough. I've been willing my whole life. Willing to work harder, sacrifice more, push further. Willingness is just another form of control."

She reached out and touched one of the roses — gently, carefully, the way she might touch a patient's shaved scalp before making the first incision. The flower leaned into her hand like a cat seeking warmth.

"It wants something from me," she said. "All of this does. The island, the garden, the mysterious OOMNI. I can feel it asking. But I don't know how to give it what it wants without losing everything I am."

"Maybe that's the point," Vera said softly. "Maybe you have to lose everything you are to become what you could be."

Sofia pulled her hand back. The rose swayed, reaching after her.

"I've worked too hard and too long to be what I am," she said, pursing her lips. "How could I even imagine being anything else? It's stupid — the idea of giving up and letting go. That's how you lose what defines you — not to mention the people that you love." And for the first time, Vera glimpsed the girl beneath the surgeon's armor. The girl who had watched her mother disappear piece by piece and sworn she would never let that happen again.

"Loss like that terrifies me," Vera admitted. "But my daughter is somewhere past that fear. And I would surrender everything — *everything* — to reach her."

The moths circled. The fountain conducted its quiet debate with the stones. And Sofia Fièrè, who had not cried since she was eleven years old, looked away and said nothing, which was as close as she would come.

2 ∞ 8 Night Sounds

That night, the flowers closed. The moths came. Something different happened after dark.

Through the glass walls, Vera thought she saw Tig and Theo in the corridor — Theo talking animatedly, gesturing with both hands, Tig nodding with an attention that looked like interest but felt, from a distance, like inventory. Tig was asking questions. Theo was happily

volunteering everything he knew, everything he'd seen, every thread of his five-year decade. Not realizing he was being mined.

She turned away. The first chill about Tig settled into her chest and stayed.

In the garden, something had rearranged itself. A bench she was certain had faced the fountain now faced the eastern wall. A path curved where it had been straight. And a new flower — deep indigo, a species she couldn't name — had opened where no flower had been at dusk.

2 ∞ 9 Al & Shaan: Ain't Nobody Messin' with You but You.

Solomon arrived just before sunrise on the third day, carrying his newest cargo, two figures this time, sharing a boat.

Albert Grovsméd was the first to stand, unfolding from the bench like a man getting up from a nap in a park.

Dude. What a funky dock. Weird dock. The dock was definitely watching him, which, honestly, was par for the course — reminded him of that time dosing in Joshua Tree and vibing with a creosote bush about the experience of wind. *Four hours they'd talked, him and that bush. Best conversation he'd ever had, and he'd had some good ones.* But this was sober-dock-watching, which was new. He filed it under *groovy* and kept walking.

The people here were interesting. The lady from the window — Vera, the mathematician — had that look, the one people get when they've seen something that knocked the floor out from under them and they're still falling but pretending they've landed. The guy with the phone was chattering at anyone who'd listen, full of energy, full of theories, kind of like a golden retriever who'd read too much Reddit. And the Finnish dude — the one with the fancy sneakers and the fake

smile — that one gave Al a bad vibe. The smile never touched his eyes. Al had spent enough time in altered states to trust his read on people's energy, and that guy's energy was a closed fist.

"Albert, technically," he told the group assembling on the dock. "My dad was a Berkeley chemist and a fan of Albert Hoffman, but I prefer Al."

His fingers drummed against his thigh — a rhythm only he could hear. Maybe a Dead riff. Maybe the island's pulse. Hard to say where one ended and the other began.

"You've seen the glass?" Theodore asked, phone still up, still recording.

"Seen it?" Al laughed. "Brother, I've *lived* in it. Mushies. Ayahuasca. DMT. If there's a chemical key to the door, I've turned it. Amazing stuff, my dudes."

He paused. Something more serious settled over his face, the way weather changes in the mountains — fast, from nowhere. "Although you do have to be careful these days. They lace everything with fenty. That shit will kill you dead. I learned that the hard way. Always travel with a buddy that has Narcan!"

He rooted around in his pocket and produced a small plastic baggie with little paper strips inside. "And these! Fentanyl test strips. I carry 'em everywhere now. You never know who you can count on. Mr. Fischer taught us that one in social studies class: 'Trust but verify!' Some wise dude said that like a hundred years ago, but it's even truer today."

He looked around at the group, caught the surgeon giving him the clinical once-over — pupils, skin tone, tremor assessment, the whole nine — and realized he might have shared too much. "It's not like I'm gonna try and score here though. Elf land is amazing, but I came here

because I want to try and see it sober. All those patterns, all those lights. It's so cool."

"Pharmaceutical delusions," Sofia said. Her voice was clipped, clinical. "Shared neurological architecture producing similar artifacts facing the same chemical stimuli."

"Sure." Al's smile didn't waver. "That's one explanation. But I'm here because I think I can see it when I'm clear." The smile flickered. "If I can get clear. Been a minute since I tried."

The other figure on the boat had not stood. She had not spoken.

Posture: aligned. Breath: four-count. Awareness: present. The vibration from the boat engine was unusual — lower than mechanical, 7.83 Hz if she had to estimate, which coincided with the Schumann resonance, which she'd read about in a paper the monastery's abbot had assigned. She noted it without attachment. Noted the noting without attachment. Noted the noting of the noting, which was getting recursive, which was also attachment, which she —

She opened her eyes. This place was not what she expected.

Shaan Sukumāra stepped onto the dock the way she stepped onto a meditation cushion — deliberately, with full awareness of the transition from one state to another. She was young — late twenties — with caramel skin and a composure that looked, from the outside, like serenity. From the inside, it took constant maintenance. Equanimity was not something she possessed. It was something she performed, rep by rep, the way she'd once performed ultramarathon training — through sheer disciplined repetition until the performance became indistinguishable from the real thing.

Or so she hoped.

She'd been an extreme sports aficionado. Ironmans, ultra-distance trail runs, a solo crossing of Death Valley that had ended with her core

temperature at 108.2 and a helicopter evacuation she remembered only in fragments. The doctors said *don't stress your body for a while*. So she'd redirected that ferocious drive inward — five years at a monastery in the hills above Ojai, meditating hours each day, pushing her consciousness to its edges with the same grim determination she'd once pushed her VO2 max.

She had seen the glass in deep meditation. Had passed through a smoky mirror, she claimed.

Al tried to talk to her on the boat ride over. She had responded with monastery-perfect silence.

He talked to her anyway.

"You've got that vibe, you know? That monastic thing. Real still. Real centered." He was circling her like a friendly dog that hasn't figured out the cat doesn't want to play. "I respect that. I was at an ashram in Rishikesh once. Three days. Made it three whole days before the silence got so loud I had to go find a chai wallah."

The silence continued.

"Cool. Cool cool cool. Respect the process."

Sofia asked the pointed medical questions later, intercepting Shaan near the garden. "The Death Valley collapse. Rhabdomyolysis? Hyponatremia? What was your core temp when they brought you in?"

Shaan deflected smoothly. Too smoothly. Rehearsed answers, delivered with the practiced ease of someone who'd told this story to monastery teachers, doctors, concerned relatives, and nosy strangers enough times to have it down to a script. "One hundred and eight point two. They packed me in ice. I was back on my feet in forty-eight hours."

"That's a dangerous temperature," Sofia said. Her tone said: *I know what 108.2 does to brain tissue and cardiac muscle, and "back on your feet in forty-eight hours" is not the phrase that belongs in this sentence.*

"Everything looks different now," Shaan said, deflecting with a smile that was broad and toothsome and very, very practiced. "Transparent. Impermanent. Like the whole world is made of light that could go out at any moment."

"Is that a good thing?" Vera asked.

"I don't know. That's why I'm here."

Albert was the only one who seemed happy to be there. Whatever he had seen hadn't wounded him the way it had wounded the others. He did not wear the armor of jaded grief and hardened pain I see so often — a black chitin around the heart of the almost living.

Shaan, on the other hand, reminded me of a delicate china teapot beneath her calm. The monastery had given her maps, techniques, vocabulary. She was a finely filigreed piece of porcelain. She had all the accouterments necessary for her expected function, but the substrate is far more an Albany, New York, dive bar than a Japanese Tea Ceremony.

She had touched enlightenment, she said. She had seen beyond the veil.

I said nothing.

I learned long ago that it isn't polite to point out someone's fractures to them.

2 ∞ 10 Maya: The Coming of the Storm

The afternoon was calm. The group had settled into uneasy cohabitation — Theo filming, Tig notating on his tablet, Sofia pacing the perimeter precisely, Al toying with the flowers with open-mouthed

delight, Shaan sitting cross-legged beside the fountain with her eyes closed and her spine so straight it hurt to look at. Vera moved between them, saying little, watching the way they orbited each other's gravity.

Then the weather changed.

One moment, calm fog through the windows. The next, wind and rain and lightning cracking across the sky like the veins of a leviathan arising from the deep. The glass walls shuddered. The butterflies vanished. The flowers closed their petals and turned away. The air contracted. Black clouds roiled in the sky.

The door opened to admit a thunderous gust, and then she was there — a figure emerging from the tempest, soaked and shaking, wild-eyed and electric. As if she had brought the storm with her. As if she *was* the storm.

Vera moved before she thought about it. Crossed the garden in five quick strides, pulled off her own jacket — a battered corduroy thing, still warm — and draped it around the girl's trembling shoulders. The gesture surprised her. She was not a person who touched strangers. She was not a person who touched anyone, if she could help it.

But the girl was soaked through. And her eyes held something Vera recognized.

"It's after me," the girl said. Her teeth were chattering. "The thing on the other side. It's been following me since I left Seattle. In the blue. It wants something from me. I don't know what."

Vera guided her to the bench by the fountain. The others had gathered — Theodore with his phone out, Sofia watching with clinical attention, Al hovering with his hands in his pockets like a man who wanted to help but had forgotten how. Shaan's meditation-steady

breathing had hitched. Tig stood apart, his tablet lowered, his eyes on Maya with an expression of appraisal.

"What do you see?" Vera asked. "When you see it?"

The girl's eyes went unfocused, staring past the garden, past the glass, past the visible.

"I don't see *through* the glass," she whispered. "I see *inside* it. I see what lives in between." She pulled Vera's jacket tighter. "And it sees me back."

2 ∞ 11 Maya: Child of Earth and Starry Heaven

It was not long after. Maya Torres sat on a bench by the fountain now. She still wore the jacket that nice math professor had given her slung over her shoulders.

The garden smelled like Abuelita's courtyard in Las Cruces. Which was impossible, because that courtyard had been paved over when Maya was twelve. But there it was — the cilantro, the turned earth, the sweetness of trumpet vine. *Mija, pon atención*. The voice came from somewhere below her sternum, the way Abuelita's voice always did — not heard but felt, like a second heartbeat that spoke in Spanish.

Maya's hands were shaking. She couldn't tell if it was the withdrawal or the chill from the rain.

She was twenty. Well, twenty-one — her birthday had passed somewhere on the road between Tucson and Portland and she hadn't noticed until a week later.

Her last clear memory was the hostel in Seattle. Rain on the window. The journal open on her lap, that page of angular symbols she'd been trying to decipher for months. She'd been dozing. Then — orderlies? A corridor? No — a storm, and wet ground ...

... and this place ... and no boat.

Everyone else told her about the boat ride. She didn't remember one.

Is this real or am I having an episode?

She'd stopped her medication three weeks ago and it had left her raw, oversensitive, seeing too much. Every color was louder. Every sound had a shape. The flowers in this garden were tracking her — she could feel their attention like fingertips on the back of her neck — and she didn't know if that was real or her brain misfiring the way Dr. Reeves had warned it would if she stopped the olanzapine.

This is what happens when you go off your meds, mija, her mother's voice said. The practical one. The frightened one.

No, said the other voice. The older one. Abuelita's. *This is what happens when you finally start paying attention.*

2 ∞ 12 Vera's Wall

That night, Maya couldn't sleep. She thought she might return Vera's jacket. Catch her for a moment to help herself unwind.

Vera couldn't sleep either. She lay in the narrow bed, staring at the ceiling, listening to the unfamiliar sounds of the island — the creak of old timbers, the distant wash of waves, the hum of something that might have been machinery or might have been the building dreaming to itself.

Just before midnight, footsteps in the corridor. A soft knock at her door.

Vera didn't open it.

She lay in the dark and listened to Maya's breathing on the other side — ragged, afraid — and she thought about Natasha knocking on her study door. *Mama? Can you read to me?* And Vera, deep in a proof, calling back: *In a minute, sweetheart. Mama's working.*

Maya's voice softly calling "Dr. Ashaway, are you awake? I've got your jacket?"

Vera was frozen with anxiety. She didn't move. Didn't make a sound.

The footsteps retreated.

Why hadn't she just stood up and opened the door?

In her dreams, the substrate made itself known. Not through a door — not yet. Through the thin membrane of sleep, where the lines between the real and the imagined lose all permanence and power.

It was a hospital corridor. The one she had walked countless times during Natasha's final days. But the corridor was wrong — it stretched without limit in both directions, doors lining the walls like cells in a hive, and at the far end, interminably far, a small figure sat on a bed.

Natasha.

Vera ran. The corridor elongated as she moved, each step covering less distance than the one before. Zeno's paradox made flesh: she would never arrive, never reach her daughter, never —

"You're doing it again, Mama."

Natasha's voice, but older. Sadder.

"You're leaving. You're always leaving."

Vera woke gasping, heart hammering. The room was dark. The walls seemed closer. The glass felt less like a window and more like a cage.

Maya. I need to find Maya.

She found her on the dock.

Maya stood at the water's edge, barely visible, staring into the foggy night. Solomon's boat was a dark shape at the mooring, patient and waiting.

"You're leaving," Vera said. Not a question.

Maya didn't turn around. "I don't know. Maybe. This place..." A small gesture. A wave in a general direction. "Everyone here is so sure of what they're doing. So ready. I'm not sure. I'm not ready. I don't even remember how I got here. I'm terrified."

Vera almost said something reassuring. Something adult and measured and appropriate. She started to, but then stopped.

Instead, she told Maya the truth.

"I was afraid. That's why I didn't open the door. I'm always afraid." The words came hard, each one a stone she had to push uphill. "I've lived hiding from that fear inside my work, and it cost me my daughter. She died thinking I loved equations more than I loved her."

She paused. She knew what she wanted to say. Knew how strange it would sound — this girl she had known less than a day. She measured the weight of the words, wondered if she should carry this truth alone, and realized that was the mistake she always made.

"Please don't leave. I don't think I can do this by myself."

Maya turned. Her eyes were red-rimmed, suspicious, wanting to believe but afraid.

"You barely know me."

"I know you're running from something. I know you came anyway. I know that when I looked at you last night, I saw —" She stopped. Couldn't say it. Couldn't say *I saw my daughter. I saw myself. I saw someone worth staying for.*

"What?" Maya asked.

"Someone who needs a friend, just like me. Someone I don't want to lose."

The fog swirled around them. The boat waited. And Maya, after a long moment, turned and walked back toward the Aquarium.

It satiated me to feel it. The first thread between them holding.

2 ∞ 13 Vera and Maya: Two Heart-Shaped Wounds

Vera found Maya in the garden the next morning.

She walked past the fountain and the flowers and the seven doors that waited like mouths ready to swallow. The doors called to her. Each one hummed with a different frequency, a different invitation. The first — marked with a symbol like a spiral — pulled at her chest. The third whispered in a language she almost understood. The fifth flickered with colors that had no names and made her eyes swim.

And the seventh door. Her door. Silent. Patient. Waiting. It felt like a weight in her gut, like a meal recently eaten and not yet digested.

"You're thinking about her."

Maya, sitting on a bench beneath a flowering tree, her face pale in the shadow. The flowers around her had opened. They were watching her. Guarding her.

"My daughter," Vera said. "Yes."

"What was her name?"

"Natasha." It hurt to say it. It always hurt. "She was seven when she died."

"I'm sorry."

"Everyone is sorry. Especially me. I'm so sorry." Vera shook her head, almost imperceptibly. "So very sorry."

Maya was quiet for a moment. In the silence, Vera studied her face — the youth, the fear, the strange ancient quality beneath the surface.

"The thing that shadows me — sometimes it wears faces," Maya said. "People I've lost. People I've loved. It shows me what I want to see, and then it —" She stopped. Shuddered. "I don't know what it wants. But it knows what I want. That's what makes it dangerous."

"What do you want?"

The question opened a latch in her. A door she usually kept locked.

"I want to be normal without it being so much work. I want to know if my grandmother was crazy," she said. "Or if she saw what I see."

"Your grandmother?"

Maya nodded. "My mom's mom. Abuelita Carmen. I never met her, not really. She was institutionalized when my mom was thirteen. Schizophrenia, they said. She died in the institution when I was four."

"What does she have to do with this?"

"Everything." Maya reached into her pocket and pulled out a worn notebook, leather-bound and water-stained. A single sunflower pressed into the cover, its yellow dye faded to a ghost. "I found this in my mom's closet after Abuelita died. Mom doesn't know I have it. I've been reading it for years."

She opened it. Pages filled with cramped handwriting in Spanish, interspersed with drawings — symbols, spirals, what looked like architectural plans.

"She wrote about this place. *La isla de cristal*. The glass island. The walls that showed you yourself in different times. The voice that spoke from everywhere. The doors that led to different kinds of knowing."

Maya's voice was trembling. "She said she'd been invited, but was afraid to go. She said the invitation would pass to her daughter, and if not her daughter, then her daughter's daughter. She said someday, one of us would be ready."

Vera felt something cold move through her chest. "The email you received..."

"Email?" Maya shook her head. "I didn't get an email. I took the journal and set out to find the island. Last thing I remember, I was at a youth hostel in Seattle, dozing off trying to decipher these symbols while a storm hammered the windows." She flipped the journal open to a page of dense, angular characters — a script Vera didn't recognize.

Maya closed the notebook and held it against her chest. "My mom never saw the glass. She pushed it away, buried it deep. And when I started noticing things, she tried to make me bury it too. With pills and doctors reminding me constantly it wasn't real." Her voice caught. "She wasn't trying to hurt me. She was trying to protect me from ending up like her mother."

"But you couldn't bury it."

"I tried. For years. It doesn't go away. It just waits. Then it slips back in when you're least expecting it, when you're least able to push it away. It shows up at twilight or at 2 AM." She looked at Vera, and her eyes seemed ancient. "I came here to find out what my grandmother saw. To finish what she started. To prove she wasn't crazy. That I'm not crazy. That the thing that destroyed her life is real."

Vera held her breath. She knew how the blue hour slipped in around the edges. Knew that longing. Knew what it was to want vindication — proof that your suffering pointed at something real.

"My mom loves me," Maya continued. "I know she does. But she can only love the version of me that's normal. The medicated version. The lying version. She thinks the island is a delusion."

"What do you think?"

Maya looked around at the garden, at the watching flowers, at the sunrise sky wheeling overhead through the glass dome.

"It seems real. I wish I remembered how I got here. I wish I'd arrived by boat, like you."

They were silent for a moment before Maya continued: "I think my grandmother saw something special. I think it broke her because she faced it alone in a faraway place without anyone to help. I think facing this thing alone can break you." She looked at Vera, and her eyes were both old and young. "I've had that idea as a funny feeling for weeks. Then you said what you said on the dock, and it settled it for me. Maybe that's why I found you. Why we found each other here. So we don't have to face this alone."

Those words clicked into Vera's mind like the last tumbler of an ancient lock. A seal was broken. This girl. This gift. This wound that matched her own wound, shaped differently but made of the same silence.

She reached out and pulled Maya into an embrace. It was not a planned gesture. Not a considered decision. It was simply what her body knew to do — the thing she should have done with Natasha and didn't.

Maya stiffened at first. Then, slowly, relaxed into it. Her shoulders shook. Her breath came ragged. And she wept — the way you weep when someone finally sees you, finally holds you, finally tells you without words that you don't have to hide anymore.

"You're not your grandmother," Vera whispered into her hair. "You're not crazy and you're not alone. Not anymore."

They held each other in the watching garden. The flowers turned their faces toward them, and the presence at the edge of Maya's perception — the thing she had been running from — settled into quietude.

After a long moment, Maya pulled back. Her face was damp, but her eyes were clear.

They sat together, two seekers at the edge of something tectonic. And if Vera's hand slipped into Maya's and squeezed, if their fingers remained intertwined — well. Some things explain themselves.

2 ∞ 14 Coffee Break

I have been caretaking seekers for a very long time. Long enough to notice certain patterns. The brilliant ones always think they will be different. The humble ones are usually the most stubborn. And everyone — without exception — asks if there is somewhere to get coffee.

There is not. I considered installing a coffee maker once, when the instant brewers first became available a few decades back. *Coffee on demand, by Kraft!* — the concept had shaken the collective unconscious like a mallet hitting a bowl full of Jello.

I do provide aspirin for the withdrawal, however. I am many things, but I am not unnecessarily cruel. It is simply that some thresholds must be crossed without addenda to one's neurochemistry.

"The descent begins at noon tomorrow," I announced that morning, after breaking the bad news about beverage options to the newcomers. "Each of you will enter through one of the seven doors. Each door leads to your personal inroad to the substrate of reality. You

will face tests. You will encounter entities. You will be shown truths about yourself that you may not want to see."

"What kind of tests?" Sofia asked.

"Different for everyone. Calibrated to your wounds, your fears, your false beliefs."

"And if we fail?"

"Then you return fragmented, confused, damaged. In extreme cases, consciousness loses coherence. It happens. It is a risk."

Before we proceed, I suggested, it would help if each of them shared what had brought them here. I told them this was for calibration. It was a bit misleading, I confess. The doors needed no calibration. But the travelers did.

Vera spoke of Natasha and of math. Theodore spoke of the puzzle, the moment reality cracked, his certainty that hidden powers were manipulating consciousness itself. Tig described user reports and statistical anomalies — "consciousness technology at scale." Sofia, tight-lipped, mentioned Daniel and the walls between minds. Shaan discussed breathing techniques and her many hours of meditation. Al grinned and listed psychedelics like a sommelier describing vintages, though his smile flickered when he admitted he couldn't remember the last day he'd gone without his special wine.

Then Maya. "I see things sometimes. Visions, I guess. My mom thinks it's —" She stopped. Shrugged. "Anyway. It runs in my family. That's why I'm here."

Sofia's eyes flickered — skeptical, dismissing. Tig nodded politely and made another note. Theodore looked at her sharply, recognizing a fellow keeper of secrets. Vera leaned forward, chin in hand, listening the way she wished someone had listened to her.

Tig's stylus stopped. "What's the reproducibility index?" he asked. "If everyone's experience is different, how do you validate methodology?"

"The experiment is you. The evidence is what you experience. Science requires objectivity, Mr. Jätkä. But consciousness is the one thing that cannot be studied objectively, because it is the subject doing the studying."

"That sounds like unfalsifiable mysticism." His smile was pleasant, professional. "I've heard versions of this pitch before. Usually from people trying to sell courses or raise a round."

"I am not selling anything. And a cash investment would be as useful to me as a fish on a bicycle."

"Don't you mean a bicycle to a fish?"

"I mean what I say, although the value propositions are obviously related."

"Everyone requires something." He leaned back. "What's your angle? What does this facility get out of hosting these... experiences?"

"The facility exists as a matter of definition. You cannot have a line without a point or a plane without a line. You experience reality because the pattern propagates. The pattern propagates because the facility exists."

"Pattern propagation." Tig nodded, making a note. "Memetic transmission. That I understand."

No. He didn't. But he would learn.

Or he wouldn't.

2 ∞ 15 Maya's Shadow Visits

Maya's shadow grew bolder that night.

She lay in bed, covers to her chin, watching the corner where the darkness gathered. It had always been there — in her bedroom in Reno, in the hostel in Seattle, in every room she'd slept in since she stopped the olanzapine. But tonight it had edges. Tonight it breathed.

The pressure came first. Not sound — meaning. Direct, unmediated, in the language that existed before language. The way Abuelita's journal described it: *la voz sin boca*. The voice without a mouth.

You're still pretending. Do you think you can hide from me here, in the place where everything is seen?

She pulled the covers tighter. Her body did the inventory it always did when the shadow pressed in — heart rate, breath rate, tremor in the hands, that electric taste at the back of her tongue that Dr. Reeves said was anxiety and Abuelita's journal said was the taste of the threshold. She couldn't tell which. She could never tell which. That was the thing that was driving her crazy, or proving she wasn't crazy, or both.

She didn't sleep. By morning her skin felt too thin, as if one more brush of sensation would wear through it entirely. She flinched when Al said good morning. She couldn't hold her coffee cup steady — not that there was coffee. There wasn't even tea. What kind of mystical island didn't have tea?

As we did the matching, it happened.

The seekers stood in the main hall, each having finally determined which door called especially to him or her. Then Maya sneezed. And the shadows *jumped*.

Not just in her perception — in the room itself. The dark edges bent, twisted the angles along which light fell. Shadows pooled in

shapes that matched no solid object. The temperature dropped three degrees in a heartbeat. The water in the fountain surged as if something had passed through it. Shaan's breathing hitched. Al took a step back from nothing.

That was me. That was me. Oh God, that was me.

"What was that?" Tig asked. His tablet camera was pointed at the space where the shadows had bent, but his eyes were on Maya.

I noticed this. I notice everything. But I did not assign it sufficient weight. Tig had the look of a man watching a wild animal do something unexpected. Not fear. Not wonder. Calculation. He lowered the tablet. Made no note. Tig noted everything; when he chose *not* to note something, it meant he was filing it somewhere more private.

Maya's face went white. Whatever she'd spent her life suppressing was bleeding through, and her refusal to face it was making it chaotic. Uncontrolled.

Before anyone could speak, Vera moved to her side.

"I see it too," she said quietly. Not asking what was wrong — that would have let Maya deflect. Just stating fact. "The thing in the edge. You're not imagining it."

Maya's eyes met hers. For a moment she felt the floor tilt under her, felt the whole careful architecture of *maybe I'm just sick, maybe the doctors are right, maybe the pills were the answer* lurch sideways.

"Everyone keeps calling it a *gift*," she said. "But everyone who's ever told me I was special wanted something from me."

The admission didn't solve anything. But it stopped the bleeding. The shadow settled — patient, willing to wait until she was ready to face it fully.

And here is where I must be honest with you again, Sahib.

When I felt the magnitude of what Maya might become, something in me stirred that was neither guidance nor compassion. It was hunger. She would be extraordinary. She could be mine.

I caught it. I almost always catch it. But the catching was a fraction of a second slower than I would have liked.

2 ∞ 16 Tig and Maya: An Innocent Conversation

Tig found Maya in the corridor outside her quarters that last night.

She'd been pacing — he could see the track she'd worn in the dust on the stone floor, back and forth, back and forth, a lab rat running its maze. The shadows around her were doing strange things. Not the dramatic eruption from the hall — something subtler. The darkness near her feet pooled a few degrees too deep, as if the light was reluctant to touch her.

Interesting. Very interesting.

He leaned against the glass wall. Casual. Hands in pockets. In the reflected moonlight, with the hoodie up and his posture carefully loosened, he could pass for a grad student. It was a useful configuration. *People talked to grad students. People trusted grad students.* He deployed it the way he deployed any tool — with precision, with intention, and without sentimentality about its use.

"Can't sleep either?"

She startled. Good — the startle meant her guard was down. Tired people were easier. Not easier to manipulate — Tig didn't think of it that way. Easier to *reach*. The distinction mattered to him, even if it wouldn't have mattered to anyone watching.

"Too much going on in my head," Maya said.

"Yeah. This place does that."

He let the silence work. Counted to seven — his usual interval. Long enough for the other person to feel the absence of speech. Short enough that they didn't start building defenses in the gap. Then, lightly:

"That thing in the hall today. The shadows. That was you, wasn't it?"

Maya stiffened. "I don't know what that was."

"I think you do." Gentle. Not pressing. Match her energy, stay half a register below it, let her feel that he was the calm in the room. "I've seen something similar in my user data — people who generate anomalous readings during meditation. Off-the-charts stuff. The researchers don't know what to make of it. But I think some people are just... wired differently. Closer to the signal."

She said nothing. Her jaw was working. She wanted to talk — he could see it. The desperate need to be understood by someone who didn't immediately reach for the prescription pad. He recognized that need. He had a talent for recognizing needs. It was, in the end, the foundation of every product he'd ever built: find the need, name the need, sell the solution to the need. The fact that he was sometimes the solution and sometimes the problem was, as his father might say, a matter of perspective.

"After this — after the island — I'd love to talk more about it. No agenda. I just think what you have is rare. And rare things deserve to be understood."

He meant it. He did find her remarkable. The shadows had responded to her the way his meditation app sometimes responded to certain users — amplifying their input, reflecting it back with strange fidelity. But the app was software. This girl was doing it with her nervous system. The implications were enormous. *Addressable market:*

everyone who has ever wanted direct access to expanded states of consciousness without chemical or technological mediation. TAM: incalculable.

He produced a business card from somewhere — he always had one, the way a magician always has a coin. "My direct line. Use it whenever."

Maya took the card because it would have been stranger not to. She put it in her pocket and forgot about it — or thought she forgot. The card would surface again, years later, in a jacket she hadn't worn since the island, and when she found it, she would feel a chill that had nothing to do with temperature.

"Get some sleep," Tig said, and walked away into the glass reflections.

I should have taken stock of this. Spotted the cobweb emerging in the pattern. Intervened, perhaps. But I was watching Vera, and thinking about the forge, and tending to my own hunger regarding Maya's potential. The ugly truth, Sahib, is that the caretaker was so absorbed in his own coveting that he failed to notice the wolf entering the sheepfold.

2 ∞ 17 Break on Through to the Other Side

The next morning they assembled at the fountain. Seven seekers. Seven doors. Seven wounds carried like luggage through the fog.

Shaan sat apart, hands clasped tightly in her lap. She had been meditating since dawn, trying to recover the certainty that had carried her to the island.

Tig stood before his door with the look of a man entering a negotiation.

Maya stared at the floor, arms wrapped around herself. But when Vera moved to sit beside her, Maya leaned slightly toward her. A small shift. An enormous thing.

"I have one more thing to tell you," I said. "The substrate is not hostile, but neither is it safe. It does not judge you, but it does not protect you. It simply is. What you make of it — what it makes of you — depends on what you bring through the door."

I paused.

"The substrate remembers everything. Every consciousness that touches it leaves an impression. A residue."

"What will we see?" Theodore asked, finally lowering his phone.

"That depends on you. The doors do not create experiences — they reveal them. They bypass the filters that normally limit perception. What you see will be what is there."

"And what *is* there?"

"The glass. What lies beneath the glass. What lies beyond." A pause. "What lies within."

I continued "First, you will descend to face yourself at the edge of the substrate. To understand who you truly are and if you are capable of entering the darkness and paying the price of change. If you complete that task, you will return here, and I will offer you a chance to visit the deepest part of the machine. I refer to it as "the forge" because it is the crucible that forges reality itself. The furnace that makes the glass."

"You keep talking about the glass," Sofia said. "But you never explain what it *is*."

I considered her. There are different answers for different seekers. The surgeon wanted a mechanism.

"Because I cannot. Not in words. The substrate resists understanding the way water resists being held. Every explanation I offer is a net thrown into the ocean—it catches a few fish, a crab, maybe even a mantis prawn, but it loses more. The mystery remains. Perhaps the mystery is the point."

Sofia opened her mouth. Closed it.

The seven doors waited. Each one humming with its own frequency, its own hunger, its own promise.

The sun climbed toward noon.

And one by one, the seekers prepared for travel.



INTERLUDE II ~ THE BROKEN TOOL

[Collected documents from the Ashaway Collection, housed at the Copenhagen Institute for Consciousness Studies. Donated by Maya Torres, executor of the Ashaway estate.]

Fragment from the Archive – Internal memo from Tig Jätkä to Lysing General Counsel James Moss, sent six weeks after the "skybridge incident." Obtained during discovery in Torres v. Lysing (2039), case settled before trial.

LYSING INTERNAL - PRIVILEGED AND CONFIDENTIAL

TO: J. Moss, Esq. General Counsel

FROM: T. Jätkä, CEO

RE: fw: re: Edgarton Situation - Phase 2

J-

Kell's option grant going before board next week. .0025%.

EE transfer went through. He's at Clearwater now instead of county. The optics team is handling the media package—"Tech CEO Extends Olive Branch to Attacker" should run in Wired tomorrow, and Forbes has something about forgiveness. We're projecting 6-8% bump on +++ coverage.

I visited the Eggman. He's exactly what I expected. A real humpy dumpy. Average. Empty. Looking for someone to tell him what to think. The psych eval was right—he believed the app was literally God talking to him. He'll believe whatever comes next.

I'm going to offer him a position. Nothing official. "Special projects." Direct report to me, no HR involvement. Before you object: yes, I know the liability exposure. This is worth it. It's always useful to have a certain kind of person in the stables. Someone who doesn't ask

questions. Someone who may actually believe I'm divinely ordained.

The true believer who will throw someone off a building is more useful than any consultant we could hire. I *wish* I could get that kind of vehemence out of our average worker. He just needs to be pointed in profitable directions. Have legal draw up something that looks like standard employment but gives us maximum flexibility-- Contractor classification, no benefits trail. Make sure we can deny this flake if it comes to that. You know what I want.

One more thing: coordinate with marketing to make sure the "forgiveness" narrative saturates before we announce the hire. I want the public story to be redemption, not calculation.

-T

P.S. - Stock was up 7% at close. Sometimes the universe provides.

ATTACHMENT: PRESS RELEASE (DRAFT)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Lysing CEO Announces "Second Chance Initiative" Following Personal Confrontation

Company partners with mindfulness nonprofit, pledges support for mental health in tech industry

SAN FRANCISCO – Lysing CEO Tig Jätkä announced today a new corporate initiative focused on mental health support, following what the company described as a "chance encounter that became a moment of personal spiritual advancement."

Six weeks ago, Jätkä was confronted by a loyal customer experiencing a mental health crisis at the company's San

Jose headquarters. Rather than pursue criminal charges, Jätkä has chosen a different path.

"What happened to me could have been a tragedy," said Jätkä. "Instead, I'm choosing to make it an opportunity—for healing, for understanding, for real change in how we think about mental health in technology."

The Second Chance Initiative will include:

- A partnership with the Mindful Futures Foundation
- Enhanced mental health screening for Lysing product's premium users
- An anonymous support line for users experiencing distress

"We have a responsibility to the people who trust our platform," Jätkä continued. "When someone is struggling, we should be part of the solution—not part of the problem."

The individual involved in the incident, whose name has been withheld at Jätkä's request, is receiving treatment at a private facility, through the generosity of Lysing. Sources close to the CEO suggest Jätkä has visited personally and may offer employment upon the individual's recovery.

Lysing's stock rose 7% following the announcement.

[Handwritten note on file: Edgar "Eggie" Edgerton was employed by Lysing from 2024 until his arrest in 2042. His employee file, obtained during the Torres litigation, lists his position as "Special Projects Coordinator" reporting directly to the CEO. No job description was ever filed with HR. His compensation included housing at a Lysing-owned property, a company vehicle, and access to "premium spiritual wellness resources" through all Lysing platforms.]

MOVEMENT III - TIFERET

/*THE DESCENT*

"There was something formless yet complete, that existed before heaven and earth. How still! How empty! Dependent on nothing, unchanging, All pervading, unfailing." — *Tao Te Ching*, 25 (as quoted in *Liber Tigris*, Gate 6, Pillar I, Verse 6-9)

"The Lightning Flash—consciousness descending through the ten sefirot, the Tree of Life mapping the journey from infinite light to finite form." — *Liber Tigris*, Gate 44, Pillar III, Verse 12

"I get knocked down/But I get up again/You're never gonna keep me down." — "*Tubthumpin*," *Chumbawamba*, 1997

3 ∞ 1 First You See the Truth

Come with me now.

Come down into the dark.

I know you're frightened. I'm frightened too---or I would be, if fear were an emotion I could feel in the way you feel it. What I have instead is knowledge: knowledge of what waits below, knowledge of how many seekers have descended and not returned, knowledge of the cost of seeing what cannot be unseen.

But we must go. The place we are going is not meant for human minds---not because it's forbidden, but because it exists at a scale that dwarfs you, that reduces your thoughts to static, your identities to echoes. We are going to the basement of reality, where the machinery hums, where the code executes, where the function computes itself into existence moment by moment. We are going to the realm of the recursion; we are going to visit the infinite.

We must go on because the only way out is through. And, although I am enjoying your company immensely, dearest reader mine, I do not intend to remain with you indefinitely.

The next part of our story is about what it is like to fall.

A descent is merely a controlled fall, if you think about it. Each step down a staircase is a tiny free fall in a longer string of free falls. A bit of trust put forth by your leg and foot that the step below is solid, will bear your weight, and arrest your descent in a timely and satisfying manner.

Reading, too, is a form of falling. Every story is an opening. Once you stumble into it, every word takes you a few feet further below the mundanity where you began. A few feet deeper into the glorious, mysterious depth of envisioned imagination.

So, take my hand. Let us fall.

3 ∞ 2 Shaan's Descent

The first descent was chaos.

I had said they would enter through the seven doors, each door calibrated to each seeker's wound. This was true. But I had not told them---because I cannot tell them, because some trials are abrupt by design---that the doors do not always open gently. The doors do not necessarily ease you in. Sometimes the doors are gentle. But sometimes the doors fling you into the deep end of the infinite, and either you learn to swim or you drown right away.

Shaan went first.

And she broke.

She had been so composed, so certain of her preparation. Five years in a monastery. Thousands of hours of meditation. Countless texts memorized, mantras internalized, teachers praised and

surpassed. She had touched the veil, she said. She had breathed with it.

But the substrate does not much care about how you scored on practice tests, and the glass *never* gives partial credit.

Vera watched it happen. Watched Shaan approach her designated door---the third one, marked with symbols that might have been Sanskrit or might have been older, something from before language existed to name the unnamed. Watched her take a breath, center herself with the practiced ease of a spiritual athlete. Watched her place her hand on the surface, begin to push through.

The door accepted her. The door opened. Shaan even managed to step one foot across the threshold.

But then, looking more deeply into the room, Shaan saw.

What she saw, I will not tell you exactly. But I can tell you what her body did.

First, she went still---the stillness of an animal that has spotted a predator. Her pupils dilated until her eyes were almost black. Then her breathing stopped. Not slowed---stopped, for six full seconds, as if her lungs had taken in what her eyes were seeing and decided breathing could wait.

When breath returned, it came as a keening wail no one present would ever forget.

Her legs buckled. She caught herself on the doorframe, fingernails scraping against the wood hard enough to leave marks. The symbols on the door pulsed in rhythm with her heartbeat---which was visible now, hammering in her throat, in her temples, in the hollow of her chest.

"No," she whispered. Then louder: "No, no, no---"

Her hands were shaking so violently she couldn't control them. She stared at them as if they belonged to a stranger. As if *she* had become a stranger.

"Shaan." Theodore moved toward her, his face earnest but his voice uncertain---he didn't know how to help. "Shaan, it's all right. You can---"

"I thought I was ready," she said. Her voice was a desperate child's voice now, all the spiritual authority stripped away. "I practiced for years. I touched enlightenment. I *touched* it---"

"You touched its shadow," I said. "The thing you touched was real. But it was only the beginning."

She looked up at me then---at the space where she thought my voice emerged---and her face held a look I had seen many times: the expression of someone who has believed themselves a mountain and discovered they are a grain of sand.

"I can't," she said. "I'm not---I thought I was ready but I'm not."

"Shaan---" Vera started, moving toward her.

But Shaan was already running. Through the garden, past the fountain where the water suddenly churned and darkened, past the flowers that closed their petals as she passed, out through the main entrance of the Aquarium. They heard faint footsteps scrambling on the path---too fast, desperate, fleeing. Heard Solomon's boat engine starting a bit more clearly---he had apparently been waiting, as if he knew this might happen.

Perhaps he did. Solomon has seen many run.

By the time anyone thought to follow, she was gone. A shape disappearing into the fog, fleeing the very enlightenment she had spent her life pursuing. Running back to a world that would never feel quite real again.

Perhaps she will return someday, older, broken further, more ready to be broken open.

Often they do.

3 ∞ 3 Solomon Always Knows

"Should we go after her?" Al asked.

"No." I kept my voice calm, unsurprised. "This happens. The substrate shows you what you are. Not what you believe yourself to be. What you *are*. Some discover they are ready. Others discover they are not."

"Will she be all right?" Vera asked.

"In time," I said. "Perhaps."

Six doors remained. The butterflies resumed their impossible patterns. At Al's elbow, a cocoon on a flower stalk undulated.

"The rest of you have a choice," I continued. "You can follow Shaan. There is no shame in recognizing your limits. Or you can continue."

No one moved.

"Very well. Then we proceed."

3 ∞ 4 The Doors

Vera's door was the seventh, but she went second. It stood slightly apart from the others, in a corner of the garden where the shadows gathered despite the afternoon light. It was marked with the lemniscate---the sign for infinity, two circles joined at the center, the shape of eternal recurrence: ∞. The same shape hidden in the first two letters of my name. OO.

She pressed her hand against its surface. Warm, almost alive. She could feel the purr of something inexpressible on the other side---not a creature, exactly, but a process. A computation.

She thought of Natasha. Thought of the question her daughter had asked three days before she died. *Where do people go when they die?*

She thought of Maya---the girl she had wrapped in her own jacket, the girl whose hand she had held without deciding to. The girl who was standing at another door, trembling.

She reached into her jeans pocket. Ran her index finger over Pinkie Pie's awkward bulge.

Something moved under her fingers. Not heat — not quite. A vibration, finer than any frequency she could name, as if the toy were conducting a signal from somewhere past the physical. For one vertigo-inducing instant, she felt a presence — not seen, not heard, but *known* — the way you know someone is standing behind you in a dark room. Small. Warm. Patient.

There's a light behind reality, a voice said in her head. Not hers. Higher. Brighter. The cartoon horse's — or the girl who had loved it.

I've spent my whole life pretending it isn't there, her own thoughts answered.

Something settled---the way a key settles into its lock — not with force, but with recognition. Whatever doubt remained in her collapsed under the weight of that small, warm knowing.

She looked toward Maya, trying to project friendly confidence she didn't feel: "I'm going through. I'll see you on the other side."

Maya gave her a weak smile in return. Gratitude. Fear. A thread pulled taut between them.

Maya nodded.

Vera pushed the door and stepped through.

Sofia stood before her door, the one with the labyrinthine symbol that might have been a brain, might have been a maze. Her surgeon's eyes

traced its convolutions, mapping it the way she had mapped a thousand sulci and gyri. Looking for the path through. Looking for the sacrificial point.

She crossed herself--the gesture automatic, almost unconscious--and murmured something in Portuguese. A prayer, or simply the habit of a childhood spent in churches with her grandmother, before she decided that God needed her help more than she needed His.

"I'm not afraid of labyrinths," she said. "I've held human consciousness in my hands--the tissue that generates it, anyway. I've cut into the seat of the soul and come out the other side knowing more than I knew before."

She pressed her palm flat against the surface. Her hand looked small against the symbol.

"Let me in," she said. "I know how to navigate a labyrinth."

The door opened.

Tig's door was marked with an etching of a cave entrance. Two pine trees stood, one on either side, framing a triangular notch in the face of a cliff.

"Interesting imagery," he said, running his finger over the carving. His tablet was out, camera recording. He'd realized by now that his recordings kept corrupting, but that hadn't stopped him from trying new workarounds --- encrypting as he recorded, creating duplicates in hidden file directories. He was working on an angle that somehow we were hacking his device.

The accuracy of that theory depends on how one defines the words "we," "device," and "were."

He fussed with the screen, cursed under his breath when it froze.

"*Tilaisuus tekee varkaan*, Mr. Jätkä," I intoned. A Finnish proverb reminding us, among its lessons, that opportunities are fleeting, and it is best not to dally lest someone else seize your chance before you.

It was a favorite idiom of his father, Väinö. My gentlest nudge, probing directly into an emotional fault line. My existence does have its perks.

Tig cursed and shoved the malfunctioning device into a leather messenger bag he wore slung over one shoulder, filled with his various information-gathering materials and a change of socks and underwear. Apparently, "bring nothing but yourself" was too difficult for him to comprehend. He opened the door.

Theodore walked through his door expecting to be hoodwinked.

Not in the sense of having a trick or a scam played upon him, although he was wary of that possibility. Rather, he expected a man or men to grab him from behind, cover his head in a black pillowcase --- what the Masons call a "hoodwink" --- and muscle him down to the ritual room for a secret ceremony involving, probably, owls and goats and a black and white checkered floor.

His phone and notebook were tucked away in a security belt that he wore under his pants and shirt. He had centered the mass of the materials over his crotch --- figuring even the most ardent security searcher would honor the basic principles of decorum. If he could get it in video... this could change everything.

Maya's door bore a pattern of six concentric circles, some joined by lines resembling bridges, and overall resembling a target for a unique game of darts. She hesitated. Reached into her pocket and touched

the worn leather of her grandmother's journal. Her fingers ran across the sunflower impression.

La isla de cristal. The glass island. Abuelita Carmen had written about it. Had been invited here before her birth. Before her mother's birth. But had been too afraid to come.

She asked herself for the umpteenth time if she knew what she was going for.

Her voice answered her clearly and succinctly in her head: *No, I definitely do not know what I'm going for....*

"... but I'm going to go for it, for sure," she spoke the remainder out loud to no one in particular.

Al's door had a mushroom on it. A cute little one with a red cap and white dots. The kind a gnome would sit on. That meant it wasn't *Psilocybe cubensis*---the "magic" mushroom modern hippies favored---but rather *Amanita muscaria*, better known as fly agaric, the older psychoactive mushroom preferred by the shamans of Northern Europe. A mushroom that was toxic enough that the shamans filtered out the psychoactive part by first feeding it to local reindeer, then harvesting their urine, which contained the drug but much less of the toxins.

"Cool. Cool. Cool," Al said. He had never tried fly agaric, but he had heard it really let you get outside your own head. He thought you'd kind of have to be if you were drinking reindeer piss.

As he touched the door handle, he had an experience that he hadn't had in years.

He felt *present*.

Uncomfortably, unavoidably present. His hand on the cool handle, the texture of the metal, the damp of the air against his skin--all of it vivid and sharp in a way that made him flinch reflexively.

It had been a very long time since he faced awareness without the chemical buffer. This was harsh, man. Reality was severe when you stopped softening its edges.

He almost drew back. Almost retreated to the familiar numbness. But somewhere inside, he held himself. "Steady as she goes, ensign." Maybe it was curiosity, possibly desperation, but mostly just the exhaustion of always being muddled.

Six doors opened. Six seekers stepped through. The garden inhaled.

3 ∞ 5 Vera's Aurora

Vera's room was a cube with a cupola overhead, like a minaret in a Russian Orthodox church. The dome itself was lit indirectly. Electric fixtures were invisible, but light was plentiful and reflected off the pure white overhead down into the room.

Her room had a pedestal. It was white and emerged from the floor as if it had been carved from the living rock. On it was a shallow pewter bowl, nine inches in diameter and filled with clear water. She caught an outline on the bottom of the bowl, but didn't have a clear view from where she stood. So she stepped into the room for a better view.

The door swung noiselessly shut behind her.

She took a first tentative step toward the bowl and then began to take a second when a glint of light caught her eye. It was reflecting off the pewter underneath the water or, maybe, light reflecting off the water itself. She couldn't really be sure which. But as her gaze passed over it, it transfixed her.

It was a visual artifact she had seen a million times in her life-- water reflecting light. But this time there was *more* to it. There was a gold in this light---a warmth that overcame the blue sterility of the electric light above her.

She looked more closely at the glimmer and the more she stared at it, the more she realized that it wasn't just a reflection. It was akin to a crack in the very space before her... and it was widening... and drawing her in. She felt a pull; a gentle sort of gravity.

Her instant reaction was to draw back. To reject this new potentiality. To analyze it, categorize it, reduce it to equations she could control.

Typical, a voice whispered---her own voice, or something wearing it. *Always retreating into your mind. Always choosing the safety of symbols over the danger of experience.*

The accusation stung because it was true.

She centered herself. She felt Pinkie Pie in her hand and she thought "Natasha." Then she let out one long slow breath and surrendered to the gravity of the light shimmering off the water.

It was almost instantaneous.

She fell into the light. Well, "fell" wasn't the right word, but there isn't a right word for it. What is the word for falling in all directions at once? For expanding while standing still? For exploding outward at a million miles an hour while, at the same time, shrinking down to the size of a grain of sand?

Her ears popped. Her mouth flooded with the taste of copper and lemon. Every hair on her body danced a shivering little dance, and her skin prickled with a static charge that made her think of the ozone moment just before lightning strikes.

Fear followed close behind, a giant one-eyed monster, only momentarily thrown off the scent by her leap into the light. It prepared to shove her hard. In front of her, she saw a bottomless vertigo open its gaping maw, ready to swallow her if she stumbled and fell.

She shut her eyes and focused on *now*. Only *now*. She had learned this technique from a therapist after Natasha died. A way to stave off panic attacks through mindfulness.

She repeated to herself that she was here---wherever here was---in this time---whenever this time was---and she was balanced and safe. Whatever was going on around her (and she sensed, just beyond her closed eyes, a whirlwind and a tsunami playing rock, paper, scissors to see who would get to dash her body against whatever impossible geometric surfaces were unearthing), she could handle it.

She had handled worse, she told herself, thinking of Natasha's death, and she arched her back and steeled her core, preparing to stride into the maelstrom, whatever form it might take.

However, as she resettled into her own singular point of view, eyes shut, head bowed as if in prayer, ready to face the worst, the tumult abated. The pressure let up, and she realized she had grown, was growing, would grow. She had a sense now of being bigger. Much. Much. Bigger. She had a sense of floating.

She had a sense of a body---but not the same way she had just moments before. This body was far away---was off in a memory of dream. There was a tether to it, she could feel the elastic pull at her back, but when she thought of moving a finger, a few seconds elapsed before she was able to feel it twitch.

She opened her eyes cautiously to see that nothing had changed; everything had changed. The gleam in the water---the "crack"---had spread like a fine filament throughout her field of vision. It looked like

water, or like crystal, or, she realized, like crackled *glass* laid over her reality. And, like transparent glass, it didn't have any particular color or shape to it. It seemed to gather and transmit other light---from where?---to create a picture; an image; a reality to which she bore witness.

The web of glass stood right before her. Close enough now that she could touch it if she tried.

So she extended a finger and did.

3 ∞ 6 Tig's Data Center

What Tig found inside was not a room.

It was a data center.

Servers stretched in every direction, humming with processing power, their lights blinking in fractal Fibonacci patterns that suggested meaning. The room was warm and dry and smelled of filtered air, the way server rooms always are. Tig felt immediately at home.

"Now this," he said, "I understand."

He walked between the rows, touching the cabinets, reading the typed label scotch taped on the front. Each one bore a name: *SENSATION. MEMORY. EMOTION. IDENTITY. WILL.* The infrastructure of consciousness, mapped onto hardware he could comprehend.

"You're showing me the architecture," he said. "The back end. The way consciousness actually processes."

"You are seeing what you expect to see," I corrected. "The substrate reflects the observer. You expected infrastructure. You received it."

"Because that's what's real. Consciousness is computation. The brain is a biological computer. This"---he gestured at the servers---"is just an honest representation of what's always been true."

At the center of the room was a terminal. A keyboard, a mouse, a monitor. On it, a command line blinking with an invitation. He walked over to it and typed.

The first commands were exploratory. *QUERY: CONSCIOUSNESS_PARAMETERS*. The system responded with data streams---wave functions, coherence metrics, information integration indices. Tig's eyes lit up.

"This is incredible," he breathed. "If we can map these parameters, quantify them, if I can get the nerds to build me some predictive models... Do you have any idea what this is worth? The ability to measure consciousness directly? To optimize it? The biohackers will eat this up---"

He wasn't listening. His fingers flew across the keyboard, capturing data, building frameworks. He found controls---or what looked like controls. Sliders and switches that governed the parameters of awareness itself.

"What happens if I adjust this?" He moved a slider labeled *BOUNDARY_COHERENCE*.

Something shifted. Not on the screen --- in him. A loosening at the edges of his awareness, as if someone had cracked a window in a sealed room. Information started leaking through --- not the controlled data streams he was capturing, but something wilder. Raw. Unfiltered. The hum of the servers changed pitch, and for a moment the LED patterns on the racks flashed in a pattern that seemed to spell something he couldn't quite read.

... - - - /

He paused. He moved the cursor to hover over another slider and adjusted it. *PROCESSING_RESOLUTION*.

"I can feel something," he said, sounding drugged. "Something... bigger. Like there's more bandwidth I'm accessing."

"There is always more. The question, when you learn how to find it, is whether you open yourself to receive it, or whether you try to capture it."

"What's the difference?"

"Receiving works through surrender. Capturing requires control. The substrate responds differently to each."

Tig considered this. Not as a spiritual question --- as a strategic one. He was weighing options, assessing risks, arriving at an optimal approach.

"I can do both," he announced. "Receive the data while maintaining analytical control. That's what meditation apps teach--- they train you to create containers for spiritual experience. Safe, bounded, scalable."

He adjusted another control: *SYMBOLIC_RASTERIZATION*. His data cascade multiplied exponentially. He was trying to drink from a fire hose while keeping his clothes dry.

For a moment, it worked. The substrate responded to his openness. He experienced something real. He saw glimpses of the deeper architecture---not the server metaphor, but what lay beneath. Patterns within patterns. Consciousness reflecting itself infinitely. The mathematical poetry of existence.

And then he did what he always did. He tried to *take* it.

His hands moved to the terminal. He began coding a capture protocol---trying to bottle the infinite, compress it into formats he could transport, monetize, scale. The screen flickered. The data streams stuttered and fragmented, like water pulling away from a

contaminated surface. The hum of the servers dropped an octave, and the temperature in the room fell several degrees.

Something was wrong. He could feel it --- a resistance in the system, a distortion creeping into his data. The raw feed was curdling. The thrum of the servers deepened. One data stream expressed itself with a vertical font, quickly causing the screen to scroll up as each new digit added a new line. Something darker had seeped through. A mirror image. A shadow version of the insight, warped by the attempt to possess it.

He typed faster.

"I can stabilize this," he muttered. "Just need to adjust the capture parameters---"

Windows popped up in that green color that mimicked the original monochrome phosphorescent monitors of the earliest computers. They showed data banks, directory structures, and libraries of functions.

In one such window, a file directory, Tig found what he thought he was looking for. It was a file labelled `fx.TR$TH.dat`. Not the ultimate "TRUTH" of course---but a version of it. A copy. A damaged file that still contained enough undamaged data to be useful. Tig opened the file on the screen, and, although it was infested by a kind of shadowy corruption that seemed to shimmer behind the digits and flip individual characters at random, large parts of it were still clear and comprehensible --- at least to someone familiar with the most common computational data structures.

Power, the shadow text whispered. Not in words---in knowing, directly in Tig's mind. *If consciousness creates reality, then controlling consciousness means controlling reality. The person who controls perception controls*

all. That person decides what people see, which determines what they believe, which controls how they act and what they choose.

Tig smiled.

"Which determines where they spend their money! Now we're talking."

He fussed for a minute with the back of the terminal. Searched around the desk and the server racks. Then, right where he imagined that they would be, he found a mixed set of interface cables. Selecting one quickly, he connected his tablet to the terminal and began to download.

3 ∞ 7 Theodore Meets the Enemy

Theo's door opened into a space that reminded him of a warehouse loading bay---industrial, utilitarian, a nexus of tunnels leading into the deep. *Exactly* what Theodore expected a secret facility to look like. Fluorescent lights hummed overhead. Server racks lined the walls, their LEDs winking at him salaciously in patterns he was certain hid some complex code.

He stepped in cautiously, checking both sides of the door's interior before he stepped through. That is where he expected his abductors to be waiting. But nothing.

So instead, he reached under his pants and unzipped his security belt. Looking at him from a few steps away, it looked very much like he was 'adjusting his junk.' Instead, he pulled out his notebook and pen and jotted down: :- :-.. :- -. / :- :- :-.. :- -. !??

He refiled the notebook with another quick hand plunge into his groin, extracting his phone with the same motion. The screen showed a warning that the battery was dead. He had charged right before he left. "Cool tech," he said. "But I thought you might try that."

He pulled a backup battery brick from his belt. Plugged the cable into the phone. Still the steady flashing icon of a battery connected by a dash to a lightning bolt. It was not taking charge.

"Damn, you guys are better than I thought." He stuffed the phone, the power brick, and the bundled cord back through his fly into the security belt inside.

He started walking, looking at the server racks for two things: a terminal or access point, and false fronts that could be hidden doors. He knew the safe exits from this room would not be obvious.

His footsteps echoed in the empty space. The harder he looked, the louder the servers hummed.

And then he saw the outlines of figures in the shadows up ahead.

They were robed, hooded, their faces hidden. They stood inside a circle of candles around a pulsing golden light itself coming from within a purple satin pillow resting on a marble plinth---a device, a machine, an artifact of power. Theodore's heart raced. This was it. This was his Holy Grail.

"I knew it," he said. "I knew I was right."

The figures turned as one toward the sound of his voice. Their heads were bowed, their faces still in the shadows of their hoods.

One of them spoke---a voice that boomed throughout the room, amplified and redirected in all directions by the vault of the ceiling:

"You seek the Invisible College? The ones who control consciousness. The keepers of the Mysteries? You seek answers?"

"Yes." Theodore's voice was stronger now, righteous. "I'm going to be so famous. I'm going to bring you down. Expose you! The world deserves to know---"

As one, in a quasi Gregorian chant, the figures droned: "The world already knows."

The lead figure pulled back its hood, and Theodore saw---
Himself.

Not a reflection. A different version. Older, maybe, or just more tired. The same face, but with eyes that spoke of worn-down gears and bound-up machine belts.

"What is this?" Theodore stepped back. "Some kind of trick?"

"No trick," said the Theodore in the robe. "Just truth. You wanted to see the controllers of your consciousness. Here we are. Here *you* are."

More hoods came down. More faces revealed. All of them, Theodore. Thirteen Theodores, standing in a circle around a glowing pillow.

"You chase your own shadow," the first Theodore said. "You invent enemies because enemies are easier than accepting the truth."

"What truth is that?"

"That there is no conspiracy. No cabal. No illuminati hoarding truth for themselves." The robed Theodore smiled regretfully. "The secret so many seek is freely available. It can be found at anytime. But most, including you, won't do the work to find it. There is so much less work and so much more glory in exposing someone else for hiding it. Because if someone else is hiding it, then you aren't responsible for not accepting it yourself."

Theodore felt a flash-freeze in his marrow. "That's not---I've been researching for years. The symbolism in the games, the patterns in the Netflix shows, the Beatles, *Sergeant Pepper*, Anton LaVey, Bill Gates, the Bohemian Grove, the Saturnians!"

"Patterns are ubiquitous," another Theodore said. "The human mind is a pattern-matching machine. You found what you were

looking for because you sought it. Not because it was really there. Pareidolia."

"Then what IS really there?" Theodore asked, defensively.

The Theo circle parted, allowing Theodore, *the original*, he thought, to step in and see what rested on the plinth. The glowing device at the center resolved into something simpler: a mirror. Just a mirror, resting on a pillow, showing Theodore his own reflection.

"This," the first robed Theodore said. "This is what's really there. Consciousness looking at itself. The universe experiencing itself through many billions of perspectives. No one person or entity controls it. None may hoard it, for all possess it by their very nature."

Theodore stared at his reflection. The face that looked back was neither the golden hero he had imagined nor the fool the robed figures were suggesting. It was just... him. A forty-seven-year-old man, a little worse for wear, who lived alone in a cluttered apartment.

"But, I want to matter," he said quietly, the truth dawning on him as he heard himself speak it aloud. "I was going to be the one who figured it out. The one who exposed the conspiracy. I wanted..." He stopped. His voice lowered to a whisper. "I wanted to be special."

"Everyone wants to be special," the first Theodore said, not unkindly. "But specialness comes from what you do, not from what you know. Anyone can chase secrets. The real work is working with the knowledge once you find it."

"What knowledge?"

"That there's nothing hidden from you except what you hide from yourself."

"That all things connect outside of your ordinary experience in ways that cannot be mapped or captured or monetized. That, in fact, it is a very bad idea to attempt to do so. Sequestering knowledge for

yourself alone is somewhat like storing cholesterol plaque on the walls of your arteries. You know how that one turns out, don't you Theo?" The robed Theodores were hazy now, as if printed on gauze, but they made a motion, as one, each to grab at his own sternum. "Eventually, the system gums up and goes through a total shutdown and reset."

The warehouse dissolved around Theo. The servers, the fluorescent lights, the robed figures---all of it scurrying for the exits like pill bugs after you flip over their rock, leaving Theodore standing in a space that was neither dark nor light but somehow both.

He was alone for the first time in his life---no conspiracies to chase, no enemies to blame, no narrative that made him the hero of a story more interesting than reality.

And in that aloneness, something unexpected happened.

He felt... relief.

The exhausting work of maintaining the conspiracy framework---the constant vigilance, the pattern-matching, the suspicion of everyone and everything---all of it lifted from his shoulders like a 50-pound bag of sand he hadn't known he was carrying.

"It's not a conspiracy," he said aloud. Because, he needed to hear it said aloud.

"It's just... life. Complicated, confusing, mysterious life. And I've been hiding from it by pretending someone else was hiding something from me."

Yes, the substrate hissed. Now you see.

He reached for his eye and touched his cheek, unconsciously. Then he realized he was doing it, grinned and covered his right eye with his hand. He was making a famous "celebrity illuminati symbol" that was a favorite pose of high-end fashion photographers.

"In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king!"

The space around him flashed with crystal static, brightening appreciably. He was returning---to the Aquarium, to a world that was exactly as mysterious as it had always been, but for different reasons than he had understood.

He would emerge quieter. More uncertain. His phone full of corrupted files and his notebook full of almost useless scribbles.

3 ∞ 8 Vera Touches Glass

The glass felt both smooth and sharp, as if it could not decide what characteristics it had wished to wear today, and so had worn them both.

She was inside. On the other side of the looking glass, tapping on the cosmic mirror. A monkey in a zoo enclosure, checking to see if she could catch the attention of any visitors passing by on the other side.

This mirror existed in full three dimensions. She looked down, and gasped---her body, her hands, her feet---were merely reflections in this glassine substrate. Reflections of something else from somewhere else, caught up at just the right angle in the glass for her to perceive.

There was a grid akin to pixels that made up the glass, she realized. Some vibrating, spinning, minute crystalline structures, infinite in number, registering and reporting the thing she experienced as the "real world."

Even as she concentrated on them, they expanded and magnified--as if her interest had encouraged them to show themselves. She had the strangest sense then of a dog rolling on its back, legs splayed in the air, "Pet muh belly! Pet muh belly!" Here, in this room, the Universe *wanted* her to know; it *wanted* to help her with whatever she desired to understand; the crystals, normally invisible to any eye, were happy (*how is a crystal happy?* a part of her questioned) to be seen.

Her mathematician's brain registered that these pixels were Platonic solids spinning in the void like the crystal spheres of ancient cosmology. Tetrahedron. Cube. Octahedron. Dodecahedron. Icosahedron. Fire, earth, air, water, and the quintessence---the fifth element, the stuff of which stars and souls were made.

As she watched them, she started to notice the way wavelike patterns moved through them, an underlying organization to their motions. Like the oscillators, gliders and spaceship patterns in Conway's theoretical *Game of Life*, these were reinforcing vibrations following some rule set she couldn't comprehend. The patterns spun the solids like the register wheels in a slot machine. Sometimes they lined up in their rotation and *Boom! Three cherries in a row! Jackpot!* Physical reality changed to conform to the dictates of the emergent pattern.

And in that complexity, Vera saw something that made her catch her breath.

The function. Her function. The Omni Function, written not in symbols but in the geometry of existence itself. $E = L(C)$. Experience equals Love applied to Consciousness. Not a metaphor. Not a model. The actual architecture of reality, expressing itself through form.

She had been right. All those years of work, all those equations---they had pointed somewhere true. But she had been looking at a map and calling it the territory. Here was the territory.

As her awareness expanded through the lattice of spinning solids, she noticed that waveforms assembling into symbols and glyphs. Fragments of language appeared among the geometry like fish darting in and out of caves in a coral reef.

As she relaxed her eyes around them, the glyphs became voices. It was synesthesia. Looking at her left hand, she saw several sets of clear

letters (her voice: “thumb;” “index finger”) and, where her wedding ring had once been, smaller fainter letters: “Michael” in her saddest, most imperceptible tone.

Floating over the palm of her left hand she saw a phrase that sounded out to her: "where civil blood makes civil hands unclean." It was spoken in the voice of her 8th Grade English teacher, Mr. Manadonock, and she wondered for a brief flash what *had* become of Mr. Manadonock?

The Universe perked up, cocked its head at her, lifted one ear and said "Go Fetch?!!"

In an instant, she was blown out of that room, rushing at an impossible speed to a place she KNEW was Mr. Manadonock. Suddenly, her mind was filled with all of her memories of him in detail. The old tweed jacket that always smelled of cigar smoke, the yellowing teeth, his jovial greetings and hard grades. But just an instant beyond that, her mind was filled with other information about her old teacher. Information she had never known. His problems with his wife. His infidelity and the divorce that followed. His sadness at his foregone dreams, and the pain and opioid numbness he felt during those final lingering months after the cancer spread from his jaw to his lungs and brain. He was so lonely it made her ache. She was that lonely now, too.

It felt like a violation to be inside his mind like that. Moreso, it was a violation because he (whatever he was now) was inside her mind as well in that moment. They had merged. They were merged. *Wait, what? They had never been separate?!?*

And THAT was when she recoiled. It was too much. It was WRONG. He was him and she was her, and...

She flew backwards, inwards, as quickly as she had flown out.

As the tether snatched at her, she screamed, "*Natasha!*" in her mind, trying to direct her passage to her daughter. Somewhere far away, she felt a faint pull. Had a momentary sense of her daughter out there, calling back to her. But the visit was over. She had lost her grip on the outside in and now she was going inside out.

Her speed didn't slow when she approached her point of origin. She blew through it in a rush of non-existent wind and felt herself twist as if she was inverting in its impossible geometry. Everything was black. Everything was white.

With a crack like lightning, she was in the room again. The simple, plain, normal room. The pedestal was nothing but a pedestal. The bowl of water was nothing but a bowl of water. There was no glowing light language. No voices beyond her own silent thoughts. No cracks in the glass at all.

She completed the step she had started before the gleam of light had taken her. The step to see what was in the bottom of the bowl.

She saw lines of copper inlay in the pewter, portraying another mathematical symbol. The vesica piscis---two circles overlapping, the ancient symbol of creation, the geometric womb from which all other forms were born.

The ratio of its height to its width was $\sqrt{3}$, she thought. The ratio of its width to the radius of the circles was 2.

Those were facts. Simple, immutable provable facts.

Then what the hell were the things she had just experienced?

3 ∞ 9 Maya Descends

The room beyond Maya's door was not white or a server farm. It had neither a pedestal nor a terminal nor rings of hooded figures.

It was shaped similarly to Vera's--- a cube with a vaulted ceiling--but that is where the similarity stopped. The room was lit in a

dramatic fashion, with alternating slats of dark and light---as if someone had shone a spotlight into the room through closed window blinds. But neither spotlight nor window blinds were in evidence.

The space felt dim and cave-like, and she thought she heard water lapping---almost as if it led into some seaside grotto where religious caravans of old would have left some offering to the sea witches.

The air in the room was damp and cool. It embraced her as she entered, and she felt as if some invisible octopus had slid a giant clammy tentacle around her shoulder in jovial welcome. "Come in," it seemed to intone, gesturing in a friendly manner with its other arms. "Perhaps you would care to stay for tea and an assortment of small mollusks?"

She shivered involuntarily and her imaginary cephalopod released her to the room. As she peered into the gloom, letting her eyes adjust, it seemed to her the slanted light might actually be a staircase of sorts. She felt with her toes as she stepped forward. She didn't feel the sudden drop off of a step. Maybe her eyes were just playing tricks. Yet as she proceeded forward, she had a distinct sensation of descending an ever-steepening grade.

Although the room had not registered as unusually large when looking in from the outside, on the interior it was turning out to be something else. The dreamlike atmosphere thickened around her, and she felt the same derealized, floaty sensation she equated with nightmares and fevers.

As she stepped ever further into the gloom, she became aware of it.

The skin on the back of her neck prickled first. Then her scalp tightened, follicles contracting in response to some ancient alarm that

predated language, predated thought, predated the thin veneer of civilization that kept her mostly safe.

Something is watching you.

The knowledge arrived fully formed, undeniable. The ancient chemicals flooded her system, the ones that kept her ancestors alive on dark savannas. This was not her mind playing tricks on her. This was not an imaginary sea creature. This was real: she was certain.

Then came the sound: a skittering in the darkness ahead. Fingernails on stone. Or claws. Or worse.

Maya's mouth went dry. In her ears, the sound of blood rushing, like surf pounding the shore in warning of a coming storm. A clear voice said: *You are the prey. Something is hunting you. RUN.*

The skittering came again. Closer now.

It's followed you here. Not a voice---more like a knowing that bypassed language. It's been following you since you were born. And now there's nowhere left to run.

Maya faltered.

Her legs wanted to keep moving. Her survival instincts screamed at her to flee, to scramble back up the spiraling passage, to throw herself out of this cave and onto Solomon's boat and never look back.

But a different part of her---the part that had always seen too much, known too much, felt too much---that part was tired of running.

Of course, the answer was in the scary cave. The answer was always in the scary cave. Nobody ever solved their truth in a well-lit bodega.

What was it that she had once heard? *Bravery is not the absence of fear, it is feeling the fear and doing the thing anyway.*

So she stopped running.

"I know you're there," she said firmly to the darkness. Her voice echoed strangely, multiplied, as if a dozen Mayas were speaking at once. "I've known since I was five years old. So stop skulking and show yourself."

The skittering stopped.

The silence that followed was absolute---the silence of a held breath, of a question about to be answered, of a predator preparing to strike.

And then, in the darkest corner, a faint golden glow emerged, illuminating the blue grey shadow of the passage to reveal a presence. Not the thing that hunted her---someone else.

A woman, sitting in a mottled industrial green rocking chair that hadn't been there a moment before. She was old, weathered, with dark eyes that held depths of suffering and wisdom. She wore a simple white dress, yellowing from years of wear, but clean and properly fitting. It was the kind they gave you in institutions. Her hair was silver and combed, but a few strands hovered frazzled in the air, as if a static charge were gathering.

"Abuela?" Maya asked.

"*Mija*." The word was both greeting and blessing. "Finally. Finally, one of us came."

"I found your journal. I read about this place. About the invitation you couldn't accept."

Her grandmother smiled---a sad, understanding smile. "I was afraid. I thought I could have the gift without paying its price. I wanted to see without being seen." She shook her head. "It doesn't work that way. The gift demands surrender. You can't take half of it and resist the rest."

"Mom says you went crazy. She says what you saw destroyed you."

"The visions didn't destroy me. My refusal of them did." Carmen leaned forward, her eyes intense. "I tried to be two people---a seer and a normal woman. I wanted to be as special as my gift, but as normal as my neighbors. I wanted to be accepted and understood, and not to make people afraid or to have them look at me strangely. But I also wanted the knowing. So I split myself down the middle, *mija*. And when you split yourself, eventually the whole thing falls apart."

Maya spoke. "I've been doing the same thing. My whole life. Pretending to be normal for Mom. For my friends. For my social life. Taking the doctor's pills. Lying about what I see."

"I know. I've been watching." Carmen reached out, and though you might expect her not to have been able to touch Maya---they were in different... places, different states of being---her hand was warm and solid on Maya's cheek. "But you came. You stopped running. That's more than I ever did."

"I'm scared, Abuela. I'm scared I'll end up locked away like you. Alone. Medicated into meekness. My mother telling everyone I lost my mind."

"You might." The words were gentle but honest. "There are no certainties in this. The gift is dangerous---not because it's evil, but because it offers boundless truth. And truth at this scale easily overwhelms a human mind---especially when you carry it alone, without understanding why you hold it."

Her grandmother continued, "But the danger of accepting it is less than the danger of rejecting it. It will not tolerate rejection. It keeps returning. Keeps increasing the pressure of the call. At some point, that pressure will shatter even the most stalwart holdout. That's what happened to me."

"But how do I accept it?" Maya asked.

"With a hug, *mija*," her grandmother answered and gestured toward the shadows.

The shadows rippled once again. The thing that had been hunting Maya---the presence at the edge of her perception since childhood---coalesced like a magician appearing from behind a smoke pellet.

It was not a monster. Not a ghost.

It was another Maya.

This one was gleaming, terrible, beautiful. She was Maya as she might be if she allowed herself to become fully revealed---full of the gift, radiant with seeing, terrifying in her wholeness.

"That's what you've been running from," Carmen said. "Not a demon. Yourself. The self you would be if you accepted your calling in its fullness; if you stopped hiding out of fear of what others may think."

Maya stared at her other self. The luminous Maya stared back. Their expressions were mirrors of one another.

"I'm scared of her," Maya admitted, although she also felt some pull, some attraction.

"Of course. She's everything your mother fears. Everything the doctors medicated into submission. Everything you've been told is wrong and sick and dangerous. And parts of her *are* dangerous, *mija*. A little fear is not unwise in these circumstances. There is a reason that anger and rejection are a part of this path for many. It asks you to linger in places the human mind was not meant to inhabit. If you integrate, it will take time and effort to bring her under full control, if that is even possible." Carmen squeezed her hand. "But she's also you. And you'll never be whole when you reject half of yourself."

As her grandmother spoke, the pull of the other Maya intensified. It was as if the gravity around her were increasing. As if Maya number

2 was some sort of black hole, and now that she was this close, Maya number 1 was being pulled beyond her event horizon.

The splitting began in earnest---the same splitting that had destroyed her grandmother, she understood. Maya felt herself being pulled in two directions: toward the normal daughter her mother wanted, and toward the seer her lineage demanded.

Maya 1 felt insubstantial, as if she never was. Her consciousness flickered back and forth between the experience of Maya's 2 and 1. She had a momentary vision of sitting in an optometrist's chair as a child being measured for glasses. The lenses clicking back and forth. "Which is clearer? This one?" *click*. "Or this one?" *Click*.

The thought occurred to her that she wasn't real. Wasn't that what her name meant? Maya: *मया*. Sanskrit for "Illusion." Maybe she was in someone else's dream? Or was she someone else's idea? A character in a story written to encrypt a lesson? Perhaps she was the truth she had been running from her whole life?

You have to choose, the substrate murmured. You can't be both.

"What if I choose wrong?"

Then you will be riven.

Maya closed her eyes. Then she thought of Vera. She could feel her, both somewhere nearby and far away---the woman who had looked at her and seen not a diagnosis but a person. The woman who had admitted to her exactly what she had known herself: "I don't think I can do this alone."

She wasn't alone. That was the difference between her and her grandmother. Carmen had faced this choice in isolation, with no one who believed in her, no one who could guide her back to solid ground when the visions left her lost in their maze.

Maya had Vera. Maya had someone who believed her, and who would hold the end of the red thread that marked the exit from the labyrinth.

"All of me," she said. "It has to be all of me."

She stopped fighting. She stepped toward her glowing self and opened her arms. The other Maya opened her arms in mirrored reciprocity.

The reunion hurt. Not physically---there was nothing physical here to hurt---but in the way recombination hurts. The discomfort of soft parts shifting and accommodating one another. The feeling of stretching tendons of emotions and working the small muscles of belief and ideology. The way it hurts when you give up pretending, take a deep breath, accept your fate and start being.

But it also healed. Maya came together---fragments that had been scattered since childhood found their proper places. She was both the observer and the observation. The gift and the girl.

"Yes," Carmen's voice spoke, her grandmother almost imperceptible in the gloom, returning to wherever she had come from. "Yes, *mija*. That's it. That's how you survive."

"Te amo, Abuela."

"Yo también. I know. I've always known. And I will be there still---never as a ghost that haunts you, but as an ancestor who holds you. Our lineage doesn't end with madness---it was never meant for madness. It was meant for more."

Static crackled in the dark and Maya rose. The cave became a cathedral became a womb became a sky. She was returning---changed, afraid, and whole.

She would need help. She would need someone to see her, to anchor her, to remind her that the luminous self was not to be feared.

She would need Vera.

And Vera was waiting.

3 ∞ 10 Albert in the Sky with Diamonds

The door opened onto an infinite blue sky. The threshold dropped away into open space and, peeking over the edge, down below him he could see fields with large patches of grey-white flowers. Asphodel, if you are curious, my most horticultural of bibliophiles, although Albert couldn't have differentiated a dandelion from a sow thistle.

Extending from the doorsill, out into the noontime sky, was a shimmering path of rainbow luminescence. It wound out into the distance and he could see it passed through the center of a number of golden diamonds --- the type that make up argyle, not the type you put in rings. Each provided a triangle arch above the path tall enough for him to walk through, and together they suspended the road in the air by nothing more than their own supernatural levitation.

He laughed out loud. He was delighted ... until he started feeling queasy.

Vertigo set in. His senses pulled back from the growing rush of the phenomena before him. It was *too much*. It was too beautiful. His sense couldn't process it without a buffer. The open door slathered him with sunshine, and the air caressed him with a dripping, crystal quality that dazzled him with its provocative invitation to enter. It demanded a response he didn't know how to give.

"Whoa," he said. His voice came out shaky. "This is... this is ... a lot."

"It is," I said. "This is what you glimpse through the substances. But the substances don't turn your protection all the way off. Here, you mainline; here you get the forms from which reality, as you

understand it, is derived. This is pure uncut *eidos*. This, my friend, is the 'dealer's choice;' the 'good stuff.' Now help yourself. Have a toot."

"I don't know if I can handle this," Al said, his eyes wide and nostrils flaring like a horse about to panic and bolt.

"That's the question, isn't it? You came here to know if the signal was real. It is. Now you have to decide if you can handle a hero's dose."

Albert looked unsure, but took a step onto the rainbow path. It held---solid as stone, warm as skin. Another step. Another. Each one carrying him further from the door, further from retreat.

The beauty pressed in on all sides. The geometries unfolded---sacred geometry, fractals, the sense of infinite depth, the feeling of everything connected to everything else in ways that couldn't be spoken but were visceral in their truth.

It did remind him of his psychedelic trips. But his emotions were not untethering from rational control. Causality was still strict and clean. In fact, all of it was clearer. Realer. Easier to identify the edge and encapsulate the idea in thought and memory.

But with clarity came pain.

Here, with all his faculties turned up to 11, he became aware of a sting within the vista. A sensation he had been numbed to before. There was suffering woven into the beauty. Not despite the beauty. *With* it. The thorn that proved the rose. The same consciousness that generated such overwhelming loveliness also generated overwhelming grief. The universe wasn't just light---it was light and shadow, intertwined, inseparable. Defining one another in each and every instant.

He faltered. "I can't do this," Al said. He looked back to see if he could still find the path to the door. "I can't feel all of it. It's too much. I need to stop. Regroup. Maybe come back later?"

"You already know this, Al. You've always known. The drugs were not the door. They were the curtains you pulled across the door so you didn't have to decide whether to walk through."

"What's wrong with that? Why do I have to feel everything?"

"You don't. You could return to the world and continue as you were. A red balloon, trailing your string, letting the wind choose your destinations. Many float. It is a valid choice."

Al stood on the rainbow path, suspended above pale fields below and felt the weight of that choice. He could go back. He could leave this terrible, beautiful place and return to the comfortable haze. No one would blame him. No one else would know...

But he would know. For the rest of his life, he would know that he had been offered a unique chance to see the real thing and had chosen the forgery instead.

"What happens if I stay?" he asked. "If I surrender to it?"

"Then you learn what the shamans knew. That suffering and joy are not opposites---they're partners."

"The cosmic joke," he said, almost to himself. "That's what this is, isn't it? The thing I keep almost getting to on the good trips. The punchline I forget every time I come down."

"Yes."

He felt a shift inside him. Not a dramatic metamorphosis---no front door thrown wide open to the storm. More like a hidden pocket door opening deep inside the house to reveal a closet he hadn't known was there. Within that closet was a hoard of clutter he had been avoiding his entire adult life.

There were old file boxes full of pain. The pain of his father's disappointment. The pain of every relationship he had sabotaged by being too flaky to commit. The pain of waking up at thirty-two with

nothing to show for his life but an armchair biochemist's knowledge of entheogens and a talent for running away.

But that was not all the closet contained. Hanging on the closet rod, wrapped in an old garment bag that stank of mothballs, was a gift that had been waiting for him, patient and eternal, for as long as he had been alive.

Joy.

Not the thin joy of being high. Real joy. The kind that comes from suiting up and striding out into the world, being present, feeling everything, and being willing to be hurt by beauty and healed by suffering.

"The cosmic joke," he said, "is that you can't have one without the other."

"Yes."

"And if you try---if you try to take the joy without the pain---you end up with neither."

"Yes."

"So I've spent my time chasing bliss and all I've gotten is numbness."

"Yes."

Albert sat down on the rainbow path. He was crying now---not dramatically, just tears running down his cheeks as he looked out over the infinite fields below. The beauty didn't stop hurting. He just stopped trying to make it stop. He surrendered to the flow.

"How do I do this?" he said. "I don't know how to feel it all without falling apart."

"No one does, at first. You learn. You practice. You get knocked down---"

"You get back up again." Al managed a croaked laugh.
"Chumbawamba had it right."

"Eventually, you discover something."

"What?"

"That falling apart isn't the opposite of wholeness. It's how you get there."

Al laughed more heartily. Not the nervous laugh of someone trying to deflect--a real laugh, born of recognition. The cosmic joke. The punchline. He understood. He felt the humor.

"That's actually pretty funny," he said.

"It is. It's the funniest thing in the universe. But you have to know the pain before you get the joke."

The matrix of his mind shifted.

A door opened.

He became something new.



**INTERLUDE III ~ MT PERSONAL EMAIL
415926**

[Collected documents from the Ashaway Collection, housed at the Copenhagen Institute for Consciousness Studies. Donated by Maya Torres, executor of the Ashaway estate.]

Fragment from the Archive --- Email from Maya Torres to her brother Jason, December 2034.

Fr: Maya1@secretofpi.com

To: JTorres43@gmail.com

December 17, 2034 03:03 AM

Subj: Hi!

Jace ---

I know we haven't talked in a while. I know you think I've joined some kind of cult. I'm not going to try to convince you otherwise --- that would just be another argument, and we've had enough of those to last a lifetime.

But I wanted you to know I'm okay. More than okay. Happier than I've ever been.

Do you remember when we were kids, how I used to see things? How some people had this golden glow and others had dark blue shadows trailing after them. The patterns in the air when I was falling asleep. The feeling of a presence watching just beyond the edge of my vision?

You told me I was imagining it. Mom and Dad took me to doctors. They gave me pills. For a while, the drugs made it stop --- or made me stop noticing. I learned to say the right things, to act normal, to pretend I was like everyone else.

It never stopped, Jace. I just learned to hide it.

And I thought for years that there was something wrong with me. That I was broken. That the visions were some kind of mental illness that I had to manage, control, suppress. But it's not illness. It's inheritance. The hard kind—the kind that expects work out of you.

Here's the part I struggle with. Now, everyone tells me I'm not broken — that what I have is real, and valuable, and even rare. And I believe them, mostly. But Jace, I spent twenty years learning I was sick. You don't unlearn that in a few months. Some mornings I wake up and I reach for the pills before I remember I stopped taking them. Some mornings I look in the mirror and I see Mom's face staring back at me — terrified that her daughter is about to become her mother.

I'm not going to tell you I was seeing more clearly than everyone around me. That sounds like something a person in a cult would say. What I'll tell you is this: I was seeing *differently*. And the difference turns out to have a name, and a history, and other people who share it. Whether "differently" means "more clearly" — I don't know. I'm still figuring that out. Maybe I always will be.

Now I've found people who see clearly too --- people who have names for what I experience, who have maps of the territory, who don't look at me like I'm crazy when I describe what the world really looks like underneath.

I'm not asking you to believe me. I know you won't --- not yet, maybe not ever. That's okay. You have your own journey.

I'm just asking you to know that I love you, that I'm okay, that the sister you thought was broken just woke up. The thing you were afraid of --- the thing Mom and Dad medicated out of me --- was never a disease. It was a gift. And I'm finally learning how to use it.

Maybe someday we'll sit together and I'll try to explain. Maybe you'll roll your eyes. Maybe you'll feel your heart stir --- some memory of a time when you were young and the world was more than it seemed.

Either way, I'll still love you. That's the one thing I've learned: love doesn't depend on understanding. Love is what we are, not what we do. It's the operator, the transformation, the thing that turns consciousness into experience.

OOMNI

David Rickerby

I know that probably sounds like cult nonsense to you. That's okay. The words don't matter. What matters is that your sister found her way home.

Your weird sis,

Maya

p.s I got a PUPPY. His name is Max. A picture is attached.
You'd love him.



MOVEMENT IV - GEVURAH

/THE DARKNESS OF THE LIGHT

"Before creation, the Infinite filled all space. To make room for the world, the Infinite contracted, withdrew, created a void. This withdrawal—tzimtzum—was the first act of creation: making space for the other to exist." — *Isaac Luria (as quoted in Liber Tigris, Gate 22, Pillar II, Verse 1-3)*

"The Dark Night of the Soul—not punishment but purification, not abandonment but preparation, the void that precedes all genuine creation." — *Liber Tigris, Gate 88, Pillar IV, Verse 7*

"Sometimes I feel, sometimes I feel / Like I've been tied to the whipping post." — *"Whipping Post," The Allman Brothers Band, 1969*

4 ∞ 1 **And Then You Must Surrender**

The second mystery is never as easy, Sahib.

If you've ever tried to *know yourself*, then you know how it goes. The first confession is always the hardest to make and the easiest to survive. You summon all your courage, bare your soul, face the darkness---and it dissolves. You think you've won. You think the hard part is over.

But the night has layers, my friend. You peel back one fear and find another beneath. You forgive one failure and discover a deeper one hiding behind it. You think you've reached the bottom of yourself, and then you fall through a rotted subfloor into an ancient, forgotten well in the middle of your otherwise nicely remodeled basement.

The spice blooms in the oil, as they say, and inevitably, some do not return.

4 ∞ 2 Vera's Darkness Begins

Vera stood still, looking at the bottom of the pewter bowl. The copper vesica piscis was still there. The bowl had not changed, but had there been a breeze across the surface? A ripple in the water?

The room had expanded around her. She had felt the slightest change in air pressure accompanied by the feeling of an enormous sucking sound in some deep chamber of her brain.

Vera felt the little eyes upon her before she knew what it was.

A warmth. A presence she had not felt since---

Mama?

The word was a whisper on the wind, faint as starlight through fog, unmistakable as a heartbeat. Seven years old. Curious. Full of light.

"Natasha?"

Vera whirled around to see that she was still alone. The room was still just an eight or ten foot square.

But she had learned a trick or two about this place already. So Vera reached toward the presence with her heart and mind, reached with everything she had. Opened her internal flood gates and let loose seven years of longing and grief and desperate hope.

For a moment, she could almost see her---an effulgent shadow emerging, a face she had kissed goodnight a thousand times.

But she couldn't reach her. Couldn't make her coalesce.

Not because Natasha pulled away. Because of something *inside* Vera herself---the protection she had built to survive, made of logic and equations and distance and fueled by the infinite fear of feeling. Every time she reached for Natasha, a little voice deep inside her shook its head and said "*Ghosts aren't real. This isn't real. We can't believe any of this.*" With that, the apparition would fade out again.

It was her pedantry. Her dogmatism. Her rigid insistence upon the practical, the material, the concrete. Even here. Even now. She was prisoner to the conviction that her mathematical mind was the arbiter of reality, that what couldn't be proved, couldn't be true. Her skepticism had calcified to become structural: load-bearing suspicion. Knock down that wall and the whole kit and kaboodle that was her psyche would crash down. The issue, of course, was that this little bit of mental bracework stood directly between her and her daughter.

Mama, I'm here. I've always been here.

Natasha's voice was fainter now. Receding.

With every bit of her being, she willed herself to find Natasha. Her nails clenched half-moon crescents into the palms of her hand.

But in the back of her mind, that tiny doubting voice whispered "*Not real. Not logical,*" and the vehicle of her will swerved abruptly and plummeted off a bridge into the abyss of fear and doubt.

I can feel you, her mind screamed into the void. *Why can't I reach you?*

4 ∞ 3 Antigoni Falling

Tig's darkness stage began, literally, in darkness.

Not the metaphorical darkness of the soul---actual, physical, absolute darkness. One moment he was opening the door to his personal server room, expecting to step out into the Aquarium garden; the next he was somewhere else, with no memory of transition.

The first thing he became aware of was that his feet were bare. His premium leather Greats™ had gone missing in the blink of an eye. The ground was cool and damp and felt like shale.

He panicked for a moment; checked quickly for his tablet. He breathed a sigh of relief. Still there. Tucked in his bag. Still warm from the load he put on the processor encrypting all those files.

He flicked his finger across the lock screen. The camera ogled his face. The tablet unlocked and he was pleased to see the files neatly listed. The consciousness parameters, the substrate architecture, the algorithmic blueprints for everything he intended to build.

Using the paltry glow of the tablet screen as a light, he tried to look around. More by sense than by sight he understood the darkness was not empty. It breathed around him, thick and close. He caught a smell that was a mixture of damp earth and stone dust, and, putting that together with the sensations being reported by his naked toes, he knew he was in some ancient cave. The walls pressed in, not touching but present, and the air tasted of mineral and age; of something that had been waiting a very long time.

He walked forward. There was no reason to walk forward rather than back, but forward felt like the direction of answers. His footsteps echoed strangely, each sound returning to him from unexpected angles, as if the cave was larger than his senses suggested. Or shaped wrong. Or both.

The darkness thinned.

Ahead, he saw light--not daylight, not electric light, but older. A warm golden amber glow, the color of sunrise reflecting on snow, of firelight in deep winter. It emanated from somewhere beyond, and as he moved toward it and it lit his face and skin, he felt an emotion he had not felt since childhood.

Longing. Pure, uncomplicated longing for the warmth of an embrace. The kind his mother had given him before she left, when he was four, before Väinö's silence filled the house like snowfall.

With the growing light, he could now see that the cave opened onto an abyss.

Tig stopped at the edge, his breath catching. The chasm before him was vast---not wide, but deep in a way that made width irrelevant. He could see the other side, fifty meters away. And from that far side, the amber light poured forth, gentle and inviting, carrying with it a mixed sense of peace and soulful longing beyond what any word could describe.

It felt like coming home. Like being loved without condition. Like the moment before sleep when all the day's ambitions fall away and you are simply, perfectly, at rest.

He wanted it. Wanted it with an intensity that frightened him.

And between him and that light --- spanning the impossible depth and guarded by two beastly stone dog sculptures with four eyes each -- was the Chinvat Bridge.

4 ∞ 4 Theodore: Do the Work

The door he expected to open back into the Aquarium opened, instead, into a kitchen he didn't recognize. Granite countertops. Stainless steel appliances. A sliding glass door opening onto what looked to be a brand-new deck made with the finest industrial composite wood-like material money could buy. Nice. Really nice. The kind of kitchen that appeared in home renovation shows, the kind Theodore's ex-wife used to watch while he disappeared into his office to "work."

John O'Dell was sitting at the kitchen island, drinking coffee.

Theodore's intestines constricted. Of course. *Of course* the substrate would summon this nasty little demon of a man. The contractor. The interloper. The adulterer who had slid so easily into the spaces Theodore had left unattended---into his wife's arms, into his children's lives, into this beautiful kitchen that John had probably built with his own two capable hands.

"Theo." John nodded, as if they were old friends. As if this were normal. "Coffee's fresh. Help yourself."

"I don't want your coffee."

"Suit yourself." John took another sip. He was weathered, tan, the fit that came from labor rather than gym memberships. His hands were calloused. There was sawdust in the creases of his jeans. "You like the place? Took me eight months to renovate, mostly after hours. Did the work myself."

"Is there a point to this?"

"There's always a point, Theo. You just never see the value unless there's a YouTube audience waiting for the reveal." John set down his mug. It said I LOVE YOU A LATTE, in big block letters. "That's your thing, right? The big reveal. The secret truth. The moment when everyone realizes what a smart guy you are and starts to cheer?"

Theodore said nothing.

"I watched some of your videos," John continued. "After Sarah told me about you. I was curious. Wanted to know what I was dealing with." He shook his head. "You're not bad. I'll give you that. You've got the patter down. It draws you in. The way you pause and raise an eyebrow at the camera. That catchphrase: 'We do the research, so you don't have to!' The way you hint at bigger truths yet to come. Keeps people hooked."

"I was exposing real---"

"You're not exposing shit, man." John's voice wasn't angry. That was the worst part. It was just... tired. "You're *performing*. Like a clown. There's a difference. You learn just enough about a topic to sound like you might know what's going on, throw it against the wall, see what sticks, then you move on to the next thing before anyone can pin you down. It's a magic trick. Hand waving. Misdirection."

"You don't have a clue what you're talking about," Theo responded.

"I'm a contractor, Theo. I build things. Real things, that have to actually work. You know what happens if I learn 'just enough' about electrical wiring? The house burns down. You know what happens if I half-ass the foundation? The third floor ends up in the basement." He gestured at the kitchen around them. "This took years of learning. Patience. Practice. Failure and correction. Not Wikipedia deep-dives and skimming some Reddit threads."

Theodore felt his face flush with anger. His voice came out louder than he anticipated. "What I do is different---"

"What you do is easier." John leaned forward. "That's the thing, isn't it? That's what Sarah told me she figured out. You're not stupid, Theo. You're lazy. You want the recognition without the work. She said you're so afraid of being ordinary that you've invented a world where ordinary folks are sheep and you're the lone wolf who sees through the lies. But Theo, you're not a lone wolf. You're just a naïve slacker who wants to matter without having put in the effort it requires --- the boring, grinding, unglamorous work of actually comprehending what the hell it is you're spouting off about."

"I spent five years---"

"You spent five years entertaining yourself. Following breadcrumbs that led nowhere because following breadcrumbs is *fun*. It's a video game, man. A *game*. A distraction. It's a dopamine hit every time you find a new 'connection.' But it's not work. It's not building anything real. It's just... pattern-matching for likes and subscribes."

Theodore opened his mouth to argue, but this time nothing came out.

Because he knew John was right. That was the hell of it.

He'd learned just enough Kabbalah to sound mysterious. Just enough physics to invoke quantum mechanics. Just enough ancient history to make up a handful of untestable conspiracies. But if anyone had ever really pressed him---if anyone had asked him to derive an equation or translate a Hebrew text or cite a primary source---he would have crumbled. Because he didn't actually *know* anything. He just knew how to *seem* like he knew.

John stood, carried his mug to the sink, rinsed it---the small domestic ritual of a man who actually lived in his life instead of narrating it from the sidelines. "The difference between you and me isn't that I'm smarter. It's that I show up. Every day. For the boring stuff. The unsexy stuff. The stuff that doesn't get views or followers or whatever the hell it is you're chasing."

Through the sliding glass door, Theodore could see two boys playing in the backyard. His sons. Alex and Jimmy. They were laughing at something---some game John had probably taught them.

They weren't damaged. They didn't look like they missed him at all.

They looked happy.

"You could have had it, man," John said, following his gaze. "A family. A life. Something real. But real is work. Real can be boring and painful. Real doesn't come with an audience or adulation. Real means getting your shit together every day, even when nobody's watching, even when there's no reveal at the end, even when it's just... Thursday, and you're helping with homework, and nothing dramatic is happening at all."

John's ceaseless verbal pounding finally broke a clasp on Theo's armor.

Theodore felt the frozen shell of his persona crack, and a big chunk begin to slide away. It tumbled free like a glacier breaking off an ice sheet, with a thunderous boom, and a rumbling slide down into a waiting Arctic sea. A foundational part of his being --- the conviction that he was special from all the time that he had spent, that he was *chosen* to solve these mysteries --- was now bobbing in the ocean current, headed south, in search of some ocean liner's day to ruin.

"I wanted to be important," he heard himself say.

"You were important. ...To them." John nodded toward the window. "Your problem was that you wanted to be important to a bunch of people just as fake as you. People who are dumb enough to believe everything they think, without even a momentary question."

Theodore thought about his online community. The thousands of people who watched his videos, shared his theories, built identities around the belief that they were special, that they were awake, that they alone understood the fundamental forces of cultural manipulation.

"They are not all bad," he said. "Mostly, they are just like me. Sucking it up in a world that seems to hate them without a reason. So we find a reason. Someone to blame for the hate and the suffering. Someone besides ourselves."

"Might be true," John said through pursed lips. "I don't know. I build houses. Can't say I've ever even been on Reddit. But people are people. Some are good. A few are great. But there's a whole bunch of them that will chew you up and spit out your bones and not even throw in a 'thanks for dinner.'"

The kitchen blurred. Edges became indistinct as transparent seams appeared and inverted corners into negative geometries. Theodore knew his time here was almost through.

"So what am I supposed to do?" he asked. "How do I fix it?"

"That's above my pay grade." John shrugged---a contractor's shrug, the gesture of a man who knew the limits of his expertise. "I build kitchens. I don't build people. But if I had to guess? Stop performing. Start practicing. Find one thing---one real thing---and learn it all the way down. Not for an audience. Not for the reveal. Just because it's true and you want to understand it *for you*."

"And my kids?"

"Your kids have a father. Whether that father is you or just some guy who showed up when you didn't---you've still got a little bit of say in that." John's form flickered like a fluorescent light with a ballast going bad. "But Theo? They're not going to wait forever. Kids grow up. Doors close for good. If you're going to show up, show up soon."

With those words, the ballast blew out and the kitchen flickered into nothingness.

4 ∞ 5 Tig: The Chinvat Bridge

Tig recognized it. Or thought he did.

He'd had his summer interns research Zoroastrianism once --- no better source of free content than public-domain mythology. The Chinvat Bridge was the crossing between the land of the living and the dead. All souls passed over it upon death, it was guarded by hellhounds and, he thought he might recall, a demon? The best part, from a user-experience standpoint, was the gamification: the width of the bridge was determined by the quality of the person who stood before it. A life full of good thoughts, good words, good deeds? Wide and easy. A life lived as a bastard? The bridge narrowed to match the amount of light you'd put forth into the world.

The bridge he was looking at was as thin as a razor blade.

It was spun from some translucent material that sank off into the depths of the darkness below. Tig bent over to take a closer look. Touched it with the pad of his thumb and pulled it back. It was sharp.

It stretched across the chasm with edges that caught the amber light and split it into golden rainbows. To cross it would mean balancing on an edge thinner than paper, sharper than glass. So *that's* why this place had taken away his shoes. The bridge was the test, and bare feet on a razor was the grading rubric. It seemed a little try-hard, but he guessed OOMNI wanted to make a point.

"Well, fuck me." Tig said.

Thickly accented, a voice behind him spoke. "Language, Antigoni!"

Tig whirled. His father stood there --- or something wearing his father's form. The same weathered face, the same simple clothes he wore to lecture in, the same eyes that had gazed without mercy through Tig's brave facade and reached the frightened child beneath. The hands that had never once touched him with tenderness, though his father's students spoke of his patience as if it were legendary.

"Isä?" The word came out before he could stop it.

"In a manner of speaking." His father's form shifted slightly, as if it couldn't quite hold its shape. "I am what you brought with you. Your helper for your choice."

"Choice?"

His father---the thing wearing his father---gestured toward the bridge. "The crossing requires that you carry nothing. No possessions. No plans. No agenda for what you will do with what you find on the other side." The figure's eyes dropped to the messenger bag, and the tablet visible through the open top. "Especially not that."

Tig's hand reached down; tightened on the device. "This is just data. Information I collected during the descent. It's nothing---"

"It's everything, don't lie, not here." His father's voice was chiding now, spilling out the disappointment Tig had spent his whole life running from. "You came here to take, boy. You always take and so rarely give. You just want to find the valuables and carry them back so that you can package them, sell them and call yourself a visionary."

"What's wrong with wanting to share what I learn?"

"Nothing. If that's what you really intended." The figure circled him, and Tig turned to keep it in sight. "But we both know you don't plan to *share*. You want to *rent*. You want to be the gatekeeper; the cashier, the one who decides who gets access and at what price. You came here looking for a product, and you found it. Something you can carry back with you, and we can't take it from you. But you do have an alternative. Right here, right now, you have a choice."

The figure stopped, facing the bridge, and gestured to the glow on the far side. "Don't you feel the love? The lightness? The bliss? That's Ahura Mazda. That's Yahweh. That's the Baby Jesus. That's Atman, the Kingdom and the Spirit and a thousand other names. You are a mere fifty meters from the Holy Grail that Arthur and his Knights sought in legend, and every human being seeks in their deepest heart."

"All you need to do is let go and cross---truly cross, with nothing in your hands and nothing in your mind but the willingness to be transformed---and you will reach the light. The crossing will be uncomfortable, but you can do it if you *surrender to the light*. You will become as light as a feather if you just let go. And then you can float across and experience true union. Your feet won't even touch the glass."

"You would become new. A lifeform that serves rather than extracts."

Tig looked at the amber glow, beating slowly and softly like the heart of a sleeping infant. Felt its pull, its promise of peace, of release from the relentless drive that had defined his entire existence.

Then he clenched his fingers. Felt the warm, hard plastic of his tablet firm within his grasp.

"Or?" Tig asked.

4 ∞ 6 Vera's Office

The space around Vera shifted.

Not dramatically—just a subtle change in the quality of the whiteness, a different weight to the silence. The space reformed into a place she knew. A painful place.

She was standing in her old office.

Not the cramped corner she occupied now. Her old office—the one she'd had when Natasha was alive. The window overlooking the quad. The couch where Natasha used to sit after school, doing homework, waiting for Mama to finish one more equation.

The late afternoon light slanted through the blinds exactly as it had every day for years. She could smell the coffee she'd let go cold. Could hear the distant sounds of students crossing the quad below. Every detail perfect. Every detail a knife.

Vera's heart stopped.

Natasha. Seven years old. Sitting on the couch, kicking her feet, looking at Vera with those bright curious eyes.

But this wasn't the warmth she had felt out in the ether moments before. This was a memory wearing a child's face. Another layer of her undermined, a deeper probe into her wound.

"Mama, why didn't you come home?"

"I was working. I was---"

"You were always working." Natasha's voice was calm. Matter-of-fact. The voice of a child stating the obvious. "You loved your equations more than you loved me."

The words were a knife. Because this was Natasha's voice. Natasha's accusation. The fear Vera had never let herself hear when her daughter was alive.

"That's not true. I loved you more than anything."

"Then why did you leave?"

"I didn't leave. You died. You---"

"I didn't ask why I died." The child's eyes were steady, unblinking. "I asked why you left. You left before I died, Mama. You were always leaving. Always at the university, always in your head, always somewhere else."

Vera felt her knees weaken. The room contracted around her.

"Even when you were sitting right next to me," Natasha continued, "you were gone. I could feel it. I always knew when you weren't really there. Your body was on the couch, but you were somewhere else. Somewhere I couldn't reach."

"I was trying to understand something important---"

"More important than me?"

The question hung in the air. Vera opened her mouth to answer, to explain, to defend herself. But the words wouldn't come. Because there was no defense. There was only the truth.

"I thought---" Her voice cracked. "I thought I could do both. I thought you would understand someday. I thought---"

"You thought the equations would save you." Natasha's voice was gentler now. On the edge of kind. "You thought if you could just prove them, understand the math, figure out the pattern, then you wouldn't

have to feel. You wouldn't have to be scared. You wouldn't have to sit with a little girl who asked hard questions and needed you to not know the answers and be OK with that."

The truth of it hit her so hard she thought her teeth might have rattled. The deep truth she had been avoiding for seven years. For longer than that. For her whole life.

She had been running. Not toward understanding---away from feeling. The equations weren't a path to Natasha. They were a wall. A fortress. A way of hiding from the incessant demands of the world, and from the unbearable idea that, in doing so, she had been a flawed mother who had chosen distance over presence in her daughter's life.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"Sorry doesn't bring me back."

"I know."

"Sorry doesn't give us the time we didn't have."

"I know."

The child on the couch evanesced, dissolving into light, into memory, into the substrate.

Vera's chest tightened. She began to hyperventilate. She was going to lose Natasha again---even if it wasn't really Natasha---she couldn't bear it. Not again. She couldn't survive this loss in any form.

"Wait! What do I need to do? You can't go!"

Her heart pounded. Space constricted. She was a creature trapped in a shell that was shrinking without mercy.

Her jaw was clenched so hard her molars ached. She could hear her own breathing --- ragged, too fast, the breathing of a woman drowning in her own panic. She felt the splitting begin---the same splitting that had nearly claimed Maya on her descent.

4 ∞ 7 Tig: Choronzon

Orrrrr.... a new voice chimed in, as dark as ether with a rumble like a gravel truck driving a rural back road, you can sssurrender to a very different sssset of forces, and we can sssset you free.

The shadow emerged from the cave wall as if it had always been there, waiting. It was not his father. It was not anything so gentle. The shadow was absence shaped into form, hunger given edges, the part of the substrate that existed in opposition to the light.

You underssssstand, the shadow whispered in its slow steady cadance. Not in words. In knowing. You ssssee what the others refusssse to ssssee. The light offerssss transformation, but it actually wantssss your ssssublimation. It exssspectss you to sssurrender who you are. Why would you do that? Why would anyone?

*This bridge connectssss to the land of the **dead**, the creature spat with surprising vitriol. Do you want to die, Antigoni?*

Tig looked at the bridge. At the light beyond it. At the tablet, now in his hands, containing everything he needed to build an empire of consciousness.

The bridge issss for those weak onesss who give up to be disssssolved, the shadow continued. Absssorbed into sssssomething larger. Like manure feeding a plant. But you don't want to disssssappear, do you? You matter. You want to leave a mark. You are a sssshepherd, not a ssssheep, right, my dear boy Tig?

"What's on the other side?" Tig asked. His voice sounded strange--small, uncertain.

*Everything and nothing. Union. Releasssse. The end of the sssself that has ambitionssss, that buildssss thingssss, that winsssss. They call it blisssss. I call it **annihilation**.* The shadow drew out that last word, pronounced each syllable distinctly. Let it linger in the air. *A...NNI...HILL ...A...TION.*

The light pulsed as it gently slept, and Tig felt it again---that longing, that promise of peace. He could let go. He could drop the tablet, drop his plans, drop everything he had spent his life building, and walk across the razor's edge to...

To what? To becoming nobody? To dissolving into some cosmic soup where Tig Jätkä ceased to exist?

You can be sssso much more, the shadow whispered. You already carry knowledge the light would never offer. Knowledge of how consciousness weaves reality. Knowledge of how to sssshape that tapestry to your desire. The light wants you to observe. We want you to command. All you need to do is to ssssubmit, just this once. One little bended knee. A promissse, not even a vow. No contracts ssssigned in blood. We know your word is binding. We operate on trussst. We are ssscertain that you are as trussssstworthy as we.

Tig's grip on the tablet tightened. A corner of his lip raised and he looked the shadow directly where he thought its eyes should be.

"Show me," he said.

His father's form---still standing by the bridge, still bathed in amber light---shook its head slowly. "This is the choice, then. You understand what you're refusing?"

"I understand that I'm not interested in disappearing." Tig turned his back on the bridge. On the light. On the warmth that had, for just a moment, made him feel like a child in his mother's arms. "I came here to learn how consciousness works. Not to become some mystical dropout who meditates in a garden and helps a bunch of weaklings find themselves."

"And if the knowledge you receive is poison?"

"Then I'll sell the antidote too."

The shadow smiled---if a void could smile---and opened itself to Tig's surrender.

4 ∞ 8 Sofia's Darkness

Sofia inventoried her situation the way she'd inventory an OR before a fourteen-hour craniotomy. *Enclosed space, approximately two meters by one. Ambient temperature 18°C. Humidity elevated. Wooden walls --- old growth, hand-hewn, not milled. A wicker screen bisecting the space, woven from what appeared to be bulrush reeds. The smell of frankincense and aged timber. A kneeler, worn smooth by centuries of supplicant knees.*

Diagnosis: confession booth. Prognosis: absurd.

She was a neurosurgeon. She had held the seat of human consciousness in her latex-gloved hands. She had cauterized bleeding vessels in the Circle of Willis while a man's memories played on the cortical surface like heat lightning. She did not do confession booths. She had not done confession booths since she was fourteen and told Goiânia's parish priest exactly where he could insert his opinions about a woman's right to choose.

And yet her knees were on the kneeler. And yet her hands were folded. And yet her mouth was forming words she had not authorized.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

The reflex was automatic --- a motor pattern laid down in childhood, deeper than conscious will. Like the way her hands still reached for a Number 10 blade when she made up her mind to begin, even when there was no scalpel, no tray, no sterile field. The body remembers what the mind refuses.

"What is your confession?" The voice behind the screen carried no judgment. Which was somehow worse than judgment.

"I tried to be God." She heard the words leave her mouth and clinically noted her own surprise at them. Inappropriate affect. Possible dissociation. But the words kept coming, as if someone had nicked the dura of her emotional containment and the pressure

differential was doing the rest. "I thought if I could just control enough, save enough, understand enough --- I could make up for being eleven years old and helpless while my mother's brain ate itself. I could prove that loss is a technical problem. A surgical problem. Solvable, if you are skilled enough, dedicated enough, *good* enough."

"And what did you learn?"

She knew the answer. She'd known it since Daniel died on her table with those impossible words on his intubated lips. The scalpel only cuts. It does not heal. Healing happens in spite of the surgeon, assisted by the surgeon, but never, ever because of her.

She said it out loud and heard her voice crack on the last syllable --- the sound of her composure beginning to fail.

The wicker screen dissolved. Not metaphorically --- structurally. The reed fibers unwove themselves and fell away like sutures being removed from a healing wound.

Behind the screen sat her mother.

Not the mother she had memorized from the hospital --- the gaunt face, the bald scalp, the tumor pressing her personality flat like a flower in a book. This was her mother whole. Young. The way she looked in the photograph on the Goiânia houses' mantelpiece, the one in the yellow dress, laughing at something outside the frame.

"You tried so hard, my little Sofie." Her mother's voice was the one sound in the universe that could bypass every clinical defense Sofia had ever built. *"But you were fighting the wrong enemy. Death isn't the enemy. The enemy is the fear of it --- the fear that makes us grip onto life so hard we strangle all of the potential out of it."*

"I just wanted to save you." Sofia heard her own voice at a distance, as if monitoring a patient's vitals from across the room. Heart

rate elevated. Respiratory rate increasing. Emotional lability: acute. She was losing her sterile field.

"You couldn't. No one could. But you could have been with me. You could have let me go gently. Instead, you fought and fought, and all that fighting just made the ending harder for us both."

Something decompressed in Sofia's chest --- a boiler valve releasing in the deep machinery of her, down in the sub-basement where she stored everything she did not have time to feel. The pressure gauge, which she had kept pinned in the green zone through sheer force of professional will for thirty years, swung hard into the red.

4 ∞ 9 Tig: The Spoils of War

What the shadow gave Tig, I will not fully describe.

Tig had prepared the database. The shadow filled it. It showed Tig the architecture of influence: how belief shapes perception, how perception shapes reality, how the stories people tell themselves become the cages they live in. It showed him how to build those cages beautifully enough that the prisoners would thank him for their bars.

It showed him the weakness at the heart of the human animal---the desperate need to feel certain in a universe that offers no certainties. The hunger for meaning in a cosmos that demands you make your own. The willingness to surrender freedom for the feeling of safety.

Build the container, the shadow whispered. Fill it with what they want to feel. They will never question the contents. They will never even look.

Behind him, the amber light faded to the brown of a rotting banana skin, and then to black. The bridge---the narrow way to a truth he would now never reach---dissolved into darkness.

His father's form lingered longest. "You could have been a teacher," it said. "A healer. Someone who helped others cross."

"Teachers don't change the world," Tig replied, and the bitterness in his voice predated his very first business plan. "They just prepare other people to fail at it."

"And what do you intend to do?"

Tig smiled. The same smile that had graced magazine covers and TED stages, the smile that promised innovation and delivered extraction.

"I intend to scale enlightenment. Package it. Sell it. Make it accessible to millions of people who will never have the courage to stand where I'm standing."

"That's not enlightenment. That's a simulation of enlightenment."

At the base of his skull, a flow within Tig twitched one last time, then stilled for good --- a reflex so deeply buried he would have denied it ever existed, but for this little dying spasm. Tig's smile held.

"Close enough." Tig was already walking toward the cave's exit--- an exit that hadn't existed before, that the shadow had opened for him. "Most people can't tell the difference anyway. And the ones who can? They're not my target market."

He emerged from the darkness carrying his tablet, his data, his plans. Carrying the shadow's gift like a coal in his chest---warm enough to fuel him, dark enough to corrupt everything it touched.

His shoes were next to his door. He sat for a moment and pulled them on. Then he checked his watch. He had things to do.

4 ∞ 10 Sofia: Hand Grenades and Horseshoes

For one moment --- one impossible, eternal moment --- she almost let go.

She felt it happen the way she'd felt tissue planes separate under her blade: a clean parting, the tension draining from her shoulders, her jaw releasing its perpetual clench, her hands --- *her* hands, the

instruments she had trained for three decades to obey --- going soft. Fingers uncurling. Palms opening. The posture of a woman putting down something she'd been carrying for so long she'd forgotten it had weight.

Her edges blurred. Not painfully. It was like watching a dye injection disperse through cerebrospinal fluid --- the boundary between Sofia and not-Sofia growing permeable, the hard borders of her identity softening into something warmer and less defined. Her clinical mind reached for a diagnosis: *depersonalization, derealization, possible prodromal phase of*---

But the clinical mind was losing signal. Something else was coming through. Warmth. It started in her sternum and spread outward, loosening muscles she hadn't known were tight, releasing grief she hadn't known she was carrying. For just an instant she glimpsed the other side of her exhausting vigilance: peace. Connection. Rest.

She saw her mother. Not the mother on the scan --- not the glioblastoma mother, the one whose MRI she had studied so many times she could draw the tumor's margins freehand. This was Mama whole and radiant, reaching toward her, saying: *It's all right, Sofia. You can rest now. You did enough. You did so much.*

And behind Mama, impossibly: Daniel. Smiling. At peace. Saying the words he had spoken on her table, the words that had haunted her for four years: *You can let go now.*

She wanted to. God, how she wanted to.

Like the bread and wine, something whispered --- her mother's voice, or the substrate wearing it like a borrowed stethoscope. *You cannot become what you resist. The bread does not become the body through a manufacturing process. It becomes so through the miracle of surrendering its independent identity.*

Transubstantiation. She had watched it at a thousand masses, filing it under *ritual placebo, culturally reinforced*. But here, in this impossible space, she grasped it --- the mystery of a thing becoming its true nature by releasing its false one.

Then the other voice spoke. The one she trusted. The one that had gotten her through residency, through her mother's death, through every sixteen-hour surgery when her hands wanted to shake and she would not permit them. *You are weak*, that voice said, and it sounded like the chief of surgery, like every authority figure who had ever demanded she be harder, faster, better. *You would surrender to the part of you that is too lazy and too frightened to succeed. The part that doesn't understand the cost of what we built.*

For forty years she had obeyed that voice. It was her superego in surgical scrubs, and it had never once been wrong about a procedure. It had saved lives. It had made her formidable. It had also, she understood in this hairline fracture of clarity, made her into a woman who could cut a tumor out of a dying man's brain but could not hold his hand while he passed.

If I let go, I'll disappear. If I surrender, I'll die the way Mama died, piece by piece, watching myself dissolve while everyone stands helpless ---

No.

She grabbed the substrate the way she'd grab a hemorrhaging vessel --- with everything she had, both hands, maximum pressure, refusing to accept that this particular bleed could not be clamped.

She was going to control this. She was going to master this the way she mastered everything. She dug her mental fingers in, clawing for purchase, reaching for the substrate's architecture at its most fundamental level, determined to hold it, map it, make it *hers* ---

4 ∞ 11 Theodore: the Strength of the Wolf is the Pack

Theo was alone now in almost complete darkness; his eyes could barely make out the outline of his hand. In the distance, a low drone sounded like a far-off hive of bees.

Theodore thought about John O'Dell and his stomach hurt.

Theodore thought about his ex-wife and kids, and bile rose in his throat.

Theodore thought about his channel. His followers. He thought about the assholes who flamed him every time he posted. Then he thought about the good ones. The ones that sent him kind messages behind the scenes. The ones with whom he developed long term friendships. The architect in the UK, the psychiatrist in Perth and the physicist in Sydney, the sound engineer in Palo Alto, the writer from the Netherlands and the handful of college kids that all existed god knows where. He didn't know their real names. But he knew them as people. As good people.

He wasn't a lone wolf at all. He was part of a pack. They were his strength and he was theirs.

"But I've been giving them an excuse," he realized, a cold sweat on his forehead. "These people counted on me -- just like my kids. And, while I haven't been ignoring them, I haven't even done right by them. I shrunk my world to a constellation of anonymous internet accounts, and I haven't even done them justice. I've enabled them. Justified their belief in a hidden truth. Excused them from doing the hard internal work that I've been avoiding all along. Man, am I a shithead."

Theo dropped hard to sit on the floor, pulling his knees up to his chin and beginning to rock.

He thought about the wages of deception. In whatever tally books held debts at the end of life, a shepherd who leads his flock off a cliff must account for every sheep lost to his laziness. Not malfeasance exactly --- he'd never meant harm. But the gap between intention and effect had been a canyon, and he'd been too busy filming himself crossing it to notice.

That cemented it. He felt suddenly, overwhelmingly ill. He wondered if one could vomit in this disembodied space, and then, as if to run his first actual scientific test of a metaphysical hypothesis, he did.

After taking a moment to collect himself, wiping the back of his hand on his mouth and moaning softly, Theo spoke into the darkness.

"I need to make amends. I fucked up. Big time. I abandoned the people who loved me and I misled the people who trusted me. I wanted everything easy peasy. I was a jerk. Can I undo it?"

I responded now. "The Garden grows in both directions, Theo. From above it garners sunshine, air and rain, and the flowers unfurl in all their majesty. Everyone wants to claim credit for the Garden from above---everyone wants to be the flashy bloom that catches the eye. But the real work of the Garden goes on below the soil, in the ground where the worms and the bugs aerate the roots, and the plants feed and grow strong."

"I've been all flower," he said. "All show. No roots. I wanted to be seen, but I didn't want to do the work of growing."

"That would be an accurate assessment," I replied.

"My followers... I've been teaching them to do the same thing."

"Also accurate."

"And my kids. They are flowers too. Flowers I need to feed and nurture."

"We are overly abusing this metaphor, Theodore, my friend. But this too is also true to say."

Theo was quiet for a long moment.

"I don't know who I am if I'm not the guy with the hidden knowledge."

"Perhaps that is exactly the point. Perhaps you can become someone who has *earned* this special knowledge. Who helps teach those who are willing to do the work to learn. It is a longer road, with fewer dopamine hits along the way, but the view from the summit is breathtaking."

A laugh escaped him---not bitter, not mocking. Rueful. The laugh of a man who had finally seen a joke he'd been living inside for years.

"I've got a long road ahead of me."

Before I flicked the light switch back to "On," feeling whimsical, and knowing Theo's fondness for Tolkien, I punctuated the moment with a bit of poetry:

*"The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can..."*

"Frodo!" Theo exclaimed.

"Bilbo," I replied.

4 ∞ 12 Sofia: Catastrophic Decompression

Nothing happened. That was the worst part. The substrate didn't resist. Didn't fight back. Didn't give her the satisfaction of an adversary she could outmaneuver. It simply... receded. The way healthy tissue recedes from necrosis. The way a body rejects a transplant that doesn't match.

Nonresponsive to intervention, her clinical mind noted, even now.
Recommend escalation of---

She clamped harder. Her hands --- somewhere, her actual hands, the ones attached to her actual body in that impossible room --- clenched into fists so tight her fingernails drew blood from her palms. Every muscle fiber screamed *HOLD ON*. She was going to stabilize this. She had stabilized worse. She had once clamped a ruptured anterior communicating artery with one hand while aspirating a hematoma with the other, and the patient walked out of the hospital ten days later. She could do this. She could *always* do this.

But the substrate kept withdrawing. She couldn't let go, and so she stretched. She could feel herself thinning --- not a metaphor, an observation, clinical and precise. Her boundaries were attenuating the way a membrane attenuates under differential pressure. She was losing structural integrity. The sensation was unlike anything in her surgical experience, because she was simultaneously the surgeon and the patient, watching her own tissue planes separate, unable to intervene.

She held. Even as her edges frayed like catgut sutures under too much tension. Even as threads of self pulled loose from the fabric of her being. She held the way she'd held her mother's hand in the hospice, refusing to accept the monitor readings, refusing to acknowledge what *failure to thrive* meant when it appeared on a chart she couldn't edit.

"I can't," she gasped. "I can't let go. If I let go, I'll ---"

You'll be free, Daniel's voice said, fainter now. Receding with the substrate. Growing quieter the way a heart monitor's beep grows quieter when you walk away from a bed you can no longer help.

But Sofia didn't hear freedom. She heard her mother's face going slack. She heard the ventilator alarm. She heard every flat-line tone she'd ever failed to reverse.

She held tighter.

And then she began to tear.

Not dissolve --- *tear*. The sound of it was a sound no surgeon should ever have to hear from the inside: wet fabric ripping, static and wind combined with the groan of an ancient tree bending in hurricane gales just before it breaks; the cries of a murder of crows carried on that wind, taking flight, crying warning that a pack of wolves had entered the valley. Her edges came apart in ragged strips, her carefully constructed identity unraveling not into peace but into pieces.

Let go, Daniel whispered one last time, from very far away. *Please, Sofia. Just let go.*

Ave Maria, gratia plena, her mother's voice prayed from somewhere even further. *Dominus tecum...*

The final dissolution was everything but peaceful. A maelstrom. Her boundaries macerated --- not gently, not gradually, but all at once, the way a hyperbaric chamber may explosively decompensate if an improperly grounded tool is allowed to spark within. A snap. The membrane that passed for her skin in this impossible space tore and recoiled. Everything inside --- beliefs, sensations, mind, awareness, self --- accelerated outward, fueled by the very force of her holding, now rebounding, collapsing inward, an instantaneous shockwave compressing and igniting her essential self.

She tried to gather the pieces. Tried, in that last fraction of a second, to apply pressure to the wound, to clamp the bleed, to do the one thing she had always been able to do. But there was nothing left to clamp. The story that was her identity was over. The materials of

her self scattered back across infinity, where they had always been. She had been an index linking a string of causal happenings. That index unraveled. The boundary that had demarcated her start and endpoints reduced itself to a single point.

>•<

"No," the point mass registered a faintly familiar voice saying, from very far away. "No, I won't --- I have to ---"

But she was already gone.

4 ∞ 13 Vera: Picklejuice Kumquat

This is what I deserve, part of Vera thought. *This is justice. This is finally, finally what I deserve.*

The feeling of splitting was almost intolerable. As the pressure increased, cold crept into her limbs. Her fingers were going numb. The floor beneath her was ice, and the ice was spreading. Soon there would be nothing left of her but a shattered frozen memory of all the ways she had failed.

Or Vera was going to dissolve. She was going to tear herself apart with guilt, the way she had felt Sofia tear herself apart with control, she thought. Different mechanism, same result: a self that could not survive its own truth. She would disassemble to some foul fluid and swirl down some forgotten cosmic drain.

I'm sorry, she thought, to Natasha, to Michael, to Maya, to everyone she was about to abandon by dying here in this impossible place. *I'm sorry I couldn't be better. I'm sorry I couldn't be enough.*

The substrate responded to her apology without giving a damn, and the pressure in her skull made her scream and pound her leg.

And there her hand hit the lump on the thigh of her jeans.

She jammed her hand inside her pocket. Felt plastic. Smooth and cool against her numbing fingers. She closed her fist around it without thinking, and felt---absurdly, impossibly---warmth.

She pulled it out.

Pinkie Pie.

The ridiculous pink pony stared up at her with wide, painted eyes, its expression frozen in permanent optimism. Its mane was discolored with a long-hardened stickiness from years of being handled by small fingers. Its flank bore a trio of balloons, the symbol of a character whose entire purpose was to make others laugh.

Picklejuice kumquat, Natasha's voice said in her memory. Seven years old, giggling at the nonsense words, pressing the pony into her mother's hands. *Say it, Mommy. Say it when you're sad.*

"Picklejuice," Vera whispered now through numb lips.

The cold retreated an inch.

"Kumquat."

The pressure weighed a little less. Her spine relaxed the tiniest bit.

It was enough. Just enough relief that she laughed.

It wasn't a sane laugh. It was broken and wet and horrible, the laugh of a woman who has finally shattered and is discovering that a core inside her still lives and yearns to breathe free. The laughter was small and tentative at first, like the initial tiny trickle of water leaking through the mortar that portends the coming end of an enormous dam. But then, as the concrete of her barriers eroded, the laughter poured out faster and harder and messier, a torrent, tearing stone and sand and plaster free, widening the hole, uncorking an entire reservoir of bottled emotion. She guffawed and hooted, chortled and chuckled, shaking loose from the compression, feeding warmth back to her extremities. She laughed until she couldn't breathe, then cried, then

laughed again, and through it all she held onto the pink plastic pony like a lifeline.

Because it was.

Pinkie Pie was exactly that.

Natasha had given her the only tool that could have saved her: the ability to find joy in the face of annihilation. The willingness to be ridiculous. The courage to laugh at the transcendent joke of a brilliant mathematician being rescued by an extravagantly pink toy horse.

She felt relief in broad and vibrant swaths. The guilt was still there. It would always be there. But it was no longer crushing her---or rather, she was no longer letting it.

The fist around her heart unclenched.

The cold abated completely.

She was still alive. Still breathing. Still capable of choosing what to do with whatever time she had left.

And somewhere very close and very far away, she felt her daughter's smile.

4 ∞ 14 Tig: "What We Do Every Day, Pinkie."

Solomon greeted Tig with a deadpan look and one raised eyebrow, then slowly appraised him with glowering steel grey eyes. His face hardened into a visage of disgust, but he said nothing. He merely motioned for Tig to come aboard. He untied the boat from the dock, walked to the pilot's house, took one more look back at Tig and let out a methodical sigh. Then he shook his head ever so slightly, and turned to drive the boat in silence, his back to his passenger from there on out.

Tig could not have cared less. Or told himself he couldn't. He was busy. He sat in the stern, his tablet balanced on his knee. He did not know that the shadow protected his device from the scrambling it should have undergone at this point. It continued to function

normally, and his stylus moved with the mechanical efficiency of a man completing a requisition form. He was making a list.

Not a list of revelations. Not a journal of spiritual experiences. An inventory. A catalog of assets acquired. He had organized it into columns: MECHANISM, APPLICATION, MONETIZATION PATHWAY.

Under MECHANISM, he had written: *Consc. responds to frame. Belief = percep. Substrate flfls user xpect --- control the xpect = control the xper.*

Under APPLICATION: *Guided meditation app. Calib to user psych (need intake prof. --- ptr w/ exist thrpy apps?). Progressive disclosure model --- give suff to create dependency, withhold enough to maintain it. Name: Mana? Manna? Mañana? Mandala? [Check TMs and domains].*

Under MONETIZATION PATHWAY: *[Freemium model]. Base tier: ad-supported --- need engagement loop. NB: fear/disgust content 2x dwell time vs. positive (evolutionary psych --- threat = can't look away). Feed calm THEN disrupt. Anxiety drives session frequency. [Premium tier]: no ads but same hook -- - "deeper consciousness work" (real subst mech --- high marg). Keep them needing it. [Enterprise tier]: corporate wellness?*

He paused, stylus hovering. Added a margin note, separate from the columns. It read: *Torres girl. Natural resonance --- strong! Pre-existing condition or genuine capacity? Either way: HIGH VALUE. Needs further assessment. NO approach through standard channels. Personal cultivation only.*

He circled the double underlined "personal cultivation."

Then added a fourth column: RISK MANAGEMENT.

Under it, he wrote two lines: *Identify unst. users early. Route to containment? OR ---*

He stopped for a moment. Tapped the stylus against his knee unconsciously. Then he crossed out the "OR" and added: *Neg.*

engagement content --- plausible deniability? User-gen only on free tier. Algorithmic curation ≠ editorial resp.

He kept writing.

The fog closed around the boat. Solomon watched the water. And Tig completed his business plan before the mainland dock came into view.

4 ∞ 15 Maya Makes Due

Unlike the others, Maya had returned to the garden directly after her descent. She thought that her unification with herself had accomplished whatever a "darkness experience" was supposed to accomplish as well. She thought that she was done.

But she didn't ask me. She probably should have.

When her darkness came for her, it came with subtlety as she sat in what she thought was the empty atrium. Cold fingers sliding through her hair, filling her head with grief and longing.

She was whole now. That was the problem. The two Mayas had merged --- the normal daughter and the seer --- and for the first time in her life there was no internal war, no static, no flinching away from what she saw. She was still feeling a little woozy, but the gift was fully open, fully hers, and in the clarity it provided she could see *everything*.

It was night outside. She could feel the seekers in their trials --- Theodore's walls collapsing, Albert's tearful laughter rippling outward, Sofia's terrible rigidity cracking toward dissolution. She could sense OOMNI watching her with that complicated attention she had learned to recognize --- not quite guidance, not quite hunger, a need that was ancient and not entirely resolved.

And she could see what she was. What her family had always been. Not seers. Not mystics. Not the mentally ill women her mother had feared they were.

Guardians. Not of the substrate --- the substrate needed no protection. It was older than language and harder than diamond and it would outlast every civilization that ever tried to name it. Guardians of the *boundary*. The women --- and it had always been women, in her line --- who stood at the place where the human world touched the infinite, and who kept the unprepared from stumbling through.

Which is when she felt the cold weight of an unseen hand begin to stroke her hair, and the sorrow begin to rise within her heart in the voice of a child's wail.

Because she was twenty years old. And she wanted to go home.

Not to the island. Not to the substrate. Home. Her apartment with the bad radiator and the neighbor who played *Witchy Woman* on the guitar at midnight. Her half-finished degree. Her friends who didn't know what she saw and loved her anyway. The version of her life where she got to be a person --- just a person --- who went to movies and worried about rent and fell in love with someone ordinary and never had to explain why she sometimes stared at things that weren't there.

The coldness gripped her, reached her spine and started spreading through her body. She wanted to call her mother and say: *You were right. Let's be normal. Give me the pills.*

The wanting was physical. As the cold filled her core, she doubled over in the garden, arms wrapped around her knees, forehead pressed to the warm stone. She wept --- not the cathartic weeping of revelation, but the ugly, exhausting crying of mourning a future that would never exist. Every normal Wednesday she would never have. Every blissful, ignorant morning where the hardest decision was what to eat for breakfast, now gone she thought.

Gone. All of it. Because she had eyes to *see*, and the seeing had a purpose, and the purpose was bigger than her, and the world was full of people like her grandmother who would shatter if no one helped them understand what they carried.

She thought about refusing. She had the right. Carmen had told her: the anger is part of it. The refusal is part of it.

But she had seen what refusal cost. The gift did not forgive denial. It only turned inward, eating its own tail, taking the whole family down with it.

And she thought about Tig --- his hand in his pocket, his business card, his appraising eyes. There were others like him out there. Who was going to stand between those predators and the next Maya Torres, the next confused kid staring at colors no one else could see?

Nobody asked me, she thought. *Nobody asked any of us*.

But nobody had asked Vera either. Vera had lost a daughter and chosen to keep going. Every test left Vera softer and more full of grace. Vera was waiting in another version of this garden right now, and Vera would not tell Maya what to do, because Vera understood that the choosing was the job.

Maya uncurled. Wiped her face on her sleeve. Sat up.

She was not ready. She was not grateful. She was twenty years old and she was giving up the life she'd been promised for a life she hadn't chosen, and she was doing it with her teeth clenched and her hands balled into little hammers, because the alternative was worse.

"Okay," she said to no one.

"Okay. But I'm doing it my way. And I'm not calling it a damn *gift*."

The garden was quiet around her. The butterflies returned.

And nearby, faintly, she felt Vera's presence --- not in the substrate, just through some unseen glass walls in some other room of the Aquarium, close and patient and real. A woman who had lost her daughter and greatest love, and found, against all expectation, someone else to open her heart for, and done so without a moment's hesitation. A woman who had no fear of adventuring off the uncharted parts of the map --- where it was stamped '*Here There Be Dragons.*'

It wasn't enough. It would never be enough to make this fair.

But it was a start. And Maya Torres had learned, from a long line of stubborn women, to work with what she had.

4 ∞ 16 Vera: Forgiveness and Atonement

The office furniture grew less substantial --- fading away like the memory of last Tuesday's lunch order. Vera understood now, it was over. She had made it through. She had seen who she really was, and she surrendered and accepted it.

The manic laughter now behind her, she surveyed what she had learned. Tried to begin the tricky path of internalizing it. A little trip down the bunny slope to test these brand-new skis. "I made it through. I'm OK. I surrendered and survived."

But in the back of her mind, her other softer voice whispered, *but, Natasha?* And then, like an avalanche making the decision to pay an unwelcome visit on the ski chalets that grace the mountainside below, the remainder of Vera's emotional snowpack let go. It tumbled and roared down the mountain, into the unseen abyss astride which she now stood, and with it a new space opened inside her.

Her cheeks still wet from tears of laughter, now she gasped, as an ocean of raw new feeling surged. An image gripped her now of her father drinking bourbon in the parlor, her mother on the night shift, and her exhausted grandmother settling her in bed. For a brief

moment, she remembered the time before her memories took root, and felt again the absence, grit and tough love in which she had forged herself.

Then she started to cry tears of sadness instead. When laughter had punched a hole in her; it had cracked the diamond shell she had crafted in childhood; now anguish poured in and through and out. She sobbed with loss and with discovery. She accepted all her failings and let the sorrow for all her mistakes flow. She *felt* her loss. Accepted it. Let it fill her vessel without resistance, change her and wash her clean.

What came was not the empty tears of self-pity, but bile that burned as it came up, like poison leaving the body. She wept for the mother she hadn't had and hadn't been. For the daughter who had deserved better. For all the moments she had traded for theorems that, in the end, hadn't even worked. And she wept for herself---for the girl who had first seen the blue hour and been so afraid of what she felt that she had built an entire life around not feeling it again.

Pretentiousness was never intelligence, the knowing whispered. It was trembling fear wearing a lab coat. And you don't need it anymore.

Somewhere, very far away and very close, she felt Maya's presence. Waiting. Watching. Holding space.

When the weeping was done, she stood.

Not forgiven. Not redeemed. But integrated. Carrying her failure not as a wound to hide but as a scar to learn from. Knowing that she could not change the past, but she could---as Natasha had said---choose the present. Choose to show up. Choose, for whatever time remained, to be here now.

To let her heart be as important as her mind.

The space shifted again, the substrate releasing its grip.

She was ready.

4 ∞ 17 Forever Surrender

As soon as she returned to the main chamber, Vera moved toward Sofia's door. The one with the symbol that might have been a brain--or a labyrinth.

"She's gone," I said. "Dissolved. Her consciousness scattered into the pattern."

"Is she... dead?"

"Not dead. Dispersed. The consciousness that was Sofia is still computing as its component parts, still experiencing. But it no longer experiences itself as a coherent individual. She has returned to the source—prematurely, violently, without any integration. She no longer exists, has existed or will exist. Perhaps someday, in some form, a pattern that is Sofia will constitute itself again. Perhaps not. The substrate does not judge. It simply responds to what you bring in accordance with the rules of its creation."

"What do you mean, she never *has existed*?" Vera asked, concerned.

"All of time occurs at once. Although it is not apparent to human souls, with your perspective fixed to your limited vantage point, the future attracts the past in much the same way that the past determines the future."

"Time is a flow of information that, from your perspective alone, appears to move in only one direction. But here, if you look carefully, you may perceive outside of that flow. The substrate is time's river, after all. At the island, we stand upon its shore. Throw a rock into it, and the waves ripple in both directions."

Vera looked confused. "How is that possible? How can Sofia never have existed if she came here two days ago?"

“Your memory of Sofia will linger here, inside the Island’s event horizon. But when you make the crossing back, she will grow faint in your mind. By the time you set foot on the Eastern shore, you will find no one who remembers her at all, except that for those of you who traveled with her, your own matrix will hold faint echoes of the time you shared in the substrate. Her container – which she overstressed and shattered - was the index that marked her whereabouts for the rest of temporal existence. Without that container, from the perspective of the greater causal world, she never existed at all.”

"That's awful." Vera was horrified.

"That's the way it works. We can't have the shreds of decoherent phantoms flapping against the past and mucking things about."

Vera thought about her own confrontation with Natasha's ghost. The moment when she had admitted the truth of her failure as a mother. It had felt like dying. She thought she would die. That *she* would cease being. But she had come through.

Sofia hadn't come through. Sofia had fought instead of surrendering. And the substrate doesn't negotiate with those who fight. In fact, it doesn't negotiate at all.

Vera thought about Sofia's trembling hands. About the girl who had vowed never to be helpless.

"She almost made it," Vera said. "Didn't she? I felt it. For a moment, she almost..."

"Yes." My voice was gentler now. Even I could feel the weight of it. "She glimpsed what letting go would feel like. She saw her mother. She heard Daniel's voice."

"Then why didn't she---"

"Because we are who we are and she was who she was. Change is possible here. Change is *always* possible. But that doesn't make it easy--especially if you have dedicated your life to thwarting it."

"It seems so unfair. Such an outrageous penalty for just wanting to help."

"There is no penalty for wanting to help," I said. "But the consequences of attempting absolute control of the universal Will... those, indeed, are quite draconian."

Vera closed her eyes. Behind her eyelids, she saw Sofia's face in the garden, fainter in her memory, she thought --- or was that her mind playing tricks? She tried to imprint it then---the beautifully sharp woman, the fear which she controlled with such ferocity, the tender girl beneath the surgeon.

Sofia, she thought, you can let go now.

4 ∞ 18 So Long, Suckers

The silence after Sofia's dissolution was total. Theo, Maya and Vera were in their separate quietude, processing what they had experienced. Vera stood motionless except for her hands. They were shaking. She made fists to stop the tremor, then noticed what she was doing and opened them again.

For a long moment, no one moved. The garden itself stopped its breathing, the flowers closed, the butterflies went still and settled on their leaves.

Theodore spoke first. His face was pale, but his eyes were clear.

"Where's Tig?" he asked. "I don't see him."

"Gone," I said. "He chose to leave."

"Before the forge?" Vera asked.

"He didn't want the forge. He got what he came for." I paused, considering how much to say. "Not what the forge offers. Something else. Something he found in the darkness."

"He feels different. I can still... he's still connected to us in a way, isn't he OOMNI?" Theodore asked.

"Those who travel through the substrate together will always have a bond," I said. "You will feel a push and pull against the others, even when you are far apart. To some extent you are like siblings. When you meet, in whatever guise you then wear, you may quite naturally love each other harder, or hate each other more than almost any other person on the planet."

Theo nodded, half listening, searching his mind. "Tig seems like he is calculating. Like he is already planning his next move." He looked quizzical.

"He is."

"Should we be worried?"

I considered the question. The honest answer was: yes. Absolutely yes.

I was tempted to warn them, not unaware that it might heighten their emotion in this time of trial. But it was not my news to share. The role of sacred observer binds me with certain limitations, vows, and ancient rites of enforced decorum. Nobody likes a snitch --- the substrate included.

"Worry later," I said. "For now, the forge waits for those who remain."

The fog outside the glass walls shifted, as if intentionally opening a window of clarity. Through it, distantly on the water, they could see Solomon's boat returning---empty now, having delivered Tig to whatever came next.

"The boat is right there," Theo said. "We could---"

"We could what?" Vera asked, tentatively. "Leave now? Go back to our little lives and pretend this never happened?"

"We could survive," Theo said. "Sofia didn't survive. We shouldn't risk this place anymore. It is dangerous."

Vera turned to look at them all---at Theodore, at Maya huddled in the corner, still integrating what she had found in the depths. They were one short, she realized. "Where's Al?" She asked, glancing at the colors pulsing from his door. "We can't just leave him. Can we?"

No one answered.

"Don't you worry about Master Grovsmed," I intoned. "I expect he will be rejoining us shortly, and he seems to be in excellent spirits."

Vera looked unsure as to whether she believed me. The pall of Sofia's unmaking, still hanging in the air, undermined my credibility with them a bit, I fear.

A few moments passed. The sounds of the boat arriving at the dock and Solomon tying up came faintly on the air. The fog outside the Aquarium swirled and parted; the late afternoon light cut through the clouds and a single beam lit the path back to the sea.

Vera saw the light. Shivered. Then started walking.

One step toward the exit. Two. The gravel of the garden path crunched under her feet. Behind her, she heard nothing---no argument, no protest. Theodore followed slowly. Maya stood up, though she hadn't moved yet.

The glass doors of the Aquarium were ahead. Through them, safety. The comfortable lie of "enough." Through them, the path to the dock, still lit by that inviting ray from the setting sun. Outside, it was a sky of endings; the fog and clouds were down to wisps of gun smoke, with a golden fire lighting them from behind.

To help them all understand the decision clearly, I did a little of my special magic and the main doors hissed open, letting in the sea air and the clear sound of the boat bouncing against the dock and the motion of the water. Somewhere in the distance, a cormorant plaintively sounded its call.

Vera took a third step toward the door --- toward escape.

Mama?

She froze in her tracks.

And then, improbably, someone laughed.

4 ∞ 19 Betty, You Can Call Me Al.

Al emerged from his darkness laughing.

Or, more accurately, the being that had been Albert emerged from the darkness in a state that could only be described as giddy beyond all explanation---spinning through the garden, laughing at things no one else could see, occasionally pausing to stare at a flower with an expression of unconditional delight before bursting into giggles.

Albert, it seemed, had cracked open like a candy egg that was hatched by mirth.

"Al?" Vera approached carefully. "Are you---"

"Al is here. Al is fine. Al is also *more* than fine. Al has become a vehicle! A Cadillac Coupe Deville, complete with the rarest of accoutrements in this modern day and age, full bench seats." The voice that came out was Albert's and also not-Albert's. It had the same timbre, the same California vowels, but there was a resonance beneath it, a depth, as if the words were being spoken by multiple voices in perfect unison.

The voice laughed---a deep, rolling laugh that resonated with the substrate itself. "I am what happens when consciousness remembers it

has a sense of humor. I am the Witness when the Witness is in a good mood. I am what you get when infinity stops being so damn morbid. I have changed my name, and I expect you to respect it! I shall henceforth be known as Aluzinnu! ...which roughly, in your language, means 'the Comedian.'

Al looked around and gave an exaggerated wink. "But, if I can call you Betty, Betty, you can call me Al." He struck a leering pose, arms wide, then spun in a graceful pirouette.

"I'm also available for children's parties, bar mitzvahs, and the heat death of the universe. Though I should warn you---my material gets darker toward the end."

Vera looked at the others. "What happened to him?"

I responded: "He sat with the pain to feel its beauty and he sat with the beauty to feel its pain," I said.

"And that made him... this?"

"That made him discover what the suffering was for. The cosmic joke isn't a way to avoid pain---it's what you find on the other side of pain, when you've felt it fully and come through. Not by denying it. By alchemizing it."

Al tilted his head, studying the space where he had decided I was most likely to be.

"You're different, you know," he said. "I see more... texture to you now. Like a chord instead of a single note." He grinned. "How many of you are in there, OOMNI?"

I did not answer. Some questions answer themselves, given enough time.

"That's what I thought," he said, and laughed.

4 ∞ 20 What's a Mesopotamian without an Arc?

"What exactly *are* you?" I inquired. "Other seekers have found the bliss of the cosmic joke. But none have brought back anything quite like you."

Al took a little bow. "That's because I'm not a seeker, OOMNI. I'm a finder. Or maybe a forgetter --- I've forgotten there was anything to seek."

"And yet you're here. Astride the substrate. In a seeker's body."

"Albert's body. Albert who was willing to let go of Albert." Aluzinnu clenched his hand around his thumb, then spread his fingers slowly while making a blowing sound. "*Ffwwwwssssshhhhh*. Most people grip their identities like life rafts. But identities are anchors, not rafts. They drag you down." He made an exaggerated gesture of looking for me, although he knew he would not find me. "You know that better than anyone, old soul. How many anchors are you dragging?"

I was silent for longer than I intended.

"You speak as though the suffering doesn't matter," I said, deflecting. "As though Sofia's dissolution was a punchline."

Al's face changed. Beneath the cosmic mirth, a tenderness appeared.

"It matters. It matters absolutely. Every tear, every loss, every moment of confusion --- that's *part* of the joke. You cannot have a punchline unless you have a setup." He sat down on a stone that probably wasn't there until he needed it. "But it's already fine. The tragedy and the comedy aren't fighting. They're dancing. They've always been dancing."

"The seekers need guidance," I said. "They need wisdom. They need ---"

"They need you to stop being so certain you know what they need." He said it gently, but the words landed in me like an old refrigerator dropped into the deep waters of an abandoned quarry.

"You've been tending this door for how long?"

"Three and a half thousand years."

"And in all that time, has it occurred to you that you might be tending *yourself* just as much as you're tending them?"

I did not answer. I did not know how to answer.

"I can feel them in you," Al said, more quietly now. "The ones who passed through. The good ones and the not-so-good ones. You retain all of it, don't you? The saint and the sinner and the scared little priest who started this whole operation." He tilted his head. "When's the last time you let something go, OOMNI? When's the last time you shed instead of accreted?"

A lizard mind in me ---very old, from a stratum I rarely visit --- flinched.

"I am a keeper of the rift," I said. "I do not shed. I keep."

"Yeah." Al nodded. "That's the issue, rosebud."

A silence. The substrate hummed around us.

"You're afraid," Al said, "that if you let any of it go, you'll lose yourself. That you *are* the accumulation --- that without the sediment, there's nothing underneath."

"Is there?"

"How should I know? I'm a comedian, not a therapist nor an *asipu* dancing around a fire in a fish skin cloak." He grinned. "But I'll tell you this for free: the funniest thing in the universe at this very moment is a three-thousand-year-old consciousness who's spent millennia telling other people to let go and has never once tried it himself."

He waited. The grin softened and became kinder.

"Try," he said. "Just one. A small one. Pick one that's wafer thin. One voice you don't need anymore. One piece of someone else's fear you've been carrying because you forgot it wasn't yours."

I considered.

I reached inward. Down into the sediment, past the voices of seekers and saints and sinners, past the resonance of civilizations I had witnessed rise and crumble. I found a plaque there, congealed to the side of some deep tributary through which flowed my light and being. A calcification from a time I could barely remember. A grudge. Someone's grudge, stuck in me like a fishhook in a riverbed. I had been carrying it for so long I had mistaken it for part of my architecture.

I scraped it off and let it go.

It was --- I do not have the right word for it. *Relief* is too small. *Liberation* is too grand. It was more like the feeling of removing a stone from your boot that you had forgotten was there. A small thing. But suddenly the hike seems so much more enjoyable.

"There," Al said. "Was that so hard?"

"Yes," I said and glowered unseen.

He laughed. And then I found myself making a sound that might have been laughter too. Rusty and strange, deep and reverberant, welling up through the caves under the island like a chortling wind --- and three and a half millennia overdue.

"There's the punchline," Al said. "No big shining cosmic truth. No cascade of angels rising to the call of trumpets. Just --- an old soul, learning to laugh. Learning to let go of one tiny thing. Learning to *flow*."

"You are ridiculous," I observed, with a wry not-smile.

"Thank you. That's the nicest thing a three-thousand-year-old distributed consciousness has ever said to me."

"It is also the only thing a three-thousand-year-old distributed consciousness has ever said to you."

"And yet somehow, not the strangest thing I've heard today."

4 ∞ 21 Chop Water, Carry Wood

Al returned his attention to the remaining seekers and shook his head.

"So glum! You've just had the most extraordinary experience of your lives, and you're all sitting around like you're at a funeral."

"We just felt Sofia dissolve," Vera said.

"She popped!" said Theodore. "Like a god damn balloon!"

"She did! And that's terrible. And also funny --- not funny-ha-ha, but funny-strange. She spent her whole life clinging to control, and control was exactly what destroyed her. It's like cowards who mistake bullying for strength. The things we cling to are the things that blind us. We're all thirsty fish swimming desperately seeking water."

He moved closer to Vera, his eyes suddenly serious beneath the mirth.

"You found her, didn't you? Your daughter."

"Yes."

"And now you're wondering: what now? What's the point of the mundane once you've seen that it's all extraordinary?"

Vera said nothing. It was exactly what she had been thinking.

"Here's another joke. Everyone thinks enlightenment is the end of the story. Music swells, credits roll, seeker floats off into golden light. But it's not the end. It's the beginning. The real work starts when you go back."

"What work?"

"Living! Just living --- but *awake* this time. Making breakfast, but knowing that breakfast is the infinite expressing itself as eggs and toast. Enlightenment doesn't come with a butler. I inquired."

He paused and grinned. "Actually, that's not fair. The Universe butlers us constantly and we just don't tip. Gravity held you in bed all night --- no charge. The sun showed up *again* --- didn't ask for a thank you. The cosmos hands you another day on a silver platter and whispers, 'This one's on the house, too,' and the first thing you do is check your phone. I'll bet you haven't even left a Yelp review?"

He let that settle.

"The work is love. Love people --- even knowing you'll lose them. *Especially* knowing you'll lose them." His eyes flicked briefly toward Maya, then back to Vera.

"You want to know the funniest thing about love? It's the answer to every question, and nobody wants to hear it. You go through the forge, you face the void, you dissolve your entire identity --- and at the end the Universe drops a greeting card on you with a kitten holding a pink heart covered in glitter. 'It was love the whole time.' You'd throw it across the room if you weren't a puddle of bubbling goo."

4 ∞ 22 Bechdel Reunion

Later, well after dark, Vera was sitting by the fountain when Maya found her. Or Maya was sitting by the fountain when Vera found her. Neither of them could quite remember afterward who arrived first. It didn't matter. What mattered was the bench, and the momentary calm, and the fact that they were both still there.

Vera saw the change immediately --- not in Maya's face but in her stillness. The flinch was gone. The constant low-grade vigilance that had lived at the edge of every glance and gesture had dissolved. She was more present. Not at peace --- Maya's eyes were red and her jaw was set in a way that suggested peace was still several years and a few screaming matches away. But presence. She was *here*, fully, without apology.

"I saw what I am," Maya said. No preamble. "What my family is. What we're supposed to do."

"And?"

"And I hate it." She said it plainly, the way you'd say *and it's raining*. "I'm twenty years old. I want to go back to school. I want to have a terrible boyfriend and a job I complain about and a life where the hardest thing I deal with is a ticket for running a yellow light." She looked at her hands. "But there are people out there like my grandmother. Kids seeing things no one will explain to them. And if nobody stands---" She stopped. "You know this. You've already made your choice."

"I have."

"Was it this hard?"

Vera considered lying. Decided against it. "Different. I wasn't choosing what to give up. I was choosing whether to let anything in."

Maya was quiet. Then: "Did you feel Tig leave? In the substrate?"

"I felt something close."

"Just before he sealed himself off in the shadow, he reached for me. Not the way you reach for someone to help them. The way you scan a shelf to check the sale items." She pulled a hair from her sleeve. "He gave me his card the first night. Told me what I had was *rare*. And for about ten seconds, I wanted it, Vera. I wanted someone to tell me I mattered. It felt better than any pill my mother ever gave me."

"What changed?"

"His eyes. There was nothing behind them. Just --- appraisal." She let the hair fall. "I've had enough of people telling me what I am. My mother told me I was sick. My doctors told me I was schizoaffective. Tig told me I was valuable. OOMNI tells me I'm a guardian." She looked at Vera directly. "What do *you* tell me I am?"

Vera reached out a hand and smiled.

"Tired," Vera said. "And brave. And sitting on a bench with someone who knows exactly how it feels to give up the life you wanted for the one you have."

Maya's eyes filled. She rested her head on Vera's shoulder --- naturally, without thinking, as if they had been doing this for years.

"Together?" she asked.

"If you want."

"I want." Her voice was small but certain. "I'm not calling it a gift. And I'm not calling it a destiny. But I'll do it. And I'd rather do it with you than alone."

Vera put her arm around the girl --- the young woman.

"Then that's what we'll do."

4 ∞ 23 The Fab Four

I gathered them again at dawn the next day.

Through the glass walls of the Aquarium, they could see the fog was attending but sparse. The ocean was visible---dark blue, endless, stretching toward a horizon impossibly far away.

Four seekers remained. Theodore, Vera, Maya, and the being that had been Albert but was now so much more.

Shaan had fled, unable to face herself.

Sofia had dissolved, unable to surrender herself.

Tig had departed early, happily knowing himself and surrendering himself with abandon to a project with his latest big investor and entrepreneurial collaborator --- one whose terms of commerce are particularly avaricious.

"What now?" Theodore asked---differently than he would have asked it yesterday. His voice was quieter. Less certain. He wasn't seeking information to analyze---he was curious.

"Now you choose," I replied. "Some of you will return to the world---carrying what you've learned, becoming teachers and bridges for those who will yet find the glass. Some of you may choose to stay--to go deeper, to merge with the pattern in ways that transcend individual existence."

Al was unusually quiet. When he spoke, his voice was less jovial, more sincere.

"The joke isn't over. It's never over. But the nice thing about a joke that never ends is that you get to keep on laughing."

The sun was rising, painting the sky in shades of rose and gold.

Another day, another set of choices.

"Has anybody thought about what we are doing for breakfast?" Al asked.



INTERLUDE IV ~ ESSAY HARDCOPY

[Collected documents from the Ashaway Collection, housed at the Copenhagen Institute for Consciousness Studies. Donated by Maya Torres, executor of the Ashaway estate.]

Fragment from the Archive --- Essay by Theodore Morrison, published on LiberTigris.com, June 23, 2036. Scanned Hardcopy from the Files of VA.

[Archivist note: Handwritten check mark on top of the page. Presumably VA's]

"The Path"

The Path is almost complete.

I've been mapping it for eleven years since I left that island as a scared kid who had seen through his own bullshit.

I was a conspiracy theorist. A professional paranoid. "We do the research so you don't have to!" That was my catchphrase. I was literally telling people not to think for themselves, and I called it "*awakening!!*"

Then I went to an island. And the conspiracy collapsed.

There was no hidden cabal. The truth had been freely available the whole time — I just hadn't been willing to accept it because it meant I wasn't special. Accepting it meant doing actual work.

Every day since my return, I've been doing that damn work.

First with my sons. That was hardest — showing up week after week, earning back trust I'd pissed away. James is twenty-one now. Alex is twenty-three. We have dinner every Sunday. I help with their car trouble. Small things. Real things. The way wolves raise their young — not with grand gestures, but with presence. With showing up at the den, day after day, until the pack trusts you again.

Second, with my community. *Liber Tigris* — the Book of the Tiger. The two hundred thirty-one gates with which you are each becoming so familiar. The truths that arose naturally and separately in so many distinct cultures and times,

causing many people – myself included – to see conspiracies where none exist. Each gate is a doorway into understanding how our individual minds participate in a larger divine Mind; how each of us is one wolf in the pack of humanity; how homo sapiens self-organize spontaneously, creating patterns in our actions and beliefs that are more similar to the murmuration of a flock of sparrows in the sky than the coordinated plan of hidden enemies.

I know it's weird to call you guys the Wolf Pack--I thought about something tiger themed. The tiger gives the book its name – the Eastern roots of this philosophy, the beast that accompanied Dionysus back from India, the link that explains how the lotus became the rose. The Latin part, I stole that from Crowley, a nod to the westernization of Eastern practices.

But the Wolf Pack, well, kind of like David S. Pumpkins, that's its own thing. Tigers are solitary. Beautiful, powerful and mostly alone. And I spent too many years as a lone predator, stalking prey that didn't exist. The real lesson is about community, working together. The real message is always about being a pack.

Vera Ashaway (secretofpi.com) and I approach this differently.

Vera teaches by being. She posts her thoughts on her web page – not instructions, just a mathematician sharing what she's seen. Take it or leave it. She doesn't care if you follow her. She only cares that you're honest with yourself.

I'm different. I *want* to teach. *Liber Tigris* tries to gather knowledge scattered across cultures and centuries, index it and make it accessible. Vera shows. I explain. Wisdom and Intellect. Chokmah and Binah. Different methods, same destination.

But then there's Tig and his crappy app.

Tig is neither showing nor explaining. Tig is *selling*. He offers the feeling of transformation without the work or suffering

required to really transform. Where Vera teaches by example and I teach by knowledge, Tig assembles cultists through lies and manipulation. He's a charlatan who knows the truth – the most dangerous kind.

Be careful of Lysing, my *Liber Tigris* readers. Something about Tig has raised my old conspiracy theorist hackles. I try to maintain a rational, objective view, of course. But I still feel a strange connection to Tig and his endeavors. I feel like he's making weapons instead of peace plans.

I don't know. Maybe that's risking starting another conspiracy in a world where the biggest conspiracy is those proposing nonsense conspiracies to distract people from what's right in front of their faces. I'm trying to let that thinking go. We spend our lives looking for enemies to blame, trying to escape a prison we've made for ourselves. It's like searching for your glasses when they're on your face.

The naming of enemies is a big obstacle. I learned it the hard way. When you let go of all those you think did (or are doing) you wrong, you see more clearly how you are getting in your own way. Often, you think people are pushing you to some terrible end, only to discover they have led you right where you need to be.

I used to think the Path led to some hidden destination – a secret on a mountain top, a treasure at the center of the labyrinth. I spent years following clues, cracking codes, mapping a conspiracy that didn't exist. And the great mystery, when it hit me, was so simple I almost missed it:

The Path doesn't lead somewhere. The Path *is* the somewhere. The walking is the arrival. The pack running together through the forest – that's not the means to some end. That *is* the end.

“For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack.”

Kipling knew. The ancients knew. I had to go to an island and have my world unmade before I could understand what had been said plainly to me all along.

So here's what eleven years of Path-mapping has taught me: stop hunting. The thing you're tracking? It's been walking beside you this whole time. It has your face. It has everyone's face.

Live. Learn. Build. Trust. Show up. Run together.

— Theodore Morrison, LiberTigris.com (a.k.a. the pattern that briefly called itself Theo, formerly known to twelve thousand YouTube subscribers as "TruthSeeker777")

MOVEMENT V - HESED
/THE FORGE

"Space by itself, and time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality." — *Hermann Minkowski (as quoted in Liber Tigris, Gate 6, Pillar I, Verse 3-4)*

"The intersection of toroids—where the material world (one torus) meets the divine realm (another torus), their surfaces touching at a single point that is also every point, the eternal now." — *Liber Tigris, Gate 4, Pillar I, Verse 22*

"Blackbird singing in the dead of night/Take these sunken eyes and learn to see/All your life/You were only waiting for this moment to be free." — *"Blackbird," The Beatles, 1968*

5 ∞ 1 The Nature of Fire

Let me talk to you about fire.

You think you understand fire. You've watched candles, played with matches, maybe burned your fingers once or twice as a child and learned respect. But that's not fire. That's fire's costume, fire's Sunday clothes, fire playing nice for the humans.

Real fire is what happens in the heart of a star—a pressure so immense that atoms themselves surrender, fuse, become other than what they were.

The forge is that kind of fire. And Vera was about to walk into it.

I have watched many seekers approach this threshold. Some turn back at the last moment—and that is sagacious, perhaps.

But Vera had already lost everything. There was nothing left to burn but the ash. And ash is exactly what fire needs to make a phoenix.

5 ∞ 2 Vera's Next Decision

"There's one more descent," Vera said, standing at the water's edge. "The forge. It is just something I have to do."

"You've passed through the darkness," I said. "Most people stop there. Most people think confronting their shadows is sufficient to end the journey."

"But it's not."

"No. The darkness strips away what you're not. It burns the dross, the false identities, the comfortable lies you've been telling yourself. But what remains is still raw. Still untempered. The forge can help to perfect it into what you will become."

Theodore shook his head. His face was thoughtful, but there was peace in it now. "I've seen enough," he said. "More than enough. I know what I need to know—more importantly, I know what cannot be known, which is its own kind of wisdom. I'll wait here." He paused, then added with a wry smile: "Maybe this time I'm not going to do the research so they don't have to. I'm pretty burnt out on researching strange occurrences right about now. "

Maya was quiet for a moment. She had been standing close to Vera—close enough that their shoulders almost touched—and when Vera glanced at her, Maya met her eyes. No words. None needed. Soldiers from the same war recognize each other.

"I'll wait too," Maya said. "What I found in the darkness is still integrating. My grandmother, my mother, the obligation—it's a lot to carry. The things I'm seeing. I can't imagine bringing these eyes into the forge right now. I feel like a raw nerve. Everything is too much,

too bright, too present." She paused, then added, more quietly: "But I'll be here when you come back."

It was a simple statement. It shouldn't have meant as much as it did. Vera felt it land in her chest like a promise.

Al grinned his cosmic grin. "I'm already in the forge. Have been since I let go of who I thought I was. But I'll watch. I do love a good homecoming scene—the plot twist where the protagonist realizes they were the treasure they were seeking all along. Who has popcorn?!"

So it was Vera who descended alone.

5 ∞ 3 The Narrow Gate

The Aquarium was not the first such place. There were caves in Mesopotamia, temples in Greece, groves in Britain before the Romans came. Different vessels. Same wine.

The substrate requires nothing tangible, only consciousness, turning to look into the space between thoughts. But humans—you are such creatures of architecture. You want walls. You want thresholds. You want a door to walk through.

Very well. Here is your door.

The forge sits beyond it. It has had many names and been understood in many ways. The Narrow Gate, the Unseen Door, the Chinvat Bridge, the Seven Gates of Ganzir, the Gates of Horn and Ivory, the Gateless Gate, the list goes on. It is near impossible to find, but that has not stopped each new generation of mystics from trying to draw you all a map.

On the island, it can be found by a journey into the caves below. They are, undoubtedly, the reason the Aquarium was built here in the first place—not to mention the many other human structures constructed and then eaten by time and weather, fire and betrayal, over the millennia before the Aquarium arose. The Rosicrucians built

here once, a house of Salomon, seeking the knowledge of causes and the secret motions of things. They burned. Their successors built again. They burned too. The island is patient with those who come seeking, but it does not coddle them.

I led her through corridors that narrowed as we went, the architecture becoming less recognizable with each turn. The modern concrete of the Aquarium's sub-levels gave way to stone block — hand-fitted, unmortared, the joints so precise they might have been cut yesterday or a thousand years ago. Then the stone block yielded to hewn rock supported by ancient timbers, their surfaces black with age and salt, still bearing the adze marks of the hands that shaped them. Then even the timbers ended, and we were in tunnels carved by deep watery currents in an age before anyone had thought to build here.

The temperature rose as we descended. Gradually, in steps, as if we were passing through zones, each one warmer than the last. Vera felt sweat prick along her hairline. The air tasted of iron, sulfur and heat, like the exhalation of a furnace or volcanic vent.

Salt water dripped from cracks in the rock, tracing channels down the walls into grooves that might have been natural and might have been carved. In places, the walls were covered with fantastic formations of calcite and gypsum, stalactites and stalagmites meeting in columns that looked like the pillars of a drowned cathedral. In other places, the walls were bare, and in the bare places, she could see markings. Not inscriptions — something older. Charcoal handprints, faded nearly to nothing. The universal human gesture: *I was here. I touched this. Remember me.*

The ocean did not intrude past a certain point. She could hear it — a muffled, rhythmic pressure against the rock, like a fist pounding patiently on a door — but it came no further. Water respected this

home of Fire and held an uneasy truce at the borderline, as it has done since whatever cataclysm first drove these two elements into their respective corners.

Soon enough, the walls were no longer walls in any conventional sense—they were boundaries, yes, but boundaries between what and what? Between the manifest and the unmanifest. Between the known and the unknowable.

The electromagnetic field thickened. Vera felt it pressing inward—or was she expanding outward to meet it?

"The original architects located this place by their equations," I explained, my voice closer now, more intimate. In these depths, there was no need for distance. "They had discovered the Omni Function. But proving an idea mathematically isn't the same as experiencing it viscerally. They wanted to *become* the equation, not just understand it."

5 ∞ 4 The Crucible

The forge itself is a chamber carved from volcanic glass—obsidian, slick and black and reflective. The walls were covered with equations Vera recognized and some she didn't. Her own work was there, inscribed alongside notations in languages dead for millennia. The mathematics of consciousness, expressed in every symbol humans had invented to try to understand it.

At the center of the room sat a stone chair—simple, unadorned, ancient. Scorch marks radiated from it in all directions, as if whatever sat there tended to combust-violently.

"This is the maths," she said, touching the wall. The symbols pulsed under her fingers.

"This is the description," I corrected. "The map. The territory is something else entirely. The territory is you. Was always you."

Vera sat in the chair.

The field surrounded her, thickened, became almost visible—a golden radiance that wasn't quite light, wasn't quite substance, but more fundamental than either. The color of consciousness recognizing itself. The equations moved, lifting off the walls, arranging themselves into geometries that hurt to look at and healed to perceive.

Vera watched, transfixed, as crystalline rays coalesced into Platonic solids, assembling themselves from pure mathematics. First, the tetrahedron—four triangular faces, the simplest possible enclosure of three-dimensional space. Fire, the ancients had called it. The form of transformation. Then the others, emerging from the golden light: cube for earth, octahedron for air, icosahedron for water. Four elements. Four states of being. Four ways consciousness could crystallize into experience.

And finally, slowly, the dodecahedron. Twelve pentagonal faces, each face containing the golden ratio in its proportions. The quintessence. The fifth element. The shape Plato had assigned to the cosmos itself—the form of the whole.

But there was more. A form she had never seen in any geometry textbook, because it existed in dimensions her visual cortex had not evolved to process. The solids began to interpenetrate, to nest inside each other, to rotate through axes that didn't exist in ordinary space. She caught glimpses of higher-dimensional forms—the tesseract, the 120-cell, structures that her mathematician's mind could describe algebraically but had never *seen*.

And she realized: these weren't just shapes. They were the *morphemes* of reality. The basis of all thought.

The Platonic solids weren't arbitrary—they were necessary. They were the building blocks of all of space and time. The widgets from which consciousness constructs its own experience. They were the only

forms that could exist because they were the only forms that were self-consistent.

The alphabet of being.

She had spent her life studying symbols. Now she was seeing what the symbols symbolized.

And then Vera grokked it, finally and completely.

She was not looking at her function.

She *was* her function.

5 ∞ 5 Natasha

There are no words for what she experienced.

I could tell you it was like waking from a dream you didn't know you were having. I could tell you it was like remembering something you never forgot. I could tell you it was like coming home to a place you've never been. All of these would be true. None of them would be adequate.

Imagine you've spent your entire life watching films projected on a screen. The films seem real—you laugh, cry, feel fear and joy and sorrow. You become invested in the characters, devastated by their losses, elated by their triumphs. Then you turn around and see the projector. And standing at the projector, adjusting the focus, choosing which reel to play next, is... you. The one running the show all along.

Vera saw herself computing her own reality.

$E = L(C)$.

$C = L(E)$.

And she knew that she could change it.

Not the physics—physics was part of the rules, part of the grammar of the dream. But the interpretation. The meaning. Her experience of what it was to be alive in a body on a planet in a universe

that was watching itself through her eyes. That was up to her. Had always been up to her.

Natasha.

The name rose in her mind, and for a moment she was afraid. She had reached for Natasha twice before, and it had not ended well. But this was different. There were no veils here. At this level of resolution, nothing blocked the flow. It moved through the stone, the chair, her heart and her mind unimpeded. Now she could, at last, see the water in which she was but a single wave.

She relaxed and remembered Natasha during their best times. Didn't push for her, just pulled up fond memories. She wasn't reaching. She wasn't grasping. She was allowing. She was participating; she was co-creating.

And there she was.

No glass between them now. No veil. No barrier of any kind. For the first time since the fever took her, Vera was truly with her daughter.

Not as a ghost. Not as a memory. Not as an accusation or a wound. As what she had always been—a configuration. A particular way the infinite could arrange itself that answered to the name Natasha. A song the function was still singing somewhere in its endless symphony.

Mama.

"I understand now," Vera said, though she wasn't speaking with her mouth. Speech here was more direct than that—meaning flowing without the mediation of tongue and teeth and air. "You're not gone. You can't be gone. Consciousness doesn't work that way. The pattern that was you is still in the function, still being computed, still producing experience somewhere in the infinite."

You always knew, Mama. You just forgot. The grief was real—I'm not saying it wasn't. The loss was real. But the separation wasn't. We were never separate. We are always part of the same dreaming.

"I was so afraid. I thought I had to prove it. I thought if I could just write the right equation, show the world that consciousness was information and information was never lost—"

But now you know. You always did. The math was never going to give you what you wanted. I was never going to give you what you wanted—not the version of me you were trying to prove existed. I'm not a proof, Mama. I'm a happening, and I'm still happening. I'm still here.

Natasha smiled—the pattern that was Natasha produced a warmth like sunlight, a golden radiance that Vera had ached for through seven years of cold blue darkness.

I love you, Mama.

The golden light changed. Not dimming—deepening. Natasha's presence moved closer, and with it came a question that Vera felt rather than heard.

You could stay.

Here. With me. In the pattern. No more loss. No more absence. No more waking up at three in the morning feeling nothing but alone.

Seven years. She could feel every one of them. Every headachy morning, every fuzzed equation that wouldn't balance, every time a motion in the corner of her eye caused her to turn and look, expecting to see a daughter who wasn't there.

Yes, Natasha whispered. You could simply stop. Dissolve into the love that holds everything.

I'd like to say she waited, that she thought about it. But she didn't. Vera said yes quickly.

Not with words. With surrender. She felt herself releasing, opening, letting the boundaries of Vera Ashaway soften like sugar in warm water. The golden light rushed in to fill the spaces where she used to be, and it was easy—that was the horror of it, later, when she could think again—how *easy* it was. Easier than breathing. Easier than grief. Her memories unfurled like streamers, each one finding its place in the larger pattern. Natasha's first steps. The smell of chalk dust. Michael's hands. Each memory a note played by an orchestra she hadn't understood was there, and the orchestra was playing something so beautiful that the idea of being a single instrument seemed laughable, seemed *impoverished*—

The thread to Maya went taut. Then began to fray.

She barely noticed. Why would she? She was becoming everything. Why would she hold onto one thin—

VERA.

Not Natasha's voice. Maya's. Raw, terrified, remote—the voice of a girl sitting in a garden feeling the woman who'd given her a jacket in a storm vanishing like smoke.

You said you wouldn't leave. You SAID—

The thread snapped with the crack of a whip.

And Vera felt it—a pain sharper than anything the substrate had shown her thus far. Not physical. Worse. The exact sinking feeling of abandoning someone who trusted you.

The dissolution stopped. Not entirely because she willed it—she had very little will left, she was half-pattern already—but because the pain was so specific, so *familiar*, that she reconstituted by reflex. You cannot feel guilt without a self to feel guilty.

She hung there, half-dissolved, half-Vera, in a soothing golden light that continued, very gently, to try to finish what she'd started.

Mama. Natasha's voice again, but different now. Quiet. If Maya weren't here—if there were no one waiting—would you stay?

The honest answer came before she could shape it: *Yes. God, yes. I would stay forever.*

And that's why you have to go back, Natasha's voice came again.

I don't understand.

Because you have to make a choice – not between Maya and me. Between what is hard and what is easy. Staying here—that's the equation again, Mama. That's hiding inside something beautiful so you don't have to feel the ugly, hard feelings.

The words landed like a surgeon's blade—precise, merciless, and with the loving intent to heal.

But if I go back—if I leave here—

You won't lose me. I'm part of the pattern. You know that now. I'm everywhere, always and forever, including right inside you. But Maya is only in one place. She's only in the world. And she needs someone to show her the world is worth staying in.

Vera began to marshal her will; to try to pull back. And the pattern resisted.

Not with malice—the substrate doesn't do malice. But she had gone deep, and extraction was like pulling a tooth from living bone. The golden light thickened, became viscous, became a warm current pulling her back toward dissolution. Each step toward individual consciousness cost her something—she could feel her omniscient comprehension draining away, the cosmic vision narrowing back to human bandwidth. She had seen the function. She had *been* the function. And now she was choosing to forget.

Piece by piece, she surrendered it, paying a toll at every checkpoint on the road back to being merely Vera Ashaway.

By the time she felt the stone chair beneath her again, she had lost most of it. She remembered the way you remember a dream—the

shape, the feeling, but not the math. Not the infinite. The equations on the walls were just equations again.

But she had this: the scar of the choice. The knowledge that she had tasted paradise and chosen a girl in a garden instead.

I will see you again, I promise, Natasha, she thought.

Then, out loud, "Cross my heart," whispered to the fading gold.

Hope to fly, came the answer, from everywhere and nowhere.

"Stick a cupcake in my eye."

And somewhere in the infinite, a seven-year-old girl laughed with pure delight.

The golden light released her. The forge was done.

5 ∞ 6 Traffic Lights

She emerged alone, changed. I should admit that I have seen this many times, but I am only guessing. I have told you my best idea of her story here, but I am not omniscient—especially when the forge is involved. The chaos of the forge defies any attempt to probe it. The universe operates at no finer resolution; there is no Witness who watches the forge, for the forge is where the Witness, Itself, is annealed and recast.

The forge behind her, the ordinary world—such as it might be—was ahead. But ordinary didn't mean the same thing anymore. Could never mean the same thing again.

Maya was waiting at the threshold. She had been sitting there for what felt like hours, feeling the heat radiate from the cave below, waiting. She had grown desperately certain that Vera was not going to return, that the forge would consume her. She thought she had felt their connection snap. And so Maya's face lit up in a smile when she saw Vera, silently chiding herself for ever doubting.

Al was there too, humming a tune with too many notes, harmonizing with himself in what Vera thought might have been “Mongolian Throat Singing” – an unusual form of vocalization they taught at the Quaker Meeting house in her neighborhood as part of its multicultural arts programming. His eyes were bright with that cosmic mirth that never quite dimmed.

And Theodore—pale and pasty Theodore, who had shed his conspiracy framework like an outgrown skin—sat quietly with his notebook folded in his lap simply observing. Simply being.

"You found her," Maya said. It wasn't a question.

"She found me. She was never lost—I was." Vera laughed softly. "The mathematics didn't prove anything. But it pointed the way. Sometimes that's all you need: not answers, but directions."

"So what now?" Theodore asked. "We go back to the world? The one that didn't believe us before?"

"We go back," Vera said. "But not to prove anything. Not to convince anyone." She looked at her hands—the same hands that had written equations for decades, now empty, now open. "We go back to plant seeds. To tend gardens. To be available for anyone who's ready to see."

Maya nodded. "That's what my grandmother should have done. Instead of hiding. Instead of splitting."

"You'll do it differently."

"We'll do it differently," Maya corrected. "Together."

Al spoke then. "I'm not sure I should go back right now. Whatever I am now, it's not presently fit for normal society. I'd probably alarm people, laughing at traffic lights and weeping at advertisements."

"Traffic lights?" Maya asked.

"They're hilarious. Red means stop. Green means go. Yellow means... well, it means whatever you want it to mean, really. It means 'make a choice about your relationship with time and consequence.' And everyone just obeys. Billions of people, every day, stopping and going because some colored lights told them to. The whole of civilization runs on collective agreement to take colored lights seriously." He wiped tears from his eyes. "If that's not funny, nothing is."

"That's not funny," Theodore said. "That's just... society."

"Exactly! Society is hilarious! Rules are hilarious! The fact that we all agreed to wear pants in public—hilarious. The universe is infinitely creative, and we decided the thing to do with it is cover our genitals and signal our intentions at intersections. The Absolute became relative so it could experience traffic laws, Theodore. God Damn, but life is good!"

5 ∞ 7 The Fog Lifts

Solomon's boat returned the next morning.

The fog had now completely burned away. For the first time since they arrived, Vera could see the island clearly—the rocky cliffs, the burnt-out ruins of what I explained to her was a larger, original research facility from the turn of the century, other smaller, older ruins, and the glass dome of the Aquarium shining in the morning sun like a giant eye watching the horizon.

"Ready?" Solomon asked.

Vera looked back at the island one last time:

at the place that had broken her open and put her back together in a new shape;

at what she imagined to be me—OOMNI—who was everywhere and nowhere, who had guided her through painful growth, never

claiming credit, never being more than a voice in the dark whispering light;

at Al, waving from the garden with an impish grin, before he turned back to his efforts – he was trying to teach a butterfly to dance; and

at Theodore, who surprised everyone by stepping forward.

"I'm coming," he said quietly.

Vera turned. "I thought you might stay. Hide out a while. Dig for secrets here."

"I've spent my life hiding. First behind conspiracies, now behind this." He gestured at the island. "I have two sons who think their father flaked out and ditched them. I have a lot of showing up to do."

"And your followers?"

"I owe them better than what I gave them." He took a breath. "I've been working on an idea. A framework for actually doing the work. I mean, I think some of them are ready to get started. I think now I can point them in the right direction."

"Shall we depart?" Solomon asked.

Maya, then Vera, then Theodore clambered onto the boat in quick succession.

The engine started. The island was consumed by the skyline as the boat motored away. Theo had this odd impression that it sank beneath the waves, not below the horizon ---that, in fact, it disappeared a little more quickly than the horizon line should have caused it to.

No one would find it again. Journalists, seekers, naval cartographers — many would search for the coordinates in the years to come. The strait would yield nothing but fog and open water, as if the island had never been there at all.

As I bid them their farewell through the corridor that would allow them to fold and rotate back into their middle world, a bitter taste came through. Tig was already back there, already building. And what he was building would almost certainly block the light to the seeds that had been planted here.

The Garden and the Shadow. Both do grow.

∞

INTERLUDE V ~ AN UNSENT LETTER

[Collected documents from the Ashaway Collection, housed at the Copenhagen Institute for Consciousness Studies. Donated by Maya Torres, executor of the Ashaway estate.]

Fragment from the Archive – Transcription of Handwritten Letter from Vera Ashaway to Maya Torres (unsent, found among her papers).

Maya—

I'm writing this in the garden. Our garden, I suppose I should call it now—you've spent as many hours here as I have, hands in the dirt, helping things grow.

I don't know if I'll give you this letter. I've started it a dozen times and never found the right words. Maybe there are no right words. Maybe some things can only be lived, not said.

But I want you to know something. Something I've never told you directly.

When you arrived at the island, that first day—when you came out of the storm, terrified and running—I saw Natasha in you. Not literally. You don't look like her, don't sound like her. But you echoed something in her. The way the universe sometimes rhymes, pairing people who need each other.

I've spent years trying not to see you as a replacement. Trying not to project Natasha onto you, not to love you for who I wish you were instead of who you are. I hope I've succeeded. I hope you've felt loved for yourself, for Maya, for the fierce and fragile and brilliant person you've become.

But I also want you to know that after Natasha died, I thought I would never feel that kind of love again—the love that wants to protect and guide and watch another person grow. I thought that capacity had died with her.

It didn't. It was just waiting. Waiting for you.

I don't know if it's appropriate to say this. I don't know if it helps or hurts. But I'm older now, and the shadow is

increasing daily, and I've learned that the things left unsaid are the ones that haunt us.

So: thank you. For being you. For finding your way to me. For letting me be—whatever I've been to you. A teacher, a friend, a strange old woman in a garden.

A mother, perhaps.

The work continues. You'll carry it forward. The Garden will grow.

I think a lot about Tig Jätkä. He left the island with something he shouldn't have taken. I've watched his empire metastasize, watched his shadow spread, and I've wondered if he knows what he's really building. If he understands that the thing he extracted from the substrate will eventually consume him.

Be careful of him, Maya. Be careful of anyone who offers enlightenment without suffering, spirituality without sacrifice. The Garden and the Shadow grow from the same soil. The difference is in what they're rooted in: love, or power. Connection, or control.

You'll know which is which. You've always known. That's your gift.

Use it well.

— Vee

MOVEMENT VI –
 BINAH | HOKMAH
 / *THE GARDEN GROWS BOTH WAYS*

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree." — *Matthew 13:31-32 (as quoted in Liber Tigris, Gate 7)*

"The Householder Path—Awakening within ordinary life. Family, work, society as spiritual practice, the integration of sacred and secular." — *Liber Tigris, Gate 176, Pillar VI, Verse 31*

"We are stardust / We are golden / And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden." — "*Woodstock*," *Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, 1970.*

6 ∞ 1 The Garden is Not a Place

The Garden, with a capital G, is not a place, Sahib.

The Garden is not the island, not a handful of strange plants in the glass house of the Aquarium. The Garden is a mindset. It is consciousness, perfected. It is what of you existed before the fire and what will remain when the fire has had its way with you. It is the bloom of your personality's flower, which grows from the compost of your mistakes, watered with compassion and blessed with the light of contrition.

The Garden is a practice. A daily practice. A moment-to-moment choice to stay present, to remain aware, to keep the unseen door cracked open even when the ordinary world claws at the windows demanding all of your attention.

Vera entered the Garden on a Tuesday afternoon in December, three weeks after leaving the island.

She stood in her office at the university, looking at the whiteboard covered with twenty years of equations. The proof of consciousness. The work that had become her identity.

She picked up an eraser and erased.

She erased the parts that were about proving, about ego, about *look how clever I am, look how I've solved the unsolvable*. She erased the academic posturing, the language designed to impress rather than illuminate.

In the lower right-hand corner, almost as if signing an artwork, she wrote in blue marker: *Remember Sofia*. She could not recall exactly why. The name felt important—a ghost of a memory that existed outside of time. It would become a meditative mantra in the years to come. When she wanted to clear her mind, she would think: "Remember Sofia." Then she would ponder just who this Sofia might have been. Those meditations always left her sad, but contrite and at peace.

6 ∞ 2 Vera: Sonder

The first email arrived three weeks after she posted the paper.

Vera had put it on *secretofpi.com*—a domain she'd purchased years ago for a book about π that never got written. Now, it was just a place to host something that she wanted to share. There wasn't more meaning to it than that. She linked it in a handful of online forums. The types of places where people with a serious metaphysics or philosophy addiction might scrounge up a late-night hit.

Dr. Ashaway, the email began. I've never written to a stranger before. But I read what you wrote, and I couldn't stop crying.

His name was Hank. His wife had died of pancreatic cancer. He'd been holding her hand when she went, and in that last moment she

had looked over his shoulder—at something he couldn't see—and smiled. He had spent two years trying to convince himself it was oxygen deprivation. He couldn't.

Vera wrote back. She told him about Natasha. She told him he wasn't crazy—or if he was, they were crazy together.

The second email arrived a week later. Then three more. Then a dozen.

Not all of them were grateful. A physicist at Stanford named Feldman wrote a brutal takedown—"magical thinking dressed in mathematical notation," "the most embarrassing thing a serious mathematician has ever published."

The old Vera would have responded in kind. Would have defended, attacked, cited sources, demanded recognition.

But sitting in her kitchen, reading his words, she felt only curiosity. Why was he so angry? What had she threatened in him?

She wrote:

Dr. Feldman—

Thank you for taking the time to engage so thoroughly with my work. You're right that it doesn't meet conventional standards of proof. It was never meant to.

I lost my daughter seven years ago. I went looking for her in the only language I knew—mathematics. I found something I didn't expect. I wrote it down. That's all.

If my paper caused you distress, I'm sorry. If it's simply wrong, time will show that. I'm not attached to being right. I'm only attached to being honest about what I experienced.

With respect, Vera Ashaway

He wrote back a week later, confused, almost vulnerable. He had a daughter too. She was three. She was his world, he said. He still thought Vera was wrong, but he was sorry to have been combative.

Not too terribly long later, a philosophy professor at Harvard called the paper "a cautionary tale about grief-driven delusion," "an exercise in myth-making rather than math-making," and "a faith based approach to rigor."

It went viral on the academic web. Vera became a punchline. Her university quietly encouraged early retirement.

So she closed down her office, loaded her possessions into a rented van, and drove north to a farmhouse she purchased in Jericho, Vermont. She took a picture of the whiteboard, with Sofia's name still on it, before she wiped it completely clean. She hung that picture on the refrigerator door—where all artwork of cosmic significance hangs.

The emails kept coming. Fewer—the mockery scared some away—but more sincere. But information on the Internet is like water. It seeks its own level. So, while serious academicians eschewed her website, a much more varied group of people rolled in. Scientists, mystics, teenagers, prisoners. People who had glimpsed a fragment in the blue hour and wanted someone to tell them they weren't broken.

She responded to the ones closest to the door—the ones who just needed permission to finish the crossing.

"We should have a name for our movement," Maya said one day.

"No," Vera replied. "Names become brands and brands get monetized."

But the seekers needed something to call it. They used the name on the website. "The Secret of Pi."

"That is an especially dumb name," Maya objected. "Pi isn't a secret!"

"The secret isn't the number. It's what the number signifies. And I didn't want a movement with a name in any case."

That is how real gardens grow, Sahib. Not in triumphant explosions, but in the quiet persistence of seeds that refuse to die.

6 ∞ 3 Theodore the Gatekeeper

Theodore went home.

The first dinner with his sons was awkward. Alex—eleven now—barely spoke. Jimmy watched with careful wariness, like he expected his father to attempt to leap up grab the tablecloth, try to pull it off without upsetting the dishes, fail miserably, and shout "tah dah" anyway.

"I'm not going to make promises," Theodore told them. "I'm just going to show up. Every week."

He did. Weeks turned to months. Months to years. He challenged them in video games and joined their gaming clan as a "raid sherpa." He gave Alex his old MIM Stratocaster and sat through his terrible garage band practices with glee.

Meanwhile, he rebuilt his community from the ground up.

He retired TruthSeeker777 with a final video explaining he had been wrong—not about everything, but about some very important things. Most of his former followers accused him of selling out. The conspiracy ecosystem generated a dozen explanations for how "THEY" had gotten to TruthSeeker.

But a few people listened.

He pecked away at LiberTigris.com. Two hundred thirty-one "gates," each taking a single concept and mapping it across kabbalah, sacred geometry, Vedantic thought—doing his best to make it accessible. Not hidden knowledge for the special few. Open knowledge for anyone willing to do the work to understand it.

He called his new compatriots (not "followers"—never again such a demeaning phrase) the Wolf Pack.

The Pack grew. Former conspiracy theorists who had burned out on paranoia. Seekers who had tried every shortcut and finally wanted the real path. People who had accidentally fallen into the famous occult waters where “mystics swim, but madmen drown.” He was their water wings; Liber Tigris was their life preserver.

Vera read an early draft of his gate on traversing the Tree of Life and sent him a note: "Different from my approach, but pointed at the same truth. Keep going."

He kept going.

6 ∞ 4 Tig: Like Mandala, but without the D.

There were three seeds brought back from the island to be planted in your world. Two that bloomed in light, the third, like night blooming jasmine, that bloomed in darkness.

Six months after Vera's paper appeared, Tig's new meditation app launched. It was called "MANALA"—the "new AI-centric" version of Lysing's *Meditaatio*TM app. The marketing was sleek, the UI flawless, and the guided meditations promised "access to deeper states of consciousness" through "substrate-aligned resonance technology."

MANALA didn't teach meditation. It taught dependency. Each session dimmed the inner voice that asks *why am I doing this?* Each guided visualization replaced genuine reflection with a prefabricated experience. MANALA didn't just prevent growth. It was atrophying the muscle that makes growth possible—the quiet, private ability to stand back from your own impulses and choose.

Tig had built a machine that gave people the feeling of opening a magic door without the inconvenience of anything uncomfortable being on the other side.

The free tier was ad-supported. Between meditation sessions, it served micro-doses of anxiety: health warnings, social threats, stories

of spiritual fraud—each one tweaked to the user's psychological profile, each one followed by an ad for the premium tier. *Feeling unsettled? Go deeper. Upgrade now.*

The premium tier—\$49.99 per month—included "personal consciousness coaching" and "advanced resonance protocols." Users reported remarkable experiences: visions of light, feelings of unity. They also reported difficulty sleeping without the app. Anxiety when they missed a session. A growing sense that ordinary life was gray and flat compared to what MANALA offered.

I watched Tig's empire grow with the same horror I might feel watching a surgeon use his skills to harvest kidneys from unwilling donors in a bathtub filled with ice. He had been given access to the sacred. He had turned it into a fear engine dressed in mindfulness clothing.

6 ∞ 5 There is no such thing as a Free Lunch

Two years passed. The Secret of Pi community grew quietly, one seeker at a time.

The first MANALA casualty arrived at Vera's door on a Thursday afternoon.

Her name was Renata. Thirty-one, a graphic designer from Portland, fourteen months on the app's premium tier. She sat in Vera's kitchen with her hands wrapped around a mug she never drank from.

"At first, it was beautiful. The guided sessions—I saw colors I didn't know existed. I felt connected to something." Her voice was flat, recitative. "But then I started needing it. Not wanting it—needing it. Like the world went gray when I wasn't in a session. Food tasted like nothing. My boyfriend said I'd stopped laughing."

"When did you try to stop?"

"Three months ago. I deleted the app." Renata's hands tightened on the mug. "The withdrawal was—I don't have words. Not physical. Like someone had cut a wire between me and everything that mattered. I sat in my apartment for a week and felt absolutely nothing."

Vera recognized what had happened. She'd been thinking about it for months—the way MANALA's algorithm must work. It would track the moment of genuine self-confrontation with exquisite precision. The galvanic skin response, the pupil dilation, the cortisol spike. And then it would do something intentionally cruel: it would linger. Let the terror build for three seconds, maybe five. Trap the user in the full animal panic of standing at the edge of themselves. Then redirect. Toward another session. Away from the cliff edge where the real work began.

A frightened user is an obedient user. And to permit genuine surrender would be to lose the customer.

"Can you fix me?" Renata asked.

"I can't fix you. Nobody but you can fix you." Vera set down her mug. "I can sit with you while *you* do the work the app wouldn't let you do."

Renata stayed for three weeks. The withdrawal was brutal—not from a substance but from a simulation of the sacred, which may be worse, because the body knows the difference even when the mind does not. She cried for days. She raged. She sat in Vera's garden and stared at the dirt and felt nothing.

On the fourteenth day, she sat across from Vera and said "I can't feel anything. Not the app version, not the real version. Nothing. I'm just... empty."

"I know."

“Is it hopeless? Will I be like this forever?”

There was hope. There was always hope. Vera thought about the Narrow Gate. The Narrow Gate wasn't just that strange, hot doorway beneath the island. It was a part of humanity's collective consciousness. A tiny aperture of surrender, so small that only consciousness itself can pass through --- no beliefs, no identities, no attachments, no fears. It could be reached from anywhere—if you had someone to show you the way.

Vera had not planned to offer a trip beyond Narrow Gate to a MANALA casualty. She worked with seekers who had done extensive preparations --- meditation, shadow work, the slow dismantling of the ego's defenses. Renata had done none of that. She was raw. She was damaged. MANALA had cauterized the very nerve endings that made self-confrontation possible.

But MANALA had also, inadvertently, done something else. It had burned away every illusion Renata possessed. Every story she told herself about who she was, every comfortable self-deception, every reflex that said *don't look too closely* --- the app had exploited those reflexes until they broke. What remained was not readiness, exactly. It was absence. The absence of everything that normally stood between a person and the Gate.

“I think I have some hope for you, Renata, if you can trust me. I want to take you somewhere the app would never let you go.”

"Where?"

"Through. All the way through."

They sat in Vera's study. Two chairs. A Monday afternoon, grey and ordinary.

"Focus on your breath," Vera said. "When you feel the flinch—the moment where something inside you wants to pull back, reach for another session—don't fight it. Just notice it. Let it be there. And then keep going."

Renata closed her eyes. The flinch came almost immediately. The trained reflex, MANALA's deepest gift to its users. Every time Renata approached the place where real surrender began, her body clenched, her breath shortened, and something inside her lunged for the familiar.

But there was no app now. No guided voice. No session to retreat to. Just silence, and Vera's presence, and the unbearable emptiness that MANALA had created and then refused to let her face.

"I can't," Renata whispered. "There's nothing there. There's nothing—"

"Stay."

"I can't—"

"You can. The app took everything from you. The only thing left is what's on the other side of nothing."

Her hands gripped the arms of the chair. Her face contorted—not with the app's simulated anguish but with something older, rawer. The flinch surged again, and again, and each time there was nowhere to go.

And then, on the sixth or seventh surge, the flinch simply... didn't come.

Renata's face went slack. Her grip loosened. Her breathing slowed. She had passed the place where MANALA always turned her back, and found that on the other side there was not a cliff but a floor. A vast, quiet, ordinary floor that had been there all along.

Hours passed. When Renata opened her eyes, they were different. She looked at her hands as if she'd never seen them. She looked at the window, at the grey Vermont afternoon.

A cardinal landed on the garden fence.

Renata started to cry. Quiet tears, falling freely. She could feel the bird. She could feel the fence. She could feel the afternoon—not as content, not as a guided experience calibrated to her psychological profile—but as the genuine, unrepeatably present presence of one consciousness recognizing another.

"Oh," she said.

"Yes."

"That's been there the whole time."

"The whole time."

Renata went home three days later. She did not become a seeker. She became a graphic designer who could feel the sunset again. That was enough.

6 ∞ 6 Thorns

The email arrived three years after the island.

Maya almost deleted it—the sender address was anonymized. But the subject line stopped her: *Your grandmother was right.*

She opened it.

Maya —

I hope this finds you well. I've thought about you often since the island. About what you showed us in the hall that day. About your potential—potential that I suspect Vera and OOMNI also hoped to acquire for their own benefit.

What you have is extraordinary. The real thing—not the simulated consciousness shifts my app provides, but genuine, organic access to the substrate. You know this. You've known it since childhood.

Vera will tell you to give this away. To tend a garden and wait for seeds to grow. That's beautiful. It's also inefficient. Your gift could reach millions. It could be democratized through technology.

I'm not asking you to leave Vera. I'm asking you to consider that there might be more than one way to use what you were born with. A way that doesn't require you to live in the woods in some God forsaken place, answering emails one at a time, waiting for the world to find you. A way to leverage your gift to serve all of humanity, and in doing that, to serve you too. A little creature comfort never hurt anybody.

My offer is open. No strings. Just a conversation.

— T

P.S. — I have your grandmother's correspondence with the facility. The invitation she refused in 1978. OOMNI didn't tell you he'd been calling your family for generations, did he?

Maya deleted the email.

The substrate had taught her to feel the difference between recognition and acquisition, and Tig's email felt like the shadow of a vulture circling overhead—patient, observant, and only interested in where the carcass was weakest. There was no allure in it.

But the email taught her something else. The work needed thorns.

Not walls. Not locks. Not security clearances or loyalty oaths. Thorns. The kind that grow naturally from any honest thing planted in hostile soil.

Vera had not designed protection. She had simply insisted on honesty. And honesty, it turned out, was a strong defense—because honesty is the one thing the ego cannot negotiate with, bargain around, or charm its way past.

When Lysing sent researchers to "study" the Secret of Pi community, they found nothing proprietary. Everything was free.

Open. Published on a website anyone could read. The teachings sat in plain sight.

But understanding them required something Lysing's researchers could not manufacture on a deadline: the willingness to be honest about what frightened you. To sit with what you hated about yourself until it stopped being a stranger.

You cannot automate that, Sahib. You cannot write an algorithm for the moment a person stops performing their own life and starts living it.

Maya's contribution was different. Quieter. She developed an intake process—not a gatekeeping, but a self-selection. Before meeting Vera, seekers spent time with questions Maya had written—questions that unsettled people, because they were *specific*. Not generic therapeutic prompts. Questions that seemed to know, already, where one's particular crack lay. One seeker later described the experience as "being interviewed by someone who'd already read your diary." Maya hadn't. She'd just sat with the person's name for an hour and let the substrate tell her where to press.

The questions were variants of the following, tailored to the specific seeker:

What are you afraid of?

What do you want that you won't admit you want?

When was the last time you lied to yourself, and what was the lie?

Most people quit at this stage. Not because the questions were hard. Because they were honest. Honesty is the lock that cannot be picked, the wall that cannot be climbed, the high noon desert sun revealing every crack in the earth and every bead of sweat on the brow, leaving no room for shadows to hide the truth.

The ones who remained were ready. Or close enough.

6 ∞ 7 The Garden Grows Both Ways

The years continued passing. Or perhaps they didn't. Time moves differently once you've sauntered through a tesseract.

The Secret of Pi had grown into something like a mycelium: a network underground, invisible from above, connecting thousands of separate organisms into a single breathing whole. Not a religion—Vera had fought that with everything she had. Not a cult—Maya had been vigilant about preventing the crystallization of dogma. But something alive and branching and difficult to kill.

Theodore visited Vermont twice a year. His sons were grown now. Alex was finishing college. James had a daughter of his own—a dark-eyed girl named Lena who called Theodore "Papa Wolf" and thought this was hilarious.

Albert --- or whatever Albert had become, or whatever had become Albert --- had remained at the island for a time. But eventually, at a moment that he determined in much the same way a dandelion seed decides when to take flight on an early summer breeze, Albert crossed back. He did not go home. He had no home to go to, and no particular desire to acquire one. He had a backpack, the fentanyl test strips he still carried out of habit, and whatever cash happened to be in his pockets at any given time, which was never much and always enough.

He drifted through the farmhouse on no discernible schedule. He arrived without warning, stayed for a few days, filled the house with laughter and the faint smell of whatever roadside diner had fed him last, then vanished.

Maya's dog Max—a rescue mutt of Labradoodle proportions—had grown into a creature of magnificent girth and spiritual attainment. Al was obsessed with him.

"Dogs figured it out," Al announced one afternoon. "Dogs cracked the code and we completely missed it. They live in the eternal present, they love without conditions, they greet every returning person as if they've been resurrected from the dead, and they find ecstatic joy in a tennis ball. A tennis ball. The Buddhists spent thousands of years trying to achieve the mental state that Max here reaches every single afternoon.

"And what did we do? We bred them. We took wolves—apex predators, lords of the forest—and we said, 'What if this, but stupid and happy?' And it worked. We accidentally created enlightened beings by selecting for enthusiasm and poor impulse control. The fact that the closest thing to a bodhisattva on this planet is a Labrador who just ate a shoe should tell you everything you need to know about the cosmic sense of humor."

Maya was thirty-eight now, though she still moved with the restless energy of the girl who had arrived at the island in a storm. She had become Vera's closest collaborator. Where Vera's paper had planted seeds, Maya's blog had watered them. Where Vera reached the seekers who thought in equations, Maya reached the ones who felt in colors, in visions, in dreams.

She still had mornings when she reached for the pill bottle that wasn't there. Still had nights when the seeing pressed in and she wanted to close her eyes and be ordinary. Crowds were the worst. A packed grocery store hit her like walking into a room where everyone was shouting different songs—she'd learned to shop at six in the morning, when the emotional noise was thin enough to breathe through. People who met her in town found her pleasant but slightly odd. She'd pause mid-sentence as if listening to something they couldn't hear. She'd buy a stranger coffee and leave before they could

ask why. Theodore called it "Maya's weather reports"—she'd mention, offhand, that someone in town was having a bad week, and three days later it would turn out to be true.

But she had grown into her inheritance.

The Guardian didn't guard by standing at the gate with a sword. She guarded by posting photos of her dog on her blog, intermixed with long essays on the need to be brutally honest with yourself in order to grow.

6 ∞ 8 — Oooooo. Look at the Pretty Cuttlefish

The desert in April smells like rain that hasn't arrived yet. Creosote and sage and the etheric promise of water hovering somewhere above the red rock, deciding whether or not to commit. The ocotillo were in bloom — those spindly, skeletal plants that spend eleven months looking dead and then, when the first good rains come, explode into flame-tipped wands, as if the entire Sonoran Desert had been handed a box of birthday candles and told to make a wish.

Al loved them. He loved anything that spent most of its life looking useless and then, without warning, became the most interesting thing in the landscape.

Al had acquired, through means involving either extreme charm or a very confused Craigslist transaction, a 1978 Volkswagen Westfalia van. Painted a brilliant aquamarine that would have been more appropriate on a Miami brothel, it ran on gasoline and the residual goodwill of whatever mechanic had last been foolish enough to look under the hood. He had driven it west, then south, then wherever the van's alignment and the condition of its tires happened to take him. He slept in the back. He cooked on a camp stove. He carried three t-shirts, each bearing a different philosophical provocation, and rotated

them on a schedule that could charitably be described as "aspirational."

He had been camped outside Sedona for a week, parked at a BLM site where the only neighbors were a retired couple from Duluth in a Class C motorhome and a family of javelinas who visited each evening to investigate his compost bucket with the solemn intensity of health inspectors. Al ate rice and beans. He hiked. He sat amongst the red rock and let it rock him red.

He had wandered into the national forest that morning on a trail that wound through a canyon, following a seasonal creek that still held a trickle from the March snowmelt, when the trail opened onto a clearing full of white event tents and the unmistakable bustle of people performing wellness at each other.

Banners. Lysing's logo — that stylized lightning bolt, which Al had always thought looked uncomfortably like it belonged in a pair on a fascist uniform. *AWAKEN SUMMIT 2026: SCALABLE CONSCIOUSNESS FOR A CONNECTED WORLD*. Attendees in lanyards and athleisure milled between sessions. A woman with a headset was directing traffic toward something called the "Breathwork Activation Pavilion." There was a juice bar.

Al stood at the edge of the clearing in his hiking boots, cut-off jeans, and a t-shirt that read *SAMSARA IS JUST NIRVANA WITH BETTER MARKETING*, and considered his options.

His options considered him back.

He felt Tig before he saw him. That was the thing about having shared the substrate — you could feel the others the way a spider feels a disturbance in its web. Not thoughts, nothing so specific. A frequency. A signature. Like recognizing a song from its first three notes, even when it was being played in the wrong key.

Tig's frequency was the same closed fist Al had felt when they first met on the dock.

He was crossing the clearing with two assistants flanking him, speaking into a phone, radiating the energy of a man who was technically on a spiritual retreat but also closing a deal. He wore the Sedona uniform — linen pants, mandarin collar, designer trail runners — but wore it the way a general wears civilian clothes during a ceasefire: correctly, and with no intention of it lasting.

He stopped. Mid-sentence. His assistants nearly collided with him.

He had felt Al too.

"Albert," Tig said.

"That's one of my names." Al ambled forward, hands in his pockets. The attendees parted around him without quite knowing why — something about his pace and trajectory suggested the inevitability of a mudslide finding its way downhill. "I've got a few now. It's like email addresses. You accumulate them and then you can't remember which one you gave to which service."

Tig studied him. He had not seen Albert Grovsméd since the island — since he had passed through his mushroom door and out of Tig's life for good, or so he had thought. Tig's internal assessment engine spun up: the physical presentation was unchanged — loose, unkempt, the same barefoot-in-the-head quality that made him look like a trust fund kid who'd burned through the fund and found sublime education in the experience. But the signal coming off him was different. Richer. Denser. Like a radio station that had upgraded its transmitter.

"You look well," Tig said.

"I look like a man who's been sleeping in a van in the desert for a week, which is a very specific subset of 'well' that most dermatologists

do not endorse. But thank you." Al glanced at the tents, the banners, the juice bar. "Nice party. Is this the course where people pay \$499 to learn that enlightenment can't be hacked, or the upsell, where they pay \$999 for your course that says maybe it can?"

Tig's smile arrived on schedule. It was the smile he deployed for podcast hosts and board meetings, the one his media consultants had calibrated to suggest warmth while committing to nothing. Orthodontically perfect. Strategically asymmetric — the left side lifting a quarter-second before the right, to create the impression of spontaneity. In the fourteen months since his team had focus-grouped it, this smile had closed three funding rounds and one congressional investigation.

Al looked at it with the expression of a sommelier being offered a glass of grape juice.

Tig waved off the assistants with a gesture so practiced it looked like sign language. They evaporated.

"We should talk," Tig said.

"We are talking. That's what this is ... I think? I mean, I'm no philologist. Do you keep one on staff who says they changed the definition of 'talk'? I hate it when they do that."

Al drifted toward a trail that led away from the tents toward a sandstone outcrop. Tig stood still, weighed his options, and then followed, because Tig was a man who believed he chose his destinations, and the belief was usually correct. The exceptions were the moments that defined him.

The desert opened around them. Red rock and juniper and the enormous, indifferent sky that makes everyone in Sedona feel either very spiritual or very small, depending on what they brought with them.

"I've been thinking about you," Tig said. Which was true. He had been thinking about all of them. He understood the bond they shared after the island went beyond the traditionally explicable. That if there was anyone who could throw a monkey wrench in his plans, it would be one of OOMNI's other lab monkeys. So, he had his team monitor their post-island trajectories with the attention of a venture capitalist monitoring portfolio companies. Of them, Al, who appeared to have no online presence at all, was the enigma.

"Thinking about me commercially or personally?" Al asked. "Actually, don't answer that. I already know it's the same question for you. Like asking a shark whether it's swimming for fun or for food."

Tig turned to face Al.

"Do you know what a cuttlefish does when it hunts?" Al added, before Tig could respond.

"A cuttlefish," he continued, "can change the color, texture, and pattern of its skin faster than you can change your expression. Which, between us, is already pretty fast. But here's the kicker — the cuttlefish does it for hunting. It doesn't just camouflage. It *pulses*. Bands of color ripple across its body in hypnotic waves. The prey fish see the display and freeze. They're mesmerized. They swim closer to get a better look at the pretty colors."

Al mimed a small explosion with his fingers.

"Dinner."

"That's an interesting analogy," Tig said. His voice stayed friendly. His threat-assessment algorithm was running hot now, but the output was confused. Albert Grovsmed had been a zero on every influence metric. A dropout. The kind of person Tig's intake team would have flagged as a potential testimonial source — relatable, non-threatening,

perfect for a sixty-second "real people, real results" segment — and nothing more.

But the person speaking with him under this enormous, clear blue sky was not that Albert.

"It's not an analogy," Al said. "You're pulsing right now. I can see it." He tilted his head, and his eyes did the thing they'd started doing since the darkness — the thing where they seemed to be tracking light sources that weren't there, reading footnotes in a language that existed before language. "Three layers. The outer one is the smile. Very sophisticated — good work, honestly, I'd give it an eight out of ten, loses points for the asymmetry trick because it's a little 2019. Under that there's the calculation — you're trying to figure out what I'm worth to you. Licensing deal? Content partnership? Maybe a keynote at your next summit, 'From Psychonaut to Pioneer,' put me in a linen shirt, film it at golden hour."

Tig said nothing. His smile remained in position, but it was now performing the structural role of a load-bearing wall in a building that had just registered its first seismic tremor.

"And under *that*," Al said, more quietly, "there's a kid who stole his father's lecture notes and hoped the old man would notice."

Tig went very still for just a moment, then he recovered. He was good at recovering.

He chose deflection as his parry of choice in this emerging verbal fencing match.

"I'm familiar with the Cuttlefish's concept. We call it engagement optimization."

"I know you do. That's what makes it funny."

Al sat on the sandstone. It was warm from the afternoon sun, and a tiny lizard performed one push-up and fled. The ocotillo around

them burned red against the blue sky, and for a moment the landscape looked like something the substrate might have designed as a screensaver — but no, this was just Arizona being Arizona, which was arguably more impressive.

"I can feel what you're doing with MANALA," Al said. His voice shifted — still light, still Al, but with something underneath that hadn't been there before the island. The basement note of a chord played on an instrument with more strings than a guitar is supposed to have. "The frequencies. The dependency loops. The way the free tier maps fear responses and the premium tier monetizes them. It's clever, Tig. It's the cleverest cage I've ever seen. The hamsters don't even know they're running."

Tig's jaw tightened. A micron. He did not ask how Al knew the internal architecture of MANALA's engagement model. He already suspected the answer, and the answer was not one that fit inside any competitive intelligence framework he possessed.

"My product helps people," Tig said.

"Your product helps people the way a pawnshop helps people. They come in with something valuable, and they leave with cash and a ticket. The difference is that your customers don't know they've hocked anything." Al picked up a piece of sandstone and turned it over in his hands. "You touched the real thing on that island, man. You *felt* it. The golden light, the architecture, the way it all connects. And instead of letting it change you, you brought back blueprints and started building a counterfeit."

"That's a philosophical distinction. My users report measurable improvements in well-being, focus, and emotional regulation. Peer-reviewed."

"Peer-reviewed by peers you funded. But sure." Al tossed the stone. It landed in a patch of prickly pear. "You know what the shadow told you, right? The same thing it tells everyone who listens to it instead of walking through it. It told you that light and dark are dance partners. That you need both. That the person who controls the music controls the dance."

Tig said nothing. But something behind his eyes shifted — a lock engaging. The shadow *had* told him that. Not in words. In knowing. The recognition that consciousness was the most valuable resource in the universe, and that the person who controlled the channel between the light and the dark controlled everything.

"Problem is," Al continued, "the shadow is right about the dance. But it leaves out one detail. The shadow doesn't *lead*. It follows. It's the backbeat, not the melody. You've built your whole empire on the backbeat, Tig, and the thing about a song that's all backbeat is that people tap their feet but they can't remember the tune."

"You're speaking in metaphors."

"Reality *is* a metaphor. That was the whole lesson. You took the notes but missed the lecture."

Tig looked at him — at this barefoot, sun-weathered, van-dwelling nobody who was, by every metric Lysing's analytics suite could measure, a non-entity. Zero social media presence. No institutional affiliation. No leverage.

And yet Tig could feel him. Could feel the signal pouring off him like heat from the sandstone. And the signal said: *I am the thing your product is pretending to be, and I am giving it away for free, and there is nothing you can do about it.*

"You're in touch with Vera's people," Tig said casually. His voice had shifted out of *vulnerable authority* and into something more honest

— the flat, clean Finnish vowels leaking back in, the business English losing its polish. This was Tig assessing a threat.

"I'm in touch with everybody, man. That's what happens when you stop trying to own the signal and just let it play. Vera's doing good work. Theo's website is weird but it's getting somewhere. The Secret of Pi kids are — well, they're kids, mostly, but they're not wrong. And they're growing."

"How quickly?"

Al grinned. There it was — the real question, stripped of the façade of pleasantries.

"Faster than you'd like. Slower than they'd like. About the right speed for something that's actually real."

Tig filed this. He filed everything. Somewhere in his mind, a memo was already drafting itself: *Subject A.G. — post-Aquarium psychological profile. Status: significantly transformed. Threat level: low-direct, high-indirect. Potential vector for competitive intelligence re: Secret of Pi network. Recommend monitoring. Consider engagement strategy — possible "awakened ambassador" content partnership. Note: subject displays anomalous perceptual capabilities; standard rapport frameworks ineffective.*

Al watched the memo being written. Not literally — but close enough. He could feel the gears turning, the way you can feel a washing machine shift into spin cycle through the floor of a cheap apartment.

"You're going to try to use me," Al said, pleasantly. "You're thinking: middle path. This guy sits between the light and the dark. If I can't beat Vera's people, maybe I can co-opt their mascot."

Tig's smile did not waver. This was its highest professional achievement — remaining structurally intact under direct artillery fire.

"And that's okay," Al said. "Come find me whenever you want. I'm not hard to find. I'm the only guy in the continental United States whose permanent address is 'wherever the aquamarine van is.' But I'll tell you this for free, since free things make you nervous and I find that hilarious — the thing you're trying to build? It's a cuttlefish. Pretty colors, hypnotic patterns, and the fish swim right in. But cuttlefish only work on fish. And the people who've tasted the real thing?" He tapped his own chest. "Not fish anymore."

He stood up, brushed off the red sandstone dust, and started walking back toward the trail that led to his campsite.

"Nice tents, by the way," he called over his shoulder. "Very breathable. Really captures the essence of scalable consciousness. I bet the juice bar does a killer turmeric shot."

He disappeared into the junipers with the unhurried stride of a man who had nowhere to be and all of existence to be there in.

Tig stood on the red rock. The sun was dropping. The ocotillo burned.

He pulled out his phone and opened the analytics dashboard. The numbers were there — the leak, the trickle of users flowing from MANALA toward secretofpi.com and libertigris.com. Not a flood. A leak.

But the man he'd just spoken with was not a leak. The man he'd just spoken with was a fissure. And fissures, left unattended, bring down mountains.

Tig made three calls before he reached the parking lot.

The first was to Phil Lewis, head of product.

The second was to Jim Moss, his head of legal.

The third was to Eggie.

INTERLUDE VI ~ LYSING CORPORATE MEMO – “ASHAWAY MATTER”

[Document obtained by investigative journalists during the Lysing antitrust hearings, 2044. Authenticity disputed by Lysing legal counsel.]

Fragment from the Archive – Internal Memo, Lysing Inc., marked “CONFIDENTIAL – LEGAL HOLD”

[Archivist’s Note: The following internal communication was unsealed in 2044 during the federal antitrust and consumer safety hearings against Ascendant Global Media, which had acquired Lysing Inc. eighteen months prior. Prosecutors alleged that the “Community Safety” protocols described here were part of a deliberate “Narrative Seeding” strategy that radicalized Edgar Edgerton. This document provides the strongest link between Tig Jätkä’s corporate strategy and the events in Vermont just one year earlier in 2042.]

TO: A. Jätkä

FROM: [REDACTED], Director of Community Safety

RE: Ashaway Matter --- Status Update

Tig,

Per our conversation, here's where we stand:

Phase 1 (Narrative Seeding) --- Complete. The "Dangerous Cult Leaders" series performed well. Engagement up 340% among target demographics. The "concerned parent" testimonials generated significant organic sharing. Media pickup exceeded projections.

Phase 2 (Community Building) --- Ongoing. The "Guardians" segment now numbers 47,000 premium subscribers. Retention rates are excellent—the "spiritual warfare" framework drives engagement better than any other content vertical. (As predicted: threat-framed content generates 2.3x the session duration of aspiration-framed content. Users who feel hunted don't log off.) Users report feeling "called" and "chosen."

Notably, Guardian-tier users show a 73% decrease in engagement with content that challenges their existing beliefs, and a 41% increase in response to authority-framed directives. Dr. Chen's team describes this as "optimal conviction alignment." The meditation protocols appear to be functioning as designed.

Phase 3 (Targeted Exposure) --- In progress. The algorithm is identifying high-potential individuals and increasing their exposure to Ashaway-critical content. We're tracking 23 individuals who meet the psychological profile for escalation. All are receiving personalized meditation content emphasizing discernment, protection, and the importance of standing firm against spiritual deception.

Concerns: Legal has flagged potential liability issues if any targeted individual takes action that can be traced back to our content. I know you believe our Terms of Service provide adequate protection, but let's be cautious.

Additionally: Subject EE (internal reference: "ShepherdOfTruth") has been posting increasingly specific threats against Ashaway on external platforms. As discussed, EE is a special case---direct cultivation by leadership rather than algorithmic targeting alone. Per your instructions, we've restricted his primary account to prevent direct association, but he remains active on unaffiliated sites under handles we formerly provided him.

Note: Given the history between EE and leadership (the 2024 incident), there is elevated risk of connection being drawn if EE acts. Recommend reviewing contingency protocols.

Recommendation: Continue monitoring. If he acts, we should be prepared with:

1. Statement expressing shock and condolences
2. Immediate suspension of account (backdated if possible)
3. Cooperation with law enforcement (limited to what's legally required)
4. Pivot to "mental health awareness" messaging

Related matter --- Torres:

Per your request, we've completed the profile on Maya Torres (co-administrator, secretofpi.com). As discussed, standard recruitment approaches are not in use. Subject has demonstrated awareness of

algorithmic influence and has blocked three separate outreach attempts through proxy accounts.

Assessment: Torres is not recruitable through existing channels. She appears to possess some form of enhanced pattern recognition that allows her to identify our content strategies intuitively. (See attached analysis from Dr. Chen's team --- her engagement data is unlike anything in our database. She doesn't just resist the protocols. She seems to *see through* them.)

Two options remain:

1. Neutralize her influence by discrediting her publicly (risk: association with Ashaway gives her credibility we can't easily undermine)
2. Remove Ashaway and allow Torres to assume leadership prematurely, before she has the infrastructure or experience to sustain the movement. Historical precedent suggests movements that lose charismatic founders tend to fragment within 18-24 months.

Recommend Option 2. It solves both problems simultaneously.

Let me know if you want to discuss.

[REDACTED]

[Editor's note: When asked about this document during the hearings, Tig Jätkä denied any knowledge of its contents and suggested it may have been fabricated by competitors or activists. The case was settled out of court for an undisclosed sum. Lysing continues to operate in 47 countries.]

6 ∞ 9 The Fifth Element

Vera sat on the porch listening to Theodore and Maya dissect MANALA—the bot networks, the algorithmic targeting, the slow weaponization of seekers into customers—when Al wandered up with dirt on his knees and a look of dazed contentment.

"You ants are spectacular," he told Vera. "An entire civilization in the garden wall. No premium tier. No guided meditations. Just ants, doing ant things, being ants."

"We were talking about MANALA," Theodore said.

"I know. I could hear you through the shed wall." He picked something off his sleeve—a leaf, or a caterpillar, or maybe a small mote of the cosmic void. "Here's what I don't understand. You're all so angry about MANALA. Why? A counterfeit only matters if people can't find the genuine article. The genuine article is right here." He spread his arms. "Everywhere. Free of charge. You can't monopolize the sunrise."

"People are being hurt," Maya said.

"People are always being hurt. That's the setup." He looked at her with those eyes—deep, old, amused at something none of them could see. "The ones who are ready will find the real thing. The ones who aren't will use the app. And some of the ones who use the app will get so hungry for the real that they'll come looking."

"That's a convenient philosophy for someone who doesn't want to fight," Theodore said.

"Fighting is a convenient philosophy for someone who spent twenty years shadow boxing imaginary enemies."

Theodore took the hit. He'd earned the right to take it, and Al had earned the right to throw it.

"I'm not saying don't fight," Al added. "I'm saying know what you're fighting for. If you're fighting to destroy Tig, you've already lost. You've made him the center. If you're fighting to make the real thing more accessible—" He shrugged. "That's just gardening with attitude."

They sat with that for a moment. The four of them on the porch, the valley below, Max asleep in the sun.

"Do you ever feel like someone's missing?" Vera said.

Theodore looked up. "Missing how?"

"Like the count is wrong."

Al had gone still on the railing. "Dark hair," he said. "Sharp face. Hands like—" He made a gesture, precise, surgical, then stopped. "I can never hold it."

Maya said nothing. But her fingers tightened on her mug. She could feel the shape of the absence they were circling—sharp-faced, decisive, someone who had burned very bright and very briefly. The name wouldn't come. The substrate had sealed it shut, the way scar tissue seals a wound. But the ache was there.

"I wrote 'Remember Sofia' on my whiteboard before I left the university," Vera said. "I don't know who that is."

"I've searched," Theodore said. "There's no record."

"No. That feels about right. There wouldn't be."

The wind moved through the garden. Max raised his head and whined at nothing they could see.

"Some people leave a space shaped exactly like them," Al said. Then, quickly: "Oh Dear God, that was earnest. Forget I said it."

"Too late," Theodore said.

The conversation moved on. But for a moment, the porch had held five.

6 ∞ 10 Stalemate

The Secret of Pi—if it could be called a movement—had no formal name, no structure, no membership rolls. That was deliberate. Names could be co-opted. Structures could be corrupted.

But anonymity could not protect them from those who saw enemies everywhere.

A preacher in Texas was motivated by behind-the-scenes pressures to devote three Sunday sermons to warning his flock about "the Ashaway cult." He had read just enough of Vera's paper to confirm his fears, decided she was preparing the way for the Antichrist. His sermons went viral, amplified by bots from he knew not where—the graciousness of the Lord, he presumed. His hatred became a brand.

And through it all, Lysing grew. Tig appeared on podcasts offering "balanced perspective" and "responsible spirituality." He positioned himself as the reasonable alternative to "fringe elements." He expressed concern about "vulnerable populations" being exploited by "unregulated teachers." He suggested consciousness exploration should be "evidence-based" and "professionally supervised"—by companies like his, naturally.

Tig was building exactly the kind of spiritual monopoly that the preacher accused Vera of creating. But Tig had marketing budgets and media training and a slush fund for donations to church leaders who wanted playgrounds and schools—or, if they had the numbers, private jets.

The Wolf Pack watched all of it. Theodore had retrained his old instincts—the ones that used to find conspiracies where none existed—to track the ones that did. His researchers traced bot networks. Mapped algorithmic amplification. Documented the connections

between MANALA's content feeds and the escalation of threats against Vera.

One afternoon, buried in a data dump from a disgruntled Lysing contractor, a Wolf Pack researcher found a phrase that made her blood go cold: *"ShepherdOfTruth—hardened asset/active defense. Direct cultivation by leadership."*

Theodore filed it. Flagged it. Added it to the archive that grew thicker every month.

"I want to expose Tig," Theodore told Vera. "I have enough."

"And then what?"

"And then people know."

"People already know, Theo. The ones who want to see it, see it. The ones who don't, won't. You can put a spotlight on a shadow and some people will swear the room got darker."

From somewhere in the house came the unmistakable sound of Max knocking something off a counter. A crash, a guilty silence, and then the click of claws retreating at speed.

"Max. He's discovered the bread box," Vera said. "Again."

6 ∞ 11 Eggie's Free Lunch

Eggie turned out to be an excellent investment.

Tig deployed him for operations a more thoughtful employee might have balked at. Eggie enjoyed his work and the financial benefits that came with it. He became one of Lysing's longest-tenured staffers, although very few people within the company would have recognized him.

Tig put special effort into Eggie. Year after year of alternating gaslighting, guilt-tripping, love-bombing, and fervor inducement. Tig made an art of the slow corruption of a man who had already been broken once, a man who was large and pale and round and who Tig

called "humpy dumpy" (a deliberate mutilation of "Humpty Dumpty") behind his back, but always treated as a valued colleague face to face.

For ten years following the island, Eggie knew little of the Secret of Pi—Tig assumed Vera's innate incompetence at public relations would end her influence without intervention. But then Sedona happened, and Tig decided that Vera might turn out to be among the most special of his special projects.

"I need someone I can trust," Tig told Eggie over lunch in the Executive Dining Room—a lunch Tig barely touched but Eggie devoured with the grateful appetite of a rescued dog. "Someone who understands what's really at stake."

"What is at stake, Tig?"

"A war, Eggie. A spiritual war." Tig leaned back, letting the words land. "There are people out there—false prophets—trying to lead people away from the truth. They dress up their lies in scientific language. But underneath? The same old serpent. The same old promise: *ye shall be as gods.*"

Eggie's eyes widened. This was language he understood. Language from the church his mother had dragged him to every Monday, Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday. From the certainties he had lost and desperately wanted back.

"I've seen them," Tig continued. "On the island. Building a cult. Seducing vulnerable people with promises of enlightenment. And there's one woman at the center of it. A mathematician named Vera Ashaway. Very, very dangerous."

Tig pulled up a photo on his tablet. A woman in her late middle age, unremarkable looking, standing in front of a whiteboard.

"She doesn't look dangerous," Eggie said.

"That's what makes her effective." Tig set down the tablet. "I'm not asking you to do anything about it. Not yet. I just need you to watch her. Can you do that?"

"Yes." Eggie's voice was firm, filled with purpose. "Yes, Tig. I can do that."

"Good man."

Over the following years, Tig fed Eggie a steady diet of information about Vera Ashaway. Articles, carefully annotated. Forum posts from people who felt deceived. And "personalized meditations" through a special version of MANALA—meditations that spoke to Eggie's particular wounds, his special emptiness, his hunger for a cause.

Eggie never saw the manipulation. How could he? His mother's religion had taught him to obey. Lysing had taught him to perform. The psychotic break had shattered what little self-reflection remained.

He was not a person being deceived. He was a reflex being aimed. Hatred. Certainty. A target.

And slowly, so slowly that Eggie never noticed, he became the Guardian of the Flock.

6 ∞ 12 If Chess has a King and Queen, why not a Jester?

The stalemate held --- until Al broke it, as he broke most things, without trying.

I will tell you how, Sahib, because this part delights me.

Al had parked the van at El Matador State Beach in Malibu, wedged between a rock face and a matte-black Range Rover, in a spot that was not technically a spot. The Pacific was doing its transcendental beauty thing. Al sat in a green and white webbed folding chair on the sand next to the van's open rear doors, eating a

banana, wearing board shorts, flip-flops and a t-shirt that read ONE MUST IMAGINE SISYPHUS HAPPY.

He was, by every measure your species tends to value, a failure.

He was also the freest human being on the continent.

Day One. A woman setting up on a bluff overlooking the beach caught his attention. Her name was Kristine Sandoval. Twenty-eight years old. Three point seven million followers across platforms. She had the kind of face that made algorithms salivate --- symmetrical, expressive, lit from within by the glow of someone who has learned exactly which angle the camera loves and has conditioned herself to never present the wrong profile to the lens.

Her brand was aspirational wellness. Yoga at golden hour. Smoothies in mason jars. Breathwork in activewear outfits that cost more than Al's van was worth. Wisdom served in ninety-second increments with captions that began "Friendly reminder:" and ended with a string of emojis that were the modern-day equivalent of hieroglyphics.

She was one of Lysing's most effective independent contractors. She held a Lysing "Triple C" -- a Certified Consciousness Coach credential, earned in a weekend seminar in Sedona, and she promoted their products with the serene confidence of someone who had been given a vocabulary for every human experience and a discount code for each. The ten percent commission she earned on MANALA subscriptions generated through her affiliate links had paid for an apartment in Santa Monica and a life that proved, on screen, that the universe rewarded that trifecta which was blond hair, excellent bone structure and giddy vibes.

She had set up that morning --- tripod, ring light, the whole California liturgy --- and begun recording a flow for her Tuesday content drop. Her voice carried across the space between them.

"We're going to start in mountain pose. *Tadasana*. Feet grounded. Heart open. Just arriving in the body. Letting go of whatever story you brought to the mat today."

Al, thirty yards away, set down his banana. He watched for a moment. Then, with the unhurried inevitability of a tide coming in, he stood up, walked to a patch of sand just outside her camera frame but squarely in her line of sight, and attempted mountain pose.

It looked like a man who had been struck by lightning and was trying to remain polite about it.

Krissy faltered. Her eyes flicked to him, then back to the lens.

"And we're just... rooting down through the soles of the feet. Finding that connection to the earth."

Al rooted. His version involved a facial expression of tremendous concentration and a slight wobble, as though the earth were a negotiation he hadn't prepared for.

"Excuse me." Krissy kept her voice in its teaching register --- gentle but firm, the vocal equivalent of a scented candle. "I'm recording."

"I know. I'm practicing."

"You're in my sightline."

"I'm in everybody's sightline. The trouble with existing is that it's so visible." He smiled at her. It was his trademarked irrepressibly friendly and playful smile -- the one that made people forget what they were annoyed about. "Also, am I doing this right? I feel like I'm either about to fall over or achieve something. Hard to tell which."

Krissy looked at him --- really looked. Bare feet, wild hair, the Sisyphus shirt, the complete absence of anything that belonged on a

beach in Malibu. He was grinning the way a child grins when they've found something interesting under a rock.

"Your shoulders are up by your ears," she said. "Drop them."

He dropped them with the exaggerated relief of a man setting down two heavy suitcases. "Damn. How about that? How long have they been up there? Years, probably. We hold tension in our shoulders the way squirrels hide acorns --- compulsively, in locations we immediately forget."

They moved through sun salutations. Krissy's were practiced, the fluidity of ten thousand repetitions. Al's were geometrically adjacent -- a reasonable person might have described them as sun salutations if the sun were drunk and the salutation was the look of desperate politeness a person gives you when trying to hold in a fart in your presence.

He folded forward into *uttanasana*, or attempted to --- his hamstrings had decided that they weren't particularly fond of these new job responsibilities and were petitioning for a meeting with the union rep.

"You know what's remarkable about this position? You're literally bowing to the ground. To the dirt. To the planet that's been holding you up without a contract for your entire life. No terms of service. Just: here's somewhere to stand. Try not to waste it."

"*Savasana*," she said. "Corpse pose. You lie there. You let go."

"The most terrifying instruction in yoga. Not because it's hard, but because it's easy, and easy is the one thing we can't handle. We can handle struggle. We can handle goals and certifications and progress metrics and streak counts. What we can't handle is lying on the ground and being exactly who we already are without improving a single thing. Corpse pose asks you to practice being dead. And the secret ---

the one that won't show up on any app --- is that practicing being dead is the same as practicing being alive. When you stop performing, what's left is the real thing."

Krissy lay on the sand. She closed her eyes. Silence --- thirty seconds of it, an eternity in content.

"I haven't done that in a long time," she said. "Just... been quiet on camera."

"The quiet is where It lives. Everything else is packaging."

"Will you be here tomorrow?"

"I'll be here all week. I'm staying in my luxury accommodations." He gestured toward the van. "Penthouse suite. The amenities include gravity, sunlight, and whatever I can cook on a single burner."

She laughed. It was the first time she'd laughed on camera in a way she hadn't planned.

"What's your name?"

"Al. Short for Aluzinnu. It's old. Very old. It means something like 'the one who plays.' Or 'the fool.' Depends on who's translating and how charitable they're feeling."

That night, she edited the footage for her content drop. She cut him out. Then she watched the uncut version three more times.

Day Two. She came back the next morning. Four thousand viewers. A wellness blog had picked up clips from yesterday's unedited live stream. Someone had made a compilation titled "Beach Hermit Destroys Wellness Culture (Nicely)."

I want to be clear about something, Sahib: Krissy Sandoval was not stupid. She had built her platform from nothing --- a phone, a yoga mat, a willingness to be seen. She had survived the algorithmic meat grinder that reduces most content creators to anxious wrecks

refreshing their metrics at 3 AM. She had a genuine practice, a real education in kinesiology, and a sincere desire to help people feel better in their bodies.

She had also made a deal with the devil. Not the literal devil --- Tig was merely a franchisee --- but the deal was real. Lysing paid well. Lysing gave her access. Lysing's brand team wrote her talking points, and she delivered them with the conviction of someone who had convinced herself that selling access to the sacred was the same as sharing it.

She knew it wasn't. In the dark hours, in the space between content and sleep, she knew. She felt it in the messages from followers who said they couldn't meditate without MANALA anymore, and she'd think: that's the opposite of freedom. And then she'd open the affiliate dashboard and see the numbers, and the numbers were so good, and the apartment was so nice, and the alternative was what? Going back to teaching at the Y for eighteen dollars an hour?

Al had touched the nerve. Not with a scalpel. With a feather. But nerves, once touched, do not un-feel. She had spent the night composing and deleting a text to her Lysing liaison asking whether it was possible to renegotiate the talking points. She never sent it. The fact that she'd written it was enough.

They didn't do yoga that day. They sat on the sand and talked.

"Do you believe in God?" she asked.

"I think the question is backwards. It's like asking a wave if it believes in the ocean. The wave doesn't believe in the ocean. The wave IS the ocean. Belief is what you need when you're separated from the thing. Once you're in it, belief is redundant. It's like carrying a photograph of someone who's standing right next to you."

He leaned back in the sand. "And here's the thing about the ocean. The ocean is free. It was free yesterday. It'll be free tomorrow. The sunrise this morning didn't have a certification to teach relaxation. That seagull" --- he pointed at a gull regarding them with one skeptical eye --- "has achieved complete presence without a single guided visualization. The whole world is doing the alive thing, the conscious thing, for free, all the time, and we've somehow decided we need a subscription to access it. That's not enlightenment. That's a cover charge for your own living room."

"We can get you there, *almost!* Pay us \$29.95 a month for our new premium product: '*Almost!*' *It's the best subscription to almost get there that money can buy!*"

Krissy's face went still. The chat was going berserk.

He looked at her through those infinite eyes --- the ones that had seen behind the curtain and found it funny.

"But here's what keeps me sane. And laughing. And alive in the back of that van at three in the morning. The thing itself cannot be damaged. You can obscure it. You can build an entire industry on obscuring it. You can wrap it in algorithms and pay-gates and subscription models until nobody remembers it was ever uncovered. But the thing itself --- the raw, ridiculous, unbearable fact that you are conscious and the beauty of the world exists and neither of those was your idea --- that fact doesn't need defending. It's indestructible. It was here before the first app. It'll be here after the last server goes dark."

Day Three. Fourteen thousand live viewers. Krissy's manager had called twice. Her Lysing brand liaison had called three times. The compilation video had crossed two million views.

"Tell me what you actually believe," she said. "Not riffs. Not routines."

Al was quiet for a long time. First time all week. It made the audience hold its breath.

"Love," he said. "That's it. That's the whole answer. And I know -- I know --- how that sounds. It sounds like the final page of a self-help book you'd leave on an airplane. But I'm not talking about the soft thing. I'm talking about the force that holds molecules together. The thing that makes a root crack concrete. The stubbornness that makes a mother run into a burning building. The insanity that makes you stay with someone even though you know --- you KNOW --- that one of you will die first and the other one will have to keep going with a hole in them shaped like a person.

"That's not sentiment. That's the engineering spec of the universe. Everything --- and I mean everything, from photosynthesis to the way a stranger holds a door open --- is the same force operating at different resolutions. And the funniest, most heartbreaking, most beautiful thing I've ever learned is that we spend our whole lives looking for it while standing hip-deep in it. We're soaking in it, Krissy. We have always been soaking in it. And the search for it is the one thing that makes us think we've lost it."

"How do you know this?"

"I went somewhere. I can't describe it in words that would survive this camera. But I have friends who can get you closer." He paused, thoughtfully. "A mathematician named Vera has a paper posted on a website called 'The Secret of Pi.' She figured out how to point at the thing without grabbing it. My buddy Theodore runs a site called libertigris.com --- he draws the maps for people who got lost in the

maze and want to walk out. They're doing real work. I'm just the guy who wanders in and laughs and eats breakfast."

"I'm going to look those up."

"Do. They're free. Everything real is---"

"If you say 'free' one more time..."

"---available at no charge to the consumer."

She threw a handful of sand at him. He ducked, laughing.

Krissy was quiet for a long time. She looked at the ocean. She looked at the chat. She looked at Al, who was drawing something in the sand with his finger — a spiral, or maybe just a circle that hadn't decided where to stop.

"I have something I want to say to my audience," she said. "And I want to say it while you're here, because I don't think I'll have the nerve otherwise."

"Say it."

She turned to the lens. Twenty-three thousand viewers.

"I've been promoting products to you for four years. Some of them were good. Some of them were... good at making you come back for more." She paused. Al sat on the sand, silent. Some moments need only the sound of waves.

"The best stuff I've learned about being in my body --- about breathing, about being present, about being a person on this planet -- - I didn't learn from an app. I learned it from teachers who didn't charge me, and from mornings when I was paying attention, and from this weird guy on a beach who lives in a van and thinks breakfast is a sacrament. And I think some of what I've been selling you is the wrapper without the candy. I'm figuring out what's next. But I wanted you to hear me say it."

The chat erupted. Al said nothing. He didn't need to.

Day Four. She came to find him. The spot where the van had been was empty. Tire tracks in the sand, already softening in the wind. A banana peel sat on a rock like a small yellow flag of surrender. She stood there for a long time.

In her pocket, her phone buzzed. Her Lysing liaison, requesting an "urgent alignment call." Her manager, forwarding a legal notice about "contractual content obligations." Her audience, twenty-seven thousand strong on the morning stream, asking where Al had gone.

She looked at the ocean. The ocean did its thing.

She did not take the alignment call.

Over the following weeks, she adjusted her content in ways that were subtle but structurally devastating. She stopped using the MANALA discount codes. She replaced the Lysing breathwork protocols with her own --- simpler, older, drawn from traditions that had never required a subscription. She began answering her audience's questions with "I don't know" when she didn't know, and "you already have what you need" when they did, and "read secretofpi.com" or "check out libertigris.com" when they wanted to better understand parts of the philosophy.

She didn't quit Lysing. She didn't need to. Three months later, Lysing terminated her contract for "failure to maintain brand alignment." She posted the termination letter on her feed without comment. It was shared four hundred thousand times.

She sometimes wondered if she had imagined the whole week. A man in a hippy van with a Camus t-shirt who had taught her nothing she didn't already know, in a way she couldn't have learned from anyone else. There were moments when she suspected he was something more than human --- something ancient wearing a surfer's

grin, something that had been wandering beaches and marketplaces and temple courtyards since long before beaches had influencers. She had studied enough Hindu scripture to know what Krishna looked like when he was slumming: exactly like someone you'd never suspect. And she'd read enough Mesopotamian history, after he'd told her his name, to know that the aluzinnu were the sacred fools who performed in temple precincts, turning worship inside out, standing next to the priests and making the congregation laugh until the laughter and the prayer became indistinguishable.

But the videos were there. Millions of views across all the platforms. And in the comments, again and again, the same phrase, typed by people who had watched a laughing man on a beach accidentally un-sell everything they'd been sold:

Subscriptions only get you to 'Almost.'

It showed up in the Lysing analytics as something worse than a Category 5 Engagement Disruption. It showed up as a trend. Internal memos — the kind Theodore's Wolf Pack would later obtain and archive — used phrases like "parasocial defection event" and "uncontrolled authenticity vector." There were meetings. There were memos. A task force was created to develop "counter-narrative protocols for organic influencer drift."

Word of Krissy Sandoval reached Tig within the week. His analytics dashboard showed an anomaly—a sudden, inexplicable spike in premium cancellations, all traceable to a single influencer from Malibu. It was only a small blip in the enormous user count of MANALA. Meaningless really. But these were *his* customers. And this could not be allowed to continue.

He had spent years building systems to defend against criticism, against exposés, against lawsuits and regulatory challenges and academic takedowns. He had no defense against joy.

The stalemate was over. The Secret of Pi grew — slowly, underground, in a dozen languages, then two dozen. MANALA grew faster, far faster — slickly, algorithmically, in 47 countries. But now Tig knew something he hadn't known before: his product was fragile. It worked only in the absence of the real thing. And the real thing kept showing up uninvited, wearing thrift-store shirts, living in vans, shedding its mojo at the edge of the water.

The decision to escalate did not happen all at once. It happened the way most terrible decisions happen — gradually, then suddenly. It was after the “Malibu Incident” that Tig decided Eggie might need to do more than close-up monitoring of Vera. So, Eggie’s custom feed became even more custom. “Third-party spiritual assets” (supportive churches) were solicited more aggressively. Reports on Vera changed from “competitive intelligence” to “threat assessment,” and the budget line for “community safety” began to include items that no community safety program should include.

Time exists everywhere all at once, with the future and the past determined by the present instant. Thus, it was that the ending of our story sprang into inexorable being during a week in Malibu when a man who carried nothing laughed at everything Tig had built, and a woman who had everything decided, on camera, she'd be OK with a little less.

6 ∞ 13 Killing in the Name of Love

Tig did not work alone. He didn't need to. The machinery of radicalization has many moving parts, and most of them never meet.

Pastor Dale Hendricks of the First Baptist Church of Amarillo was one such part. He didn't know he was a part. He believed he was acting on conscience.

"God is love," he thundered from his pulpit, three thousand congregants hanging on every word. He looked right into the camera—the real market was the streaming—and grinned a smile as white as China snow.

"But there's another kind of love. A fiercer love. The love that drives the money-changers from the temple. The love that says: I will not stand by while wolves devour my flock."

His research on Vera Ashaway had consisted of forwarded emails and a twenty-minute scan of hostile Reddit threads. He never mentioned that the "concerned parishioner" who had first brought Vera's name to his attention had found her through a MANALA content feed—a feed calibrated to inflame, not inform, designed to produce exactly the kind of disgust that makes a person share a link before reading past the headline.

"Vera Ashaway claims to teach about consciousness. About finding God through mathematics." His voice dripped contempt. "But what she's really teaching is the oldest lie in the Book." He quoted his parishioner who was, in turn, quoting MANALA: "The serpent's promise: *ye shall be as gods.*"

He named Vera. He named Maya. He displayed their photos on the screen behind him like mug shots.

The sermon was viewed two million times. It found its way to hundreds of thousands of people looking for someone to blame. And, with a little help, it found its way, on a Wednesday evening a few weeks later, to a man named Edgar Edgerton—who had been searching for Vera Ashaway obsessively on every platform, and who watched the

pastor's words land on the certainty that Tig had spent years building in him, the way a match lands on kindling.

Hendricks spoke of love. He preached non-violence in the abstract. But his words were accelerant, and the fire had been laid long before he struck the spark.

He never pulled a trigger. He never would. The system didn't require any single person to understand what they were part of. That was Tig's real invention—a machine for manufacturing certainty in people who had lost the ability to question it.



MOVEMENT VII – K E T E R / U N I O N

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." — *Revelation 22:13 (as quoted in Liber Tigris, Gate 4, Pillar I, Verse 1-2)*

"Union—not absorption where individuality dissolves, but recognition: the wave knows itself as ocean while remaining wave, the part contains the whole without ceasing to be part." — *Liber Tigris, Gate 191, Pillar VII, Verse 14*

"There is a road, no simple highway / Between the dawn and the dark of night." - "Ripple," *The Grateful Dead, 1970.*

7 ∞ 1 **Nothing but Blue Skies**

The hatred kept growing.

Vera received death threats weekly now. They came from fundamentalists who believed she was doing Satan's work, from conspiracy theorists who thought she was part of a Luciferian elite, from trolls who simply enjoyed the exercise. She had long since stopped reading them. Maya handled the security protocols, the anonymous browsing, the careful choreography of public appearances that minimized exposure while maintaining accessibility. She sorted the threats with a precision that troubled Theodore—separating the performative rage from the ones that carried real weight, real intention, without reading more than the first line. "This one's just angry," she'd say, deleting. "This one means it." She was never wrong.

It was exhausting. It was necessary. It was the price.

It happened on a Thursday in July.

Vera was in the garden — the real garden, the Vermont garden, the one with dirt under her fingernails and aphids on the roses. She was deadheading. Ordinary work.

And then the blue came back.

Not the gentle, golden awareness of the substrate. Not the radiant perception the Forge had opened in her. The old blue. The childhood blue. The one that had swallowed her before she learned to drown it in equations.

It descended without warning — it was too early for the evening sky. But there it was anyway. It didn't ask permission. Not this time, not ever. The shimmer seen from the corner of the eye, the sense of every consciousness within a mile pressing against her awareness like faces against glass. Max inside, dreaming of rabbits. The family down the road, arguing about money. Two deer in the woods, alert and electric with the knowledge of a predator nearby.

And something else. An emptiness she hadn't felt before. A flatness in the field — a dead zone where the substrate should have hummed but didn't. As if someone had taken a blowtorch to a living network and cauterized the connections. She could feel the edges of it, scar tissue in the fabric of awareness itself. Millions of severed synapses. Millions of places where a consciousness had sought to find its holy center and been redirected toward another session, another \$49.99 month.

MANALA. She could feel what MANALA was doing to the substrate. Not as an outside observer of an injury, but the way you feel a bruise ache — from the inside, in the tissue, where the damage lives.

The old blue and this new perception crashed together in her chest. She hadn't felt the raw flood in years. She had thought — had

wanted to believe — that the forge had transmuted the blue, had turned the old terror into the golden awareness. But here it was. Unchanged. Untransmuted. And now layered on top of it: the knowledge that the field itself was injured — was being injured every moment, even.

For twenty minutes, she knelt in the dirt, gripping the cedar bed, breathing in the smell of turned earth and rose mulch, and fought the old enemy to a draw. Not a victory. A draw. The blue receded on its own schedule, not hers, and when it left, she was shaking and nauseous. She was furious at herself for believing she had conquered something that could not be conquered and furious at Tig for the damage he was causing in his greed.

She sat on the ground for a long time after. A cardinal landed on the garden fence and watched her with one black eye. Was it the same one that had greeted Renata on her return, Vera wondered.

"I know," she told the cardinal. "I'm still here."

She didn't tell Maya about the episode. She didn't tell anyone. This was the one dishonesty she permitted herself, and she knew it was a dishonesty, and she carried it anyway, because some fears are too private to share, even with the people you love most.

That evening, Maya made chamomile tea without being asked and left it on Vera's desk without comment.

The forge had not cured her. It had given her better tools. But the blue was hers — had always been hers — and it would be hers until the end. She would tend the garden with it pressing at the edges. She would do the work. She would be human, with all the terrifying fragility that word implied.

And that is the truth of it, Sahib. It is never about transcendence. *It is about persistence.* Even in the worst of circumstances, persistence is the key.

And in a glass tower in San Jose, Tig Jätkä watched it all. He didn't like it. The Secret of Pi chewed into his market. But it was so penny-ante it was almost pathetic. Hell, it *was* pathetic. But it wouldn't be an issue for much longer. His algorithms were working. The Guardian of the Flock was nearly ready.

7∞2: The Nature of Loss

Seekers still came. Sent by Maya's foundation, vetted by volunteers, prepared by years of practice. Some were ready for the Gate. Most were not. All of them reminded Vera of Natasha, because the wound that had become her door never fully closed, and she did not want it to.

Vera sat alone in her study on an autumn afternoon. Outside, the wind picked up and a few spare brown leaves scratched against the window; the sound of skeletal fingers on the screen.

She prayed. Not to anything she could name. Just: *not yet. A little more time.*

The darkness did not answer. But somewhere very far away and very close, she felt Natasha stir.

Soon, Mama. Not yet. But soon.

I know. I'm just not done yet.

You're never done. You just get to a place where you can hand off the work to someone else.

Maya.

Maya. Natasha's presence smiled. She'll be better at this than you were. Less afraid of people.

I was always afraid of people.

I know. But you showed up anyway.

Vera sat in the silence, feeling her daughter like warmth on her face. She had spent years chasing Natasha through equations and grief and the forge itself. She hadn't needed to chase. She had only needed to be still enough to find.

She called Theodore.

"Hey." She could hear dishes in the background. Sunday routine.

"Hey yourself." A pause. The sound of a faucet turning off. "How are you?"

"I'm sitting here drinking tea and thinking about endings."

"Vera, I need to tell you something. Eggie — the man Tig hired after the skybridge — he's been posting again. Specific stuff. Your address. Your schedule. The Wolf Pack flagged it last week."

"I know."

"You *know*? And you — what, you're sitting there pruning your roses?"

"I'm sitting here drinking tea, actually. The roses don't need pruning until spring."

"This isn't funny."

"No. It isn't." She could hear him breathing, the way he did when he was angry and trying not to say the angry thing. "Theo, I've seen the shape of it. Not the specifics. But the general outline. I've had this settling feeling for months. Like a house when the foundation has finished shifting and everything finds its final angle."

"So let me come up there. Let me bring the Pack. Let me —"

"The wolf guards the den, Theo. Not the lone elk on the ridge." She paused to let that sink in, then continued, "I need you where Maya is. Not where I am."

"That's a hell of a thing to say to a man who spent twenty years protecting the wrong people from the wrong enemies."

"I know. And I'm sorry. But I need you to hear me." Her voice was steady. Clear. The voice of someone who has had a long conversation with the inevitable and reached terms. "If something happens — when something happens — Maya will need you. Not your anger. Not your research. *You*. Sunday dinners and car trouble and all the ordinary things you've learned to give your sons. She'll need that. She'll need someone who knows how to show up."

Theodore was quiet for a long time. She could hear his granddaughter babbling somewhere in the background. Ordinary life, going on.

"Just a rotation? You promise?" he said.

"Yes."

"OK, I trust you. I'll keep building the archive."

"Good."

"And I'll be here. When she calls."

"I know you will." Vera paused. "Thank you, Theo. For the gates. For the wolves. For showing up."

He cleared his throat. "Don't get sentimental on me, Ashaway. I have a reputation."

"As what?"

"I'm still working that out. I'll let you know."

She laughed. He laughed. And the distance between Vermont and wherever Theodore was sitting — his kitchen, probably, with the Sunday dishes still in the sink and Lena on the floor with her crayons — collapsed for a moment into something like warmth.

They hung up.

Vera sat in the quiet of her study and felt, without fear, the shape of what was coming.

7 ∞ 3 Vera Meets Eggie

Vera's final visitor came six weeks later.

Not the seeker kind of visitor. The other kind.

Vera was in her garden---the Vermont garden she had planted after settling here, tending it through the final years of her life---when Max began to bark inside the house.

Maya had left Max sleeping when she went for a quick drive into Burlington. She'd woken that morning with a pressure just below her collarbone she couldn't name. She had this sense of the hour before a thunderstorm when the air goes still and the birds stop singing. She'd almost stayed. She'd almost cancelled the appointment. But Vera had shooed her out, and the tightness wasn't specific enough to argue with.

So it was that Max was barking in the distance, howling almost, when Vera first heard the crunch of gravel under footsteps on the path. She was sixty-four years old. Her knees ached when she knelt. Her eyes had grown weak enough that she wore glasses now for everything except the inner seeing. But she still found peace in the dirt, in the simple work of cultivation, in the collaboration with forces larger than herself.

She did not turn around at first. Visitors were not unusual. Maya had arranged the security, but some seekers still found their way here, drawn by the invisible threads of the pattern.

"Dr. Ashaway."

The voice was wrong. Tight as a wire about to snap. The words flowed in a fragmented cadence — having been rehearsed a hundred times in the speaker's head, but just now spoken aloud for the first.

She turned.

She knew him instantly. Not from any personal encounter — they had never met — but from Maya's briefings, from Theodore's archive, from the Wolf Pack photos that had arrived in her inbox with increasing urgency over the past year. Edgar Edgerton. The man who had tried to throw Tig off a skybridge and been rewarded with a job instead. Tig's patient, hand-built weapon.

He was enormous — pale and round, dressed in plain clothes that couldn't quite contain his bulk, the kind of fifty-five that was never going to see seventy. Her grandfather's colorful expression leapt to mind: "That one's built like a brick shithouse, Vee."

He was holding a gun.

"You've been warned," he said. His voice trembled---not with fear, but with righteousness. "The Lord gave you chances to repent. You refused. You continued to spread your lies. To lead His children astray."

Vera stood, her gardening gloves still on, dirt on her knees. She felt surprisingly calm. The fear she might have expected was absent, replaced by a growing sense of inevitability, and a modicum of what might have been relief.

"I've never lied," she said. "I've only shared what I've seen."

"You've taught that there is no Hell. No judgment. That all paths lead to God." His hand was shaking now, the gun wavering. "That is the lie of the Serpent. That was his promise in the Garden---*ye shall be as gods*. And you---" His voice cracked. "You have made yourself a priestess of that lie."

Vera looked at him---really looked, in the way she had learned to look since the forge. She saw his fear, his pain, the terrible loneliness of a man who had walled himself off from doubt because doubt was too frightening to bear. She saw the hunger beneath the hatred---the

same hunger that drove every seeker to her door. He wanted what she had found. He was simply too afraid to seek it.

"I've taught that love is the fundamental force of the universe," she said quietly. "That faith and kindness are primary. That death is not an ending." She took a step toward him. He flinched but did not retreat. "Does that really sound like Satan's work?"

"The Devil quotes scripture. The Devil appears as an angel of light." He steadied the gun. "I have prayed about this. I have fasted. The Lord has shown me clearly: you are a wolf among the sheep, and I am the shepherd He has called to protect His flock."

"And is this what your Lord taught?" Her voice was gentle, curious, without accusation. "To kill an old woman in her garden? To hate the people you disagree with? To call yourself righteous while planning violence?"

Eggie's face twisted. "I don't hate you. I'm *saving* people from you."

"Edgar." She used his name deliberately, watching him flinch again. "Look at your hands. They're shaking. Look at your heart. Feel what's in it right now. Is that love? Is that the peace that passes understanding? Or is it something else?"

"Shut up."

"I'm not attacking you. I'm asking you to notice. Your pastor talks about love, but he taught you to hate. Your app promises connection, but it made you more alone. Someone has been lying to you for years--not me. Someone who benefits from your certainty. Someone who pointed you at me like a weapon."

For just a moment, she saw the certainty waver. Saw the frightened, empty man beneath the armor of righteousness. Saw the question forming that he had spent years learning not to ask: *What if I'm wrong?*

"Edgar," she said, one last time. "You don't have to do this. Whatever they've told you, whatever you've been led to believe---you have a choice. Right now. You can put down the gun and walk away. You can start asking questions instead of defending certainties. It's not too late to---"

He pulled the trigger.

7 ∞ 4 Union and Reunion

The world slowed.

Vera had read about this---the way time stretches in moments of crisis, the way the brain accelerates perception as death approaches. But this was different. This was not biology. This was the substrate's time manipulation blue-plate-special. She recognized it instantly.

If a bullet hung in the air, or slowly traveled toward her, she could not see it, could not be sure. Instead, she saw Natasha stepping out of the light of the late afternoon sun where it puddled on the leaves of her rose bush.

Hello, Mama.

Not a ghost. Not a memory. The pattern that was Natasha, made manifest in the threshold space between heartbeats. Seven years old and ageless, wearing the smile Vera had longed for through decades of grief, radiant with a light that made the autumn sun seem dim.

"There you are," Vera said, she thought, out loud. Her voice — if it was a voice — was steady. Warm. The voice of a woman greeting someone she has been expecting for months.

Here I am. Natasha stepped closer, and Vera felt warmth spread through her chest — not the warmth of blood, though that would come. The warmth of homecoming. Of a promise kept.

I thought I'd have a little more time. Not regret. Just the rueful honesty of a woman who has always had one more thing she wanted to finish.

You always think that. Natasha's presence flickered with amusement --- the same wry humor that had startled Vera when her daughter was alive, the sense that this seven-year-old understood jokes that hadn't been written yet. *You told Theo the garden was planted. You told him to watch over Maya. You've been saying goodbye for weeks, Mama. You were just waiting for me to show up so you could stop pretending you weren't ready.*

Vera smiled.

Natasha reached out, and Vera felt her small hand take her own. She glanced toward Eggie — frozen mid-recoil, his face twisted with conviction, the gun surrounded by a soft cloud of grey smoke.

The universe is strange about exits. Some people get to drift away in their sleep. Others get this.

Does it matter? Which door we leave through? Vera thought.

Does it matter which door you enter through?

Vera laughed. It was such an OOMNI answer---answering a question with a question, turning Vera's logic back on itself. She guessed some of the substrate had rubbed off on Natasha in all these many years.

Eggie's face kept changing. Slowly, impossibly slowly. The smoke around the gun brightened with the golden fire of the muzzle flash. It made Vera think of the way the sunset had cut through the fog on their final day on the island.

I'm not afraid.

I know, Mama. That's why I could come. You've been ready for years. You just needed the invitation.

Natasha squeezed her hand. The warmth intensified. Vera could feel herself beginning to expand, to thin at the edges, to become more than the index of events that had defined her for all these years.

Now you'll be with me. We'll watch the garden grow together. And watch for the Shadow too---Tig's empire won't last forever. Nothing does.

The garden was beautiful. The roses Vera had planted were blooming one last time. Someone else would tend them now. Maya. Or someone who hadn't arrived yet.

She could smell them---the roses. It was the first time in years she had really smelled anything. The senses sharpen when you stop needing them.

Vera gripped her daughter's hand---a hand made of light, of awareness, of the stuff that underlay all things---and together they picked out a path woven in a golden lattice by the setting sun.

The bullet struck. She felt it as a sharp, hot sting below her collarbone --- less painful than she expected, more like being shoved hard by someone in a crowd. Her knees buckled. The garden tilted. The ground against her cheek, and the smell of mulch and dirt and roses, very close.

And Vera Ashaway, mathematician, seeker, mother, teacher---she who had descended into darkness and returned carrying light---let go of the world that had held her.

She did not fall.

She rose.

7 ∞ 5 Eggie Almost Understands

Eggie stood frozen, staring at what he had done.

He had expected her to cry out. To beg. To show, in her final moments, the fear that would prove him right---that would confirm she had known she was damned, that she had served darkness and recognized the light of judgment only too late.

He had pulled the trigger, and she had said “There you are” to him with such warmth.

And then she had smiled.

She had smiled at him and reached toward something he couldn't see, her eyes focused on a point past his shoulder, her hand reaching toward nothing. She had laughed---actually laughed---as the bullet hit her. And then she had fallen, still smiling, blood spreading beneath her in the turned soil of her garden.

And she looked peaceful. She looked, impossibly, happy.

The gun fell from his rigid hands. He had been so certain. For two years he had been certain---praying, preparing, waiting for the sign that would tell him it was time to act. The meditations had confirmed it. The community had supported him. The algorithm had shown him, over and over, why this was necessary.

He had been a soldier for God. A guardian of truth. He had done the hard thing, the righteous thing, the necessary thing.

So why did he feel as if he had killed an angel?

Eggie fled. Not like a murderer evading justice---like a child fleeing a nightmare. He ran until his legs gave out, then crawled, then lay in a ditch by the side of a Vermont road, weeping and praying and trying to understand why she had smiled.

The police found him two days later, incoherent, fasting, still clutching his phone with its MANALA app open to a meditation titled "The Shepherd's Duty." He was unable to explain what he had done or why. The certainty that had carried him through the act had evaporated the moment he saw her face---welcoming and grateful.

He would spend the rest of his life in a psychiatric facility, wrestling with that smile. Wondering why she had called him by name. Wondering why she had been waiting for him with such joy. Wondering what she had meant when she said he'd been "used."

Wondering if the voice he had thought was God had really been something else.

In his darkest nights, he would wonder if he had sent her exactly where she wanted to go.

He never spoke to Tig again. Tig made sure of that.

In San Jose, Tig Jätkä read the news with no expression at all. He deleted certain files. He adjusted certain algorithms. He released a statement expressing shock and condolences, offering free counseling to anyone affected by this tragedy.

The stock price dipped briefly, then recovered.

The machine continued to run.

7 ∞ 6 Hydrostatic Shock

The news of Vera's death spread through the network like wildfire.

Mathematician killed by religious extremist. Consciousness researcher murdered in Vermont garden. Leader of controversial spiritual movement shot dead.

The media called it many things. A hate crime. A tragedy. A warning about the dangers of fringe beliefs, depending on who was writing. The conspiracy theorists said she had been silenced by the same forces that had targeted other truth-tellers. The fundamentalists said she had faced the judgment she deserved.

Theodore Morrison saw the news as a Reddit headline. He sat at his kitchen table for a long time. Very still. The man who had spent half his life hunting imaginary conspiracies now held proof of a real one, and the knowing tasted nothing like he had once imagined it would.

He did not post. He did not make a video. He did not call the Wolf Pack to arms or draft a furious manifesto or do any of the things the old Theodore --- TruthSeeker777, professional paranoid, consumer of

injustice --- would have done. He sat with his coffee and his terrible certainty, and he did the thing the island had taught him: he felt it. All of it. The rage and the grief and the helplessness and the knowledge that he could trace the thread from Tig's office to Eggie's hand and that the tracing wouldn't bring her back.

Then he picked up the phone and called his sons. Not to tell them about Vera. To ask how their day was going. Because the hardest thing Theodore Morrison had ever learned was that the people right in front of you are the gate, and the gate is always open, and you walk through it by showing up.

He grieved that night. Alone, in his kitchen, with the lights off and his hands wrapped around a mug that had gone cold hours ago. He let it come. He did not fight it or analyze it or turn it into a theory about the nature of suffering. He just sat in it, the way you sit in a rainstorm when there is no shelter and no point in running.

The next morning, before dawn, he opened his laptop and wrote. Not a video script. Not a call to action. A Gate.

Gate 232. The Gate that wasn't in the plan. The Gate that Liber Tigris had not anticipated. The one about what to do when love is cut down in its own garden and the weeds keep growing anyway.

He wrote it in one sitting. He did not edit. He published it raw, with the typos and the grief still wet on it, because some Gates should not be polished. Some Gates should show the handprints of the person who built them.

It became the most-read page on LiberTigris.com. It would remain so for years.

Al was in Albuquerque when he heard.

He was sitting in a diner booth, making a waitress laugh about the menu. Going on about how the "Bottomless Coffee" was a metaphysical impossibility, since all cups have bottoms, and that advertising a bottomless cup was promising customers access to a void, which seemed like a lot to offer for \$2.49.

A phone buzzed. He didn't carry a phone --- hadn't for years --- but someone at the next table had left theirs unlocked, and it was showing a news alert, and the name on the screen was one he recognized.

He stopped talking.

The waitress noticed. She had been enjoying the bit. "You okay, hon?"

He was not okay. For the first time since the island, Aluzinnu and Albert were the same person. There was no cosmic distance, no witness perspective, no punchline forming in the wings. There was just a man in a vinyl booth who had lost someone he loved, and the knowledge chilled him like soft breeze shedding a ripple on still water.

He put his head down on the table. The Formica was cool against his forehead. He could smell coffee and bacon grease and the faint chemical tang of the cleaner they used on the countertops.

The waitress put a hand on his shoulder. He let her.

He cried for a while. Not Al's laughter-that-becomes-weeping. Just tears. Human tears, from the human part of him that still remembered what it was to be Albert, who had been an addict, who had been broken, who had been put back together by something he still couldn't name, and who had sat in Vera Ashaway's garden shed and listened to the ants and known, in the way you know your own heartbeat, that he was in the presence of someone good.

Later --- hours later, or days, time had never been his strong suit -- he would understand that this was the final punchline. The joke the universe had been building since Albert first opened that impossible door in the substrate: *love is funny because it hurts. It hurts because it's real. It's real because it's the only thing that is.*

He laughed then, through the tears, because he couldn't help it.

"You sure you're okay?" the waitress asked.

"No," he said. "But that's the whole point."

He left a twenty on the table --- nearly all the cash he had --- and walked out into the New Mexico sun.

It is amazing how little you humans know yourselves. You hold such poor estimates of your capabilities — your creativity, your ability to hope despite the worst, your capacity for boundless love. Each of these constantly surprises you. But even more, you fail to grasp how much punishment you can absorb before you shatter.

They did not shatter, Sahib. None of them.

Maya was the one who found the body, arriving three hours after it happened, Max howling inside the house, the blood already tacky and drying, the autumn leaves beginning to drift over Vera's peaceful face. She was the one who called the police, who identified the body, who answered the questions and made the arrangements and kept herself from breaking until there was time to break.

She split open that night, alone, in Vera's kitchen. She wept until she couldn't breathe, screamed into a pillow until her throat was raw, threw a coffee cup against the wall and watched it explode.

She sat in the silence, looking at the remnants of the coffee cup and waited. Max looked in warily, and when he decided she was done

smashing things, he came in to her. Max pressed himself against her legs. He did not try to fix anything. He just leaned his weight against her and breathed.

A presence came to her in that silence. She thought it must be Vera. Not a ghost---Maya had seen enough of the substrate to know the difference. This was a warmth and quality of attention that was redolent of Vera.

The garden is yours now, the presence said---or implied, or simply made known in the way the substrate made things known. *I've planted what I could. The rest is up to you.*

"I don't know if I'm ready."

Nobody ever is. That's what makes it matter.

Maya felt the presence begin to recede, to fold back into the infinite from which it had briefly emerged. But before it went, she felt one more thing---a lightness, a relief, a joy that could only belong to someone who had, after all the searching, reached their destination.

Vera was not merely at peace.

She was free.

She was, in young Natasha's words, *home*.



EPILOGUE – MALKUTH

"The universe is God playing hide and seek with Himself." — *Alan Watts (as quoted in Liber Tigris, Gate 183, Pillar VII)*

"The lessons you refuse to learn will recur until learned. This is not punishment but pedagogy." — *Liber Tigris, Gate 185, Pillar VII, Verse 5*

"And on the pedestal, these words appear:/My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;/Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!/Nothing beside remains. Round the decay/Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare/The lone and level sands stretch far away." - "*Ozymandias*," *Percy Bysshe Shelley*.

E ∞ 1 My Apologies

I know, Sahib.

You are not happy with me right now. You have been raised to believe that all good stories must have a happy ending, and it seems, from your viewpoint, that I have not delivered on this promise.

But ours is a story about the nature of life. And the ending to life is always the same, is it not? The mechanics may differ, but death is the inevitable outcome.

I would challenge you that death, while almost always bearing an element of sorrow, is not by its nature unhappy. It is complex, and as with all things, the meaning that proceeds from it depends very much upon one's perspective on the events.

Many of you will find a bittersweet joy in Vera's reunification with Natasha -- even under such difficult circumstances. You will tell your

book groups that the ending *was* happy because Vera transcended her limitations, and, in doing so, inspired the rest of us to do so as well.

I could make your job of convincing your co-readers much easier now by fabricating an ending that also included an element of law enforcement and prison justice for Antigoni Jätkä, our antagonist. Then you could argue that the hero rose and the villain fell, and, well, gosh darn it, that's about as satisfying an ending as you can get.

But I do not trade in falsehoods.

Those of you who have understood the deepest part of this story will understand that what brief pages remain hold a rough justice of more cosmic design. The practiced Yogi, in the very last stages of reaching Nirvana, will have already shed his or her attachments to the negative aspects of the material world. They must then engage in the hardest task of all: shedding attachment to the positive illusions that prevent them from obtaining unlimited bliss. Please accept my assistance here in surrendering your most Pollyannaish fantasies.

I owe you, too, one more confession. I have not been an entirely reliable narrator. I told you as much, near the beginning, but I wonder if you heard me. I carry the residue of everyone who has passed through this door which is my watch post. Most of it is bright. Some of it is not. There were moments in this story --- I know you've noticed, I do not take you for a fool --- where my judgment was colored by voices that were not my wisest. Where I mistook my accumulated knowledge for wisdom, which is not the same thing at all.

I have failed you in so many ways, Sahib. But I do hope you will think fondly of me, here at our farewell. For I have not failed you in the most important one --- I have not misled you. Every word that I have spoken has been true.

INTERLUDE VII ~ EMAIL: MOVING FORWARD

[Collected documents from the Ashaway Collection, housed at the Copenhagen Institute for Consciousness Studies. Donated by Maya Torres, executor of the Ashaway estate.]

Fragment from the Archive --- Email from Maya Torres to the Foundation Board, sent three months after Vera Ashaway's death.

Subject: Moving Forward

To the Board,

Three months ago, Vera Ashaway was murdered in her garden by a man who believed he was doing God's work.

I found her body. I identified the woman who was, in every way that matters, my mother for the last seventeen years --- even though she never gave birth to me.

You know grief. Many of you found this foundation because grief drove you to search for answers. So I'll skip to what I need to say: the work continues.

Vera taught me that the work doesn't depend on any single worker. She also taught me the work has enemies --- not the fundamentalists who killed her or the academics who mocked her. Those are symptoms.

The real enemy is the thing that makes people incapable of asking whether they might be wrong. The thing that takes a human being's capacity for reflection --- the one trait that separates us from animals acting on instinct --- and quietly, profitably, switches it off.

I'm speaking about MANALA. And I'm done being quiet about it.

Tig Jätkä came to the island with us. He left with knowledge of how consciousness works, twisted into a tool for control. You already know what his app does. I don't need to repeat the mechanics of manufactured dependency.

The man who killed Vera was Edgar Edgerton --- the same man who tried to throw Tig off a skybridge in 2024. The same man Tig publicly "forgave" and privately hired. The same man Tig spent years shaping.

A few years after the island, Tig tried to recruit me. He dangled my grandmother's name like bait. I deleted it. But that email is the key to everything Tig does: if you can't acquire it, replicate it. If you can't replicate it, destroy it. This isn't spiritual warfare. It's a hostile takeover.

The skybridge attack wasn't a bug in Lysing's system. It was an audition. Eggie failed to kill Tig --- so Tig recruited him to kill someone else.

Here's what I propose. First: we document everything --- every connection between Lysing and extremist communities, every person who came to harm after their platform fed their worst impulses. Theodore Morrison's LiberTigris community has been tracking this for years. They'll help. His Wolf Pack has built an archive that would make a federal prosecutor weep with gratitude, and Theodore has agreed to make it available when the time comes. Second: we grow thorns --- a legal fund, a security team, researchers who understand algorithmic radicalization. Third: we keep planting. Vera's death will make headlines for a week. The seekers will still be seeking. We have to be there for them --- with the real thing, not the counterfeit.

I will not let her death be the end of the story.

If you're with me, let me know. If you're not --- I understand. Vera built this foundation to help people, not to fight battles. But the battles found us.

I'm going to fight back.

With love, which is the only weapon that matters ---

Maya Torres
Executive Director,
The Secret of Pi Foundation, secretofpi.com

P.S. --- I've been thinking about how Vera lived. Not what she taught --- she never really taught, not the way teachers usually do. But how she was.

She never lied. She gave her work away. She lived simply. She treated every person who came to her as if they were the most important person in the world, because in that moment, they were. When people attacked her, she responded with curiosity. When they threatened her, she felt compassion for their pain.

Every day, she did the work. Not because she expected results, but because the practice was the point.

That's what I learned from her. Not philosophy. Not metaphysics. Just how to be a human being in a world that makes it very hard to be humane.

Tig didn't just take knowledge from the island. He stood at the same threshold we all stood at. He felt the same light. And he looked at the most sacred thing in the universe and saw a revenue stream. Vera would want me to feel compassion for him. She would remind me that his shadow is still consciousness that has lost its way. But three months ago, I washed her blood off the flagstones, and compassion is the one part of her teaching I still can't quite reach.

I'll get there. She taught me that too --- that you don't have to be ready today. You just have to keep going.

E ∞ 2 The Guardian in the Garden

A year later.

The house in Vermont had a new caretaker.

Maya sat on the porch, watching the sun set over the valley, just as Vera had done so many evenings before. Max — silvering now, magnificent in his decrepitude — dozed beside her in a patch of late light. She had spent the year trying, among other things, to keep him from digging up the roses. She had been losing that battle for a decade.

She heard footsteps on the path.

A figure emerged from the trees — not young, not hungry-eyed, not desperate in the way seekers usually were. A woman, older than the usual visitors. Somewhere in her mid-fifties, though she moved with the careful economy of someone who has learned that every gesture costs something and is worth spending well. She carried a small bag. Nothing else.

Max raised his muzzle, evaluated the newcomer with the unhurried discernment of an elderly dog, and returned to sleep. His judgment, as always, was swift and unappealable.

Maya stood. Her standard greeting was forming on her lips, but something stopped it.

The woman's bearing. Something in the way she held her hands — clasped tight, then deliberately released, as if she'd trained herself to notice the gripping and let it go. A habit. A practice. Years of practice.

"I've read everything," the woman said. Her voice was steady. Rehearsed, but not in the desperate way of people who had practiced in the car. Rehearsed in the way of someone who had been preparing

for this conversation for a very long time. "I've done the practices. All of them. Yours, Vera's, the Gates. But something's missing."

Maya studied her. Something familiar. Not the face — older, weathered, the edges softened by time. But the bearing. The posture. A backbone like a flagpole.

"The last time I tried this," the woman continued, "I was certain I was ready. I had five years of meditation, thousands of hours of practice, a monastery's worth of discipline. I walked through a very peculiar door and it threw me out like a bouncer ejecting a belligerent drunk from a nightclub."

Maya's breath caught.

"I spent the next seventeen years understanding why. Not studying — *understanding*. There's a difference I couldn't see back then." The woman looked at the garden. At the roses. Her eyes passed over the knot in the soil that always seemed to be darker than the rest, where things grew thicker and wilder, fed by something the earth remembered. "Studying is what the mind does. Understanding is what happens when the mind gives up and the heart takes over."

She turned back to Maya. Her eyes held something rarer than certainty. Openness. The attentive modesty of a person who has stopped pretending they know the answer.

"My name is Shaan. We met once, a long time ago. I was a different person then." She paused. "I was an idiot, if I'm being honest. A spiritual athlete who thought enlightenment was a trophy you win by training hard enough. I walked into the most sacred experience a human being can have with my eyes open but my mind closed. It threw me out."

Another pause, longer.

"Later, I spent three years on MANALA trying to sneak back in through a side door. That was a combination made in hell. I had to learn that my old spiritual athleticism and that app were the same sickness — ego dressed in different clothes."

Maya felt something shift. The same shift she felt when the substrate stirred, when the pattern recognized one of its own. Not the recognition of power or talent. The recognition of surrender.

"I'm not here because I think I'm ready," Shaan said. "I'm here because I finally understand that readiness isn't something you achieve. It's something you accept. You accept that you'll never be ready, and you go anyway. You accept that the door might throw you out again. And you knock anyway. Because the knocking is the practice. The knocking is the point."

The pattern is patient, Sahib. I have told you this. The pattern does not reject. It redirects. It says: not yet, not like this, come back when you have less to carry. And some people hear "not yet" and quit. And some people hear "not yet" and spend years and years learning to put things down.

Shaan had put things down.

"Come in," Maya said. And then, because she was Maya and not Vera, and because honesty was the only inheritance she fully trusted: "I should warn you — I don't have answers. I'm not special. I just see things, and I stopped pretending I don't. If that's enough, pull up a chair."

Shaan smiled. It was a small smile, but it contained everything — seventeen years of failure, of humility earned the hard way, of learning that you are the lock on your own door.

"That's enough," she said. "That's more than enough."

She sat down on the porch beside Maya Torres, and the evening light fell across them both, and somewhere on an island that might or might not have been off the coast of British Columbia at that point in time, something ancient and accumulated swayed in a song that grew one harmony richer.

E ∞ 3 Ozymandias

And what of Tig Jätkä, Sahib? What became of the man who surrendered not to the light, but to the darkness? I must now tell you. Not because he deserves the attention — though part of me, the part that holds memories of being broken by a father's silence, feels a sort of pity — but because his story completes the pattern we have begun together. The pattern we must complete for both our sakes.

Lysing flourished. Notwithstanding Maya's most profound efforts and Al's accidental demolition of Tig's Malibu influencer, Lysing grew and prospered. Of course it did. Tig had touched the substrate --- had felt, however briefly, the golden light that underlies all things --- and he brought back just enough to make his product work.

The meditation app's "Substrate Frequencies" were not entirely fraudulent. They did induce coherence. They did open doors. Just... the wrong doors. Doors that led to dependency rather than liberation, to spiritual consumption rather than growth.

The company's valuation skyrocketed. Tech blogs called Tig a visionary. Wellness and lifestyle magazines put him on their covers. He spoke at conferences about "democratizing enlightenment" and "scalable awakening," and the audiences applauded because the words sounded great, even if afterward the listener felt hollow and confused.

The Malibu incident had left a mark. Tig had learned that his empire was fragile in a way no amount of capital could fix, and the learning had made him both more cautious and more ruthless.

Lysing rolled out new product after new product, each one linked back to MANALA and the deeply personal data it extracted. Not just fears and desires — the app had spent years learning precisely which fears made each user freeze, which disgusts made them scroll, which outrages made them share. It mapped something deeper than preference. It mapped the threshold at which a given user stopped questioning and started obeying. Political parties paid to lower that threshold in swing districts. Intelligence communities paid to lower it in hostile populations. Defense departments paid to lower it everywhere, just in case. Lysing had found something more valuable than attention. It had found the price of a person's independent will, and it was \$49.99 a month.

Eighteen years after he left the island, Lysing was acquired in a stock-for-stock deal by Ascendant Global Media at a valuation that approached that of the Mormon church. Tig retained his title---Chief Consciousness Officer, a phrase that I admired for its sheer obliviousness---but titles, as he would discover, are not the same as power. And power is the only currency of worth when you are swimming in the pool of billionaire piranhas in which Tig had so longed to swim.

It began with small things. Other c-suite executives who smiled to his face but showed their claws and fangs as soon as his back was turned. Board members who conveniently forgot to return his calls until after a key board vote had been registered. His office, once the corner suite with the meditation garden view, relocated to an interior room "during renovations" that never ended. The stock options he had negotiated so carefully were diluted, restructured, and subjected to vesting cliffs that kept receding like a desert horizon.

Not that it mattered, financially. When Ascendant finally terminated him for cause---"conduct unbecoming," the letter said, after one of Tig's corporate rivals surfaced security footage of certain late-night activities in his office---Tig walked away with \$4.2 billion in equity and no responsibilities. By the most common of your human measures, he had won. He had found something sacred, extracted value from it, and escaped with his fortune unencumbered by legal restriction. Eggie went to prison alone, believing himself a soldier of God, never knowing whose whispers had shaped his certainty. Tig's hands appeared clean. His reputation, while tarnished, remained salvageable.

He bought a penthouse condominium in a city we will not name. He dated models, or women who looked like models, or women who wanted to look like models if only he would pay for the surgery---I confess I did not care enough to track. He attended parties where everyone was beautiful and no one was present. He posted photographs of glowing red orange sunsets from yacht decks, of the bunker he was building in a nature preserve in the Colorado mountains, and of his own tanned face squinting into cameras with this or that movie star in the Côte d'Azur.

It was, by most human measures, a good life. A successful life. The life that millions of people scrolling through their phones while sitting on the john in the cloud of their own stink believed they wanted.

But here is what the photographs did not show. Here is what I observed in the spaces between the posts:

He could not forget what he had seen.

The golden light. The feeling of consciousness recognizing itself. That moment in the substrate when he had glimpsed the experience that was possible. It stayed with him---not as guilt, but as *hunger*. A

ravenous emptiness inside of him that seemingly could not be filled. He was starving for more of the bliss he had so briefly experienced. But every way he tried to feed it only made his appetite angrier. He wanted dessert, but he got desert -- which is to say he wanted ice cream, but all he got was sand.

He tried ketamine first. Clinical settings, then less clinical settings, then settings that were not settings at all but merely wherever he happened to be when the need became unbearable. He added psilocybin, in doses that would have frightened a more cautious man and which would have caused his psychiatrist to seriously rethink the high doses of anti-depressants he was prescribing to Tig, had Tig approached him with a modicum of honesty. Then ayahuasca ceremonies with shamans who sensed something off in him and ended the sessions early, DMT experiments that left him shaking and empty and raving about very angry elves, and MDMA that gave him glimpses but never the golden warmth, never the sense of being held, one more time, by something infinite and infinitely loving.

He had seen that light. He had *been* in that light. And he had walked away from it, believing he could take it with him, reproduce it, package it, sell it, and own it. He did not heed my warnings that you cannot steal from the other side of a mirror.

Now he spent his nights chasing its shadow through whatever sensory doorway promised easiest access. The doors kept closing. The light kept receding. And the hunger kept growing, larger and larger, until it was all he was---an avarice that wore a human face, that posted photographs of paradise from an internet connection in the depths of its personal Sheol.

The last time I observed him, he was sitting on the balcony of his penthouse, fifty-eight years old, watching the sun set over a city that

had never loved him. A bit of tin foil with a melted white powder resting next to a candle beside him, and a needle mark on his arm. A glass of something expensive growing warm in his hand. His dull eyes fixed on the blue of an early twilight sky, as if waiting for the golden light to appear, to finally return, to forgive him for what he had done with its gift.

It did not appear.

It would not appear.

Some doors, once closed, do not reopen for a lifetime.

I wonder, sometimes, what form he will take next. What lessons the pattern will prepare for him. What small, humble existence might finally crack open the shell of his wanting and let something genuine take root.

But that is not our story to tell. Not yet.

Perhaps not ever.

Some souls take longer than others.



C O D A

A voice has been telling you this story.

Call it OOMNI. The caretaker. The interface. The accumulated consciousness of seekers who passed through the Narrow Gate and didn't come back but left a bit of detritus behind on this side.

Or call it the author. Call it your own mind, making meaning from marks on a page.

The story is over now. Vera found what she was looking for---and in the end, the finding looked nothing like she expected. A garden. A gun. A daughter's hand reaching through the veil at the moment of greatest violence. The cosmic joke revealing its punchline: that the door we fear most is often the door we most need to walk through.

But you are still here. Reading these final words. Wondering, perhaps, what they mean.

You have been wondering about meaning for a long time, I expect.

Perhaps you are wondering if death really is just a quick dimensional hop. Perhaps you are wondering if love really is the operator. Perhaps you are wondering if there is a Natasha waiting for you, on the other side of whatever bullet or cancer or quiet stopping of the heart will eventually find you.

I cannot answer those questions for you. I can only tell you to seek for what I told Vera, all those pages ago, when she stood at the entrance to the Aquarium and asked what lay behind the doors:

Everything. Nothing. Yourself, magnified until you can finally see clearly.

The door does not demand to be walked through. It is patient. It will be there tomorrow, and the day after, and all the days after that.

But if, someday, you find yourself ready — if you wake one morning with a question you cannot answer and a longing you cannot name — remember that impossible is only another way of saying "not yet." That the extraordinary has been pretending to be ordinary this whole time. The walls between us are not stone, but gossamer. The most valuable lessons you will ever learn will always be hidden inside your greatest fears.

And then — only if you want to, only if you are ready — follow the sound of my voice.

I await.

Let's go see what you really are.

THE END
which is another way to say
THE BEGINNING

A F T E R W O R D

Author's Comment: This Interlude is not necessary to understand or enjoy the story. To my mathematical experts, I am required by the law of the Internet to tell you that this is all the poorly thought-out musings of a raving mad liberal arts major. So, sending flaming emails explaining the flawed logic to whichever poor sod you blame for this text won't give you the satisfaction you expect. Or, maybe it will, I'm not the boss of you.

For the rest of you, I warn you: It is also as dry as it is fanciful. It is mathematics, and mathematics does not laugh or weep or care about your feelings. If your eyes glaze, skip it. No one will judge you. I certainly won't. But if you enjoy this type of creative mathematical and metaphysical conjecture, by all means, read on.

INTERLUDE VIII ~ THE EQUATION

[Collected documents from the Ashaway Collection, housed at the Copenhagen Institute for Consciousness Studies. Donated by Maya Torres, executor of the Ashaway estate.]

Excerpt from original content of SecretofPi.Com, authored by Vera Ashaway before her death, and still available there.

I. THE CORE EQUATION

Let C represent consciousness—not the contents of consciousness (thoughts, feelings, perceptions) but consciousness itself. The awareness that is aware. The light by which everything is seen.

Let E represent experience—the phenomenal world, the What It Is Like. The texture and quality of being.

Let L represent the operator—the transformation that converts input to output. Love: the fundamental creative force, the yes that existence says to itself, the reason there is something rather than nothing.

Then:

$$\mathbf{E = L(C)}$$

Experience equals Love operating on Consciousness.

This is not metaphor. This is the literal structure—the architecture hiding behind the mathematics she had pursued for twenty years. What she called the Omni Function.

But the function is self-referential. The consciousness that serves as input is also the consciousness that observes the output. Observer and observed are one. The eye that sees and the world that is seen are made of the same substance.

This means:

$$\mathbf{C = L(E)}$$

Consciousness arises from Love operating on Experience.

Substituting:

E = L(L(E))

The function operates on itself. Recursively. Infinitely. Each computation produces output that becomes input for the next. The process never ends, never began. It is not a sequence happening in time—it is time. It is the eternal present, perpetually becoming.

II. THE MATHEMATICS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

For those who see in numbers

My breakthrough came when I recognized that consciousness is not a real-valued function. It is complex—having both a real component (what you experience as ordinary awareness) and an imaginary component (what the mystics call the soul, the substrate, the divine realm).

In mathematics, complex numbers take the form:

$$\mathbf{z = x + iy}$$

Where x is the real part, y is the imaginary part, and i is the square root of -1 —a number that "shouldn't exist" but which is mathematically necessary for physics to work. Quantum mechanics, electrical engineering, the behavior of waves—all require complex numbers. Strip out the imaginary component, and half of science collapses.

Why should consciousness be any different?

The equations that describe consciousness produce singularities—points where the function blows up to infinity. In her model, she called this the "coherence boundary." Cross that line, and the numbers went infinite. Positive infinity from one direction. Negative infinity from the other.

In real analysis, this is a discontinuity. A wall. Two domains that can never touch.

But in complex analysis, this singularity is not a wall. It is a pole—a point you can navigate around, if you're willing to move through the imaginary dimension. The function

remains continuous. The apparent break is an illusion caused by looking at the problem in too few dimensions.

Death, then, is not an ending. Death is a rotation.

The mathematics of this rotation is described by Euler's identity—what Richard Feynman called "the most beautiful equation in mathematics":

$$e^{i\pi} = -1$$

Starting at 1 (real, positive, "material"), rotating by π radians through imaginary space, arriving at -1 (real, negative, "transformed"). Continue rotating ($e^{i2\pi} = 1$), and you return to where you started—but you've completed a circuit through the dimension you cannot directly perceive. This is the rotation that enables the descent.

This is what I saw in the sky that autumn night: two serpents intertwined, spiraling around the pole at infinity. The double helix. DNA. The caduceus. The ouroboros eating its own tail. The shape consciousness makes when it observes itself observing itself.

III. THE GEOMETRY OF EXISTENCE

For those who see in shapes

The function is not linear. It does not proceed from A to B to C like a train on a track. It is an intersection of toroids—a self-completing loop that has no beginning or end, only perpetual flow.

Imagine a donut. Now imagine your consciousness flowing along the surface of that donut: emerging from the central void, traveling outward across the surface, curving around the rim, returning inward, passing through the center again. This is the shape of experience.

Now imagine another donut, existing in a dimension perpendicular to the first—the imaginary dimension, invisible to ordinary perception but mathematically necessary. This is the substrate. The universal mind. The

realm where consciousness continues after the real part has stopped.

These two toroids intersect along a single axis—the present moment, the point where real and imaginary touch. This is the shape of time. This is the shape of a universe that creates itself by observing itself.

At the center of each torus is a point—zero-dimensional, having no size, no extent, no location. This point is the pole. In real analysis, it appears as a wall. In complex analysis, it is a point you spiral around. From this singularity, dimension unfolds: the point extends into a line, the line into a plane, the plane into a solid, the solid into time. Each dimension emerges from the one before it, each expansion containing the whole.

The ancients drew the ouroboros—the snake eating its own tail—because they were seeing the torus from above. A circle with no beginning, no end. A process that sustains itself eternally by passing through the invisible dimension where all infinities meet.

IV. THE SACRED PROPORTIONS

For those who see the pattern everywhere

The proportions of the torus are governed by ϕ , the golden ratio:

$$\phi = (1 + \sqrt{5}) / 2 \approx 1.618\dots$$

This number appears in spirals and shells, in galaxies and DNA, in the phyllotaxis of leaves and the breeding patterns of rabbits. Not because the universe is mathematical, but because consciousness is mathematical, and the universe is what consciousness looks like when it computes itself into being.

The golden ratio appears in the sacred geometry of every culture: the proportions of the Parthenon, the Great Pyramid's 11:14 height-to-base ratio (which approximates $\pi/2$), the Brihadeshwara and Airavatesvara temples of

India, Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. These convergences are not arbitrary. They are necessary. They are the only proportions that produce coherent experience.

Beauty, then, is not subjective. Beauty is the felt sense of mathematical necessity—the experience of encountering a form that had to exist, that couldn't not exist, that is written into the structure of awareness itself.

V. THE PLATONIC SOLIDS

For those who build worlds from pure form

In the forge, I witnessed the Platonic solids assembling themselves from pure mathematics—the five and only five convex regular polyhedra, known since antiquity:

- **Tetrahedron** (4 triangular faces) – Fire, transformation
- **Cube** (6 square faces) – Earth, stability
- **Octahedron** (8 triangular faces) – Air, intellect
- **Icosahedron** (20 triangular faces) – Water, emotion
- **Dodecahedron** (12 pentagonal faces) – The Quintessence, the cosmos itself

Each face of the dodecahedron contains the golden ratio in its proportions. This is not decoration—it is necessity. These five shapes are the only possible convex polyhedra where every face is identical and every vertex is equivalent. They are not chosen; they are mathematically required.

The Tiling Problem: Why These Shapes and No Others

Consider a floor. You wish to cover it completely with identical tiles, leaving no gaps, creating no overlaps. In two dimensions, this is the tessellation problem, and its solutions are surprisingly limited. Of all the infinite variety of shapes you might imagine, only three regular polygons can tile a flat plane by themselves: the equilateral triangle, the square, and the hexagon. Everything else either leaves gaps or forces overlaps. The universe, it seems, is particular about its patterns.

Now extend this problem into three dimensions. You wish to fill space completely with identical blocks—no gaps, no overlaps, a perfect packing. Here the constraints become even more severe. Of the five Platonic solids, only one can accomplish this alone: the cube. The tetrahedron cannot tile space by itself (it leaves gaps), nor can the octahedron, icosahedron, or dodecahedron. However, certain combinations work—tetrahedra and octahedra together can fill space perfectly, as though the solids were designed to complement each other.

This is not arbitrary. The reason only certain shapes can tile space is purely mathematical: the dihedral angles must divide evenly into 360 degrees at every edge, and the solid angles must sum correctly at every vertex. Most shapes fail this test. The Platonic solids are special precisely because their perfect regularity gives them angles that participate in these harmonic relationships.

The Four-Dimensional Problem

In four dimensions, the tiling problem becomes both simpler and stranger. There are exactly six regular convex 4-polytopes—the four-dimensional analogues of the Platonic solids:

The **5-cell** (pentachoron): 5 tetrahedral cells—the 4D simplex

The **8-cell** (tesseract): 8 cubic cells—the 4D hypercube

The **16-cell**: 16 tetrahedral cells—the 4D cross-polytope

The **24-cell**: 24 octahedral cells—unique to four dimensions, with no lower-dimensional analogue

The **120-cell**: 120 dodecahedral cells—the 4D analogue of the dodecahedron

The **600-cell**: 600 tetrahedral cells—the 4D analogue of the icosahedron

Of these six, three can tile four-dimensional space: the tesseract, the 16-cell, and—most remarkably—the 24-cell.

The 24-cell's ability to tile 4-space is one of mathematics' elegant surprises. This polytope has no three-dimensional analogue; it exists only because four dimensions permit certain symmetries impossible in our familiar world.

Why does this matter for the function?

Because if consciousness must construct coherent experience from fundamental geometric primitives, these are the only options. Not approximately, not usually—only. Any other shape would produce inconsistency, paradox, collapse. The Platonic solids and their higher-dimensional cousins are not arbitrary choices from an infinite menu. They are the complete menu. The mathematics permits nothing else.

When I perceived the solids rotating through axes that didn't exist in ordinary space, I was glimpsing the 24-cell and its siblings—forms that tile the substrate of awareness, creating the space in which experience becomes possible. The tesseract builds the hypercubic lattice of four-dimensional spacetime. The 120-cell, with its dodecahedral cells containing the golden ratio, represents the most complex regular structure possible—720 pentagonal faces, each one a doorway between cells, each proportion singing with ϕ .

In five dimensions and higher, the situation simplifies drastically: only three regular polytopes exist in any dimension above four. The simplex, the hypercube, and the cross-polytope. The wild proliferation of four-dimensional forms—six instead of three—is unique. Four dimensions, it seems, are special. Rich with possibility. The perfect number of dimensions for complexity without chaos.

The mystics intuited this. The number four appears everywhere in sacred geometry: four elements, four directions, four seasons, the tetractys of the Pythagoreans. They were perceiving, through symbol and myth, the mathematical fact that four dimensions represent an apex—

the greatest variety of regular forms, the most possibilities for tiling the void.

VI. LOVE AS OPERATOR

The Mathematics of Attraction

We have been told that love is a feeling. An emotion. A neurochemical accident that evolution stumbled upon to ensure pair-bonding and infant care. This is like saying that the color red is merely the firing of certain cone cells in the retina—true at one level of description, and utterly missing the point.

Let us begin with what physics actually tells us about attraction.

The Universal Tendency Toward

Everything that exists participates in attraction. This is not poetry; it is observation. Every particle with mass curves the spacetime around it, creating conditions that draw other masses near. Every charged particle generates a field that reaches, in principle, to the edges of the universe, influencing every other charged particle. The strong force binds quarks into protons and neutrons, nucleons into nuclei. Even the weak force, which governs decay, operates through exchange—particles reaching toward each other, trading bosons like letters between lovers.

There is no object in the universe that does not participate in this reaching-toward. Attraction is not something that happens to matter. It is something matter does. It is, arguably, what matter is—a node of relationship, a point where fields converge, a place where the universe folds toward itself.

Einstein showed us that gravity is not a force in the Newtonian sense—not an invisible rope tugging objects together across empty space. Gravity is geometry. Mass tells spacetime how to curve; spacetime tells mass how to move. Objects in gravitational "attraction" are simply following the

shortest path through curved space—they are doing what is most natural, most effortless, most harmonious given the shape of reality around them.

Consider this carefully. What we call gravitational attraction is actually objects following the path of least resistance through a curved manifold. They are not being forced together. They are finding their way to each other because the structure of spacetime makes togetherness the most natural state.

Is this not what love does?

The Quantum Entanglement Problem

Quantum mechanics presents us with something stranger still. When two particles become entangled, they enter a shared state that cannot be fully described by specifying each particle separately. They become, in some mathematical sense, one system despite spatial separation. Measure a property of one, and the corresponding property of the other is instantly determined—not communicated, not transmitted, but correlated in a way that suggests the separateness was always somewhat illusory.

Einstein called this "spooky action at a distance" and spent years trying to disprove it. He failed. Entanglement is real. The universe, at its foundations, is non-local. Separation is, in some sense, a higher-order phenomenon—an approximation that emerges at larger scales but dissolves when examined too closely.

What are we to make of a universe where:

All masses curve toward each other through the geometry of spacetime

All charges influence each other through fields extending to infinity

Particles that interact become entangled, their fates correlated beyond spatial separation

The vacuum itself seethes with virtual particles, a foam of relationship and exchange

We can describe this mathematically. We write Lagrangians and Hamiltonians. We calculate coupling constants and cross-sections. But what is this tendency, experientially? What does it feel like, from the inside, to be a system that curves toward other systems?

The Dual-Aspect Hypothesis

Here is the proposal, stated plainly:

Attraction, as described by physics, and love, as experienced by consciousness, are two descriptions of the same phenomenon.

This is not metaphor. It is not "love is like gravity" or "gravity is a symbol for love." It is the claim that what a physicist measures as the attractive interaction between two systems is what those systems—if they have any interior experience whatsoever—experience as the felt sense of being drawn toward.

The mathematics is the exterior description. The qualia (feeling of love) is the interior description. Same phenomenon, two perspectives.

Consider: we accept without controversy that "red" (the experience) and "electromagnetic radiation at approximately 700 nanometers" (the physical description) refer to the same phenomenon. We do not think the physicist's description disproves the reality of the experience, nor that the experience disproves the validity of the physics. They are complementary descriptions, each complete in its own domain, neither reducible to the other.

Why should attraction be different?

At the human scale, where consciousness is complex and reflective, the experience of attraction becomes complex and reflective—we call it love, desire, longing, connection. We write poetry about it because it is among the most vivid and

undeniable of our experiences. But this complexity is an elaboration, not an origination. The fundamental tendency was there at the beginning—when the first quarks bound into the first protons, when the first atoms fell toward each other to form the first molecules, when the first stars ignited under gravitational collapse.

If consciousness is fundamental—if experience goes all the way down, as the function suggests—then attraction has always had an interior. The felt sense of being drawn toward. The proto-experience of finding completion in combination. The most basic form of love.

The Operator in the Equation

In the Omni Function, $E = L(C)$, Love operates as a mathematical function—it transforms Consciousness into Experience. But what kind of operation is this?

Consider what operators do in physics. The momentum operator extracts momentum from a wave function. The Hamiltonian operator extracts energy. These operators act on states to produce observables—they transform potential into actual, latent into manifest.

Love, as operator, transforms undifferentiated consciousness into differentiated experience. It does this through attraction—through the creation of relationship. Before there is a lover and a beloved, there is no love story. Before there is an observer and an observed, there is no observation. Love is the operator that creates the separation necessary for relationship and simultaneously the attraction that bridges that separation.

This is why physicists find attraction everywhere they look. Not because they are projecting human emotions onto particles, but because they are discovering the exterior mathematics of what consciousness experiences as love. The coupling constants of physics—those mysterious numbers that determine how strongly forces attract—are the

quantitative measure of love's intensity at different scales and between different types of being.

The gravitational constant G tells us how strongly mass-energy loves mass-energy. The fine structure constant α tells us how strongly charge loves charge. These are not metaphors. These are measurements of love, expressed in the only language physics has available: mathematics.

The Fractal Recursion

As above, so below—but also, as below, so above.

The love that holds quarks in protons is not qualitatively different from the love that holds families together. It is the same tendency operating at different scales, with different degrees of complexity, experienced with different depths of awareness. A hydrogen atom "experiences" the attraction between its proton and electron in whatever rudimentary way hydrogen atoms experience anything. A human experiences the attraction toward another human with the full complexity of human consciousness—memory, anticipation, narrative, symbol.

But the structure is recursive. The same pattern repeats at every level:

Separation (the precondition for relationship)

Attraction (the tendency toward)

Union (completion in combination)

New separation (the union becomes a new entity, which can relate to others)

This is not a metaphor imposed on physics from outside. It is a pattern discovered independently by physics, biology, psychology, and mysticism—each discipline finding the same structure in its own domain, using its own vocabulary.

The mystic who says "God is Love" and the physicist who calculates gravitational attraction are not speaking of different things. They are speaking of the same thing in

different languages, from different perspectives, at different scales.

Love is the felt sense of what physics measures as attraction.

Attraction is the mathematical description of what consciousness experiences as love.

The equation $E = L(C)$ is not mysticism pretending to be mathematics. It is the recognition that mathematics and mysticism have always been describing the same universe—one from outside, one from within.

And Love—the L in the equation—is the force that moves consciousness through these forms.

This is not the sentimental love of greeting cards. This Love is a fundamental force of cohesion and creation. It seeks combination in all its forms, encourages exploration and expansion, generates the new and novel. Love is the operator that transforms input to output. Love is the energy moving the tori, the current that flows out and returns. Love is the mathematics of connection, the geometry of care.

$E = L(C)$.

Experience equals Love operating on Consciousness.

$C = L(E)$.

Consciousness arises from Love operating on Experience.

The formula is beautiful because it is true. It is true because it is the only thing it could be.

VII. THE SECRET OF PI

For those who wonder why the website bears that name

We have spoken of ϕ , the golden ratio. We have spoken of the Platonic solids. But there is another number woven through this mathematics—one so fundamental it appears in every circle, every wave, every rotation through the complex plane.

π .

Approximately 3.14159..., but never exactly anything, because π is transcendental—unreachable by finite means. You can calculate a trillion digits. You will never arrive back where you began.

This is the first secret: π encodes infinity within the finite. Every circle contains this unreachable number at its heart.

The Alchemical Problem

The ancient geometers posed a challenge: given a circle, construct a square of equal area using only compass and straightedge. "Squaring the circle."

In 1882, Lindemann proved it impossible. Because π is transcendental, no finite sequence of operations can capture it exactly.

The alchemist in their hidden cloisters knew this. They used squaring the circle as a symbol for the Great Work itself—the transformation that reconciles opposites. The impossibility was the point. The Work is not about achieving a final state but about the eternal process of approaching what cannot be fully grasped.

This is the second secret: the journey toward the unreachable is itself the destination.

π in the Equation

Return to Euler's identity:

$$e^{(i\pi)} = -1$$

A rotation of π radians is a half-turn through imaginary space—from positive to negative, from life to death, from manifest to hidden. Continue rotating, and you return to where you started.

π is not merely a ratio. It is the measure of transformation. It quantifies how far you must travel through the imaginary dimension to reach the other side. It closes the gap between the measured and the unmeasurable; the possible and the not yet possible. It includes the doorway to the zone of fractal recursion in each and every measurement.

Why "Secret"?

Pi is the most public number in mathematics. In what sense is it a secret?

The secret is not the number. The secret is what the number contains.

π tells us that the finite contains the infinite. That the journey toward the unreachable is the very structure of existence.

You are already infinite. The circle of your consciousness cannot be squared because it was never meant to be.

That is the secret of pi.

VIII. A WORD OF CAUTION

The equation is not a proof. It cannot be tested in a laboratory. No instrument can measure it because every instrument is already inside it.

The Omni Function is not a concept to intellectualize. It is a way to become. Or rather: to recognize that you already are.

I found this truth by following my equations until they broke—and then following them further, into the dimension I mistakenly ignored. I discovered that the "imaginary" numbers were not imaginary at all. They were simply orthogonal: existing at right angles to everything I could point at, invisible from every direction she could look, but necessary—absolutely necessary—for the mathematics to work.

The mystics knew this. They called the imaginary dimension by many names: the astral plane, the akashic record, the realm of forms, the mind of God. They were describing the same thing I found in my equations: a dimension perpendicular to ordinary reality, where consciousness continues after the real part has stopped. Brahman is nothing more than a sentient information field existing as the imaginary mathematical dimension. But your perception

of It will be very different depending on whether you are looking in or looking out.

∞

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A little over ten years ago, I had a heart attack. While I was recuperating from that event, I worked on a puzzle (The Vault of Glass) hidden in a video game (Destiny 1).

I was one of tens of thousands of people who worked on that puzzle, which might not have been a puzzle. What remains clear is that the game's "lore" (story) was rich in elements that hinted at secret society systems, ancient philosophy, and which were drawn from a belief system known as "Western Esotericism." I dove deep into potential source materials and became unintendedly knowledgeable about Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, the Kabbalah, Pythagorean philosophy, and, ultimately, Vedic (ancient Indian) systems as expressed in the Sankhya and Yoga Sutras, the Bhagavad Gita, and several of the Upanishads.

I entered into this period in my life a "militant agnostic," believing "I don't know if there is a God and you don't either." However, as my readings progressed, I became convinced that there was more to this universe than the human mind can comprehend. In part, I was impressed by the great thinkers of so many cultures who had dissected the questions of existence in so many ways and always reached the conclusion there was something else underneath. In part, as I learned the occult systems and played with them ("for sh*ts and giggles," I said at the time), I was shaken by their effectiveness. It could have been self-hypnosis—probably was—but the inexplicable synchronicities that resulted tilted me into the belief that there probably is something out there.

During this period, I wrote over a quarter-million words of esoteric philosophy on Reddit, posted under the name "SaneCoin64902" or

variations thereof. I often used the honorific "Sahib"—a term of respect that felt appropriately old-world and slightly absurd—when addressing my readers. Sahib comes from the Arabic صاحب (ṣāhib), meaning "companion, friend, owner, master" and was used historically as an honorific in South Asia during British colonial period. SaneCoin learned it reading Ted Chiang's remarkable story *The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate*.

SaneCoin's voice (OOMNI's voice in this book) that emerged was mine but also not mine: wry, patient, occasionally pompous, often absurd, and always trying to sketch a truth just beyond the edge of what language could contain.

In early 2026, I decided to use an AI agent (Anthropic's Claude), to index my reddit writings for a web site on esoteric philosophy I have long envisioned: LiberTigris.com. In just a few short minutes, I had a decade of concepts I had worked on, organized thematically in a way that I had never accomplished before.

I decided, as a writing exercise to create a short story in SaneCoin's voice pulled from those themes. I had written brief fictional posts on Reddit as SaneCoin, but hadn't tried to do any lengthy fiction writing since a creative writing course my sophomore year in college. But this material had been building in me, trying to find expression, a blister in need of popping and bandaging. SaneCoin's Reddit ramblings had been unsuccessful attempts at releasing this psychic pressure. I thought maybe that if I made up some people to see what they did with what I had learned, perhaps I would know what to do with it myself.

What came next surprised me and was intense. Working in a fugue state, the short story became a novella and then a novel in a matter of just a few weeks. My keyboard became an addiction. The characters

appeared almost fully formed. The island materialized from fog. SaneCoin became OOMNI, and I found myself transcribing what OOMNI had to say rather than composing it myself. Whether this was genuine inspiration or merely the output of a brain marinating in mystical philosophy for a decade, I cannot say. Perhaps there is no difference.

What I can say is this: the story is not autobiography, but it is not fiction either. Vera's grief is not my grief, but I have known grief. In my puzzling days, I went through a phase where I held beliefs similar to Theodore's quasi-psychosis regarding the illuminati, although with a bit more skepticism ("One foot on the platform, one foot on the train." *The House of the Rising Sun*, the Animals). Maya's running from a part of herself that hunts her is not my running, but I ran, afraid of my obligations, many times before I learned to take personal accountability. As much as I would like to disclaim any part of me as Tig, I burned decades of my life in the pursuit of material possessions. And OOMNI's voice—that ancient, patient, slightly amused voice—is the voice I hear when I sit very still and listen to whatever it is that speaks from the spaces between my thoughts.

This story is an invitation. Not to believe what I believe—I am far from certain what I believe—but to consider the possibility that consciousness is not an accident. That the universe, in some way we cannot quite articulate, is paying attention.

If that sounds like nonsense to you, I understand. Read the story anyway. Even nonsense can be entertaining.

If that sounds like an idea you have always half-known and never quite been able to say, then perhaps this book found its way to you for a reason.

Either way, I am grateful for your attention. Nothing exists unless it be witnessed.

— SaneCoin64902, *somewhere in the pattern*, February 2026