

HARLEY AUSTIN

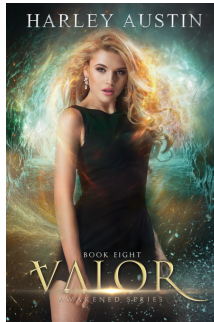
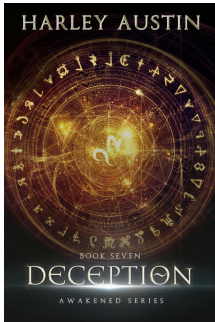


BOOK ONE

AWAKENED

A WAKENED SERIES

HARLEY AUSTIN'S AWAKENED SERIES



COMING SOON
BOOK NINE
PROMETHEAN

COMING SOON

COMING SOON

COMING SOON

BOOK TEN
NOVUS

BOOK ELEVEN
MERIDIAN

BOOK TWELVE
ASCENSION

HARLEY AUSTIN'S AWAKENED CHRONICLES



COMING SOON

BOOK FOUR
TRAVADA

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BOOK SEVEN
OBLIVION



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BOOK FIVE
PRIMAL

COMING SOON

BOOK EIGHT
ARCHANGEL



COMING SOON

BOOK SIX
ATLANTICA

AWAKENED SERIES

BOOK ONE

AWAKENED

HARLEY AUSTIN

HARLEY AUSTIN PUBLISHING

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*For my beautiful wife and angel;
the love of my life and the very best friend
anyone could ever hope to have.*

*And for Chris;
the best brother anyone could ever hope to have
and my number one fan.*

AWAKENED

INTRODUCTION

By Harley Austin

The book you now hold in your hands is the beginning of an EPIC STORY, one that now spans OVER 20 novels in 3 series, and continues to grow in depth and popularity.

I have had readers tell me that they go back and re-read their favorite books within the series three and four times. The series has created rabid fans.

AWAKENED is a story that unveils the gods of old reborn in our modern era. A steamy paranormal sci-fi intrigue thriller romance, the series crosses numerous fiction genres to deliver a deep, compelling tale of power, love, mystery, and betrayal that both men and women will find riveting.

With each new book, the past of the old gods is revealed as discovered through the lives of the reborn. Each book follows new young people who harbor the blood of the gods, but who must now make their way alone, living alongside an

increasingly hostile Humanity to rekindle their people and rediscover their ancient knowledge lost to the ages.

Awakened is truly a UNIQUE story. The stories of the Awakened will take you to places you as a reader may never have ventured to; I know they did for me as the author.

While the series is more or less billed as paranormal sci-fi romance, that is not really what the Awakened Series is all about. Yes, you will find romantic relationships within the stories, usually steamy, some of them straight, some of them not at all. I honestly didn't start out to write a series that became what the Awakened epic did—but then Awakened has always been a very surprising work for me.

There is something for everyone within the pages of an Awakened book and story.

Also, I feel like I need to give some of us, usually the guys, a FAIR WARNING: This first book, Awakened, is a story that started out as a typical slowly building intrigue-romance. No, I don't write my stories this way anymore, but rest assured as you get deeper into Awakened and the rest of the series, you will see the epic blossoming into something beyond fascinating.

If Awakened moves too slowly for you at first, then feel free to just jump to the next chapter. The story picks up a lot of speed the deeper you get. Another fair warning is that the Awakened books are not stand-alone novels. They often rely heavily on the reader having knowledge of previous books and people within the epic.

Thank you for reading Awakened—I know you'll enjoy the series and I hope you become a fan like so many others have.

~ Harley

PROLOGUE

Qumran, 1947

This is bloody insane," Alastair mumbled under his breath, the sound of automatic gunfire in the not so far off distance. He pulled his foul-smelling, draping Arab disguise more tightly around his head as he followed his armed Bedouin guides under a bright moonlit night around the shores of the Dead Sea.

The small cadre of dirty men made their way up a short canyon and then ascended some steep rocky terrain along the side of the cliff. When they could climb no further, a rope ladder appeared, suddenly unfurling down the side of the steep sandstone.

Alastair shakily climbed the short forty feet to a small, kerosene lantern lit cave where only a couple of Bedouin guards with rifles and two colleagues now stood huddled over a rickety table scattered with disorganized piles of very old

scrolls and tall clay pots beneath it. He pulled back his disguise and dumped the malodorous robes onto a rickety wooden chair next to the entrance.

"I do hope," Alastair began, his British accent thick with the culture and arrogance of his people, "that the both of you didn't bring me out into the middle of this Godforsaken hellhole in the middle of the night to look at more of these—worthless scraps?"

"They're not worthless, Alastair," Monique shot back. "And if you had a brain in your head you be able to see that."

She wasn't backing down. His ruse about the scrolls' value being worthless would be in vain if she'd already found a buyer or someone else in the antiquities trade who knew their paleography half as well as he did.

Alastair frowned, and then nodded. "Alright, let me have a look. This better be worth getting shot at to get here."

"We found dozens of the ones you've already looked at, in another cave not far from here," Cantwell offered, hunched over the table beside Monique. "But then we came across this little grotto," his eyes darting up and around the cave they were now within. "At first, we thought it to be like the other one, harboring a handful of these clay pots and preserving scrolls like these," his eyes scanned the scrolls now laying atop the table.

Alastair nodded. The scrolls they'd uncovered had not only caught his own attention but were garnering the attention of some of his competition as well. It wouldn't be long before the authorities began nosing around, ruining any chance of the find being profitable.

"But as we explored further, we noticed that the wall toward the back here wasn't actually stone, but a kind of clay brick made to look like the surrounding stone."

"A hidden chamber?" Alastair asked.

"Exactly what we thought as well," Cantwell nodded.

“Interesting. Have you drilled to see what’s on the other side?”

Monique scoffed. “This isn’t some archeological dig, Alastair. In case you haven’t noticed, we’re in the middle of demilitarized zone. This whole area is on the brink of civil war. There wasn’t time for protocol. We broke through it,” she leveled.

Not at all surprised, Alastair looked at the both of them, “And?”

“Maybe you should just see for yourself—” Monique finished.

The three of them moved to the back of the short cave where an obvious thick wall of stone-looking clay brick had been knocked aside. Alastair squeezed himself through the short opening and entered what lay beyond, followed by his two colleagues. Through the hole, a large chamber much bigger than the natural cave he’d just been in opened before him. Perhaps thirty feet in diameter, there was nothing natural about this hidden chamber. The sandstone had been neatly and smoothly carved away into the shape of dome. A pair of kerosene pressure lamps were already burning and well-lit the large room. Aside from the rubble of the broken entrance, the floor of the hidden chamber appeared unusually smooth, almost polished as if a single piece of stone. But it was the walls of the chamber that gave Alastair the most wonder upon entering.

“What the bloody—?” Intricately carved and smoothly finished bas relief images covered the walls from floor to apex depicting images of people and events he’d never seen before. “—what the bloody is this?” Alastair looked carefully at the walls of the domed room.

“You tell us,” Cantwell half cajoled. “You’re the bloody expert.”

"I've—I've never seen anything like this. My God," he marveled in intoxicating wonder as he moved his hands delicately over the slightly dusty stone, leaving behind a shining sculpture from beneath the dust.

"This—this is not Essene! It's not even Arab!" Alastair glanced in surprise at his schoolmate colleagues.

"Oh, quite." Cantwell nodded. He looked at Monique nodding his sarcastic approval. "He's quite good you know. Quite good."

Monique approached Alastair. "Robert and I had planned on keeping this grotto our little secret for a while. But when we uncovered this," she motioned to the intricate bas reliefs, "we seemed to have bitten off a bit more than either of us could chew."

"That's an understatement," Alastair agreed. "I've never seen anything like these; the style is—" Alastair fought for words, "completely unlike anything ever discovered in the region. Nothing even comes close, or as well preserved."

"The walls aren't the only thing in this room that's been *well preserved*, Alastair," Cantwell offered. "The truth is, we didn't bring you here to look at walls."

"Well, what then?"

Cantwell pointed to the center of the room. "Those."

Alastair had been so taken with the illumination of the sculptured walls that he'd completely missed seeing the dais at the center of the room. The smooth black stone was almost unnoticeable in the lantern light. The three of them approached and ascended the short circular stairs of the polished dais. Twelve stone scroll handles protruded from the middle of a four-foot tall altar that had the look and feel of polished granite.

Alastair looked at his colleagues and then carefully drew up one the scroll handles from the multi-ton stone base. He rested it on the inscription-covered table and carefully

unrolled what felt like papyrus but clearly wasn't. It felt almost new, in fact.

"What is this material? It's not velum, or papyrus. It feels almost like, cloth of some kind."

"We were hoping you could tell us," Monique nodded.

Alastair shook his head as he carefully unfurled the scroll, "I haven't the foggiest ... what, what is this?"

The young-looking professor glanced up at his colleagues in disbelief again and then back at the scroll. This—this isn't Hebrew, or Aramaic. It's, it's—Phoenician," the three of them said all at once, looking at Alastair.

"That's—that's—"

"Impossible?" Monique finished.

"Quite." Alastair agreed. "It's impossible, in fact."

"And yet, Alastair," Cantwell continued, "here we are; in a room of exquisite design; looking at Phoenician scrolls that haven't been seen in perhaps three to four thousand years."

Alastair glared at the both of them. "Do either of you actually realize what you've discovered here? I mean, the magnitude and value of this find is beyond—"

"We don't care what they're worth, Alastair;" Cantwell began firmly, "Yes, they're beyond valuable. We want to know what they *say*."

Alastair frowned and began to study the ancient writing for long moments. "It's written like an apocalypse or future revelation, it reads like a prophecy of some kind." He continued to read the words. "Hmm, we're apparently in the middle of some epic revelation, I don't have any real context."

"Forget context, what kind of prophecy?" Monique asked.

Alastair frowned with a mocking glare. "You know, the two of you really should have studied more and fucked less."

Alastair's comment drew a wry smile from Cantwell. "Tell me you're not still smoldering about the three of us? That was years ago, old chap."

“Don’t be so fuddy-duddy, Alastair,” Monique scolded. “You should be glad we skipped studies. We wouldn’t have needed you here otherwise to interpret for this rather momentous occasion.”

“Humph,” Alastair frowned. Even now in her forties, Monique could still command his attention as well as she did many years ago at the university.

“So what does it say?” Cantwell prodded.

Alastair read slowly the ancient words processing the thoughts as best he could with what he knew of the ancient Canaanite dialect. He read then re-read the words out loud:

FOR A TIME THE SONS OF GOD SHALL REST WITH THE
DAUGHTERS OF MEN AND NONE SHALL REMAIN WHO
WALK THE FACE OF THE EARTH

Both Cantwell and Monique stood motionless hanging on every word Alastair uttered from the ancient writing.

“The sons of God resting with the daughters of men? That almost sounds like Tanakh, or Torah,” Cantwell assured.

Alastair nodded. “The sons of God were assumed to be great heroes in ancient times. Some claimed them to be children of the gods.”

“Like Hercules?” Monique questioned.

“More like Sampson,” Alastair corrected.

“Well, keep going, what else does it say?” Cantwell continued to prod.

Alastair continued to skim the words:

EVEN AS THE EVIL ONES DIMINISH, SO THEN SHALL THEY
ALSO INCREASE IN POWER TO SPREAD THEIR WRATH
THROUGH THE NATIONS

He continued to skim until the last paragraph of the end of the section he'd been reading.

AND FROM THE BLOOD OF THE DARK ONE SHALL RISE
THE REBORN AND HE SHALL BRING FORTH FROM THE
MIDST OF MEN THE AWAKENED OF GOD

"The 'reborn'? 'Awakened of God'? Alastair, these are not Christian or even Mithraic," Cantwell scowled. "Are you sure you're reading that properly?" His tone a bit incredulous.

"Stop it," Monique scolded. "No one reads or translates better than our Alastair Bond." She smiled at him.

"Indeed," Cantwell agreed still sporting a frown, and then a nod. He canned his sarcasm. "So what *are* these scrolls then, Alastair? What do they mean? What are they all *about*?"

"Don't you know already, Cantwell?" Alastair looked annoyed at his colleague. "That answer's been right in front of you this whole time."

Alastair pushed aside the cloth-like scroll to reveal the inscription that had been inlaid within the top of the polished altar. "Someone has gone to an awful lot of trouble and expense to protect and preserve ..." Alastair read the words aloud—

"THE BOOKS OF GOD"

"Which god?" Monique raised her brow.

"Difficult to say. The word is akin to *Adonis*, a proper noun of the period. It was the precursor to Ba'al in the Mesopotamian region, specifically the Sumerian I think, and Ra in Egypt, then what splintered into Hebrew El or Elohiym in Hebrew, and eventually Solis in the Roman era."

"Sun gods?"

"Imprecisely, Cantwell, but yes."

“Ba’al and Ra? Became Yahweh?” Monique raised her brow.

“Not exactly, but each culture assigned their own meanings and titles to the names inherited from the previous cultures.”

“Who or what are these ‘reborn’ as you say?” Cantwell continued. “Mithras? He was supposed to have been ‘reborn’ after they sacrificed him. But that was a Persian deity if I am not mistaken.”

“There were a number of resurrected gods of this era. Why are the two of you so intrigued by this? It’s nothing more than ancient myth.”

“Is it?” Monique raised her brow again.

Alastair scoffed.

“Look here, Bond,” Cantwell interrupted, “someone went to a lot of bloody-hell trouble to create a chamber than is far beyond anything anyone has ever seen from a period that barely had the knowledge to stack rocks and plow a field. Not even the pyramids would be built for another two thousand years from the date of the language when these were written.”

Alastair nodded.

Cantwell motioned his colleague’s attention to the bas-relief wall of their chamber. “The detail of the carvings of this one section are intricately precise.” He pointed to a carving sculpted near the top of the section of wall where a lantern burned, well lighting the area. “This sun radiating it rays, is repeated seven times within this dome.”

“So?”

“So each one is a perfect copy of the others.”

“Define perfect?” Alastair queried.

“All seven are exact duplicates, down to the millimeter. Not a single variation between any of them. They’re perfect, as if carved mechanically somehow.”

“Mechanically —” the seasoned archeologist scoffed.

"I don't know how else to explain it."

Alastair raised his brow to Monique. "And what do you think?"

"Honestly? *Something* carved this tomb, or whatever it is, *using* a means we cannot explain. It's utterly perfect, Alastair. Whoever these 'sons of god' or 'heroes' as you call them, were, they were doing things far beyond what anyone else was doing at the time. The sandstone of this room is perfectly polished."

He nodded his agreement. He couldn't argue with their findings, but what those findings ultimately meant after further study—could be anyone's guess at this point.

"We were hoping these scrolls would tell us more about the people who built this tomb."

Alastair turned his attention back to the scroll, laying it out further. He scanned its writings for long moments. Then mumbled to himself. "Hmmm."

"What does, 'hmmm' mean?" Cantwell watched his colleague's face carefully.

"This section tells of a goddess, reborn. Her name is *Elisheva*, 'God's Seventh', as near as I can make out."

"Seventh of what?"

"Goddesses would be my guess," Alastair offered, still scanning the cloth. "Ah, here we are—she is one of seven gods of destiny. Her power will know no equal," Alastair half mumbled reading the ancient words.

"Really?" Cantwell smirked. "Zeus isn't going to be happy about that."

Alastair continued his half mumbling. "It appears that she is awakened from a long sleep by another god called *Levi*."

"Oh good heavens, Alastair," Cantwell frowned. "Now you're testing us. Putting us on. Come off. We're not stupid."

"I'm not putting you on, Robert. I have better things to do than waste any of your time. These are the words."

“Alastair, ‘Levi’ doesn’t appear in the Hebrew record for another thousand years,” Monique charged. “That much we all know.”

“Agreed. But this isn’t a historical writing—it’s an apocalypse; a revelation; a prophecy.”

“Doesn’t ‘levi’ just mean priest of some kind, ol chap?”

“Ordinarily, I would agree, Robert, but within this context, it is being used as a proper noun. Whoever wrote this knew of someone who would have this name—in the future. And it doesn’t just mean ‘priest’, but someone with high knowledge.”

“High knowledge—” Monique began. “Like someone with the knowledge to perhaps carve a room like the one we’re standing in?”

“Indeed. Perhaps.” Alastair agreed.

“Does it say *when*?” Cantwell asked. “Do we know when this Elisheva and Levi chap will appear?”

Alastair shook his head. “Only after the ‘Dark One’ appears, whoever that is, and these ‘Seven Lords of evil’ have taken over the world. It’s all quite muddy at this point.”

“We need to study these, Alastair.” Monique began pulling other scrolls from their slots in the altar. “All of them.”

“Where?”

“Not here.”

“You’ll never get them out of the region as large as they are. The authorities are already searching everyone.”

“Don’t argue with her, Alastair,” Cantwell warned, also pulling more of the scrolls from their slots. “You know how she is when she makes up her mind.”

“I’ll get them back to London,” she assured.

“And then what?” Alastair began rolling up the scroll he’d been reading.

“Then we start finding out who wrote these ‘books of the gods’—and why.”

1

Lisa sat perched on an outcropped boulder next to the high-mountain trail waiting for her brother to answer a nature call. A minute later James emerged from the thick underbrush back onto the lightly worn path. She jumped from her boulder back onto the path as the two began their afternoon descent back to the campsite.

“I still think you need to let me submit your resume to HR, Lisa. I’m telling you, we’re in a huge hiring frenzy at the moment. I know the director of marketing. He could get you into something really nice; a cushy office.”

“I’m not becoming a corporate drone.”

“I’m just sayin’,” he offered, backtracking a bit.

“Listen, I really appreciate the offer, but I think I need to do this on my own. Mom and Dad helped out getting me into school; you helped out with the agency; I’m starting to feel like I can’t do anything on my own.”

"People help each other out, Lisa. It's what it's all about."

"I know; but—"

"But what? So someone helped you get into school and I helped you with a connection for the modeling agency. Nepotism only goes so far, it just gets you in the door, you did the rest."

She nodded. James was right. Her parents had good connections within the church and it had been those connections that had gotten her into one of the top religious universities in the country. She was grateful for the opportunity and she'd worked very hard to keep her GPA close to a four-point, even with her other jobs and activities.

"Are you going to take that gig with *Seattle Denim*?" he asked, stepping carefully down some makeshift trail steps. "It sounded like they really want you with all the messages they keep leaving you."

"Yes, I do. But the agency keeps getting in the way."

"You mean the rep wants more money."

"They keep saying I'm worth more, but it's already a lot of money. We don't live in New York. I'm fine with the offer."

"They probably want to push your bill rate higher so you can command more with the next client. That would be my guess anyway."

Both clomped down a steep part of the well-hewn trail.

"Did Dad tell you he got a call from the Conference?" James asked over his shoulder as she followed him down a narrow part of the trail.

"Yes, I was fuming when he told me about it. Honestly, that's part of the reason why I really want to do the local commercials now." Lisa began speaking in an overt tone of over-the-top high-brow sarcasm, "*'We're just concerned that your daughter's choice of vocation is unhealthy. We don't want to see her committing spiritual adultery.'* And what is that, exactly, 'spiritual adultery'?"

"It's whatever they want it to be," James assured.

"They act like they've never seen anyone wearing a swimsuit before."

"They're just not used to seeing someone from the church wearing one. Five bucks says that one or two, shall we say 'less attractive', ladies at church are behind this. They probably didn't like the way their husbands were looking at your clothes—or you," he grinned.

"James, they see people at waterparks and on beaches all the time. I'm not the first person to model a bikini. Other people model."

James looked at his sister with a grin, "Not like you do. I've told you this before, you are beyond hot in those things. The camera more than loves you."

"Still, I can't believe the church's busy-bodies want to insert themselves into my business. I don't work for them!"

"No, but Dad does. What did he say when you talked to him?"

Lisa smiled, "You know Daddy. What do you think he told me?"

James chuckled. "Knowing Dad, I'm sure he told you not to worry about the church and to follow your dreams."

Lisa nodded, "That's exactly what he said."

"See? Dad's right. Don't worry about it. They're just jealous because they're not getting paid to sit on a beach in Barbados surrounded by photographers. Which reminds me, you said they wanted you to go back?"

"They do, but not for another six months. That's the problem with this job, it's not exactly a constant paycheck. I only get paid when I work and the work isn't anything close to steady right now. I went to school so I could get a real job. Modeling is just kind of extra money. All it did was put me behind in my classes and help pay down my student loan—" Lisa ran into the back of James as he abruptly stopped in the

middle of the path. “Hey, what’s—” Lisa suddenly froze with James as she looked down the trail at what had caused her brother to all but freeze in the middle of it.

Both of their eyes were now fixed on a very large brown bear that had wandered onto their path not far from where the two of them now stood.

“Oh, my God,” Lisa whispered.

“Shhh,” James silenced. But even his whisper was too loud. The big animal’s attention was suddenly on the both of them and it grunted and snarled deeply as it began bounding up the path toward the two of them.

“RUN!” James pushed his sister back up the path running with her. He pulled a small buck knife from its belt clip and unfolded it while pushing Lisa ever faster up the trail.

The path rounded some trees and then forked. They couldn’t see the bear at the moment but they could hear it grunting up the path just behind them. James thought quickly. He pushed his sister in the direction of the descending fork. “RUN, that way!” he demanded pointing down the barely visible path. I’ll distract it up this way. It can’t run as fast up hill following me—GO!”

Lisa could hear the animal closing in. She wanted to argue but if James had a plan, it would probably work. She nodded and then darted as quickly as she could down the other path.

Adrenaline pumped through James’ veins as he watched Lisa vanish into the woods down the side trail while he’d stood in plain view of the big animal lumbering up the main path. His plan worked. It began following him instead of her. But the massive bear was a lot faster running up hill than James had thought. It was closing the distance between them!

He had maybe one chance. There was still food in his daypack. Still sprinting, he slipped the pack from his shoulders and zipped opened the top of it. He turned it upside down and

dropped it, letting its contents spill out on the path. He didn't look back.

After a few minutes he was nearing the summit of the mountain ridge again. He stopped to rest breathing heavily. If the bear was still following him it was going have one very tired dinner. He listened intently, his heart still pounding heavily in his ears, but there was no sound or sign of the huge bear.

* * * * *

After several minutes of running, Lisa's own adrenaline had run its course and she slowed and then stopped to rest cautiously, catching her breath and listening for any sound of the pursuing bear.

It was quiet in the forest all around her.

The trail she'd run down had forked several times heading down the mountain and now it had literally vanished into thick fern and underbrush on the steep hillside. She thought about calling out for James, but that might attract the bear as well. She frowned to herself and kept quiet as she attempted now to backtrack herself to the mountain trail she'd just run from.

* * * * *

A solid hour passed before James chanced descending the path again. He wanted to give the bear time to finish off their lunch and hopefully wander off.

Descending the path once again, James rounded the corner where he'd dropped his daypack. Litter from the pack was everywhere all over the trail and the light nylon of the daypack had been shredded like it was paper. The food was gone. James

collected the litter and attempted to contain it within what remained of the knapsack.

He wondered if Lisa was alright and where she was right now. 'God, please let her be alright,' he prayed silently to himself.

* * * * *

Lisa pulled her iPhone from the side pocket of her hiking shorts and looked at the signal strength. It still showed the 'no signal' icon. Without a connection even the satellite map would be useless. It was now official. She was completely lost.

Several hours had passed since the encounter with the huge bear and despite her best efforts to retrace her steps back up the steep mountainside to the main path, every trail she seemed to encounter just disappeared into more thick underbrush.

The part of the mountain she now found herself on had become steep and rugged. She lifted her hand to look once again at the sun through the tall thick pines. It was getting very low now. She knew James would be looking for—

Suddenly, without warning Lisa's footing slipped. Her legs gave out and she tumbled several yards down the mountainside. Before she was able to stop sliding her foot began complaining—loudly. She finally brought herself to a quick stop on the steep hill, but the sharp throb that now shot through her ankle was more pain than she had felt in a very long time. The stabbing ache was making her eyes well. She lifted her leg with her hands behind her knee, biting her lip, and just let her throbbing foot complain. After several minutes the initial shock of the injury was over but her ankle now hurt like hell.

"OHhh!" she fought back tears trying to ignore the throbbing. "Good job, Lisa," she muttered to herself through

the pain. Could her bad luck get any worse? Then it struck her that it probably could get worse. That bear might still be able to track her down to eat her. That ill thought motivated Lisa to pick herself up and begin hobbling painfully down the hillside looking for less steep ground.

* * * * *

The sun had long set behind the mountain. James had a sizable bonfire going in a small campsite clearing next to the trail that lit up the area nicely. He hoped the firelight could be seen by his sister, wherever she was. But as the dusk drew darker, the only thing his campfire attracted were the small posse of the uniformed rangers who had already been out looking for Lisa. He greeted them again. They told him what he already knew was coming. They wouldn't be able to search for his sister in the dark. They'd organize a morning search party at first light. The rangers helped James extinguish the fire. He followed them off the mountain calling out for Lisa, wishing he'd never even gotten out of bed this morning.

2

Through the pine needles of the low branches that had been her shelter, Lisa could barely make out the first light of dawn. Most of the pine straw she'd covered herself with had fallen away during the night but it still covered her bare legs. Her foot felt a little better but it continued to ache terribly.

The morning air was still and cold. Lisa pulled her solid red flannel shirt tighter around herself, but the material wasn't very thick and even it felt cold around her skin.

She pulled out her phone and turned it on—or at least she tried to. It didn't even flicker to the dead battery screen. She frowned and put it away. Lisa waited under the tree until she could see more light. Her stomach growled from a lack of food from the night before. She found the other half of her granola bar that had been last night's dinner and finished it.

Lisa emerged cold and stiff from beneath her tree into the cool forest air, brushing the dust and pine needles from her clothes. Now fully daylight, the morning air felt crisp against the bare skin of her legs. She pulled again at her flannel shirt for some warmth. In the distance she thought she could hear water breaking in the stillness. That was good. A stream meant civilization—eventually.

Hobbling down a heavily treed hillside, all Lisa could do was listen for the sound of flowing water. She could hear it much more clearly now, but had no idea where it was. She was glad when the hillside eventually began to slope more gently. Her ankle was not happy about the angle of the mountainside and it complained less when she was finally able to begin walking on more level ground.

Although the slope of the mountain had grown flatter now, it was still heavily treed within the ominous rugged terrain. Lisa had descended into a kind of canyon where rocky cliffs jettied upward on the far side.

She could see the stream now. It was a lot bigger than she'd imagined, filled with small to huge smooth boulders and fast rushing water. It was not the friendliest stream she'd ever seen but it had large pools of still water here and there. If this had been spring, she imagined that most of the smooth boulders would be covered in melting snow runoff. Now summer, most of the winter runoff was gone and though sizable, the stream was easily crossable as she climbed, hobbled and hopped from stepping stone to rock to boulder.

It was on one of these huge boulders that Lisa now lay in the warming morning sun. Although the rock itself was still cold, the sun warmed her skin quickly.

'This would be a good spot to be if a search helicopter flew overhead,' she thought. 'But would there even be a search helicopter?' she then wondered. She'd never been lost but had heard news reports of search and rescue parties using them.

Then she wondered if she'd have to *pay* for the rescue effort? She hoped not.

Eventually the sun warmed her boulder and she had to unbutton her flannel shirt to expose the navy tank she wore beneath it. She hoped Mom and Dad, and James were not worrying too much. She was sure her parents would have half the denomination praying for her safety if not the whole church out searching for her by now.

Lisa sat up on her boulder and stared worriedly into the deep pool that had been formed by the many huge boulders like the one she was sitting on. The water was absolutely crystal clear and looked deep.

Her worried thoughts were abruptly sidetracked when she noticed several parallel lines at the bottom of the pool. She squinted her eyes a bit, trying to figure out what would cause the odd symmetry. Through the slow-churning surface of the pool she eventually focused on a metal grate nestled between two of the larger boulders at the bottom of the pool.

'Huh?' her mind mulled. She was in the middle of nowhere. But this was clearly a sign of civilization! Her mood immediately lifted. Obviously, she was not as lost as she had thought. The grate had to cover some kind of pipe maybe that fed a lot of water to somewhere. All she needed to do was find where it led.

Lisa jumped up nursing her aching foot. It seemed to her that the grate's pipe ran underground along the opposite shore perhaps? She wasn't sure. If the pipe was buried, she'd never really know where it led, but it had to lead somewhere.

On the far shore of the stream she walked through the dense drooping branches of pines and underbrush. Through the trees she could tell that the canyon had begun to narrow and the water of the stream had grown much faster than it had been just a mile or so back. The trees were slowly being replaced by more rocky terrain and the water had now grown

savage moving through them. The roar of the water had replaced any sound of the forest around her.

As she cleared what she thought would be her last rock before the stream had completely taken over the canyon, she saw what looked like the symmetry of civilization again. Through the dense trees she could barely make out what looked like the edges of a structure. A part of something concrete jettied out slightly from the hillside and over the water. It was wholly covered by trees and vines and tucked seemingly clandestinely into the side of the canyon. Lisa hobbled her way across the rock she was on and moved through undisturbed thick forest fern and shrubs toward the structure. It was definitely some kind of building with an immense concrete roof that merged seamlessly with the treed hillside. Beneath the thick, massive roof was an obvious concrete building of some kind, heavily covered by an overgrowth of greenery and the surrounding pines and boulders. Whatever it was, it blended very well into the hillside.

Lisa approached the odd, bunker-looking structure with curiosity. Was it part of an old abandoned dam, the entrance of an old mine or something else? As she approached, she could see a kind of concrete terrace that jettied out a little over the water below. The terrace started at the sides and then wrapped around to the front. She stepped onto the walkway and carefully looked around the corner. While the side of the building was overgrown and looked unkempt, the walkway over the unruly stream had been completely cleared of any vines, leaves and undergrowth.

Filtered morning sunlight streamed through the dense trees from above and onto the concrete deck. Rather than being the ominous sterile-looking structure that it was from the side, the front of it was very different. The entire front side was a thick glass wall set a few feet back from the concrete roofline. The terrace appeared to be a well-kept patio complete with nice

chairs and a table. She peered into the glass from the corner of the building. The inside looked like a house. And a well-to-do one at that. There were pieces of fine furniture, a couch and chairs, even a grand piano.

Lisa forgot the worry of being lost as her feelings turned to deep curiosity. 'Who would be living all the way up here? And with such elegance?' She cautiously made her way onto the terrace and then to what looked like a pair of front doors. The doors were just large sections of the heavy glass wall, but the one she tried slid almost effortlessly open. Once inside she closed the door quickly and quietly. With the large heavy door closed, the roar and sound of the water below outside was now just ambient noise that barely penetrated the soothing warmth of the home's grand interior.

The inside of the home had been more than well decorated; it was like looking at something out of a *Veranda* magazine. The space was huge, warm, elegantly modern, with clean lines and fine art. Although large, with tall ceilings, the home felt cozy with indoor greenery and soft touches of comfort. The polished and reflective large-tile floor reminded her of some of the fine hotels she been in while on modeling trips.

The whole home was a kind of open area, with the massive roof resting on four colossal smooth stone columns that supported what must be the enormous weight of the hillside above. The pillars extended up into what looked like a fine wood drop ceiling with finished square and rounded trays that marked the different sections of the hugely open space. Modern recessed spotlights spread a nice warm glow throughout the whole home.

A grand central spiral staircase led down to another level of the home. The columns separated the large open space into distinct areas with an open kitchen set back against the middle of the far back wall. Only the front of the home had glass that one could see outside. Oddly, the windows seemed to extend

all around the sides of the home as well. But the side windows were all covered with the concrete façade on the outside. Lisa struggled with why someone would put windows around concrete that no one could actually see out of, but maybe the concrete had been added later to keep the hillside from coming inside. It made some sense.

Lisa wandered into the home a bit more. She could hear water running, a shower maybe, from one of the corners of the home.

Although lost, she wasn't about to just barge into someone's home, especially one so remote. She didn't know who lived here. Someone who obviously valued his or her privacy. Still, she was completely lost and out of options.

"Hello?" she called out nervously. "Hello, does anyone live here? Hello?"

She walked around one of the massive central pillars to stand just outside of what was obviously a bedroom area. A large king bed with plush bedding was unmade; the room looked well lived in.

She heard the shower cut off. A moment later Lisa watched as a tall and very well built man with broad, muscular shoulders, large arms and powerful-looking thighs emerged from behind a granite-tiled shower wall. His hair wetly tossed, he was still drying his face with a short plush towel that draped from his hands and only barely covered his front.

"Hello?" she called, feeling really embarrassed for catching someone just coming out of the shower.

He quickly brought the towel down from his face revealing a very startled young man, a look of deep surprise all over his face. It was obvious he'd not heard any of Lisa's previous 'hello's'. The handsome stranger quickly turned away giving Lisa a quick view of his smoothly rounded backside, thick thighs and muscular back, while he dashed the towel around

himself. Although the short towel was a bit small for a wrap-around, he managed to tuck it around himself.

With his short towel now covering everything below his waist, he turned back around to look at her. Lisa couldn't help but be impressed by his chiseled build. She'd seen some nice looking guys on her beach shoots, but this guy bested all of those with his broad, well-defined pecs and rippled abs. She had to deliberately tear her eyes away from the rest of him to look at his face. Despite his towel-dried wet hair, the face of the twenty-something guy appeared just as handsome as the rest of him.

His startled look faded as he studied her curiously for several moments.

Then he said, "Are— are you lost?"

3

Lisa breathed a sigh of relief, "Yes!"
He nodded now with a look of understanding. "You're that girl everyone's been searching for since last night."
Lisa nodded. "I got chased by a bear and separated from my brother and couldn't find my way back to him!"

"Wow. You slept outside all night? Are you alright?" he asked, real concern rising in his voice.

Lisa nodded. "I'm fine. Well, except for my ankle. I'm, I'm pretty sure I sprained it," she favored it taking a hobbled step. It still really hurt.

"You sprained your ankle?" he asked, now walking toward her. "Here, you need to sit down."

He lifted her arm around his shoulder and helped her into the kitchen. His freshly showered skin was warm to her touch and the muscles of his broad shoulders felt like nothing Lisa

had ever touched before. He effortlessly helped her to one of the kitchen's barstools.

"So, your name is Lisa?" he asked making his way around the kitchen's bar and to a mug rack that had several types of colored mugs.

She nodded. "Lisa Kyle. I suppose I'm all over the news by now."

He nodded, "Yea, pretty much. My name's Kent."

"Pleased to meet you, Kent," she smiled. Lisa couldn't help but notice how well the partially wet towel hugged his waist and barely covered his handsomely rounded ass. She kicked herself for having such thoughts when this was clearly not the time or the place. Still ...

"Let me get you something hot; coffee, tea, cocoa?"

"I usually do tea, but I think I could really use a cup of coffee right now."

"Anything in it?"

"Loaded with cream and sugar, please."

"No problem," he smiled at her with an amazing set of dimples.

Lisa watched as Kent brewed her some coffee from a *Keurig* all the while still wrapped in his all too small damp towel. Kent's back and shoulders were a near mesmerizing set of flexing muscles as he worked. She couldn't help staring. She'd met a lot of other buff guys before, but there seemed to be an almost immediate chemistry with her and her towel-wrapped host. Tearing her gaze from his towel, again, she had to keep reminding herself that she was lost.

"There you are," he said, sitting the cup in front of her along with a nice chrome spin-tray of various coffee flavorings.

"Thank you," she said gratefully, fixing up her cup and then taking a long hot sip from it. It felt wonderfully warm going down.

“Kent, your place here is, really amazing,” she offered. “A nice house all the way up here? It’s incredible.”

He nodded. “Thanks, um; listen, Lisa; I don’t get many visitors up here. Actually, I don’t get *any* visitors up here. I apologize for being so startled.”

“It’s alright. I can see; you like your privacy.”

“Well, it’s not by choice, I assure you.”

“I’m sorry?” she responded, sipping more of the hot coffee with obvious enjoyment.

“Let me get dressed and we can talk over breakfast. You must be starving.”

“Famished,” she offered.

“I’ll only be a minute or two. Will you be alright?”

“Uh-huh,” she nodded.

Kent smiled his dimples at her once again and she watched him, and his towel, walk muscularly around the big pillar and disappear into the bedroom.

Lisa must have been very thirsty; she was just getting to the bottom of her cup when Kent came out into the kitchen. He’d dried and styled his hair, dressed in very short khaki hiking shorts and a white collarless stretch shirt that failed to hide even the smallest detail of his chiseled physique. His clothes were a bit over-the-top in emphasizing his fabulous body, but, Lisa wasn’t going to be judgmental—Kent had a marvelous build. Besides, she’d dressed to emphasize her own curves on more occasions than she could count. If she were a guy with Kent’s body, she had to admit, she’d do the same. Kent had said he didn’t get any visitors up here. Maybe he was trying to impress her? If he was, he’d succeeded.

Aside from Kent’s body, that little detail of never getting any visitors had really piqued her curiosity. ‘It’s not by choice ...’ she replayed in her mind. What had he meant by that? His

words had been rolling around in her thoughts ever since he'd left the kitchen to get dressed. Now that Kent was back, maybe she could get the 411 on that comment and his odd luxury home tucked way up here in the mountains.

"Lisa, should we have a look at your ankle?" he asked, an elastic bandage box in his hand.

"Probably. Don't tell me you're a doctor?"

"No, but I've treated a few sprains. They're not fun."

'Wow,' Lisa mused silently to herself, 'Kent is certainly being thoughtful.' She watched as he carefully unlaced her hiking boot far enough that it practically fell off her foot by itself. He carefully rolled back her thick wool-cotton hiking sock to reveal a slightly swollen and ugly bruised ankle.

"Ooh," Lisa cringed at the sight of black and blue on her own foot. "How bad is it?"

"Move it around as best you can for me."

Lisa moved her foot in several directions, some of which were really painful. "Ow!" she grimaced when the movement obviously went to far. "It looks bad."

"Actually, you still have good movement. I don't think you tore anything too badly. You made it all the way here. We can put the wrap on it if you like," he said nodding toward the box on the counter.

"It feels better just to have my boot off of it."

"Okay, just let me know and I'll wrap it for you," he offered. Kent carefully rolled her sock back onto her foot to keep it warm, then stood up and gave her a smile. "What would you like for breakfast?"

'You,' she smirked jokingly to herself as she watched Kent walk into the kitchen. At least the situation had not dampened her mirth. Kent stood on the other side of the counter. In his white stretch shirt he looked like a short-order cook waiting to take her order.

"I'm not picky, Kent, but I am a vegetarian."

"Really? I guess that makes two of us then," he revealed, a look of intrigue crossing his face. "So, how about some blueberry Greek yogurt and granola? I also make pretty awesome omelets, if I do say so myself."

"Honestly, Kent, right now, anything you have would be wonderful."

"All of the above then, coming right up," he smiled.

Lisa watched him pull a carton of eggs and a branded blueberry yogurt container from the large built-in refrigerator, along with a box of cereal from a cabinet.

"Kent," she began, "if you don't get visitors how do you keep yogurt and eggs in your refrigerator? Come to think of it, how do you get electricity all the way up here?"

"I'm totally off the grid. I think the house is hydro-powered, from the stream somehow."

"I saw a pipe grate in one of the pools upstream. It's what led me here actually."

"Really? You saw that? I've wondered about that too. I thought it was pretty well concealed though. I guess it isn't," he mused, stirring and then spooning some of the light blue yogurt into a small serving bowl and then handing it to Lisa.

"So where do you get fresh yogurt?"

"I sort of have it delivered."

"How? There's no way to get up here? Not very easily anyway," she said taking a bite. It tasted wonderful.

Kent just smiled at her and poured some granola into another bowl.

"I can't wait to contact my folks and tell them I'm alright."

Kent put down the cereal box. Lisa saw the handsome features of his face suddenly fall.

"Lisa," he began, his tone becoming quite a bit more serious. "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

Lisa blinked at him. "Oh, don't tell me you don't have a phone?"

"No, I have a phone. A good one; it works, even way up here."

"So what's the bad news?"

Kent took a very visible breath. "You can't call your folks."

Lisa blinked at him again. What he said seemed to stun her momentarily. "I'm sorry? I can't call my folks?"

Kent shook his head.

"Ah, why not?" she asked carefully, a sudden odd chill crawling over her skin. She set her yogurt spoon down in the bowl.

Kent frowned, pressing his lips together. "Lisa, you can't leave."

A sudden wave of horror flooded over her. Unwelcomed thoughts began washing through her mind. What was Kent saying!? Was he holding her prisoner here? She'd survived the mountainous Cascade wilderness with its wild cats and grizzly bears only to be undone by a mountain man holed up in some remote chalet?!

Kent must have seen the look on her face because he backed away to the far kitchen counter, like he was giving her some space.

A noticeable nervousness entered Lisa's voice. "W—what do you mean I—I can't leave?" her last words quivering. "Are you telling me I'm some kind of prisoner here?"

"No, no," he began shaking his head emphatically, "you're *not* a prisoner, Lisa. You—you just can't leave."

There was an earnest sincerity in Kent's voice; it was odd, almost pleading. It didn't make any sense. She tried to process in her mind what she was hearing with the kind and unthreatening demeanor of the man who stood before her. Lisa's thoughts took another sudden turn; her impulsive fear began to fade into curiosity.

"I'm not a prisoner?"

"No," Kent assured her.

"But I can't leave," she reiterated curiously.

"Right," he nodded.

"What if I left anyway?"

Kent looked her in the eye. "Then I'm a dead man."

4

Kent! Are you serious?! This is a joke, right!? A joke?"

"It's no joke, Lisa," the look on Kent's face and his tone were completely serious. "You've somehow managed to wander into a lot more than just a girl getting herself lost in the woods."

Lisa thought about what Kent was saying. She looked around at the house and then back at him, at how unthreatening he was attempting to appear despite his intimidating body. If Kent had wanted to do her harm he could have done so at any moment and not been challenged at all by Lisa.

"Kent, who are you? What is this place?" she asked, now very curious, her thoughts stumbling over themselves.

Kent sighed. "You're in a safe house, Lisa. A maximum security safe house."

‘Safe house,’ she mouthed. Of course! It made sense now. The government set up safe houses for people who were in witness protection programs; to keep them safe from really bad criminals who wanted to kill them before they could testify during their trials. They were very secret and the people in them high-value witnesses. And now Lisa had lost her way and stumbled right into the middle of what was obviously a super-secret one, very well hidden deep within the Cascades. Evidently the government *really* wanted to keep Kent out of the reach of somebody—probably from somebody who *really* wanted him out of the way.

Kent could see the lights going on in Lisa’s head, the looks flashing across her face. He moved back to the counter opposite her and pushed aside the box of granola. He folded his hands together on the cool granite and looked at her. She was nodding her sudden understanding.

“Lisa,” Kent began, “there are only three people on planet Earth right now who know where I am; the guy who delivers my supplies; me, and now you. And not even the supply guy knows my name, what I look like, or even who I am.”

Kent could see that Lisa’s thoughts were already conflicted. ‘She’s smart,’ he thought to himself. She was already way ahead in where this conversation was going. That was good.

“I can’t even call my folks,” she offered, still deep in thought.

“Because they’ll want to know where you are. They’ll ask you how you were able to call them in an area where no cell towers exist,” Kent finished.

“And if I just leave and show up perfectly fine by some road somewhere it will raise questions I won’t be able to answer,” she added.

Kent nodded. “They’ll ask how you were able to survive for days and days and then walk out of these mountains with

a sprained ankle. How did this young woman live like a mountaineer off the land for weeks?" he asked rhetorically.

Lisa looked blankly past him, thinking. "But—Kent," she began, worry suddenly entering her voice, "in a few days, if they don't find me—they'll abandon the search. They'll think I died up here somewhere," her voice quivered. "My family will be devastated! I can't do that to them!"

Kent frowned deeply, sadly, nodding remorsefully. He could see her eyes beginning to mist as unwelcomed thoughts and feelings of despair rose and moved through her. He felt really sorry for her and then, as beautiful as she was, wished he'd never laid eyes on her.

"Kent, who are you?!" she asked point blank, her eyes now beginning to well.

"I can't tell you that, Lisa," a large lump growing in his throat. "The less you know the safer you'll be."

"Kent, seriously!" Lisa suddenly lost it.

The emotion he knew was coming finally spilled out from her as deep sadness washed over her face.

"You tell me I can't leave!" she bawled. "Tell me I can't go home to see my family! Make them think I'm dead!? And then you won't tell me why or even who you are!? I'm already in this deeper than I know," she cried, thinking of her parents and of James and the terrible loss they would feel.

Kent let his head fall between his shoulders. He felt her pain. He knew exactly her anguish. When he raised his head to look at her his own eyes had begun to more than just mist.

"You!" she sniffed looking at him. "Why are you crying? You're not the one whose parents and whole family are going to think you're dead—"

Lisa stopped short. Her mouth suddenly fell open.

"Oh my gosh! Kent! Don't tell me no one knows—?"

He pursed his lips together, shaking his head, while failing to hold back his own watering eyes. "My family thinks I'm dead too, Lisa."

Lisa left her chair and moved hobbling to where Kent was. He might have been a perfect stranger but she wrapped her arms around him anyway. It was just the kind of person she was. Kent couldn't help himself. He held Lisa gently, sharing her pain and tears with his own.

5

THE LIFE BLOOD OF GOD SHALL MOVE UNSEEN DRAWING
TOGETHER THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF MEN

—THE BOOKS OF GOD

T heir embrace was tearful and very long; two strangers sharing the same pain. The weight of Lisa's new 'imprisonment' had landed hard on her while Kent steadied her in his arms. He was a little surprised by his own tears, tears that had suddenly tickled out while holding this unexpected and amazingly beautiful girl.

But what intrigued Kent the most was the duration of their embrace. Here was this beautiful young woman, a stranger he'd never seen before in his life, yet, he didn't want to let her go, ever. He waited for her to pull away even after their tears had ended, but she just continued holding on to him. It was obvious that there was some kind of attraction between them.

But he'd never felt anything like this with anyone before. The feeling was odd, powerful.

"Lisa?" he began, his voice low and quiet, still holding her close. "Do you—feel something? I mean, I think I could stand here all day holding you."

"It's not just me then?" she admitted, looking at him. "I thought it was just me being emotional."

"Is that what this is? Just the emotion of the situation?"

"I guess," she sighed, still not pulling away.

The two of them continued to hold each other warmly for many long minutes until Lisa's ankle complained. Kent warmly pulled away and deftly lifted Lisa from the floor, carrying her the short distance back to her chair on the other side of the breakfast bar. Their fingers continued to touch each other's arms until Kent moved away back to the other side of the counter. It was like they didn't want to let go of touching each other.

"This is—" Kent began, "odd."

Lisa nodded. "Yea."

"So I'm not just imagining this? I mean, I really didn't want to let go of your hand a moment ago."

"I didn't want you to," she admitted.

"I feel like I've been drugged or something."

"Kent, it's obviously the situation we're in. This is serious. You have people who want you dead and now I'm caught in the middle of it. This is all very emotional, for the both of us."

Kent nodded, still not sure if Lisa was altogether right about how he was feeling.

Breakfast was mostly quiet as they ate together, both deep in thought about each other and what to do about Lisa's sudden and unexpected discovery of Kent's safe house.

“Kent,” Lisa broke the silence softly, “thank you for breakfast.”

He offered her a smile. “My pleasure,” he said quietly.

“Would it be okay if I used your shower? I’m really feeling grungy. I think the hot water might help me relax, maybe give some time to relax and think about what I’m doing.”

“Of course,” he encouraged. “There’s also a nice tub in there as well. You’re more than welcome to use either. There aren’t any doors in the house, so, I’ll just be over here in the study until you’re done,” he motioned toward the back of the home that was opposite the master suite and bath. “You can borrow some of my clothes if you like until we can clean yours.”

Kent watched Lisa limp slowly around the massive pillar and into the master suite. He began cleaning up their breakfast dishes until he heard the water running in the tub. He relaxed in a favorite chair in the study and surfed one of the local media sites looking for updates on the missing hiker. Hundreds of people from a local church were now out looking for her. Kent hoped none of them would be unlucky enough to also get lost or lucky enough to find his concealed home here in the mountains like Lisa had accidentally done. He’d been told that the home had been here for decades and survived unnoticed after dozens of searches, hunters and even wildfires. No one had ever found it.

But somehow, Lisa had. That fact, more than anything, really triggered Kent’s curiosity. God, the Universe, Karma or something had destined Lisa, of all people, to find him. Sure, he had been terribly lonely for months on end now. There were always video games to play and movies and television shows to watch; but there had been no one to actually talk to. Kent was forbidden from venturing too far out from the house. To fill his spare time he took advantage of the universal gym in the basement of the home. After months and months of

following a workout regime he'd bulked up well. He had always been a kind of skinny guy—but his family would be proud, if they even recognized him now.

Mostly, Kent felt really sorry for Lisa, because she was now trapped in the same tangled web that had ensnared him. However, he couldn't help but feel a sense of wonder that she was even here. It made no sense.

And their odd attraction. Where was *that* coming from? Maybe Lisa was right; cooped in the mountains for as long as he'd been and the emotion of the situation was probably at the root of that. Still, the attraction seemed a little more than just emotion. He wasn't exactly an overly emotional kind of guy. There was something visceral here; something ...

"Kent?" he heard Lisa call his name. He left the chair and wandered into the master suite. Lisa's clothes were sitting neatly piled next to the tiled entrance of the bathroom.

"Are you okay?" he asked keeping his eyes away from the bathroom area.

"I'm fine, but could you please get me a glass of water?"

He smiled at the request and walked in to see Lisa resting in a tub full of bubbles. Her hair was wet and pulled back. Even with wet hair Lisa was unusually beautiful. He went to the bedroom cooler and took out a small blue bottle of *Saratoga*. He uncapped the chilled bottle and walked it to her.

"Is this okay? I can get you a glass."

"Is that water?" she asked.

"Uh-huh," he nodded with a smile.

Lisa took the bottle and drew a long drink from it. "I guess I'm still dehydrated from being lost."

Kent sat down on the edge of the tub. Lisa looked at him curiously. She'd only wanted some water but it looked like Kent had parked for some conversation. She didn't mind. She had more than enough bubbles.

“Lisa,” Kent began, looking at her with a kind of inquisitive expression, “why are you here?”

The question was odd, but salient at the same time.

“That’s a really good question. You tell me?”

“I don’t know, that’s why I asked,” he mused.

“I think I was sort of asking the same question to myself a moment ago. Why is this happening to me?”

He nodded. “My life was shattered because of something someone else did. Your life is now shattered because of me.”

Lisa shook her head. “I don’t think so, Kent. It’s not your fault you’re here. If I’m stuck here, it’s because of the same person or persons who put you here. Besides, I wouldn’t exactly call living up here ‘shattered,’” she motioned looking around at the open luxury bathroom and bedroom beyond. “More like, inconvenienced.”

“Well, you’re a bigger optimist than I am then.”

“Optimist?,” she scoffed. “You don’t know me. Optimist isn’t exactly the title I’d choose for myself. Maybe God put you here for a reason and the same for me.”

“I don’t know. I’m not exactly on speaking terms with God at the moment,” Kent admitted.

“That would be a lot of us,” she assured.

Kent thought about Lisa’s words for a long moment, then nodded.

“Lisa, I know you don’t want to be here, so this may sound really selfish, but, I’m glad you’re here.”

“Kent,” she lifted her hand out of the bubbles to rest it on his. “I have to admit, this would not be my first choice for starting out life after college, but I can tell you this, if I had been in your shoes first, I know I’d be saying the same thing to you.”

He smiled and squeezed her bubble-soaked hand. The touch of Lisa’s warm hand in his own delivered something beyond just the sensation. This wasn’t just his imagination. There was something more than just the emotion of their

situation there. He may not know what that something was, but whatever or whoever Lisa was, it was almost electric between them. He didn't bring it up.

Kent scooped up a finger-full of the suds and tipped them onto her nose in a playful gesture. "I'll put your clothes in the wash."

* * * * *

The home had most of the amenities of the modern world. Lisa found a blow-drier but no hot rollers or even a straightening iron. Obviously, Kent didn't need or use them. Still, this was hardly roughing it. She felt a little odd rummaging around Kent's things looking for something to wear. Either Kent had an eclectic sense of fashion, or this house had been used by several people over the years and whoever ran the safe house had kept some of their things around. She figured it was probably the latter.

Unfortunately, it seemed none of the previous occupants had been women. Most of the newer clothing was Kent-sized; not exactly fitting for her model figure. Lisa managed to make do with some of his Lycra boxer trunks, tan khaki hiking shorts held up with a belt, and a black polo that hung loosely on her shoulders. She felt the darker color might better hide her chest's current bralessness.

Lisa found Kent in the study playing a game on an iPad. He put down the tablet and stood up when she walked in.

"Wow," he began obviously impressed, "my stuff looks even nicer on you."

Lisa found a smile; glad that someone was happy with her. She wasn't very happy with herself at the moment.

"How is your foot doing?"

"Better. It feels better the longer I'm off of it."

"You should let me wrap it for you."

Lisa nodded and took a seat on the study's deep couch as Kent fetched the bandage from the kitchen. She rested her leg on his as he very carefully began wrapping her foot.

"So how long have you been up here?" she asked. She watched as a frown drift across his lips.

"You want to know how long you're going to be stuck here," he ventured.

"I do."

"Twenty-two months and five days."

"Almost two years? Is that normal?"

"No. They said it would be for eight or nine months at the most."

"Why has it been so long?"

"Because the other side is very dangerous."

"Who's this 'other side' and why do they want you dead?"

Kent stopped wrapping for a moment. "Lisa, the less you know about me the safer you'll be."

"Kent, do you really think the people on this 'other side', as you call them, are going to think twice about letting me live if they find us? Honestly? They're not going to waste time trying to figure out what I know or don't know. I'll be just as dead as you."

Kent saw the seriousness in her face and went back to wrapping.

"I have something they want."

"Maybe you should start from the beginning."

Kent looked at her and nodded.

"I was like you a few years ago, fresh out of college. I had a computer science degree with a minor in politics. A real geek."

Lisa looked at the muscular guy carefully wrapping her foot. He hardly looked like the 'geek' or 'poli-sci' type.

"I had some friends of the family in high places in D.C. So when I graduated I got a really nice job in a small datacenter. I

basically ran secure mail servers for a number of government agencies.”

Lisa’s eyes grew wider with interest.

“So one day, I’m minding my own business when my boss, Chuck, comes in with this flash drive. He puts it in my hand and then says, ‘Kent, hold onto this for me and don’t let anyone know I gave this to you.’ He then walks out without another word. About a week goes by and then Chuck doesn’t show up for work. Then a bunch of Secret Service show up and everyone in the center gets the third degree, asking us what we knew about Chuck. I played dumb. After a couple of days they all left, but I never saw Chuck again.”

“Did they take him away somewhere?”

“I don’t know.”

“What did you do with the drive?”

“I hid it; for safe keeping.”

Kent finished wrapping her ankle. The bandage felt good as she continued to rest her legs over Kent’s.

“So they must have found out about the drive somehow and then came after you?”

“Yea. Somehow they found out about it, but not from me. They asked about it. Then other people around the office started disappearing. First my manager, Jack, just leaves mysteriously. They said he got a new job but his cell number no longer worked. Then Kirsten got into a really bad hit-and-run accident. She didn’t make it. Things were adding up too quickly, so I flew out to see our friend of the family who is, or was I should say, a judge in D.C. Now he does lobbying.”

“Kent your family seems really politically connected.”

He nodded.

“I told him what had happened and what was happening to my coworkers. He said he’d look into it.”

“Did he?”

“Oh, he looked into it alright. That same afternoon I was in the executive lounge at the airport to catch my flight home when this cute airline agent approaches me and asks if she can speak to me privately for a moment. I said sure. She leads me to a private room and introduces me to some guy I’ve never seen before. Then she just leaves.”

“Who’s the guy?”

“He doesn’t tell me his name. But he starts talking and I suddenly realize that he knows more about me than I think my parents do.” Kent looked intently at Lisa. “He says I have two choices. I can go back to the lounge and be dead within a few days or I can enter a WITSEC Program—like, right now. They’ll protect me while they figure out what to do with the data that’s on the flash drive I have. He then says, ‘You have sixty seconds to make your decision.’”

“Oh my gosh, Kent!”

“That wasn’t really the hard part, Lisa. It didn’t take me five seconds to tell him I was in. I’d already seen what they did to Kirsten. There was no reason she shouldn’t have been able to leave the hospital. I talked to her in her room. She was bruised and cut-up but nowhere near critical. Kirsten never left the hospital. They made it look like the accident killed her.”

Lisa shook her head in disbelief that someone could be so evil. “So what did they do with you?”

“It was weird, Lisa. I went into a security room with Mr. No-name. He took all my stuff, my ID’s, cards, wallet, laptop, even the clothes I was wearing, everything. I was given different clothes and a really good disguise. Then I watched on this video surveillance monitor as some *other* guy with my stuff, my clothes and my same exact build and haircut is coming out of the hall I had been led into.”

“A body double?”

“Yea, and all of it just that fast.”

“Wow. So where did they take you?”

“They dressed me like one of the ground crew and told me to hitch a ride with some guy named Juan. He’d be waiting for me in the employee parking lot. That was last time I ever saw Mr. No-Name. The next thing I knew, I was on a private jet leaving the country for Canada, then a few more flights on small planes, and then I ride a small pontoon boat with a bunch of Navy Seals into a military base in Seattle and then a stealth helicopter that makes almost no noise drops me off here. That was almost two years ago.”

“So how did they fake your death?” she asked.

“They didn’t,” he offered flatly.

“What do you mean they didn’t? You told me that your family thinks you’re dead.”

“I mean they didn’t have to fake it. That flight out of Washington D.C., Lisa, never made it to Dallas, let alone Seattle.”

A cold chill fell all around Lisa. Her mouth fell open. “The plane crashed!?”

“It did. With two-hundred forty-six people on-board, including my double. There were no survivors. The FAA ruled the official cause of the ‘accident’ as ‘mechanical failure’, but it may as well have been gremlins. It was all covered up.”

Lisa was shaking her head in disbelief at the thought of what he’d just told her. She knew of the crash he had been describing. It had been all over the news.

“Kent what kind of people are after you?!”

“Evil people, Lisa. The kind who don’t blink an eye at murdering two-hundred and fifty people to tie up one loose end.”

“Whatever is on that drive must be pretty damning,” Lisa was very curious herself now.

“It is, Lisa,” Kent assured. “It has names, dates, emails, and transaction details tracking the movement of well over a billion dollars.”

“A billion is a lot of money, Kent. No wonder they want you and anyone else out of the way. So do you know who these people are?”

Kent nodded. “Oh yea. Most of them. They’re embedded within the highest levels of our own government, Lisa; and they have unlimited resources.” He paused not sure if he should say any more. Maybe he’d said too much already. But she was right, if they found her with him, she’d be just as dead. Kent looked at her, “Lisa, this data—leads all the way to the White House.”

6

THEN SHALL THE SEVEN LORDS RAISE UP A SERVANT OF
EVIL FROM THE SONS OF MEN AND THEY SHALL
CROWN HIM RULER

—THE BOOKS OF GOD

Nice swing! Remember to follow-through all the way just like I showed you.”
“Damn! That’s one for the record books, I’d say,” the distinguished man watched in satisfaction as the ball bounced and then rolled precisely onto the green.

Another man, dressed in a coat and tie, approached the two golfers, obviously out of place on the warm, sunny course. “I’m sorry to interrupt, Mr. President. Can we speak privately for a moment?”

“Sam, have you met my Chief of Staff, Mr. Harlan?” the President asked.

“Not yet. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Harlan.”

Harlan smiled and shook the man’s hand. He had a lot more on his mind right now.

“Give us a minute, Sam,” the President dismissed his instructor.

“Sure, Mr. President.” Sam bagged his club and then began walking toward the clubhouse.

“This better be important, Harlan; I just had the best shot of my life a moment ago. I don’t want to lose my groove.”

When Sam was well out of earshot a worried look took over Harlan’s face. “Hydra’s back.”

The president gave him a look of disgust. “I thought you people said you killed it.”

“We did; well, I mean, we thought we did.”

“Maybe you should name your projects more carefully next time. The irony’s not funny, Harlan.”

He nodded.

“What do we know? Where’s the loose end?”

“We don’t know yet. They want to sell us the information.”

“So buy it.”

“It’s expensive.”

“Harlan,” the president looked at him with another look of disgust, “I don’t worry about expenses. That’s your job. Take care of it.”

“Yes, Sir.”

7

The elegant home that had suddenly become Lisa's prison felt a little less punitive now that she understood more about what Kent had been through. But it was her own odd twist of fate that made her curious. It seemed strange how the events of the past couple of days were so mysteriously twisted, or was it precisely designed, that she had now become so inextricably entangled in Kent's life? She felt like she needed some time to just *not* think about her situation for a while.

Lisa watched as Kent carefully pulled a sock over her newly bandaged foot and ankle.

"Well, Kent, if I'm going to be here for a while, you should probably show me around," she suggested.

The suggestion lifted the somber mood of their talk. Kent lifted Lisa's legs from his lap. Taking her hand, he helped her up off of the couch and then with his arm around her, gave her a short tour.

She really didn't need Kent's assistance, but the chivalry of her brawny-cut host was cute, and it gave her an excuse to feel his skin close to hers. Her attraction to him was beginning to feel a little less like something emotional and a little more like something innate between the two of them; she couldn't exactly put her finger on it. She just liked being close to him.

"I don't think this was originally designed to be a house," he began, pointing at the large open spaces that were essentially divided by the pillars. "I think it was maybe supposed to be like a warehouse or maybe a barracks of some kind."

"It's interesting," Lisa offered placing her hand on one of the smooth stone columns. For polished granite it felt slightly warm instead of the cool. "This feels like solid stone to me," she rapped her knuckles lightly on the column. "Why put something so nicely polished in a barracks?"

"I thought about that too," Kent nodded. "Maybe it was built for officers or high government officials? Like a kind of executive bunker maybe."

"It looked really old to me when I first saw it from the outside," Lisa offered. "It looked like someone had built it a really long time ago."

They walked to the center of the home next to where the grand spiral stairs led into the lower level. At the center of the top of the stairway, three huge pots held an indoor Ficus tree, large bushy palms and some tall bamboo that almost reached to the much taller ceiling above the stairs.

"I got the same impression," Kent agreed. "Obviously someone still knows it's here. They went to a lot of trouble and expense to remodel it, probably within the past few years."

"It's very elegant," Lisa complimented. "It's like living in a hotel."

"Yea," Kent assured. "*Hotel California*," he snarked.

"You can check-out anytime you like, but you can never leave," she quoted.

Kent was nodding.

"It's actually really big for a place you have to be cooped up in," she looked around at the broad and well-decorated spaces and then looked out of the wall of glass windows that made up the open front of the home. "If you're gonna be in a prison, hey—might as well be one like this. How big is the place?"

"It's about sixty feet—and perfectly square, with two floors."

"I take it back. This is not prison, maybe purgatory. Kent, you could stuff my folk's whole house into just this floor and have space left over," Lisa offered. She looked up at the ceiling. "Is there an attic?"

"Not really," Kent offered. "It's just a false ceiling hiding the pillars that support the roof. I was bored one day and went up there. It's empty except for a bunch of electrical for the lights."

Lisa looked at the massive pillars again. "I can see why these need to be so big," she began, "it seems like they're supporting half the hillside and trees on this side of the canyon. It's kind of like a really big cave; it's very well hidden."

"It is *really* well hidden," Kent nodded. "With the tall pines and overgrowth, you can't see the front of it from the air or even from within the canyon itself unless you're right up on it."

"Yea, I noticed that. The only reason I saw it was because of the straight lines of the concrete the vines were covering outside. I don't think I would have noticed it otherwise."

Lisa looked at the polished, wide-stone stairs that circled around the potted plants leading down. "So what's in the basement?"

"It's kind of the entertainment floor now. Let me help you down the stairs, I'll show you."

Kent held Lisa as she hobbled down each wide step. The stairs wrapped grandly around the center of the home. Once at the bottom of the stairs, the ceiling was some twenty feet above them. On the lower floor things were not quite so elegant, but still, it too had been remodeled with nice finishes and all of the modern touches.

Then Lisa noticed something odd; there were windows on all sides in the lower level as well, but they had been covered with the outside concrete as well for some reason.

"That's strange," she pointed.

Kent nodded, "Yea, the concrete covering the windows down here?"

"Yea, who puts windows in an underground basement?"

Kent shrugged. "Government contractors I guess?"

Lisa grinned a melodic chuckle.

The lower floor had the same open floor plan with the massive pillars separating an open game room that sported an exquisite pool table, a couple of modern pinball machines, and a very large screen television that was viewable from eight very comfortable-looking movie chairs.

They walked into the theater area.

"This is really nice," Lisa offered, taking a seat in one of the soft, reclining leather chairs. "I bet you use this a lot to pass the time."

"Yea," he said taking a seat next to her. "I'm not that big of a movie buff, though. I mostly use it for playing Xbox games."

He watched Lisa roll her eyes. "Kent, don't tell me you're addicted to video games?"

"Probably," he admitted.

"I'm not even sure I know what an Xbox looks like," she offered.

"It's really cool with the surround sound in here," he smiled, knowing she would probably not be impressed. Still, the thought of maybe having another player, even for something like bowling, would make the games he had been playing all alone much more interesting. "Maybe sometime I could show you and we could both play?"

"Mmm, we'll see." Lisa wasn't making any promises; but the thought of surround sound movies on a screen this size would be really nice. She actually found herself looking forward to watching some of those.

Kent helped her up and they walked into another section that held a large universal gym and some free weights that Kent had obviously spent a lot of time using.

"So this is where Mr. Universe spends all day," she grinned at him.

Kent nodded. "Not *all* day," he corrected. "Usually only a couple of hours now." He patted the machine. "This has really helped me work off a lot of stress and anger, actually."

"Anger?" she asked. She'd not thought about Kent being angry. He'd been treating her far too nicely for someone who could ever be angry.

Kent nodded, frowning. "It's true, Lisa. This place will make you angry, at some point. It sinks in slowly; and the more you think about it, the loss; it's really—" he sighed, "difficult some days. You may need this at some point," he gripped one of the machine's chrome supports firmly, "Trust me. It helps."

On the far side of the space someone had built out a number of smaller but nice guest rooms, each decorated very differently, and each with its own bathroom. Kent reasoned that the rooms were built a while ago for some small group or large family to use while they were being protected by WITSEC.

Along the back wall was a state-of-the-art utility space with a matching washing machine and dryer nestled between two

dark granite counter tops and a sink. Another nicely finished stand-alone bathroom and shower was set close to the theater. Kent showed her a storage area that someone had stocked with a lot of dried and canned foods.

They returned to the game room. Lisa looked around the large open spaces, impressed, but also curious. "All of this room for just one person? I wonder why they chose to put you here?" she mused rolling one of the pool balls across the table, watching it bounce from bumper to bumper over the felt and then return to her hand.

"I've wondered that myself. This place looks like it would have been better used for a larger family instead of just one guy. I sort of figured that WITSEC just has all kinds of different spaces, some more protected than others."

Kent helped Lisa back up the stairs where she got the rest of the tour that ended in the main living room. Kent watched as Lisa sat at the grand piano. She began to play a sweet popular song with a nice style that seemed to Kent to be all her own.

While Kent was impressed with her playing, Lisa was more than impressed with the instrument. What was this!? It was more than just a piano. It had a very rich sound that she'd never heard before. It was as if the strings were stretched differently or maybe there more of them? She wasn't sure, but its sound was unusually full and bright.

"You play really well," Kent complimented.

"Not at the moment," she continued softly. "I'm a little rusty. This past semester didn't leave me with a lot of time to practice."

Kent listened; completely captivated by Lisa's talent.

She finished playing the tune, thoroughly impressed with the instrument and determined to get back to it again. Kent watched her as she looked for a brand or mark somewhere, but someone had obviously removed it. She assumed that the

piano must be a custom instrument that someone had ordered to be made.

"Kent," she began, getting up from the bench and walking with her now signature limp over to the pillar at the entrance to the bedroom area. "If I'm going to be here a while, what are we going to do about sleeping arrangements?"

"I was wondering about that myself. Don't worry about it. I'll sleep in the study. The couch there is plenty big enough. I've fallen asleep on it more times than I can remember anyway."

"Maybe I'm the one who should be sleeping in the study. I'm the interloper here."

"Lisa, you are hardly an interloper. I would feel really terrible if you were sleeping on the couch. I'll take the study."

"Kent, truth be told, I've never actually shared an apartment with a guy before," she admitted.

He nodded. "Well, I've never shared an apartment with a girl before, especially not with anyone as beautiful as you," he smiled the compliment.

"Well, you're not exactly hard on the eyes yourself, Mr. Bodybuilder," Lisa quipped. 'Maybe we should share the bedroom,' she thought to herself.

"That's really tempting, Lisa, but I'm not sure it's a good idea," he grinned.

"Oh! My gosh, Kent!" Lisa's hand went to her mouth. "I did not just say that out loud?!"

Kent could see the embarrassment washing over Lisa's now red face.

"I—I can't believe I just said that! I did not mean to say that, Kent. I'm sorry," she apologized.

"Lisa—"

"I don't know where that came from. It just sort of slipped out."

He chuckled at her.

"Oh, I am so embarrassed," she admitted; now shaking her head and deliberately looking at the floor, mortified.

"Lisa—" Kent interrupted. "Don't worry about it," he assured her warmly. He watched her blush shyly. She was incredibly cute. "If it's any consolation, the same thought crossed my mind. Honestly, I was thinking the same thing."

"You were?"

Kent nodded. "Believe me, Lisa, as much as I would like to, really I would," he looked warmly at her while leaning against the pillar next to her. "But as beautiful as you are, and this electric attraction or whatever it is that you and I seem to have, I honestly don't think it would be a good idea. I—" Kent paused not really sure if he needed to say any more. He was pretty sure neither he or Lisa would be able to keep their hands off of each other if they did find themselves sleeping in the same room together.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing," he smiled.

Kent watched from the pillar as Lisa hobbled into the bedroom. The fact was he *had* been wondering about how they were going to work sleeping arrangements. He'd already been having thoughts of warmly snuggling with Lisa, especially after their long embrace earlier. It was amazing how attracted he was to her. But the chemistry his body seemed to have with hers was bringing up a lot more than just casual snuggling with his new guest. But then his chivalry brutally crushed any thoughts his unusual feelings of attraction were bringing up.

Lisa began tidying up and making the bed. He could tell she wanted to put the little foible of their sharing the room behind her. Kent went in to help her straighten the covers from the other side of the bed.

"Kent, I'm really sorry," she apologized again, not looking at him, still feeling very embarrassed. "That just kind of fell out. Really, I'm not that kind of person."

"I can see that," Kent said, beginning to help her with the comforter, "Hey. Don't be embarrassed. It was cute." He smiled at her. She returned a half smile to him.

"I'm sorry this place is such a mess," he attempted to change the subject. "I wasn't expecting guests," he joked.

Kent's attempt at humor didn't exactly go the direction he'd intended. Lisa looked at him, a sudden wave of deep sadness washing over her face. Kent realized too late that it had been exactly the wrong thing to say at the wrong moment. The now embarrassed and feeling vulnerable Lisa began to take on a look of sadness beyond anything he'd ever seen anyone have in his life.

Kent watched in helplessness as Lisa's beautiful face crumpled and she started to cry. He walked quickly over to her and took her into his arms again.

From somewhere within Lisa a gushing well of emotion burst out of her and she began to bawl uncontrollably. Kent held her tightly, stroking her hair as her tears began wetting his shirt.

"I feel like I've lost everything, Kent," she wept into his chest.

"I know," he said, softly holding her. "I know," he repeated warmly.

Lisa needed to let the emotion pour out of her soul. His arms around her and his soft reassuring voice gave her a feeling of security, something that she desperately needed at the moment. Kent knew the feeling well. He had wept more times than he could remember. Only he didn't have anyone to hold onto.

Seeing and feeling Lisa like this, Kent decided that there was no way he was going to let her be alone, even if he was just in the next room. No, he didn't trust himself in the same room—let alone the same bed—with this beautiful woman. But suddenly he just didn't care about other people's opinions.

AWAKENED

Lisa needed someone. He just wanted her to feel safe and secure and to comfort her. He'd already grown accustomed to feeling out of control. Maybe he could at least give Lisa some sense of peace in her feelings of turmoil.

And as far as being a gentleman and sharing a room with her; God, the Universe, Nature or someone had done the impossible and delivered this beautiful soul into his lonely life. Despite his best attempts at chivalry, somehow Kent had a feeling that Nature was going to do whatever the hell it wanted to anyway.

8

Kent lifted himself quietly from the bed so as not to awaken the now sleeping Lisa. He had spooned softly with her, holding her, as she cried herself into what was probably a much-needed nap after having spent the previous night out in the cold. He dimmed the lights in the bedroom, quietly made himself some late afternoon coffee, and slipped out onto the terrace to read. Somewhere above, over the din of the rapids, he could hear a low-flying search plane. The sound of it made him feel terrible. But at least *he* knew Lisa was safe, even if the rest of the world thought she was lost.

The sun had already slipped behind the canyon's ridge when Lisa opened the glass wall door that led onto the terrace. Kent got up and hugged the still sleepy Lisa.

"How was your nap?" he asked.

She yawned deeply within his embrace, "Nice. But lots of dreams. I kept falling in and out of sleep."

"You fell asleep pretty quickly," he said, feeling her snuggle into his embrace.

"I did. I think I like the way you hold me. It makes me feel like I'm less out of control."

She hugged him and then moved to the terrace railing. Lisa watched the water blast in light sprays over the rocks not far below. A broad canopy of evergreens covered their terrace and filtered the sunlight over mossy rocks and fern giving this part of the stream the feeling of a tiny secluded rainforest. A small trail led to the water's edge a little way down stream and a pool where the fast water collected into calm again.

"It's so peaceful here," she offered as Kent approached the railing next to her making sure his arm was touching hers. She leaned into his touch.

"I know; it's like time stands still here."

They admired their view together for a while before returning indoors. Kent showed Lisa the floor button that allowed them to lock the doors from the inside.

"They tell me this glass is bulletproof," he said tapping on it with his finger.

"Really? It's very thick. Like that stuff they have at the bank. I can believe it."

"Would you like a drink before dinner?" he asked.

"What kind of drink?"

"A glass of wine, or some Cognac? I don't have a very wide selection, but I like to indulge on occasion."

"Maybe something with dinner. By the way, I'm starving. What is for dinner?"

"How about some pasta? I've got some premade garlic bread and a bag of salad. It's not exactly fancy."

"Kent, that sounds wonderful. I'm not picky, really."

Kent helped Lisa to the kitchen bar to take the weight off her foot while he began preparing a pan of water and some pasta sauce from a jar.

"So, Kent, I dreamed about you. I was on a plane sitting next to you. Only it wasn't you, but your double."

"That doesn't sound like a very good dream."

"It wasn't. I woke up just before the plane was about to crash. People on the plane kept trying to give me this flash drive and I kept telling them no, I didn't want it."

"I'm sorry," he said pouring some white wine into a chilled crystal glass. "I guess my world must seem like it's closing in on you."

Lisa shook her head as if trying to shake the memory from her mind. She curiously swiped his wine glass and took a small sip. The look on her face told Kent that Lisa wasn't all that into wine.

She pushed the glass back to him shaking her head disapprovingly. "I don't think alcohol and I will ever get along," she admitted. "I never have liked the taste."

Kent grinned lifting the glass to his lips and taking a sip from the same place where Lisa's lips had touched.

"So, Kent, do you know what was on that drive your boss gave you?"

"I do," he breathed nodding, allowing the bouquet of the fine wine to fill his senses. "And it's not pretty."

She nodded but said nothing.

"You're dying to know what's on it aren't you?"

"Yes and no. I'll probably be killed for knowing, but I'm probably dead anyway if they find us together, so I guess it doesn't really matter."

"Lisa," Kent looked at her setting down the glass. "If we were found and killed right now, I would die a better and happier man having known you for just today."

“Ohh,” she smiled, reaching her hand out to squeeze his. He returned her gentle gesture.

Kent pulled a box of some long bucatini pasta from a drawer. Lisa swiped his wine again and ventured another sip from the glass—only this time it was not really for the flavor of the glass’ contents. Although, the white wine did seem to taste better the second time. Kent grinned to himself, watching Lisa sip from the same place on the edge of the crystal he himself had. He’d not expected to be sharing wine with her from the same glass, but it was turning into something fun; an unexpected intimate exchange between the two of them.

“So maybe you should tell me,” she said, setting the glass down again between them. “What was on it?”

“Well, it took me a few hours to break into the encryption, but once I was in, I couldn’t believe what I was looking at,” he began.

“Wait a minute,” she interrupted. “How do you break into an encrypted drive? Isn’t that supposed to be impossible? That’s what encryption is for, right? To keep people *out* of your data?”

“Sure it is. But encryption is still only as good as the key and algorithms you use to encrypt the data to begin with. I was part of the team. I knew the algorithms. All I needed was Chuck’s key.”

“How did you find that?”

“I guessed it. Part of what makes breaking encryption possible is knowing the people who encrypted the data in the first place. We all knew Chuck pretty well. If he was giving me a drive with encrypted data on it, I sort of figured that at some point he’d want me to know what was on it. There’s no way he’d have used a randomly generated key. It would have had to have been something we knew together as people, as team members, as uber-geeks.”

"Uber-geeks," she repeated with a grin. "No ordinary geeks these guys. Oh, no. We're *uber-geeks*," she mocked.

Kent grinned but remained serious.

"No, it's true, Lisa. A bunch of us met through Mercer High's technology honors programs; we all sort of went on to U-Dub taking the same classes and then a bunch of us got hired right out of school through the same recruiting firm. We all knew each other really well."

"So, you guys shared passwords as well?" she raised an eyebrow.

"No, but there are a myriad of off-the-wall things we shared as people, sayings we draw from books, movies, games, all kinds of colloquialisms. It took me a couple of hours but I eventually I hit on Chuck's key."

"Dare I ask?" she queried, her eyebrow still raised.

Kent looked at her. "Enacoi."

"Enacoi? It sounds like a Native American name."

"It's not."

"What does it mean?"

Kent grinned at her, "It's 'Iocane' spelled backwards."

"I don't get it."

He shook his head, "Never mind. It's not important. What is important is that I read the data and then re-encrypted it with my own key."

"I still don't get it. It just sounds like someone encrypted the data with an easy password."

"That's all an encryption key is, Lisa. It's just a kind of password. A lot of times the keys are really long random strings of characters. Sometimes they're simple passwords or phrases. Enacoi wasn't the only word in the key, it was just the clue that told me what the rest of the key would be."

"So are you going to tell me what was on the drive?"

"Are you sure you really want to know?" Kent asked in all seriousness.

"Um, hello!" Lisa grouched. "I'd kind of like to know what I'm giving up my life and family to protect!"

"Alright," Kent nodded. "Fair enough," he said, taking another drink from their glass. "I have no idea where Chuck got the information but there were dozens of recorded phone calls and copies of hundreds of private emails from individuals, government employees, Congress people from both parties, and the White House."

"The White House? You have private phone calls and emails from the White House? From the President?!"

"Both to and from," he nodded.

"What do they say?"

"It's all in a kind of code. Certain words are used in place of certain people, certain activities and events. They do that to make it more difficult for people to know what the conversation is really all about. And it prevents people from scanning the mail activity across the internet and flagging certain types of messages with high-value words and phrases. If a phone call or email is ever intercepted then it just seems like people are talking about a bunch of nonsense."

Kent saw that the water was already boiling on the island's induction cooktop and he scattered the pasta inside the pot.

"What are these calls and emails all about?"

"They're all discussions about the last presidential election campaign, more to the point; its funding. Do you remember anything about a controversy surrounding the president's campaign website and the way they were accepting credit card donations?"

Lisa shook her head. "I don't get very deep into politics, Kent. Seriously, I usually just vote for the guy with the least annoying commercials."

Kent nodded. "Well let me put it to you this way, when you go online to buy something with your card, what pieces of information do they *always* ask you for?"

“Well, my name, *exactly as it appears on your card*,” she emphasized sarcastically. “Address, the credit card number, of course, expiration, oh, and the security code on the back.”

“Precisely. The security code. That code is called a CSC or CVV code. When you buy things online, that code helps the merchant processor avoid fraudulent transactions. If someone steals your card number somehow, they might have the card number, but they wouldn’t have your security code because the only place that code is actually electronically stored is in the card-issuer’s database. It’s just printed on your card. That number helps to keep the bad guys from running electronically stolen card numbers on ecommerce sites.”

“So what has this got to do with the president’s website?”

“Lisa, the president’s campaign website was accepting card donations without an address and without a security code.”

“Huh? Really? You can do that?”

“Sure you can. You just have to pay a slightly higher rate to your merchant processor so they can cover any bad or fraudulent payments. But it is *highly* irregular for any ecommerce site to take card payments without address verification and without a card’s security code. Without an address and security code, you can accept a credit card payment from anyone.” Kent paused looking at Lisa, “or a donation from *anywhere*.”

Lisa looked at him, her wheels obviously turning.

“Anywhere? You mean like, from outside the country? Foreign donations?”

Kent nodded.

“But that would be—”

“Illegal,” Kent finished. “*Highly* illegal. Impeachably illegal, in fact. It would be considered a high crime, a felony. Congress would not even have to bring an impeachment. The President would be arrested on a felony warrant.”

“Kent, I don’t think you can arrest a sitting president.”

“The Constitution does not immunize the President from arrest, Lisa. He could be removed by SCOTUS and arrested by his own Secret Service if they found blatant illegal activity that voided his Constitutional eligibility for office.”

Lisa nodded at Kent’s logic but seemed to frown. “Are you sure these calls and emails actually tie the president to knowledge of what his campaign was doing?”

Kent looked at her. “You voted for him, didn’t you?” He grinned.

“I did, Kent,” she admitted. “He looked like the more honest guy to me.”

“Don’t worry about it, Lisa. He won. A lot of us voted for him. But that doesn’t excuse taking foreign money to beat out your challenger. That’s just un-American.”

“But, don’t they have to report where all of their money is coming from? You can’t hide where the money comes from, can you?”

“Sure you can. You’re not held to the same reporting requirements for small donations that are under fifty dollars. These people, the foreign donors, they own banks overseas, Lisa. These banks issue their own reusable gift cards. This card is like a debit card that you can refill over and over. They electronically created and filled literally millions of these reusable cards with, ten, fifteen, twenty-five to forty-nine dollar balances, all in U.S. funds. Then they programmed a handful of servers to hit the president’s campaign website with the electronic cards matched to the name of a real life person who had made political donations to the president’s party in the past. But with these particular transactions they used no address, no zip code and no security code. If you look at the transaction records I have, all of the transactions were coming from the same anonymous servers using cards that were issued by just three banks, all of the transactions being processed through private offshore merchant processors that were

owned by those banks. And the timestamps on the transactions are all milliseconds apart. At times they were processing hundreds of transactions every second. Within weeks they pumped hundreds of millions into the President's campaign so he could keep up with his challenger."

"Yea," Lisa pointed at Kent as she remembered the unusually brutal campaign, "that rich guy. I remember he was raising all kinds of money. A lot of my friends were really upset about it. We started making our own donations at school."

"Right, and that's what the press reported; that many of these small donations were coming from politically motivated students. The problem with that is, Lisa, there aren't enough politically motivated students in America to bring in that kind of money. It's statistically impossible. But that's what was sold to us by the President's media."

Lisa just blinked at him, a sinking feeling rising within her stomach.

"When it was all done, they'd pushed over a billion dollars into the president's campaign—and all of that money coming from just a couple of foreign individuals. They called them 'the investors'."

"A couple? Two people?"

"Yea, two people. Two people who are not U.S. Citizens have poured over half a billion dollars each of their own money into our current president's last reelection campaign. It represented well over half of the campaign's take over the course of the election."

"Over half!? Oh, my gosh, Kent! And you have all of this data?!"

He nodded. "Right down to the campaign's server activity logs and the card numbers, transaction logs and approval codes and donor name of every card payment they took in. Lisa, I have enough data to send the President to hell."

“Can’t you get it to someone at the FEC or the Justice Department?”

Kent shook his head. “It’s stolen data, Lisa. What I have would never be admissible in court because of that. The problem is, even if they could legally subpoena the information using a grand jury, all of the domestic log data has long been scrubbed by now, and there’s no way to force a foreign bank or offshore processor to turn over their records. Besides, the president *owns* the Justice Department and by extension the Federal Election Commission. Any investigation would go absolutely nowhere. They’d just cover it up and pretend it’s a non-issue.”

“Can’t you go to the media? A story like this would be a huge scandal; someone in the media would jump on it! Right?!”

“You would think. But frankly, there are more people in the media right now who would want to *kill* a story like this than report it to the public. The president is very popular with the U.S. media, well, most of it anyway.”

“Yea, it kind of seems that way, doesn’t it,” she agreed.

Kent nodded, stirring their pasta sauce. “President Nixon was forced to resign over Watergate because he had a very hostile media. Our president is kind of a media darling at the moment. This story would be ignored and killed before it ever got out of the editorial boardroom.”

Lisa tried to take in everything Kent had said. Kent watched her face as she thought about everything he’d just told her. Her countenance was slowly falling.

Kent frowned as he looked into his saucepan, stirring slowly.

“We’re really screwed, Kent. You know that.”

Kent look up from his pan into her eyes—and nodded.

9

T heir dinner conversation had tapered off to next to nothing. There were a few times Kent thought Lisa wanted to say something but she kept silent; she just seemed to be thinking about everything Kent had revealed.

Lisa now knew it all. Why Kent had been brought here, and what the secret contents of the flash drive were. She also knew the kind of people Kent was dealing with. Ruthless. Calculating. Supremely powerful and brutally evil. The kind of people who would literally murder hundreds of innocent people just to keep one person silenced. Little if nothing seemed beyond their grasp to control.

Or was there?

She was still thinking about that. Someone in the government was keeping Kent out of their grasp, safe and alive. Kent had mentioned that the military were somehow involved. Lisa had never had much use for the military or

anyone within it. Deep within her she despised it. It was an organization dedicated to killing people. Her entire life her church had told her that it was better to be a non-combatant if one found oneself drafted into the military. She'd been raised that "thou shalt not kill" meant anyone, including one's enemies. She wasn't sure she agreed with that particular doctrine but that's what many of her friends believed. But these same people in uniform were evidently the ones keeping Kent alive and well in this elegant mountain fortress against the will of the very president she had voted for.

Oddly, Lisa suddenly found herself getting more than just a little interested in something she had hardly given a second thought to in the past—politics.

Lisa sat with her legs folded under herself on the deep, soft couch in the study reading the latest news on Kent's iPad while he finished cleaning up and putting away their dinner dishes. As expected, the search parties had found nothing. Lisa had simply vanished without a trace; no clothing had been found, no signal fire built, and no clues as to where she'd gone. Speculation was running wild about what had happened to her. Had she been eaten by the bear? Fallen into an abandoned mine? Someone had even alarmed that she'd been abducted by a Sasquatch.

What troubled her most was that James was being looked at as a person of interest in her disappearance, which made her suddenly fume. James was one of the most benevolent human beings on the face of the Earth. If she could only contact him somehow; send him a message that he could let the authorities know she was alright; even if they didn't know where she was. But it took Lisa only a few minutes to discover that their internet connection was being heavily filtered. She could reach and download news and other content sites, but every social media and webmail site she attempted to visit simply showed her a "Not Authorized" screen. Seeing the screen made Lisa

suddenly realize that she wasn't the only one being kept prisoner in this mountain abode. She was just as stuck here as he was at the moment.

Lisa again looked up and watched Kent as he worked quietly in the kitchen. Oddly enough, she realized that Kent hadn't told her his last name. She tapped up a search page on the tablet and found several articles on the flight that had crashed on its way to Dallas almost two years ago. One of the memorial sites had a passenger list of all of those who had died in the disaster. There were three "Kent's" onboard. She eventually found a graduating class list for Mercer High. There were several "Kent's" in his graduating class that year—but only one matched the last name of the Kent on her passenger list: Kent Levi. So that was his last name, she mused, "Levi".

Lisa found a few pics of Kent online, including a very nice memorial site that his family had evidently setup. She looked at some of his high school and college graduation pics, comparing them with the hunky guy now towel-drying his hands and making his way toward her in the study. His memorial site showed a kind of moving timeline of some of the things Kent had done as a kid, complete with all kinds of pictures: he'd become an Eagle Scout; built robots in his high school's robotics lab and had filed for his first software patent at age nineteen!

Kent took a seat on the opposite end of the couch with a book from the study's shelves in hand.

"Overachieve much?" she mused, looking at him with a smile.

"Huh?"

"I'm looking at a timeline of your life online," she disclosed.

"Oh," he rolled his eyes. "I take it you found Mom's memorial site for me."

Lisa nodded. "It's very impressive. You're quite the accomplished technologist," she complimented. "Or should I say, 'uber-geek'?" she smiled mockingly.

"I just like to, you know, build things. Usually it's stuff people don't think they need, so it goes nowhere."

"Well, I'm impressed. The last bodybuilder I worked with wouldn't know how to turn on a computer, let alone build one. He—"

Lisa felt Kent tap her knee with his stocking foot while pointing toward the front of the house, "Looks like we have a visitor."

Lisa turned to see a very large bear bumping along the terrace outside. A sudden bolt of memory shot through her.

"Oh, my God, Kent!" Lisa began. "That looks like the bear that chased James and I yesterday!"

"Really? The news said that you had been chased by a bear. That's a little odd," he said getting up. "I wonder if it followed you here somehow. Tracked your scent maybe?"

She turned and watched the huge animal sniff its way along the terrace and around the chairs and table outside.

"Can it see us?" she asked looking back at Kent.

"Not through the glass. It has a blackout property when the doors are locked. It lets light in from the outside, but our lights can't be seen outside. All it sees is a smooth black wall."

Kent helped Lisa to her feet and both approached the glass wall cautiously to look at the wandering beast up close from the safety of the other side of the thick glass. The massive animal took up most of the width of the terrace. After a few minutes, the big bear lumbered lazily to the other side of the terrace and disappeared downstream, bounding haplessly into the forest.

"Wow, I sure hope we don't meet up with that thing while we're outside," she said touching the glass and feeling thankful that it was there.

Kent slipped his arm around her and gently pulled her close to his side. "I'd protect you," he assured her. His gesture felt warm and comforting and seemed to dispel the gravity of their dinner conversation. Her arm moved around him and they walked and hobbled back to the couch together.

"So, Kent, aside from being an uber-geek and a target of the world's rich and powerful, tell me about yourself," she smiled, taking a cushion and trying to forget why she was here.

Kent sat down on the cushion next to hers. Lisa took the opportunity to stretch her legs over his. Kent rather instinctively rested his hands on her smooth skin. He couldn't remember ever sitting with a girl like this, but he certainly wasn't going to complain about having Lisa's long smooth legs resting over his.

"Well, you saw the website. I grew up in Seattle. My dad's a businessman and lawyer, and mom's, well, mom's kind of a socialite. She has an art store that's also a coffee house."

Lisa smiled. "Like Seattle doesn't have enough of those," she snarked.

Kent grinned, "I know, right? I think dad just thought it would be used for a tax write-off. But believe it or not, I think the store is what really helped give my family some of our deepest political connections. Mom can be quite the schmoozer."

Lisa immediately grew intrigued with Kent's family.

"Like I was saying earlier, I went to Mercer and then U-Dub. I was totally a member of the geek underclass, Lisa. I congregated in dimly lit datacenters with other computer nerds playing video games and *Dungeons and Dragons* on the weekends."

Lisa smirked. "You don't really act like the nerdy type, Kent."

"You didn't know me in college," he grinned.

"So, did you date anyone in college?"

“Date?” Kent half scoffed and then shook his head. “Not really. I mean, I went out with a few people, but nothing serious; and no one that was half as hot as you,” he smiled the compliment to her, deliberately smoothing his hands along her legs.

“Aww,” she smiled.

“What about you?” he asked. “I can tell you grew up in the South.”

“Yes, mostly Texas and Georgia. Daddy works in our church’s leadership. He’s transferred a few times because, well, that is just what people in leadership positions in our denomination do.”

“You still have the accent,” Kent grinned.

“Whaat? Lil’ ol me’”, Lisa poured it on thickly with pure Southern eloquence and gestures.

Kent laughed.

“I think I lost a lot of the accent while at school.”

“No, it’s still there. It’s cute. I like it actually.” Kent watched Lisa smile. “So what landed you in Seattle?”

“James got a really good job here. Then Daddy transferred here while I was away at school. After graduation I was planning to settle in Seattle with my family. As a kind of reunion, James and I had been planning this hike for months.”

Kent nodded and looked away. “So, did you ever date anyone?” he asked a bit sheepishly, not actually looking at her. He was sure he wasn’t going to like the answer.

Lisa waited for him to look at her again, “You don’t need to be shy, Kent. Yea, I got asked out a lot.”

“Anything serious?”

“Yea, there was one guy. I thought it was serious but after I left for college the relationship pretty much crashed and burned.” A brief frown flitted across her face as she tried to forget that particular memory. She’d fallen hard for the guy and they’d even talked about marriage. But things hadn’t

worked out as she'd planned. She shook the bad memory from her mind.

She looked at Kent, "So, would you have asked me out if you had known me in school?"

Kent breathed a smirk and looked up at her again, "Are you kidding? Lisa, you would have been *way* out of my league. Our family had money and all that, but I was still a computer geek. Not exactly the self-confident type around women."

"You don't exactly fit the computer geek profile," she assured.

"It's just the façade," he said lifting his arms and flexing his nicely defined biceps and pecs.

"Kent, this," she wrapped her hands around his massive flexing bicep, "is hardly façade," she corrected. "I think I would have been intimidated if someone as built and nice-looking as you had asked me out!"

Kent smiled at her. "So, you want to go out?" he only half joked.

"With you? Sure!"

Her immediate answer really warmed Kent's feelings. He smoothed his hands along her legs. "I guess in a way we're already going out. Like it or not."

She nodded her agreement. They sat quietly together for a few moments.

"So, Kent, did you ever make out with any of your dates?"

Kent shook his head. "No."

Lisa slipped her legs off of Kent's and folded them under herself on the couch, bringing the two of them closer together.

Kent looked at Lisa. She was incredibly beautiful. And whatever this attraction was between them wasn't helping.

"Why not? Did you only date idiots?" she joked, thinking a girl would have to be a fool not to want to be making out with this guy.

"You're going to think this sounds really bad, Lisa, but, I never really wanted to make out with any of my dates. So I didn't."

"That doesn't sound bad at all, Kent. In all honesty, there were several people I dated for fun but didn't want to get that close to. There's no shame in that."

"No?"

"No."

It felt good to Kent that Lisa didn't think badly of him. He looked at her.

"Actually, Lisa; I've only been on one date with someone I really wanted to kiss." He moved a bit closer, looking at her.

"Oh?" she said, moving herself closer to him as well.

"Yea." Kent leaned in.

"What was she like," Lisa suddenly felt affectionately nervous, "this girl you wanted to make out with?"

"Beautiful," he whispered looking into her eyes.

"So did you ever kiss her?" she asked softly, her pulse taking a jump.

Kent moved himself slowly toward her; his eyes closed, his lips lightly touched against Lisa's. Lisa's own eyes had already closed as she opened her pout to feel the warmth of Kent's lips brush lightly against hers.

"I'll let you know in a moment," he breathed softly into her mouth.

Lisa drank in Kent's light kiss, her lips trembling with anticipation. She returned his soft lip play with her own. He toyed with her lips lightly; when she would advance he'd all but withdraw.

"You—you're teasing me," she whispered.

"Yea," he breathed.

She exhaled deeply, her emotion easily rising.

"You've been teasing me all day," Kent continued, his lips dancing lightly over hers.

"I have not," she breathed a subtle protest against his mouth.

"Have too. Every time I see you," he brushed. "The way you wear my clothes. How you move. You are *pure* torture."

"Hmm," she smiled. "Get used to it, Superman," she returned, drawing his lip into her mouth. The sensation of Lisa's unexpected play launched Kent's own emotion. He returned her lip gesture with a slightly more impassioned kiss of his own.

After long moments of light nibbles and more intimate kisses, Lisa retreated, her heart pounding and her body breathless. Kissing Kent was becoming oddly overwhelming to her. It was beyond obvious that the two of them shared a really powerful chemistry. She didn't want to stop but she forced herself to—if for no other reason than to allow her feelings to simmer down.

Kent's hand gently went to the side of her face. "Alright?" he asked concerned.

"Yeah," she breathed a soft, heavy exhale. "I just—needed to come up for air. You kiss—really well. Too well."

"I do?"

Lisa nodded very approvingly.

Kent was finding he needed to really restrain himself while his lips played softly over Lisa's. Everything about her was incredibly powerful in the way she just drew him into her warmth. The attraction between them was uncanny, nearly overpowering.

"I think my lips really like yours," he offered. "A lot."

Lisa rested her hand lightly on his chest as she moved in closer to him. They both closed their eyes. "Maybe you should taste them again." They quickly felt each other's lips once again.

To Kent, Lisa's touch felt beyond magical; her hands gliding over his pecs easily triggered deep and unfamiliar

emotions within him. Their kisses all too easily grew with intensity, becoming more passionate with each passing moment, as if neither of them could get enough of the other. He tasted her tongue with his while she explored his inner lips with hers.

When Lisa moved closer to Kent, her wounded ankle suddenly complained, forcing her to withdraw and nurse it.

"I'm sorry, are you okay?" he apologized.

"Yes, I just pushed on it a bit," she assured. "I'm not sure this is the most comfortable for my ankle."

"Maybe we should find someplace—a little more comfortable?"

"You mean, like your room?" she grinned.

"No, it's your room. We're already *in* my room," he corrected, grinning.

"My mother would have a cow if she knew I was making out with a hot guy in my room."

"I won't tell her if you don't," he joked.

"Promise?" she smirked.

Kent lifted Lisa easily from the sofa and walked her into 'her' room. After dimming the lights he laid her softly onto the comforter and slipped himself up next to her. With both now in a warm romantic embrace, their lips met once again.

Lisa was completely enchanted by Kent's warm chiseled body moving softly next to her own; how his muscles flexed smooth and powerfully, yet gently beside her.

Making out with Lisa like this became an amazing dream come true to Kent. In school he'd never have braved to even talk to someone like Lisa let alone ask her for a date. But making-out with her, tasting her lips like this, feeling the warmth of her skin next to his was beyond magical. *Nothing* like this had ever happened to him before!

Kent gently entwined the bare skin of his thick powerful legs with Lisa's as their lip-play climbed more passionately.

Their entangled embrace only added to the warmth of the kiss they continued to share.

Kent's legs locking with her own should have given Lisa a feeling of alarm, but the sensation of Kent's smooth skin and muscles moving gently but strongly against her own created the exact opposite emotion within her. She wanted Kent to hold her powerfully. Lisa moved herself over onto Kent resting herself fully onto him, no longer teasing but taking his lips forcefully, deliberately.

Within the new heat of their kiss, it wasn't long before Kent's hands wandered from her back and then down onto her nicely rounded ass. Feeling Kent's lips and his hands gripping her firmly gave Lisa more than a few twinges of not so subtle desire. She'd made out with guys like this before, but Kent seemed to be able to move her like no one else. It was like he connected with her feelings, and touched her body like he somehow knew what she was feeling and how she wanted to be touched. He rolled her softly over the comforter. Her own hand slipped around the firm and well-defined full curve of the back of his shorts. The flexing of his muscles and warmth of his skin created a mesmerizing feeling within Lisa.

Within their heated kisses, Kent's hand bravely slipped up under the cuff of her loose, oversized shorts to kneed the Lycra boxer trunks she wore of his.

"These feel really nice on you," he complimented through a deeply breathing smile.

"I think I like wearing your underwear," Lisa admitted, half breathless between their now lighter kisses.

"You can wear my underwear anytime," he assured, brushing his lips along the length of her neck.

The scent of her skin and her hair filling his senses became nearly intoxicating to him. "Why do you smell so nice?" he kissed around her ear gently.

Lisa smiled audibly, enjoying the sensations he delivered over her sensitive skin.

Although Kent had been wearing a rib-hugging stretch shirt all day, Lisa decided it was now too much. She un-tucked it and began slipping it up his abs.

“You don’t like my shirt?” he teased, moving his lips down her neck once again.

“I just want to feel your skin.”

Kent peeled the shirt the rest of the way off giving Lisa’s hands full access to his now bare chiseled form.

With Kent now shirtless, Lisa moved herself over him again and began kissing his neck and then kissed him down onto his well-defined chest. The touch she delivered more than made his skin tingle. When her lips found one of his nipples she began kissing, suckling and lightly biting him. Lisa could feel Kent’s back arching; he began taking deep breaths as she tortured him with the sensations.

“Oh, my god, Lisa,” he breathed, enduring the sweet sensations she was delivering, “you’re gonna make me explode doing that.”

He heard her giggle softly and then felt her lips move to the other side of his chest.

Kent had never been affectionately tortured by a woman in his life. He’d already become well aroused, but Lisa was deliberately, seriously, turning him on. Would she want him doing the same to her? Did she want be making out with him bare-chested? Kissing her the same way she was doing to him? He decided that two could play this game. His hands slipped warmly down her sides and carefully untucked her shirt allowing his hands full access to her bare skin beneath it.

Lisa gasped excitedly feeling Kent’s warm hands follow up her sides and take her very full breasts in hand. Her nipples already firm and pert, Kent’s fingers gently squeezed them sending shivers of feeling down her body. He lifted her shirt

off and onto the comforter beside them while she straddled his powerful body. Kent brought her chest to his lips teasing her nipples like she'd been doing to him.

Lisa discovered that the virgin Kent was way beyond naturally talented when it came to making out. His skillful lips and incredible body well beguiled her every emotion. Even now, the feeling of Kent's bare skin moving against her own had become more than just incredibly alluring. Kent's tender fingers wandering over her body, his clean masculine scent and warm skin moving softly over hers became intoxicating.

She felt Kent's rock-hard firmness push gently against her shorts while she moved her hips over him in a soft makeout rhythm that pushed emotions between them to well above boiling.

Something within her desperately wanted Ken doing more than just kissing her, but it was the sensation of feeling her belt being unbuckled the suddenly derailed those emotions with a heavy dose of cool warning. Lisa didn't know why she'd allowed herself to go this far. But she knew that she couldn't go any further—her *body* wanted to go further with him, a *lot* further, she *really* could—but she also knew where it would lead and she wasn't sure if she really wanted to live with herself in the morning if she gave in to those emotions under the circumstances. She didn't really *know* Kent.

Lisa was fairly sure that Kent had probably never been in a situation like this. She'd totally wound him up; allowed herself get too immersed in his way-too-powerful kiss and amazing body moving against hers. She'd gone too far and led him down a path that needed to now abruptly end. As handsome and hunky as he was, if she let herself ignore her conscience, it would only be harder on the both of them. She gently retreated from their kiss.

“Kent,” she began softly, “I’m sorry, but, I’m not sure I trust myself making out with you—not without clothes, I mean.”

“Oh,” he offered surprised. “Ah, okay. I’m sorry. I guess I just thought—”

“No, no, don’t apologize,” she offered slipping herself from between his legs and putting a little distance between them on the comforter. “It’s not your fault.”

She watched him prop himself up bare-chested looking at her. A bewildered look moving across his face. She wanted to touch him again but dared not. She found her shirt and slipped it back on.

“I—I’m the one who got carried away. You’re—ah,” she sighed, trying to simmer her emotions down to low heat. “A lot better at making out than I think anyone I’ve ever dated. “Whoo—” she struggled to contain her emotions.

Kent watched her move off the bed and retreat out of the bedroom.

10

I don't know! I don't know!" she cried. "I only overheard the conversation. I've told you everything I know!"

Her head dropped between her shoulders. Her hands and feet remained tightly bound to the metal chair as the teeth of the zip-tie restraints dug into her skin.

"We just need the name of the person in witness protection, Ms. Brooks. That's all. Then you can go," he lied, professionally, convincingly.

"They didn't say any names. I told you that!"

The tall man knelt down in front of her and lifted her chin with his surgical-gloved hand. Her face already black and blue, his glove smeared red from the ugly bleeding bruises he'd expertly inflicted. He looked at the other three people in the dimly lit room. They shook their heads.

“Very well, Ms. Brooks. We believe you.” He pulled the gloves from his hands and left the room with the others. The heavy metal door shut behind them.

“She doesn’t know, Harlan,” the tall professional offered. “We got everything else except the name. I don’t think she actually knows.”

“She’s not part of it?”

The tall man shook his head. “Hardly. She’s just an enterprising bitch who happened to put herself in the right place at the right time to overhear something she thought would be really valuable.” He shrugged. “Turns out—she was right.”

“This is getting out of hand, Brad,” Harlan began. “Too many people know something, just like her. Even *I* am hearing rumors of rumors. Nobody seems to know what the rumors are about, or if they do, they’re not talking. It’s causing a lot of nervousness on the Hill.”

Harlan looked through the one-way glass at the Brooks woman still tied to the chair in the next room. He raised his chin in thought.

“I even got a call from one of our investors this afternoon. He was also asking what was going on. That’s not good. It’s not good when your investors, you know, the people who pay the bills, start asking questions. We hired you people for the Hydra project because we needed you to tie up quite a few of these loose ends. You’re supposed to be the best, yet we still have *loose ends*. What happened?”

“There were no loose ends,” the only woman in the room offered confidently. “Every subject was eliminated.”

Harlan looked at the stone cold woman. “Well, you missed someone. Who ever it is, they’re in witness protection now. *Witness* protection,” Harlan emphasized. “Do you know what that means? It means this person is a *witness*,” he said

condescendingly. "They know something about this data. *That* is called a loose end," he offered not withholding his sarcasm.

"Oh, and," he continued, "did we ever retrieve the stolen data drive? Oh, wait," he snapped his fingers sarcastically, "no—we didn't. It's still floating around out there somewhere. That's another—*loose end!*"

"The data is not a loose end," another of the men in the room offered. "It's useless even if someone does find it. Subject two hyper encrypted the files. We're still working to decode the archive we found on his system. So far, it's been impenetrable."

"Well somebody decoded it! We wouldn't have all of this murmuring if the data were still locked up. Probably someone, whoever they are, from Hydra. Perhaps your body count isn't exactly accurate."

"It's accurate," the woman assured.

"Maybe not." The last man in the room said. His voice was deep. "We had one subject that wasn't physically accounted for."

"That's because there weren't any pieces of him big enough to account for," Brad assured.

"Interesting," the woman said stepping up to the glass. "He's right. We assumed that subject seven was on that flight from boarding records. What if he wasn't?"

"We watched him board," Brad began. "We have him on video getting onto the plane. We don't waste million dollar weapons on empty targets."

"And if it wasn't actually him?" she offered.

Brad glared at her. Talking like this in front of the client was bad for business.

"Then Witness Protection has our loose end," Harlan concluded.

"That is not going to be an easy end to tie up," the deep-voiced man assured.

“Easy, hard, I don’t care,” Harlan warned. “That’s what we pay you people for. To solve these kinds of problems! You know who he is. How tough can it be? Find him!”

“It’s not that easy, Harlan,” Brad informed. “If someone’s in witness protection, it means people are already nervous. You can’t just go knocking down doors. That will get us nowhere. Unfortunately, we already have a strike against us. We didn’t know that witness protection was involved until a few minutes ago from this subject,” he nodded at the woman on the other side of the glass.

Brad looked Harlan in the eye. “You knew Hydra was rearing its ugly head again. You knew the intel was radioactive. You should have played it cool and just paid her the money. Kept it quiet.”

“Don’t tell me how to do my job, Brad. You work for me, remember?”

The tall man moved faster than Harlan could see. Harlan felt himself slam against the one-way glass—hard! Momentarily stunned he recovered to find Brad’s long strong fingers wrapped around his throat.

Brad’s voice was calm; calculating. “I work—for money. Not you,” he corrected.

Harlan felt Brad’s fingers loosen from around his throat. The tall man began straightening Harlan’s tie and jacket. He spoke precisely, deliberately. “It’s—imbeciles—like you, that keep people like me in business. Remember that, Mr. Harlan.” He patted Harlan’s face.

Harlan nodded, both angered and scared.

Brad backed away from him. “You want this mess cleaned up?”

Harlan nodded again.

“You’re now paying us what the Brooks woman was asking.”

“What!?” Harlan exclaimed exasperated. “This is supposed to be warranty work. You screwed this up by not getting your target!”

“Mr. Harlan,” the woman spoke up, “What Brad is telling you is that your own incompetent meddling has voided the warranty. The moment Ms. Brooks mentioned Hydra, you should have come directly to us instead of trying to handle this yourself. You’ve made our job substantially harder now. When this subject doesn’t show up for work tomorrow morning, it’s going to make people even more nervous than they already are. It’s going to take a lot more resources and time to figure out where they are hiding subject seven, where they have hidden the data, and how they plan on going public with it.”

“We can’t pay you anywhere close to that much money! Haven’t you heard? Everyone’s talking ‘tax cuts’ these days. We don’t have that kind of money to appropriate!”

“That’s not my problem, Harlan,” Brad said coldly. “You want this cleaned up? I expect to see a deposit by the end of the week.”

Harlan pursed his lips. He nodded.

11

Water splashed furiously over the rocks below the terrace. Kent sat watching it, still in his shorts and shirt and socks from the night before; his iPad sitting in his lap, its self-updating news app totally ignored.

His thoughts swirled warmly around Lisa. Their date had gotten off to a great beginning and their make out time had been incredible. He'd discovered that Lisa was a really good kisser, although, he really didn't have anyone to actually compare her to. She definitely seemed to enjoy the way he kissed. He still felt a little awkward about how abruptly things had ended, but he understood her feelings and at least something of what she was going through.

After slipping his shirt on again, he'd found her curled up in the study, feeling sad and a bit self-conscious about going so far on what amounted to a first make-out date. The two of them

had just sat together in the darkness of the study talking late into the night.

For the second time in as many minutes, Kent discovered his coffee mug was still empty. He set down the iPad and went to the railing to just watch the sprays shooting over the rocks below and think about if there was any way he could possibly help her get out and back to her family.

Lisa found Kent looking at the water outside.

"Hey," she greeted in her Southern accent, walking up beside him next to the railing.

"Hey," he returned, not really sure what else to say.

"I'm sorry about last night," she apologized again.

"Stop," he smiled warmly at her. "You don't have to keep saying that," he assured.

"No, I do. I keep kicking myself for getting so carried away. I never should have taken your shirt off. It wasn't fair."

"I didn't mind," he looked at her.

"Still; I don't know why I got so carried away."

"Well, Lisa, you and I seem to have really good chemistry, I think."

"Really good?" she looked him. "Kent, it's beyond 'really good'. Trust me. I'm usually not like that. Somehow I'm really attracted to you. It's a little weird, actually. Didn't you feel it? When we were kissing last night?"

"Yea, but, honestly, Lisa, I was just thinking it was because I'd been stuck up here by myself for so long. But, it does kind of seem like you and I have this really strong connection. Maybe we should just not make-out."

"I didn't say that," she offered, bumping her shoulder into his, the thought hitting her sideways. "Maybe we just need to be a little more careful?"

"I had a great time having dinner and talking with you in the study last night," he offered. "Truth be told, until we talked last night, I had no idea I'd been making out with a supermodel," he grinned.

"Supermodel? Ha. Hardly," she corrected.

"Yea, well, I may have kind of Google'd you this morning," he admitted, smirking. "For a part-time job you certainly seem to have become quite the fashion celebrity."

"Honestly, Kent, it's all PR. My agency goes overboard to make me look a lot more popular than I really am. Truth be told, I don't even know what magazines or ads my photos even show up in anymore."

"*Sports Illustrated*, for one," he grinned. "I saw your swimsuit pics. I bet it's fun going to all those places."

"It is. But it's a lot of work too. I would shoot for a couple of weeks and then have to work like crazy to make up the classwork. It really just helped to pay for school and kept me out of going into a lot more debt than I did. I honestly don't consider it a real job."

"Well, your portfolio is pretty impressive. I can see why you're really popular," he complimented.

"Yea, well, that's the glam you're seeing. For every pic you see online, there were a hundred more of the same set that looked like I was standing in front of a mirror taking a bad selfie," she smiled beautifully.

He grinned and then helplessly ran his eyes down her figure. She was still dressed in his oversized shirt and shorts. He noticed her still badly bruised ankle.

"How does your foot feel this morning?"

"Better. It's still really sore. I'm going to really try to stay off of it for the next couple of days, I think."

Kent nodded and turned to look at her, sensing an opportunity. "I could help you. I mean, get things for you. I don't mind."

“Kent, that’s sweet, but I’m not helpless,” she smiled at the offer.

“No really. I wouldn’t mind. It’s not like I’m doing anything else around here.”

“Well, I guess you could make me one of your omelets, like yesterday.”

Kent quickly scooped her off her feet, half surprising her.

“Oh!” she laughed moving her arm around his neck. “Kent I *can* still walk,” she assured.

“No, we need to keep you off of your feet,” he held her in his powerful arms. “For the next few days you can call me your personal attendant. Your wish is my command!” he smiled.

She giggled softly. “Honestly, Kent, you’re going to spoil me.”

He looked warmly into her eyes. “Oh, believe me,” he assured with a grin, walking her into the house, “I intend to.”

12

Kent's over-the-top chivalrous attending to Lisa's every need and refusing to allow her to walk had given her ankle the time it needed to begin to heal; at least it had begun to feel much stronger now. The pain had nearly vanished; although, Lisa still had a slight limp if she walked on it too much.

Kent entered the study and set some tea for her on a side table. The weather had turned nasty and wet and cold outside with the both of them cooped up indoors all afternoon.

Lisa looked mopey.

"You're still thinking about your folks," he offered.

"Yes." It made her depressed knowing the sadness they were probably going through right now.

"You know," he began, taking the couch cushion next to hers and slipping himself under her legs. He began ever-so-gently rubbing her tender foot, being careful not to push too

much or move her ankle. "I've been thinking that there may be a way we could get you home."

"Kent, we've already talked about this," she assured. "It's going to be at least another week before my foot feels better for me to even think about trying to hike out of here. Even then, I'm still really concerned about what will happen to you if I do that."

"I know. But in a couple of days is my call to WITSEC. I think I may be able to get them to come in and pick you up when they make the next delivery."

"Pick me up? In a helicopter?"

Kent nodded.

"But, what about the search and rescue effort?"

"Right, well, I haven't gotten that far yet. But I'm willing to bet that WITSEC could come up with a really good rational excuse for you showing back up at your folk's home."

"Kent, that's a great idea; but, do you think they would? Just pick me up like that?"

"I don't know. I guess we'll find out when I call."

A new feeling of hope rose within Lisa. She sat up and folded her legs back under herself on the sofa and snuggled herself up against Kent. He wrapped his arms around her and lightly kissed the side of her head.

The warmth of Kent's scent again filled Lisa's senses. He *was* going to help her get home. She lightly kissed his neck, bringing a gentle audible smile from him and a warm hug. Being this close to him now brought back some memories of the day when the two of them had only just met. Was Kent really that good of a kisser or had she just imagined it from the roller-coaster emotion of their first day together?

She nibbled on his neck, drawing a deep breath out of him. Her lips wandered to his ear and then his cheek. When her lips found his, Kent returned her light kisses with some talented ones of his own.

"I hate the way you kiss me," she protested as their soft make-out continued.

"I know, I suck," his lips toyed with her pout drawing her emotion quickly higher.

"You don't, that's the problem," she assured between kisses.

"Lisa," Kent pulled back from his kiss and put some distance on the sofa between himself and Lisa.

"Did I do something wrong?" she pouted.

"No, nothing. But—well, every time you rev my motor we end up making out for too long and I start to get sore."

"Sore? You mean—"

He nodded.

Lisa smirked. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, you didn't know? It's not funny, Lisa."

"I know it's not. I'm sorry." Still, she couldn't help but smirk at the situation that all this time Kent had been so quiet about it. "Does that mean you're not going to kiss me anymore?"

Kent returned her smile. "No, but, these makeout dates of ours are going to kill me."

"I'm sorry, Kent. I just didn't realize—"

"No, it's alright. Part of the problem is this chemistry you and I seem to share. It's not helping, Lisa; it's everything I can do just to keep my hands off of you."

"You're not the only one with that problem, Kent. Trust me," she admitted.

* * * * *

Lisa waited, sunning herself on a huge upstream boulder that helped form yet another of the large pools not far from the house. The midstream pools were one of the few places in the canyon where there were no trees to obscure the sun. She

didn't have a bathing suit but she made due with a pair of Kent's French-cut bikini briefs and her own rolled-up tank top. The briefs didn't exactly fit her well up front, but she'd seen Kent wearing them a few times and they fit him snugly, maybe too snugly. Kent wasn't exactly lacking anything in the male department.

She watched as he approached, hopping from one boulder to the next one to get to hers.

Lisa looked up at him, her sun glasses shading her eyes.

"Well, I called them," he offered, crouching on the rock next to her, resting his hand on her knee and looking at her laying beautifully across the massive rock. She always looked amazing no matter how she was dressed.

"What did they say? Are they going to pick me up?"

"Well, there's good news and not so good news."

"Oh?" she sat up.

"The not so good news is they won't right now, not unless it's a medical emergency. I told them about your foot. They said that's not an emergency."

Lisa frowned.

"But they did say they'd run it by a few of the marshals to see if they could come up with a plan. So, it's not exactly falling on deaf ears."

She let out an unhappy sigh.

"They just don't want you accidentally exposing me to the local police. It's been over a week now. If you suddenly turned up, with all of the government and media attention the authorities would be asking you all sorts of questions."

"But you told them I was going to keep this our secret, right? I mean, if I said anything, I'd be in just as much danger as you are right now."

Kent nodded. "Yea, I told them that you'd be quiet about where you'd been and about me. They said they still couldn't

risk the exposure. In fact," Kent frowned a sigh, "you've been ordered to stay put."

"What?!"

Kent nodded.

"Ordered? by whom?! They can't do that to me!"

"I told them the same thing, and that it wasn't legal. My dad's an attorney. But they quoted me some statute I'd never heard of and said they'd have a federal judge issue a sealed order this afternoon. I'm really sorry, Lisa."

"Oh! OH! That is so frustrating. I can't believe they'd do that! I'm really starting to hate the government."

"Do you want to talk to them? I can call my contact back if you like. He's actually a really nice guy," he unclipped the odd-looking yellow and black radio phone from his belt and offered it to her.

She held up her hand, "No. No, Kent, I don't know what I would be able to say that might change their minds. It sounds like they've already decided what they're going to do anyway. I guess I'm just going to have wait until my foot heals and then hike my way out of here on my own. Order or no order, I am not putting my parents through hell thinking I'm still lost up here."

"When do you think you'll be leaving?" he asked, not hiding his disappointment.

"Probably in a few days. I think my ankle will be strong enough by then."

Kent nodded. "You know I'll help you any way I can, Lis'." He was still looking at her from his crouched position on her rock. "Well, hey, that gives us a few more days."

Lisa shook her hair back, looking at him beautifully.

"For what?"

"For me to keep asking you out," he smiled. "Would you be interested in having dinner with me tonight?"

Lisa looked at him, smiling. "Of course I'll have dinner with you. You don't need to ask."

"No, but I just like asking you out," he assured.

"Silly."

"Lisa," Kent's tone turned serious for a moment. "You're not angry at me, are you—for getting you mixed up in all of this?"

"Kent," she took off her glasses to look at him. "Why would I be angry at *you*?"

"I don't know; I just thought that maybe part of you might be. WITSEC wasn't exactly helpful."

"Well, if I'm angry about the situation it's not with you. It's just the circumstance that I might be angry about. Sure, you're kind of part of it all, but I'm not upset at you," she assured.

"It's just," he sighed looking across the water and then back to her eyes, "well, honestly, selfishly, I really don't want you to go."

"I can see that," she smiled.

"Well, I just didn't want you going home with your last thoughts of me being some kind of scoundrel."

"Kent, you, my dear," she reached out and put her hand on his knee, "are hardly a scoundrel. If anything, you've been a prince."

He smiled.

"Kent," she looked at him.

"Hmm?"

"Your secret is safe with me. I'm not going to tell anyone anything."

He nodded and took hold of her hand. "I know you won't," he gently squeezed her hand. "Hey, maybe we could share a glass of wine with dinner?"

Kent watched as another warm smile crossed Lisa's lips. "Absolutely," she assured.

“Well, I guess I’m going to put this away,” he clipped the phone back onto his belt. “Do you want something to drink? It’s a little warm out here.”

“Ooh, that would be great. Maybe an iced tea?”

“Sure.”

He stood and she watched as her hunky cellmate easily leaped from each boulder back to shore.

Kent was halfway back to the house when he heard a sound that sent a bolt of fear and alarm through every nerve of his body. A scream! Her scream. Lisa! He whirled and began running back toward where he’d left her just a minute ago. When he’d cleared the drooping branches of the trees the led into the boulder clearing he saw something huge and brown advancing across the rocks toward a fleeing Lisa! It was leaping whole boulders and was almost right upon her! He didn’t have time to think. Adrenaline was already shooting through his limbs making them shaky. The weapon was already in his hand and he quickly pulled back the action to chamber a round.

It was only by sheer chance that Lisa had looked up. The massive bear was already on the first rock, but perhaps it had slipped, splashing awkwardly in the water. The splashing sound had caught her attention. The moment she saw it she screamed in shock as terror flooded into her being. For another moment she’d been frozen stiff with fear, but then she’d fled, leaping to the next rock as she screamed.

Her limbs now felt like lead but she pushed herself to move as quickly as she could to the next big rock. When she looked behind her the big animal was now only two boulders away from her and bounding across them quickly. She screamed again, half stumbling onto the next boulder. She was almost to the shore!

A loud crack echoed through the peace of the canyon. Lisa heard the big animal roar loudly right behind her. She leapt off the last boulder and onto the shore. She then saw Kent standing, focused completely on the huge bear now landing on the rock Lisa had just left. Both of Kent's hands cradled the gun. Again the big animal roared loudly, like it was filled with some kind of rage!

Lisa heard two more loud cracks echo across the canyon and then more huge bellows behind her as she now ran toward Kent. She was not looking back! Kent had lowered his weapon and was already beginning to move in the direction of the house when Lisa caught up with him. Both of them instinctively grasped each other's hands running. Kent half pulled her through the underbrush as they made their way as fast as both could toward the terrace. Lisa's ankle began to throb but she ignored the pain, at least until they reached the terrace. Her foot suddenly gave out causing her to cry out in intense pain. She stumbled; but holding onto Kent's hand kept her from falling. Kent's powerful arm reached around her, lifting her as she held onto his shoulder. He lifted her quickly and moved them toward the doors of the house.

Both of the tall glass doors of the home were wide open as Kent dashed the two of them inside. They quickly pushed both massive panes of thick glass closed behind them. Kent hastily hit the floor button with his boot to lock them. It only took seconds before the massive burly beast bounded quickly onto the terrace, bellowing loudly. The huge bear flung itself repeatedly at the thick doors, but the secure glass never once moved, even against the great weight of the monstrous animal. It clawed at the seam of the doors, leaving great streaks of mud and red all over the glass.

One of Kent's arms still held strongly around Lisa in her makeshift swimsuit; his other arm outstretched; the weapon in

hand pointed directly at the monster on the other side should their glass barrier somehow fail.

"Are you alright!?" he asked pulling her close. Both of them were breathing heavily, trying to catch their breaths after the brief intense sprint.

"Yea," she exhaled heavily, wincing at the pain, "but my foot wasn't quite ready for that," she hobbled herself close to him, trying to ignore the stabbing sensations still shooting through it.

"I definitely hit it," he pointed the weapon at the streaks of blood on the glass. "I don't know how many times."

"It looks really mad," she said worriedly.

Kent nodded. "I think I slowed it down, but I really pissed it off too."

"Will that kill it if it gets in here?" Lisa said looking at the weapon Kent held firmly outstretched in his hand.

"I doubt it," he frowned. "Not unless I can get a headshot. It's only a nine-millimeter. Let's just hope I have enough rounds in the magazine to do something if it does get in."

Lisa tightly wrapped her arms around Kent while he held her close.

After long minutes the big animal finally began to tire. It was clear now that despite its usually large size, the bear was going to be no match for the thick glass wall that separated them. Kent lowered and finally holstered the weapon. He wrapped his arms around Lisa as they watched the massive beast mull about grunting as it tossed around the terrace furniture. After a few more minutes it lumbered off the terrace, leaving a gruesome trail of bloodied mud in its wake, disappearing into the forest downstream.

Kent and Lisa moved carefully to the windows to look out.

"Kent, look at all the blood it left behind," Lisa peered out of a place on the glass that was un-smearred with red. "Is it going to die?"

Kent shook his head. "I just winged it, Lis'. That's not a lot of blood for something that size," he assured.

"This is twice now that thing has come after me. I don't want to meet up with it again," she said, squeezing him tightly.

"Yea, you and me both."

Kent looked down at Lisa and the look of fear still in her eyes. The look on her face moved him deeply. He needed to somehow erase that feeling of fear from her. Brushing her hair back from her face, he gently kissed her forehead. The two of them stood in the filtered sunlight, quietly breathing, holding each other tightly.

* * * * *

Lisa had finally stopped trembling. With Kent spooned tightly around her in the dimmed light of their bedroom to calm her nerves, she'd drifted off to sleep. Again, he carefully left her resting with part of the comforter covering her. Their brush with death had left his own nerves a little jumbled. He felt incredibly relieved that both he and Lisa were now tucked away safely inside the house.

Outside, the rain was pouring down in sheets. Gusting winds blowing through the canyon were common with the storms here. The wind blew the water heavily, splashing over the terrace and against the glass, washing clean the evidence of the day's harrowing brush with death.

Kent withdrew to the quiet comfort of the study and his favorite chair. Grabbing a fresh hot mug of coffee, he tried to relax. Glancing at the front page of the *Seattle Times*, his eyes grew wide with surprise. One of the story headlines grabbed his attention: "*Mauled Searchers Recovering*". Somehow Kent had missed the original story from two days ago! He tapped the link back to the first story.

“Searchers from a local church looking for lost hiker Lisa Kyle found only tragedy today when one of their search parties was attacked by what witnesses described as a large Grizzly bear. ...”

“Oh my god,” Kent whispered to himself shaking his head. He and Lisa had just narrowly escaped meeting a similar fate! He wondered if it was the same bear they’d just encountered? He was pretty sure it was.

Kent read the story in utter disbelief. Five people from Lisa’s church had been mauled by a large bear. One of them had been killed.

“Park rangers immediately suspended the search and closed all trails open to the public leading into the Snoqualmie and Wenatchee National Forests. ...”

Maybe that’s why they hadn’t heard any search planes in the past couple of days.

“Some authorities within the Forest Service expressed their concerns privately that Miss Kyle may have met a similar fate as the search party ...”

Kent was very glad that hadn’t actually happened to Lisa. Still, it was pretty clear now that a lot of people were likely writing Lisa off as having perished in the jaws of a dangerous wild animal.

Kent thought morbidly about that for a while. What if the authorities just stopped looking for her because of the danger? Everyone would assume she’d been killed by the bear, just like this other person had been. Would Lisa change her mind about staying? Wait it out at least until the danger had passed? He was pretty sure she wouldn’t want to chance hiking out of the forest now, nor would he allow her to do so! He hoped she

wouldn't challenge him about that. Lisa was smart. He knew she wouldn't; well, he hoped she wouldn't. WITSEC certainly would probably be happy about the bear; it was very clear they wanted Lisa to stay put and well away from any media or the local authorities.

Kent finished reading the story and the updates. Only one person had died and it looked like everyone else would be recovering from the attack. He wondered if he should feel responsible for the death of the searcher? That was probably going too far. He wasn't the one who got Lisa lost or hurt her ankle, and he certainly didn't know the bear was dangerous. Feeling responsible for someone else's bad fortune was probably going too far.

Kent slipped on some ear buds and closed his eyes, listening to some soothing music to calm the uneasiness in his spirit. Somewhere in his listening mind he offered a few thoughts of thanks to God, if He or She even existed, for helping Lisa, for bringing her to him, and for rescuing them from what could have been a terrible tragedy earlier in the day. Oddly, Kent hadn't talked to God in a while. He wondered if God was even listening.

13

Harlan's foul mood followed him into the Oval Office where the President and the Secretary of Homeland Security, were already meeting. The last couple of days had not been good ones. Both men looked at him with inquiring stares as he closed the door. He was already frowning.

"I'll take that look to mean we're still not any closer to finding this kid?" the president offered.

"He's gone deep, Mr. President. He's out there, somewhere. We're just not sure where yet."

The DHS Secretary looked at the President, "We re-reviewed the airport videos from almost two years ago showing him getting on the plane. You were right, Harlan. It wasn't the same guy. I'm shocked you figured out who the loose end was so quickly," the Secretary mused.

“Yea, well, Frank, you’re not the only one with resources,” Harlan assured, the memory of Brad’s hand around his throat was still fresh in his mind.

“So someone got wise and tossed us a body double at the last minute. We apparently didn’t move fast enough in tying up the loose ends,” the president offered. “One slipped away without our notice.”

“He didn’t just slip away, Mr. President,” Frank assured. “He’s being kept out of the way by someone who knows something about the operation.”

“So why have they waited so long?” the President asked.

“Probably because they don’t have everything they need. My guess is that they’re missing some crucial piece of evidence.”

“Don’t they still have the log data from our servers?” Harlan looked at Frank.

“Probably, but it’s likely inadmissible as any kind of evidence. They had no probable cause and no search warrants. It’s all stolen data—data that was technically stolen from the U.S. Government. The Justice Department would never let it see the light of day in a courtroom, trust me.”

“Yea, well, I wouldn’t count on that, Frank,” the President countered. “I’m a lawyer, remember; and I’ve discussed this with the Attorney General. This Levi guy, he wasn’t at all a part of the theft; so he’s a witness. His personal testimony could open the door to admitting the data as evidence, stolen or not.”

“Yes, okay, that’s true,” Frank admitted nodding, “but we’re not going to let it get that far, Mr. President. I have people watching his family and anyone else that was associated with him, all from a safe distance at the moment. If anyone so much as sneezes WITSEC, believe me, we’ll know about it.”

14

WE SHALL FILL MAN WITH OUR IMAGE
AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD SHALL DRAW NIGH THE SONS
AND DAUGHTERS OF MAN TO BE AWAKENED

—THE BOOKS OF GOD

Dinner baking in the oven filled the home with an amazing smell. Lisa had insisted that Kent let her make them something for the two of them. He sat at the kitchen bar and watched as she breaded, seasoned and spiced fillets of tofu along with thickly-sliced red onion and potatoes, broccoli and small peppers. Well dashed with Parmesan, the unfamiliar dish was making Kent very hungry as it slowly baked.

“I feel really bad for the Harpers,” Lisa began, watching as Kent took a sip from their shared crystal glass.

“Did you know them?”

“Not personally,” she admitted, “it’s a big church. But I’d hate to lose a family member, especially like that.”

Kent nodded.

“Are you going to be okay? I know you were really looking forward to leaving.”

“I’m not leaving, Kent. Not after what just happened. Until they move or euthanize that thing it’s going to be too dangerous to try to hike out of here. So I guess you’re stuck with your new roommate. Sorry,” she mocked with a wry grin.

“Well, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t happy about that,” he smiled back at her. “I know you really want to go home.”

“I still want to go home. But even if the whole world thinks I’m dead, at least I’m not. I guess I’ll just give my family and friends a really big surprise when all of this eventually blows over. I’m just sad about having to put my family through that kind of pain. They’re already planning my funeral,” she sighed. “But I guess it beats the alternative of actually being dead.”

“I think I’ve told myself that same thing a time or two as well. It’s the thought of the reunion that keeps me at peace, I think.”

“I think it will be really hard on them, but in the end, it will be a very happy day when I finally come home.”

“You and me both,” he assured.

Kent watched Lisa check their baking dinner. The hot smell again refilled the kitchen wonderfully.

Both Kent and Lisa relaxed in one of the large reclining movie chairs. Lisa had slipped out of hers and now shared his as the two of them kissed softly, reclined in the darkness of the home theater after dinner and an old 80’s movie neither of them had seen.

“Mmmm,” he began, holding her lips in his, the side of her face in his hand, “you really know how to cook.”

“I’m just getting warmed up,” she grinned against his lips.

“I was talking about dinner, goof. I think I’ve discovered another one of your talents,” he offered.

She smiled at the compliment, pulling his lower lip slightly into her mouth and released it. “Well, mister, this is definitely one of your talents,” she offered through his kiss.

He breathed a smile.

Making out with Kent in the theater was the perfect end to a romantic date with her brawny roommate. It didn’t take long for the two of them to begin wrapping themselves together in the reclined chair as the emotion of their making out moved to well above warm.

Kent felt his shirt becoming untucked again.

“Hmm,” he kissed, pulling her hand away gently from the white stretch muscle shirt tucked into his black Khaki shorts. “Uh-uh,” he rebuffed, “I don’t want to be sore again like the other day.”

Lisa looked at him with one of her very Southern pouts.

He rolled his eyes. “Alright,” he sighed, lifting the shirt off and giving Lisa full access to his chiseled chest and abs.

Kent’s hands wandered over Lisa’s amazing ass while she tortured his nipples mercilessly with her lips. She was killing him with the way she teased him like this. Kent couldn’t help but wander his hands over the front of her own shirt kneading her chest softly through the open red Henley she wore.

Lisa was quickly driving him crazy with emotion yet again. The sensations she sent through him were excruciatingly fine. And he knew how this would end—painfully, like it always did. But Lisa’s lips and smooth bare legs wrapped around his were worth it. Kent gently began unbuttoning her shirt. He’d grown to really enjoy their shirtless makeout sessions, even if

it did make him sore. Kent opened the oversized Henley and slipped his hands warmly inside her shirt as they kissed.

Lisa snuggled herself warmly against Kent's skin and began teasing his lips again softly while his hands moved caressingly in uninhibited exploration of her smooth skin and amazing bare breasts.

"That feels really nice," she complimented. Kent's delicate touch on her chest always gave Lisa a warm, sensuous feeling. His masculine but gentle fingers felt incredible against her skin as he gently kneaded her while the two of them moved intermittently between soft and passionate kisses.

It was in the warmth of these intimate moments with Lisa that Kent would set aside his own feelings; it was hers he really cared about. Sure he enjoyed her touch, but he wanted to make *her* feel beautiful, alive, safe, and desirable. At times it almost felt as if he could sense what she was feeling and how she wanted to feel and be touched. He tried to sense and then give her what she wanted.

Kent opened her shirt fully now but didn't take it all the way off. Bare skin to bare skin, they kissed hungrily, locked in a softly powerful embrace. Kent gripped the backside of Lisa's shorts with his hand in their growing, deliberate passion while both rocked softly against each other's shorts. He'd grown more than rock hard once again under Lisa's insanely torturous lips.

"You're going to get me in trouble, again," he whispered breathfully against her lips.

"Alright," she withdrew, lifting herself out of their chair. "We could go upstairs and talk—in my room," she added.

Kent smirked. "Your room? To talk. Right. You just want to torture me some more. Like you did the other night."

"Maybe," she gave him a wry smile.

He gathered his shirt and followed her upstairs where they resumed their warm romantic embrace, their lips meeting once

again. Their now shirtless bodies entwined as the two of them rolled softly with each other across the comforter, devious and enchanting with their own wandering touches.

They kissed, embraced, made out, talked, and snuggled off and on well into the night. But their extended make-out session was now beginning to leave Kent with an unusually severe ache between his thighs.

"Lisa," he came up for air, breathless against her sweet tasting lips, feeling her move gently against his shorts, "You're killing me. I'm getting really sore now," he breathed.

"Ohh," she cooed sympathetically, moving her hand over and right onto the tall hardness pushing out from inside his khakis. "I didn't mean to put you in any pain."

Kent was pretty sure this was the first time she'd touched him quite so intimately. "Yea," he winced, "it's bad. I think I went too far this time. It just feels—" Kent stopped when he felt Lisa's fingers unbuttoning his short khakis. She carefully unzipped them and peeled away the front of his shorts revealing shimmering white trunks that hugged his cut waist.

"Oooh," she breathed, honestly a little astonished by Kent's fully aroused manhood that made a long, thick bulge in the thin Lycra, almost protruding out of them.

Lisa drank in the sight of Kent's beautiful masculine form. The back of her fingers moved and lingered all along the front of his tall bulging briefs.

Kent watched her breathlessly as she teased his fully hardened package. "Jeeze, Lisa, I'm not sure how this is going to keep me from getting worse," he grimaced through the sensations she was delivering into him.

Lisa breathed a smile, gently squeezing the rock-hardness beneath the spandex.

While Lisa teased and devoured the visage of the writhing Greek god laying next to her, Kent wasn't about to let her get away with overheating his emotions. She was going to be

teased just as badly. Her Henley had long since vanished into the night and Kent cautiously unzipped and slipped her out of her shorts.

Rising up on one elbow, Kent looked hungrily at Lisa in the dim light. With her flowing hair, beautiful face and curved body dressed only in some of his own shimmering snug boxer trunks, he smoothed his hand over her skin, watching her chest rise and fall with each deep breath. She looked like an absolute angel. His angel. An new possessive feeling washed over him as he moved his hand lightly over her skin. He felt so incredibly drawn to her.

"Lisa," he whispered against her neck, "you look absolutely amazing, especially in just these" he complimented softly, his hand moving over the front of her trunks. "You could be a swimsuit model," he mocked, grinning.

He watched her smile as she deliberately stretched and writhed softly, giving Kent a full and sensuous view of her amazing body.

"Lisa?" Kent breathed softly, moving closely against her warm skin and feeling her fingers delicately exploring him intimately through the Lycra while he did the same with her. He watched her body move with the intimate sensations he delivered into her. "Ever make out with anyone like this? I mean—ever?"

"No," she kissed him softly. "Not like this."

"We," he began, delivering another warm kiss while speaking through her lips, "should make out like this more often."

"You think?" Lisa smiled her agreement into his mouth.

They rolled intimately together on the comforter kissing with Lisa now spread over the top of him, her hips softly rising and falling against his thick firmness. Kent's hands slipped under her briefs to grip and knead her very fine bare ass.

She felt Kent softly pushing her trunks off of her curves.

"I take it you don't want me wearing your underwear any more?"

"Mmm-hmm," he kissed her seriously. "Lisa, right now," he breathed deperately, "I don't want you wearing anything." He slipped her out of them.

With nothing on, Lisa sat up, straddling Kent's cut waist between her bare thighs. In the dim light Lisa looked beautiful unclothed. Between her thighs she sported a narrow, bikini-trimmed but thick patch that the backs of Kent's fingers now softly moved through. His fingers then slipped down and ultra-lightly caressed her delicate folds, causing her to take in more than a few rippled breaths. The feelings Kent's fingers delivered within her were making her gasp for air.

Lisa wanted—no, *needed*—to see all of Kent as well. She slowly peeled away his stretch trunks, revealing his stunning bare manhood. She found it amusing that Kent kept himself shaved very short around his length, but not totally bare. She'd never touched a guy like this before. She ran her fingers delicately over his hardness and watched him savor the sensations she delivered into him.

"Ohh, Lis'," she watched him wince at the deeply powerful pleasure her fingers delicately moved through him.

For the first time with nothing between them, they kissed and moved and rolled together over the covers. Feeling Kent's warm, powerful body fully exposed against her own curves sent Lisa's desire soaring. Her hands explored the thick powerful muscles of his back, then his rounded muscular ass once again as she uncontrollably rocked herself softly against his long firmness.

Kent softly rolled over Lisa, warmly and gently covering her with his large body, kissing her; his manhood slipping between her thighs, gently grazing her intimately.

Feeling Kent's sudden intimate touch against her sent a brief wave of powerful desire through Lisa. They continued to

kiss while Kent hovered above her, intimately playing the tip of himself against her moistening folds.

“Ooh, you’re—teasing me again,” she gasped in protest, drawing an uncontrolled breath as the weight of Kent’s hips pinned hers to the comforter.

He nodded. “Get used to it,” he breathed, kissing her with a mischievous grin.

“I know what this it. You’re punishing me,” she breathed heavily between kisses, feeling his manhood tortuously and wetly probing the outside of her folds intimately. Kent was killing her with the intimate sensations. “This is payback for making you sore, isn’t it,” she breathed trying to rock her hips under his.

“It is,” he whispered playfully.

Although he was really enjoying watching Lisa endure his torture, Kent also realized that neither of them were protected, nor did he have any protection way up here in the mountains. He didn’t exactly plan on having any company. She felt him stop teasing her and sigh.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

“Lisa,” he hovered over her, his eyes watching hers. “I know we could go further, but, we really should stop. We don’t have anything to protect you.” He kissed her. “We don’t have to go any further.”

Lisa brought Kent’s lips back to hers softly once again. Kent kissed her and despite his own warning, he continued to tease her softly with himself, watching her move and stretch alluringly beneath him.

While it was becoming very entertaining to watch Lisa and how he was able to arouse her so powerfully; her breaths, her deep kisses, how she moved herself beneath him was pushing Kent’s own desire to a near uncontrollable peak. His glands more than ached now. It was everything he could do not to just launch himself into her. He really wanted to take Lisa; fill her

with himself fully, deeply. Her folds had grown wet from their play together.

“Lisa, I—I really need to stop,” he warned again. “Seriously, I’m going to end up making you very pregnant with the way I am right now,” he kissed, only half joking.

“Kent—please,” she pleaded softly, taking hold of his massive shoulders, “I don’t want you to stop, please.”

“But—Lisa,” he breathed a protest against her pout.

“Kent. Don’t stop. Please—” she pleaded softly as if out of breath.

Kent knew he should have retreated. But it was the pure and yearning tone in Lisa’s voice. Maybe it was her. Maybe it was their chemistry, their odd attraction. Whatever it was, it moved Kent, emotionally, viscerally. Like a Siren’s call. For everything Kent was worth he could not have denied her now even if he had wanted to. The sincerity in Lisa’s voice as he felt her softly lifting her hips against his torturous length, as if yearning to move him inside herself, was more emotion than he could resist. Kent embraced Lisa in a warm, emotional, soft kiss and slipped himself warmly, wetly and deeply into her.

Lisa suddenly cringed a gasp beneath him.

“Lisa?!” he stopped, not moving now at all, even though he wasn’t all that far within her.

“Ooh—Kent,” she breathed, gripping him, her nails lightly digging into his hips.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked raising his chest from hers, a worried tone in his voice.

She pulled him back to her lips and kissed him. The twinge of pain she knew would be coming was already beginning to dull.

“It’s okay,” she breathed, passion still moving within her. She moved her hips against his, as if trying to push him further within her.

“Lisa,” he breathed warmly against her mouth, “did I just—I mean—is this your first time?”

“Yea,” she kissed him, softly nodding, running her fingers over the sides of his head, through his hair. “Is that okay?” she asked.

“I—I, don’t know,” he looked at her warmly, curiously. “I guess that makes this a first for both of us.” Kent returned to tasting her lips.

Feeling Lisa moving tightly around him, Kent couldn’t help but continue to move himself slowly into her until she’d accepted him completely.

With his lips on hers, Kent easily made the twinge of pain a distant memory for Lisa as they continued to kiss, with Lisa locking her legs tightly around Kent’s formidable thighs.

Lisa had never felt anything so intimate as what she felt now with Kent holding her like this; the way his lips lightly caressed hers while he glided his thick rock-hardness slowly, gently, deeply within her. It was more emotion than she’d ever experienced. She rolled softly with him over the comforter rocking her hips softly with his.

With Kent now beneath her, Lisa lifted herself up and straddled him again, watching him as he flexed himself warmly, seemingly uncontrollably into her. His hands found the sides of her hips while Lisa gave him a full view of herself sheathed over him. Kent admired her curved form as he watched himself move into and within her.

While Lisa enjoyed the sensations Kent aroused moving within her, she could see that Kent’s breathing had grown heavier and in the dim light of their room, a light glow had begun to cover him.

“Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?” he whispered heavily, out of breath, arching himself warmly into her. His hands holding gently around her hips, he watched her breasts dancing under her hair in the low, soft light.

Lisa's fingers slid over his abs and pecs. "I was about to say the same thing to you," she whispered back, watching his body rock, gently moving under her. Watching Kent's body move beneath her like this only added to the warm feeling he was drawing slowly up within her.

Kent looked up helplessly as an uncontrollable and exhilarating feeling began to build powerfully deep within him. The upright position she had him in was pushing him quickly to the edge, but somehow denying him at the same time.

Lisa noticed the change in Kent's tension as he began to push almost wildly, deliberately and deeply into her.

"What's the matter, big guy?" she teased his nipples, watching his every muscle flex and tense as waves of painful pleasure were washing over his face.

Emotion had been building within her also, but she was nowhere near where Kent appeared to be now. Kent lifted himself strongly beneath her, as his hands gripped tightly around her straddling hips. She watched him arch his back and breathe deeply with the passion that now flowed through him. Lisa had never seen a guy in the throes of passion before. It made her feel powerful, the way she was able to make him rock and toss himself beneath her.

"OH! God! Lisa!" Kent whimpered. "You're going to—you're going to make me—!"

Kent never finished the words. She felt his muscles flex and tighten with the intensely building ecstatic emotion. As overloaded as he was, Kent felt himself begin to release even before he'd reached his peak. His whole body now arched beneath her. Lisa watched him watching her as he powerfully, vocally, massively erupted, spilling his ecstasy into her.

"LISA!" he called out, burying himself deeply into her, over and over, with each successive wave of the near excruciating ecstasy that rocked through him. Again and again

he breathlessly called out her name, never taking his eyes from hers.

Incredibly deep emotion flowed over Lisa like a wave as she watched Kent's eyes never leaving hers through his excruciating release. The sight of his ecstasy, knowing that he had made her the full focus of it, deeply stirred within her.

"Ohh, Kent, Honey," she breathed, emotionally moved by hearing her name over and over as she watched her beautiful Kent flex warmly beneath her. She slid her hands up over his glowing pecs and lowered herself gently onto him again with a sweet kiss, listening to him gasp heavily, feeling his chest rise and fall while his heart raced still wildly.

"Ohh, Lisa; Lisa," she heard him exhale heavily again. Kent folded his arms around her, his powerful legs gently moving and locking around hers; his body flexing deeply as he continued to rock and press himself fully into her.

"Are you okay?" she whispered into his ear, her hand stroking the side of his head.

"Ow," he breathed softly with a smile.

Lisa lifted herself up to look at him. "Ow?"

He nodded. "That was—that was like torture," He exhaled. "I guess this has been building inside me all week. Too many long makeout sessions I guess. Ooh," he sighed again, savoring both the pleasure and ache of the massive release.

"Hmmm" she giggled a smile. "Feel better?" she squeezed herself intimately around his length that filled her quite a bit more slippery now.

He nodded taking a deep breath and pleasant sigh. His hands slipped over her chest. "I—" he breathed deeply, "have a confession, Lisa."

"Oh?" she smiled.

"Since that first day I saw you, I've wanted to be with you like this. Every time we made out. I wanted you. I wanted to kiss you. To hold you. To make love to you; just like this."

"Aww," she smiled, "We'll just have to not wait so long next time."

"Next time?" he beamed, overwhelmed by that very sexy thought.

"Next time," she nodded, giving him a smile.

"Did you come?" he asked, still moving softly within her.

"I'm fine," she said softly.

Suddenly Kent didn't like the sound of that. He wasn't an expert on women by any means, but he knew enough to realize that 'I'm fine' meant the exact opposite with a lot of women. It had been Lisa's first time. Was she in some pain? He knew she'd never tell him if she was, not with the two of them like this.

Kent softly rolled her beneath himself and withdrew from her. He lay next to Lisa, offering her soft kisses. She was kissing him but she seemed to have lost the intensity and the passion they'd shared just minutes before.

Kent explored her neck with his lips once again, which she seemed to like. He moved his kisses to her breasts and toyed delicately with her nipples between his lips and teeth. She seemed to respond, but nothing like they'd just shared. He moved to her smooth tummy kissing her sides and her navel with soft brushes of his lips.

He began kissing her bikini area, moving his lips through her tiny but thick tuft.

"Kent, you should kiss me up here," she said attempting to pull him back up to her.

Kent sensed that his intimate kisses were making Lisa nervous. But Kent *wanted* to kiss her intimately. He knew she'd never been kissed like this before. Maybe she just didn't know what to expect; didn't want to offend him with her scent. Then again, Kent had never kissed a woman like this either, but he knew exploring Lisa like this would likely bring her to the kind of release she'd just given him.

Kent took both of Lisa's protesting arms and gently pinned them to the comforter beside her. He looked warmly into her eyes.

"Lisa—trust me."

She looked at him with a warm but wary gaze, trying to move her wrists from his grasp. But Kent's powerful arms held her fast. He just gazed into her eyes.

"Trust me, Honey. Please."

Something in Kent's voice moved her. She could see the warmth and caring in his eyes. She stopped struggling, drew a deep breath and nodded. He lifted her arms and rested them on the pillow above her head. Kent kissed her on the lips softly again, then her neck and breasts once again. It wasn't long before he'd reached her bikini area and began kissing her inner thighs.

Lisa still felt uneasy about Kent's exploration of her. But when he'd said 'please' with such feeling in his voice, it moved her like nothing he'd ever said to her.

Despite her initial reservations, she could not deny that the feeling of Kent's lips brushing gently over her upper legs was becoming alluring. The uneasy feeling she'd had with the idea of him kissing her intimately was suddenly being replaced with some interest. His kissing was making her skin tingle. With his lips teasing her she couldn't help but move her legs as his kisses moved deeper between them. Desire soon returned with a vengeance inside Lisa as soon as she felt Kent's tongue move warmly and delicately over the tops of her intimate lips.

Kent smiled to himself as he felt Lisa draw a deep breath. He wished he could watch her face as he teased her like this.

Lisa exhaled a soft emotional breath as Kent began to send deeply sensual feelings through her. Her hips rose with the new sensations. "Oooh, Kent," she breathed. "That feels—really nice! Ohhh," she exhaled softly.

Kent delicately invaded her folds with his tongue and teased her firm button causing Lisa's hips begin to rise and fall repeatedly.

"Aaahh—Kent," she called out softly again, arching her back, her breaths becoming deeper. "What—what are you doing to me?!"

Kent continued his intimate assault, drawing her soft, supple folds into his mouth.

Lisa felt her hips moving almost uncontrollably under Kent's incessant, playful teases. Her hands moved to her sides and she began gripping and scratching softly at the comforter with each wave of new sensation Kent delivered into her. She couldn't stop writhing as the feelings bolted softly from between her thighs, awakening every part of her being from his warm, wet teases.

Her whole body was now tingling!

She felt Kent's hands around her hips, gripping and kneading her ass as emotion rose steadily within her. His play against her folds, her clit, his tongue slipping lightly into her, all of it pushed her to a height of feeling and desire she'd never been to before. A glow of perspiration was now all over her skin with her deepening breaths.

"Kent! Oooh," she breathed heavily, arching her body deeply while gripping the comforter tightly.

Kent smiled to himself at the thought of the deep feelings he could deliver into her with the two of them like this. It seemed like Lisa's emotion had moved almost to the breaking point now. His teasing was causing her to buck wildly. With each breath she began calling out loudly.

The built-up tense emotion within Lisa had finally reached its own peak within her. She opened her mouth, exhaling loudly as an immense and incredible wave of deep pleasure detonated within her! She'd never experienced anything so

powerful in her life. Lisa screamed as her body all at once rocked with the massively explosive ecstatic release.

But it wasn't stopping! Kent wasn't stopping. His incessant wet teases rocked her body delivering wave after wave of unbridled ecstatic bolts. Lisa couldn't help but call out loudly as each successive wave of pleasure rocketed through her quivering body.

Kent was taken by complete surprise by Lisa's deep and loudly emotional release. It made him feel a sense of warmth for Lisa that he was able to send her into such intense feeling.

As her waves began to subside, Lisa now gasped when his tongue again touched her very sensitive button.

"Kent! Please, Kent!" she gasped. "It's too much," she pleaded. "Please!"

Kent had no idea what to expect. He'd no idea Lisa would erupt so powerfully; nor be so tender and sensitive after a climax. He'd just wanted to make her feel more pleasure again.

He made her body rock and gasp one final time; then ceased his teasing. He moved over her, kissing her intimately, along the glow of her skin, over her rising and falling tummy, until he had found her open mouth taking in deep breaths.

He kissed her lips tenderly, a saline scent filling her senses.

"Hmmm, you taste like sex," she said with a soft giggle.

Kent pulled back for a second, "I'm sorry."

She quickly brought his lips back to hers and kissed him passionately, moving her lips all over his. "Don't you dare stop kissing me!" she warned.

Kent entwined himself with her, holding her, kissing her softly, warmly again.

"Kent," she breathed heavily, still recovering, "that was—really amazing."

"I've been wanting to make love to you like this, Lisa," he admitted again in an intimate whisper. "From the moment I saw you. I couldn't believe my eyes. How beautiful you were."

"Well, you, ah," she caught some breath, "weren't the only one with those thoughts," she admitted. Her emotions began to simmer down some as he rolled beside her. "Kent," she breathed, "when I saw you walk out of the shower holding only that towel? And then you and your muscle shirts and shorts, and these dimples," she touched his face. "Honestly, I was having a lot of rather naughty thoughts about you, myself. I was. I sort of remember being the one who suggested we could share the bedroom," she self-impugned, smiling.

He nodded. "I guess we're sharing it now."

She nodded. "I want to share it with you."

He squeezed her close to himself, breathing a smile. "I never ever thought my first time would be like this," he admired her, his hand caressing over her skin along her side and resting on her hip. "I mean, I never thought I'd ever be making love to someone so beautiful. I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asked concerned.

"Kent, please. You didn't hurt me; I knew what I was doing. I wanted to be with you."

"I—I didn't know it was your first time. I mean, I guess I should have; but, as beautiful as you are, I just figured—"

"Wrongly," she interjected.

He nodded. "I guess I have a few things to learn about women," he admitted.

"Learn?" she grinned, "Oh my god, Kent, if you *learn* any more I won't survive. It's like you know exactly how to touch me."

He pulled her close to himself in the dim light. "It's odd," he began, "how attracted you and I are to each other. I've never felt anything like this with anyone. Have you?"

"No. This must be what they mean when they say 'you'll know it when you meet the right person,'" she suggested.

"I guess so," he mused next to her. "It just seems so, visceral, overpowering almost. It's like I have to be with you."

He felt her nodding softly.

15

Morning found them snuggled together under the comforter. Kent watched Lisa sleeping beautifully on her pillow, his thoughts replaying the memory of the two of them the night before. He wanted to feel her warmly against his skin again, but after everything she'd been through, he decided to let her sleep. Kent moved quietly from the sheets, slipped into a pair of snug-fitting workout pants and made his way into the kitchen for a cup of coffee and a quick breakfast.

Overcast again, a heavy morning rain fell across the canyon outside, leaving the ferns and low tree leaves wet with tiny streams of running rainwater.

Leaning shirtless against the water-beaded glass, Kent sipped his coffee thoughtfully, unable to tear his thoughts away from the sleeping angel in the next room. He still couldn't believe how beautiful she was; and what an amazing

time they'd shared. Fate had somehow landed this beautiful woman into his tiny dangerous world. He drew a hot sip from his cup, trying to make some sense of it all. He wondered about himself, wondered about these past many months he been stuck here, and then wondered about Lisa suddenly showing up so lost, injured and helpless.

It just didn't make any sense.

He'd considered briefly that she might be a kind of spy sent by the government to finally do away with him. However, that seemed to make even less sense than the random chances of her finding him by accident. Kent was still very sure that everyone had thought he'd perished in the plane crash. He wasn't a big fan of pure random chance and he didn't care that much for God either. He'd been terribly lonely and had been pretty angry at life, the Universe and everything. But Lisa wasn't faithless or hopeless; she had faith in God. Maybe bringing Lisa into his life was God's way of giving Kent some hope. Maybe—he thought—maybe God wasn't quite so bad after all. He watched the rain, mulling over that thought for a while.

* * * * *

Kent finished his last set of reps on the universal's bench press. The long workouts on the machine helped him pass the time, day after day. It also helped him forget that he was really a prisoner in this tiny mountain fortress.

As usual, sweat had beaded all over his skin. He pulled his towel off the machine when he noticed Lisa standing quietly by the stairs watching him, a smile now moving across her lips. He wasn't sure how long she'd been standing there.

"Sleeping beauty has awakened, I see." He grabbed a drink from his water bottle.

"You didn't wake me," she said walking over to him. She was wearing only his white stretch muscle shirt that she'd stripped off of him the night before. The narrow shirt barely covered the top of her thighs and hugged and displayed her chest and body as well as it did his.

"You may not want to get too close," he warned as she approached him. "I probably don't smell very good at the moment."

She walked up to him anyway, brushing the perspiration from his pecs with her palms and then landing a sweet peck on his lips with hers. He smelled like Kent to her. Sweaty or not, she discovered that she liked his scent.

"How long have you been up?" she asked.

"Since six. You slept a long time."

"I did. I think I needed the rest."

He couldn't help but dance his eyes all over her. "Why do my clothes always seem to look way better on you than they do on me?"

Lisa smiled. "Because I'm a girl, silly."

Kent returned her smile, gathering his towel, bottle and iPad. Lisa headed upstairs with Kent following, watching how well his shirt hugged and barely covered the shapely curves of her very fine ass.

"I'm going to hit the shower, Angel."

"Without me?" she asked.

"I wouldn't think of it," he grinned.

Kent pressed Lisa soapily between himself and the shower wall; her lips locked firmly against his, her hands slipping and gripping with lather over his muscled glutes. He slipped and moved his aroused body against hers, but after last night's 'first time', he thought she might still be sore and didn't want to cause her any more pain than he had already.

"I have a confession to make," she said coming up for some air from their kiss.

"What's that?"

"I've never showered with a guy before."

"I have," he admitted, "with lots of them, in fact. It's no big deal."

"Very funny," she bit his lip.

"Ooh," he flinched, "Okay, I admit; I've never showered with a girl before. Especially not with one as beautiful as you."

"You're just saying that because I'm only wearing your bubbles at the moment," she smiled, slipping and moving her well-lathered body over his.

"My friends at school would be totally jealous if they ever found out I was naked in the shower with a swimsuit model."

"Well, Kent, you're not exactly unremarkable yourself here. *You* could do some modeling you know. I bet I could get you some gigs."

"Really? That would be kind of cool."

"Hmm, then again, no," she corrected.

"No?"

"No. I want you all to myself," she pulled him closer.

"Hmmm," he kissed her grinning.

When they had finally rinsed, Kent carefully dried her skin, wasting no opportunity to view her model figure from every angle. Lisa mirthfully admired him admiring her. She then made him pose playfully while he dried himself, as if she were his modeling photographer.

Afternoon found the two of them lying together on the comforter. Neither had bothered to dress after their shower. Although Kent's talented lips and teasing fingers had sent Lisa into ecstatic bliss several times, it had been Lisa's talented lips that had pulled him over the edge twice in the past hour. Kent

now ached again between his thighs, but for the opposite reasons, having been utterly *emptied* by Lisa's unyielding enthusiasm. He'd no idea he was even capable of doing what she made him do. He'd discovered that his Lisa was an incredibly talented lover as she now cuddled herself around him.

"I'm beginning to think that it may not be all that bad being your prisoner," she offered with an afterglow smile.

"Prisoner? You're not my prisoner, Lisa." He hugged her gently. "You can leave. You just might want to wait until they find and get rid of that bear."

"Are you still worried about the police asking me questions and finding you?"

"Yea, maybe; then again maybe I'm over-blowing it."

"I would so be all over the media, Kent; the authorities would be asking all kinds of questions. I'd have to lie—"

"Why? Just don't tell them anything. You got lost, now you're back."

"Oh sure, like that would fly."

"Lisa, I've been thinking about this. At some point, I think you are going to have to go back home. I mean, sooner than later."

"I am? Why?"

"You haven't seen the news. I was reading about you this morning. There's a lot of noise being raised that your brother had something to do with your disappearance. Something about your life insurance."

"Kent, I don't *have* any life insurance. I could barely afford school. Even working making the money I was, I still had to take out loans."

"I'll bet you do have insurance, you just don't know you do. A lot of times schools will sell you a policy as part of the standard enrollment paperwork. They make extra money on these things. You probably bought a school-sponsored policy

as a student and you listed James as the beneficiary. He probably doesn't even know the policy exists either. But it does give the authorities motive for your disappearance."

"Kent, this is not good," she leaned up. "James wouldn't hurt anyone, especially me."

"I know," Kent consoled, "but the police don't know that. All they see is a missing young woman, a body that still hasn't been found by hundreds of searchers, and there's the possibility of a motive. They have to follow up on these things."

Lisa rested her head next to Kent's, worry all over her face.

16

Lisa stirred softly from sleep, waking in her late morning fashion to find the bed empty, as usual. The two of them were very different in their sleep schedules. Kent was an early-bird while Lisa liked to stay up late into the night and wake at the crack of noon. But Kent always let her sleep.

She'd found that she liked wearing Kent's white stretch muscle top as a nightshirt. It fit her snugly, and didn't bind when she moved in her sleep. Besides, it felt nice, like Kent was all around her.

Her Kent would now be down in the basement working up a sweat. She rolled to look at his side of the bed and to imagine him lying there. A note rested on his pillow.

"Aww," she said to herself. "How sweet."

But as she read the words, a feeling of dread fell all around her ...

Dearest Lisa,

By the time you read this I will have gone. When you read the news this morning you will learn that James was arrested by the authorities last night and charged with your murder. I know how much your brother means to you and I cannot allow more innocent people to be harmed because of my misfortune. I have to go. Then there will be nothing here to keep you from returning to your family. You wont have to worry about putting me in danger. In the kitchen you will find a daypack and a compass-map that will lead you to a highway about twenty miles from here. Maybe some day we will find each other again. My memories of you, the first time I saw you, our first night together, and all the other days and nights that followed will be with me forever.

I love you.

Kent

Tears were already welling in her eyes before she reached the end of the note. She fell into his pillow sobbing, “Kent! No!” she cried out! “No! No! No! ...” She clenched his pillow in her fist wishing it was him and that he wouldn’t be able to escape from her grasp. But Kent had already long since slipped away.

* * * * *

Lisa walked along the side of the seemingly forgotten and abandoned two-lane road as dusk approached. The electronic compass-map that Kent had given her had led her out of the canyon, over a major ridge and down to the lonely road. She wondered where he was right now — and if she’d ever even see him again. She wanted to tear up, but she was already out of tears, using them up as she moved through the mountains.

A car with headlights beaming approached and slowed as she waved it down. She was suddenly dazzled by bright red and blue lights from the top of the car as the vehicle pulled off to the side of the road.

* * * * *

She sat quietly on her bed in her room, thinking.

Just thinking.

Even with a subtle knock on the door she never moved. She ignored it. The door opened and James poked his head inside.

"Hey," he said, letting himself in and closing the door. He sat down on the foot of the rickety mattress. "I came by to see how you were doing. Mom said you haven't left your room for days.

Lisa just stared.

"You know, over all, it was a pretty interesting ordeal. My lawyer says they're going to completely purge the arrest record. It will be like it never happened.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"You don't have to apologize for getting lost, Lisa. We're all just glad you're safe. It was a miracle from God."

"But ..." she added pedantically.

"But what?"

"You didn't come all the way over here just to tell me that."

"No," he admitted. "I just thought you might want to talk—about what happened."

"I don't."

"You didn't even go to the hospital or talk to the police. They just wanted to know what happened to you up there, that's all."

Lisa said nothing.

For long minutes James just waited, listening to her say nothing.

"Wow," he sighed. "Lisa, this is just not like you. All clammed up. You're usually talking my ears off. What happened to you?"

Lisa looked at him. "I wish I could tell you, really, I do."

"Some people are saying you were abducted by aliens."

"Actually, it was a Big Foot," she said flatly.

James smirked. Now *this* was the sister he knew.

He looked at her. "Seriously, are you okay?"

She looked at him, "Does it look like I'm okay?"

"No," he said. "Anything I can do to help?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

James just sat beside her. Finally he got up, pulled a book from one of her shelves and sat next to her again, just reading silently to himself.

She pushed her shoulder into his. "You don't need to stick around. I'm fine. Really. It was an adventure. Maybe someday I'll tell you everything; but I just can't right now."

James nodded and got up again, putting the book back on the shelf. "Well, if you think of anything you need or just want to talk, you know where to find me. You can come over to my place any time."

Lisa managed a smile. At this point, James was happy for even that. He left closing the door quietly, his words seemingly echoing in her mind, 'You know where to find me.'

'Huh?' she thought to herself. 'Would Kent know where to find me? Of course he would. But would he try, given the circumstances? If she was ever going to get over this funk she had sunken into, she needed to find him. But where would he be hiding? She was sure he'd be holed up in some monastery or super-secret enclave by now, courtesy of Witness Protection, unable to contact her. She thought about contacting his folks, but what good would that do except upset them and endanger them and him even more?'

AWAKENED

Then the thought struck her: what if Kent had encountered that bear!? She shook the disturbing thought from her mind. 'No! He is okay, somewhere!' she forced herself to believe. She'd just need to wait for him to try to make contact with her. If he was able to ...

Months had passed by since Lisa's epic, life-changing secret adventure in the mountains. To her deep disappointment, she had heard nothing from Kent. As much as she continued to silently think and often dream about him, she knew inside that she might never see her clandestine Kent again. She needed to get on with her life.

Although a new graduate in an ever-shrinking job market, her local modeling celebrity had helped her quickly land an entry-level marketing position with a small online start-up in downtown Seattle. The new job wasn't without its challenges, however. Her overweight, middle-aged director was a complete disorganized mess, barking orders for this and that to get done yesterday. Still, the work wasn't exactly difficult and it was a really good paycheck for a first-time job.

She'd also landed a great new contract with a local jeans designer in Seattle to model a sleek new line. The *Seattle Denim* designs made her look fantastic; or she made the jeans look that way. In any event, the weekend shoots all over the Puget Sound area were a nice relief from the monotony of her weekday job—the same job that now had Lisa grumbling to herself as she walked to lunch at close to two in the afternoon.

Her boss' late morning meetings never ended at noon, and now she felt weak having had nothing to eat since breakfast. Sitting down at a now mostly empty Subway, her phone beeped a text message alert. She looked at it.

"Hey, gorgeous ..."

The phone number was all X's and O's.

'Huh?' Either she was being spammed or she'd just gotten a message from—Kent?! A wave of emotion suddenly lifted within Lisa's soul.

"r u ok?," she tapped and then waited.

"Been better. You?" the message replied.

Been better? She wondered what that meant. "where r u?" she tapped.

"Here," came the replay with a winkicon.

Lisa looked around the restaurant and then turned in her booth. A broad-shouldered man sat toward the back of the small shop, a black fedora tipped down over most of his face. But his disguise was useless against Lisa. She would have easily recognized those lips, chin and dimples anywhere! She picked up her tray, walked to the back of the shop and slipped into the seat snugly beside him.

"You are so a sight for sore eyes," he smiled at her, lifting the brim of his hat.

"I'm not sure whether to kiss you or punch you; I may do both!" she exclaimed in a hushed, perturbed tone. "Where in the world have you been!? Why haven't you contacted me before this? You can't imagine the hell I've been through

worrying about you! Not knowing if you're still alive, wond—
“

The tips of Kent's fingers rested against her lips. “Shhh,” he began quietly, “slow down, Beautiful,” he quieted, and then looked stricken when he saw the tear that slowly rolled down her cheek. “Oh, Honey; don't cry. Please.”

“It's just I haven't seen you in months!”

“I know,” he sighed heavily. “I've had to make a lot of changes. I checked out of Witness Protection.”

“What!? Kent, you can't do that!” she whispered emphatically.

“Too late. They wanted to ship me off to some place in Michigan. I said no.”

“Why!?”

Kent looked at her. “Because I'm in love with you.”

“I—” was the only thing that dropped from her mouth.

“I wasn't going to leave you—again,” he said.

“Kent that puts you in so much danger. You have to go back!” The tears of unsettled emotion continued to trickle down her face as she thought about what he'd just told her.

But her concern about keeping him in WITSEC wasn't exactly the response Kent had expected from Lisa. At all. Had their time away from each other cooled whatever they had shared months earlier? Was she really only worried about his safety, and not actually longing for him, to be with him? Kent suddenly felt embarrassed and foolish. He frowned.

“Ah. I'm—I'm sorry, Lisa. I seem to have made a terrible mistake. If you'll excuse me ...” he gathered himself to leave.

“Kent,” she objected, not moving, “where are you going?”

“I don't know.”

“Don't leave.”

“Don't leave? Why?”

“Because I just found you again!” she quietly exclaimed.

“Not good enough. Excuse me.”

"Kent you can't leave me!" she protested, not moving.

"Then you had better give me one really good reason why I should stay," he said firmly. She could see pain all over his face and his eyes were misting.

"Kent, wait. Please. You want me to tell you, 'I love you'. I don't know if I can—not yet."

"Then let me know when you figure it out." He tried to leave again.

"Kent, listen to me, please!"

Kent waited.

"I never told you this, but, I was engaged not too long ago—to a guy named Daniel. We dated almost the whole time I was in school. I thought that relationship was it. You know how everyone tells you, 'When it's right, you'll just know'? Well, I thought I knew. We were head over heels in love, a nice ring, a wedding date, mushy 'I love you' notes." She gazed off into the distance, remembering.

"I had the rest of my life completely planned out. Then, just a few months ago, it all fell apart. He just left me and started dating someone else. Just like that. No warning. No apologies. I was devastated. I really thought we were in love," she shook her head.

"And then, you happened. Those feelings all hit me again, but different. I felt this trust with you that I had never really felt with him. I couldn't admit it to myself, but I really think I was falling in love with you. But when I woke up with your note in my bed and you were gone—I ..."

Kent just listened.

"... I know you left for honorable reasons. You have no idea how hard I cried that morning. My Kent was gone."

Kent looked at Lisa, feeling suddenly incredibly sad. He could see the hurt and anger all over her face.

"I had to leave alone, Lisa. It was better for the both of us. Then no one would be able to tie you to me. You would be completely out of danger."

"But you didn't even give me a choice!"

"It—it just seemed like the best thing for the both of us."

"But it wasn't the best. You should have talked to me, told me what you were planning, instead of treating me like some child! People discuss things, Kent, when they're a couple!"

"Lisa, I know you. You wouldn't have listened to me. We might have been found together and that would have been really, really bad."

"But you made me feel abandoned all over again. I really started to have second thoughts about the love I felt for you. I trusted you! Should I trust someone who didn't think enough of me to reach out to me like an equal?"

"Hon, this wasn't about trust. I could see how much we'd fallen in love. I'm not stupid. Leaving like I did took both of us out of danger. It was the only way to allow you to leave and also keep the local authorities from finding me."

"That is not true!" Lisa asserted. "There is no way I would have insisted on staying, knowing that James had been arrested. We could have at least talked about it! You should have trusted me!"

Kent just looked at her, suddenly realizing that she had been more than deeply wounded by his decision to leave without telling her. He began to feel terribly sad that maybe he'd not needed to leave in such a hurry.

Lisa watched as an extremely sad expression moved across Kent's face. Her heart softened. The last thing she'd wanted to do was get into an argument with him. There would be time to talk about this later. Lisa couldn't stand seeing him look so sad any longer. Somehow, she had to wipe the look of utter dejection off of Kent's handsome face.

"Kiss me," she said.

“Lisa—I—” Kent didn’t feel like kissing.

“Just shut up and kiss me.”

Kent moved cautiously toward her. Their lips met timidly at first, then their memories of each other all too easily took over. The moment he felt her lips on his once again, Kent couldn’t help but kiss Lisa as warmly and passionately as ever. His kiss wrapped around her heart as easily and powerfully as it had back on the mountain. It was that same emotion that Lisa now returned with her own kiss; an emotion that was beyond magical to Kent. Their shared kisses were still soft, deliberate, sweet and just as passionate.

“Oh—I so missed you, Kent,” Lisa breathed, tears again trickling down her face and wetting his own.

“I missed you too, Lis’. I’m so sorry I hurt you. You have no idea how hard it was for me to leave you all alone up there by yourself. I went over and over in my mind, scenario after scenario, trying to figure out a way for the two of us to leave together so you could return to clear James. Going alone, it just seemed like it was the only way.”

Lisa nodded. “I know going back was the right thing to do. It was just so hard to suddenly not have you with me. I felt abandoned all over again. It took me a long time to recover. I don’t know that I ever did.”

“I’m sorry, Hon. I didn’t know about the engagement. We’d talked about so many things. That one never came up.”

“I know. It was on purpose. I thought about telling you a few times. I just never did.”

“I guess we still have a lot to talk about,” he admitted. “I’ve never been in love with anyone before.” He pursed his lips, “Should I be feeling stupid for telling you that?”

“No. Should I feel stupid for wearing your shirt to bed every night?”

“You don’t still have that?” he mused, looking thoughtfully at her.

"I do," she assured. "I can't go to bed without it."

Kent grinned. "Lisa, you're amazing. I guess I'll need to show you that I'm not going to be a flake like that Daniel guy."

"Don't worry. You're not like him. Not even close."

Lisa suddenly remembered how hungry she was. She began unwrapping her sub. "Have you eaten?"

"I'm fine."

"Fine?" Lisa looked at him, her intuition kicking in. "Kent where are you staying; how are you living?"

He shrugged.

"You're struggling, aren't you?"

"It's been tough, Lisa. The money I had from the safe house is running low now. I have to be careful what I spend."

"When did you eat last?"

"Yesterday," he said.

"Kent!"

"I have to conserve what I have, Lisa."

"Kent, a guy your size has to eat, a lot."

"I know."

"Here, she moved her tray in front of him. I'll get us some more."

"Lisa, I—" he began to protest.

"What?"

"Thank you."

* * * * *

Lisa's new apartment wasn't actually new, but it smelled new and it was nice. Though still small, it was bigger than most in her building and it had a perfect view of Lake Union, the freeway, the rest of the city and Puget Sound in the distance. It was a lot nicer than the dingy, bug-infested motels Kent had been living in and out of. He stood looking out the sliding glass door window. It felt like the exact opposite of his view on the

mountain. Peace and timelessness had been replaced with bustle and a never-ending stream of cars and lights and people. Still, he decided, the view was very nice.

“Lisa, this location is fabulous. This is not an inexpensive place.”

“Some friends at church own the unit. Actually, they own a bunch of them in this building. I’m kind of getting the church family discount. Besides, the last tenants all but destroyed the place. After the remodel, they wanted someone who would take care of it.”

“You have to be the most lucky and unlucky person alive,” he quipped.

“No,” she corrected. “Just blessed.”

“Yea, well, getting entangled in my life was hardly a blessing,” he assured.

“Oh?” she walked up and shared the view with him. “I wouldn’t exactly call meeting you a curse.”

Kent’s arm moved around her and pulled her to his side.

“Hey,” she asked, “by the way, how did you find me?”

“Honestly?” he looked away sheepishly. “I—may have sort of hacked your phone.”

Lisa looked at him, a grin beginning to appear on her face. “You hacked my phone?”

He nodded. “I’ve been following you for months. Watching your little dot on my phone. I watched where you went, and at what time. I watched you as you got a new job and this new place.”

“You stalked me using my own phone?”

“Hmm? Yea, pretty much,” he nodded. “You usually only go to one of three places for lunch; you go to church with your family at the same times every week and then you have dinner at your folks’ house.”

“That’s kind of creepy.”

“No,” he said shaking his head. “It’s not, Lisa. It was the only thing that helped me keep my sanity while I was away from you. Sometimes I pretended I was with you and your family. I even attended your church a couple weeks ago. But after the service I couldn’t even say ‘hello’. I wanted to. I *really* wanted to.”

She pulled him to herself with both arms and then felt Kent’s arms move gently around her also.

“I’m not letting you go again, Kent. I’m not!” she said forcefully. “I lost you once; I’m not losing you again. It’s too hard, Kent. It’s just too hard.”

“You can’t say that, Lisa. We don’t know what will happen with me. We have today. Tomorrow may be different.”

“Then we have to plan tomorrow.”

Kent thought about her words. He nodded. “We can try, Hon. We can try.”

18

Lisa was still sleeping soundly when Kent awoke. A deep, sweetly warm feeling moved through him as he gazed at her face, so smooth and beautiful. How very much he had missed waking up beside her. Normally, he would just watch her sleep for a bit before slipping out of bed and starting his day. But her alarm would be going off soon and she'd need to begin getting ready for work. He moved quietly toward her under the covers, avoiding touching her skin.

Kent decided that he'd become her personal alarm clock. His hand searched discretely until he found the tip of her breast. She stirred softly as he teased her ever so lightly. Her nipple hardened and Lisa moved slightly under the sheets, drawing a long sleepy sigh.

Kent was suddenly intrigued with how far he could take this before she actually awoke. He toyed with her, teasing her sensuously here and there ever so lightly. A soft 'mmm' fell from her sleeping lips as he continued to mischievously and

intimately tease her in her sleep, curious about whatever dream he was causing her to have. Lisa's hips rose softly as she moved in her sleep.

'Well,' Kent smiled to himself.

He watched her intimately move ever so gently against his lightly teasing fingers. After a number of sleepy caresses her mouth opened slightly and she began drawing deeper breaths.

Lisa's whole body sleepily arched softly. Kent was now captivated by what was happening in her dream as she unconsciously teased herself softly against his light caresses.

"Oooh—Kent," soft words floated from her lips.

It was a shame he couldn't be a participant in what they were doing in her mind.

Lisa's body flexed warmly again, her hips now rocking intimately against his teasing fingers while she lay in her sleepy fantasy.

He watched, fascinated, as her body soon slipped into full climax with what sounded like a waking breath from Lisa's open pout. He slipped his hand quickly away watching her body flexing and arching in a waking ecstatic stretch.

Lisa opened her eyes as she drew a deep breath and then turned to look at Kent smiling mischievously at her. She exhaled deeply, obviously still in the midst of some sleepy ecstatic tremor. "Was—ooh. Was that you?" She asked obviously recovering from what appeared to be a very deep release.

Kent nodded, moving his hand over her tummy. "That must have been some dream," he grinned.

She nodded, looking back up at the ceiling. "We were back at the house in the mountains. You had me tied down to the bed and were making love to me as I struggled to get away."

"Really?" he frowned. "That's a little—weird."

She rolled over to look at him, a smile appearing on her lips. "No silly. I was your prisoner."

“Your dream kind of makes me look bad.”

She reached her arm out to touch his chest. “No. It just means that in some ways I still feel trapped in your world. Kent, I *wanted* to be tied up and made love to by you. It was super hot.”

“Oh, nice; you’re Stockholm-ed now.”

“Would you stop. It was sweet. It felt—like it was where we belonged.”

He leaned in to kiss her lightly. “It was fun watching you go-off in your sleep,” he admitted. “Maybe we should re-enact your dream?”

“I think we need to be careful,” she cautioned. “Last night was probably really bad timing for me. I’m probably really fertile right now.”

“Why didn’t you say something last night? I could have waited.”

“Kent. We hadn’t seen each other in months. Did you really think the two of us could have stayed away from each other here in the same apartment?”

He agreed. “Let alone the same bed.”

“Kent, I needed you to make love to me.”

“I needed to make love *to* you,” he admitted.

Lisa let out a deep sigh. “Are we hopeless?” she asked flopping back onto her pillow.

He nodded. “Yea, pretty much.”

* * * * *

The ground floor of Lisa’s building had the ubiquitous closet-sized workout room with a couple of treadmills, a couple of video screens and an okay universal gym with some additional dumbbells.

Kent hadn't seriously worked out in months since leaving the mountain home. Today would be painful. He had missed painful; and he now embraced it with a vengeance.

* * * * *

It was after eight in the evening when the door opened and Lisa entered, carrying several shopping bags and a large Amazon box. Kent helped her bring in the bags.

"What's all this?" he asked.

"I went shopping," she bubbled happily.

"Obviously," he smirked. "So that's what you were up to after work."

"You didn't have much in the way of clothes so I thought I'd see what I could find for you."

"Lisa," he objected, "this is all very sweet, but I can't be costing you money like this."

"Kent, don't worry about it. I have a couple of good jobs right now. Your clothes are in tatters. It's time you had some new ones; besides, I had a lot of fun shopping for you! It's not really that much, a few shirts, some pants, socks, your favorite underwear," she smiled at him, "and a few sexy things for me."

"Sexy? Really?" Kent was suddenly interested and began looking into the bags but only found things she'd bought for him. "What did you order?" he asked pointing to the box.

"Oh, my boots! They were my reward to myself for not telling off my boss the other day. The guy's a complete insensitive idiot."

Lisa cut open the box with a sharp kitchen knife and removed a boot box of *Old Gringo* cowboy boots.

"*Old Gringo*, huh?" he grinned watching her remove the boots from their box. "Is this a Southern thing?" he asked watching how excited she was.

"No, it's more like a Texas thing."

The black leather boots were highly embroidered with an amazingly detailed and very colorful design. The smell of the rich leather wafted up from the box, and Kent suddenly discovered he really liked the smell of new boots.

"Wow, those are really different," he said, holding one while she tried the other one on. Kent helped her slip on the last one.

"Okay, you now know one of my big secrets—I'm sort of an *Old Gringo* junkie," Lisa grinned. "How do they look?" she asked happily, posing in several different positions as she modeled them with a new pair of black skinny jeans.

"Different. They're really nice. I've never seen boots like these before. Where are they made?" Kent looked in the box for a tag or something telling more about them. A thick dark envelope mostly covered in boot wrap caught his eye in the bottom of the box. Kent paused. He'd seen only one other envelope like this one before.

"Lisa," he interrupted her enthusiasm with a serious tone.

"Hmm?"

"I don't think this part of the package is from Amazon." Kent lifted the heavy, charcoal-black envelope out of the *Old Gringo* box.

"What's that?" she asked.

He looked up at her, "WITSEC."

"Really?" her eyes widened.

Kent unwound the black string that held the heavy stock of the large envelope closed. He removed a flat, shrink-wrapped black package and another slightly bulging, smaller dark grey envelope. He opened the smaller envelope and spread a new driver's license, social security card, a couple of U.S. passports, several bank cards and a neatly folded letter onto the counter. Kent stood staring at the contents, shaking his head.

Lisa picked up the driver's license. "Wow, this is a really good picture of you," she said.

"I'm sure," he mocked.

"I thought you said you checked out of witness protection?"

"I did," he assured firmly.

"Evidently they don't want you checking out, Mr. ..." Lisa read the name off of Kent's new license. "... Kyle."

"Kyle? What? He snatched the card from her hand and glared at the ID.

"Kent Kyle. Oh, that's original."

"Why would they give you *my* last name?" she asked.

Kent wasn't sure he liked where this was going.

Lisa picked up one of the passports. "Hey, this is mine," she opened it for him to see her picture. "I've never applied for a passport. I didn't even know I had one!"

"Well, you have one now," he grouched, picking up and unfolding the piece of paper. Kent was pretty sure he already knew what it was. "Here's something else you didn't know you had," he said handing the document to Lisa. She looked at the top.

It read, "State of Nevada—Marriage License".

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I 'm married!?"

"Congratulations," Kent said dryly, not hiding his sarcasm.

"Kent!" she emphasized looking up with an expression of bewildered horror, waving the paper, her accent slipping into full Southern. "I can't be married! What about my *parents!* My family?"

"Lisa," Kent attempted to break in.

"... oh my gosh, my *church!* What will *they* say? I haven't even been seeing anyone officially ..."

"Lisa," he raised his voice a bit.

"... No one was invited! This can't be happening! My mother's gonna kill ..."

"*Lisa!*" Kent finally broke into her rant.

She looked at him, a panicked expression still on her face.

"Your mother?" his eyebrow raised. "Really?"

Lisa blinked blankly at him for a second and then shook her head, apparently recovering from the initial shock of seeing her name on a marriage license.

"I'm—I'm sorry," she apologized suddenly realizing what she'd been saying. She smirked and then chuckled at herself.

"Evidently WITSEC has decided to include you in my new cover. I didn't ask for this, Lisa; honestly, I didn't," he assured.

"I know you didn't. I just can't believe they'd stuff me into this situation as well. Just mess with my life like this."

"I don't know what they're thinking. But these are smart people, Lis'. Putting us legally together like this might make for a really good cover if someone is just looking for a single guy named Kent Levi."

She nodded. "And evidently, Kent," she held up his new passport, "you don't just 'check out' of Witness Protection whenever you want to."

"Evidently."

"Kent," Lisa was serious all of a sudden. "These people who are protecting you, they're obviously not finished with this. Clearly they want you alive and available when this thing, this cover-up, whatever it is, breaks loose. Look at all this. They want you blending into society. It's probably not their ideal way to hide you, but for now you can at least have some semblance of a life."

Kent pursed his lips with a frown. "You're right."

"You just don't like being told what to do," she moved up to him, her arms slipping around him. "I know you. You're a little cocky sometimes."

He pulled her close to him.

In a way he was happy that they were together again, and in a way he was boiling mad that the government had just slammed Lisa into his perilous life. Then again, fate had already made her more than involved well before the feds had stepped in.

Kent nodded. "Yea, I supposed I am sometimes. I just don't want you getting hurt."

Lisa set down the license. "So, what's in the black bag?" she asked.

"It's probably money. I got one like it when I first went into hiding. Only," he picked up the hefty bag, "my last one was nowhere near this big."

"Really?"

"Here, you can open it," Kent handed her the bag.

Lisa took the bag. It did feel heavy. She pulled the tab to unseal the end and then reached inside. She removed a couple of the very thick bundles of one-hundred dollar bills. There were several more of the bundles still in the bag.

"Kent," she said seriously as she handed him one of the stacks, "this is a lot of money."

Kent fanned part of the thick stack looking at the bills. It was new but random cash. None of the serial numbers were consecutive. He took the bag and looked into it.

"Yea, it is. Wow. I only got a few thousand last time. Look, there's a note." He removed a hand-written card. Kent read it, grinned, and then handed it to 'Mrs. Kyle'.

It read simply, "Happy Honeymoon."

* * * * *

"You don't live in a vacuum, Lisa. People are naturally curious. I don't know how to answer their questions."

"So this isn't really about me, it's about what other people are gossiping about?"

"Lisa, Sweetheart, your father and I are very concerned."

"About what other people saying."

"You know that it's more than that. You're obviously very attracted to this young man."

"His name is Kent, Mother."

"Kent," she corrected herself. "He seems to spend an awful lot of time at your apartment. It seems like he's always there."

"He is always there. We're a couple."

"Well, it *appears* like he's all but living with you. You don't want to give people the wrong impression. Especially the Dugans. You know how concerned they might be if they knew a *couple* was living in their condo. They only rented it to you because they knew you'd honor God with it."

"Not everything is as it appears, Mother."

"Are you still saving yourself for marriage?"

"Mother! Please, how old am I?"

"Yes, you're an adult, Lisa, but you'll always be my little pumpkin. I can still worry about you."

"I can't believe you'd even ask such a thing. But to answer your question, yes, I've been saving myself for my husband all my life."

"Alright, I'm sorry, dear. You just haven't been the same since you got back from being lost. Then after you started your new job, you met this young man. It's been a lot of change for you, really quickly."

'You have absolutely no idea,' Lisa thought to herself; then agreed with her mother. "You're right, it has been a lot of change."

"We just worry about you, Honey. With all of this change, we don't want you to lose sight of what's important. You should bring Kent to church with you."

"He's been to church with me."

"Yes, well, I meant more often. We haven't seen you there but a couple of times since the two of you started dating."

'That's because WITSEC will kick his butt if he gets too public,' she thought sarcastically. "He doesn't like crowds, Mother. Our church isn't exactly small and cozy."

"It's a mother's job to worry, Lisa. Someday when you have kids of your own, you'll understand what we go through."

Lisa's mom set a plate in front of her with a marvelous looking sandwich on homemade bread and some chips.

"So how are things at work? Is your boss behaving himself?"

"Oh!" Lisa had just taken a bite. She hurriedly finished it. "The COO fired him yesterday!"

"Oh my word! Well, that's good. It was about time."

"It was. Nobody liked him."

"So who's going to be your new boss?"

"They want to promote me!"

"Really?"

"That's why I wanted to come over, to tell you and Daddy the news."

"Lisa, that's wonderful! Just out of college and they offer you a director position!"

"I know, right? But I haven't accepted yet."

"Oh, why not?"

"I want to think about it. They really need two people doing that job. If I take it I'm going to insist that they give me an assistant."

"Well, you would know. You practically ran the financial aid office at school."

Lisa nodded. "They know that. The office at school gave me a really glowing reference."

"When are you going to let them know?"

"After Kent and I get back from our cruise."

"Cruise!?" Her mother's eyes widened. "You and your new boyfriend – are going on a cruise?"

"Mmm-hmm," she took another bite of her mom's fabulous sandwich.

"But what about your job? You just started!"

"It's fine. The company is completely rethinking how they want to reorganize the department. It's a shambles, Mother. They won't miss me for the ten days we're gone."

"Ten days!?"

Lisa nodded, still munching.

"Well, that's a nice long vacation for someone who just began their career!"

"Mother, they already gave me the time off to think over their offer."

"Ten-day cruises are not inexpensive, Lisa. Is Kent paying for this?"

She nodded, "Yes, actually, he is."

"Lisa, young men do not take young ladies on expensive cruises without asking for something in return. Are you two getting separate rooms, I hope?"

"Mother, please, this again?"

"People will really talk about this, Lisa."

"Not if you don't tell them, Mother," she insisted. "I'm not living my life just to please the church's gossipmongers. You shouldn't either."

"Normally I wouldn't, Lisa, but your father still works for the church. People are nosey, much more nosey than your mother," she winked.

"I'm not telling anyone. It would be nice if you didn't either."

"I don't think you'll have to worry about that, dear," her mother smiled, finally taking a bite of her own sandwich.

* * * * *

"Mr. Levi, there's a call for you on line six."

"Put it to voicemail, Jeri, I'm in the middle of something."

"I think you'll want to take this one, Mr. Levi. It's from Washington."

* * * * *

The air and sun of the Mediterranean felt good. It also felt good to be out of Seattle and away from the apartment where Kent spent most of his time. The two of them relaxed on the ship's sun deck. A very friendly well-dressed waiter set a couple of fruity drinks beside them.

Kent stretched out on his chaise wearing a white designer swim brief Lisa had found for him at one of the shops onboard ship. His tanning muscular body glistened with sunblock as he drank in the mid-day sun.

He looked over at Lisa from his chaise. With her long hair, glistening skin, well-filled-out matching white string bikini, and stylish sunglasses, she looked like a Hollywood celebrity. He sat up and then snapped a photo of her with his phone. Maybe one day he'd send it to his college nerd buddies. They'd never believe that she was his wife. Lisa looked incredible.

"I think I'm becoming spoiled, Kent. I could really get used to this. If only some of my friends that I grew up with from church could see me now! I wish I could post some of our pics on Facebook. They would be so jealous of me right now! A nice vacation with my really hot superman."

Kent smirked to himself. "Yea, I have some friends that would be envious of who I married, that's for sure," he smiled.

"It's weird thinking I'm married to you."

"Don't you want to be married to me?"

"I do. That's what's so weird about it."

"You're confusing me."

"I guess I'm just flummoxed about the *way* it happened."

"Me too. It wasn't exactly an orthodox wedding, was it?"

"Wedding? Kent, we didn't *have* a wedding," she corrected.

He thought for a moment, "No, I guess we really didn't," he agreed. "Do you want one?"

Lisa seemed to think about what he asked for a moment. "I don't think, so. Maybe just a big reception or something after

all of this is over. I don't want to try to change how it actually happened."

"No?"

"No."

"So I'm really stuck with you for the rest of my life?" he grinned.

"You better get used to it, mister," she warned. "Unorthodox or not, I'm calling it official."

"I'll never get used to being with you, Lisa."

Kent picked up his drink, pulling the little umbrella from it. "I wonder what our families will say when they find out?"

"Mine will be horrified! My family is continually living in a fishbowl, worried about everything someone else might say or think from the church. I had to always make sure that everything I said or did as a kid didn't reflect badly on them."

"It sounds like there were people who were not all that nice to you growing up."

"Actually, most were really nice, Kent. Some of the rich kids and their parents weren't. Even in the denomination's schools I attended, there was a lot of favoritism if your family had money. Mine didn't. I guess I probably have some resentment about that."

"People with money sometimes get snobby, Lis'. Especially when they haven't had to work for their wealth. My family has always worked hard to earn our money. Even my great grandparents owned some really successful businesses, ones that prospered even through the Great Depression."

"But you've grown up with money."

"I did. And I've seen first-hand what you're describing about attitude and the favoritism. People treat you differently if they know you're wealthy, often times without you even being aware of it. You get things other kids don't. You're given opportunities others aren't."

"But that's not fair, Kent," she protested.

"Maybe not, Hon, but it is what it is. You yourself have been shown favoritism just as much as anyone else, not because of your money, but because of how you look. It's *your* gift."

"Yea, a gift everyone has tried to exploit. And you're right. Before I became a model no one paid any attention to me. Now—I can't tell you how many times I've been invited to events and parties by people I don't even know."

"And the same things happen to the wealthy families. We get 'invited', as you say, to things because people want something from us; usually our money or influence."

"Hmm," she said, "I guess I never thought of it like that before."

"Wealthy families will often befriend each other because they know no one is trying to schmooze them for something. And they often have a lot more in common, either by profession or in business. If my dad and your dad were sitting in the same room, they would have almost nothing in common to talk about, I don't mean small talk, I mean on a personal cultural level. Their life experiences have been very different."

"That's probably true," she agreed. "I bet your parents are really interesting people."

"They are."

"Do you miss them?"

She saw Kent's face grimace for a moment. Lisa sat up, her hand reaching for his arm. "Oh, Kent, I'm sorry. What a stupid thing for me to say."

His hand reached out to rest on hers. "It's okay, Hon."

She could see him fighting back the emotion. She left her lounge chair and sat down next to him on his. "I'm sorry."

"I know you meant well. I just try not to think about them too much." He patted her hand. "I'm okay."

* * * * *

Michael Levi looked husky, even for his tall frame. The well-groomed, handsome forty-something man walked with an air of sophistication as he moved pensively through the mall passing the crowds that had gathered to take pictures by the Lincoln Memorial. Through dark sunglasses he spotted Brian waiting beside a tree and the two men walked slowly into the park and away from the crowds.

"It's been a while, Brian."

"Too long, Michael. How's your golf swing these days?"

"I don't play golf, Brian, you know that."

"It was a joke, Michael."

"You didn't bring me three-thousand miles to tell me golf jokes, Brian. What's up?"

"You never were much for small talk, Michael. Alright. You remember the last time we talked?"

"Of course. Kent's funeral. The day I lost my son in that plane crash. Absolutely the worst day of my life. Thanks for bringing it up," he frowned.

"It was one of my worst days as well, believe me."

The two men walked a ways in silence.

Brian took a deep breath. "Michael, there are some things you need to know about Kent. Things I couldn't tell you that day at the funeral."

"Oh, like what?"

"Like there was more to that plane crash than is commonly known."

"What do you mean?" Michael looked at Brian and met his gaze as they walked.

"The plane didn't malfunction, Michael. It was attacked. Shot out of the sky by a high-altitude SAM."

Michael stopped walking and looked at Brian with utter disbelief. "Good God!"

"It's true," Brian resumed walking. "I can give you the missile's inventory and serial number if you like."

"Brian, why are you telling me this?"

"Because it's time you knew the truth. A big still of some really nasty moonshine has been quietly brewing here in Washington—and it's all about to blow. Even the rats that have been here a while sense something; they don't know what it is but they're already running for cover."

"So telling me my son was murdered is supposed to make me feel better how?"

Brian looked at him, "Kent wasn't on that flight, Michael."

"Brian, what are you saying?"

"Your son is alive, Michael."

Michael Levi just stopped and stared intensely at his friend, trying to process what he was hearing.

"Walk with me," Brian encouraged.

The two men strode deeper into the park.

"Kent was working for a contractor that provided data services to the White House and several other executive departments, including the president's campaign."

"He was. You got him that job at Hydra."

"I wish now I hadn't."

"Brian, what happened?"

"Someone hacked their servers from the inside, Michael, and stole some data; some very embarrassing data."

"How embarrassing?"

"Watergate embarrassing."

"Ouch."

"Through no fault of his own, Kent ended up with a copy of it."

"So he wasn't involved?"

"No. But some very powerful people were very aggressive in tying up the loose ends. Lots of accidents happened and some people just disappeared. Kent had the God-given sense

to fly out here and tell me what had happened. I put him into Witness Protection. That's where he has been for the last two years."

"You've had my son in a witness protection program for two years and didn't tell me? You made all of us think he was dead?!" anger suddenly rising within Michael's voice.

Brian stopped and looked Michael in the eye. "That's enough, Michael!" Brian warned. "This was just as hard on my family as it was on yours. Save your anger for the people who tried to kill Kent. I saved Kent's life! We needed this to look real. It's been just as hard on Kent as it has been for all of us. Maybe more so."

Michael glared at Brian; then pursed his lips, nodding. He could only imagine the pain Kent must be going through, not being able to talk to them.

"Is he okay? Where is he now? If I can ask."

"He's on a cruise in the Mediterranean. But when he gets back, Michael, all unholy hell is gonna break loose on the Hill. Everything is already in place. All I need now is that data."

"He didn't give it to you?"

"No, he didn't. He didn't have it with him. He hid it somewhere. He didn't trust anyone then. I doubt he'd have given it to me if I had asked."

"Kent's a smart kid."

"Yes, he is. But now we need that data. He's not going to know who to trust. We may need you to help out in retrieving it."

"So that's what this conversation is really all about. Using me to get to my own son?"

"You know the score around here, Michael. Trust is a slippery commodity in this town. Friends become enemies and vice versa practically overnight. I can't leave anything to chance, not even among old friends. A lot of people have been working very hard behind the scenes for the past two years to

make this happen. If Kent falls through, all this work will be for nothing, and a huge injustice against the American people will go unpunished. I can't just force him to hand it over to me. And if the place he's hidden it is difficult to reach, he may need our help. We need that data."

"So when can I see him?"

"I don't know yet. If all goes well, we'll make a big public show of your reunion. But, you can't breathe a word of this to anyone. Not even Marseille."

"I understand."

The two men walked in silence for a while.

"You're not talking much," Brian offered.

"Just remembering. And trying to figure out if I need to kiss you or strangle you."

"I did my best, Michael. I watched Kent grow up too."

Michael nodded. "So Kent's on a cruise—is he with anyone?"

"He is, actually." Brian fished in his pocket and removed his phone, then brought up some photos. "Here, have a look."

"Wow! Look at him! All buffed-out just like his old man!" Michael nodded his approval.

"I figured Kent needed a way to keep busy, so I had a Universal installed at the safe house. He put it to good use."

Michael walked while scrolling through the pictures on Brian's phone.

"Whoa! You put Kent on a cruise with a supermodel? Nice," he smirked.

"No, I didn't. *I* had nothing to do with the cruise or the young lady getting involved in all of this. She stumbled into Kent's life all by herself."

"She's beautiful!"

"That she is. Congratulations. She's also your new daughter-in-law."

"Huh? She is? Kent's married?"

“In a manner of speaking.”

Michael looked at the photo of the two of them again. A very pleased smile crossed his face.

“By the way, Michael, you owe me two million dollars.”

“Oh? What for?”

“Your son’s wedding present.”

20

Kent and Lisa walked pensively together, arms around each other, back to their cabin. A day of sightseeing on shore, a gourmet dinner aboard ship and finally dancing in the nightclub had rounded out an amazing day and evening. Kent opened the door of their stateroom for Lisa and then closed and locked it behind them.

Lisa pulled back the sheer curtains of their suite's living room, revealing a moonlit sea and the lights of some unknown city's shoreline in the distance.

"Wow," Kent said walking up behind her. That's quite the view. It's almost as beautiful as you are."

"Hmmm," Lisa sighed leaning back against him, exhausted. "You should pinch me."

"Just to make sure this isn't all some kind of dream?"

"Umm-hmm."

"How about if I just grab this very fine ass of yours instead?" His hand squeezed her lightly through the silky-smooth material of her evening dress.

"It's like a dream, Kent. Being here with you."

"I feel the same way. Your getting lost in the woods was the best thing that ever happened to me, Lisa."

"Aw," she turned toward him as he was smiling oddly at her. "What—what are you smiling about?"

"You. I've wanted to say something to you all day. Now, I can't think of a more perfect moment."

Lisa looked at him, curious.

"Close your eyes," he said.

With her eyes closed she felt Kent take her hand and slip a ring over her finger.

"Oh—oh, Kent! You did not!" she said excitedly, her eyes still closed.

"Okay, open."

Lisa lifted her hand to see a beautiful diamond ring set glittering on her finger in the moonlight.

"I love you, Lisa."

She stared up into his piercing handsome eyes. She could see the deep warmth of love in them and a hopeful apprehension on his face. Lisa didn't need to wait. She knew perfectly well how she felt about him.

"I love you too, Kent."

Lisa watched as the apprehension left his face. She thought they might embrace but he continued looking into her eyes.

"What?" she asked softly.

"Marry me." He said.

The warmth she felt for Kent suddenly welled up as powerful emotion within her. Her mouth opened and her eyes began to glisten.

"You mean, for real?" She said, emotion filling her voice.

He nodded. "For real. I never really got the chance to ask you to marry me. Now I'm asking."

"You know I can't live without you," she said brokenly, her eyes welling up.

"Is that a 'yes'?"

Lisa nodded, "Yes!"

The weight of uncertainty suddenly lifted from Kent as he and Lisa embraced in a warm and impassioned kiss. After long moments of tasting his lips, Lisa withdrew breathless.

"When did you know?" she asked.

"That you could say it? That you loved me?"

"Yea."

"The day we saw each other again at that Subway by your work. When you told me to kiss you. Your kiss, Lisa, told me everything I needed to know about how you felt, even if you couldn't say it."

"I just couldn't bear to lose you again, Kent."

"You don't ever have to worry about that, Lisa. I'm not going anywhere."

"Oh," she whispered softly into his mouth.

Kent felt his shirt being unbuttoned. She slipped the partially opened shirt off his broad shoulders and down to his waist. Kent's hands slid up the light smooth fabric of her dress to feel her light G-string and bare tush.

They continued to kiss in the moonlight, desire rising quickly within both of them.

Kent lifted Lisa's dress the rest of the way off of her and let it fall to the floor. His own shirt and slacks dropped beside it.

"Maybe we should find somewhere more comfortable?" he grinned against her lips.

"Make love to me, Kent," she kissed. "Not as your girlfriend. But as your wife."

He lifted her off the floor looking into her eyes and kissing her softly. They moved into their bedroom. He laid Lisa onto the comforter slipping himself up beside her.

“Kent, the way you laid me on the bed just now, it’s exactly what you did our first night together in the mountains.”

He nodded, kissing her. “You did say you wanted to be made love to as my wife.”

21

A man dressed in typical business attire yawned while looking over the top of his magazine as he watched the affectionate couple rolling their luggage away from the baggage area. He spoke quietly into an invisible device stealthfully embedded in his clothing. "Subjects just left baggage claim. They're headed for the parking garage."

Kent and Lisa rolled their bags from the terminal and made their way to where Lisa had parked her car. Kent had just popped the trunk when a jet-black Hummer sped quickly to where they were. It stopped with a quick chirp. Kent dropped the bag he was holding and quickly pulled Lisa close to himself.

Several men and a woman exited vehicle, each wearing dark street clothing, dark glasses and very visible firearms. The woman approached Kent directly, her hand held out. "We'll

take it from here. Keys," she said flatly. Kent handed her the keys.

One of the men opened the back door of the Hummer and motioned with a nod for them to get in.

"Kent?!" Lisa said, visibly shaken.

He pulled her close. He looked at the armed people, frowned and then nodded for the two of them to get in. The door closed heavily behind them and then automatically locked.

They watched from inside the vehicle as another man entered the front passenger seat. He turned in his seat to face them, removing his glasses. Kent recognized him immediately!

"Good afternoon, Mr. Levi. We meet again." he said as the driver now drove them casually through the garage.

Lisa felt Kent breath a sigh of relief.

"Lisa, this is Mr. No-name," Kent offered.

"Oh, like that's a new one," they heard the driver quip.

"Names are a kind of liability in our business, Kent," he smiled. "We don't tell our witnesses anything, both for their safety and ours.

"And I see I finally have the pleasure of meeting you also now, Miss Kyle," he smiled at her.

Lisa managed a smile.

"You created quite a conundrum for us," he said looking at Lisa. "We didn't quite know what to do about you at first. From the looks of things, I'm going to assume that our solution meets with your approval," his glance moved between the two of them.

Lisa smiled shyly, now a bit self-conscious that these were the people who probably knew her more intimately than almost anybody on the planet. Kent squeezed her hand but said nothing.

"Good," he said. "Things are coming to a head very quickly in Washington, Kent. Unfortunately, it appears that the other

side now knows about you. How much they know we still don't know yet. We need you to retrieve the data."

"And then what?"

"In three days the Senate Judiciary Committee is holding a very high-profile hearing. Every media outlet in the country will be present at that hearing. Everyone thinks this hearing is going to be about healthcare." He shook his head, "Healthcare is not what is really on the agenda. Once the hearing begins, we will sideline the healthcare issue and present you and the evidence to the world. Some very important people will be in that room to listen to what you have to say, Kent. All you have to do is just answer the questions they ask you."

Kent nodded, suddenly feeling very nervous.

Their Hummer traveled north from SeaTac and then across I-90's floating bridge and exited onto Mercer Island. Lisa had driven over this section of the freeway hundreds of times, but had never actually ventured off of it and onto the island. Under Kent's direction, the large SUV wandered into a residential area with homes that looked palatial to Lisa.

"Turn left here," Kent instructed the driver.

He nodded.

"This is where you grew up?" Lisa asked.

"Yea," he smiled at her warmly, feeling comforted with finally being back home.

The driver pulled into a cobbled-stone drive and up to a closed gate. He punched in a code Kent gave him to open the gate. The large gate began swinging silently open. It made Kent feel good that his parents had never bothered to remove him from the security system.

The Hummer drove slowly up the driveway and around the central fountain in front of the massive luxury home.

“How long will this take, Kent?” Mr. No-name asked. “If there is going to be trouble, I want to know how long we should wait before we need to come in there.”

“I only need a few minutes.”

Kent and Lisa exited the vehicle and went around to a side door by the garage breezeway. Lisa watched as Kent produced a half rusted key from a hiding place and unlocked the door. The alarm pad by the door beeped a warning. He punched in his code to disarm the system. The light on the alarm went green.

Lisa followed Kent through a mudroom and into the large, exquisitely designed smooth brick floored and granite surfaced kitchen. Lisa looked around the immense and beautiful space with its hanging copper pans, massive gas range and elegant cabinetry.

“Kent, this kitchen is beautiful!”

He nodded. “Mom’s quite the designer.”

Everything seemed quiet in the home. A door off the butler’s pantry led down a curved brick walled stairway. They now stood in the home’s generously sized and well-stocked wine cellar. Lisa looked around at all the bottles. It reminded her of a small wine and liquor store.

“You hid the drive in your wine cellar?” she asked.

“Not exactly,” he offered.

Kent punched a numbered sequence into the cellar’s temperature controls. Suddenly one of the wine racks on the far wall began to slowly move silently back into the wall, all by itself. Lisa’s eyes grew wide with intrigue. The rack of wine then slid just as quietly to one side revealing a heavy, solid steel vault door.

Kent went to the door and pressed his palm to a piece of glass on the vault door’s exterior. It pulsed with an amber light several times until the panel suddenly went dark and the vault’s handle began to silently spin open by itself. Kent pulled

the heavy door open revealing a nicely finished, walk-in closet-like room with fine, tall glass-fronted cabinets. Each cabinet seemed to hold something different. The cabinet that caught Lisa's attention first was the closest one where every shelf held neatly stacked bundles of money in several different currencies. Other cabinets sported rows of different rifles, old guns and antique weapons. Yet another cabinet looked like its own jewelry store complete with a window displaying busts holding intricate diamond necklaces, trays holding dozens of large stone rings and other beautifully designed jewelry.

Kent opened a solid wooden drawer revealing several large and small pistols. Lisa watched him as he took one of the smaller ones, loaded the weapon with a magazine and then stuffed it into the back of his pants with a clip-on holster.

He loaded and then handed a smaller pistol to Lisa. "You should put this in your purse."

Lisa was horrified by the thought of having a gun anywhere even near her! It was so small it almost looked like a toy. "No!" she exclaimed forcefully, shaking her head.

"Lisa," he said firmly. "I thought you were raised in Texas?"

"Kent, I was raised in the church! I've never even held a gun before! I'm supposed to be a lady."

Kent frowned. "Lisa, these little Ruger 380's are *for* the ladies. This one is my mom's."

Lisa looked at the pink and black coloring of the weapon. "I wouldn't even know how to use it," she argued.

"I can teach you later. Please, just put it in your purse."

Lisa took the little weapon and carefully slipped it into her small bag, still not happy about having something so dangerous in her purse.

"Just one more thing to retrieve," Kent said, moving toward the back of the room. He reached under the lower shelf of one of the open cabinets and removed something stuck to a

small piece of duct-tape. It was a small red and black stylized-rubber protected flash drive. Lisa looked at the palm-sized device.

"That little thing is what hundreds of people were murdered for?"

Kent nodded.

As they passed the money cabinet on their way out, Kent stopped and helped himself to several bundles of bills, handing her some. "Here, we may need this later."

"Kent I can't steal this!"

"Lisa! Really? This is my family's money."

Lisa nodded her head. "I'm sorry, Kent." She took a couple of the bundles and stuffed them into her purse. "I'm just nervous."

They headed out of the vault with Kent closing and securing the doors. Lisa looked at the now secured wine cellar once again as they headed up the stairs. No one would ever realize the treasures hiding behind the simple wall of bottles.

Once upstairs they headed back to the mudroom to leave. Kent felt Lisa pull on his arm holding him back. "What?"

"Kent, look, outside."

They peered through a small window that looked out onto the driveway. A Mercedes had pulled up behind the Hummer they had all arrived in. A tall man and a woman had just exited the Mercedes smiling and carrying on in some kind of mirthful conversation. The woman walked around the front of their car to the tall man and gave him a hug and they walked arm in arm to the far side of the Hummer.

"Who are they? Friends?" Lisa asked.

"I don't know. I don't recognize them," Kent said.

They watched from their window for long moments. Suddenly a hole appeared in the Hummer's passenger side window. And then another. And another.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" Kent whispered, his pulse suddenly quickening. "That couple! They just shot them!"

Lisa looked at the three holes in the passenger side window. "How do you know? I didn't hear anything!"

"They have noise suppression, Lisa. Silencers. Mr. No-name is dead!!"

They kept themselves very low as they watched the mild-looking couple walk away from the Hummer. Kent studied their faces. "Get a good look at them, Lisa."

"I am," she assured.

The two assassins began walking toward the mudroom door. Kent quickly went to the door and locked it quietly. He could now hear them conversing casually outside. He thought about arming the security system, but they likely knew that he and Lisa were already in the home. The door handle rattled.

"It's locked," he heard the man say on the other side of the door. "They probably used the front door or went around to the back."

"I'll check the back," he heard the woman say. "Oh, and sweetheart, only one round per subject this time."

"Ha, ha, very funny," Kent heard the man scoff as he walked off.

Lisa's heart was pounding heavily in her ears.

"What do we do!?" she whispered.

"They'll be in the house in a minute. We wait and then leave while they're searching for us."

Kent," Lisa squeezed his arm as they crouched by the door in the mudroom.

He patted her hand. "It'll be alright, Lisa. Shhhh."

From somewhere in the house Kent and Lisa heard a large door close.

Kent stood up and took a set of keys off of a key rack next to the door. They quietly slipped out the mudroom door and into the breezeway leading to the garage. Kent's key let them

into the side door of the multi-car garage. Kent closed and locked the door behind him.

The garage held several expensive luxury cars. Kent led Lisa to the last stall where a very sleek blue and black two-tone sports car sat quietly.

Kent opened his door that swung straight up instead of opening to the side. "Get in," he said quietly.

Lisa lifted her door, slipped into the glove-like sporty seat and closed the car door as quietly as she could. "I've never seen this kind of car before. Who makes—Bugatti?" she asked reading the interior nameplate.

"They used to be French made. This one's Italian," he said preparing to start the vehicle.

"Lisa," Kent began. "When I hit the garage door opener and start the engine, it's going to give us away. We're going to rocket out of here like there's no tomorrow. They might start shooting. I love you." He said.

She kissed him quickly, "I love you too. Go."

Kent looked at how nervous she appeared. He probably looked the same. He hit the garage door button. The door began rising slowly upward. The engine of the beefy sports car purred to life instantly. Before the garage door was even halfway up Kent was in gear and speeding quickly out of the garage and down the driveway. Lisa had never been in a car that could move so fast. The gates of the driveway were already opening as they approached. Kent slowed the car to avoid hitting the still opening gates and then dexterously turned onto the residential street and sped them quickly away at several times the speed limit.

The tall man and the woman met up outside. Kent and Lisa were long gone. The two assassins walked casually back to their car, looking bemused at the turn of events. They got in.

"He executed that very smoothly," she complimented pedantically.

He nodded, pulling slowly out of the driveway. "It won't matter. He has something we want and we have something he wants. I'm sure he'll be willing to trade."

"You've driven this car before," Lisa noticed, impressed with how well Kent exited the garage and estate.

"Of course I have." He looked at her. "It's my car."

Lisa smirked and finally breathed a nervous sigh of relief.

Kent wove in and out of traffic at high speed like a NASCAR driver. He finally brought his speed down as they entered the more commercial area of the island. "We need to get off the island," he said. "We don't know how many more of those people they have."

"Where do we go? We can't go home now!"

"No," Kent shook his head. "But I know someplace we'll be safe."

"Where?"

"Remember when I told you how I got to the mountain home, on a helicopter?"

"Right, the one you said didn't make any noise."

Kent nodded. "We flew out from Kitsap. I have a friend at the Navy base there."

"Part of Witness Protection?"

"No," he offered now pulling their car onto I-90. "Just a guy I met while in Witness Protection. They had to move someone out of the mountain home before I got there. I lived incognito on base for a few weeks while they made the preparations. I got some interesting tours of some of the hardware they keep there. Knock your socks off kind of stuff."

Lisa wasn't all that curious about military hardware at the moment, and didn't ask.

Although sandwiched into the later part of the Seattle rush hours, Kent and Lisa finally boarded the ferry heading for Bremerton. Kent assured Lisa that it was safe to get out, stretch and walk around. There were a lot of people going home from work and they easily blended in with others on the crowded ferry.

Lisa sat beside Kent, the two of them munching on some snacks they'd found at the ferry's concessions.

"Kent, I can't stop thinking about how this day has just gone from super terrific to harrowing, all in a matter of hours."

He nodded.

"What will happen when your folks come home and they find, well, you know?"

Kent looked at Lisa. "My folks won't be coming home, Lisa."

"What do you mean?"

"I think they have them," Kent sighed.

"They? Who are they?"

"The assassins," he frowned.

"Kent!" Lisa exclaimed, alarmed.

"I just have a feeling. Our home is never empty. There's always somebody there. Cleaning crew, a couple of friends, grounds people, our cook. The whole home was quiet and the alarm armed in the middle of the day." He shook his head. "That never happens. Mr. No-name would have told us if they'd taken my folks into Witness Protection. The bad guys obviously got to them first and No-name didn't want to tell me."

"Hostages?" she asked.

Kent nodded. "I'm guessing they'll want to trade my folks for the data."

"Kent, what are we going to do?"

"I don't know, Lis'. The problem is, there won't be any kind of trade. They need me out of the way and my parents now too. They'll offer a trade but it will only be a trap to kill all of us and destroy this," he patted his pocket.

"Then we're no better off now than we were when I first met you," she said. "In fact, it's worse."

Kent nodded. "A lot worse."

It was beginning to get dark when Kent pulled the car up to the front gate of the military base. A woman dressed in the typical base fatigues stepped out of the booth as Kent lowered the window. She was clearly intrigued by the car but kept her professional demeanor.

"How can I help you sir?"

"I need to speak with the base commander. Tell him 'Serval' is here."

"I don't think the base commander is even here at the moment, Sir."

"This isn't a joke, Ma'am. It's a matter of national security," Kent said dead seriously.

The guard studied his face for a moment. "Alright," she nodded and then disappeared into the guard booth. After what seemed like several minutes both Kent and Lisa saw several jeep vehicles with MP's coming toward them, some of the jeeps exited the base and immediately surrounded their car. The gate began to open.

The guard emerged from her booth. "Follow the MPs please." She waved them all on.

Kent drove slowly surrounded by the base's security vehicles. They followed the MPs down a number of streets to what looked like a residential park. Lisa had never been inside a military base, although she'd lived next to one before.

“Better leave your purse in the car. They don’t like weapons on-base unless you’re authorized.”

Lisa quickly set her purse on the floor, remembering what was in it. They parked in front of what looked like a typical residential home. Lisa was still feeling nervous about where they were, but she sensed Kent felt much more at ease as he shut off the car. He squeezed her hand and gave her a smile.

They got out and were immediately surrounded by MPs.

“Standard security protocol, Sir. Do either of you have any weapons, firearms, knives, on your person?”

“We do, in the car,” Kent offered candidly.

They were both patted down and searched.

“This object in your pocket, Sir. What is it? May I see it?”

Kent produced the red and black flash drive. The MP examined it and then handed it back to Kent.

“We’re clear, here,” he announced to the rest.

Two of the MPs stayed to escort Kent and Lisa into the home where a tall middle-aged balding and muscular man dressed in fatigues appeared to be waiting. He dismissed the MPs who left closing the front door behind them.

“You two okay?” the big officer asked. His face looked stern but his voice was deep and kind.

Lisa glanced over at Kent, who was nodding.

“I never thought I’d see you again, Serval. What’s this all about?”

“No-name is dead.”

The big man’s eyes darted left and right for a moment. “Your WITSEC contact is dead,” he repeated.

Kent nodded.

“That’s not good,” he stated matter-of-factly.

“Tell me about it,” Kent agreed.

“Alright, I can see why you’re here now. C’mon inside. We obviously need to talk. But, Serval, I don’t believe I’ve had the

pleasure of meeting your lady friend," he smiled courteously at Lisa.

"Oh, Admiral, this is my wife."

"Your wife?" he raised an eyebrow at Kent. "A Mrs. Serval," he smiled at his own joke and shook her hand kindly.

The Admiral led them to his living room. "Please, have a seat. Can I get either of you anything to drink?"

"Maybe some water, please," Lisa asked.

"And you, Serval, your usual?"

"Yes, thanks Admiral."

The big man graciously served Lisa a tall glass of ice water with some lemon from the kitchen and then handed Kent a short glass of Cognac from a serving bottle at the living room bar. He took a seat opposite Kent and Lisa who were sitting very close together on the couch.

"So," the Admiral began, "you said your WITSEC contact was killed. How do you know?"

"I watched it happen," he said flatly.

"And you're still alive?" the Admiral asked in curiosity.

"We saw it at a distance while hiding and then slipped away before they could get to us."

"Well now. A little adventure today, I see." The Admiral seemed to ponder for a moment. "Serval," the Admiral began, "we're going to have to break some protocols here if I'm going to be able to understand what's really going on. Right now I'm in the dark about everything. All I know is that WITSEC sent me someone to keep alive. Okay, I did that. Then I'm told we don't need to make your deliveries any more. They've moved you. Fine. Now you show up on my door step telling me that you witnessed the murder of your protection contact."

Kent nodded.

"Young man, you ain't exactly playin' in the minor leagues here, are you," the Admiral stated. It was not a question.

"No, sir."

"Well, Serval, if I'm going to help, we need to put all of our cards on the table. You ready to do that?"

Lisa watched as Kent nodded.

"Alright. Who are you, son? And who's after you?"

"My name is Kent Levi, Admiral."

"Levi ... Levi," the admiral said thinking out loud.

"As in in 'Levi-Steele'," Kent finished.

"The attorney?"

Kent nodded.

"Well, that certainly bumps things up a few notches," the Admiral nodded. "So who wants you dead so badly?"

Kent looked the Admiral in the eye, "The President of the United States."

Lisa watched as the Admiral's eyes widened; his face suddenly taking on a slightly paler tone. "Holy shit," he mumbled, the expletive almost falling out of his mouth.

The Admiral got up from his chair and began pacing quietly to himself, deep in thought.

"Serv—ah, Levi," he corrected himself. "How the hell did you get into such a mess?!"

* * * * *

"Hey," the middle-aged Senator said holding the phone to his ear. He could already see it was Brian was on the secured line.

"I'm afraid there's bad news, Mark."

"Oh? How bad?"

"They got our WITSEC people."

"WHAT! How?!"

"Somehow, I don't know. And now we can't find our witness."

"Holy Jesus! Brian, how the hell do you get the drop on a couple of U.S. Marshals? That's supposed to be impossible!"

"It is, Mark. They got lucky."

"And what happens if they get lucky again?"

There was silence.

"Listen, Brian," Mark began, "do I need to cancel the hearing?"

"No!" Brian was emphatic. "There's too much riding on this. Don't cancel the hearing, Mark."

"Right now our witnesses are in the wind, Brian. We only have a couple of days to find them," Mark argued. "This whole thing could blow up in our faces!"

Brian took a deep breath and continued. "You're right, Mark, it could. You need to give me some time to find them." Brian heard Mark sigh on the other end. "Alright. I'll go through with it. If nothing else, I guess we can waste our time talking about healthcare."

"There's more, Mark. The people who took out our agents also left a ransom note."

"Ransom? They have hostages? Who are they holding?"

"The witnesses' parents."

"Michael Levi?! Jesus, Brian!!"

"I know. I know!"

"I guess I don't need to tell you how bad this is getting!"

"You don't. Trust me," Brian empathized.

"Listen," Mark instructed, "I know you're already doing your best on your end. Let me see what I can do on mine."

"That's why I called," Brian said.

"Okay. You alright?"

"Let's just say I've been better, Mark."

"Don't worry about it, Brian. God's in control."

"Sometimes I wonder about that, Mark."

The call ended.

Mark sighed pulling the phone away from his ear. "Yea, me too, my friend. Me too."

* * * * *

For the next two hours Kent told the sordid tale to the Admiral and everything that had happened. During the discussion, they migrated to the kitchen and sat at the bar while the Admiral made something for all of them to eat.

Toward the end of the story, they watched the Admiral pick up his cellphone and dial, interrupting Kent.

"Perry, come over here on the double, I have a little job for you." He ended the call. "Serval, I'll need your keys. I mean, Kent, I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize, it's alright, Admiral," Kent assured handing him the keys. "Serval is fine with me."

"I'm going to need to keep your car out of sight."

The backdoor of the home opened and a young and well-mannered man entered.

"Perry, I need you to take the Bugatti sitting out front and make it disappear. Nobody, and I do mean *nobody*, finds it. We'll need to return it later. Understood?"

"Absolutely understood, Admiral."

The Admiral handed Perry the keys and the young man left quickly.

"Serval, I'm not a politician. I'm a soldier. Because I'm a soldier, I have a chain of command. That chain of command follows all the way up to the same man who wants to see you dead and out of the way.

"But above that, I also swore an oath to uphold, protect and defend the Constitution of these United States against all enemies, both foreign and domestic. And that oath I intend to damn well carry out! When a Chief Executive uses foreign money to get elected, then by all rights he's committed an act of treason against the Constitution and the American people. That is a high crime. He has just invalidated himself as the holder of that sacred office."

Lisa sighed in relief upon hearing the Admiral's words. Kent rubbed his hand over her back.

"The hearing is in just three days, Admiral," Kent reminded.

"I know what hearing they're talking about. I just didn't know why they were making such a big deal out of it. Now I know," he nodded. "This hearing is going to make Iran-Contra look like Romper Room."

"Romper Room?" Lisa asked.

"Never mind," the Admiral chuckled, "it was before your time. In the meantime, you two will be staying here with me as my guests."

"Just like old times, Admiral," Kent smiled.

"I missed havin' you around, Serval," he smiled back. "Listen, you know where everything is. Just ring Perry if you need anything else. Looks like I'm gonna be up all night getting things ready for you to be at that hearing."

22

Lisa woke sleepily and then turned to see Kent still sleeping next to her. She snuggled up next to him under the sheets, spooning him, and reaching her arm around onto his chest. His skin felt warm against hers. She felt his hand reach around behind himself to softly grip her ass as he took a waking breath.

“We have to stop meeting like this; my wife will get suspicious,” he said in a soft mirth.

“You should dump that witch,” Lisa continued. “She doesn’t treat you nearly as well as I do.”

“I can’t leave her,” Kent said turning onto his back, a smirk rolling across his face, “she’ll take me for everything I have.”

Lisa sighed, “What has she got that I haven’t?” she pulled Kent’s hand to her bare chest. Kent couldn’t help but softly massage her breast.

“She’s not nearly as beautiful as you,” he assured.

"Does she make you feel as good as I do," Lisa pouted, overacting. Kent felt her fingernails running teasingly along the outside of his French briefs, sending some sudden and astonishing sensations through his jewels.

Lisa watched Kent sigh warmly.

"Not like you do," he assured again. Lisa had definitely awakened Kent's body, even if his brain was still a little sleepy.

"What happens if she finds us like this?" Kent played.

Lisa felt Kent's fingers wandering over her skin.

"Ooh, I hope she does. Serves her right for not treating you like a real man."

Kent began kissing Lisa lightly on her chest, then warmly and ever so lightly around her neck. He heard Lisa sigh lightly as he pulled the covers away from her skin and began kissing her body lightly all over. Kent had discovered long ago that this was one of Lisa's favorite foreplays. She relaxed as Kent's lips kissed and teased her body from toes to nose. He soon had Lisa breathing heavier with the delicate sensations he delivered.

Lisa lifted her hips softly as Kent now teased her bikini area through her panties.

"You need to take those off," she breathed, her hips rising.

Kent's lips left her panties as he moved himself over her. His fingers locked into hers, raising them above her head. He began kissing her neck, his body hovering lightly against hers.

"I don't know that we should be going all the way in the Admiral's guest room."

"Kent you can't do this to me!" she whispered in protest.

"Do *what* to you?" he kissed her ear, his very firm briefs rocking softly against her panties.

"Tease me like this!" she breathed.

Lisa's body had become more than revved from Kent's gentle playing of her. Kent could set her off so quickly if he

wanted to! She softly began smoothing her lips over his chest, teasing his nipples.

“Ohhh,” he breathed, “now that’s just not fair!” he protested.

Lisa had her own weapons. She’d become just as well acquainted with Kent’s body as he had with hers. Lisa played him like a fine masculine instrument. It wasn’t long before she had Kent’s hands in her panties sliding them off.

The Admiral knocked on the door, opened it, and peered into the room where Kent and Lisa were still holding each other, deep in afterglow.

“If you two lovebirds are finished, we have a chopper that’s preparing to take you to McChord. Perry will drop you off at the pad. You have thirty minutes.” He closed the door.

Kent smirked at Lisa, “I guess we better hit the shower.”

Both Perry and the Admiral were waiting for them politely when they entered the foyer. The Admiral nodded to the both of them.

“Serval, you know I hate long good-byes. Get the hell out of here and make sure you make that appointment! *Capisce?*”

Kent nodded. “Yes, Admiral.”

“Oh, and one more thing,” he said opening the front door and nodding at them, “I expect a full report from the both of you when this is all over. That’s an order,” he smiled.

“Yes, Sir,” they both said.

“Go on, get out,” he motioned.

“Perry, what’s McChord?” Lisa asked after they had gotten into a dark-windowed car.

“Air Force base, Ma’am. Home of the 62nd. They handle transports all over the world.”

“Where are they taking us?” she asked.

“Don’t know, Ma’am. My orders are to get you to our chopper. That’s all I know. From there I’m pretty sure others will have orders where to take you.”

They drove only a short way before everyone could see a large helicopter, its rotors already moving and prepared for flight.

“Sir?”

“Yes, Perry?”

“It was good seeing you again.”

“Likewise, Perry.”

“There’s some rumor flying around the base about you two, if you get my meaning.”

Perry could see Kent nodding in the rearview mirror.

“I don’t know who you are, Sir, but I haven’t seen this kind of quiet background mobilization for someone—ever. Don’t trust anyone. Especially anyone not wearing a uniform.”

“Thanks, Perry,” Kent offered.

“Besides, Sir, I’d kinda like to have some more of that grilled asparagus you whipped up last time you were here.”

Kent nodded, grinning.

“Here we are,” Perry pulled the car up to the helipad. Several squads of fully armed soldiers in combat fatigues stood waiting. One of them opened the car door and the two were escorted onto the waiting helicopter. They were given life vests and helmets, and then buckled into passenger seats. Four very tough-looking soldiers accompanied them, harnessing themselves in and around them. The doors of the chopper were closed as the pilot informed everyone over the helmet com of their expedient departure. They felt the sensation of lift-off as the ground fled beneath them.

“Sorry the accommodations aren’t exactly first-class, folks,” the soldier in charge spoke into his mic. Lisa could hear his voice in the helmet’s headset. “We’ll only be in the air for about twenty minutes.”

Kent could see the stares from the other soldiers. Their expressions showed curiosity and yet were blank at the same time. Lisa noticed it also. Both of them could clearly read their uniforms, however. These men were Navy Seals.

Kent and Lisa exited the helicopter and were escorted into a black, heavily armored but executive-looking Humvee with thick glass and very comfortable leather seats. The driver whirled the vehicle from the helipad and began driving them down a long road that paralleled a very wide and long runway. Up ahead, Kent could see a large cargo plane sitting at the end of the runway, like it was in preparation for takeoff.

The driver whipped the large Humvee onto the runway and around to the back of the plane. Without even a pause, they rapidly drove up the ramp until the vehicle finally came to a quick stop inside the large cargo jet.

“This guy drives like you do,” Lisa quipped to Kent, not feeling so good after taking all the corners at high speed.

The glass between the driver and the two of them lowered as the driver removed her helmet, shaking out her long, dark hair. “We’ll stay put until we’re aloft. Then you can get out and stretch.”

Kent looked at Lisa, smirking. “Sexist much?” he joked.

People outside were securing the Humvee to the interior of the plane. Then everyone seemed to just vanish elsewhere within the plane. Although they couldn’t see anything, they soon felt their acceleration and then the liftoff as the massive plane powered itself into the air.

* * * * *

Harlan entered the DHS Secretary's office and closed the door. "What's up, Frank? You were all cryptic on the phone."

"You wanted to be notified when we had something. Well, we have something."

"Really? Aw, man, give me some *good* news for once, Frank," Harlan sighed, somewhat relieved. His own efforts were not working out as well as he'd hoped. "I need some good news right now."

"Alright," Frank smiled. "We've ID'd the kid's alias in WITSEC."

"Sweet!" Harlan's mood suddenly lifted. "Do we know where he is?"

"Not yet, but we're assuming they're still somewhere in Seattle."

"They?"

"The kid's cover includes a wife."

"How'd you find him?"

"We ran facial recognition over all of the video we had in public terminals and airports for the past couple of months. We spotted him leaving SeaTac and then JFK for Europe about two weeks ago."

"Europe? What the hell was he doing in Europe?"

"Taking a cruise," Frank offered flatly.

"Jesus! Really? I'm busting my ass trying to nail this bastard and he's livin' it up on a cruise?!" Harlan shook his head.

"Maybe you should take one, Harlan, you look like you could use a long one."

"I may be on a permanent one if we don't find this kid! So I take it he didn't go home."

"No, we sent people there last night. No one showed up."

"Did you find any files?"

"Nah, it was clean."

"Damn."

"You know, Harlan, it seems wherever this kid goes, we keep finding bodies all over the place."

"So?"

"So these last two were agents registered with WITSEC. The Marshal Service is a lot tougher to deal with than the little people you normally leave me with."

"You're not the only one working on this, Frank."

"You hired contractors?" he quipped. "I am deeply hurt," he continued sarcastically.

"Yea, well get over it. They almost had the kid before you did."

Frank nodded, "Touché."

"Any word on the Hill about how they're planning on spilling the beans?"

"Nothing concrete. We have agents and informants listening everywhere. Everyone who knows something has totally clammed up. Probably because people keep disappearing or ending up dead all over the place, in case you hadn't noticed."

Harlan frowned at him.

"But you know, in a couple of days there's going to be the healthcare hearing. It's live. If I wanted to spill the beans in a very public way, I might try to hijack that hearing."

"What? That's crazy, Frank."

Frank looked at Harlan. "So is funding a presidential campaign with a billion dollars in foreign money."

* * * * *

The door of the officer's cabin aboard the cargo plane opened and a very handsome, tanned-skinned thirty-something officer in uniform with a thick military build entered, closing

the door behind him. He studied the young couple for a few moments, especially Kent.

“Kent and Lisa Kyle,” he began, his face now growing a smirk. “So, you two are the mysterious cargo I’m keeping under wraps. Interesting. I’m Admiral Dark,” he reached out to shake their hands and then took a seat across from them at the table.

“Is that really your name?” Lisa asked.

“Yes, Ma’am, it is. You’re being kept in the ‘Dark,’” he smiled. “It’s part of what I do.”

“The Navy’s own version of Witness Protection?” Kent asked.

“In a manner of speaking, Kent. I often have the job of making things and people just disappear. Over the years, I’ve have become rather good at it.”

“I like the sound of that,” Lisa nodded.

“Where are we headed, Admiral, if I can ask?”

“Andrews Naval Air Facility.”

Kent looked at the Admiral. “Andrews? The Air Force Base? Isn’t that where the president’s own plane is kept?” He tried to keep his tone respectful, but a slight edge crept into it. “You do know who is after us, right?”

“Trust me, I know *more* about you, Mr. Levi, than you do,” Admiral Dark assured, “including your Administrative entanglements. Sometimes the safest places in the world to hide people—and things—are right under the noses of those who are looking for them.”

Kent nodded. He wasn’t sure if he agreed with the logic, but it seemed to have some merit to hide someone where they would never think to look.

Dark continued, “I was the one responsible for putting you in our little safe house in the Cascades. It was one of my men who made your deliveries. But you,” Dark looked intently at Lisa, “you Miss Kyle, or I should say Mrs. Levi now; you

definitely gave all of us a bit of intrigue. It's not everyone who just wanders into a high-mountain canyon and up to one of our stealth installations."

"It was purely by accident, Admiral," she assured.

"I don't believe in accidents, Mrs. Levi," Dark offered flatly. "Fate seems to want you mixed up in all of this for some reason. I find that beyond intriguing."

Kent squeezed Lisa's hand.

"I don't know that I follow you, Admiral."

"It's not important at the moment. The fact is," Dark returned his gaze to Kent, "we've been intimately involved with this whole situation from the outset. Your former boss, Chuck, was one of our deep-cover operatives. We knew what the Administration was up to. We installed Chuck to collect the data we needed and to do it quietly. He setup the botnets. He installed the packet-sniffers on the network. But he got a bit *too* aggressive. DHS got suspicious. His audio-taps were not as well disguised as they could have been. They were able to trace the code signatures back to Hydra where all of you worked."

Lisa could see Kent nodding and frowning.

"You know the rest of the story, Kent. Chuck gave you the only copy of the data that we know of. And now you're not just a courier, you're an A-list witness of these events; the *only* witness still alive, in fact. We need you to testify at the hearing that's coming up. We need to know if you're prepared to do that?"

"I spent almost two years locked away in that place, Admiral. I'm not going to allow those years of my life to be wasted. I'll testify."

"And what about you, Mrs. Levi? You're just as mixed up in all of this now as your husband. Are you willing to sit beside your husband; to testify if need be?"

"I don't know what I can add, Admiral," Lisa offered, "but I'll do whatever I have to do to help. You can count me in."

AWAKENED

“Good.” Dark got up to leave. “We’ll be landing at Andrews in a few hours. If you need anything, the Seals outside will get you what you need.” The admiral glanced over at Kent and then Lisa again. A slight smirk seemed to tip the edge of his mouth as he closed the door behind himself.

Mark entered the large hearing room. The media were everywhere. Cameras flashed and video recorded the event as he entered. Outwardly he appeared cool and collected for the hearing, but inwardly his feelings were distraught and depressed. Despite the Senator's own best efforts, the person who he really needed to be at this hearing was still missing.

The last of the committee chairs to enter the room, he took his seat next to his fellow chair people. The clock read four minutes to nine. He checked his phone for any texts. But there was nothing.

* * * * *

Kent and Lisa sat in the back of a large convoy of personnel trucks that were now speeding their way through the streets of

Washington D.C. Admiral Dark had ordered Kent and Lisa dressed in the same fatigues as the rest of the soldiers they were riding with. The nervous couple glanced at each other. Kent wished he could tell her how cute she looked in fatigues and a helmet. He smiled at her, but Lisa wasn't smiling. She managed something of a smile, but Kent could easily tell his wife was very nervous. But somehow, being surrounded by dozens of Navy Seals, Kent didn't feel as nervous as he thought he should be feeling.

* * * * *

There was a subtle knocking on the door. The operations security manager whirled in his seat and away from the logistics monitors he was watching in the small dimly lit room somewhere within the hearing building. He looked up at the outer hallway's security monitor. One of the pages was standing at the door of the otherwise empty hallway with another box of *Crispy Cremes* and several more coffees on a rolling cart. Their box had been emptied long ago.

"Well, now that's what I call efficiency," he grinned. "Miskowicz, open the door for the young lady."

The security officer left his monitors, unsecured the door and opened it revealing a very tall dark-skinned soldier staring him in the face!

"Peekaboo!" the Seal said, immediately rushing and overpowering the wide-eyed agent with a small arm pistol. Several other soldiers poured into the security room, quickly overtaking the security staff. The security door closed quietly behind them.

A moment later the door opened again. A camouflaged arm reached out and took hold of the cart of doughnuts and coffees, pulling it quietly inside the room and closing the door quickly once again.

* * * * *

Kent and Lisa's convoy arrived at the hearing building. Soldiers began quickly exiting the transport along with Kent and Lisa.

From the sidewalk a Secret Service agent radioed. "Control, this is Cox. Were we expecting military exercises today? I've got a shitload of armed, looks like Naval personnel, exiting vehicles at the building perimeter."

"Copy that, Cox," the security manager offered calmly, the business end of a Colt .45 semi-auto pressed lightly against his temple. "It's a last minute authorization. All teams, we have new orders ..."

The dozens of soldiers quickly disappeared into the building as the transports left the scene just as quickly as they came. Inside the building, team commanders quickly deployed squads to the building's internal security staff while Kent and Lisa and several more squads just bypassed the security personnel and scanners and made their way to the elevators.

Inside the elevator, the soldiers assisted Kent and Lisa with removing their fatigues, revealing appropriate formal business attire for the hearing. When the elevator doors opened, Navy Seals had already secured the hallway much to the disgruntled looks of numerous Secret Service agents who were standing down, severely out gunned and out numbered.

Kent approached the operation field commander who now stood by the door in full dress uniform.

"When I open this door, Mr. Levi, I and my fellow officers will flank you on all sides and then escort you to the witness table. Anyone that's already seated there will be removed in an

orderly fashion and you will be seated in their place. After that, we get out of the way and you get your fifteen minutes of fame. Understood?"

"Understood," Kent said, very nervous.

"Godspeed, Sir," the commander nodded.

"Thank you."

"... The point is, Senator, that this law has already been enacted by a major ... majority vote ..." The Attorney General stopped speaking while turning in his chair to see what the commotion was about toward the back of the room. The hearing room doors had opened and a dozen or more smartly uniformed military officers with shouldered weapons had begun to quietly fan out around the perimeter of the room. The media had completely moved their attention from the witness table to the wave of smartly dressed soldiers now entering.

Moving toward the Attorney General and his seated staff were a squad of similarly armed, dress uniformed officers of significant rank. A young couple was among them. The Attorney General suddenly realized who and what he was facing; he knew exactly who these two people being escorted toward him were. He frowned at them, all of them.

One of the officers approached him and whispered quietly beside his ear, "You should wipe that scowl off your face, Sir. There are cameras in the room. You're finished here. Please gather your things quickly and in an orderly fashion, and take a seat where you are directed. Do you understand exactly what I have told you?"

On television, the Attorney General appeared to look around the room and then nod at whatever he was being told by the well-dressed Naval officer.

“Jane,” the well-dressed and well-known male news anchor began, “there appears to be quite a few military personnel who have just unexpectedly entered the hearing room. Can you tell us and our viewers what this is all about?”

“Indeed, Jim, we’re seeing perhaps a dozen or two dozen or more smartly dressed, what look like Navy Officers entering the room. It’s not on any agenda we in the media were given. This appears to be an unexpected addition to today’s hearing ...”

The committee chairwoman leaned toward Mark. “You know anything about this?”

Mark looked at her with a look of surprise that was just as astonished as her own. “I don’t know anything about this,” he told the truth. It felt good for once not to have to lie.

The Attorney General and his staff had gathered their things and were quickly being escorted away from the hearing table. Kent and Lisa took their seats as four of the officers remained standing behind them. The cameras all over the room were flashing wildly. Kent now sat in front of people he’d never seen before or had only seen being interviewed on TV. He removed the flash drive from his pocket and set it on the table in front of himself.

One of the people in front of Kent had begun gaveling over the din of noise that had risen in the room, mostly from reporters who were now on the phone with their producers wondering what to do.

“Order.” She called banging the gavel several times. “Order.”

The noise in the room died quickly.

“Young man. Young lady,” the seasoned chairwoman spoke directly, calmly, curiously. “It’s not just anyone who can

walk into a Congressional hearing the way you two have just done. I assume you have a very good reason for being here?"

"Yes, Ma'am, I do," Kent said.

"What's your name, son?"

"My name is Kent Levi, Senator."

"And yours, young lady?"

"Lisa Kyle Levi, Ma'am."

"I thought I recognized you, Ms. Kyle," The Senator smiled. "If my son puts one more poster of you on the walls of his room he won't be able to find the light switch."

The hearing room erupted momentarily in soft laughter.

"So, Mr. and Mrs. Levi, what brings you to us today? And under a very fine military escort I might add."

Kent lifted the black and red flash drive for her to see. "This does, Ma'am."

"And what is that, Mr. Levi?"

"It's a flash drive. It contains ..." Kent suddenly blacked out, falling head first onto the table. The white dress uniform of the officer next to him splattered in red! Kent's blood was flowing now all over the witness table, his eyes still open, his face in an unnatural, unmoving look.

Lisa screamed!

Two of the soldiers flanking the couple were sinking to the floor. Lisa felt herself being suddenly thrown onto the floor, hard! A big man covering her with himself was attempting to push her under the table. People were suddenly screaming and running for the exits, but the officers were under orders to allow no one out! They ordered the crowd to the floor for their safety while looking for where the silent shots had come from.

Within seconds one of the officers next to the corner of the room saw the ceiling's cracked security dome. "Bogie's in the ceiling at one o'clock. Camera dome," he spoke clearly and deliberately into his com.

The officers opened up their own automatic weapons into the ceiling, loudly riddling it with large caliber slugs. Within moments red began staining the tiles of the ceiling above, and then dripped in large droplets onto the carpeted floor below.

The cameras and live feeds were still rolling.

There was another pop and then a loud hum just before everything in the room went dark.

“Jane, we seem to have lost our feed to the hearing room. Are you able to see anything?”

“No, Jim, we just witnessed this young man beginning to answer the Senator’s question when we suddenly saw what looked like blood spraying against one of the military uniforms. It really appears that this young man, a Mr. Kent Levi, has been shot by someone in the room. We heard screams as pandemonium then broke out in the room as the Naval officers began opening fire, apparently at the ceiling of the hearing room. We then lost our news feed. I’m hearing that we are attempting to reestablish our live connection to the hearing room.”

“Jane, do know anything yet about these two young people and why they were escorted into the hearing room?”

“Not yet, Jim; but Jim, I’m now hearing reports that there’s been a massive power outage in the building, and indeed much of the area where the hearing building is ...”

The hearing room had become pitch black for only a few moments as outside Seals began activating their battery lights and moving quickly into the room.

“MEDIC!” the field commander yelled attempting to stem the flow of blood coming from Kent’s motionless head. “MEDIC!!”

A two-man team was quickly on top of them taking over for the commander.

“What the hell was that!?” the field commander barked as the hall operations team began moving in illuminating the large room with their field lights.

“Looks like EMP, Sir. Tactical. It’s knocked out most of the city block.”

“Give me that,” he barked at the officer holding one of the few electronic devices in the area still working.

“Request permission to engage Operation Fortress.”

Inside the command center the Admiral watched with a dozen other staff as he listened to the events take place.

“Repeat,” they heard the audio. “Request permission to engage Operation Fortress.”

However, the Admiral had already given the order.

“We’re one step ahead of you commander. You are hereby ordered, engage Operation Fortress. Repeat. Engage Operation Fortress.”

The field commander heard the order loud and clear. He looked at his fellow officer, “New orders, Commander. Spread the word. This is now Operation Fortress. We’re going ‘Dark’.”

Lisa’s world seemed to be a blur as she was forcibly taken from the room while still trying to get to her Kent who now lay motionless and still on the blood-covered table with two men hovering over him talking in medical terms she didn’t understand.

She screamed Kent’s name again.

Someone put a cloth over her mouth that made the room suddenly spin and fade into blackness.

* * * * *

As soon as it had landed in the remote countryside field well outside of D.C., Dark leapt onto the silent chopper that had evacuated the Seals from the city. Kent lay on a stretcher, professionally triaged by the team's medics.

"How is he?" Dark asked the lead medical officer.

The officer looked at him shaking his head. "Not good, Sir. He's lost too much blood. He's coded twice. The only thing keeping him alive right now is God."

"Alright!" the Admiral raised his voice, "Everyone, off! Close it up and secure the perimeter! Except you, doctor, you're with me."

"You heard the Admiral! Move it, people!" the team's commander barked. "The Admiral gave you an order!"

The Seals poured out of the chopper, closing the doors and took up positions all around the almost silent helicopter's still spinning rotors.

Inside the helicopter, Dark asked for the doctor's field knife. "What's your clearance level, doctor?" Dark ordered.

"I'm a seven, Sir."

"You're about to become a twelve."

"Sir? There is no twelve," the doctor corrected.

Dark looked back at the doctor. The Admiral quickly sliced open Kent's wrist with the ultra sharp blade and then just as quickly expertly turned the blade onto his own palm, cutting himself deeply. Dark took hold of Kent's weekly bleeding wrist with his own bleeding hand and held it tightly.

The astonished doctor said nothing but simply watched on as the Admiral held tightly to Kent's wrist.

Dark looked at the medical officer who still said nothing but was beginning to pale. The admiral held onto Kent's wrist for long minutes watching Kent carefully.

The doctor watched as the admiral finally released Kent's wrist, the deep slice in his patient's arm was no longer bleeding and the wound looked visibly smaller, as if it had actually partially healed!

The admiral wiped the blade carefully and then handed the doctor's knife back to him.

"Don't try this at home," Dark offered with a steeled look.

The medic quickly reached out and took hold of Dark's own hand and looked at his palm. The admiral's palm was itself almost healed. The wound was visibly narrowing quickly right before his eyes! The astonished officer watched as the deep laceration faded completely from the admiral's palm until it was as if it had never been there.

"How is your patient doing?" Dark asked.

The medical officer looked at his field monitors. Kent's vitals were slightly improved. They seemed to be getting better with each passing moment. He looked up at the admiral. The middle-aged doctor's stare dug deeply into Dark's. The doctor spoke quietly in perfect Hebrew. *"I don't believe it. It's true. You. You're one of them; aren't you?!"*

Dark looked at him, *"One of who, doctor?"* The Admiral's Hebrew was elegant, cultured and precise.

"Don't bullshit me, Sir. I know what I just saw."

"We need this young man alive," Dark offered.

"I hope to God whatever you just did to this boy didn't curse him for all eternity."

Dark nodded. *"Me too, doctor. Me too."*

24

THE LIFEBLOOD OF GOD SHALL BE REBORN
WHEN THE SEVEN LORDS REIGN SUPREME OVER THE SEVEN
NATIONS THEN SHALL THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF GOD
BE AWAKENED AND SHALL REST NO LONGER

—THE BOOKS OF GOD

The young woman's name is actually Lisa Kyle," an agent of the Secretary of DHS reported to everyone assembled in the presidential briefing room. "She's a fairly well-known fashion model; recently graduated from a private religious college in Tennessee. Oddly enough, we can't find any records of her actually marrying this Levi guy."

"Maybe they got married at sea?" Frank suggested. "They were on an extended cruise after all."

"Could be," his deputy nodded. "We'll look into that."

“What about her family? What do they know?” the President asked, finally crushing out his cigarette in the ashtray, much to the relief of most in the conference room.

The DHS agent looked a bit frustrated. “Somehow the media beat us to the punch on her family. We got there pretty quickly but several media vans were already parked in front of the home and at the office where her father works. Her brother was already talking to reporters on camera when we showed up. There wasn’t a whole lot we could do and they *did not* want to talk to us—at all.”

“Did you bring them in?” the President asked.

Frank broke into the deputy’s report. Some of the people in the briefing room were not on the same security clearance as others. “We just questioned them onsite, Mr. President. The media are already circling. We didn’t want to make anyone uncomfortable. Besides, I am more than certain these poor people are not involved in the least. What concerns me most is the military’s involvement,” the Secretary looked unhappily at the Naval Chief.

“So do we know who all of these military people are who were involved in the disruption,” the President now directed himself to the Chief of Naval Operations.

“Absolutely, Mr. President. No one’s making any attempt to hide their identity. It appears that they’re all just following orders.”

“Orders? From who?”

“We don’t know yet. We’re still looking into that.”

“Well,” the President appeared annoyed, “have we interrogated any of them to find out what they know?”

“Know what, Mr. President?” the Chief asked.

“We’ll,” he paused, “you know, what they were doing at that hearing in the first place.”

“Is there something specific you’re looking for that these men and women in uniform might know, Mr. President?” the

Chief probed, not really sure what the President had in mind. It appeared a bit odd that the President and other civilians in this group seemed to know some things that he didn't.

"No, Jerry, I just want to know why over a hundred of our Navy Seals broke into a Secret Service secured facility without anyone knowing about it until it happened and then vanished without so much as a traffic ticket."

"And, Mr. President, I'd like to know that too. And I'd also like to know how an assassin was able to penetrate DHS Secret Service security and install themselves in a maximum security building during a hearing with top Congress people."

"Well, Jerry—I'd like to know that too," the President assured.

"Admiral," Harlan spoke up, "I've been trying to keep the media at bay for two days now. And I still don't have anything to tell them. How long is your investigation going to take?"

"The media? Seriously, Mr. Harlan? I've got *Congress* people from both sides calling me on the phone thanking us for taking out the assassin. They're not worried about the U.S. Navy, they're asking questions about Homeland's *lack* of security," he shot an ugly glance at the Secretary.

"I'm looking into it, Jerry," Frank assured. "We have a full investigation underway, just like you do. What we're most curious about is why these Seals detonated an EMP after the shooting. The electro-magnetic pulse was strong enough to fry every piece of electronics for a city block. That is purely military hardware. Secret Service doesn't have access to anything like that, that's for sure."

"What makes you so sure the Navy detonated it? The assassin could have done that," Jerry countered.

"The assassin was pretty dead by that time, Jerry. We searched the entire building and found nothing," Frank lied. "That device had to come from one of your people, to blackout

the media while they made their exit. Pretty damned effective too."

"Okay, gentlemen, let's keep the finger pointing down to a minimum here," the President interjected.

"Jerry," the President began, "I'm going to order all of these people who were involved in this incident relieved of duty immediately, and all of them brought in for questioning."

"Well, Mr. President, that's going to be difficult to do."

"It is? I'm Commander-in-chief, ain't I?"

"Yes, Sir, you are, but I was just informed this morning by the Judge Advocate General that all of these people have been placed on administrative leave pending an investigation by the JAG's office relating to this incident. Evidently these men were all acting under a little known standing order I have yet to review. Not even the SecNav was aware of it until today."

"Are you telling me we can't even talk to these people, Jerry?" the President asked.

"That's exactly what I'm telling you, Mr. President. The SecNav's hands are tied. Not unless you want the SecNav to get into a gigantic pissing match with the JAG's office on national TV. With all of the media attention surrounding this right now, that would get really ugly, not to mention bad for a morale that's already in the dumper. We have to respect and follow the U.C.M.J. These men and women in uniform have rights, and apparently they're exercising them."

"Christ," Harlan swore under his breath, lowering and shaking his head. "So you're telling us they've lawyered up?"

"We are a nation of laws, Mr. Harlan," the Naval Chief assured. "Being Commander-in-chief does not trump the law. Military personnel have rights too."

Glances shot around the room as people took notes. The President raised an eyebrow at Frank, who was shaking his head.

“Listen, Gentlemen,” the Naval Chief continued, “whoever was responsible for this knew *exactly* what they were doing. They had it well planned. They executed that plan with flawless precision. Had Homeland done its job, the hearing would have commenced with whatever it was this young couple had to say.

“These people in Congress are now demanding that we produce these kids for another hearing. That is, if that young man is still alive. We don’t even know what his status or prognosis is at this point.”

“I’m getting the same thing from the press and the public,” the Press Secretary added. “The public is clamoring to know what this Levi guy was about to say to the committee before he was shot on live TV in front of twenty million witnesses. Talk radio, social media and the blogosphere are going nuts with the conspiracy and cover-up theories. And I must tell you, Frank, Jerry is right. These people are praising this group of Seals and pointing their fingers at you, wondering why Homeland fell asleep at the switch.”

“Well, we don’t want people losing faith in Homeland Security,” the Secretary offered. “We should probably say this was a joint operation between DHS and the Seal teams.”

“Frank, have you actually seen the videos? The ones circulating online?” the Press Secretary asked, a little bewildered.

“No, I’ve been a little busy to watch TV,” Frank answered, somewhat annoyed by the press secretary’s tone.

“There were fifteen major news agencies in the room. We have media footage showing the Seal teams all but arresting Secret Service agents; relieving them of their service weapons and communications. Your guys look really bad, I’m sorry to say. No one’s going to buy that story. *I* couldn’t even sell that story.”

“Alright, alright,” the President jumped in. “Listen, it looks like we’re all still processing what happened here, and things are continuing to develop—”

The door of the conference room opened as one of the president’s aids entered quickly. He spoke softly into the chief executive’s ear. All eyes were on his face as his expressions grew much more serious. The president stood up from his chair.

“I have just been informed of some new developments within this situation. As of right now, I am treating this as a top security breach by a possible terrorist element within our own military. No press releases, no talking points, nobody talks to the media, nothing leaves here either officially or unofficially until my team has had the opportunity to review it. We’ll meet again this afternoon. Keep your schedules open. Everyone clear?”

They all nodded.

“Good. Dismissed.”

* * * * *

“We have a problem,” Dark announced unhappily walking up to the professionally well dressed woman behind her luxury office desk.

“I do not have problems,” she assured with a smile, her well spoken Italian accent was just as beautiful as she was. “Problems are your job.”

“Yea, but I can’t fix this one,” he assured.

“Oh?”

“Kent Levi’s awake.”

Dark watched her eyes dart too one side for a moment.

“Impossible.”

“Not impossible,” he corrected. “I just left him. Very awake and very much *awakened*.”

"How very?" she asked.

Dark rested both of his hands on the edge of the expensive mahogany and looked her in the eye, "VERY."

"Interesting," she thought for a moment. "Apparently the prophecy is true," she mused.

"I don't believe in prophecies," he quipped.

"Believe what you like." She got up from her tufted high-back leather chair and went to the window of the upper-floor high-rise office. Her thoughts were calculating while she watched a ferry as it was leaving the dock in the distance. "The gods are not stupid, Dark," she looked at him, her slender arms elegantly folded. "Obviously, there was a reason the Steele's were protecting the Levi family all this time. Perhaps now we know why."

"Francesca," he began, "we're not the only ones who know about the prophecy. The Seven have the same *Books of Ra* that we do. It's not going to take them long to realize what's happening. In fact, they may already realize it."

"Probably." She gave him a pedantic look.

"You know if they discover what he is, they're not going to allow him to live. He'll become a prime target."

She looked back out at the water. "I know."

Dark watched with her as the ferry chugged out into the sound.

"Do you think it's actually possible? That the gods are actually returning?" he asked, his gaze never leaving the water.

"I do not know," was all she said.

* * * * *

Lisa sat curled up on her bunk, feeling terribly frustrated and woebegone. It had been nearly two weeks since she had heard from anyone. She'd been practically held prisoner in the

small cell with boring magazines, a handful of old books and no outside media. No one would talk to her. Even the people who brought in her meals said nothing to her, even if she spoke to them. She still wasn't sure who was holding her here. She began to wonder if the government finally had taken her prisoner. If she had been taken by Admiral Dark's people, wouldn't she know something by now?

She heard the door of her room open and then close as it had many times before at the same time everyday. She watched out of the corner of her eye as whoever entered delivered her breakfast. She didn't look at the person directly, and paid no attention as they set the tray down.

"You've looked better, Mrs. Levi," she heard a vaguely familiar voice offer. Lisa looked up. Perry, the Admiral's personal assistant, stood by the door.

"Perry!" Lisa practically jumped up off the bed. He was the first person she'd recognized since waking up in this room after the hearing. "Oh! Am I so glad to see you!" she exclaimed, grateful to know that she had at least been taken by people wearing white hats. The joy of seeing a familiar face now had her eyes beginning to well up.

"Likewise, Mrs. Levi." Perry reached out with a brief compassionate hug. "I am sorry about the rudimentary accommodations. We're not WITSEC, but I did the best I could under the circumstances."

"You? Perry, where's Kent?"

"I wish I knew, exactly, Mrs. Levi. I was just given orders to keep you safe and out of the way, so that's what I've been doing. My apologies for the rude accommodations and lack of news."

"Perry, I've been here for weeks! No one to talk to ..."

He nodded. "I'm sorry about that, Mrs. Levi. I didn't have a lot of options. The hearing has created quite a firestorm and

everyone has been lawyering up or vanishing like ghosts. Even the Admiral has been relieved of duty by the Administration."

"Where's Admiral Dark?"

"Admiral who, Mrs. Levi?" Perry asked. "There's no Admiral Dark assigned to this base."

Lisa nodded and then shook her head, "Never mind."

"Admiral Duke and I will be leaving this afternoon, Mrs. Levi. You need to be gone before we leave."

"Perry, I've got to find Kent."

"I don't know where he is, Ma'am. Honestly, it's been such a hornet's nest around here since the hearing. The Administration has been pulling out all the stops trying to find you and Mr. Levi. With the Admiral being relieved of command, we can't protect you anymore."

"How dangerous is it—for me to leave?"

"Honestly, Mrs. Levi," Perry shook his head, "if I were you, I'd stay out of sight. Don't go home. This Administration is extremely dangerous. They don't care about the rule of law, military or civilian. They're ruthless and brutal. If they find you—" Perry didn't finish his sentence.

Lisa nodded.

"You should have some breakfast, Ma'am. I made it myself. Your car is upstairs. The keys are on your tray here. The door is open and the guards will let you out. If I were you, I'd be out of here within the hour."

"Perry, where am I supposed to go? I'm sure the government will be watching my family, Kent's family, where am I supposed to go?"

Perry looked at her with his typical calming demeanor, "I wish I could answer that for you, Mrs. Levi. Really, I do. But all I can say is that it's time for you to survive. Good luck and Godspeed, Ma'am."

Lisa just looked at Perry. Her mind seemed to clear of all of the minutiae of worry. She nodded.

Perry walked out of the room without another word, leaving the door wide open.

* * * * *

It was still early morning when Lisa pulled out of Navel base and into the ferry lanes that would take her back across the sound to Seattle. It would be another half hour before the next ferry would arrive. She sat nervously in Kent's highly conspicuous sports car. She looked over at the empty seat and then at her purse sitting on the passenger floor exactly where she had left it when Perry had stashed the car weeks before. She picked up the bag and looked inside. It contained her makeup bag, a very dead iPhone, several of the bundles of cash Kent had given her and the hot pink and black Ruger pistol Kent had insisted she take. She looked in the glove box to see Kent's own weapon right where he had left it.

Lisa sighed and closed it.

"Now what am I supposed to do?" she thought nervously to herself. She tapped on the radio and found some morning news to see what she'd missed over the past several weeks.

It wasn't long until the traffic began moving onto the ferry. As she was boarding the car onto the ferry, a talk show program started up with the host welcoming his listeners in a rather annoying shtick, proclaiming his "*talent on loan from God.*" She was about to change the station when the host spring boarded his show's opening with a quip about Navy officers being "*tortured by the regime*". Lisa took that to mean that this particular talk show host was not a fan of the current Administration. She kept listening.

"... okay, so for weeks now the 'regime' has been stonewalling, obfuscating, and downplaying the rumor that the Navy Seals involved in the healthcare hearing—where the still missing Kent and

Lisa attempted to testify about something we have yet to learn—are actually being tortured for information!”

‘Oh, so they do know about us now,’ Lisa mused. She wondered if that was a good or a bad thing.

“I’m telling you people, this whole circus just has infamy written all over it for the Dictator-in-chief. From the New York Times, hot off the presses today, tadadat-tadadat-tadadah! comes this headline and story. ‘President Asserts Executive Privilege in release of Navy Hostages’—er, I mean ‘Detainees’. Well they may as well be hostages under torture from the optics of all of this!”

Lisa listened as the host snarkingly read the story from the Times about how the President was defying a court order today ordering the release of scores of Navy Seals who had been identified at the hearing and had been arrested as terrorists. Lisa nervously put on some sunglasses for an impromptu disguise even though the sun was not out, and continued to listen.

“There is just not going to be any way for the regime to spin its way out of this. ‘Ken and Barbie’, our affectionate name for the two kids who the regime allegedly attempted to have murdered at the hearing, are also still MIA! Oh, and did we mention that the elder Levi’s are still on an extended vacation? Hopefully not somewhere at the bottom of Puget Sound!”

So Kent was right. His parents had been taken, Lisa thought. She hoped her own family had not been taken into some kind of “protective custody” by the government. She continued to listen in the car as the ferry glided across the water.

“... honestly IF these kids are still alive, it would mean an instant Pulitzer for anyone in the media to get them on camera for an interview—I mean a REAL interview—and not one of these pretend interviews. Of course, IF that happened, you would also be one very dead reporter. What? Sorry ladies and gentlemen but my overpaid staff are talking to me over the IFB. The staff believes there are

actually reporters out there who would love to get the scoop on this story. What? You think I'm joking? Hells bells I'm not joking! There is a trail of bodies, well, missing bodies, a mile long here and all of it leads to the front door of the White House!"

Lisa had listened to enough. The host was entertaining but he was also getting on her nerves. Maybe it was because she was the "Barbie" who was the focus of the show at the moment, and he seemed to be treating her dire situation all too cavalierly.

How ironic it was that she and Kent had become kind of celebrity fugitives now. Every television station in America would be clamoring to interview them, to be the first to get their story. But, annoying as he was, the talk show host was right. Both she and Kent would be more than dangerous for anyone to interview right now. The White House wanted her dead. And in a right now kind of way.

* * * * *

Mark climbed aboard the smaller twin-engine luxury jet that had been waiting for him. He was looking forward to getting home for some badly needed rest and some quality time with his family after all of the insanity that was swirling around the Hill still weeks after the hearing and the odd disappearance of his two would-be witnesses.

He gave his things to the pretty and curvaceous flight attendant and made his way to a seat with a small table where Brian was already waiting. All of the window covers had been pulled closed.

"Something to drink, Mark?" Brian asked the youthful-looking Senator, now barely into his forties.

"Please. Something smooth and stiff," he sighed, loosening his tie. The attendant acknowledged his request professionally.

"Can we talk here?" Mark asked, motioning back at their attendant.

"It's fine. Brenda's part of my staff."

"Your wife know about 'Brenda'?" Mark mocked with a smirk.

"All my wife knows is that I'm a ridiculously over-paid lobbyist who keeps her in the lifestyle to which she is accustomed. I prefer to keep it that way."

"Have you heard anything about these kids yet?" Mark asked.

"No. Just the same rehash. It's been very quiet since the hearing. The Administration has been doing an admirable job keeping the story off the front page. It looks like they are winning the PR battle at this point."

Mark frowned. "We were so close, Brian. That assassin just came out of nowhere."

"That was my fault, Mark. I seriously underestimated this administration's resolve here. It won't happen again, I assure you."

"It's not your fault, Brian. Nobody would have thought that they'd actually attempt to murder a witness on the stand in front of cameras. I guess it just shows the desperation they have for keeping this thing quiet."

Brenda set Mark's drink down in front of him with a cloth napkin. "We're beginning to taxi now, gentlemen. We should be aloft in a couple of minutes. I'll be up front in the cockpit if you need anything."

"Thanks, Brenda," Brian acknowledged.

Mark watched the shapely attendant walk to the cockpit and close the door.

"And she's a pilot?" Mark asked.

"You have to wear a lot of hats in my company, Mark. It's how I keep things running smoothly," Brian smiled over the top of his glass.

"You didn't offer me a ride home just to show-off your staff, Brian. You said it was important."

"It is. The Administration is quietly singling out military personnel they think might have been involved in the hearing. They're all but completely ignoring the U.C.M.J. You know that some of the military personnel involved have been secretly arrested and even tortured."

"I know. We're pressing very hard for their release right now. It's illegal confinement."

"You won't get anywhere with that."

"Why not?"

"Because if you put military people who have actually been tortured in a public forum it could mean impeachment. The president's own party would never survive the fallout from that. They're really digging in on this one, Mark."

"I don't understand how the hell can they do that? Our own military. Our own people!"

"The Administration doesn't care about patriotism, Mark. It's all about the money to them now. They have no respect for the military; they aren't Statesmen. They have no business running a 7-Eleven, let alone a nation. They're just a bunch of street thugs that have stepped into shoes they don't even know how to tie. There's nothing civilized about them. *That* was my mistake. I gave them the benefit of the doubt, that there was a modicum of human decency within their ranks. I was wrong."

"I think all of us on the Hill are beginning to realize that as well. Good God, Brian, we don't torture our own citizens, especially our own military. These people have been under arrest for weeks. How long has this been going on?"

"Probably since the arrests began. The press has been less than interested in the illegal arrests. We need to make this interesting for them. I want you to subpoena these people; bring them into the Senate for a hearing, let them tell their stories."

“That’s a good idea, Brian, but if the Administration has tortured these men, it’s like you said, they will never allow them to appear and tell their story. We’ll issue the subpoenas and the witnesses will just never appear. The Administration will continue to claim executive privilege of an ongoing investigation and once again we’ll have egg all over our faces. We’ll just look like fools.”

“That’s what I want to have happen.”

Mark looked at Brian. “You want to make me look like a fool—”

“No, I want the media to get interested in this story again. If they think they can make all of you look like fools, then they’ll run with the bait. I want you to leak to the press that these Naval officers are being tortured for information. It will look better coming from you than from someone like me. You’re immunized from the Administration’s actions; little people like me are not.”

“But then what? I don’t have any evidence.”

“Not yet. But I want to find out where they’re keeping these Seals they’ve arrested. Everyone’s keeping real quiet, Mark. Nobody is talking about anything, not even where these men might be held. If we rattle the cage a bit, get the press interested, start putting the wives and kids of these officers on the tube, it might shake something loose; give us a clue as to where they’re holding them. Our men and women in uniform will not take politely to their own being tortured by an Administration and a Commander-in-chief they already despise. It will hopefully keep them from arresting and torturing any more officers as well.”

“No, it won’t. It’s like you said; we’re dealing with savages. But I’ll go along with it, Brian. Anything I can do to keep these people out of harm’s way of the Administration. Even if I have to stand up there in my underwear, believe me, I will.”

* * * * *

The Admiral sat next to Perry in the officer's lounge nursing a double scotch at two in the afternoon. Neither man said a word. There was no need; both knew what was coming. It wasn't long before the new base commander entered with several squads of MP's.

"Andrew Duke," the young admiral barely out of academy improperly addressed the elder officer.

"You're out of line here, sonny," the Admiral quipped, not looking at him while taking a sip from his glass.

"That's Admiral now to you, Duke," the young graduate demanded.

The elder Admiral turned on his stool to look at the young executive officer. "So you're really what passes for officer material these days?" the Admiral questioned.

"At least I'm not a traitor."

"Oh, you are. You're just too stupid to know that you are. Dumbass kids," he scoffed.

"I don't have to take that from you!"

The Admiral smirked, shaking his head. "You just did, sonny."

"Andrew Duke, you and your staff are under arrest by executive order of the President of the United States."

"Is that so?" the Admiral mocked.

"Yes. It is," the officer assured. Several of the MP's now surrounded the Admiral and Perry and the rest of the Admiral's staff that had gathered in the lounge.

"You know what the problem is with you kids," the Admiral began.

The officer glared at him.

"You're all just numbers. You have no style," he finished his drink.

The MP's escorted the Admiral and his staff out the door. Besides the bartender, only one patron remained seated at the far end of the bar.

"Hey," a couple of the MP's approached him. "Didn't you hear? You're under arrest."

"Oh, I'm not with them," he defended.

"You are now," the MP demanded, lifting him off the bar-height chair by his arm.

"Okay, okay, take it easy. I'm going." Dark grinned a slight smirk as the MPs followed close behind him.

25

News desk," someone on the other end of the phone spoke in a rather hurried tone.

"I need to speak with the person in-charge of your news department."

"What's this regarding and can I get your name?"

"My name is Lisa Kyle."

"Another one. Don't take offense to this lady, but you're the fifth 'Lisa Kyle' to call my desk this week. We got totally sucked into the first couple of these and almost ran with totally bogus stories about how the President had stolen all of the gold in Fort Knox and another one about how his campaign had been funded with off-shore credit cards. I'm sorry, but we're not talking to anyone just on the phone anymore. You're going to have to make an in-person appearance."

There was a long pause.

"Can you guarantee my safety?"

"Excuse me?"

"If I come in, can you guarantee my safety?"

"Hold on a sec ..."

A minute later an older-sounding woman picked-up the phone, "Who am I speaking to?"

"Lisa Kyle."

"I see. Do you have any way of verifying that you are who you say you are, Miss. Kyle?"

"Actually, it's Mrs. Levi now. If I come in for an interview, can you guarantee my safety?"

"I can. But hold on a minute, please. Let me check with our security people ..."

Lisa suddenly felt unsettled about even making the call to the media. She knew that they would be interested in the story, but the guy at the news desk had already seemed to dismiss what she was going to tell them. How could they have known about this? Unless, she felt suddenly angry, the Administration was trying to head off the real story by planting it within the media as a kind of kook conspiracy. That would go a long way in dispelling any public outrage if they could convince people that the truth was actually just some manufactured hoax.

"I'm sorry to keep you on hold, Mrs. Levi, but I needed to make sure security would be available for your safety. Can you give me any identifying information I could use to verify that you are who you say you are? We've had several people call the station claiming to be Lisa Kyle and Lisa Levi, even your parents."

"What would you like?"

"How about a social?"

"How would you be able to verify that? How would you get my social?"

"Be serious, Mrs. Levi. You're the hottest story on the planet right now. We *are* a major network. We have our sources. Every reporter worth their salt has a file on their desk

an inch thick covering you and your husband. Just tell me the last four numbers if you're concerned. It's okay."

"Seven, seven, seven, two."

"Oh. Wow. Okay. You're the real deal. How do you want to meet? Are you someplace safe right now?"

"Yes, I'm safe. I can be at your studios in a few minutes."

"Alright. I'm going to put you on hold again to call my producer. He's absolutely going to flip. I'm not sure where he is at the moment so this might take me a few minutes. Please don't hang up, I'll be right back."

"Sure."

Lisa waited for several minutes with the on hold music. It was too long. Somehow, something inside her didn't feel right. She clicked off her disposable phone and dropped it into one of the trash bins of Pioneer Square as she quickly made her way to one of the buildings and entered a gallery. She watched out the window at the park. Within minutes, two men dressed in plain clothes approached the trash bin where she had dumped her phone. They dug into the bin and found the phone and appeared to be talking into headsets as they looked around at the thin crowds mulling around the park. Lisa left the window and went to the coffee bar. She ordered a latté and took a table at the back of the gallery wishing she were invisible.

She felt suddenly stupid and angry with herself for not heeding Perry's advice. What was she thinking? Kent would never have done something so stupid!

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the two men again, entering the gallery. There was no rear exit for her to run. It didn't take but a moment for the two well trained agents to zero-in on her table. Soon they were standing right next to her.

"Lisa Kyle?" one of the agents nodded at her. "You need to come with us."

"The hell I do," she retorted not looking at them.

“Miss Kyle, we can do this the easy way or the hard way, it’s your choice.”

“I’m not going with you,” she glared. “You can drag my dead body out of here if you like, but I’m not leaving with you.”

“There’s no need to make a scene, Lisa,” the other agent offered.

A scene. That was it. Lisa suddenly stood up in her booth and began calling out to people in the half-filled gallery. “Everyone! Hello! Everyone can I have your attention?” she called out.

Lisa immediately drew everyone’s attention quickly to herself. “I’m Lisa Kyle! The one everyone has been looking for. My husband was the man you saw that the government shot on national TV while attempting to testify at the hearing several weeks ago. All of you! I need your help!”

Everyone was staring at her. She could see a few people getting up out of their chairs and making their way over to her table.

“Oh, Jesus,” she heard one of the agents curse under his breath. “Only in Seattle,” he grumbled. The agent tried to take hold of Lisa’s hand and she instinctively let him have it in the chest with her boot—hard! He staggered backward, totally off balance, and into a flimsy coffee mug display stand that made a terrible crashing sound as both he and the display’s ceramic mugs and other knick-knacks fell smashing loudly to the floor.

Several other patrons now got out of their seats and made their way over to the commotion while others appeared to be leaving quickly.

“These men work for the government. They work for the same people who tried to murder my husband!” Lisa continued.

A dozen or so people had now gathered around, not so much about the commotion but because they recognized Lisa

from the massive media coverage that had been playing for the past several weeks. A big man with a bandana tied around his head approached the still standing agent.

"I sure hope you're not harassing this young lady?" he gruffed.

"Homeland Security people!" the agent informed loudly holding up his badge. "This is official government business. Back to your seats or you will all be arrested for interfering in official government business!"

"Oh yea?" the big man gruffed again. "You going to arrest the whole store? We know what you did to Mr. Levi. You shot him in head. And you shot several of our soldiers. I'm a veteran! You don't shoot your own. That's bullshit!"

The agent's gun was suddenly out and pointed directly at the large biker-looking man.

"Last warning!" he demanded as his partner finally got to his feet. "Out of the store! All of you! Now!"

But oddly only a few left. The rest, men and women, just stood there, looking not happy.

"What now, tough guy?" The biker scoffed. "You just gonna shoot all of us? Kill all of us like you tried to kill this girl's husband? I think you're the one who needs to leave."

"We want *you* to leave, now!" said one of the other men in the crowd.

The agent's weapon rose into the air and he cranked off a very loud round into the ceiling. "I ordered you to leave!" he bellowed!

Suddenly there was the sound of zippers moving, Velcro stripping, leather snapping and hammers being pulled back as half-a-dozen in the crowd now trained their previously concealed weapons onto the two now wide-eyed DHS agents.

"You *really* wanna go there, buddy?" the biker asked, leveling his own snub-nose revolver on the agent. "It's time for you two to leave while you're still both breathin'."

The agents looked down the business ends of now eight weapons leveled in their direction. No one would miss at this close range. The lead agent scowled and angrily put his weapon back into its holster. The other agent followed his example, and they pushed their way through the crowd. "This isn't over," he bellowed on the way out. "You're all going to be under arrest!" the agent growled, angrily leaving the shop.

When they had gone someone locked the door. The big biker lifted his hand to Lisa. "You alright, darlin'?" he asked helping her off the booth.

"Thank you. Thank you. All of you," Lisa said gratefully.

"No problem," one of the armed men nodded, putting away his weapon.

"She needs to get out of here. Without anyone seeing her," an older woman with her own gun suggested. "If Lisa walks out that door there's no telling how many police will be out there."

"I can get her out."

They all turned to see an older teen dressed in the coffee house's signature apron.

"I know the 'Underground'. It's right underneath us. They won't even know she's left."

"Go!" the biker man motioned.

Lisa gave the big bearded man a kiss on the cheek as they were leaving.

The teen girl led Lisa down into the basement of the gallery. "My name's Mary, by the way, but everyone calls me Molly."

"Thank you, Molly," Lisa followed.

In the basement, Molly unlocked a large heavy wooden door. Beyond it was a dusty, dank, brick-walled corridor that seemed to stretch for a long way in either direction.

"What is this place?"

"Old Seattle. Before the fire."

“What fire?” Lisa asked following Molly into the dank corridor.

“The Great Fire in 1889,” Molly pulled Lisa through a narrow doorway that looked like it was ready to collapse but probably wasn’t. “It destroyed much of this part of the city. When they rebuilt they did it on a kind of shelf. All of this part of Seattle sits on top of these old streets and tunnels.”

“Wow. How do you know about all of this?” Lisa asked.

“I’m a wharf brat, or ‘rat’ as some say. We’ve been playing in these tunnels since I was a kid. You just have to know where to get in and get out, and what parts to stay away from.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Yes and no. But don’t worry, I’ll get you out.”

Lisa noticed that Molly did seem to be very well acquainted with the tunnels. She rapidly and efficiently moved the both of them through brick corridors, dusty basements, and dank dripping concrete passages until both had utterly disappeared deep into the Seattle underground.

26

The sun had begun to slip behind the ridge as Lisa approached the stream she recognized as the one that would eventually lead her into the canyon and to the mountain chalet.

As promised, Molly had delivered Lisa back to the street level where she had caught an empty cab. Even the taxi driver had recognized Lisa immediately. He'd been listening to a police scanner and told her that there were warrants for her arrest; and now with her being sighted in the area the police were everywhere looking for both her and Kent. They'd already found Kent's car. She was glad she'd removed everything from it before leaving it behind.

Lisa had quickly come to the realization that staying anywhere in town was not going to be an option. Not even the media were interested in helping her. With no one else to turn to, Lisa knew where she had to go. Back to the only safe place on Earth she could think of.

It was well past dusk when Lisa finally stepped onto the concrete of the terrace and rounded the corner that was the front of the home where she and Kent had met for the first time. It felt strangely peaceful and good to be up here again with nothing but the roar of the water below. The terrace was empty except for the chairs that she and Kent had spent many an afternoon and evening sitting in, just being with each other.

The thick glass doors were closed just as she had left them months ago. They slid apart easily and closed behind her just as smoothly as she remembered. She looked around the large open home. It was quiet and a little eerie in the dim light. She clicked on several of the lamps to warm the home's elegant atmosphere. The place was still pretty clean for being abandoned for months. Lisa walked back to the kitchen, setting her daypack on the counter. There were a few dishes in the sink; dishes she had not left there when she'd left. Clearly, someone was living in the home. Another someone? Had WITSEC reassigned the home to someone else? Or had Kent returned to recuperate here as well? She didn't know.

But she had no where else to run. She was just going to have to take her chances with whoever was now the authorized resident.

Lisa walked into the bedroom and looked around. It didn't take her long to realize who the other occupant was who was living here—it had to be Kent! He had been back here. But where was he now?

"Kent?" Lisa called out quickly moving through the home's open rooms and then down the spiral stone stairway into the basement. "Kent?"

The basement was just as empty. But she could tell that he had been here, and very recently. His unfolded laundry was still in the dryer. She made her way back up the stairs and into the kitchen. Where would he have gone? There were fresh vegetables and some fresh dairy in the refrigerator. Clearly,

someone was bringing new supplies into the home again. Had Admiral Dark put Kent back here?

Despite the very long trip up the mountain to get here, Lisa found herself feeling anxious, nervous, and very excited that Kent was somewhere around. She felt like she needed to get rid of some of her nervous energy. She put on some upbeat music and began cleaning up the kitchen. She finished Kent's laundry and put everything away, then tidied up the bedroom. She finally flopped exhausted onto the comforter and fell fast asleep.

* * * * *

Stirring softly, Lisa opened her eyes to the dim light of the familiar bedroom. She sat up. She was still in her clothes from the night before, and the nightstand clock told her that she'd slept well into the morning, as usual.

The steaming shower felt wonderful on her skin. It was the first time she'd felt really rested in weeks, maybe months. The scent of the water, Kent's favorite soaps and shampoo; all of it made her feel all the more comforted and rested. She wrapped her wet hair in a towel and then wrapped herself in another one before stepping out of the shower in search of some of her clothes she knew would still be there.

Stepping into the bedroom from the shower she heard a very familiar voice, "Well now ..."

Lisa looked up to see Kent staring at her.

"Kent! Oh my gosh!"

Both Kent and Lisa ran into each other's arms. Kent lifted Lisa off her feet, twirling her around while drinking in her scent and warmth. They drew each other close and lost themselves in a barrage of passionate kisses that neither wanted to end.

“Lisa!” Kent began, his eyes welling, “where the hell have you been!?”

“They, I,” she couldn’t finish the sentence as tears rolled down her face as she hugged him as tightly as she could.

Both were still weeping when they finally pulled back to look at the other. After gently wiping each other’s cheeks, they sat down on the bed.

“I’ve been so worried about you,” Kent began. “They wouldn’t tell me anything about you; where they were keeping you. They just said they had you in a safe place.”

“Kent it was terrible. They had me on the Navy base in Bremerton—in a cell! No one would even talk to me. They just let me go a couple of days ago. I think the Admiral is in trouble. Perry said he’d been relieved of command.”

Kent nodded, scowling. “The President—treasonous bastard,” Kent cursed, “—is doing a purge. He’s treating this whole thing like it’s a terrorist plot to infiltrate the top brass of the military. It’s given him an excuse to fire a lot of good people in the command, and replace them with his own cronies.”

“But he’s the *real* terrorist,” she retorted, “he’s the one who broke the law to get elected! Kent, they’ve even floated the story of the illegal funding of his campaign.”

“I know. I know,” Kent nodded. “They’ve made it seem like it’s just a big kook conspiracy theory now.”

“What do we do?”

Kent shook his head and took a deep sigh. “I don’t know, Hon, I’m just glad you’re alive.”

“You’re glad *I’m* alive!? Kent, *you* were the one who got shot! I saw your blood all over the table! I thought you were dead!”

“Yea, well, I guess it looked a lot worse than it was,” he looked away from her.

"Hey," she lifted his chin and brought his gaze back to hers. Her intuition kicked into overdrive. "You've never lied to me. Kent ..."

Kent looked intently into her eyes. He heard her heart beating, smelled her scent, and felt the warmth of her body as his eyes traced every intricate detail of her skin and face.

"... don't start now."

Kent nodded.

"I know what I saw," Lisa began. "I've played and replayed that horrible memory over and over in my mind more times than I can count. I've had more nightmares about that day than I want to remember."

Kent nodded but said nothing.

"Kent, what's going on? This isn't like you, not at all. You're hiding something from me. What is it?"

"I—I can't tell you," he admitted.

"Does it have to do with Witness Protection?"

"Kind of," he shrugged, lowering his head again.

Lisa just looked at her husband; there was a struggle going on inside of him. She didn't know what to make of it.

"There shouldn't be any secrets between husbands and their wives," Lisa offered.

"Sometimes there has to be, maybe. I don't know."

Lisa pull him to the side of the bed and just sat next to him, saying nothing for long minutes. She tried to just be there for him whatever it was that he was dealing with. Still, it didn't keep her from wondering what had been happening to him these past several weeks. Then a thought struck her.

"Kent," she began again, "they kept me in that cell for a reason, didn't they? To keep us apart."

Kent looked up at her again. He watched her lips part in astonishment. "You knew! You knew that they were keeping us apart, didn't you!?"

He pursed his lips and nodded. "I couldn't do anything about it, Hon! I—I begged Admiral Dark to just let me talk to you, but he wouldn't even tell me where you were. I even took a swing at him." Kent frowned.

"What!?" Lisa was now even more astonished. "You punched an admiral? For me?"

"Well, I wouldn't exactly call it that. He's trained military, Lisa. I may as well have attacked Bruce Lee."

"Did he hit you back?"

"No. Every time I swung at him he just blocked it or spun me around. It was pretty pathetic actually."

"Every time?! How many punches did you throw?"

"Well, several. I was really pissed, Lis'. I just launched into the guy. You know me, I'm not a violent person, but I had had enough of the cloak and dagger crap. I was going to kick his ass. I'm a lot bigger than he is."

"What happened?"

"I eventually just cooled off. It was probably the most anticlimactic fight ever. I was way outclassed." Kent frowned again.

Lisa put her arm around Kent and pulled him close to herself. "I can't believe you stood up for me like that. It's very sweet." She got Kent to smile at her.

Kent stood up from the bed and then helped his wife to her feet. "You should get dressed, Hon. We have a lot to talk about."

"Are you going to let me in on your big secret?"

"I don't know," he offered honestly.

* * * * *

"This is getting embarrassing, Frank," the president closed the folder on his desk.

Frank nodded his agreement.

"You had her. It would have put us just one step away from the kid too. And you let her get away. Gone. Just like that."

"She got lucky," Frank admitted.

"Again?" the president questioned.

"You keep saying that, Frank," Harlan interjected. "How lucky can one bitch get?" he smirked.

Frank ignored him and his stupid joke. "We had all the right people in place, Mr. President," Frank assured. "Eventually, we'll get one or both of them. They seem to like to pop up every few weeks or so, we'll nail them, believe me."

"Do we have any idea where she might be now, where she might go?"

"Well she can't get far. We're monitoring the airports, bus stations, rental car agencies. If she so much as turns on her phone I'll know it."

"What if she's in witness protection like the kid was, what then?" Harlan asked. "Hell, you'll never find her then."

Frank spun around looking at Harlan, "What did you just say?"

"I said, if she's back in witness protection ..."

"Good God! Harlan! That's it!" Frank shot his glance back at the president. "What if she went back into witness protection?"

"You're losing me, Frank," the president began. "She was never *in* witness protection, only the Levi kid was; and we lost him for two years."

"No, we didn't, actually. We just stopped looking because everyone thought he was dead."

"Okay, so now *she* goes into witness protection, boom, gone," the president motioned with his hands. "That gets us nowhere."

"Not so fast," Frank pointed his finger against his lips, the wheels turning in his mind. "What if our Miss Kyle ..."

"Mrs. Levi," Harlan quipped.

"... whatever;" Frank continued, "knew where Kent Levi's safe house was?"

The president frowned in a musing thought.

"And how would she know that, Frank?" Harlan quipped unenthusiastically.

"Jesus, Harlan, you really need to study your reports. Do you even read them?"

Harlan said nothing.

"So what are you saying, Frank?" the President mused out loud, "That Lisa Kyle was in the same safe house as Kent Levi?"

"Doesn't it make sense?"

"No," the president said flatly. "You don't just wander into someone's safe house, do you? I mean, what are the odds of that?"

"Listen, I've read the reports on our *Miss Kyle*," he emphasized looking back at Harlan, "dozens of times, in fact. Just a few months before this whole thing breaks loose with the hearings, the Kyle woman gets lost. Everyone thinks she's dead. King County even arrested her brother for her murder. Then suddenly she shows up again out of nowhere."

"So she got lost in the woods, big deal," Harlan snarked.

"For six weeks?!" Frank questioned.

Harlan looked at Frank and then at the president, then back at Frank. He got up from the couch.

"That's right, Harlan, even a rocket scientist like yourself can put two and two together. Congratulations," Frank leveled.

"So, Frank," the president began, "you think maybe WITSEC had a cabin tucked away in the mountains around Seattle somewhere?"

"I think that's a real possibility, Mr. President. And if I wanted to stay out of sight of civilization, I'd head straight back there, wherever *there* was."

"Frank, there are probably thousands of cabins all over those mountains," Harlan began. "We all skied several of the resorts around there back in our college days. How are you going find a needle in that size of a haystack?"

"I don't think that haystack is going to be all that big. The cops picked her up on a road coming out of those mountains. That cabin can't be more than a couple of days' hike from where they found her. Besides, we have rangers who probably know every cabin in the area. If she's gone back there, it shouldn't take us but a couple of days to find her and maybe Kent Levi as well."

* * * * *

Now dressed, Lisa sat down on the barstool with a cup of coffee and a mostly fresh doughnut that Kent had brought in from a delivery the night before. Kent took the stool next to her with his own cup and a couple of the doughnuts.

"I'm sorry about all of this," he began.

"Is it your fault?" she asked taking a bite.

"No, I guess not. I still feel responsible somehow."

"Don't," she munched. "If you want someone to blame, you can blame God or maybe the devil."

"I don't exactly believe in the devil, Lisa. Unless you're talking about the guy who sits in the White House."

"I like to think that God watches out for us, even when things are looking their darkest."

"I hope so. They're looking pretty dark right now."

"Mmm," Lisa began with a mouth partially filled with doughnut, "Dark," she finished munching, "Admiral Dark—what happened with you two after the fight—or, whatever it was?"

"Oh," Kent grew suddenly sullen again as he looked into his coffee.

"Kent, don't keep this a secret. Something happened between you and Dark, what was it?"

Kent drew a big sigh. "Something happened to me after I was shot, Lisa. I almost died."

"Something? Like what?"

"Honestly? I'm not sure. I—I can't explain it."

"Maybe you should start from the beginning," she offered.

"I don't know where that is, exactly. The last thing I remember was sitting in front of the Senator with the drive in my hand and then everything went black. I woke up in our bed, here. Dark was the only person here when I came to."

"You didn't wake up in a hospital?"

"No. I was here."

"Well," Lisa mused, a little befuddled. "There was a lot of blood. I guess maybe the wound wasn't as bad as I thought."

Kent looked at Lisa. "No, Hon. I was all but dead. That's what Dark told me."

"But that makes no sense, Kent. Why bring a man who's at death's door here?"

"Dark did something to me, Lisa. Something incredible."

Lisa looked at him, listening intently.

"Maybe it would just be easier to show you." Kent slipped from his barstool and went to the kitchen's back counter. She watched as he took a sharp paring knife from the knife block and then leaned onto the island counter with the small knife in front of her. Before Lisa could finish taking a sip from her mug, he deeply slit the tip of one of his fingers.

"Oh, my god! Kent!" she gasped. "What are you doing?!"

Kent said nothing. Lisa just looked at the nearly inch-long wound. It hardly bled at all. She looked up at Kent with eyes still wide.

"No, don't look at me, keep watching my finger."

Lisa looked down at his hand once again. She realized that the deep gash was already visibly much smaller than it had

been just a moment ago. She took hold of his hand and watched as the now tiny wound suddenly completely vanished before her eyes, leaving no scar or trace that it had ever been there.

She moved her fingers over his looking for where the gash had been just a moment ago.

"It's gone!" Lisa looked up at her husband, utterly astonished.

Kent simply shrugged, pursing his lips. He put the knife away and then took hold of Lisa's hand again from the other side of the counter.

"I don't understand," she began. "How is that possible? People don't heal that fast, Kent."

"I do; well, I do now."

"What did they do to you?"

"You mean what did *he* do to me?"

"Admiral Dark? *He* did this to you?"

Kent nodded. "He's just like I am; or I should say I'm just like he is now. Or, something like that."

"What does that mean? What is he?"

"I don't know. He's like no one I've ever met, Hon."

"Does he heal like this? This fast?"

"Yea," Kent nodded. "There's more, Lisa. I'm not the same man I once was. Not even close."

"Not the same? Kent, you're talking in riddles. I'm starting to feel really upset here. Are you saying you're not really my husband?"

"Oh, no, no, Lisa, Hon," Kent made his way quickly around the counter and took his wife gently into his arms. She was trembling slightly. He sensed her feelings, listened to her heart beating rapidly and smelled her gentle scent. Everything about her was invigorating to him. He felt more attracted to Lisa now than ever. She was more beautiful to him now than she ever had been. He'd never felt feelings as deeply for her as what he

felt now. He bathed his wife in his emotions and let his own feelings for her wrap around her.

Lisa felt immediately calm as Kent took her into his arms. She felt his love for her flow warmly through her. It was like a warm, sweet sensation that moved gently through her. It felt like he was—somehow—inside her feelings. She could feel him! Feel what he felt!

“Kent, what—what are you doing? It’s like I can feel you all over inside me.”

“You can? Because I can feel you too. It must be part of this—thing, whatever it is.”

Whatever Admiral Dark had done, he had given Kent something beyond incredible. For the first time in her life Lisa could feel the emotions of another human being. She pulled Kent closer to herself.

“It’s like nothing I’ve ever felt,” she whispered. “I can feel what you’re feeling. It’s—nice.”

“It felt like you were going to say ‘weird’.”

“I was,” she admitted. “But, this is really moving, feeling your emotions like this.”

He sighed, kissing the side of her head softly.

“You’re worried,” she offered quietly. “I can feel it.”

“No. I’m scared, Lisa,” he corrected. “I don’t know what’s happened to me; what I’ve become.”

“I know,” she squeezed him more tightly. “I’m here. Whatever Dark did to you, I’m not leaving you. You know that. Right?”

“I know, Hon. I *see* you.”

“We’ll get through this together, somehow.”

Dark felt the truck finally come to a stop. He thought he had a good idea where they probably were. DHS had setup a number of these clandestine 'detention centers' all over the country and now he was about to get his first real look inside one.

He heard the tarps of the military transport flop open as other soldiers entered the back of the truck and began hoisting people and officers to their feet.

"Get up, dogs. End of the line," some MP barked.

Once off the truck, the opaque hood Dark had been wearing was yanked off and for the first time he could see the others who had been with him on the long trip. There were eleven people in all. Dark recognized a few of them from some of his command teams. These people were no rank-and-file soldiers, but high-level officers. The Administration was doing one hell of a job removing people it did not like.

The fact was very few in the military had any respect for this particular Commander-in-chief; it was the dirty little secret that everybody knew but no one would talk about—except behind tightly closed doors.

“Get a real good look at the moon and stars now people, because this will be the last time you’re ever going to see them again.”

“What!?” one of the female officers exclaimed. “I don’t know who you people think you are, but the JAG is going to hear about this!”

“Lady,” one of the guards snarked, “the JAG doesn’t listen to terrorists. So just shut your trap. Believe me, we’ll have you opening it soon enough anyway.”

* * * * *

Whatever had happened to Kent had not dampened his appetite for Lisa’s affection. Lisa found both she and Kent were just as amorous as ever—if not more so. Still breathing heavily, Lisa lay completely exhausted as noon approached with Kent tracing the side of her nearly wet breast with his finger. She looked like she’d been running a marathon.

“Kent, I think I’m done this time. I mean it,” she took a deep breath, “Honestly, you’re going to kill me!”

Kent withdrew his finger from her skin. He’d not even broken a sweat during the past couple of hours, but he could see that his wife was not going to be able to endure anymore.

“I guess my stamina is a lot better than it used to be,” he offered.

Lisa took another deep breath and looked at her husband as he slipped off of their bed. After several rounds, Kent was still very much aroused as he unsheathed himself from the latex.

“Are you going to be okay,” he asked.

Lisa nodded, "I'll be fine," she was still out of breath. "I just need to recover. It's like you're like the Energizer bunny now."

Kent thought about what she was saying. It wasn't just his stamina that had rocketed to new heights. His thoughts seemed to come much more quickly as well. Memories of his childhood that he thought he'd forgotten, classes in school that he'd taken, manuals that he'd read, it all seemed to easily return without effort.

He finished cleaning himself and then sat lotus on the bed next to her. He shook his head.

"What?" Lisa rolled onto her side to talk to him.

"I just don't know what to make of all of this. It's like I'm Superman or something. I'm a lot stronger, faster. I can see really clearly, things and colors I couldn't see before. I hear your heart beating. When I'm around you, we can feel what each of us are feeling. It's like all of my senses are so much more keen than they used to be."

"Kent, you said that Admiral Dark did something to you. Whatever it was, he did it to save your life. I've heard about the military doing all of these experiments on people; you know, trying to create the ultimate super-soldier. People with hyper stamina and strength. People who can't be easily killed."

"So you think maybe they injected me with something?"

"I think that's possible," she nodded. "Kent, the way you are now, you'd be the perfect soldier. Imagine it, a few people like you could take out an army of hundreds. Maybe Admiral Dark is one of these people the military created?"

"I don't know. But I do know that Dark doesn't like what's going on within the government anymore than we do. It would be really scary to think that the government had control of armies of people like me—and Dark."

"Obviously they don't," she mused.

Kent nodded. "But that would be just as strange. Like there's almost a kind of shadow government at work here, both sides battling it out behind the scenes from the inside."

"That might explain a lot about why they went outside of the country to raise money then. One side was a lot better financed while the other was running out of money." Lisa suggested.

"I don't know. I guess we need to talk with Admiral Dark, if he ever shows up again. "I feel like I'm *really* trapped now."

"How so?"

"It was bad enough being locked up in witness protection, now it's like I'm trapped in a totally different body."

"Trapped?" Lisa rolled that thought for a moment. "Kent, that's not exactly the term I would use for someone who's just been given a gift like this."

"Well, 'gift' isn't exactly the term I would use to describe this."

"Kent, honestly, you've been given something that people all over the world would kill and die to have! What would you call it, if not a gift?"

Kent looked at his wife. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. My life was turned upside down because I had something just *one man* wanted. Now I have something the *whole world* wants. That's not a *gift*, Lisa. It's a curse."

* * * * *

The tall, tanned-skinned twenty-something park ranger watched with intelligent eyes from behind a curtain inside the lodge as a black SUV pulled into the ranger station's parking lot. The government license plates told him that these people were here to bring them only one thing—trouble.

He watched as four men got out, dressed in black, official-looking hiking clothes. They began removing their gear from the back of the rig.

A couple of rangers went out with their own gear to greet the agents who were now donning daypacks.

"You boys ready for some adventure?" one of the rangers grinned, as if he were talking to a group of Cub Scouts. All four of the men glared at him.

"Are you two the guides?" one of the agents finally asked.

"That's me. I'm Ranger Bob and this here's Ranger Nick."

The four men did not look happy. Ranger Bob looked well into his forties and was easily close to a hundred pounds overweight. Ranger Nick's acne complexion made him look like he was barely out of high school. Nick grinned at the men from within his ranger uniform that was easily a size too large for his sleight frame.

"We were supposed to have *seasoned* guides, Ranger. People who know these mountains. Do you actually *know* these mountains?"

"Been all over these mountains as a trail guide for the past twenty years. Yep, I know 'em all."

The lead agent visibly sighed in disgust. "Alright, we don't have time to waste here. Henderson, you're with me. Patterson, Rios, take 'Ranger Rick' here and try not to get lost."

"Ah, that's Ranger 'Nick', sir," his voice cracked.

28

AND THE SEVEN LORDS SHALL SEND FORTH THEIR
SERVANTS TO DESTROY THE LIFEBLOOD OF GOD WHERE EVER
THEY MAY BE FOUND

—THE BOOKS OF GOD

Kent, what are you doing, exactly?" Lisa asked, looking up from her iPad. Kent was staring at one of the pillars of the home again, this time the one between the kitchen and the study where Lisa was reading. The smooth stone seemed to intrigue him.

"I don't know myself, exactly," he offered. There's a bunch of stuff written here. I never saw it before. Like different designs or a foreign language or something. I can't read what it says."

“You’ve been saying that for days now. I still don’t see what you’re talking about. It just looks like smooth stone to me.”

“I know,” he frowned—again.

Kent knew exactly what Lisa was saying. He’d spent nearly two years cooped up in this place with nothing to do. He’d been over every square inch of the place and never once did he ever see any of the designs or writings that he was able to see now. Whatever Dark had done to him, with his new vision he was certainly able to see them very clearly now. The writing was perfectly smooth but something about the way it was laid into the stone stood out with whatever his enhanced eyes could now see, like maybe something that was only visible in the upper UV of the spectrum.

Kent followed the lines of the design onto the floor, once again. The design seemed to point toward the central stone stairs, or did it emanate from the stairs toward the pillars? He traced the design down the stairs once again. The design seemed to just end at the last smooth stone stair.

Lisa stood at the top of the stairs watching Kent. “Why don’t you show me what you’re seeing, you know, make a drawing,” she suggested.

Kent just looked up at her, “You know, I *knew* there was a reason I married you. That is a great idea!” Kent bolted up the stairs and blurred past her into the study and grabbed a notebook and some pencils. It was astonishing to Lisa how fast he could move now.

Kent was clearly engrossed in his new project. Lisa knew better than to bother him when he got focused on something, especially video games. He looked just as focused now. She found a fanfic for one of her favorite TV shows on the iPad and wandered into the bedroom to read.

* * * * *

"Lisa!" She heard her name, waking her from a light sleep. Kent was standing over her. "You have to come look at this!"

"Huh?" she sat up blinking. The clock told her she'd been asleep for just over an hour.

"Okay, give me a minute. I need to wake up."

"I'll be in the study. You're not going to believe this!"

When Lisa finally made it into the study, she'd brewed herself some afternoon coffee on her way through the kitchen. The study was now a kind of mess. Kent had sheets of paper laid out all over the desk with drawings and markings drawn all over them. Lisa walked around the large desk table, sipping her coffee and looking at what Kent had been drawing for the past couple of hours. An amazing amount of work had been produced, and Kent's artistic ability was not just good but amazingly precise as well. The details within his drawings were remarkable.

The work looked like finely detailed hieroglyphs of some kind. There were detailed lines and structures and circles with what looked like maps drawn within them. Lisa studied the drawings as Kent watched her move around the table.

"Wow," she mumbled looking at everything Kent had drawn during the past hour. "All of this is written all over this room?"

"Yes," he assured. "It's everywhere in here."

"These are the pillars?" she pointed to part of the drawing. Kent nodded.

"These can't be the pillars, Kent, they're no where near this tall."

"They are according to the drawings on each of them."

Lisa looked again. "Kent, they'd have to be like, a couple of hundred feet tall then, right?"

"More."

"More?" her eyes widened.

"I don't have an accurate scale, Lis', but if I'm right, and I think I am, these pillars you see here," he pointed to one of them, "descend over twelve thousand feet below where we're now standing."

"Twelve *thousand*?! Oh my god, Kent!" Lisa's mouth gaped open in astonishment. She looked back down at the drawings again. "That's insane. That's like more than two miles deep. Is this like a mine shaft or giant well of some kind?"

"It's more than that. Lisa, look at these drawings again. This place is perfectly square. People don't build square wells. And the structure broadens slightly the deeper it gets. This is no well, Lisa. It's a tower."

"A tower?!"

Kent nodded.

"Kent, what are you saying? That the mountain just sprang up around this place and eventually covered it? A two-mile tall tower?! How is that even possible? Who could build something this tall and then bury it so deep?"

"I don't know. I think it would take millions of years for any kind of tectonic action to occur, but maybe something else happened to bury it. Rainer's not that far from here. Some kind of ancient volcanic activity, maybe. I don't know."

"That would have to be something really violent, Kent. Do you really think this tower, or whatever it is, would have been able to survive a massive natural disaster like a volcano? St. Helens devastated everything in its path. I've seen the pictures; I'm sure you have too."

Kent nodded.

Lisa looked around the room then back at Kent's drawings, wishing she could see the intricate artwork he was able to see. "I wonder who built this place? And why?" she mused.

"Why do people build towers?" Kent asked, somewhat rhetorically.

“So they can see further, keep an eye on things from afar. Or a beacon maybe?”

“Yea, and that works well if you’re living in the Dark Ages. What if you’re not living in the Dark Ages? Why do we build towers today?”

“Communications? Kent, did they have communications a hundred years ago. No.”

“Lisa, would you look at this place!? Have you ever seen glyphs like these? I haven’t! I couldn’t make these up out of my head if I tried. There is language written all over this place. These glyphs are highly organized and grouped. The whole place looks like a flippin’ control tow—er.”

A sudden chill ran down Lisa’s spine. She felt Kent’s emotions wash all over her again. He was suddenly astonished and dead serious. For a brief instant she felt his understanding of what he’d been studying all over the room. And then the flash of emotion was gone.

“I’m ... I’m sorry, Hon. I guess I just had a massive epiphany. I didn’t mean to invade your feelings like that.”

“You didn’t invade me, Kent. Besides, I think I like feeling your emotions. I think I understand now where you’re going with this. But I have to tell you that I’m not one of those people who believe in millions of years of evolution, advanced races or ancient astronauts. I was raised in the church. None of this exactly gels with my worldview, you know?”

“I know. But I think both of our worldviews are going to need some adjustments, Lis’. I’m not exactly myth—”

Lisa saw Kent’s eyes grow suddenly wide. Kent immediately went to her side. Lisa turned to see the two strange men now standing at the entrance of the study, their guns drawn and pointed directly at the two of them.

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Tiger One, this is Tiger Five. We have acquired both targets. Repeat, we have acquired *both* targets.”

“Roger that Tiger Five. Hold for confirmation on instructions.”

“Roger that, Tiger One.”

Kent glared at both of the agents. As slowly as they were moving to him he was sure he could take them out with time to spare; but then again, he didn't know about Lisa. Both still had their guns out. What if one of them got a shot off and killed her? No. He was going to play it safe for now. There would be other opportunities for escape, he was sure. For now he needed to stall, maybe distract them somehow.

“'Tiger'?” Kent began sarcastically. “Seriously? You people couldn't come up with a more original handle? Like 'Mountain Lion' or something?”

“On the floor, both of you, now!”

Both of them sank down to the floor and did nothing while the agents cuffed their hands behind their backs and then seated them on the study's couch.

While they waited, one of the agents took notice of the papers and drawings spread all over the desk. "What's all this?"

"*Lord of the Rings* role playing game," Kent explained. "It's Elvish."

The agent just shook his head. "Jeeze, you kids have *way* too much time on your hands these days."

Harlan's phone rang. He answered hushed so as not to disturb the rest of the cocktail lounge's clientele.

"I'm gonna send you on that cruise you've been wanting to go on, Harlan."

"Holy shit! Frank! Don't tell me you found them already?" Harlan spoke quietly, but suddenly excited.

"Yep. I got two agents holding them right now. All cuffed-up and ready to go."

"Sweet! Just pop 'em both; right now. Let's get this over with. I'm tired of dealing with this," he said emphatically but still hushed.

"What's your hurry, Harlan? I might want to interrogate them first. Find out whose been hiding them in witness protection. Maybe they've got other copies of the data floating around out there? They may be high value to us."

"JESUS. H. CHRIST! ARE YOU INSANE!?" Harlan stood up shouting loudly into his phone, unable to believe his ears!

The entire lounge dropped suddenly into a still quiet with everyone now looking at him.

Harlan looked around the startled room. "Sorry," he quickly apologized to several of the people sitting within earshot of his table as he quickly left.

"Frank, are you fucking kidding me!? You're not funny if this is a joke!" Harlan fumed into the phone as he headed out the door of the lounge.

"I am serious, Harlan. What's a few days of interrogation?"

"Frank, c'mon," Harlan pleaded, "Hydra's been dead for two years and then suddenly it's back. Goddammit, let's just kill the damn thing and be done with it!"

"And that's why you're not sitting in my chair, Harlan. You're far too rash; too much of a bully. Still too 'street thug'. You're not refined, like me."

"Refined. Fuck." Harlan scoffed nervously.

"No, I'm serious here, Harlan. What happens if there is another copy of this data floating around? What happens if it pops up from some enterprising lawyer on the Hill here? We need that intel. Wouldn't you rather know and be rid of the possibility of yet another loose end?"

"Ahhh! Jesus!" Harlan ran his nervous fingers through his hair, totally beside himself. He sighed trying to contain his rancor. "Listen, Frank, at this point I don't care what the fuck you do. I'm out of it. I'm calling the President right now. I told you what to do and you didn't listen to the 'street thug', so now all of this is on your ass, not mine. I'm clean. If all hell breaks lose again, it's your ass that's gonna be on fire. You got that!?"

Frank was suddenly listening to dead air.

"Roger that, Tiger One." The agent looked at his partner. "Change of orders, Henderson. Looks like they want us to bring them in—alive."

The agent looked at Kent and then Lisa. "Well, kiddies, I hope you like hiking, because it's one hell of a jaunt out of here. The cuffs will be staying on; so don't ask. On your feet."

The agents led the two of them outside and off of the terrace. As they started across the fern underbrush heading up

the shore of the stream, Lisa felt a sudden sadness coming from Kent, like his emotions had once again invaded her being. Why was he doing this now to her? The last time she felt something like this coming from Kent the two agents had entered their home. Was this Kent sensing some kind of danger that he was now somehow instinctively communicating to her?

Her intuition all at once kicked in. Lisa pretended to stumble, falling and then disappearing into the thick fern underbrush. Seconds later she heard one of the agents cry out in agony as he fell to the ground beside her, his eyes open, an archer's arrow protruded from his forehead. Then she heard scuffling. Lisa looked up from beneath the ferns to see Kent pummeling the other agent like he was some kind of ragdoll. As well trained as the agent was, he landed only a couple of punches while Kent seemed to easily dodge most of them. But even the punches the agent did manage to land against Kent seemed weak, like Kent was impervious to them, as if the hard blows were pillows instead of fists.

Kent leveled a two-fisted punch into the agent's chest. The force of Kent's blow lifted the sizable man off his feet and sent him quickly sailing airborne into the side of the gorge, bouncing him off the cliff rock with a sickening smack and landing him heavily into the ferns below. The agent didn't get up.

Kent immediately went to Lisa and helped her to her feet. She felt the cuffs snap off under Kent's unbelievable new strength.

"Who shot the arrow?" Lisa asked looking around. But she saw no one.

"I don't know," Kent offered, "but we need to get out of here. When these two don't check in when and where they're supposed to, this whole area will be crawling with feds."

"We can't leave your drawings, Kent. We can't allow those to fall into their hands!"

“Good point. Let’s grab a few—things …” Kent suddenly stopped talking and stepped in front of Lisa. Standing on the terrace of the home stood a tall, tanned-skin uniformed park ranger, his leather-wrapped tribal bow still in hand, another arrow firmly set in its string, pointed directly at the both of them.

* * * * *

“Susan, it’s Brett.”

“Hello, Brett. I was wondering how long it was going to be before I got your call this week.”

“Yea,” the President chuckled. “Say, Susan, I need to call in a favor or two.”

“Let me guess, the subpoena that’s coming into the Court tomorrow?”

“Yea,” he chuckled again, “that’s the one.”

“I’m not the Chief Justice, Brett. There’s only so much I can do.”

“How do we look in terms of maybe having the Court send back the existing ruling?”

“Well, honestly, Brett? The Court’s not going to ignore this. The whole nation wants to know if the President really has the power to cancel a Congressional subpoena. It’s a separation of powers issue.”

“It’s just that we have an ongoing investigation, Susan. The lower court agreed with our position on that. This whole thing is totally partisan. The other side is just trying to embarrass us with these fugitives now by bringing them out into a public hearing when they should be behind bars for treason. But, I admit, the optics of this were really badly handled, unfortunately,” the President offered.

“Yea, that’s putting it mildly. But listen, the bad guys are out, right?”

"They are. The purge was very effective. I think we were able to weed out the disloyalists. But you know, we had to bend a few rules to get there, Susan."

"Well, I think we all have to do that now and then just to get through the red tape and get things done. Honestly, Brett, it sounds like to me what you really have here are maybe a handful of civil rights violations."

"Yea, I suppose that's all it really boils down to."

"So, Brett, good grief. Just offer to compensate them."

"Yea, we thought of that too."

"No takers, huh?"

"Well, some. But there are still quite a few holdouts."

"Well, I can tell you, Brett, this is a *very* serious issue. We don't want to be rash in coming to a decision on this. It may take the Court several months to sort all of this out with our schedule the way it is."

"You think so? We could use the additional time to smooth this over."

"I'm pretty sure this decision won't be out for a while. Was there anything else?"

"No, only that you're a great friend, Susan. Hey, are you busy this weekend?"

"Depends. What did you have in mind?"

* * * * *

The young Native-American ranger looked silently at the couple. Through the tree branches behind them he could see other agents coming down the canyon upstream on the other side. He lowered his bow and stepped off of the terrace, still saying nothing.

"Daniel?!" Lisa's eyes drew wide. "What—? What are you doing here!?"

But the ranger said nothing as he walked quietly past Kent and Lisa to examine the two very dead agents. He then motioned for the two of them to follow him back onto the terrace.

“Daniel?” Kent looked at her. “You know him? Is he—?”

Lisa nodded, still shocked to see her former fiancé after all that had happened between them.

“We don’t have much time,” Daniel spoke finally. “The others will be here quickly. We have maybe a couple of minutes before they get here.” Daniel entered their home with the two of them in-tow. “You need to gather your things, quickly.”

“Aren’t you—?” Kent began.

“Yes. I’m Daniel,” he offered, “Daniel Hawk. I’m one of the park rangers assigned to this area.” He looked briefly at Lisa as he fought back an emotion that was attempting to rise within him. “Listen, we don’t have much time,” he re-emphasized. “Get whatever it is you need quickly. We need to leave. Now. Before they get here.”

But it was already too late. Lisa was already sensing Kent’s feelings within her own again.

“Kent, do you feel that?” she asked him, alarm in her voice.

“Yea,” He nodded. “It’s weird.”

“You somehow instinctively share your feelings with me every time there’s danger. That feeling, whatever it is, you need to pay attention to it!”

Kent quickly went to the doors and closed them, then tapped the door lock with his foot. Within seconds a small squad of four agents all dressed in the same hiking uniforms and gear descended onto the terrace from downstream, their weapons already drawn.

“What *is* this place?” one of the agents asked looking at the building from the outside.

“Looks like a military outpost maybe,” another said.

“Look for a door. There’s got to be a way to get inside somehow.”

One of them tapped the barrel of his weapon on the opaque black glass wall. “What is this stuff? It looks like glass or polished stone maybe.”

“Hey, look here! There’s a really fine seam in the glass here, and over here. They could be doors of some kind.”

From the inside the three of them watched in silence as the team of agents tried to push, slide, pound and bust a hole in the seam of the glass door. Then one of them fired his service weapon at the door at point blank range. The slug ricocheted off the seam, never leaving a scratch.

“Jeeze, that’s really hard stuff,” the agent examined the impact area.

“Yea, I think my mother-in-law’s made from this stuff.”

“Can it! They have to be inside. They got in somehow. We just need to figure out where the entrance is.”

“What makes you think they didn’t get in right here?” one of the agents asked his commander.

“Does this look like a door to you?” his commander replied, motioning at the smooth glass wall.

“No. But that doesn’t mean it’s not.”

“Fine. If it’s a door, *Socrates*, you open it!”

“What are we going to do now?” Lisa held onto Kent’s arm.

“Nothing,” Daniel said. “We wait.”

"For how long?" Kent asked.

"Until they give up and leave."

"What if they don't? Leave, I mean, what then?" Lisa asked.

Daniel looked at her, "Let's hope they're not that patient." He turned and walked back to the kitchen. Kent looked at his wife and shrugged as they followed him.

Daniel was busy looking through all of the cabinets and drawers, like he was taking an inventory. Kent and Lisa watched him nodding approvingly to himself. "You're really well stocked here; good for maybe a month or two. Hopefully we won't have to wait that long before the rest of your people come for you," he said looking at the two of them.

"Before who comes?" Kent asked.

"Your people, the Great Ones."

"Daniel, *who* are you talking about?" Lisa asked.

Daniel looked oddly at the both of them. "Your people," he repeated. "You are the Great Ones, are you not?" Daniel looked at each of them and then at Kent. "I watched you spar with that agent outside. It was no contest. He was dead before he even hit the ground."

"Dead?" Kent asked suddenly surprised. Kent looked at Lisa and then back at Daniel. Kent now had a sinking feeling in his stomach and it wasn't coming from his unnatural senses.

The young handsome ranger looked bemused by Kent's response.

"You do know who you are, don't you?"

Kent shook his head. "Daniel, I've never heard of these 'Great Ones'. I think you may know more about me than I know about myself at this point."

"I wasn't only speaking about you, Kent." Daniel's gaze fell onto Lisa.

"Why are you looking at me?" Lisa asked.

"They haven't told you?" Daniel folded his arms, still looking at her.

"Told us what, Daniel?" Kent interrupted. He wasn't exactly sure he liked the way Daniel's eyes were meeting Lisa's.

Daniel sighed, frowning. "You are the Awakened. The reborn of the Great Spirit. It was prophesied that the Great Ones would return. First there would come the 'evil ones' to wreak havoc and destruction on the land; it was the final sign before your coming; the coming of the Great Ones. All these centuries our people have been waiting."

"Is that what I am?" Kent asked.

Daniel nodded. "You have been awakened by the blood of the Dark One, the halfblood children of the Great Spirit."

"Is that what Dark is?" Kent mused. "A halfblood of the Great Spirit? Like, a demigod? Is that what he did to me?"

"It is said that the blood of the Great Ones is so potent that it turns ordinary men into great warriors."

"Wow," Lisa said wide-eyed looking at Kent. "I guess I need to get in line for some of that," she smiled at him.

But Daniel was shaking his head. "You may want to think twice about that, Lisa," Daniel began. "Their blood is also cursed."

Lisa's smile quickly faded from her face. She looked at Kent and then back at Daniel. "What kind of curse?"

"Their blood is poison to anyone but the ones who harbor the lifeblood of the Great Spirit."

"Poison?"

Daniel nodded. "It can kill within seconds. I have watched it happen. But it will also awaken, if you are a child of the Great Spirit."

"Is that what Kent is?" Lisa asked.

Daniel nodded. "As are you."

"Me?!"

"That is what I was told." Daniel continued moving through the kitchen taking a kind of inventory. "The

Awakened are hunted by the light, the light-bearers, the illuminated ones."

"Illuminated? Illuminati?" Kent asked. "I thought they were supposed to be evil?"

"It depends on who you ask," Daniel nodded. "You have an enemy now, Kent; one that you're not even aware of."

"The enemy I already have and *know* about is bad enough, Daniel. Now I have an *unseen* one that's even worse!?"

"It won't matter. Your people are not going to leave you. That much I know, that's for sure. The Great Ones take care of their own. They always do."

Kent slumped his shoulders shaking his head while leaning against the granite island counter, "Why the hell did I ever get into IT."

"How do you know so much about all of this, Daniel?" Lisa asked, "Until a few days ago, I'd never even heard of any of this."

"No one has. It's the way the Great One's desire it. They are never found unless they want to be. Hidden temples like this one are but a few of the only visible signs that they even exist. I belong to a small but very old group of shamans called *Issaquah*. It is our job to keep people out of the area and away from the ancient temples so they are not discovered and defiled."

"Temples?" Kent scoffed in his half depression. He looked up at Daniel. "Is that what you think this is? Buddy, you don't know the half of it."

"The half of what?" Daniel asked.

Kent motioned in the direction of the study and the papers that were still spread-out over the desk table. "Have a look at those."

Daniel began walking over to the table, followed by Lisa. The ranger kept his eye on the men outside who were still attempting to break the glass, this time with portable flame

cutting tools while another team was heaving large rocks against the glass. Both teams were getting nowhere.

"I thought you were just a park ranger," Lisa began. "You never mentioned anything about these Great Ones."

"No, I didn't." Daniel stopped to look at her. "I couldn't. The Issaquah are servants of the Dark Ones, Lisa. We just protect the temples. I didn't know who you were."

"Daniel, I'm not one of your Great Ones," she assured.

"Yes, you are. Only I didn't realize it until—" Daniel stopped.

"Until what?"

"—it was too late."

"Is that why you left me?"

He nodded. "The Dark Ones had seen you, Lisa. Seen you with me. I'm just a man. I will never be more than their servant. But you, you and Kent, you are the reason why we have kept the temples a secret. Somehow fate brought the two of us together. But we were never meant to be."

"You could have said something!" she whispered, feeling the old familiar pain rising inside herself.

"I'd been forbidden, by the Dark Ones. Besides, we are not like you, Lisa. What we had would never have worked. Your destiny is to ascend the thrones of the Awakened; and mine, I would simply be left behind."

Daniel turned to walk into the study as Lisa caught his arm. He looked into her eyes as he'd always done and saw the mist rising within them.

"I'm sorry, Lisa. I had no choice."

Daniel walked into the study, his eyes beginning to focus on the many sheets of paper and drawings that were scattered about the table. He began moving around the table with a rising astonished interest, his eyes widening, taking in the details of Kent's drawings. Then he looked up at Lisa who was walking in, attempting to wipe the mist from her eyes.

"Where—where did you get these!?"

"Does it matter?" she obfuscated.

"Lisa! These are incredible," Daniel continued to look over the drawings. "I've never seen anything like these."

Lisa watched as Daniel began studying the drawings.

"Look here," he pointed at a set of glyphs, "these are the symbols of the ancient one's different sources of power: sun, earth, moon and stars."

"Daniel?" She blinked. "You can actually read this?" Lisa exclaimed.

"Yea," Daniel nodded, "I can read—some of it."

"KENT!" she called.

"My grandfather taught me. He knew the language of the Great Ones. We used to write letters back and forth in their language when I was a boy. He's the reason I joined the Issaquah."

Kent strode slowly over to the table, still depressed over his newfound 'cursed' condition. His blood was poisoned and now someone worse than the President was trying to kill him?

"Kent, Daniel's reading these." She pointed toward the drawings.

Kent perked up out of his funk, "What? Seriously, you can read this?"

Daniel nodded, "Some of it, yea."

"Daniel, that's incredible! What do they say?"

"You still haven't told me where you got these," Daniel reminded.

Lisa looked at Kent.

"I drew them," Kent admitted. "This morning."

"You did? How? You just told me you don't even know who you are? How would you know how to even write in the ancient tongue?"

"These symbols, the text, it's all over the walls and pillars in here. I'm the only one who can see it, evidently."

Daniel thought for a moment and then started nodding. "Your people, Kent; it is said that the Great Ones can see and hear what we cannot. It is how the Great Ones hide among us, yet are never found."

Kent nodded his understanding. "So your people have been caretaking this place for generations? I heard your conversation with Lisa."

"Not just generations, but for *centuries* my ancestors have been watching over this place. It is sacred to us. We have shared the legends about your people. They are passed down in the language of the Great Ones, from one generation to the next."

"Legends? So, I take it you've never actually met someone like me," Kent offered.

Daniel shook his head. "I've only heard the legends. The Dark Ones never show themselves. But my grandfather, he knew some of your people. He was one of the few who knew and spoke with you. He spoke with the Dark Ones. He knew your language and then taught some of it to me." Daniel nodded toward the table. "These drawings; it makes me wonder if any of my ancestors had any understanding of what it was they were actually protecting."

"Can either of you tell what this place is or why it was built?" Lisa looked at them and then down at the table of drawings.

Kent pointed at some of the pictures he'd drawn. "This place isn't at all what it appears," he offered looking at both of them. "We're just using the top of it right now."

"The top?" Daniel asked.

Kent pushed aside some of the papers and began arranging other pieces of paper together until they formed what looked like a long slender obelisk-like structure.

Daniel's eyes drew very wide. "Great Spirit," he whispered.

"We're right here," Kent offered pointing at the top of the structure. "It's like a lighthouse or tower of some kind, but it's buried deep within the mountain."

"Who buries a tower in a mountain?" Lisa asked, looking at Daniel. "If you build a tower, aren't you wanting it to be above everything, so you can see or others can see you, like a monument or a lighthouse?"

Daniel seemed to study the drawings for a moment. "I don't think this place is a monument," he finally offered. "These are controls of some kind, but I don't think it's for a lighthouse. You don't build lighthouses and then bury them."

"Controls?" Kent began, "So this is a control room?"

Daniel nodded, "Yea, of some kind."

"Like a control tower?" Kent mused.

Daniel continued to study the words and drawings. He then began nodding. "It's a control tower alright, but it wasn't designed for air traffic. These are all ancient power symbols. If I had to guess, I'd say this place was designed to control power, not aircraft."

"Power? What kind of power?" Kent asked.

"How should I know? I'm not one of your engineers. I'm barely understanding the controls."

"Does it still work?" Lisa asked.

"Apparently, it's still on," Daniel nodded. "Look here at your drawing next to each of the pillars. This is a scale. It's still producing power, but only a tiny fraction of what it seems to be capable of."

"So it's just in a kind of standby mode then?" Kent asked.

"I would think so," Daniel agreed. "If these symbols are accurate, it's still on, but it's just not doing much at the moment. See this repeated term," Daniel pointed to the same unreadable word, "everything's in a kind of 'sleep' mode right now."

"Sleep mode," Kent wondered out loud. "I wonder how long has it has been like this?"

"I'm not sure," Daniel offered, looking at some of the drawings and searching through them for something that looked like a representation of time. "The *Issaquah* have been watching over this place for at least a few hundred years. There's been a lot over overgrowth since whomever turned the top of this place into a house." His eyes caught a glimpse of some time symbols. He read them but then suddenly he wasn't sure if his interpretation was accurate.

"Kent are you sure you drew this accurately?" he pointed at some indecipherable text next to one of the 'sleep' symbols.

"Yea, I was really careful. See—" He took the piece of paper and held it up against the side of the pillar. "—they're exactly the same. Well, okay they would be if you guys could see both."

Daniel walked over to the pillar and looked at the paper again. "I may be off somewhat; my math is a little rusty. But this is time," he pointed to the unrecognizable numbers within the drawing. "This control says that it's been in sleep mode for almost twelve thousand lunar cycles."

"Lunar cycles?" Lisa thought, "That's like months, right?"

"Yea, basically," Kent assured. "So, the last time someone was here using this place was almost eight or nine hundred years ago? Since the Dark Ages?" Kent asked Daniel.

Daniel shook his head, "No. The Great Ones count in base twelve. The last time someone was here running this control was over eighteen-hundred years ago."

Kent looked at Lisa and then back at Daniel. "That's," Kent began, "that's impossible." Kent shook his head.

"Well, if you don't believe me, you read it," Daniel offered, a bit insulted.

"No, Daniel, he's not questioning you," Lisa chimed in, "I think Kent's just a little overwhelmed."

"I—I'm sorry, Daniel. Lisa's right. I, ah, I'm just dumbfounded that something like this was built that long ago."

"Kent," Daniel forgave the comment, "it's probably a lot older than that. This control was put into sleep mode almost two thousand years ago. These places are probably much more ancient than that."

"Places? There are more?!" Lisa asked.

"Yea. These," Daniel walked back over to the table and pointed to the circles with the maps that Kent had drawn, "these are other towers; all over the world. And these lines that are drawn here, I bet the towers are all connected some how. I don't know how—"

"Daniel," Lisa interrupted, "if this is really a power plant like you're saying, where does the power come from; and where does go?"

"I don't know that either, Lisa. If I were to guess from these drawings, the power, whatever it is, gets broadcast to other receivers, somewhere within the vicinity of the tower, that's my guess."

"It's their version of a Tesla coil, then," Kent announced. "Tesla was a brilliant scientist who showed that you could broadcast electricity. He powered light bulbs without using wires, that sort of thing. Obviously, he was a few millennia late to the party."

"Or he borrowed the idea from your people," Daniel offered. "

"Daniel, you keep calling them 'my' people. Whoever they are, I've only met one of them and even then I don't remember a thing about what happened to make me one of them."

"You are what you are, Kent. I'd start getting used to it. Once you're one of them, there is no going back. And they will come for you. Both of you."

AWAKENED

“You seem pretty sure of yourself, Daniel. What if they don’t come? What if the feds don’t leave? How long do we wait before we do something?”

“They’ll come,” Daniel assured. “They always have. I’m sure someone knows we’re here. Somewhere.”

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Mr. Secretary, the President is on line one.”
“Thanks, Alice.” Frank hesitated before picking up the line. It had been yet another week since they’d found the cabin, or building or whatever it was, where the Levi couple had holed up. He still wasn’t any closer to finding them or knowing even if they were in the building at all.

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Frank, you’ve been avoiding me.”

“I have. I’m sorry, Mr. President. I’ve just been so focused on resolving this issue. I really wanted to be able to give you something more than just ‘We’re still working on it.’”

“Well I can appreciate that, Frank. I have a lot of confidence in your ability to get this resolved. I like how you’re keeping it real quiet. That’s nice work. The last thing we need are hikers

and reporters wandering into that area and mucking things up.”

“Exactly, Mr. President.”

“So, I’ve seen a handful of emails going by. This is really remarkable. Is there really nothing that we have that’s been able to even scratch this stuff? This, glass, or whatever it is?”

“No, not yet, unfortunately. The geologists are really stumped as well. For all intents and purposes they assure me it’s just glass, but it doesn’t *behave* like glass. It’s the damnedest thing.”

“What about the scans? I saw that some of the x-ray scans came back negative.”

“Well, they weren’t actually negative, Mr. President, we just can’t get any kind of signal to penetrate any of the glass. The concrete surrounding the glass isn’t a problem. But the signal gets blocked by the density of this glass material once it gets past the concrete.”

“Interesting. Are we any closer to knowing who built this place?”

“No on that as well. It’s not on any of the federal registries, nor is it within any of the military inventories since we started keeping these records. Now that doesn’t mean we didn’t build it, but often times these things get built off-budget, if you know what I mean.”

The President chuckled. “Yea, all of us are very familiar with ‘off-budget’, Frank. Like you house in Bimini was off-budget.”

“That was a very kind gesture, Mr. President.”

“Well I intend to get a lot more kind if you can step this effort up a bit, Frank. My administration is depending on this little issue finally disappearing once and for all.”

“We’re working very diligently, I assure you, Mr. President.”

"I know you are, Frank. Call me when you can finally get me something definitive."

"You know I will, Mr. President. Thank you."

"Bye now."

The president tapped the end call button.

"Wow," Harlan began, "you totally soft-balled that one."

"That was honey, Harlan. Some people work better with honey than with vinegar."

"So how come you never treat me with honey?"

"Because, Harlan, you work better with vinegar."

"I do?"

"Yes, you do."

"Well, you could buy me a house in the Bahamas. I wouldn't complain."

"Listen, Harlan, if you find these kids and put them out of their misery, I'll buy you an *estate* in the Bahamas."

"Really?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

Harlan gathered himself and quickly left the Oval Office.

* * * * *

Lisa walked down the spiral staircase, carefully avoiding the pieces of paper that Kent and Daniel had been leaving here and there as notes for the glyphs and writing they had been following all over the home. The upstairs was now a complete mess with furniture and potted plants and area rugs moved out of the way for Kent to better see more of the image details that ran all along the floor and walls, pillars and ceilings.

In the basement there were all manner of similar images, glyphs and segmented illustrations that everyone had been

helping to map. Daniel had also begun to teach them how to read some of the ancient language.

At the moment, however, Kent was giving Daniel a lesson in weight training on the universal.

"Twenty-eight," Daniel grunted, finally out of strength and out of breath. "There!" he puffed, "that's one more than yesterday."

"Excellent. You'll be up to thirty by the end of the week," Kent assured.

"Yea, if you don't kill me with your crunches first," he moaned sitting up.

"It's only pain, Daniel. It's the only thing that hurts me."

Both Kent and Daniel watched Lisa as she sleepily approached with her morning cup of coffee. It was almost noon.

"Hey," she greeted slipping into her Southern accent. It looked like Daniel had just come from some boot camp hike. He looked exhausted. Lisa's appearance finally gave Daniel exactly the out he needed to escape the gym.

"You realize that you married a masochist, right?" Daniel said looking at her getting up painfully off the bench.

Clearly Kent had pushed Daniel very hard again this morning with his workout. Kent smirked as he and Lisa watched Daniel head up the stairs grumbling to himself in some Native-American dialect.

"Are you killing our translator again," Lisa offered, sipping from her cup.

"He's just sore from training. He's doing really well."

"You should go easier on him; be a bit more considerate. He really respects you, but he is our guest. Would you want to be in his shoes—moccasins?"

Kent nodded his head, "Probably not. Sorry."

"I know, you're just trying to help. But the last thing we need is for our translator to be ticked-off at us," she grinned.

"Yea, that's a good point," he agreed.

Lisa sipped from her cup. "So did you guys make any progress on getting deeper into the tower this morning?"

"No. I don't know," now Kent sounded frustrated. "Maybe."

"Maybe?" she set down her cup.

"Well, the writings all over keep talking about the keys."

"Right," she nodded, "we don't have any of those."

"Apparently not. The thing is, the same symbol for key is also the symbol used for the receivers of the power the tower generates."

"Interesting." Lisa mused. "So the receiver, whatever it is, also grants you access to the tower?"

"It would seem so," Kent nodded.

"So what do you do if you don't actually have one of these keys?"

"You don't get in."

"But, Kent, aren't we 'in' already? I mean, we're in the building. Right?"

"Sure, but being inside doesn't just automatically grant you access to anything. Just because you have the computer doesn't mean you're in. You have to turn it on and then have credentials to login somehow."

"So, you're the IT guru. How would you turn on and login to a new system?"

"Well, first of all, this system is hardly new. So someone has to create an account for you; give you access."

"Can you hack into it? Like you did my phone?" she smirked over her cup.

"I wish. But this isn't anything like what we build. There aren't any keyboards or monitors for you to try to hack into the system with."

"I don't think that would matter."

"Well, of course it would matter."

"No, you're not getting what I'm saying. You're thinking like an engineer. Stop it."

"How am I supposed to think?"

"Kent, you're always telling me that in order to break into something or crack the code you have to know something about the people who built it. Right?"

Kent nodded.

Lisa looked at Kent and then walked over to a piece of paper that had been carefully placed on the floor with some drawings on it. She picked it up and then held it in front of him.

"Try to think like people who would build *this*."

Kent just blinked at her.

"Kent, I think all this time you've been trying to decipher all of this and force the language into your own way of thinking about things. This is a totally new language, with probably very different understandings of how things work. You have to try to think like the people who would build a place like this."

"So you're a linguist now?" he smirked.

"No, but I've taken some Bible classes in church that covered Hebrew and Koine Greek. You can't properly translate the language without knowing something about the culture of the people who wrote it. You know, kind of like the way you decoded your boss' flash drive."

"Decrypted," he corrected.

"Whatever. The point is, you cannot impose your way of thinking onto what someone else has written in their own language; otherwise you end up with a really bad translation. The Hebrews didn't think like we do today."

"Okay," Kent nodded, agreeing with her observation.

"Maybe we need to think a bit more abstractly," she continued. "What would one of these Great Ones do if someone showed up here and didn't have a key, but maybe needed access somehow?"

“Yea, okay, that’s a good point,” Kent admitted.

“When I was working at that startup back in Seattle, they hired all kinds of UI and UX people to build the user experience. We had like five programmers but we had over a dozen UI people.”

“UI people *are* programmers,” Kent corrected.

“Right,” Lisa nodded, “but they’re also designers, artists most of them. They don’t just write code, they build the *experience*,” she emphasized.

“So you’re saying forget about *how* it works and think about what *makes* it work—from an interface perspective.”

“Yea,” Lisa was nodding, “I think you just said it better than I could have.”

“Hmm,” Kent looked around the basement room they were in, his mind moving in several directions at once.

“Okay, so I’ve got nothing but I need access somehow,” he began thinking out loud. “If I’m just a regular guy, I’m seeing nothing. But because I’m me, one of these supers, already I’ve sort of passed the first level of security here.”

Lisa was nodding. “Sure, you can at least see the interface and controls that no one else can.”

“Okay, so I recognized the tower, so somehow the tower needs to recognize me, authenticate me somehow. It obviously doesn’t just happen when I walk in because I’ve been all over this place already. Where or how does that happen—I wonder?”

“Somewhere upstairs maybe?” she offered “That would be how you got in, right? It doesn’t seem like you’d have to go to the basement to get in.”

“Okay, good point,” Kent mused.

They walked up the spiral stairs together with Kent looking at the different markings. At the top of the stairwell Kent began looking around. The grouping of tall plants growing from within the massive pots in the center of the home had covered

the polished tile floor that the spiral stairs descended around. They had since moved those pots days earlier. It was the floor that Kent now studied once again; focusing his attention on the concentric drawing and glyphs at the center of the room.

"This," he pointed to the floor. "This keeps grabbing my attention for some reason. It's the key symbol. It's larger here than anywhere else in the home." Kent strode to the center of the drawing on the floor. Suddenly he felt surrounded by a soft new glow of light! The new light faded into life around him and bathed him in a warmth he could not describe. It seemed to wash over and through him. He actually 'felt' its warmth gently course throughout his body, smoothly soothing his every nerve. He couldn't tell if it was coming from the floor or the ceiling or both. It was just there—flowing through him.

Lisa watched as Kent stared at her with an astonished look on his face. "Can you see this?!" he asked.

"See what?"

"The light!"

"What light?" Lisa looked around where he was standing. "Kent, I don't see anything. You're just standing here. Did you turn something on?"

"I think so. I'm standing in some kind of flowing light. You can't see it?"

"I don't see anything. But I understand if you do."

Daniel walked up still shirtless from their workout, watching Kent standing at the center of the stairs. Kent appeared to be looking for something on the floor or the ceiling.

"What are you doing?" Daniel asked.

"He's activated something," Lisa offered. "He says he's standing in some new light we can't see."

"I think I'm ..." Kent began. "... think I'm ..." Kent suddenly had an epiphany or, was it a premonition, it almost felt like an instruction that he somehow suddenly knew. He

looked up into the light, lifting his hand as if reaching for the ceiling.

Both Lisa and Daniel now saw the brilliant flash around Kent's hand. Kent saw and felt it as well. Kent slowly lowered his hand to see the now slender band of gold that wrapped his finger. There was a seamless diamond-like or crystalline inset sandwiched between two polished rings of a deeply gold-looking metal, or was it polished stone? He couldn't tell.

But it wasn't the ring itself that surprised Kent Levi the most as he stood in the central light of the spire, it was what he now *felt* and *understood* as his mind seamlessly merged with the tower's central control systems. He could suddenly 'feel' the tower, all of it; its depth, its systems, its controls, even others elsewhere who were drawing trickles of power from it, he somehow sensed it and them—all of them!

"Wow," was all that slowly escaped Kent's now open lips as he looked distantly at the ring on his finger.

Both Lisa and Daniel moved up to Kent in the central circle to see the ring that had appeared on his finger.

"Is that it?" Lisa asked. "Is that the key?" she asked Kent, but Kent's mind seemed to be wholly preoccupied elsewhere, like he was in a daze of some sort.

Both Lisa and Daniel looked at Kent whose blank stare told them that something more had happened to him.

"Kent! Kent! Look at me!" Lisa raised her voice.

"Huh?" he said distantly.

Daniel quickly took hold of Kent's hand, removed the ring and tossed it. The metal band skidded away across the smooth polished tile.

Kent shook his head as if coming out of a trance. "Oh, wow," he breathed.

"Kent look at me," Lisa took hold of his face. "Who am I? Are you okay?"

"Yea," he nodded, recovering quickly. "Yea; it's okay, Hon. I'm fine."

"Kent, what happened?" Daniel asked.

"I saw it. The spire. I was inside it. It's incredible."

"You saw what, Kent!?" Lisa asked.

"You were right, Lis'. You don't *work* these controls. You *experience* them, literally."

"It looked like that ring was taking you over somehow," Daniel warned.

"No, no it was nothing like that. I was just—experiencing their network. It's like nothing I've ever seen—I mean *felt*—before. It's incredible. I didn't even scratch the surface of it. I guess I just got lost in the feeling of exploring it for a moment."

"It was like it had taken you over; like you were in a trance," Lisa cautioned.

"No, no, it wasn't anything like that. It's hard to explain. My whole life, yours and Daniel's too, everything we've ever seen or experienced, it's all come through our senses. It's like our minds are trapped inside of us; all we ever see of the outside world is what comes into us from our sight and the rest of our senses, and even then, most of that is just sight.

"I don't know if I'm saying this right, but, imagine that you're not limited by your five senses anymore; imagine you have several other senses now. All of them feeding directly into your mind the way your eyes deliver images. Instantaneous information. You don't notice or even see that there's an interface. It's just all right there in your mind. You, you *feel* it," he emphasized. "I feel like I've been somehow blinded now."

"Did you even hear me calling out to you," Lisa asked.

"Oh, Hon, yes, I heard you, I *sensed* you, I *felt* you; and Daniel too. I was just so, engrossed in the new sensations, the new senses. You can't imagine it. It's so much more—detailed—it's like sight and sound mean nothing anymore. I

just wasn't paying any attention to my own senses—they're just so—rudimentary by comparison."

"I don't know if I want you wearing that key anymore, Kent. I don't want to lose you to whatever this place is or who these people are."

"It's not just a key, Lisa. It's a receiver; amplifier; an interface into a whole new world—the world of our people."

"Ground control, we are armed, copy?"

"Roger that. Ground control is clear. It's all yours," the fighter pilot and co-pilot both heard in their helmets.

"Roger that. We're on approach now."

The pilot muted their transmission.

"So did you figure out what our target is yet?" the pilot asked, off com.

"I'm still not sure. The GPS coordinates were just uploaded. Looks like it's just going to hit somewhere in the mountains. As far as I can tell, there's nothing up there."

"I sure hope I didn't get dragged out of bed at four in the morning to knockout some gun-hoarding dumbass holed up in a cave waiting for Armageddon."

"Well, hey, it is Seattle. If it's Armageddon they're waiting for, it's about to start raining five thousand pounds of hell, fire and brimstone. The light's green, commander; anytime you're ready."

"It's all yours."

"Roger that. Fox three."

The massive missile detached from the fighter, it's propulsion igniting, speeding the multi-ton guided munitions on course at high speed toward its deep-woods mountain target.

The three of them sat and stood at the kitchen bar trying to make sense of what Kent had just experienced. Daniel had retrieved the ring and set it on the granite counter in front of all of them. They'd discovered that the ring did nothing for either Daniel or Lisa. But all Kent needed to do was touch the thing and he was immediately connected to the ancient network. Lisa still didn't want him anywhere near the ring or the network it connected him to.

"It's not just a network, they call it a continuum," Kent began. "It connects everyone *to* everyone and to different ..."

Kent stumbled, "... entities, I guess, is the easiest way to think about it."

"So you could see other people connected to the network?" Lisa asked.

"It's not a network, Lis'. I mean, it is in the sense that it connects things, but it's more like an awareness."

"Like the Borg?"

"No, no, it doesn't control you. Just the opposite. You control *it*. It ... it—extends you."

"Extends?"

"Yea, that's why I wasn't really paying any attention to you guys, I was too engrossed in what I was experiencing for the first time. I could hear and see both of you just like I can now, but when you're extended into the continuum, or I guess *by* the continuum," he corrected himself, "you and Daniel just became a very small part of where my mind was and what I was focused on."

Both Lisa and Daniel looked at each other.

"That's incredible, Kent," Daniel offered. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel some envy for you at the moment."

"I don't," Lisa interrupted. "It sounds dangerous."

Kent shook his head. "I didn't feel any danger whatsoever, Lis'. Just the opposite, in fact. It felt like the safest place anyone could ever be."

“You didn’t feel like those other people were watching you; like maybe they’d be upset about you accessing their network uninvited?”

“Not network; continuum. And no. I sensed them and I know they sensed me. They all felt like good people. I don’t think they or the continuum would have let me in if they thought I was a bad person. I don’t.”

“Do you think it’s intelligent?” Daniel asked.

Kent shook his head. “No, not like it’s sentient. I guess it’s got to have some kind of artificial intelligence, but it’s not like I was talking to *Jarvis*, or god forbid, *Hal*.”

“Who’s *Jarvis*?” Daniel asked.

Lisa smirked.

Kent looked somewhat bewildered at Daniel. “I take it you don’t watch many movies?”

“I spend most of my time in these mountains, Kent. I try to keep up on the latest tech, but I avoid the city as much as possible. Cities give me the creeps, frankly. Ask your wife.”

Lisa giggled.

“Never mind; it’s not important. What is at the moment is that we figure out a way to get rid of the feds outside. If they—
”

Kent never finished his thought.

The room became suddenly darker as the glass of the front of the home went completely opaque, blocking out any sunlight from entering. The only light in the home was what came from the interior lights of the drop ceiling above them. A faint rumbling could be heard outside, but none of them could see what was happening, nor could they feel anything other than the still quiet of the home’s interior.

They made their way quickly to the front of the home to see nothing but a black glass wall.

“What’s going on out there?” Lisa worried.

“Sounds like an avalanche outside,” Daniel suggested. “Maybe they’re trying to bury us?”

Slowly the darkened glass of the front room began to clear, but as the opacity faded and its transparency slowly returned, it did so all around them. Everywhere, on all sides of the interior, a hazy dust-cloudy sun light now filtered into the home. But all that was visible outside at the moment were huge billows of dust and large falling rocks and massive chunks of concrete striking against the glass outside everywhere they looked.

“Jesus,” Kent breathed. “That was no avalanche!”

“Kent, what’s happening,” Lisa asked holding onto his arm.

“I think they just detonated something really big outside; trying to get in here.”

All of them looked around at the now very uncovered walls of the home. What had once been obscured by concrete and half a mountainside had, in an instant, been blasted away! Now, not only could they see light coming in from the home’s front, but it was coming in from all sides. The only places that they could not see out of were where the drop ceiling and the façade interior walls of the bedroom, kitchen and study had been built to create the interior living spaces. The whole of the space now looked like a very open glass house.

It took several minutes for the dust to finally clear.

“God—” was all that dropped out of Lisa’s mouth as the dust finally began to blow away. Both Kent and Daniel just stood motionless, and stunned.

Where once was a beautiful mountain oasis with a crystal clear stream, had now been instantly replaced with something that looked like a massive crater of charred dirt, rocks, smoke and hotly falling burning debris. The once beautiful stream surrounded by lush old growth forest trees and ground cover was utterly gone. The forest all around them had completely

vaporized into blackened debris and smoldering earth. The concrete terrace and façade of the home were simply no more. There was nothing left but smooth glass protruding from cratered scorched Earth some twenty feet below them.

All of them looked at each other in stunned astonishment of the sudden devastation that had taken only a moment of time to create. The scene of instantaneous destruction outside was uncanny. It felt surreal.

Kent leaned against the cool glass with his forehead. "Oh my God," he whispered, shaking his head in utter disbelief. "Oh my God."

Daniel walked away from glass shaking his head. He was dizzy. He couldn't look at it. He walked back to the counter and sat down feeling like he was about to toss. Kent and Lisa just stood motionless, still looking at the utter devastation.

Somewhere, Harlan waited, surrounded by a couple of military brass. He didn't care who they were. He just needed a job done.

The explosion had been beyond impressive, even to him. They waited for the dust to clear as they watched their monitors.

"So what happens now?" Harlan asked.

"We pick up the pieces and try to put them back together to see what used to be there," the General assured with a chuckle. "If anyone *was* in there," he smiled at Harlan, "they're not now."

Harlan nodded and continued to watch the hi-res video feed coming into the room. But as the dust began to clear, all eyes within the room began to widen.

"Holy Mary, Mother—" someone offered quietly over the com.

Harlan dropped his face into his hand. He was shaking his head. "You have got, to be, fucking kidding, me ..." he stared unbelieving along with the rest of the people in the room. Harlan started to grin uncontrollably and repeated himself.

The generals just looked at each other in utter disbelief at the obsidian structure that protruded cleanly from the crater—without a scratch anywhere on it.

Kent and Lisa found Daniel still sitting at the counter.

"Kent," Daniel began quietly, "I don't think you have a choice anymore. You're going to have to access this continuum again and call for some help."

Kent looked at his now very nervous wife.

Lisa slid the ring toward him with her fingers.

"It will be alright, Hon. I promise," he said picking up the band and placing it on his finger.

"Don't forget about us," she reminded.

"I'm not. I can see you both just fine. I think it takes just a little getting used to keeping your attention focused on ... several different ... things ..."

Daniel frowned.

"He's gone, isn't he?" Lisa looked worried.

Kent was just staring off into space, like he'd just slipped into a coma.

"He'll be back, Lisa. He's exploring. Let him learn."

"What if he's not the same when he gets back?"

"Lisa," Daniel began, "in case you hadn't noticed, *no one* is ever the same after an encounter with the Great Ones."

31

Several weeks had passed since Kent had mentally checked out and disappeared into the continuum. Both Lisa and Daniel had tried removing the ring from Kent's hand but the band simply would not come off. Seldom even eating, every few days Kent would wake to check-in and chat, but then he'd slip away once again into his continuum coma.

With each passing day, the feds outside were either crawling all over the structure with new test equipment or they were excavating and removing more of the rock and earth that had for centuries, if not millennia, concealed the tip of the tower.

Outside, it was a veritable night-lit rumbling construction zone of portable laboratories and close-quarters heavy equipment that had been flown in by the Army Corps of Engineers.

On the inside, all was peaceful and quiet. Perhaps too quiet.

Lisa made her way into the basement level. Kent was once again in one of his extended comas upstairs while Daniel had finished yet a light second workout of the day. Still shirtless and in some of Kent's light workout shorts with a towel around his neck, he'd wandered into the game room and had just broken a fresh rack of pool balls, scattering them all across the table. She watched him not so expertly drop balls into the pockets. It had become a way for him to unwind and forget the seriousness of the life they found themselves stuck within.

Lisa picked up a cue stick after seeing Daniel miss his second shot. It was not the first time she and Daniel had sparred over the table. It was becoming a daily routine, but one Lisa was beginning to enjoy. It took her mind off of all of the other confusing and distressing things. She took her shot, dropping the ball firmly into a pocket from some distance.

"I should have had you as my partner at the ranger tournament," he offered as she took aim. "You're a natural at this. We'd have cleaned up."

Lisa said nothing but took another aim. The cue ball struck its target and rocketed the solid orange ball into a side pocket. Lisa frowned at the nice shot.

"You look really unhappy, Lisa," Daniel observed.

"Wouldn't you be?" she groaned, taking aim again, rocketing the next ball into its intended corner.

Daniel leaned onto his pool cue. This wasn't the first time Lisa had taken over his table. He might get another turn or two if he was lucky.

"He's gone again, I take it?" Daniel asked.

She nodded. "He'll give me five words and then it's like he's lost again."

She missed her shot.

Daniel tossed his towel onto one of the chairs and then moved to where Lisa was standing. She'd set him up for an almost perfect shot. She stood next to him, watching him take careful aim. The striped ball rolled easily into the pocket.

"Maybe you could just talk to him?" he offered.

"I do," she frowned. "All I get is 'yea' or 'uh-huh'; it's like he's half asleep. Sometimes I think it would be better if I knew he wasn't even home; but I know he can hear me. It's like he's too busy; he just won't talk to me."

"I saw him in the kitchen this morning eating," Daniel offered.

"Did he talk to you?" she asked.

"Not really." Daniel took aim. "He mumbled something about Fibonacci cycles or sequences or something and then went back to your room."

"It's like he's stuck in his own personal *Second Life*," she frowned.

Daniel missed his shot. He sighed.

Lisa missed her next shot as well.

Daniel put down his cue and walked up behind her, his fingers firmly began rubbing her shoulders pushing the tension out of her neck.

"You want me to try to talk to him?" he asked.

"Good luck with that," she sighed. Daniel's touch seemed to melt away the stress from her mind as well as loosen her tense muscles. "It probably wouldn't help anyway. He'd just mumble you to death."

Daniel smirked.

He pulled her back against himself, still carrying out his tension-melting neck and shoulder rub. "He's only trying to help, Lisa. It may take a while, whatever it is he's doing." Daniel felt her sigh again. He finished massaging her shoulders, gathered his cue and then stood next to her studying his next shot.

"I've been thinking about what you said," she began.

"About?"

"About people not being the same after they've been changed by the Great Ones."

Daniel looked at her. He nodded.

"I'm starting to think you might be right. I don't know what to do. It's like Kent's a completely different person now."

"I think he's just been really busy, Lisa."

"I'm beginning to think that it's more than that. He's more than just distant, Daniel. He won't even touch me anymore. It's like he has no interest in me."

"Well," he began, "I have to admit, since he's been gone, things have been a lot quieter around here in the evenings. I thought the two of you were just keeping it quiet."

"No," she shook her head. "He totally avoids me. If I even try to warm up to him he shuts it down."

Daniel looked at Lisa. "Really?"

"It's like I'm poison or something. Like he has no interest in me anymore."

Lisa watched Daniel lean carefully over the table. The light nick of the cue ball tumbled the target ball into the pocket. He stood up, brushing lightly against her, as he moved past her to his next shot.

"I wish I knew what to say." Daniel missed the shot. He stood quietly as she moved next to him to take hers. She felt him lean against her as she took aim.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Distracting you; you're kicking my butt."

She sank her target ball and then straightened up next to him. Her eyes subtly traced him as he studied the table. She had to admit, Daniel's naturally tanned skin looked nice against the white nylon workout shorts.

Lisa stepped back, not really happy with the sudden feeling of chemistry Daniel was able to stir up within her. She

just tried to ignore it. She walked around to the other side of the table and studied it carefully for her next shot. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Daniel leaning on his cue as well. She took aim and sank the solid ball expertly, as if she'd been playing the game all her life.

"I guess I'm going to have to pull out all the stops now if I'm going to even come close to winning," he said, walking to where Lisa was headed for her next shot. He took up a position leaning back against the table right where she needed to be.

She grinned beautifully, catching on to his little game of obstruction. "You know you're in the way," she said with a grin.

"So, I guess you'll need to move me," he toyed.

Lisa was humored by the adolescent ploy as she tried to move around him and push him out of the way. She had an almost good shot when she felt Daniel's fingers gently dig into her ribs, tickling her and completely destroying her concentration. Lisa dropped her cue and immediately launched her own retributive tickle strike into Daniel's ribs. She knew exactly where he was most vulnerable. But Lisa also knew that Daniel was a formidable opponent at tickle assault. He slipped behind her, his arm capturing her around her waist where she could no longer reach his ribs as his fingers gently dug into her sides and armpit causing her to erupt hysterically in laughter. In a last ditch effort to escape his tortuous grasp, Lisa tried to turn away but stumbled, sending the both of them tumbling to the floor onto each other. Lisa lifted herself partially off of Daniel who had ended up on the bottom of their stack. Somehow, like their own little version of Twister, his hands were still holding onto her sides. She could tell that he'd rolled under her on the way down to keep her from hitting the floor.

She was still laughing hysterically. "Are—are you okay?" Lisa asked, still startled from the fall but still giggly as well.

"I, think, you need to be tickled more often," Daniel smiled.

Lisa realized that she was lying prone over Daniel on the thick carpet that surrounded the table. He didn't seem to be trying to move her off of himself, and she really didn't feel like moving off of him either. She just looked at him. His hands left her sides and stroked her cheek, moving her hair away from her face. The way he touched her felt nice. It felt like someone actually cared about her.

Finally pulling herself to her feet, Lisa breathed a smile at Daniel and then took hold of his hand, pulling him to his feet. But instead of getting back to their game, Daniel just stood next to her. Was it instinct or just something unfulfilled within the both of them? Cautiously both moved together again in a soft embrace. Feeling Daniel's arms around her made her feel wanted again.

Daniel felt Lisa's arms fold around him; felt her sigh and relax in his. Holding Lisa like this was probably a really bad idea. Yes, he wanted to be a friend and comfort her. Maybe she was comforting him as much as he was comforting her. But he could tell that the smoldering emotions she was kindling to life within him were becoming more than just those of a friend. He'd always felt deeply attracted to her. Yes, she was beautiful, but his attraction to Lisa was different. There was something about her. He couldn't put his finger on it. But it was beyond powerful. It was everything he could do to ignore it when he was close to Lisa. But right now, for some reason, he didn't want to ignore it. He knew she felt it as well.

"Are you okay?" he asked, pulling her warmly against himself.

She sighed again, holding on to him. "Yea."

* * * * *

Lisa lay quietly next to Kent listening to his light breathing. Every now and then she would place her ear over his chest to hear his heart beating slowly, just to be sure he was still with them.

She'd been thinking more and more about what Daniel had said, that maybe her Kent wasn't actually the same man she'd fallen in love with and married. What if he had changed? What if who he had become physically was too different for him to remain interested in her? Her worries seemed to compound the more she lay next to him silently on their bed.

Lisa found herself thinking about Daniel. What they shared as a couple well before she'd met Kent. Her mind wandered back to their recent embrace by the pool table; how he'd felt so warm and comforting to her. How he'd made her laugh. She liked how Daniel still touched her; if he walked by her, how he'd lightly smooth his fingers quietly across her back or arms. His little shoulder massages had turned into some lengthy back rubs and were just what she needed to push the stress away.

Her thoughts of Daniel were interrupted as she felt Kent's chest rise in a deep almost waking breath, his arms suddenly folding around her.

"Kent?" she whispered quietly in the darkness of their room. She heard him breath a smile.

"Kent! Are you back?" she sat up quietly as his hand smoothed across her back.

"I never left, Hon. I've been here the whole time." Kent propped himself up onto one arm."

"What have you been doing? You've been killing me with worry!"

"I know. I'm sorry. I've been trying to figure out a way to fix this situation. It's incredible the things I've been finding—and learning."

"Are we going to be able to leave here?"

Kent nodded. "I think so, pretty soon."

"Oh," she sighed some relief flopping back onto her pillow, "that's what I wanted to hear. The sooner the better."

"I'm really sorry about all the time this is taking. It's like I'm back in school trying to relearn science and math."

"Back in school?" she looked up at him. "I thought you were trying to get us some help?"

Kent saw Daniel walk around the pillar and stand in the dim light. Daniel could be very quiet when he wanted to. As quiet as he was, Kent still heard his heart beating, his soft footsteps, his shallow breathing.

"Are you two awake?" Daniel asked very softly.

"Yes, come in, sit with us," Kent motioned.

Daniel took over a corner of the bed, his legs folded under himself. He listened as Kent talked in the quiet stillness of the room.

"I've been exploring, trying to learn more about this place and who the people were who built it."

Daniel and Lisa both nodded.

"And I met someone."

"You met someone?" Lisa was even more uneasy now. "Who?"

"He's one of your 'Dark Ones', Daniel. He's part of a clan of people like me—well kind of like me."

"What's his name?" Lisa asked.

"His name is Sevrin. He's nothing like what I expected. But he does know Admiral Dark. Actually he knows all of our people; what's left of them."

"Tell us," Daniel encouraged.

"You were partially right, Daniel, about these people being the descendants of the Great Ones. They've been called all kinds of names over the millennia, your people called them the Great Ones, to others they were called Nephilim; others called

them children of the gods. Sevrin just calls them 'the family'. There aren't many of them left."

"So some of the legends of my people are true," Daniel began. "The Great Ones were slowly leaving us. Now only their children remain."

Kent nodded. "That's right. A really long time ago there were millions of the Great Ones. They built a massive and thriving civilization. They taught us all kinds of things."

"Us?" Lisa asked.

"Their nation, or race, or family now, whatever you want to call them, was able to advance far beyond what other people on Earth were doing at the time. Imagine America today compared to some aborigine tribe in Africa or Australia. We have iPhones, computers and the internet and they're running around with stone knives and bow and arrows. No offense to your skills, Daniel."

Daniel shrugged.

"But that's how they were compared to everyone else."

"So what happened to them?" Lisa asked.

"Their civilization fell into war," Kent frowned.

Daniel nodded. "The Great War. It's what destroyed the Great Ones."

"Not totally. But that is what happened. All that's left are a handful of them and their half-blood descendants, people like the Dark clan."

"Where is this, Sevrin?" Lisa asked.

"Actually, he has a house here in the Cascades."

"Close to the tower," Daniel observed.

Kent nodded. "The towers broadcast and the rings are the receivers. The closer you are to the tower, the more you can channel."

"Are they going to help us?" Lisa asked.

"Well, now that's the interesting part. *They* are not."

"What?" Lisa alarmed. "But, I thought they'd send help?"

Kent held up his hand. "Hon, *they* are not going to help us, but they did send help—they sent me."

Daniel was nodding to himself.

"You?"

"Lisa," Daniel interrupted her with a calm voice. "Like it or not, you and your husband are descendants of the Great Ones. Their blood flows through your veins. Both you and Kent are their reborn, their Awakened. I doubt they would have sent him if they did not believe he could handle the situation."

Kent was nodding.

"So what are we going to do?" she asked.

"Well, Sevrin left that up to me. So I've been studying. Trying to learn as much as I can about our people, their culture, their science. It's amazing how much they know about the world around us. There's so much to learn." Kent shook his head. "And right now, I really don't know what I'm going to do."

Daniel smirked. "I like your honesty, at least."

"Well, honestly, I don't," Kent shrugged.

"Kent, the most evil and vile man alive has bulldozers outside unearthing what is probably the most powerful technology mankind has ever known and you're shrugging it off like it's some kind of joke?"

"No," Kent shook his head, "Hon, I'm not. I know what's at stake here. Believe me, more than you or even Daniel know at the moment. I thought about just burying the tower using the canyon walls somehow, but that might kill a lot of people working in and around here. Besides, they'd just unearth it again once the avalanche was through. We need a way to keep them away from here. For good. I just haven't figured out how yet."

"I don't know how you plan to keep the government, especially this Administration, from doing something they clearly want to do?" Lisa frowned.

“That’s actually pretty easy,” Daniel interrupted. “My people have been doing it for years.”

“Huh?” Lisa looked at him.

Kent was already smiling at Daniel.

“My people have casinos where your people do not. My people hunt and fish where your people cannot.”

“I don’t think you’re going to suddenly get them to make this place into an Indian reservation,” Lisa leveled.

“Don’t have to,” Daniel assured. “The courts will do it for us. We just call it an ancient shrine of the Native American peoples. An ancient stone marvel built high in the Cascade Mountains. Every archeologist on Earth will flock here.”

“To learn the technology of the ancients,” Lisa leveled, frowning.

“No,” Kent corrected. “To look at a big piece of shiny glass that must remain undisturbed for all time.”

Daniel nodded, grinning.

Lisa thought about what Kent had just said. Then she began nodding her head. “Okay. Okay, I get it. That might work. We just have one problem—we’re stuck in here and the minute we step outside, we’re dead.”

* * * * *

Several images of the mountain home faded in and out on the screen as the older and very English-accented scientist narrated.

“This is what it looked like when we first arrived. A quiet looking concrete and glass bungalow nestled into the hillside of this pristine sylvan setting. One might have mistaken it for an old World War I ‘miltry’ base of operations of some sort.

“As I am sure all of us here are aware, there wasn’t much any of us could do to get inside the structure from what appeared to be a front door. It wasn’t until one our ‘miss-isle’

munitions was attempted, a GBU-28 to be specific, that we discovered that the concrete was simply a façade covering what was clearly a more distinct, ah, glass—for lack of a better word at the moment—structure concealed underneath.

“Additional equipment was used to remove the resulting debris exposing this—”

New images of the structure, showing the progressive unveiling and subsequent excavation efforts, flashed one after the other across the screen.

“It’s fully sixty feet square at the ‘toup’ with a classic and mathematically symmetrical pyramid dome. At present some twenty feet of the structure has been unearthed. We have no idea how far the structure might continue down into the mountain, or even who might have built such a structure. There are no markings whatsoever on any of the surfaces we’ve uncovered.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” the President smiled. “Don’t go anywhere. This meeting is all about asking questions and seeing what kind of answers we can come up with.”

The President looked around the room at the handful of assembled suits and uniformed personnel. He smiled briefly a second time at one of the shapely assistants who returned a blushing smile.

“Doctor, do we have absolutely no idea who built this?” one of the Joint Chiefs began.

“No, I’m afraid not, General. There isn’t a single marking on the structure. It would be nice if we had something, some kind of detail or inscription, but the structure is completely smooth, devoid of anything except a few very fine seams toward the top, which someone has been floating the notion might be doors of some sort, but I’ve seen no concrete evidence of that.”

“Doctor, with all due respect,” Harlan began, not hiding his disapproval of the doctor’s assessment, “the initial photos

showed lawn furniture on the balcony, right next to those *seams*, as you call them, just before it was blown to smithereens by the bunker buster. We know that someone was going in and out of the structure. We had agents *in* the structure for god's sakes."

"Inside!?" the doctor looked suddenly amazed.

"Ah, that's not exactly common knowledge, Harlan," the President interrupted, obviously perturbed and glaring at his chief of staff. "That little piece of information is highly classified national security intel, people. Not for repeating—to anyone—including you unfortunately, Doctor. If you get my drift," the president leveled.

"Yes, yes, Mr. President. Yes, of course. But that does change things quite a bit."

"How so?"

"Well, immeasurably! Whoever built this structure has capabilities far beyond anything we possess today. We cannot even tell what the classification of the material is, let alone what it's composed of."

"Glass?" Harlan offered.

"Hardly. The silica structure of glass would have ..."

"Alright, that's enough from you, Mr. Harlan. I need to keep this meeting on track. The fact is we know that the structure is hollow and that it has a door of some kind. We need to figure out how our agents and others got inside."

"Are there people still in the structure, Mr. President?" a top aide asked.

"We think so, but we don't know. No one saw them enter but we didn't find anyone in the surrounding woods. The logical conclusion is that they're locked inside somehow."

"So, it looks like we're the big bad wolf, huffing and puffing to blow in the sturdy brick house?" the shapely blonde offered in a somewhat sarcastic but very intelligent tone.

The President looked at her, more than slightly taken in by her stunning looks but also intrigued by her tone.

“So what are you saying, Miss ... ?”

“It’s just Brenda, Mr. President. It seems to me if you have three little pigs locked up in their house, at some point they have to come out. Perhaps instead of huffing and puffing ourselves into exhaustion, we leave ... sort of,” she said with a motion of her head that implied subterfuge.

“That,” the President began, “Miss Brenda, is perhaps the most intelligent thing I’ve heard all day. We need to talk after this meeting is over. Any other ideas, people?”

* * * * *

Daniel stood in front of the doorway as if a statue, watching. The stream had never returned, probably diverted elsewhere further up the valley by the Army. The land below them was now left desolate. It was bad enough that the massive bomb had destroying every tree, plant and habitat with fifty feet of the tower, but the government’s heavy construction equipment had made an even bigger mess of the forest around them as well.

“Still trying to figure out why they left?” Kent walked up from behind him.

“They didn’t leave. They’re still out there. I can feel them,” he offered almost ominously.

“Well, that’s odd because I can’t and I’m the one with the Spidey-sense, remember? I can see a lot better than you; there’s no one out there, except a couple of elk, sixteen raccoons, three hundred and fifty eight squirrels and that bobcat that wanders through here every other day or so now. They took all of their equipment. I’m pretty sure they’re gone.”

“Not gone. They’re government. Never are they ever actually gone.”

"Maybe I should go out and have a look around?" Kent suggested.

Daniel turned his head to look at him. "No."

"No? Who died and left you in-charge?"

"You're too valuable. You have a wife. I will go."

"Should we wake Lisa? She might want to know you're going out. At least give her a vote."

"Do I look like a Democracy to you?"

Kent nodded. "Be careful, Daniel. I know these people all too well myself."

Kent tapped the door button. Daniel carefully slipped one of the doors open and quietly let himself half slide and half fall into the soft dirt below. Kent tapped the door button again and watched the door quickly and quietly close itself, locking once again. He now watched with sensitive eyes as Daniel made his way across the no-man's land of freshly graded dirt, up the canyon and into the deep forest underbrush until he could see him no longer.

"Tiger Commander, this is God," the female voice came in over the com.

"Roger, God, what's up?" the Marine clad in camouflage gear answered over his headset.

"It looks like we have some activity down there. I've acquired a target, a single, male, moving through sector two now."

"From the structure?"

"Roger."

"Well, well, took 'em long enough. Put it on all of our heads up, God."

"Transmitting live stream now. Do you see the target?"

"Yea, got 'em."

"Tiger Twelve, he's right on top of you guys."

"No, actually, Commander, we're kind of on top of him at the moment. Feisty little brat. Nothin' we can't handle. What do you want us to do with him?"

"Good work gentlemen. Just sit on him for now until we get further orders. Thanks again, God."

"No problem, guys. Doing my job, just like you are, only at eighty thousand feet." The pilot ended her transmission.

* * * * *

Kent was obviously stuck in the continuum somewhere when Lisa awoke. She poured herself a hot cup of coffee and wandered out to the front window of the home. The hot brew splashed all over as her mug shattered to pieces when it struck the stone floor. Lisa was already running for the bedroom, screaming. "KENT! Kent, wake up!"

Kent awoke from the continuum as she came racing into the bedroom. "Daniel! He's outside! And they have him!"

"WHAT!?" Like a blur, Kent was at the front window.

Kneeling in the dirt, with a gun to his head, was Daniel. Several other agents also surrounded Daniel with visible automatic weapons. Lisa came running up to the window.

"What do we do!?" she alarmed.

"I don't know."

"They're gonna kill him!"

"I know."

"Kent, we can't let them do that! He risked his life to save us!"

"I *know!*"

"We've got to do something!"

"I KNOW!" Kent shot an annoyed look his wife. "Are you ready to die too?! They'll just kill all of us!"

She pursed her lips and looked out through the glass.

"Maybe they won't."

"And maybe pigs fly; c'mon, Lisa! Do you *know* these people?"

"I do. They won't harm us if they know they need us to get something they want."

"Like what?"

"The data! That's what all of this was over in the first place. That's our bargaining chip."

Kent thought about what Lisa was saying. Lisa was suddenly watching him nodding. "Maybe you're right. No, you are right," Kent began grinning. "But we need something just a little bit bigger. C'mon, we need to get dressed."

The men down on the ground had been standing with Daniel for nearly two hours. They'd been grumbling almost the entire time, but they had their orders.

"Hey, look up there," one of them pointed.

All of them watched as an opening slowly began to appear some twenty feet above the ground toward the top of the short obsidian obelisk. A young man and woman stood in the opening dressed in what looked like dark, form-fitting bodysuit uniforms of some kind.

"Let him go!" Kent demanded. "It's me you want, not him."

"Come down and let's talk," the agent replied.

"FORGET IT, KENT! IT'S BULLSHIT!" Daniel yelled.

The agent with the weapon cranked off a round into Daniel's thigh. Daniel cried out in agony as the bullet ripped through his leg but the other agents held him fast from falling.

"Jesus!" Kent mumbled under his breath.

"You may want to make up your mind quickly now," the agent called out. "You really don't want your friend here to bleed to death."

"Let's go, Lisa. Before these bastards put any more rounds into Daniel."

"I'm right beside you."

Thin glass planks began protruding from the side of the structure forming a majestic set of stairs that Kent and Lisa now used to step down from the tower doors.

"Huh? What the ... ?" one of the agents whispered seeing the stairs literally grow quickly out of the side of the black structure, slipping into place just as Kent and Lisa stepped down onto them.

A number of agents were already scrambling across the soft dirt to meet them at the bottom as the final stair moved into place. Four of the agents took hold of Kent and Lisa and escorted them at gunpoint away from the structure, while other agents headed quickly up the stairs for the opening. But it was already too late. The doors of the tower had closed and their grand stairway was now quickly receding back into the smooth obsidian glass structure from the bottom up. The agents who were caught on the now non-existent stairs fell or slid mostly unharmed into the soft dirt below.

Kent and Lisa were brought to where Daniel and a large cadre of agents now stood.

"Open it back up!" the lead agent who had shot Daniel ordered.

"Bite me," Kent answered. "You shot my friend. I'm not doing you any favors."

"Open in up or I'll put another round into your friend—his head this time!"

Kent called his bluff. "If he dies, not you, not your cronies, not even your bastard President will *ever* see the inside of this place. Ever." Kent stared him in the eye, unmoving.

"Why you pathetic piece of shit, I'll ..." he raised his pistol, pointing it directly at Kent's face.

Kent never moved a muscle; never took his eyes off those of the man threatening him.

One of the other agents put his hand on the lead agent's gun lowering it slowly. "Hey—chill. This is waaay above your pay grade."

The lead agent scowled and then holstered his weapon. "Get 'em outta here!"

32

BUT THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD SHALL BE THEIR SHIELD
TO WITHSTAND THE WRATH OF THE SEVEN LORDS AND ALL
THEIR NATIONS AND MINIONS

—THE BOOKS OF GOD

A helicopter waited loudly in a small clearing up the canyon where water once flowed weeks before. Daniel's leg appeared to be bleeding badly as they loaded everyone into the aircraft.

"We have wounded," the lead agent reported to the pilot. "We should probably stop at the nearest hospital."

"Gotcha," the pilot acknowledged as the chopper lifted into the air and headed for Seattle.

* * * * *

Lisa paced in the small but nicely decorated private O.R. waiting room that had way too many armed agents guarding the entrance.

"Would you stop," Kent relaxed in an overstuffed leather chair. "He's fine. He lost some blood but the slug went all the way through. It nicked the bone but it missed the artery."

"Are you sure?"

Kent nodded. "I heard the surgeon say it myself in the next hallway."

"Maybe it was someone else."

"Lisa, another Native-American gunshot patient with a bullet wound in his thigh named Daniel in the same hospital? Please."

"I'm just nervous. I want him to be okay."

"It sounds like you're still really attached to Daniel. Are you?"

Lisa glared at him, "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, I was just curious. It just seems like you two have become really good friends lately."

"He's easy to talk to. Especially when certain people take off for days and weeks and you don't know if they're alive or dead," she frowned.

"Ouch. Maybe next time I'll not leave so we're all just stuck in a glass terrarium the rest of our lives."

"Can we talk about this later?" she glared.

Kent just frowned and went back to surfing the continuum. He was getting much better at doing both, participating in the here and now while multi-tasking within the continuum.

It wasn't long before a doctor appeared in light blue scrubs with one of the agents neither Lisa nor Kent had seen. He looked disturbed and unhappy. Even sad.

"Kent, Lisa," the doctor began. "I'm afraid I have some bad news. Your friend Daniel ..." the doctor shook his head. "The bullet shattered his femoral artery. He lost a lot of blood. His

blood pressure dropped too low during the procedure to remove the bullet. His heart stopped. We couldn't revive him. I'm so sorry."

The doctor then turned and left without another word.

Lisa started to say something but Kent quickly engulfed her in his arms, very strongly. She could hardly breathe. In fact she began gasping for breaths. "It's okay, Hon," she heard him say, while kissing her head.

"No, no," Lisa breathed, barely, suddenly crying.

Kent looked at the agents who had followed the doctor into the room. "I don't think this is going to go well. Maybe you guys could give us a few minutes?"

The men nodded and then left the room.

When they were out of the room Kent relaxed his arms.

Lisa's face was wet with tears.

"Are—are those real?" Kent asked.

Lisa look at him with one of the saddest faces he'd ever seen. "Do they look real!?" she cried.

"Yea," Kent nodded, feeling bad for her and stroking her cheek.

Lisa suddenly smiled. "Good. It means the acting classes I had while modeling finally paid off," she said wiping the faux tears from her face. "I just never thought I'd be using them in real-life."

"Good grief," Kent looked up, shaking his head. "You had me convinced."

"How are we going to rescue Daniel?" Lisa questioned.

"I don't know. This place is totally crawling with agents right now. I'm not even sure if that doctor was really even a doctor."

Suddenly, Lisa felt Kent invading her feelings again. It felt like someone was coming. Someone evil.

"Oh my god, Kent!"

"I know, I feel it. Hold on tightly to me, Lisa. And don't let go."

Lisa wrapped her arms around her hunky Kent within the small cozy waiting room. And suddenly the two of them—were gone.

A middle aged man dressed in very casual typical Seattle attire walked into the waiting room with a shapely blonde woman and several of his own agents in tow. He looked around the empty waiting room.

His Aussie accent drawled thick and uncultured. "Ay," he began looking at the DHS agents in charge. "I thought you said them kids was here? So where are they?"

The agent looked around the room and shrugged, "the bathroom maybe?"

"Well go look, dumbasses. I haven't got all day."

When the agents went to go look, he leaned toward the shapely woman next to him. "Brenda, you feelin' anything," he asked her quietly.

"There's nobody here. No one in the bathrooms either. They're not here."

"Shit," the Australian frowned. "I don't have time for this. They could be anywhere by now."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'll just have to add them to my list, I guess."

The agents showed up empty-handed as expected. "We can start a search for them. They couldn't have gotten far."

"Mate, don't bother. You're wasting your time. Just double the guard around the aborigine kid and call me when he comes to."

"They call them Native-Americans now," Brenda offered.

"Yea, whatever. They all smell the same to me."

Kent and Lisa had never moved. The room around them appeared drably colored, almost a sepia tone, but otherwise just as sharp in its detail. They'd watched the two people who had obviously triggered Kent's danger senses and heard their entire conversation. Then watched them as they left the room with the rest of the agents.

"They didn't see us," Lisa whispered after they had gone. "How did they not see us?"

"Because we weren't there anymore."

"What do you mean, there? We're still right here, aren't we?"

"Yes and no. We're in the same geoloaction, but at a very different atomic frequency. It's part of how we hide so well."

"What do you mean, 'atomic frequency'? What does that mean, exactly?"

"It means the atoms in our bodies no longer exist at their natural frequency," Kent was looking around at the room. He let go of Lisa and tapped the wall. It still felt solid to him.

"You, you did something to our atoms!?"

Kent nodded. "You should keep your voice down. We can still affect things at this frequency. Someone might still be able to hear you."

"How long does this last?" Lisa asked, looking down at herself. It was interesting seeing herself in sepia.

Kent walked back to her. "Until I put us back."

"It won't wear off!?" she asked quietly, alarmed.

"No. It's natural law, an object in motion will stay in motion unless acted upon by an outside force. At this frequency we almost don't exist where everyone and everything is now. If I had pushed the frequency higher, we'd have effectively become de-solid."

"You mean like moving through walls?"

"Yea."

“That just gives me the creeps.”

“Well, we can creep-out about it later. We need to find where they’ve put Daniel. So, Hon, listen, we’re here but we’re not here. Other things can still affect us. Try not to run into anyone. If you pick something up, it doesn’t disappear.”

Lisa nodded. “Ah, we should probably stay off of any plush carpeting then as well,” she pointed down at their feet and the impressions they were both leaving in the waiting room’s nice carpet.

Kent nodded. “Good point.”

* * * * *

“You know, Brenda, you really should join our little organization,” he grinned. “We could always use another good empath,” the weathered but handsome Australian offered, putting the glass of dark ale to his lips. The early lunch meant the restaurant pub next to the hospital wasn’t very crowded yet.

“You already have one, Rowan,” Brenda smiled professionally. “You’re dating her, remember?”

“Well, dating is kind of a strong word, it’s more like we’re just mates really.”

“Sorry, Rowan. You know how I feel about breaking up couples. Besides, you know as well as I do that your bosses and I wouldn’t exactly get along,” she smiled.

“No,” he sighed, “no, I supposed you wouldn’t.”

“You know they’re just using you, right?” she offered.

“Everyone uses somebody, Brenda. They use me, I use them. Even you—what are you using me for?”

Brenda smiled and took a sip from her glass. “What makes you think I’m using you?”

“Oh, please, we all know the score here. The whole bloody planet’s at war, only no body knows it. ‘Cept people like you

and me. Besides, everyone knows you're a double-agent. So what's your game? Who are you working for?"

Brenda shook her head. "I don't work for anyone, Rowan. I'm self-employed. I'm simply an entrepreneur. I don't like this war anymore than you do. It's bad for business. I'm just trying to protect my assets, just like you."

"Maybe you should show me your assets some time, I'll show you mine," he smiled.

Brenda smiled back, but simply stirred the iced tea in her glass.

* * * * *

"How many times—do I have—to keep saying this!?" Harlan was visibly holding back his rage in front of not only his boss but other surrogates in the room. "Fucking-plug-them-next-time!" he half yelled, fuming.

"You don't plug the golden goose, Harlan," Frank offered. "You don't. There's a much bigger picture here. All you're focused on is your own ass."

"They're still a loose end," Harlan cooled. "I should have plugged the both of them when I had the chance."

"But then we'd have never known about this structure, Mr. Harlan," the President assured him.

"Well, thank you, Mr. President. I don't know how, exactly, to take that. My screw-up leads to some archeological find and everybody is suddenly super happy."

"Everyone screws up, Harlan. Even me sometimes. Just ask my wife." He chuckled at his own joke. "Call it fate, but this mistake of ours has helped us find something we had no idea even existed."

"Okay, so fine. But it's like a million-ton paperweight. Even if we do manage to find these kids again, they're not just going to let us inside the place."

“Don’t be so sure, Harlan,” Frank offered. “We still have the guy’s folks. If we play this hand right, they’ll let us inside. Trust me.”

“How long do you think it will be before they rescue their friend from the hospital?” the President asked.

“I’m guessing no more than a few hours. They’ll wait for him to be moved into a room and then my guess is they’ll come for him.”

“You’re sure the chip we implanted will be undetectable?”

“It’s completely passive. It was imbedded in the femur itself. He’ll never feel it even after it heals. If he gets anywhere within range of our sensor net, we’ll be able to follow them—anywhere.”

* * * * *

It had not taken Kent and Lisa long to find where Daniel was being kept in recovery. Monitor leads, drain tubes and IV drips were hanging from him as he rested surrounded by a hornet’s nest of agents and uniformed police.

It took another several hours before they moved him into a small private room with guards stationed both inside and outside.

A nursed approached the door to Daniel’s room, making her rounds. The uniformed guards outside opened the door to let her in. One of them stepped inside with her to find the empty bed and his four fellow officers lying very unconscious on the floor.

Daniel stirred. The bed he was laying in was incredibly comfortable. Realizing he was awake, he sat up quickly. Was he dreaming? He was dreaming. He had to be dreaming. He was in the tower's bedroom. He pushed the sheets away from his thigh. The bullet wound was not just healed, but gone. Without even a scar. This *had* to be a dream. He pinched himself. No, he was indeed awake. The ugly memory of the gunshot and pain still rang clear in his mind. Somehow the Great Ones had healed him. He felt glad and grateful to be alive.

Someone had dressed him in shimmering bright blue trunk briefs. The shiny snug-fitting material was not exactly his style. He wondered if it had been Kent or Lisa. Either way. I wouldn't be the first time Lisa would have seen him without clothes. But how did he get back here? The last thing he remembered was

blacking out on the helicopter on the way to the hospital. It felt like late evening. He could see that it was dark outside.

Daniel slipped silently out of bed and into the kitchen, but it was empty. He moved without a sound to the edge of the study where he found Lisa reading on her iPad. From the shadows, he watched her scroll the text of whatever had captivated her interest. He could see her breathing and her chest rise and fall; he watched her sigh deeply as if engrossed in a steamy love story. Lisa sighed softly again. She was incredibly beautiful. And even with the simplest of clothes, she dressed to kill. It had been one of the many things that had attracted him to her.

He shook the thought from his mind and slipped silently down the stairs into the basement. Where was Kent? Daniel hoped he hadn't gone out again. Didn't he realize how dangerous it would be? Then again, they had rescued *him* apparently. He was the one who had foolishly gone outside of the protection of the tower. Obviously, Kent and Lisa had managed to get him back here to safety somehow. But where was Kent now? Had they been allowed to come back by the government in exchange for Kent? He needed to find out.

Daniel slipped quickly back up to the top of the stairs. Lisa was now in the kitchen making some tea. He stepped out of the shadow of the pillar and waited for her to notice him.

"Oh!" He gave her a start. "I hate it when you do that!" she smiled. "Glad to see you're finally awake. They had you really drugged."

"It feels like I'm dreaming," he said watching her.

Lisa shook her head. "No. It might seem like that. But you're here. You're alive. It's no dream."

"Where's Kent?"

"He left to go meet Sevrin."

"Sevrin, the Great One?"

Lisa nodded. "Sevrin said that they needed to talk. I believe Sevrin's exact words were, 'Kent, if you keep this up you're either going to end up dead or dangerous.'"

"I guess Sevrin prefers him dangerous," Daniel mused.

Lisa watched Daniel move up to the bar still wearing only the electric blue Lycra boxers. The thin material didn't hide much of Daniel. He was well packaged. He slid onto one of the bar stools. Daniel was no where near built like Kent, but his much more slender yet defined body and naturally tanned skin held its own mystique—its own attraction. Daniel was definitely easy on the eyes shirtless—or pantless.

"What happened to my leg? I blacked out on the chopper. Where's the wound?"

"We took care of it." Lisa grinned over her teacup.

"Tell me you didn't make me one of them!"

Lisa shook her head. "No! No. Daniel, I wouldn't do that to you, or to myself for that matter. Somehow it feels like this blood of these Great Ones has changed Kent. I wouldn't want that kind of change. That feels like a curse in and of itself."

"Thank you." Daniel looked at her. Lisa couldn't help but look back at him. His deep brown eyes were almost black in the low task lighting of the late-night kitchen. Those eyes made her tingle slightly as she sighed softly and looked away into her cup.

"You're still unhappy?" he offered.

"Huh? Oh," she kept staring into her cup. "I—I don't know. I keep thinking that maybe I'm just not cut out for all this cloak-and-dagger business. You know, you trust people you think are good people and then suddenly you find out the people you voted for are not just scoundrels, but—"

"Evil."

Lisa nodded.

"My people have never trusted the government. Not even our own. Government is just another word for corruption."

Daniel slipped off the stool and went to the mug rack. Lisa tried to not look too conspicuous as she watched him brew himself some coffee in the snug shiny briefs.

He set his mug beside hers and leaned against the granite countertop.

“So what *do* you think you want?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t know,” she sighed. “Part of me wants to go back to working at a dot-com, you know, nice and peaceful where the only emergency is some server going down.”

“But?” Daniel probed.

“But what? Daniel, I’m tired of people pointing guns at me. Honestly, my life lately has been one danger after another.”

“What’s wrong with danger?”

She looked at him with a raised eyebrow. It was an odd question. “I’m not sure what you mean?”

“People live danger; everyday. We seek it out. Rock climbers, bungee jumpers, even mountain bikers. Those are the obvious ones. There are others less obvious. You, sought out danger, even before you met Kent.”

“I did?” she questioned. She’d never really thought of herself as the danger-seeking type.

“We’ve all seen your photos in the magazines, Lisa.”

“Modeling is hardly dangerous, Daniel,” she smirked, taking a sip of tea.

“I disagree. It takes courage to step out in front of others with next to nothing on.” He took a sip from his cup. “To let others see you, just as you are.”

Lisa looked at how Daniel was dressed. He was standing next to her with next to nothing on. Was he making a double-entendre or was that just part of his point? She attempted to ignore the comment.

“I get Photoshopped,” she smirked setting down her mug, “just like everyone else.”

"But you don't need it," he smiled, setting down his cup.

"So you think I've always lived a little dangerously?"

Daniel smiled and then moved himself dangerously close to her. "You know you have. Why complain about it?"

As close as he was, she could feel Daniel's warmth. "I, ah, think you like danger too," she breathed, looking up at him but not moving.

"Sometimes. Other times it's good to be—cautious."

Daniel pushed her hair back from the side of her neck with the back of his fingers.

"You're, ah," she took a sweet breath, "not exactly being 'cautious' at the moment, are you?"

Daniel looked at her, "Neither are you."

Lisa felt a ripple of something primal move through her as Daniel's arm moved around her, gently pulling them close together, like he'd done many times before. He looked warmly into her eyes. Lisa's hand went to the side of his face. Daniel's finger lightly traced the outline of her full lip. She opened her mouth slightly feeling the ripples of emotion Daniel sent into her with the two of them this close.

There was something deeply alluring, something forbidden, about what they were doing. Still, the two of them explored the sensations of each other's warmth as the temperature rose between them.

He drew even nearer to her, his face so close their noses were brushing lightly. His fingers lightly caressed the skin around her neck sending twinges of the illicit emotion into her. She felt Daniel's lips lightly brush hers. "I don't think I can be cautious around you," he breathed.

Feeling the light sensation of his lips against hers made Lisa draw a rippled breath. "You're really dangerous, Daniel, you know that," she breathed.

Daniel returned her lip play. "Not half as dangerous as you are."

34

Lisa heard Kent's voice as the bedroom lights glowed to life.

Kent stood at the foot of the bed. "Hey, c'mon you guys. I know it's early, but we have work to do."

Daniel lifted himself sleepily from his pillow, his trunk briefs lost somewhere under the comforter with Lisa still snuggled next to him. Both Daniel and Lisa watched sleepily as Kent turned and walked out of the room.

Kent was munching on a breakfast bar when the both of them emerged from the bedroom dressed and mostly put together. A pair of their favorite coffee mugs were already sitting steaming on the bar prepared just the way each liked. They both took a mug and sat down on stools that were well apart from each other.

“Sorry to get you up so early,” he began. “I’ve been learning some things that I had absolutely no idea about; especially some things about my folks.”

Lisa watched nervously as Daniel took a sip from his mug. He didn’t appear to her to be all that worried. That didn’t mean he wasn’t. Daniel could be hard to read sometimes.

“Daniel, how does your leg feel?” Kent asked.

Daniel nodded swallowing the hot brew. “Perfect. Thank you.”

Both were looking only at their cups as the silence built thickly. Kent finished making himself some coffee and leaned against the back counter.

“Did you two have fun last night?” Kent asked, looking at the both of them over the top of his cup before he took a sip from it.

Lisa felt suddenly mortified! She turned a bright shade of pink. She didn’t look at Kent at all.

Daniel looked at Lisa, who wasn’t looking at anyone, and then back at Kent. “It’s my fault, Kent. Don’t blame her.”

“I don’t need to blame anyone for anything, Daniel. Trust me, I know exactly what happened between you two last night,” Kent nodded, taking a sip from his mug. “I guess my question is, are you two are still in love?” he asked point blank.

Both Daniel and Lisa looked at each other. Both knew the answer but neither spoke.

Kent sighed his frustration. He had a lot more important things to deal with right now; and what had transpired between Lisa and Daniel last night wasn’t making his life any easier. The truth was, he honestly didn’t know what to do. He was deeply in love with Lisa; and now he was just as deeply wounded. He also now realized just how badly he’d been treating her.

“Lisa, I’m sorry. For the way I’ve been so distant lately. I guess, I guess I should have realized—”

Lisa looked up at him.

It's just—I've been so busy lately and considering how you and Daniel were hitting it off, I guess I just didn't realize what was happening with all the stress of the past several weeks," he paused, "it hasn't been easy for any of us."

Daniel shook his head. "You shouldn't make excuses, Kent," Daniel rebuffed. "The fact is if you had been here watching out for Lisa, taking care of her like a real husband instead of a pretend one, I wouldn't have to act as your stand-in."

Daniel's admonishment stung. He knew Daniel was right. Kent nodded.

"Listen, both of you," Kent began looking at them, "I know this is hard—for all of us. The truth is I don't think I'm handling any of this very well myself. You're right, Daniel, I've been so engrossed in learning and studying that I'm forgetting my wife and I'm forgetting about you—you have a life beyond these walls as well."

Daniel nodded.

"I'm just really worried about my parents; they're still being held somewhere by these savages and I need to get them back alive," Kent lowered his head. "I have so much yet to learn and I'm trying really hard not be distracted."

"Kent, what about your parents? You still haven't been able to find them?" Lisa asked, thankful that the subject was turning to something other than last night.

"No. No, not yet. But—I've learned some things about my folks I never knew before. We have to get them back."

"How are we going to do that if we don't know where they are?"

"With this," he pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and laid it on the counter.

"What's that?" Lisa wasn't sure if she wanted to open it.

“It’s a ransom note, left by the assassins who tried to kill me. I went back home last night with Sevrin. We found the note in my room.”

Lisa’s eyes drew wide. “What are they going to want? They already destroyed the data you had.”

“I don’t know. I guess I need to make contact with them somehow to find out.”

“Bad idea,” Daniel offered.

Kent frowned at Daniel, but he was nodding. “I know. You’re right, Daniel. But it’s the only lead we have.”

* * * * *

“As all of you are aware by now ...” the President began. The Rose Garden was filled with media people as the cameras flashed. “... we have a deep disagreement and controversy between two branches of our esteemed government. Months ago, my Administration conducted a purge of terrorist elements that had infiltrated our own military. After a very thorough set of investigations, many military officers within the highest positions of our own Navy, Air Force, Marine and Army were placed on administrative leave, dismissed and even arrested by my Administration for possible terrorist connections.

“I will admit that we have been very aggressive in ferreting out and dismissing many of our career military. But the infiltrations have been deep, insidious, and even treasonous. But I and my Administration have resolved that the Constitution that has led our country to where we are now is of the utmost importance. I swore an oath of office to preserve, protect and defend that Constitution from all enemies, both foreign and domestic. I make no apologies for the actions my Administration has been forced to take for the sake of preserving our great Democratic Republic.

“In doing so, in carrying out this so-called ‘purge’ as some within the media have mischaracterized our actions, we have indeed bent some of the rules. Sometimes when you’re in the middle of a fight for the survival of your nation, you just have to cut through some of the red tape and do the right thing.

“In this process, a few members of my staff inadvertently violated the civil rights of *some* of our military detainees. As soon as I became aware of what these people were doing, I immediately put a stop to it and terminated their responsibilities with my Administration. This government, and myself personally, have absolute zero-tolerance for this kind of ruthless behavior against any of our American military personnel.

“Not so surprisingly, many of my political adversaries have attempted to cast the mistreatment of these detainees as quote-unquote, ‘torture’. I have been apprised of the facts and I assure you that this is not at all the case.

“However, politics being what they are within our nation, my opponents have gone so far as to attempt to subpoena some of these detainees and put them up as a public spectacle; all in an effort to somehow embarrass my Administration. However, we are a nation of laws. As a nation of laws, we have ‘due process’, a due process that must be upheld, especially in matters of national security.

“Since this is an ongoing investigation of the utmost concern to the very survival of our nation, I am determined to not allow political theatrics to interfere with an ongoing investigation, especially when the security of our nation is at stake.

“As all of you know, weeks ago, I signed an executive order suspending Congress’ subpoenas of these detainees citing our ongoing investigations of the suspected terrorists. This, as you know, sparked an immediate challenge in the

courts; a challenge, quite frankly, that we welcomed because we knew we were in the right.

"Today, as you and all of us now know, the Supreme Court of the United States has issued a decision. The High Court has sided with my Administration due to the deep significance and weight of the due process and procedures now being played out within the courts. The suspension of the Congressional subpoena will stand until due process has run its full course.

"These very serious issues will now be allowed to commence within the courts of *jurisprudence* and not in the court of partisan political opinion."

"I'll be happy to take a few questions now."

* * * * *

Kent walked beside his wife along one of the many mountain trails, miles and miles away from where the government had surrounded their mountain home. The mid-afternoon sun was warm and the day next to perfect—except for the silence between them.

"Do you want to talk?" he asked.

"No," she started. "Yes," she corrected.

"I'm sorry," he apologized.

"Why should you be sorry? You didn't do anything."

"Yea, I did."

"What did you do?" she continued walking, staring at the path.

"I let you down. Left you vulnerable when you needed someone close. I was so preoccupied with my studies and finding a way out of the situation, that I forgot to be your husband and your friend."

"Hmm, yea," she nodded.

"In a way, I think I pushed you into him," Kent offered.

“Don’t say that. I’m just as guilty here, Kent. I could have shut him down. It’s just—I guess I wanted someone to hold me; someone to make my problems go away; to make me forget where I was.”

“I’m not judging you, Lisa. Just trying to understand what I did wrong so I don’t keep doing it.”

Lisa reached out and took hold of his hand, locking her fingers in his. It made him smile inside; something he hadn’t done in many, many weeks.

“I’ve never really had a girlfriend before, let alone a wife. I think I’m still a little green here.”

She nodded squeezing his hand, “You are. A girl needs attention, Kent, someone to talk to; someone to hold her when she’s feeling upset. Daniel was right. In a way, you let him be your stand-in while you were out playing whatever on the continuum.”

“Well, it wasn’t play, that’s for sure.”

“Work. I’m sorry. Either way. The point is you were gone, and he was there; and paying all kinds of attention to me.”

“I’m sorry.”

They walked for some time in silence.

“I—” she began. “I didn’t realize how difficult it would be to be all alone with that kind of stress. I didn’t handle it very well. I couldn’t call my folks about it, or even escape onto Facebook to talk with friends. I guess you see people’s true colors in difficult situations like this. I’m really disappointed in mine. I didn’t think I was that kind of person.”

“Lisa, I didn’t marry you because I thought you’d be perfect. I haven’t been perfect. Daniel certainly has his own imperfections. I keep wondering, were I in his shoes, would I have done the same thing?”

“Would you have?”

"Maybe. I don't know. Knowing how much I am attracted to you—probably. I get the impression that Daniel can be a pretty formidable guy."

"He is," she admitted.

Kent nodded. "Do you think—" he paused afraid to even ask the question now, "you two are still in love?"

"Honestly, Kent? I think there's still something there. He hurt me, badly. You know that. But, now I know the reason he left. It wasn't his choice."

Kent said nothing. He just listened to Lisa. With his hand holding hers he could feel her emotions deeply, the confusion she was going through. She did still have some deep feelings for Daniel—but there were also deep feelings within her for him as well.

"I can feel us drifting apart, Lis'. I don't know how to fix it."

"I don't know that you can," she said.

Kent stopped walking and turned to look at her. She could see the pain in his face.

"Lisa, I didn't ask for this—any of this! I—I didn't ask to be the, the carrier pigeon for stolen data. I didn't ask to be hunted by the government and shot. And I certainly didn't ask for this blood that's now flowing through my veins."

"But it's changed you, Kent. It's like I don't recognize you sometimes. The things you can do now. The things you don't do anymore. It's like you're not the same man I married."

He nodded. "I guess war has a way of changing people, Lisa. At some point we have to grow up. The secure little college life goes away, your family goes away, and suddenly you're standing in the middle of a world you never dreamed existed; run by the most evil people you could never have imagined. You didn't ask for it and neither did I. But now that we're here, what are we going to do?"

Lisa looked at Kent. She nodded. "I just want my husband back. The man I fell in love with. The man who took me into his arms and wanted to be with me."

"Lisa, he ever left. I'm still the same guy."

"No. No, you're not. You used to touch me all the time, Kent. Kiss me; make love to me. When was the last time you really kissed me; the last time the two of us actually slept in the same bed without your mind floating away to God only knows where!?"

Kent pursed his lips and looked down at the trail, then he looked back at her. "Lisa, I'm sorry. I was trying to figure out a way to handle this. I know how much you hate me the way I am now. But, you have to understand, I didn't want to infect you with the same curse."

"Infect me? What do you mean?"

"I've learned a lot about who and what I am now, Lisa. I knew we had to stop being intimate like we used to. I could see that you didn't like what I had become; I knew you'd really hate me if I infected you as well. I had to protect you—from me."

"So—it's not just your blood?" she stopped.

She watched Kent shaking his head. "Lisa you're not exactly a passive lover. Even with protection, I couldn't be sure that I wouldn't—pass my curse onto you."

"Kent!" she began, "you should have told me!"

"Told you? And ruin any chance I might ever have of sleeping with my wife again? Lisa, you *hate* this thing! Anyone can see that. And at some level that means you hate me," his gaze fell.

Lisa's mouth opened as she suddenly realized what Kent must have been going through.

"Oh, my God. Kent, no! No! I don't hate you! I don't!"

"Sometimes our actions speak louder, Lisa."

Kent began walking again with Lisa taking hold of his arm tightly, holding herself as close to him as she could.

"I've probably spent whole weeks digging into how to undo this thing. It's been tried. Many times." Kent shook his head. "It can't be reversed."

The two of them walked pensively together for a while with Lisa holding tightly to him. Kent reached out to her and pulled her close.

"It was like I was trapped. I knew what was happening between you and Daniel. He was paying more and more attention to you while I was off lost in the continuum trying to figure a way out of this. I guess I sort of knew it was only going to be a matter of time. I could see that I was losing you, Lisa. It just made me all the more depressed watching it happen and being powerless to stop it. Daniel didn't have the curse. I did. At least with Daniel, you could be close to someone. And I knew he was an honorable man, just like his grandfather."

Kent heard Lisa's sadness. Then saw her tears.

"Hey," he said, pulling her close kissing the side of her head through her hair, her indescribable scent filling his senses.

"This thing scares me, Kent. Honestly, it does."

"I know, Lis'. It scares me too," he embraced her.

"I—I don't know what to do." The tears leaked out slowly from her eyes wetting her face. "I still love Daniel. I know you can feel that; but, I hope you can feel that I'm still in love with you."

"I can feel you, Lisa," he said consolingly. "I can't hold what you feel for Daniel against you."

"Can we fix this?" she said emotionally.

Kent looked at his precious bride, and gently moved her hair away from her tearing eyes. "I think so," he responded, his voice full of love and renewed conviction.

"How?"

"I don't know, Hon. Somehow. We'll fix this, Lisa, I promise. I don't know how; but we'll fix it."

* * * * *

By late afternoon Kent and Lisa had returned to the tower. It didn't take them long to discover that Daniel was no longer there. The doors were closed but not locked. Obviously, Daniel had left and not told anyone where he was going or why.

"This is my fault," Lisa immediately began.

"Why is it your fault?"

"None of this would have happened if we hadn't—" she stopped, too embarrassed to actually say it.

"I guess he must feel awkward about the whole thing," Kent suggested.

"I'm sure he does; but Kent, he's a sitting duck out there. Look at how easily they captured him last time. What was he thinking?"

"Probably about you."

"Me!?"

Kent nodded. "He doesn't want to hurt you, or me either for that matter. I'm just guessing, but knowing Daniel, he was willing to risk leaving, even if it means maybe getting killed, rather than stick around."

"Kent, we've got to find him!"

"I'm already looking, but—"

Kent could feel nearly every living thing within the limited range of his ability. None of them were Daniel.

"Can you see him?"

Kent shook his head. "It's no use. Even with the tower, I'm just not a very skilled empath at the moment, Lisa. I don't see him. He could be anywhere in these mountains by now."

* * * * *

Daniel had used every ounce of cunning his grandfather had ever taught him about moving unseen through the forest. After waiting now, in the darkness, He'd passed platoons of soldiers, squads of agents and sizable encampments of men and equipment on his way out of the canyon.

Finally away from the government, he continued to move silently through the forest until he'd found the place he was looking for. Daniel slipped silently between and then beneath the large boulders that had been long overgrown by the forest. On the other side were the ancient caves of his people. He stripped off his shirt just inside the entrance and applied the ceremonial paint to his chest and shoulders as a sign of respect before entering further.

In ages past, his people would have taken a flame torch to light the way, but, alas, Daniel's light and flame now came from a dated Coleman lantern burning fuel. It now lit up the cavern very well as he moved deeper into it. Ten minutes later he was at the water's edge. A subterranean lake of immense beauty and grandeur spread before him.

In the center of the small lake, a grand stalagmite rose maybe a hundred feet, but was nowhere near the roof of the cavern. The calcified rock had been intricately carved long ago by his people, a totem to some ancient religion, long forgotten.

The cavern had always been one of his favorite of places. And with deep sorrow, it would now become his *final* resting place.

The ancestral stone blade was already in his hands. He sat perched atop a rock so that his life would slowly drain away into the warm water below. As if drawn by duty, the razor-sharp edge of the sharp stone blade touched his skin. He closed his eyes, taking his final breath. His arm lifted high and—

"That's probably the third worst decision you've made today, son."

Startled by the sound, Daniel quickly looked around in the direction of the voice. Not ten feet from him an old man, overweight and casually dressed in blue jeans, boots, and a button-down shirt, nodded a smile. He lifted his eyes to look into Daniel's from under the brim of his cowboy hat.

His eyes. They reminded Daniel of his late grandfather's. His eyes were kind and behind them shone wisdom far beyond anything Daniel knew he would ever know. He lifted the lantern and looked at the old man.

"How—how did you get in here?"

"Oh, I followed you. Nice place you have here, Daniel. Beautiful," the old man's voiced slightly echoed with the drawl of someone from a Texas cattle ranch.

"How do you know my name?"

"Oh, I know your sister, too. Cheyenne's been looking all over for you, you know."

Daniel slipped off the rock leaving the blade and the lantern in his place. "Is she okay?"

"Well, that depends—on you."

Daniel looked down at the pebbled shore. Somehow he knew where the old man was going with this conversation. Daniel didn't know who the old man was, but he did know that no one had followed him into the cave. It was the Great Spirit who now talked with him. He kept his mouth closed.

"You know, Daniel, you're not the first man to fall in love with a goddess. You won't be the last."

"But I took the oath. I am forbidden." Daniel frowned still looking at the ground in respect.

"You have a very strong sense of duty, son."

Daniel looked up at the old man.

"Don't let it override what's up here." The old man pointed to the side of his own head. "Or here," he then tapped his chest.

"But—she needs to fulfill her destiny within the prophecy. That will be with Kent, not me."

"Oh, so you're a prophet now?" the old man looked at him.

Daniel slowly shook his head.

"You know, Daniel, that's the funny thing about prophecies, they sort of have a way of fulfilling themselves, with or without our help."

"But—" Daniel began. "we're still in love. We both felt that last night. She is wife of the first reborn. What if she leaves Kent—because of me? I cannot allow that to happen. I will not interfere in the destiny of the Great Ones."

"Oh, son," the old man chuckled, "that particular horse left the barn lonng ago. Like it or not, you are already part of that destiny."

"But—"

"You have people who need you, son. You're all the family Cheyenne has, now that your grandfather is gone. She needs you. Kent and Lisa—they need you as well. More than you know."

"They both should hate me. Especially Kent."

"Why? Because you rekindled something that had never really gone out? Listen, Daniel, if you really love that girl you won't worry about Kent. He may have fumbled the ball this time, but trust me, Kent can take care of himself."

Daniel looked into the eyes of the old Texan again. "How do I face them?"

"Like a man, son," he reached out and gripped Daniel's shoulder with a firm hand. "You face them the same way you would want someone to face you. With kindness and dignity. I think you'll find they don't hate you at all; just the opposite in fact."

Daniel nodded, pursing his lips.

"In the meantime, I bet you can catch up with your sister. She's not far now."

"She's here? On the mountain?"

"She is. You'll find her," he pointed, smiling, "out there, somewhere."

Daniel turned from the old man and took up the lantern.

"Aren't you coming?" Daniel asked.

"Oh, I'll be fine. Go on, now, git!"

"But," Daniel looked toward the entrance of the cavern, "I have the only light— "

When he turned to look at the stranger again, the old man was gone.

The old Texan watched as Daniel and his lantern faded into the distance, until both had vanished completely out of sight. He shook his head grinning at the irony, thinking about what Daniel had said. "*You do have* the only light, son," the old man whispered, a smile under his breath. "That you do."

* * * * *

The moon shown nearly full as the clouds parted overhead. The teen moved between the trees and through the underbrush with the silence of a deer. She stopped at a larger Ponderosa, quietly examining the disturbed needles and broken foliage. It looked as if four, maybe five men had passed by in the last several days. No hikers ventured this deeply into this part of the forest. And these were no ordinary men. She lifted a ragged strip of camouflage material from a jagged branch. No mere government agents; no, these men were military. Somehow Daniel was mixed up in all of this. She didn't know how, but she hoped he would be able to find her or she him. There was now only one place left to look.

* * * * *

He heard her long before she saw him. She emerged from the thick underbrush to see her brother sitting on one of the boulders that covered the entrance to the ancestral caves. He looked sad in the bright moonlight.

"What happened to you? You've been gone so long. I was worried!"

Daniel looked at her but said nothing.

Cheyenne climbed up on the boulder and sat next to him, offering him her canteen. He took it graciously and drank several swallows from it before handing it back. Her water always had a hint of lemon juice in it. It was one of the many, many things he liked about her.

"Some men keep coming by the house," she said. "They keep asking about you and about me. They wanted to know where you were." She saw him nod ever so slightly. "What did you do?"

He looked at her. "I killed one of them."

"Why?"

"They found the temple."

"Only bad things come from killing, Daniel. That place has always been cursed. It's why father never joined the *Issaquah*. He wanted nothing to do with it."

"I had to. They had Lisa."

Cheyenne's eyes drew wide. "Lisa? She was at the temple?"

Daniel nodded.

"Oh, Daniel. I'm sorry. Seeing her again; it must have been painful."

"It was, at first."

"Daniel," Cheyenne studied him, "I've seen that look in your eyes before." She moved his long hair back from his face. "You still have Lisa in them. How? How will that work? You are forbidden."

"I'm leaving the *Issaquah*, Cheyenne."

“Why? Who will take care of the temple?”

“The Great Ones. They are awakening, just as the prophecies foretold. The reborn will now take up their legacy. They don’t need us anymore.”

“What will you do?”

“I don’t know. But I killed one of the agents. They know who I am, and now they know you. I’m sorry,” he looked at his sister. “Because of me, your life is ...”

“... with you.”

“Cheyenne, I’m a marked man now. The government is relentless. They will come for me. And even if I live to be a hundred, my life will be a constant struggle. That’s no life for you. You deserve better.”

“But what about Lisa? She’s one of them. She can help you, right?”

Daniel buried his face in his hands with a deep sigh.

“What’s with you?”

Cheyenne watched as Daniel looked up into the moonlit sky. There were no tears, but his eyes were wet with pain.

“I—I made a mistake. I don’t know if she will want to help me.”

“What mistake?”

Daniel seemed to compose himself, burying his pain. He slipped down off of the rock. “The clouds are coming back. It will be darker soon; we should go.”

“Where? Where can we go that they won’t find us?”

“They will find us, Cheyenne, but it won’t matter. I’m taking you to the temple. And, if there is any love for me left within Lisa, maybe she will forgive me enough to at least keep you safe from my mistakes.”

35

WHEN THE SERVANT OF EVIL
UNITES WITH THE DAUGHTER OF DARKNESS
THE TIME OF PEACE SHALL BE NO MORE

—THE BOOKS OF GOD

I’m so glad that you could join us for lunch, Brett.” The older, well-groomed, handsome and finely British-accented host offered with a smile. The dining room was a very private room for just the five of them, the chamber elegantly adorned within one of D.C.’s more sophisticated establishments. It was also devoid of any Secret Service; a private security detail had not allowed them in.

“I appreciate the invitation,” the President offered warmly, not sure who he was really speaking with. But the investors had insisted on the meeting and he wasn’t about to ask for the details on such short notice.

"It's not everyday we get the opportunity to dine with heads of state, but when we do, Brett, I assure you it is of the utmost significance."

"So, I've been told," the President nodded. "I'm honored and, and humbled."

"As you should be," the elder gentleman acknowledged without so much as skipping a beat. "Some of your predecessors were not nearly as amiable to our position, Brett. But we've been keeping our eye on you," he smiled and nodded at everyone in the room. "And I must say, we very much *like* what we see."

"Well, thank you."

"You are most certainly welcome," the elder gentleman nodded.

"Brett, this is my daughter, Amethyst." The late twenty-something beautifully striking and very shapely woman nodded with a polite smile and gleaming lavender eyes, but otherwise said nothing. "Also, Mr. Taylor and Sheik Hammond, your investors, you already know."

The President nodded. "Mr. Rigel, your daughter is stunning," he complimented, still captivated by her unusual eyes.

"Isn't she though? But please, Brett, let's break with the formalities; we can be more casual now."

"Should I ask what this meeting is all about?"

"Of course. I like a man who gets right to the point. You've found something, Brett. Something extraordinary. Something we have been looking for, well, for centuries."

"So you know about that?"

"You did a good job of keeping it a secret for as long as you did. But we eventually find things out, don't we my dear," he winked at his daughter. "Have you been able to get anyone inside?" Rigel looked at the President.

“Well, yes and no. Before we even knew what it was we had a couple of agents inside to arrest some fugitives who were using the structure as a hideout.”

“It’s okay, Brett, we know all about the Levis and their children. You went in to arrest Kent Levi and his new wife, Lisa Kyle.”

“We did. It didn’t go well.”

“Well, Brett, I’m hardly surprised. Anyone who knows about these structures would tell you, they are fraught with all kinds of danger. I’m afraid your agents probably didn’t stand a chance.”

“Structures? You mean there’s more than one?”

“Dozens, actually,” Rigel admitted.

“The problem, Brett,” Amethyst spoke, “is actually getting inside one.” Her voice was incredibly beautiful and melodic.

The President nodded. “We had a similar experience. It’s impenetrable.”

“Indeed,” Rigel offered.

“Why do you want to get inside?” the President took a sip of his water.

“Because, Brett, the very knowledge of how to build one of these structures is hidden within it. We alone have the keys to unlocking its secrets.”

“So, Mr. Rigel, at the risk of sounding rude, and believe me I don’t mean to, what do you need me for? I think you pretty much have the resources to do whatever it is you want to. Am I right?”

“We do, Brett. But we prefer to work in the background, like we did with you through the last election. We prefer to stay away from the mundane and trivial tasks. We employ people like your investors here to handle the more remedial tasks we need to get done.”

"I see," the President was a little more than beyond impressed with Rigel and his organization. He'd no idea his own investors were working for anyone other than themselves.

"You're being promoted, Brett."

"I am?"

"Yes, you'll begin working directly now with a few others within our organization. People who will help you out. Mostly, we need you to help us find a way to help our people get inside that structure."

"I would be more than happy to help in any way I can. But, the problem is, I can't seem to get any of my own people in it, let alone yours."

"Indeed, but if we work together, we may have a chance at making it happen."

"Alright. I'll do what I can. I do have some pretty incredible resources at my disposal."

"Indeed you do, Brett. Which is why we are working toward bringing you a way to enjoy a third term."

"A third term? Really?"

"Yes. I wouldn't joke about anything so significant. The fact is, you've already been working toward that goal, setting our plans into motion."

"I have? I mean, I guess I have," he looked at his two investors who were now nodding. "A third term, huh?"

Everyone at the table was nodding.

"Well, of course, I'm in."

"Excellent," Rigel smiled. "We knew you would be."

* * * * *

"What do you see?" Lisa asked, watching Kent stare out at the stars through the glass. Both had changed into their black armored bodysuits once again; ready at a moment's notice in case they needed to leave the safety of the tower.

"Just more of the same; soldiers; agents. They're keeping their distance, but they're out there. Hundreds of them."

"What do you think they're planning?"

"I don't know. But judging from their radio conversations it seems like they're here for the long haul. I don't know what they're planning."

Lisa stood in silence, looking out at the beauty of the moonlight silhouette of the forest trees against the starry sky. She wished for the return of the roar of the rushing water that used to be below them.

"It's interesting," she began, touching the glass with her fingers ever so lightly.

"What's that, Hon?"

"How something seemingly so fragile is the only thing standing between ourselves and such a powerful enemy outside."

"They don't know what they're up against," Kent nodded out the window. His mind focused on several squads of soldiers who'd taken up positions several hundred yards away as the tower's passive awareness fed him their locations, heat signatures, identities, heart rates and vitals. He listened to their radio communications as each one radioed their check-in and all clear. "If any of them had any glimpse of understanding of what it was they stood against right now," Kent shook his head, "they wouldn't be within fifty miles of here."

Lisa looked at her husband. "You could destroy them; kill all of them, right now; couldn't you?"

Kent continued looking distantly out the glass with a sigh. He nodded. "With a thought," he half whispered.

"That's kind of scary; having that kind of power," she leaned into him.

"It scares me too, Lis'," he slipped his arm around her. "But even with all of this, it still hasn't helped me find my parents."

"We'll find them," she pulled him close.

Kent mused to himself. "You know, I often wondered about Dad's business partner; he's one of us. All those years and we never even knew it; never even suspected Mr. Steele was anything but just a really super nice guy."

"So your dad's business partner was all part of this? One of these Great Ones?"

Kent nodded.

"I guess that explains a lot. How you got all mixed up in this. It sounds like your folks were doing a lot more than just writing contracts and serving coffee, Kent. It sounds like they knew about him; at least some things about him."

Kent shook his head. "They were just people working with a powerful industrialist, Lis'. I don't think they knew anything about this."

With his arm around her, Kent's enhanced senses *felt* her, he sensed easily how bright she really was.

"You're just as mixed up in all of this as I am," he offered.

"What do you mean?"

"Daniel."

"What about Daniel?"

"His family has been working for the Dark clan for generations. He found you, by accident. How did you two meet?"

"I was on hike with James after I graduated high school. We met Daniel along one of the trails and he asked if we'd like a guide. Then James kept pushing me into him on the trails as we hiked. By the time we'd reached the car on the way back Daniel and I were holding hands; he asked me out. He's why I never dated anyone else all the way through school. And then, suddenly, he wasn't talking to me anymore. It was like I didn't exist."

Kent nodded. "He didn't know, Lisa. Who or what you were. But the Steele's did. They noticed you were different the moment they saw you."

“What am I, Kent?”

Kent kissed the side of her head. “Honestly, I don’t know, Lis’. You show up really bright on every sensor I throw at you. You’re kind of like me, one of the Awakened, one of the ‘reborn’ as we’re called. But, honestly, I don’t know what you are Lis’. You’re not like the rest of us, the gods I mean. It’s why they never brought you here.”

“I guess I sort of showed up here anyway.”

“You did. It was pretty miraculous. Two newbloods, showing up at the same temple, the same tower, even though the gods themselves were trying to keep us apart.”

“You keep calling them that, ‘gods’; is that what they are? What we are?”

“Compared to everyone else we are. Only,” Kent sighed. “I’m not feeling very god-like when I can’t even find my own parents.”

“We’ll find them, Kent.

“There’s not a whole lot to go on except for the ransom note. It’s the only lead we have. I’m sure the Administration has put my folks in their own version of witness protection now. It’s just like it was with me; no one knows where they are except for those who put them there. I just hope they’re alright.”

* * * * *

Daniel discovered that he was really beginning to hate the feeling of cuffs being cinched down hard onto his wrists. Cheyenne was on the ground next to him. She looked at the scowl on his face. They were both being lifted to their knees and a bright light flashed into their faces.

“Well, let’s see what we got here,” the officer in charge looked at them as he kneeled himself into the underbrush. “Couple of Indian kids,” he mocked. He scrolled through a

small tablet and found some pictures. "Well, well, now; you're Daniel Hawk."

Daniel said nothing.

He looked at Cheyenne. "Nice family resemblance. I'm betting this is the Hawk girl we wanted to interview as well. Out for an evening stroll, kids?"

The captain looked at their expressionless faces. "Don't talk much do you?"

They said nothing.

"Alright. I'm just here to pick up strays. Sergeant, inform base command we have a couple of trespassers."

Daniel frowned but looked around. Maybe there would be some way for them to escape into the woods, but the ankle cuffs would keep them from moving very quickly. Suddenly Daniel recognized a very familiar voice.

"That's all right, sergeant, I'll handle it from here," Daniel looked up in surprise. Kent? He was dressed in some kind of black body uniform, and pushing his way past the sergeant in charge. Kent walked right past the heavily armed men surrounding them up to the two cuffed captives; he easily pulled the two of them to their feet.

"Who are you, exactly?" the half startled captain questioned, not sure where the big soldier dressed in the strange body-tight uniform had come from.

"It's dark, captain. Don't believe everything you see." And in what sounded like a quick rush sifting air, the three of them suddenly vanished, and were gone.

Lisa had watched Kent step away from the glass and then vanish in the sudden subtle shift of air. A few moments later she heard the same sound again as three people were now standing in the front room of the tower. Two of the people Lisa recognized immediately. The third, a teenage girl, looked like

she could have been Daniel's twin sister, only it was obvious she was much younger.

"Wha—," the olive-skinned girl said, obviously quite startled. "W—where are we?"

"Safe." Daniel smiled at his sister. Both quickly recovered from the shock of the instant change in surroundings.

"Let me get those cuffs off of you," Kent offered, making quick work of the industrial-strength restraints which seemed to almost fall off when he touched them.

Daniel and his sister stood for a moment, rubbing their sore wrists as Lisa walked up to Cheyenne.

"Oh, my gosh, Cheyenne! I haven't seen you in years. Look at you! You're all grown up, and beautiful!" she complimented.

"I still collect magazines that have you in them, Lisa. But, you look even more beautiful now."

Both of them hugged tightly.

"I'm so glad you're here, Cheyenne. Now maybe you can help us keep your brother from wandering off, *like an idiot!*" Lisa continued, leveling a glare at the chiseled face now smirking wryly at her.

"Are you both okay?" Kent asked politely.

Daniel nodded. "How did you know? How did you find us?"

"Let's just say they need to do a better job of encrypting their radios," Kent replied. "You gave us quite a scare, Daniel, *again,*" Kent emphasized, rolling his eyes for good measure.

Daniel nodded. "I think I need to speak with Kent for a few minutes," he said finally, looking at Lisa and Cheyenne. Both of the women got the message as Lisa led Cheyenne to the back of the house toward the kitchen, "I can't tell you how really glad I am to see you here Cheyenne!" Lisa began walking with her in tow. "It's going to be so nice to finally be able to talk to

another girl! I've about had it up to here with all of the boys!
..."

Cheyenne breathed a subtle smile.

The men watched as the girls moved out of earshot.

Kent looked at Daniel.

Daniel looked Kent in the eye. "I need to tell you something. And I don't know how to say this so I'm just—going to be level with you. I'm not leaving her, Kent."

Kent looked at Daniel. "I'm—not sure I follow."

"Lisa."

"You know we're married, right?"

"You gods took her away from me. I'm taking her back. Just fair warning."

Kent breathed a smile. "You know she's a goddess."

Daniel nodded.

"It's not gonna work, Daniel. It's why the Dark clan ordered you to stay away. You'll only get hurt. Again."

"I'll take my chances."

Kent thought for several moments, still looking at Daniel. He nodded. "Alright. I can't tell you what to do. But I'm not letting her go." Kent held out his closed fist. "Game on, Buddy."

"Game on." Daniel struck Kent's fist with his own. Kent's fist never moved. Suddenly Daniel was waving his now open hand in pain after striking something that felt like solid rock.

"Ow—Jesus, Kent—" Daniel complained under his breath.

Kent lifted an eyebrow.

They both turned to look at the two women who seemed to be chatting it up now over by the kitchen. Cheyenne had taken to one of the barstools while Lisa looked like she was about to prepare something.

"You know, you two really look alike."

"We always called her my younger twin. She turns nineteen in a few weeks." Daniel watched the two smiling and

laughing. It had been a while since Daniel had seen his sister smile.

“Pretty hot for nineteen,” Kent mused.

“God or no god, I will kill you,” Daniel deadpanned, not looking at him.

“No worries,” Kent assured. “*Lisa* would kill me first.”

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The four of them sat and stood in the kitchen munching on snacks and finger foods that Kent and Lisa quickly prepared. While not exactly a proper dinner, it was large and varied, and both Daniel and especially Cheyenne were grateful for the meal.

“Our grandfather brought us to this place when I was little,” Cheyenne entered into the conversation. “It was empty then. But I like your kitchen.”

“It’s your kitchen now too, Cheyenne,” Lisa assured her.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about this, guys,” Kent looked at all of them. “We all can’t stay cooped up here forever. At some point, we need to have lives again.”

All three heads nodded in response.

“How?” Cheyenne asked simply.

Daniel looked at his sister, then at Kent. “Cheyenne has a point; the government wants us, all of us.”

"*This* government wants us," Kent corrected. "I think it's time there was a change in the Administration."

"Those are bold words, Kent, and I respect them, but we are just three people standing against a nation," Daniel warned. "What can any of us do?"

"Four," Cheyenne corrected. "We are four."

Daniel shot her a scowl. Lisa smiled quietly taking a drink from her water bottle and exchanged significant glances with Cheyenne.

"Well for starters, it's not actually a *nation* that hates us, technically speaking, it's really just one man. If you change out the man, all of this goes away."

"He only has to finish out this last term, right?" Lisa offered. "That's less than four years. Then he's gone."

"Right, but then another puppet pops up in his place," Kent added. "These people who funded this administration; they're not going to allow just anyone to slip into the White House after this. They have their foot in the door. Look at everything they've been doing: taking over industries, auto manufacturing, insurance, healthcare, everything. Slowly but surely, they've been installing their own people into positions of power. It's not just one side of the political aisle that's involved. If that data showed me anything, it's that people on both sides of the aisle have been compromised, bought and paid for with global money."

"Kent, you're saying that this government is just a puppet?" Lisa asked.

"Not just this one, Lis', I don't know that's its ever *not* been a puppet."

"So shouldn't we really go after the people pulling the strings?" Lisa asked.

"I wish we could, but we don't know where they are. They hide themselves very well. The next best thing is to go after their tools. If you shoot the gun out of the hand of the bad guy,

disarm him, then suddenly he looks like the powerless bully that he is.”

“I didn’t know you were such a tactician?” Lisa smirked.

“I’m not. But I have been reading *Sun Tzu* lately,” Kent smiled.

“*The Art of War*,” Daniel mused thoughtfully. “‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend.’ Interesting. But how do we start? Where do we go?” Daniel asked. “If we can’t stay here, protected by the tower, how do we keep ourselves out of the hands of this Administration?”

“We learn how to blend in, just like the rest of the Great Ones do. Daniel, you move through the forest without making a sound and you leave no trace that you were ever there. I’m willing to bet your sister can do the same.”

Daniel nodded.

“It’s the same idea, only we’re going to learn how to do it in the city. You two,” Kent said nodding at the twins, “blend into the peace and serenity. We’re going to blend into the noise.”

“How do we learn this?” Daniel asked.

“Sevrin. He’s old and very wise. He’ll teach us. He has a home not far from here and I think it’s large enough for all of us for the time being.”

“What about the government, Kent? They won’t leave here until they have what they want.”

“You know, that’s the funny thing about governments, Daniel. They’re just made up of people; people who have jobs. None of us likes to work when we’re sick. And I have a feeling that the curse of the Great Ones is about to make a lot of people hanging around here really sick of coming to work.”

I should go wake our guests," the tall, spry, greying and neatly goateed Sevrin smiled. "They'll be happy to know you're here!"

"You'll do no such thing," Dark countered. "They're guests, let them sleep."

"It feels like the old days again, when we ran the bed and breakfast. Remember that?"

Dark took a sip of his coffee, rolling his eyes. "Don't remind me."

"You loved it in the Alps and you know it, *mon ami!*" Sevrin way over-emphasized the accent. He made Dark smile.

"I did."

"The Cascades were the next best thing."

"They are," he nodded. "You could have chosen a place a bit closer to civilization."

"You always say that. I like my privacy."

"You're hardly a hermit, Sev."

"I just miss the Alps, that's all."

"She's very quiet," Dark observed, not taking his eyes off of the tablet he was surfing.

"Yes, she is," Sevrin agreed. "Not unlike her granddad." Sevrin looked over to see Cheyenne standing quietly next to the entrance of the grand open kitchen. Morning sunlight brought radiant light, and the smell of baking cinnamon rolls filled not only the kitchen but the rest of the massive A-frame home as well.

"Come in, Sweetheart," Sevrin called out with a smile to the longhaired, beautiful young lady. "We're all friends."

Cheyenne walked into the kitchen bravely. She passed by Dark and took a seat one chair away from where Dark was sitting.

"How about an iced cinnamon roll?" Sevrin asked.

Cheyenne just looked at him.

"Better get one while they're still warm, Miss Hawk," Dark offered with a handsome smile. "He makes the best rolls anywhere on Earth. Trust me."

Cheyenne nodded.

Sevrin lifted a large gooey roll from the pan and began slathering the top with icing.

"You are the Great Ones," she said finally, trying not to appear star-struck as she glanced from one to the another.

"Well, that's a matter of opinion," Sevrin grinned and set the roll down in front of her, along with a nice cloth napkin and well-polished utensils.

Dark slid the tablet aside. "Yes, Miss Hawk, we are the Great Ones, well, most of us anyway," he kidded, glancing wryly at Sevrin who took the dig in stride.

"I did not think the Great Ones actually existed. My grandfather told us about you."

"He was a good friend," Sevrin nodded.

"You knew him?"

"Knew him?" Sevrin chuckled, "Young lady, *I* was the one who hired him!"

"Hired?"

"There you go, Sev, ruining the mystique again."

"Mystique is for outsiders, Dark. She's practically family and deserves to know. Your roll's getting cold Sweetheart, you should eat it," he smiled at her.

Cheyenne took a bite and chewed slowly. The roll was beyond amazing.

"I actually met your Granddad when he was about your age actually, working at a lumber mill in *Squak Valley* ..."

"Are you awake?" Lisa asked.

"Yea," Kent breathed quietly.

"Surfing?"

"No. Just thinking."

"Really?"

Kent rolled his head over to look at her. Her hair was a wavy mess and she looked exceptionally cute. He couldn't help but smile at her.

"How did you sleep?" he asked, reaching out and caressing her beautiful face with his fingers.

"Not long enough. Somebody's baking cinnamon something downstairs."

"Probably Sevrin's version of a wakeup call."

"Your Sevrin's quite the character. He's not anything like what I expected."

"Yea, he is a little bubbly, isn't he?"

Lisa moved close to Kent and wrapped herself around him as he moved his arms and legs around her under the warm covers.

"Kent," she began, "what are we going to do—about us?" she asked.

"That's what I was just thinking about."

"It's going to be unavoidable, isn't it?" Lisa offered, looking straight into his piercing blues.

"What is?" Kent asked, not all that sure he liked where this was going.

"Making me like you."

"No. No, I wouldn't say that," Kent assured. He hoped he was telling the truth.

"Yes, it is. Kent," she began softly, "if I want to stay with you, I am going to have to embrace your world, no matter how frightened it makes me."

Lisa felt him sigh as he pulled her closer and buried his face into her fragrant hair.

She wasn't going to be distracted. Lisa pulled back and looked straight at him again. "Kent," she said firmly, "I'm not going to be married to a man I can't make love to. And you shouldn't have a wife that can't keep up with you."

Kent lifted himself up on one arm to look at her, concern written all over his face. "Lisa, you're scaring me. What are you saying?"

"It's like we're both afraid and angry at each other, I think."

"How?"

"I'm angry that you're surfing around in the continuum all day. How it steals you away from me. I'm like the ultimate computer widow. I resent it; maybe because I feel left out and, yet, I want to know all about it at the same time. You know things now I want to know, but the only way for me to know them is to embrace the very thing I hate. I know you try to hide it, Kent, but I know you're always connected. It's like it's your drug."

Kent nodded his agreement.

"And at the same time, I'm scared of what you've become. You're superhuman now; you rock all over me when we're in bed. I want to be like you, but, this curse, it scares me. I don't

know anything about it and who these people are that are going to be coming after you. And now you're afraid to even touch me because you don't want to push me into becoming what you are."

He nodded again, frowning. "But, Lisa, I'm not going to pull you into my world if that's not what you want. Married or not, I wouldn't do that to you."

"But, Kent," she paused, "we were born different; both of us. Like it or not, I'm already *in* your world."

Kent nodded.

She scrunched up the pillow beneath her. "The truth is, I think Daniel's right."

"What do you mean? About what?"

"I think I like living dangerously. My whole life, I've never taken the easy road. I put myself out there, and I took charge. At school, when other students were complaining about having to work a few hours a week, I was all but running our financial aid office. When my friends were getting cushy jobs at big companies, I took the one with the small risky startup. I model clothes that people in my church despise me for wearing. I want to think of myself as someone who wants to get along and just fit in; but, I think I'm discovering, that's not really who I am."

Kent looked at his wife with a worried look. "Lisa, are you saying you don't want to be with me anymore?"

"No," she reached out to touch him warmly, "I'm saying that I can't be afraid to be with you," she pulled herself close to him again.

Kent drew her close. "I'm still not sure I know what that means exactly?"

"It means—dangerous or not—I do still love you. I need you; and I think you need me."

"I *do* need you," he assured.

“Maybe—maybe it’s time I stopped running from this thing and embraced it. If I were like you, I’d have something more to contribute. I can’t be afraid of you or what you’ve become.”

“Lis’, you don’t have to be like me. You don’t. I love you so much just the way you are,” he breathed, kissing the side of her face and moving his lips down toward her very sensitive neck. “It doesn’t matter to me how you chose to be.”

Kent felt her smile inside. Her lips then found his. It was the first time Kent had allowed her to kiss him on the mouth in weeks. How very much she had missed the feel of his lips on hers. And now she could feel Kent’s hands warmly smoothing along her back and sides as she suddenly found herself in a sweet morning makeout session with him.

His skin touching hers, Lisa’s feelings were no mystery to Kent at the moment. She was pushing the two of them into much more than a morning make-out. He could feel her love for him but there was a new determination in her as well.

Still, he had his own reservations about her sudden change of heart. Did she really want this now? He’d missed her warmth, how she touched him. The way she kissed him, he couldn’t help but slip his hands down the back of her soft tank and then over her short panties that always just barely covered her ass.

“Lisa, Hon, we need to be careful. You’re going to turn me on kissing me like this,” he warned.

“So?” she toyed, brushing her lips against his in a way that made him take in a deeply emotional breath.

Kent wasn’t really sure why he was allowing her to push him further into this. He knew where it could easily lead. He was still a little unsure about why she now wanted to be awakened like he’d been.

“Lisa, you know what that does to me,” he complained through a softly rising kiss.

“Hmmm,” she purred against his lips, “So stop me—superman.”

Kent drew in a warm breath from her. Lisa’s lips were always magical to him in the morning for some reason. His pulse easily quickened as her body flexed warmly around his.

“You’re not going to stop this are you?” he said feeling her lips moving over his t-shirt along his pecs, and then to his nipple, pushing warm ripples through his body.

“Mmm mmm,” she countered.

“Lisa,” he breathed feeling the tingles of sensation she sent into him, “are you sure you want to do this?”

Lisa drew back and gazed into his deep blue eyes. A strange new excitement began to infuse her senses. Somehow she knew her choice had already been made; possibly before she’d ever met Kent.

Lisa smiled, her eyes sparkling as she leaned forward. Gently, she found his lips again with hers while Kent’s fingers found the tips of her breasts and teased her gently into firmness through her soft tank.

Kent felt her hand on his own chest as her fingers now kneaded one of his nipples through the very light material of the colored t-shirt he was wearing.

“You know that’s not exactly helping me stop,” he grinned, kissing her while basking in the fine sensations she teased gently through his body.

“Do you want me to stop?” she kissed.

“Not if you keep doing that,” he assured whispering next to her soft pout.

Both of Kent’s hands moved under her tank, slipping it off of a now very focused and amorously breathing Lisa. She slipped his shirt away and dropped it somewhere under the covers. Both now locked themselves around each other in one of their more well-heated morning makeout sessions.

The weeks they had been apart had not dampened the warmth or emotion they shared between them. Kent could tell she was deliberately pulling out all the stops; pushing every physical and emotional button he had. He still wasn't sure about her apparent decision to become one of them.

He took hold of her hands with his own. "Lisa, really, you don't have to. You can't undo this."

"Kent," she began, failing to free herself from his powerful but gentle grip, "don't try to stop me. I've made my decision. It's my destiny too. Besides, I'm not going to give you a choice."

The sensation of seeing Lisa struggle against his grasp was in itself powerfully alluring. While her lips distracted him in a passionate kiss, Kent slowly released her hands as they locked themselves around each other in a softly passionate embrace.

Lisa's hand moved softly over the warm and very bulging cotton of his short trunks.

"Oh, you—you are just not playing fair here," he complained.

He felt her hand slip softly inside them as she began lightly teasing the full length of him with her fingernails. It was Kent's catnip. She could get his heart racing and even make him beg for her when she touched him like this.

After long minutes of Kent attempting to resist her talented fingers, his heart was quickly pounding. A now intensely passionate and deeply gasping Kent offered her his final warning. "Lisa—" he breathed hotly against her soft lips while feeling her tormenting fingernails moving over his rock hard skin. "Lisa, honestly, I am so going to fuck you if you don't stop that."

Lisa grinned wryly against his lips. She liked it when Kent's pillow talk got rough. It made her want him even more. She pushed his briefs away, continuing her intimate assault.

But Kent wasn't the only one on fire. Teasing him like this always brought with it a sweet punishment of its own as Kent's hands moved softly all over her body while she teased him. She was practically panting herself now.

Kent was though with foreplay. He could feel Lisa's emotion, sense her tension; the scent of her aroused body was beyond overwhelming to him. Lisa's panties came off in several pieces as he deftly snapped the material like paper and dropped them away from her skin. Kent rolled her beneath himself under the covers as they kissed skin-to-skin. Lisa had more than succeeded in redlining Kent's RPM's.

"Oh, you are so fucking hot, Lisa!" he breathed emotionally, kissing her passionately under the intense assault of her flexing body and enthralling fingernails. "I should be fucking you every day, as hot as you are!"

Kent couldn't restrain his emotions any longer. Locked in a intense kiss with Lisa's legs wrapped around his, Kent sank himself deeply and fully into Lisa. Both drew long breaths as each felt the intense intimate connection. The two of them moved now as one beneath the covers. Kent drew himself up onto his forearms to watch her as the sensations of their love played warmly across her face. Kent loved watching her body rock beneath him while he pleased her slowly, deliberately.

Lisa watched him, watched his face move as she sent ripples of excitement pulsing through his body.

"Ohh, Lis'," Kent breathed, looking deeply into her with his feelings as he moved intimately within her. "You know how dangerous this is," he warned. "I'm not wearing anything to protect you."

"All you need is me," Lisa said sweetly, kissing him softly. She look into his eyes. "You're wearing me."

"I love you, Lisa," he whispered looking into the eyes of his beautiful wife.

“Oh, Kent,” she held him as the covers cascaded off of the two of them. “I love you, too,” she gasped, slowly moving herself over him.

It was like this was their first real moment of brutally honest intimacy; nothing held back and nothing covered up. It was new, yet as old as time itself. The emotion of the moment briefly left her feeling overwhelmed with love, and helpless to her own rising passion.

Responding to the raw emotion he saw in her eyes and felt deep within her body, Kent soon had Lisa breathing in deep and regular gasps. Sensing her emotions, what she felt and what she needed, his powerful body quickly pushed her deeply over the edge. He contained her intense cries of ecstasy with his open mouth, feeling her chest rising and falling heavily against his own.

Although her intention had been to excite Kent, he’d more quickly done the same to her. His talents in bringing her to the edge of pure ecstasy and then gently pushing her quickly over it were beyond skilled. It had been some time since Kent had rocked her body like this. She’d almost forgotten what an incredible lover he could be.

Lisa lay beneath him in a deep glow, still breathing heavily. “You didn’t come with me?”

“I’m really trying not to,” he revealed, his breathing seemingly controlled and measured. Lisa could tell he was somewhere very close to his own edge. Obviously he still wasn’t sure about the decision she had made. But he couldn’t be afraid of her destiny; she wouldn’t allow him to avoid it any longer. It was her choice to make. She took it out of his hands. Lisa softly flexed her body around his manhood, pulling him closer to his edge.

“Lisa! Oh—Lisa! Stop! What are you doing!” Kent breathed deeply, emotionally, looking at her.

"We already discussed this," she informed him with a warm, sweet kiss. "I was meant to be like you. For now and forever." Lisa brought his lips to hers and kissed him warmly while moving her body hotly over his.

"Lisa!" his breathing rippled through their kiss. "You've got to stop! Ah—" he gasped, trying one last time to fight the intense emotion that all but consumed him. "Oh god, Lisa! I'm going to—" Kent tried to withdraw himself from her; but it was too late. His body's ecstatic reflex instead drove him deeply, fully into her as his denied passion finally erupted, spilling like a tidal wave of desire into her. "Lisa—!" he breathed as quietly as he could as new wave after new wave of ecstatic tension released into her from within him.

"Lisa! Oh, god, Lisa! Look at me!" he held her face so she could see his and the worry that was written all over it. "What did you do!?" he breathed heavily. "Why!?"

"It was only—Ahhhhh! ..." she gasped, flexing and arching her back as something warm and deeply incredible ripped through her, delivering an unexpected ecstatic sensation so intense she couldn't breathe for a moment. A victorious look washed across her face. "It was only—ahh—only a matter of time, Hon. It was time."

"Are you okay? What was that!?"

She shook her head. "I don't know," she breathed recovering but still feeling the intense sensations ricocheting all over her body. "I guess it's you, inside me now." Her breathing quieted a little.

Kent watched his wife's face, as her breathing seemed to slow. He tried to withdraw from her.

"No. Please. Kent," she pleaded, "don't leave me. Stay with me, please."

Her moving words gripped Kent's heart. He held her closely, wrapped his body around her, pressed himself fully into her while giving her a light kiss.

"How do you feel?" he asked, concern still written all over his face.

"Warm," she began speaking more slowly, "like something incredibly warm is moving through me. Oh—Kent! It's—it's so wonderful."

"Lisa!" Kent was suddenly astonished. "Your eyes. They're changing color!" he said softly, watching as her irises faded into different shades and finally settled into a piercing sky-blue hue.

"Kent," she began softly, her breathing finally relaxing, "everything—everything," she looked around the room and then back at Kent. "Is this how you see me?" she marveled softly.

Kent nodded.

"You're amazing!" she said quietly reaching up weakly and touching his face. "I had no idea. Everything looks so—beautiful!"

Kent smiled and took her hand in his. He felt her breathing slow even further. It wouldn't be long now.

Lisa's eyelids drifted down. "Oh, my goodness, why am I so tired?"

"It's okay," he whispered. "You'll sleep now. It's what happens."

"Will I wake up?" she asked. He could tell she was fighting the sleep. But it wouldn't matter. Her strength had already left her.

"You will. Just like I did." He held her hand against his face since she now lacked the strength to keep it there herself.

"Don't leave me, Kent," she breathed so softly only his ears could have heard it. His beautiful Lisa closed her eyes and drifted ever so quietly into sleep. He touched his forehead to hers, half smiling and half sad. His tears finally fell from his own cheeks onto hers.

“I love you, Lisa,” he cried softly. “Don’t you dare leave me. Please ...”

When Kent finally made it downstairs, he found everyone in mirthful spirits as they chatted in the kitchen and dug into a large pan of supersized cinnamon rolls. Even Cheyenne was smiling and laughing next to Daniel. Kent was rather surprised to see Dark sitting at the counter.

Kent walked past Sevrin, bumping fists with him on the way past to the coffee pot.

“When did you get in, Admiral?” Kent asked.

“This morning. And it’s just ‘Dark’ now, Kent. You’re not under my command.”

“Sorry. Habit.” Kent finished pouring. He still wasn’t all that happy about seeing Dark. Every time the man showed up it meant some kind of trouble was brewing and Dark was there to somehow fix it. Kent leaned against the lower part of the

large central island stone counter eyeing the rolls and trying to decide if he wanted one or not.

“So when will Lisa be down?” Sevrin asked.

Kent looked down and then up at everyone. “She’s—she’s not going to be down for a while.”

Dark suddenly looked up with a raised and eyebrow, “Define ‘while.’”

“It’s going to be a few days.

“Days?” Daniel looked at Kent. Dark and Sevrin looked at each other. Dark stepped down off of his chair and picked up his tablet and mug. “I guess they don’t call it the ‘wedding cottage’ for nothing. Excuse me. I apparently now have some time to waste.”

They watched Dark stalk out of the kitchen and take a seat out in the great room next to the empty fireplace.

“What’s up with him?” Kent asked looking at Sevrin.

“Ignore him. He’s just grumpy because he lost the bet.”

“What bet?”

“That you would join Lisa with the rest of the family, of course!”

“Oh, of course,” Kent frowned sarcastically. “You actually make bets on something so personal?”

“Kent, honestly, when you’ve been part of the family for as long as we have, awakenings become, well, typical. I get a lot of mixed company staying here at the house. Some family, some not. It happens, a little more often than it probably should, that family and non-family sort of get together here, if you get my drift. The guests end up staying for a few weeks while they’re awakening.”

“It’s practically a brothel!” Dark called out grumpily from the front room.

Cheyenne started giggling as Daniel smirked.

“Some in the family have nicknamed my home the ‘wedding cottage’.”

Kent nodded his understanding now, fighting back a snicker, a bit bemused by Dark's labeling of Sevrin's home. "So Lisa's not your first 'extended stay' guest then?"

"Oh, heavens, no. And I did put you in the 'wedding suite' on purpose," Sevrin admitted, smiling.

"'Wedding suite', huh?" Kent mocked.

"It works every time!" Sevrin assured.

"Sevrin," Cheyenne asked softly, "Lisa is sleeping? For days?"

"She is, dear. The Great Ones can awaken others, but it doesn't happen immediately. An awakening can take many weeks." Sevrin looked up at Kent, "Or in your case, days, evidently."

"It's just like what Grandfather said. I never believed his stories, but he always told them so well."

"I loved listening to Hawk tell his stories as well, Cheyenne. No one told stories like your Granddad, that's for sure," Sevrin nodded.

"Sevrin," Daniel began, "are the Great Ones really cursed, as they say?"

"War is a curse, Daniel," Sevrin offered. "As long you have something someone else wants, there will always be the danger of war. Our knowledge is our curse. It is what protects us, but it is also what puts us in peril."

* * * * *

Kent ran his fingers through her hair. She was barely breathing. He wondered if she was dreaming and if so what she might be dreaming about.

'Mind if I come in?' Dark thought to Kent over the continuum as he made his way down the upstairs hall.

'Sure, it's open,' Kent thought his reply.

Dark stepped inside and closed the door.

"She's really beautiful, your wife. You scored well, Kent," he complimented. "Not bad for a Seattle nerd."

Kent looked up at Dark and then stood up from the bed. "I'm sure you didn't come all the way up here just to insult me."

"No. Actually, I didn't come up here to insult you at all. I came up here to apologize."

"For what?"

"Your awakening."

Kent nodded.

"It was kind of a command decision, Kent. I don't make those lightly. It was either let you die in that chopper or make you one of us. I followed my instincts and broke protocol to keep you alive."

"I don't know that I need an apology, Dark. Sometimes we're victims of circumstances. No apology needed. I'm grateful to be alive."

"Well, I know you were pretty angry about it earlier. Truth is, you kind of took some of us by surprise, Kent. We didn't exactly know what to do with you. Your awakening wasn't exactly—typical. I think you know that now."

Kent again nodded.

"I just wanted to make sure you weren't still angry. I have enough to worry about without having a god upset with me as well. Especially if he's really a newblood."

"You don't believe the prophecies," Kent sensed.

"I don't know what to believe at this point, Kent. Some of us have been following the prophecies for millennia. Sometimes they seem to be accurate; other times," he shrugged, "not so much. They've often been dead wrong."

"I am what I am, Dark."

"So it would seem, Kent. I can't argue with your biology. The Sentinels have given you the keys to limitless power. You've been given an awesome responsibility, Kent. *That,*"

Dark gestured at his ring, "is why you don't take orders from me anymore."

Kent nodded.

"I think you'll rather like being a god; it kind of grows on you."

"It does," Kent assured, still nodding.

"The truth is, Kent, the family could use a few more nerds," Dark smiled.

"Yes, yes we could," Kent agreed with a half smile.

"I'm calling a meeting down in the great room just before lunch. I sent Daniel and Cheyenne into town with Sevrin to pick up some of their things. Admiral Duke and Perry should be arriving any time."

"The Admiral? And Perry? Here!?"

Dark nodded. "We rescued them and hundreds of others after the Administration locked them up and were beating the hell out of them. They work for us now."

"Wow. I didn't know. Are they—part of the family?"

"Perry has been for a long time. The Admiral is just an ally who has been pulling strings in the Navy for us. He knows nothing about the family. Just like your folks were with the Steele's."

Kent nodded again.

"So, listen, Kent, since this is your first meeting with other family members, just keep in mind that not everyone in the family gets to wear one of those," Dark nodded at Kent's hand, gesturing to the deep-gold colored band on his finger again. Kent had already well noticed the same gold-toned key Dark had been wearing.

"The gods were smiling on you the day that appeared on your hand. Don't disappoint us."

Dark left quietly, closing the door behind him.

* * * * *

Standing on the log home's massive dock-like deck, Dark and Kent watched a single white Range Rover pull up into the river rock stone driveway. Perry and the Admiral got out and looked around at the beauty of the majestic, high-lake forest setting. Tall pines surrounded them on all sides, half-ringed in by majestic ridge peaks with a pristine glacier-like lake nestled into something that resembled a kind of natural mountain crater. The Admiral and Perry made their way onto the rustic open deck toward Kent and Dark.

"Well I'll be damned," the Admiral said looking at Kent as they approached. "Serval, I have to be honest. I never thought I would see you again, son! I'm so glad I was wrong," they shook hands vigorously.

"After hearing what happened to you, Admiral, I was thinking pretty much the same about you, and you too, Perry."

"Good to see you again, Mr. Levi," Perry smiled. Both men shook hands with an exceptionally tight grip that would have crushed the hands of anyone not superhuman.

"Dark, you're looking pretty good for a spy who is supposed to be dead," the Admiral joked, gripping his shoulder.

"Nice to see you as well, Duke."

"We owe you an eternal debt of gratitude, son. That was a mighty fine operation your people pulled off."

"All in a day's work, Duke," Dark smiled.

"How is Lisa, Mr. Levi," Perry asked.

"She's fine, Perry. We're doing very well. She's spending some time away, but I expect she'll be back with us in four or five weeks or so."

Kent watched Perry blush slightly and grin. "Excellent to hear, Mr. Levi."

The small group informally sat or stood in the great room of the home. Kent kept quiet while the others discussed the latest developments within the Administration.

“As you might have been able to tell from all of the arrests of military personnel, the White House has done a pretty good job in attempting to spin this hearing shooting every which way from Sunday to make themselves look like the victims here instead of the perpetrators,” the Admiral informed.

“However, a lot of people within the Armed Forces, the Congress and the media are still not real happy with the President’s purge. We’ve got lawsuits piled a mile high now with the JAG and the DOJ. It’s continuing to cause a lot of people in the media to keep asking questions; especially about how an assassin got into a hearing room that was controlled by DHS Secret Service.”

“Aren’t they just blaming that on the military now, Admiral?” Kent asked.

“Oh, they are. But it’s one thing to report on a shooting from a safe distance or after the fact; it’s quite another to actually have been in the same room and experienced the danger first hand. The Congress and media people were pretty shook-up over this, Kent. Not to mention that the EMP destroyed millions of dollars in broadcasting equipment from all of the satellite vans parked just outside. Those reporters lost their personal devices and data as well. They’re not just curious or unhappy; they’re flat-out pissed. They want someone to blame and will do anything to find that someone. While the Administration tries to paint itself as just another one of the victims here, a lot of journalists are beginning to locate a few brain cells. They smell something fishy; and they’re on the hunt. It’s why this story is still pretty hot in the mainstream media despite the Administration’s efforts to kill it.”

“You mean the President is no longer the media darling he once was?” Kent scoffed.

"I wouldn't exactly say that, Serval. The Administration continues to hold significant sway within certain elements of the media. But these journalists cannot help who they are. They're still sharks when it comes to a good story. And they smell blood. They want it. Even if they have to bring down their much-adored president to get it."

"Do we even have a chance of holding another hearing?" Kent asked. "With better security this time?"

"They've done a pretty good job of trying to spoil the Hydra evidence," Perry admitted. "The Administration has leaked several versions of stories into the tabloids about their campaign funding scheme. Everything from how the Trilateral Commission, even the Illuminati, backed the funding of the last campaign. They even went to the trouble of manufacturing some bogus evidence, but it was easily refuted as just a collection of previously stolen credit card numbers. They've made the whole notion of foreign money being funneled into the campaign look ridiculous."

"Perry's right," the Admiral agreed. "The only one's seriously talking about this now are the kook bloggers and conspiracy theorists."

"Interesting," Kent mused. "It almost sounds to me like they don't really know the extent of the data we have then."

"*Have, Kent?*" Dark looked at him. "Your flash drive was destroyed by the EMP."

Kent grinned. "Yea, well, I am an IT guy. Do you really think I'm *that* stupid not to have a backup of something like this?"

They all but cheered at the sound of Kent's words. "That's my boy!" the Admiral offered with a relieved smile.

Even Dark was grinning approvingly as he stood up and addressed the Admiral and Perry.

"This puts us well back into the game then, Kent. We'll need to retrieve that backup data. How accessible is it?" Dark questioned.

"Very, if you know where to look."

"We're listening," Dark said.

"Oh, well," Kent stood up, "Chuck had given me a physical copy so I figured it would be a good idea to have an online backup as well. So, before I went to DC and got stuffed into WITSEC I made an online backup. But I didn't trust just uploading it some backup service somewhere where they could probably find it and delete it. I needed some really serious persistence."

Kent could see Perry and Dark were nodding.

"I wrote a script that segmented the files into a couple dozen autonomous encrypted archives and then I embedded those archives into some of the more popular movie files on P2P."

"Nice," Dark continued nodding. "Very clever."

"Yes, well this is apparently good news for the computer geniuses in the room," The Admiral began, "but for the rest of us, can we get this in English, please?"

"Sure, Admiral," Kent continued. "P2P stands for 'peer-to-peer'. It's a file-sharing network of autonomous nodes. Meaning, that none of the nodes are actually 'aware' of where other nodes are in the network. A node is actually someone's private personal computer somewhere on the planet. Nodes are able to contact each other over the internet using the P2P protocol. When someone searches for and downloads a file onto their computer, they automatically become a new node in the network. The files then get replicated thousands and even millions of times all over the world. And because the file sharing protocol is totally decentralized, there's no way to track who has what file or even where it is. Even if you do manage to physically find a node with the file or files your

looking for, there are still thousands of nodes with a copy of that same file. All we have to do is search for the movie files I created and we can download and then piece the data back together."

"Interesting," the Admiral seemed to mostly understand. "But, Serval, it's been two years since this whole thing started. In my experience, the internet can be a pretty fickle thing. What if those videos no longer exist or have been deleted by whomever? What do we do then?" the Admiral asked.

Kent smiled, "Yea, well trust me, Admiral, the movie files I chose won't be going out of popularity anytime soon."

"Let me guess, you attached the data to porn videos?" Dark asked.

"No," Kent shook his head. "I needed something with a lot more persistence. Disney."

Kent watched the nods and smiles and even chuckles of the others around the room.

"Okay, Kent," Dark began, a tiny grin creeping onto his usual poker face, "once again, it looks like you're the star of the show here. We'll need you to go after that data and rebuild the files. Let all of us know once you have the files assembled."

Kent nodded his understanding.

"In the meantime," Admiral Duke began, "my team will be formulating some way of getting this back onto the front page and back into the public eye. We all know it's not going to ever be admissible as evidence in any kind of court setting. We've got to put it out there in a way that the public can see it; and then make up their minds about how they want to view it."

"Duke, is that really going to make any difference at this point?" Dark asked. "The administration will just continue to spin this as more manufactured evidence. We'll be right back where we started."

"You may be right, Dark," the Admiral admitted. "But I'm not going to stop fighting just because someone shoots and

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wings me. If I've learned one thing over the past month, it is that we have some really smart people working to remove this devil from office. No one is invulnerable. We'll find something. Believe me, you don't build the kind of bad karma this joker is building and get off scot-free. That's for damn sure."

In the days that followed their meeting, Kent retrieved and reconstructed the data from dozens of movie files stored on hundreds of thousands of hard drives all over the world. The fully reconstructed archive now sat safely tucked away within the continuum.

Perry looked around the large expanse of the home with its four massive pillars and very open floor plan. He walked to the window and looked out at the devastated landscape, now just a sprouting bed of forest weeds taking advantage of the rich bare soil several feet below.

“It’s a shame,” he shook his head.

“I know,” Kent agreed.

Perry turned and surveyed the interior of the home, its jumbled furniture that had been moved to reveal the control designs that were spread across most of the surfaces of the tower’s main control room.

“This has all been very interesting, Mr. Levi.”

“What has?” Kent placed his hand on one of the pillars. The column’s invisible interfaces glowed visibly to life now as Kent played the symbols. The stone spiral stairs suddenly began turning, opening a passage to the other levels deep below.

“Your spending all that time here in the tower, never knowing really what its true nature and purpose was.” Perry went to the spiral stairs and then walked beside Kent to the lower level and then down to the next level below. The lights glowed to life as they descended into the next chamber where no one had been for nearly two thousand years.

“I think that’s pretty much a constant for most of life, Perry. We go through life thinking that it’s one thing, but never realizing that its true purpose lies far beyond but what we use it for.”

Perry nodded.

The third floor down was doubly taller than the ones above it as they descended the stairs to the landing. They could see out of the glass walls at about ground level now. Except for the four pillars, the stairs and the two of them, the floor was empty and dust-free. Both men walked to the wall and looked out across the field of dirt.

“It’s so intriguing,” Perry marveled. “From one side, you just see nothing but a black wall. From the other, it’s your window to the world. It’s like the whole of humanity lives in darkness. And we’re the only ones who can see the light.”

“It does seem that way, doesn’t it,” Kent agreed.

“Still,” Perry continued, “it feels like a lot of people don’t want to see the light. It’s like the light is their enemy. They just rather keep living in the dark, because it’s all they know.”

Kent nodded at Perry’s thoughts.

“So what’s his story?” Kent began. Although he appeared to be merely looking at the dirt landscape, an idea was forming in Kent’s mind.

"I was wondering when you were going to get around to that question," Perry grinned slightly. "I assume you're talking about Admiral Dark?"

Kent nodded.

"That's a long story, Mr. Levi; even then I'm not sure I know most of it."

"He's just a little hard to peg, that's all."

Perry looked at Kent. "I don't know that I would try to 'peg' Admiral Dark, Mr. Levi. He's very much a maverick."

"How old is he?"

"Older; between two and three hundred I think. Maybe a little older."

Kent nodded again.

"You don't like him, Mr. Levi. I think that feeling is mutual between the two of you for some reason."

"Yea, you're probably right about that, Perry. We got off to a pretty bad start. Truth be told, I think it was my fault, my reaction to being awakened under the circumstances. I should be thankful." Kent looked at Perry.

"Better than being dead, sir."

"Yes, Perry, it is." Kent grinned.

The two of them continued to walk down into the heart of the tower on the spiral stairs that were no longer made of stone, but had become wide dark glass planks suspended by nothing. The stairs simply appeared into place as they descended. The stone façade of the pillars was gone, revealing the clear cylindrical power cores that now extended deeply into the wide shaft below. Only the faintest hint of a gentle white glow was coming from the matrix of long circuit-like tubing that ran mostly vertically but also circularly within them. A soothing calm began to wash over Kent as he descended the stairs. Something about being here quieted his spirit and focused his thoughts.

"So why doesn't he like me?" Kent mused, looking at Perry as they descended the stairs to the next landing some hundred feet below them.

"Mr. Levi, I probably shouldn't be saying anything that might cause a rift between you and other family members, but I guess you'll learn it sooner or later. The children of the gods are not happy with their parents at the moment."

"I sort of got that impression," Kent agreed. "The gods seem to be a bit too *laissez-faire* in dealing with their adversaries."

"It's not just the Steele's, Mr. Levi, it's been most of them for past several generations. They act like the war is over, but it's clearly a cold war, and it's been heating up."

"So the employees don't like the decisions the executive management is making," Kent offered.

"That's one way of looking at it, Mr. Levi. Another is that the people don't like the direction their government is taking them. They're leading them into destruction."

Kent nodded his understanding. "Then I take it, I wasn't a welcomed appointment to my position?"

"I wouldn't say that, Mr. Levi. The gods chose you. They're very intelligent. Who are we to argue?"

"Still, Perry, Dark clearly doesn't like me being where I am. I'm sure he probably sees me as just another mistake in a long line of decisions he disagrees with."

"It's not personal, Mr. Levi. Admiral Dark is a soldier; a warrior if you will. He expects discipline, knowledge, experience. You're very new to the family. You are a big question mark in his mind, I think. And you have been greatly blessed. I think he feels you are not deserving of such a high blessing, even if you are a reborn like they prophecies say."

"Really?"

"Mr. Levi," Perry paused on the stairs, a serious look crossing his face, "do you understand where you are? Look

around you. You can summon the power of the stars at a moment's notice. The gods clearly chose you for something. They placed you here for a reason. And Miss Kyle, that was hardly an accident."

"I don't think they planned on me getting shot, Perry."

"No, probably not. But I'm sure they planned on you becoming awakened at some point. Your tribe has always been favored by the gods, Mr. Levi. I'm sure you've read the Books by now."

Kent nodded. "You want to know if I'm part of the prophecy?"

"With all due respect, Mr. Levi, you do have all of us wondering."

"Myself included, Perry," Kent assured.

"What if the prophecy is true?" Perry continued.

Kent looked at him. "You're afraid that it is."

Perry nodded. "Very. It means all out war all over again, Mr. Levi. I don't know that any of the demigods will survive."

Kent nodded. "I'm sorry, Perry. It must be frustrating."

Perry chuckled. "The gods have *always* been frustrating, Mr. Levi. That is certainly nothing new."

"I'll try not to disappoint anyone."

"You haven't so far, Mr. Levi. That's for sure," Perry assured him, as they continued down the grand stairway toward the warm, white glow deep below.

40

AND THE SEVEN DARK LORDS
SUMMONED THEIR ARMIES TO MAKE WAR AGAINST THE
FIRSTBORN OF LEVI

—THE BOOKS OF GOD

Lisa stirred softly and smoothly stretched under the satiny cotton sheets. She always liked the feel of their bed when she awoke in the mornings, especially when the bedding smelled freshly washed. She liked waking while listening to the subtle sound of the rushing water outside.

“Huh?” she sat up quickly, now wide-awake. It was obviously late morning and sunlight was streaming into the front room of the mountain home.

The colors! “Oh, my god,” Lisa whispered to herself looking around the room. The detail her eyes picked up around the room! It was amazingly beautiful! Exceptionally vivid and

stunning color astonished and filled her sight! But it wasn't just her eyes, the sound of rushing water also filled her ears from outside the walls of the tower. But—the government had destroyed the stream. Where was the sound coming from?

The soft sheets felt amazing to the newly sensitive feeling of her skin. Lisa slipped her naked and newly awakened body out of bed. She briefly stretched while looking around a bedroom that she immediately recognized had been completely redecorated! A new set of classically carved dark cherry armoires had replaced the old closet space. Even the open bathroom had been updated with new stone tile and more current fixtures. But what really caught her attention was the wall of windows at the front of the house.

Lisa ignored her nakedness for the time being and walked out of the bedroom. She paused for only a moment to brush her hand over the smooth designs and words she could now see on the pillar.

"So this is what you were seeing," she whispered quietly to herself, amazed at the details and intricacies of the glyphs and controls she could now easily see. She couldn't read what they said, but the letters and patterns were beautifully designed.

Lisa made her way out into the living room. The tall potted palms and trees and bamboo were back in the center of the house. An new ornately beautiful area rug rested beneath the grand piano; the piano's lid propped fully open. The surrounding furniture was also new, less modern and a bit more plush and classic. It looked incredibly and professionally well decorated.

Lisa moved to the front of house and looked out of the tall glass windows. "I must be dreaming," the words dropped softly from her lips. An new extended stone deck with several comfortable chairs were sitting outside. Beyond the deck were trees and rocks and lush greenery. The most remarkable thing

of all was the stream that was now flowing again, back where it had been months ago. The rocks and trees were a bit different than what they had been, but the lush sylvan setting had been completely restored! Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to repair what the government had completely devastated.

“Kent,” Lisa spoke softly to herself, “you did not,” she smiled, leaning elegantly against the glass. Although the stream and forestscape looked a bit new, it would surely not be long before all of it would be just as beautiful and peaceful as it was when she first discovered the home those many months ago. Her husband had made a truly wonderful effort in bringing the ambiance of their mountain home back to life.

But there was more to just the new beautiful landscape that Lisa could see and hear with her eyes; she also *felt* things in ways she never had before. She could feel the smoothness of the glass in front of her, even though she wasn’t really touching it. And beyond the terrace and stream outside she was acutely aware of other things, animals moving through the new undergrowth and high up within the newly transplanted trees. The sensations were astonishing, feeling the tiny minds of each of these creatures. She shook her head in wonder and offered a prayer to God for whatever she had become. She wasn’t sure how becoming one of these Great Ones was going to settle with her church, but she’d have plenty of time to think about that later.

Lisa turned and looked at the rest of the home. The kitchen had also been updated to a more classic looking design, now with a full dining room next to it where the study had once been. The study had been moved toward the front of the house to make room for the new floor plan. Lisa decided she liked what had been done, although, it was a bit masculine. She figured a few of her own touches would make the space a bit more home-like.

Kent was obviously out somewhere else. She hoped he was okay. Lisa showered in the newly updated bathroom, thoroughly appreciating that their shower was now large enough for two. Dual rain heads came down from the ceiling, and multiple shower heads came out from the wall as well. The new experience was completely invigorating. Still, she rather liked the cozy shower where the two of them had spent many a morning together. Eventually exiting the new luxurious bathroom, Lisa wrapped her wet hair in a velvety towel and went in search of something to wear.

She found what was obviously Kent's armoire first. It was nicely stocked with fresh new clothes. She then opened hers to find some hanging jeans, tops, and very nice dresses. Lisa thoughtfully selected a slim pair of light-colored skinny jeans, and grabbed a pretty magenta top to put on. Excitedly, she continued exploring the contents of the armoire.

It was like Christmas morning. Humming a happy tune, Lisa found a dozen or so large to smaller shopping bags, wrapped gifts, and gift bags. In the bottom of the armoire she uncovered a couple of Old Gringo boot boxes that contained some beautiful boots in just her size. Lisa's eyes began to mist as she considered the thoughtfulness that her sweet husband had shown in not only remembering her favorite brand of boots, but gifting her with more of them as well.

Lisa decided that continuing to explore and discover the treasures of the armoire required dried hair and breakfast first. She blew her hair dry and flat-ironed it until it was glossy smooth.

Kent was obviously keeping the new kitchen well stocked. She found some nice ripe bananas and some Greek yogurt in the refrigerator that made a fast, easy breakfast.

After breakfast, Lisa wasted no time returning to explore her new wardrobe; pulling bags and packages and containers and boxes from the large wardrobe. She opened the two

Victoria's Secret bags first to find some pretty underthings to wear before venturing further into some of the others. Kent had done a really good job of finding out what she really liked. Bras and panties and other essentials were in the larger bag. They were in great colors and looked very comfortable. Best of all, they were exactly the right size. The smaller bag, on the other hand, had some fantasy things she knew Kent had probably picked out because he wanted to see her in them. Lisa giggled a bit as she sorted through the bits and pieces of sexy lingerie.

She opened another heavier bag and lifted out some of its contents. "Well now! What were you planning we do with these!" she chuckled to herself as if Kent were there in the room with her. The leather, spike studs and steel chain adorning the his and hers outfits left her raising an eyebrow as she put them back into a bag.

Finishing her exploration, Lisa figured it was time to actually get dressed, and slipped on some white lace stretch panties that hugged her like a glove. The matching lace bra felt nice against her skin as well. There were a few other naughty little numbers in the bag as well that she carefully un-tagged and put away in what had now become her lingerie drawer.

Kent's taste in clothes for her seemed to be an eclectic mix of things she really liked and a few things she placed nicely back into the bag to exchange for something else later. When Lisa had finally dressed she was still wearing the nice lace stretch panties under some well-fitting boot-cut black stretch denim and a softly comfy ribbed magenta top with crocheted openings in the long sleeves. The fabulous taupe and magenta *Old Gringos* fit her slender feet perfectly! She admired the clothes in the full-length mirror; feeling very pleased with most of Kent's selections.

The smallest bag she had found was from a jewelry store. There were some nice gold earrings in a box, a pair of diamond

studs in a still nicer box, and an obsidian glass box that looked like the windows of their home. She could see that the symbol on the top of the box was only visible to someone with her eyes. Lisa lifted the box from the bag. A seam appeared for her to open the box when she touched it and then disappeared when she wasn't.

"Kent Levi, you did not," she whispered again under her breath. She was pretty sure she already knew what was in this box. She opened it to reveal a shining band of gold with a gleaming crystalline inlay that matched Kent's own gold-hued ring. Lisa stared at the band for long moments, wondering if she should even touch it. Caution won out and she closed the box, setting it with the other pieces of jewelry on a shelf in the wardrobe.

* * * * *

Perry and Adam had already been seated in the factory-sized pasta restaurant when Kent entered the spacious dining room with its eclectic, whimsical decor. People were mulling everywhere and he could hear them talking business, family, politics and bad relationships. Making his way through the busy lunch crowd, it didn't take him long to spot the two of them at their table.

Sevrin had introduced Kent to Adam over the continuum and the two had been talking deep tech for months now. It wasn't until his tour of the tower with Perry that Kent had discovered that Perry and Adam were actually a couple.

Both Perry and Adam stood up as Kent approached.

"Mr. Levi," Perry smiled, "you know my partner, Adam."

Kent shook Adam's hand super-firmly, "Hey, Adam," Kent began smiling. "Awesome to finally meet you in person."

The very handsome Adam return the smile. "Nice to meet you in person as well, Mr. Levi. I've never actually met one of the gods before."

"Alright, both of you, please, it's just 'Kent'," he assured.

They all sat at the small square table.

"It's been ages since I've been here," Kent looked around at the massive and very busy restaurant.

"I think we come here at least once a month," Perry looked at Adam nodding.

"The pasta with mizithra is the only reason Perry gets me anywhere near this place," Adam assured.

Kent had already been well doused with Adam's culinary critiques of seemingly every restaurant in America, Canada and Mexico. Outside of tech, food was definitely Adam's thing and he usually had a detailed opinion about what was great and what wasn't and why. They made a great looking couple but their personalities were very different. Kent looked at the two of them.

"Something wrong, Mr. Levi?" Perry asked.

"No, it's just that you guys are like exact opposites."

Both of them were nodding. "We get that a lot, Mr. Levi," Perry agreed.

"We have quite a lot of things in common, though," Adam assured. "Like design; food; fine automobiles."

"Cars? Perry, you didn't tell me you were into cars."

"I like *old* cars, Mr. Levi," Perry noted.

"Oh, that's right," Kent began, "you're sort of the old man here."

Kent looked at the twenty-something-looking Perry. "So what are you now, Perry? Eighty, ninety?" Kent smirked.

"Something like that, Mr. Levi," Perry frowned a grin.

Their waiter approached and smiled at the handsome threesome. "Well, aren't I the lucky one today," he grinned,

fully appreciating the very good-looking man buffet spread out before him.

The waiter's voice seemed to trail off into the distance as Kent's feelings and senses unexpectedly kicked into deep overdrive; a massive wave of trepidation suddenly filled his every nerve. The entire room seemed to slow in motion as superhuman adrenaline shot quickly through his bloodstream. There were men and a few women all over the dining room getting up to face them. Suddenly Kent saw weapons; large weapons; automatic weapons.

Somewhere a woman screamed seeing the wholly custom, Desert Eagle-size magnum semi-auto weapons in each of the well-dressed man's hands. Two very loud pops broke into the pleasant murmur of the large, crowded dining room; and then another loud pop, and another and another as the weapons fired, ejecting their oversized casings.

A large hole followed by a quick massive bloodstain appeared on their waiter's white shirt as Kent saw a large bullet exit his chest and strike the side of Adam's head! But the massive spinning round only glanced off, causing Adam to fall backward in his chair from the blow. Kent lunged for Perry, knocking him to the floor as sprays of rounds began flying above them striking anyone and anything unfortunate enough to be in their path. People were suddenly screaming and shouting and falling like slaughter onto the floor where Kent and Perry and Adam now lay for cover. The spray of bullets from the semi-automatic weapons splintered and shattered and exploded everything all around them!

There wasn't time to talk. Kent quickly looked around; he needed a weapon—and fast!

The gunmen briefly ceased their fire looking to see where their targets had fallen and to re-target more accurately.

A suddenly airborne dining table flew at the closest agents at high-speed, taking out two of the gunmen. The table was

immediately followed by several chairs sailing through the air at high speed that struck other gunmen with accurate and deadly force. Almost instantly, Kent was on his feet; moving like a blur. He caught one of the advancing agents and whirled him strongly into two others who had their guns out and were attempting to make a bead on Perry and the semi-conscious Adam who remained still prone on the floor. Kent quickly reassessed the situation. There were too many of them. They needed to get out of here—and fast!

As Kent turned to collect his friends and teleport them all away, several agents tackled him from behind as if in some kind of coordinated martial attack. Kent felt himself being knocked to the ground onto his stomach with several weapons going off against his back. The stabbing pain of being suddenly shot multiple times by the massive rounds sent him into a brief shock as bullet after bullet entered him painfully! Shot after shot pierced his body until a single thought rang out from his mind.

The tiny crystalline inlay within his ring shimmered into brightness. A split second later the bullets no longer penetrated him as a warm glow radiated from every inch of his skin; lighting up his powder-burned and bloodstained shirt from within.

Kent lay motionless for several moments while a deadly stream of now ricocheting semi-automatic gunfire sprayed the men who had toppled themselves onto him as they continued discharging their weapons. Several of them were lethally struck by their own ricocheting rounds.

Although massively injured by point-blank heavy gunfire, his new body seemed to ignore the mortal wounds as they began to heal very quickly.

Kent spun onto his back to confront two agents who were still attempting to pump hot rounds into him. He mercilessly seized both men with a telekinetic grip and sent both of them

hurling upward at high speed into the solid-wood beamed ceiling some twenty feet above. Kent was already long gone when the two men finally returned smashing to the floor.

Bullets were again ricocheting and flying off of the golden-glow of Kent's skin the moment he was standing as most of the gunmen concentrated their fire on him. Several of the gunmen had found Adam in his prone position and were now riddling him with open gunfire.

"NO!" Kent's hand thrust forward as the crackle of pure white-hot plasma was already beginning to form around his fingers. The branched bolt of raw energy leapt from his outstretched hand, striking all four of Adam's assailants with lethal accuracy. The fleshly targets were nothing to the sprays of the super-heated particles as each bolt continued past its target to strike the far wall of the old brick building leaving smoothly hot gaping holes of slagging brick and mortar in their wake. Whatever parts were left of Adam's half disintegrated assailants fell charred and lifeless to the ground.

Perry was crawling toward Adam. The gunfire had dropped considerably when Kent felt another warning of danger. He turned to see several incoming airborne devices that looked something like silver grenades. Kent leapt from where he was onto Perry and Adam, trying to shield them from the hell that was about to break loose. Several of the grenades rolled toward them. Kent had only seconds! Both he and Perry worked blindingly fast, sending the devices hurling in every direction there was a gunman. But the last one left Perry's hand too late. It detonated spraying shrapnel and fire against all of them. Kent's now near invulnerable body mostly shielded them from the explosive force.

Explosions were now going off all over the dining room as the grenades detonated! Kent instinctively tried to cover both Perry and Adam as best he could.

They could hear screams and shouts and the sound of glass explosively shattering and wood splintering that echoed throughout the warehouse-sized dining room, as anyone still capable of moving ducked for cover or made mad dashes for any exit or window they could find.

Smoke now filled the room everywhere making it difficult to see.

Kent looked at Perry. He seemed barely conscious, but through the thick smoke he couldn't tell what had become of Adam.

"This is bullshit!" Kent swore under his breath. Anger built quickly within him. He needed to put a stop to the senseless carnage, and he needed to stop it now!

All over the pillars of their new home Lisa watched curiously as long-slumbering controls suddenly glowed to life all by themselves. Light paths along the floor filled with a soft flowing light of white as somewhere, something deep within the core of the structure—something long silent—was coming mysteriously back to life. With a low sliding hum, she watched the panels with interest as something within the tower, somewhere, energized very quickly while something else tapped and drew down the power from afar.

Kent's stood up slowly, deliberately. He rose up out of the smoke, his body now pulsing with a vibrant white light. Both of his hands were now lit with the crackle of white hot plasma; the pupils of his eyes replaced with a solid white glow that leaked a small trail of the hot energy upward. The smoke didn't matter to him anymore. He saw everything as clearly as he needed to see as his mind now target agents everywhere in the room.

Several of the gunmen watched as Kent stood, his white-glowing flesh fueled with something wholly inhuman and unworldly.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God," one of the agent gunmen breathed astonished at the sight of the smoothly white glowing being now standing before him.

"Code one!" one of the other agents began quickly speaking into an unseen mic. "Code one! Repeat, we have a code one!" He pulled other agents back away into the smoke. Kent watched as other agents now began backing away.

Suddenly, an unusually large bullet harmlessly struck Kent in the shoulder blade, the heavy uranium round disintegrating on impact. He turned just as another of the same kind of round slagged hotly off of his chest, splattering molten heavy metal, instantly catching the wood floor into a small fire around the splattering liquid metal.

Kent raised his hand and allowed the bolt of white-hot plasma to leave his hand; striking the agent squarely, slagging much of the big weapon into junk and dropping most of the attacking gunman lifelessly to the ground.

He keenly surveyed the room through the smoke, looking for anyone else with a weapon drawn. His senses warned him of danger from behind as he whirled and dodged another round that came out of the smoke toward his head. But this was no ordinary bullet; the round was huge, and propelled like a small missile. He dodged out of the way, letting it pass by him only inches from his head. The obviously propelled rocket raced past him and struck a section of the old-time brick wall many yards behind him. A moment later the old thick wall massively exploded, raining crumbled brick and debris engulfed in smoke and fire down onto anyone and everyone unlucky enough to be caught in the area. Part of the wall fell into rubble from the round's explosive impact, rocking the

entire building and collapsing part of the massive wood beam roof with its force.

Kent decided, plasma shield or not, he was *not* going to get hit with one of those. But it was already too late! Another of the rocket rounds was already coming right at him and quite a bit lower. Even with his speed, there wasn't time to dodge. Instinctively, he quickly caught the large round within his still plasma-misting hand, letting the explosive round utterly vaporize and disappear into the energy that burned hotter than the sun around his hand.

That was enough of those. Kent targeted the team with missiles. He let loose more of the plasma bolts striking dead the distant team of agents with their small bazooka-style rocket guns, and leaving still more slagging hot holes in the far brick wall.

Kent hunted the remaining agents down with a few more of the bolts leaving his hand before it was all over. He didn't know how many of the agents had retreated or how many he'd actually killed. He just knew that none of the agents around him remained alive. The gunfire had ceased. His senses seemed to settle down now that the danger seemed to have passed.

Kent closed his hands into fists, the bright glow of the plasma vapor extinguishing from both of them; his white-hot plasma armor receding until his skin now merely glowed a soft gold hue. There were wounded people crying and moaning, and dying everywhere all around him. The once eclectic fine restaurant was now a shambles and looked like a war zone from a third-world bombing. Small fires burned everywhere, and some were beginning to grow larger. Kent moved quickly over to where Perry and Adam were. The lower half of one of Perry's arms was missing, blown away while grappling with the grenade; shrapnel wounds covered his body and now ragged clothes.

Perry knelt protectively over the semi-conscious Adam. One of the attacking agent's massive semi-autos had come into his possession and Perry appeared to be wielding the weapon with deft skill, dropping an empty magazine and reloading the weapon single-handedly.

Kent knelt over the two of them. He heard Adam groan. Adam's body was so riddled with gunfire that Kent had no idea how he was even still breathing, but he was.

Kent's ears picked up the sound of police sirens in the distance. They would be there in minutes to take care of the dead and wounded and small fires. Kent knelt beside Perry and Adam. He touched them both, shifting all of them instantly out of the smoke and dust with a quick sound of rushing air, leaving no trace that any of the three of them had ever even been there.

* * * * *

Lisa stood by the sink, her late dinner dishes resting in the bottom of it. She took a final drink from her tea glass when she felt—something. Someone was coming; but it didn't feel like danger. It felt like—like Kent! She turned to see him just as he appeared in the front room. He was really grungy, like he'd been rolling in dirt or soot or something. His clothes were practically in shreds, ripped and tattered and singed and he smelled like smoke. Lisa put down her glass and began moving toward a now very startled Kent.

"Huh? Lisa?" he said seeing her now up and awake. "Lisa!" he began moving quickly toward her. Kent embraced and hugged her, twirling her off of her feet. She smelled new and clean and like—Lisa! Kent then realized he wasn't exactly fresh and clean himself. He put down his wife and moved back a little.

"You're—you're awake! How—? Are you okay?!"

Lisa nodded, but seemed more interested in how her husband looked at the moment. “Kent,” she began, “look at you! What happened to you?” Looking more closely, she noticed that parts of his clothes were not just burned, not just torn, but shredded. Underneath them, his skin looked perfectly fine.

“I—ah,” he started; but then stopped.

“Yes?” she prodded.

“You’re not supposed to be awake yet,” he said.

“Don’t change the subject. Where’ve you been? What’s been going on?” her new mind suddenly was putting two and two together with what Kent looked like and what she had seen with the tower hours before. “You’ve been in a fight,” her fingers pulled a piece of his singed and tattered shirt from him. “That was you accessing the tower, earlier today, wasn’t it? Did you start a war while I was asleep?” she only half joked.

Kent looked at her. Then he nodded. “In a matter of speaking. I think it was the Seven—they just tried to kill me.”

“What?” Lisa’s normally sweet tone came out very worried.

Kent nodded. “I was having lunch with Perry and his partner when these guys,” he shook his head, “agents, I guess, showed up and started shooting at us. They had really powerful guns. They didn’t target anyone by our table.”

“Oh, my god, Kent! Was anyone hurt?”

“All of us were hit, several times. But, Perry’s husband,” Kent shook his head, “he took the worst of it.”

“Oh! My God! Kent,” Lisa spoke softly, her eyes widening in horror. “Perry’s husband? Is he alright?”

Kent nodded, but still frowning. “I just came from one of our ERs. Both he Perry and Adam were in really bad shape but the doctors were confident they’ll both recover.”

“Oh,” she visibly sighed in relief. “Thank God.”

"Yea," he smiled nodding. "I—I need to clean up. I'm sorry I'm such a mess."

"Are *you* okay?" she placed her hands on his chest to stop him for a moment. Kent looked into her eyes.

"No," he began shaking his head. "I am *not* okay." He pushed past her toward the bedroom.

Lisa followed him and watched as he angrily stripped the war-torn clothing from himself. The ruined clothing landed in a pile on the floor next to the open bathroom's entrance. Although his clothes looked ready for the trash, Kent looked completely unharmed except for the soot that clung to him here and there from his clothes. Kent walked into the shower and turned it on. Lisa followed him standing at the entrance of the shower and watched him soap the grunge from his body.

Lisa sensed the rising uneasiness within him. Inside, Kent's feelings were terribly shaken, like he was going through his own post traumatic stress.

"Tell me about what happened," she asked, sensing his every feeling and emotion.

Kent shook his head, "These people, there must have been twenty or thirty of them. They're just animals. They didn't care about anyone or anything except riddling us with as much lead as they could possibly throw. Fucking savages," he swore.

Lisa just stood there, her mouth partially open.

"They tackled me. I couldn't get to Perry or to Adam to help them," Kent's voice filled with emotion. "They hit us with grenades that blew everyone in the place to hell. It was mayhem. People were running. Bullets were flying; hitting and killing and wounding people who had nothing to do with us," his voice cracked with pain.

"I'm so sorry. You feel really angry to me," she offered softly.

He nodded a sigh and leaned back against the back wall of the shower, "I am."

“What did you do?”

“I saw what they were doing to Adam, and I, I just, freaked, I guess.”

Lisa looked at her husband. “Freaked?” she asked. “What does that mean, ‘freaked’?”

Kent stood there looking at her from the shower, soap running down his pecs. “It means I started killing people.”

Lisa just blinked at him.

“I had to make it stop, Lisa!” he said passionately, his pursed lips now quivering. “They just kept pumping rounds into Adam like he was target practice. I had to make it stop.”

Lisa walked straight into the shower with Kent and took him into her arms. The bar of soap landed on the floor as Kent embraced her and he buried his face in her neck. “I had to make it stop,” he repeated, his voice cracking in pain. “I just had to—make it stop,” Kent openly cried now, the pain welling up from within him.

Lisa wrapped her arms around him, holding him tightly as the shower drenched his skin as well as her new clothes. She didn’t care. She could feel Kent’s pain within herself. She needed to sooth his deeply troubled feelings with her own.

“Lisa,” Kent began, feeling his wife’s feelings enter his own for the first time. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t help it,” he whispered. “They just kept coming and bullets were flying everywhere and they were hitting people and kids and exploding and ...” he cried like a child.

“Shhhh,” she soothed, feeling his every turmoil of the horrific ordeal. “It’s okay, Hon,” she calmed his feelings with her own. “I know you. You did what you had to do.”

After many long minutes in the shower, Lisa could feel his spirit settling. The pain of the raw emotion was passing. Kent, leaned back against the wall of the shower and looked up at ceiling, feeling a soothing sense of relief somehow.

Looking at his beloved wife, Kent suddenly realized that he was feeling her emotions within himself. She had already been feeling and soothing and healing his.

"You. It's you. It feels like you're inside me somehow, in my feelings," he spoke softly. "Like we're one."

She nodded. "We are one."

Kent released a long emotional sigh that Lisa felt in the deepest fibers of her being.

"I guess this means that neither one of us are the same now, are we?" she asked.

Kent shook his head. "No. And now there's no going back. For either of us."

Lisa placed her head on his shoulder and held onto him tightly letting him feel everything she felt for him.

"Are we safe here?" she asked.

She felt Kent's feelings answer exactly what she wanted to know even before he spoke. "Yea. We are. We're more than safe here," he assured holding tightly onto her. "Nothing on Earth can touch us here. We're safe."

Feeling both Lisa's calming emotions along with her strong, skillful backrub were enough to massage much of the tension of the previous hours' events from Kent's mind. Her hands worked his back and shoulder muscles, drawing approving groans from the weary man lying beside her on their bed.

"You are so hired," he offered, finally sporting a grin.

"Better be careful, I'm really expensive," she warned.

"You're worth it," he assured her, as he turned over relaxing in the beauty of her gaze.

The compliment caused a warm feeling to rise up within from her.

Kent continued to drink in the sight of his beautiful wife. Neither had bothered to dress after their shower a couple of hours ago. It was kind of becoming their thing some days.

"I missed you," he offered, taking her hand and touching her fingers to his lips. "You were asleep a long time."

"A week is a long time."

"Yea, but it should have been a lot longer," he assured. "Only a week. I know some people who are going to find that a little unnerving."

"Why?"

"Well, let's talk about it later. I'm just really glad you're back."

"So, what did you miss about me while I was gone?" Lisa asked coyly.

Kent sat up and lifted Lisa's chin with his hand and then softly brought her lips to his trying to sense her emotions with his own. It was still a little strange how he could feel what she was feeling as he kissed her. Like he could feel his own lips touch hers.

"This is really," he mused pulling away, "weird. These new feelings."

Lisa's eyes looked into his, "Yea. It's a little strange," she finished. "How we can feel each other's kiss," she said.

Kent nodded. He cupped the side of her face lightly in his hand, feeling what Lisa felt with the sensation. He then pulled her lips to his once again.

"That is so—" he fumbled for a word, "wild. Are you doing that or is it just me?"

"I think it's both of now," she admitted. "I can just *feel* you and I guess share what I feel with you? You've done it to me, made me feel what you were at times, whenever there was danger."

He nodded, "Yea, but, was it wasn't like this. Both of us feeling the emotions of each other. It's really powerful," he marveled, feeling what she felt as his finger traced the sides of her face. He could actually feel the sweet sensation he delivered into her.

"I think I know what this is," he said finally. "You're an empath now. Empaths can have shared feelings. So that's what Sevrin meant."

"Empaths?" Lisa asked.

"Yea," he nodded. "Most of the women, even some of the men, when they are awakened, become very sensitive to the emotions of others—empaths. I read some about this with Sevrin during my studies in the continuum. I guess I should have realized it before. I have a little of it with my senses, like when I touch you. But, you—you," he grinned, "obviously were blessed with a *lot* of it," he smiled.

"I guess I have been," she nodded. "I have always been pretty intuitive, but now I can actually sense your feelings. Feel what you feel. It's really strange. It's kind of alluring, actually."

Kent nodded again. "Sevrin mentioned that too. He said that there's nothing like it when two empaths share feelings. How deeply it binds their friendships. Then he started going on and on about 'their *love* experience'," Kent mocked Sevrin's voice. I think that was about the time I started to tune him out. Too much information."

Lisa softly invaded Kent's feelings with her own. She explored Kent stealthfully, feeling everything that he felt inside. How much Kent really loved her. Then she had a naughty idea.

"So, hunky man," she smiled, "what does *this* feel like?"

"What does wha—? OH. Whoa, oh, Lisa! You—" Kent suddenly exhaled softly his eyes now wide. "You should stop that!"

"Stop what," she offered facetiously, hitting him with the soft empathic sensation again.

"Lisa—ohhh, god! What are you doing!? Seriously, stop! You're gonna kill me! That is *more* than turning me on!"

"It is?" she looked at him amused.

"You know it is! What are you doing?"

“Experimenting,” she admitted.

Kent exhaled deeply, folding his arms around his chest, tensing practically every muscle he had as the powerfully erotic sensation hit him again, “Oh, OOHHH, geeze, Lisa! What are you doing to me! Stop! You’re gonna make me want to more than kiss you in a minute!”

Kent was beyond intrigued by his wife’s torturous invasion of his senses. Somehow Lisa had tapped into his emotion for her in ways that he’d never experienced or even dreamed he had before. The sensations she extended into him were beyond powerful, but torturous.

But she wasn’t the only empath in the room. He had some of that ability as well, maybe not nearly as strong as hers, but as long as he was touching her, maybe two could play this game!

Kent pulled Lisa close, kissing her warmly, distracting her passionately, as his own empathic feelings invaded hers. He’d never tried this before; never thought of attempting to sense another human being like this. But there she was, her feelings all over inside his mind. This wasn’t coming from his ring or the sensor net within the continuum. It was just him. Kent felt her, her intricate and delicate emotions. She was complex. And incredibly beautiful in how she looked to his mind. Somehow, instinctively, he found what he was looking for within her and delicately, empathically touched her.

“Ohh,” she breathed suddenly, feeling the subtle but still captivating feeling he was able to tenderly tickle within her. “Ooh, I see what you mean. I guess you *can* do it too,” she exhaled softly, basking in his gentle erotic caress of her feelings.

“How does it feel?”

“It’s really nice. It feels sweet. You’re making me tingle all over. Why were *you* reacting so much?”

“Probably because I wasn’t doing this—”

“AHHH!” Lisa screamed. Her unclothed body flexed suddenly uncontrollably with a wild ecstatic emotion that rocketed through her. Her mind took hold of Kent’s as she instinctively pushed him out.

“Well,” he grinned, his mind all over her trying to push his way back into her feelings for another tender assault. But Lisa’s strength was able to easily keep him out. She recovered from the ecstatic tremor.

“I guess I don’t know my own strength. I’m sorry if I overdid it,” Lisa apologized.

“It was a little intense,” Kent agreed still smiling. “You’re really good at this. I’m trying really hard to see you again but you’re keeping me out somehow.”

She nodded, and then stealthfully slipped past his defenses for another tender assault on his feelings.

“You’re kind of a natura—AHHH! Lisa! Dammit! You’re gonna kill me with that!” he complained, attempting to recover.

As Lisa again invaded Kent’s feelings, this time she did so much more subtly, smiling gently as his eyes opened wide in surprise.

“Oh, ooh, Lis’,” Kent began, “oh, now that’s—yea—that’s,” he began, his thickly-muscled body stretched out over the comforter as his back arched softly under the sensually smooth ecstatic feelings she delivered into him. He was still trying to find a way back inside her own feelings.

“Now that’s not fair,” Kent complained against her continued intimate assault. “You can keep me out and I’m like a sitting duck.”

“Not my problem, superman,” she countered, still ever so tenderly drawing up his emotion.

Kent felt her deliver a new deeply sensual feeling that made his hard body writhe softly while his cock drew so rock hard it throbbled. “

“Oh you are so going to get fucked after that one,” he assured, suddenly hotly embracing Lisa in a passionate kiss that took her a little by surprise. She dropped her defenses so that both were now sharing their feelings as they moved with each other aggressively over the covers.

“I guess were not getting any sleep tonight,” she said, kissing him hotly while feeling both his emotions and manhood all moving sweetly inside her.

“Sleep? Oh, no,” he assured her, kissing her way beyond just passionately. “But trust me—you are going to *need* some sleep—” he kissed, breathing hotly, “by the time—I’m done—fucking you—into tomorrow—”

42

The elegant clock on the ornate bedside table read barely after midnight. Both had lost track of how many times they had launched each other into a deep mutual ecstasy. Their shared feelings left them both without any doubt that they were deeply, passionately and insatiably in love with one another.

Kent and Lisa held each other close, with Kent just barely moving softly, sweetly within her giving her warm sensations without trying to arouse her too much again.

"It's tomorrow," she whispered.

"So it is," he grinned.

"I like a man who keeps his word," she purred, snuggling her face on his chest as if he were a pillow.

Kent pressed himself warmly, fully into her with a light body hug he could feel she really liked.

"I should be tired, but I guess I slept enough already," she breathed, enjoying the feeling of Kent's manhood moving ever so softly inside her and the relaxing indulgence that permeated her body.

"Hmm," she felt Kent muse.

"What?"

"You know you actually woke rather early."

"You said that before. How long was I supposed to sleep?"

"Several weeks is the norm," he nodded softly. "I think Dark is going to be a little amazed that you woke early."

"Is that bad?"

"No, it's a good sign actually. Some people don't wake up at all."

"Really?" she lifted her head.

"It's okay," he pulled her back down onto his chest. "It didn't happen to you. You're fine. Probably better than fine. I woke up early too, according to Dark. Maybe it's a newblood thing."

"I feel so lost in this world of yours sometimes," she admitted. "Now, I guess it's my world too."

"Don't worry, Hon. I feel just as lost myself sometimes. Now we both have a lot to learn and both of us have a very long time to learn it. In another hundred years you'll look just like you do today."

"What?" Lisa lifted herself from Kent's chest.

He looked at her.

"Tell me you're joking."

He smiled at her, "No, I'm not joking."

"Kent, seriously?" she exclaimed softly, not wanting to ruin their mood. "How long do we live?"

"Hmm," he shrugged and pulled her back down onto himself. "It depends. It's a pretty broad range for the awakened; for people like Dark, between a couple hundred to

a couple thousand. It's several thousand for the gods. But the prophecies say the reborn will never die. We never age."

Lisa lifted herself onto her arms and fully off of his chest. Kent couldn't help but notice her very pert breasts yet again. They always got his attention. Then he looked at the wonder in her face.

"Kent, seriously? We don't age?"

He nodded. "We live forever."

"But—my family?"

He nodded. "They will have passed and you and I will still look like we do now; only, hopefully with clothes on at some point."

"Goof!" she pushed his forehead into the pillow.

Still, Lisa didn't quite know what to do with what Kent had just told her about her longevity.

Kent could sense that Lisa was through with lovemaking for a while. He let go of their intimate embrace as she slipped herself from him and their sheets and then watched her warmly as she dressed in the darkened room.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Out to the terrace. Maybe take a little walk. I just need to think for a while."

Kent nodded. "I'll join you in a little bit," he offered.

She gave him the empathic equivalent of a nod and a warm hug and stepped out of the room.

Outside in the midnight air the forest was alive all around her. Lisa wandered in her thoughts, off the terrace and downstream sensing everything that breathed. The feelings and sensations from the wildlife filled her with an invigorating sense of awe. She was suddenly hit with the thought that there was a lot more to God than she had ever imagined possible.

In fact, that was why she had come outside now. She had more than a few questions for God and she wasn't finding very much comfort in the still silence He'd been giving her lately.

Lisa finished her lengthy one-sided discussion with Him and just looked up through the trees at the stars—wondering. Wondering who she was now. Wondering where everyone had come from. And wondering if her church had even the remotest of clues about what they had taught her about God to begin with. She knew her Bible like the back of her hand, but she also knew that what she'd been raised to believe was nothing like the history she was now living. The blood that now ran through her veins and the history of the people to whom it belonged was ancient—much, much older than what her church had been teaching. She felt a little like she was her own Copernicus, discovering that the Church's perspective of the natural world wasn't exactly reality.

Lisa found a downstream boulder where the water ran by swiftly but quietly. She stood on it looking up at the stars. Again she sighed deeply. Her new mind recalled the Scriptures all too easily, like she'd memorized the entire canon. Every chapter, prophet and Gospel now, she seemed to be able to recall from memory, even the different translations. She thought quickly. It suddenly occurred to her that there were a lot of things she'd been taught *about* the Scriptures that her church wanted to focus on and far too many more that it seemed to be all too quick to ignore.

Lisa's religious thoughts were interrupted by something she could feel now moving leisurely upstream. At first the sensation gave her a jump of trepidation, but then, as she focused, she felt more curious. She could sense the burly animal as it skipped across the shallow water not far from where she was perched. It moved up the shore. She could feel what it was feeling. It wasn't long until the big burly bear

noticed her. It stopped and stood on its hind legs in a defensive display of its towering massive frame.

"Hey," Lisa spoke to it, offering it a kind of empathic greeting.

The big animal grunted and dropped back to all fours, looking at her just as curiously now, and just as cautiously.

"You don't have to be afraid," she said, her feelings touching his.

He grunted again, still cautious, but he began moving toward her slowly.

Lisa left her rock and walked slowly toward huge beast. She felt its fear but her own feelings attempted to smooth away the trepidation it felt.

It spoke to her in its own bear-like way, the soft guttural sound was unintelligible but Lisa could feel what it meant.

"No, don't be afraid; it's okay," she said walking up to the simple beast that was many, many times her size. She held out her hand for him to sniff.

Something about her scent caused a visceral fear to shoot through the big bear, but Lisa's empathic connection smoothed it away softly. "No, no, don't be afraid," she said.

The bear spoke again softly, still a little nervous about being this close to her.

She touched his nose and gave him a little scratch around his sensitive muzzle. He didn't smell very good but it was what Lisa felt inside of him that gave her a warm feeling. The animal was big but it was also still rather young and incredibly fearful.

"It's okay," she began scratching under its chin and around its jowls, causing it to grunt enthusiastically. "Oh, wook at yoow," Lisa scratched around its massive head feeling what the big bear was feeling and noticing what it liked. "Yoow arew just a bwig cuddly wuddly, arew't youw," she practically had the big animal purring.

Then suddenly her new friend grunted and moved away quickly back into the forest the way it came.

“Well, now,” Lisa mused. “Something I said?”

She washed what she could of the bear-smell from her hands in the stream, her thoughts returning to her thinking about her church and then her family who had been involved with the denomination for generations. She shook off her wet hands, not really wanting to dry them on her new jeans. But with the first shake the water fell from her hands leaving them completely dry.

“Huh?” Lisa mused what had just happened. She wetted them in the stream again and again and watched as the water simply fell from her skin with a single shake. She wetting them again and discovered that she didn’t have to shake her hands at all, the water seemed to simply fall off at the simplest of thoughts.

With that thought, she placed her hand into the water again. But instead of wetting her hand, the pool receded away from her skin!

Lisa stared at the simple pool of slowly churning water in front of her. She stood and then hopped onto one of the boulders as the water fled away from the large rock she’d just jumped to. The boulder she now stood on was completely dry as the water churned around it, as if somehow avoiding the massive rock.

“Oh, my god,” floated from her lips. She jumped from the massive boulder onto the dry ground of the stream bed with the quickly flowing waters keeping their distance while moving all around her well above her head. She knelt down and picked up a handful of the dry sand of the riverbed, letting it sift through her fingers.

The waters avoided her as she made her way around the huge rock and then back to the shore with the stream refilling itself behind her as she stepped away from the water’s edge.

Lisa stared at the midnight stream in astonished bewilderment. She walked further downstream where the canyon would begin getting steep again and drop quickly. Rocks along the shore of the stream formed a kind of ledge that overlooked the large valley below. The view from this ledge was always breathtaking. Kent had brought her here not long after they'd first met. She wondered what it would look like with new eyes in the starlight. But as she approached the place, she could see an older, husky-looking man already sitting on the outcropping of rock. He stared pensively into the darkness under the brim of his cowboy hat. That was odd. She hadn't felt or noticed him sooner. Even odder still was that her danger sense wasn't tingling at all.

She cautiously approached the old man who now seemed to notice her.

"Beautiful view you have here, Lisa," he offered in a thick Texas drawl. "Mighty fine."

"And, you are?" she asked.

"Henry," he smiled and then got to his feet with a groan. "You know, you kids gotta stop picking these out-of-the-way places. The old folks aren't as spry as we used to be."

Somehow he made Lisa smile.

"You're not from around these parts, Henry," Lisa offered, slipping into her own Southern politeness. She was fairly sure the old man was probably safe to talk to.

"No, ma'am," he assured. "I'm a very long way from home. You're a long way from home yourself these days."

"Oh?" she asked.

"It's no fun having to move away from the people and places you were raised with. Makes me homesick sometimes."

Lisa walked up to the ledge beside Henry and looked out at the valley below. It was incredibly beautiful at night. She looked back at the elderly man.

"So, go back," she offered.

"Can't go back," he said with a shake of his head.

Suddenly Lisa understood what the old man was talking about. Henry felt very normal to her. But somehow she knew this old man was a lot more than what he pretended to be.

"I think I know that feeling," she said looking at him.

"You do," he nodded. "A lot of us do."

"Us?" she asked.

"Yep. It's tough when you think you're someone and then you find out you're someone totally different," he nodded.

Lisa scoffed in agreement. "I'm not sure *what* I am anymore," she offered into the starry darkness of their conversation.

"Oh, I do. You're Lisa," he smiled.

"If it were only that simple, Henry," she sighed.

"Why make it any more than it has to be?"

"I'm a little different now, Henry."

"Are you?" the old man met her gaze with the kindest eyes she'd ever seen.

"I'm not the same person I was," she assured.

"Do you remember Janie?"

"Of course," Lisa nodded. But she wasn't sure how Henry knew of her.

"Her dad got that new job making all kinds of money and rubbing elbows with the big wigs at the General Conference."

Lisa nodded.

"You two didn't talk much after that."

"She was diff—" Lisa stopped.

"Was she?" Henry asked.

"I guess I thought she'd become ..."

"... someone else?" Henry finished. "Nah. Still the same old Janie. I felt sorry for Janie. She lost a lot of friends after that."

Lisa pursed her lips and fought back an emotion.

“We all find ourselves in circumstances we can’t change, Lisa,” Henry continued. “We suddenly find we can’t go back to the place we were before. Kind of like Janie.” Henry looked at her. “Kind of like you.”

“Is, Janie like me?” Lisa asked.

“No, Honey. No one is like you. Not for a long, long time has there been anyone quite like you. Long time.”

“What am I, Henry?”

“That’s something you’ll need to discover for yourself. But you might want to start with this—” Henry held out his hand. Her slender gold band with its fine crystalline inlay rested in his palm.

Lisa looked at him. Somehow she knew better than to ask him how her ring had found its way into his hand. But she did know what would happen the moment she touched it. The same thing that had happened to Kent when his band first appeared on his hand. She was still more than a little afraid but—Lisa swallowed and cautiously picked up the ring.

Her mind smoothly and invisibly slipped into the continuum revealing hundreds of others she could now feel. The wondrous feeling was only momentarily overwhelming and suddenly all at once she knew exactly what Kent was talking about and why he wanted to spend so much of his time here. Her senses expanded exponentially. She was suddenly in London looking at boats carrying sightseers down the Thames. And then in Cairo atop an office building that overlooked the Great Pyramid; and in a dark jungle river in Peru floating lazily over the water on a dilapidated riverboat—and all of it through the eyes and senses of people she’d never met.

“Not too bad, now is it?” Henry smiled.

Lisa focused on her own physical senses so as not to be rude and ignore Henry. “I had no idea,” she whispered in wonder, slipping the ring onto her finger. “It’s like my senses are everywhere. It’s a little overwhelming.”

"Yea. It can seem that way sometimes. You'll get used to it," he assured.

"Can they see me?" she asked.

"They can, if you want them to. But, Lisa, the people who built the continuum; they were people just like you, Honey. Because of that there will be things you can see, places you can go, that no one else can. Remember that."

"What am I supposed to do now, Henry?"

"You're already doing it; trust me," The old man smiled. "And if I'm not mistaken, those are Kent's boots I now hear."

Lisa nodded. She could feel him coming their way.

"Thanks for the nice company, Lisa."

She smiled. "Well, I don't know how much company I've really been, Henry."

He nodded a kind smile and started down the very steep hill.

"Oh," he stopped and looked back, "you know, you might want to look Janie up sometime. I'm sure she'd love to hear from you. She could use a good friend these days. Maybe you could too," he winked her a nod from under his hat.

Lisa nodded. She watched the old man clump down the hillside and disappear into the thick underbrush, and then felt him drift away until she could feel him no more.

"Hey," Kent walked up from behind her.

"Hey," she took hold of his arm.

"You're in the continuum. I never thought I'd see that day," he offered.

"I was getting there," she assured.

"You feel kind of sad. Everything okay?"

"Yes," she nodded, wiping back a small tear. "Just remembering an old friend."

Kent took her warmly into his arms as they both looked out over the beauty of the midnight valley below.

AWAKENED

We had a bit of problem yesterday in Seattle, Rowan.” Rigel dashed his cloth breakfast napkin onto his lap and poured himself some fresh-squeezed orange juice from a crystal pitcher.

“Yea, so I gathered.” He’d already seen the reports, it was all over the news. The restaurant within the old waterfront warehouse had practically burned to the ground. “Your people made one hell of a mess.”

“It was. Your intel was perfect, as usual, but we encountered some *unusual* resistance. We haven’t seen this kind of resistance since, well, since I’ve been around anyway. We never had this kind of problem when *you* were handling things—personally.”

Rowan suddenly didn’t like the sound of where this little impromptu meeting was going.

"So what do you want me to do about it? You should train your teams better."

"They're already the best trained," Rigel assured.

"Well obviously they're shy somewhere. Two or three dozen men should have been able to get the job done. You only had two targets."

"There were three," Rigel corrected. "*Three* targets."

"So?" Rowan shrugged. "You had one more. Like that's never happened before."

"Kent Levi has been awakened."

Rowan said nothing; he gave Rigel his poker face.

"I don't need to tell you what kind of complications this creates for our plans. We have the best-trained people on Earth. The best equipment. But we need a little bit more."

"Uh huh," Rowan now knew exactly where this was going. "Like what, for instance?"

"We need a weapon. A real weapon."

"Bloody hell no!"

"Kent Levi is beyond dangerous! He could delay plans that have been in place since before you were born!"

"That's not my job, Rigel. The bargain was, I find them, you exterminate them. How you do that is your business, not mine."

"Which is why we want to offer you a new job."

"Yea, I'll bet you do," Rowan got up from his chair.

"You haven't heard our offer," Rigel protested. "It's exceptionally generous!"

"I'm sure it is," Rowan picked up a piece of bacon. "Only problem is, it's a little hard to spend it after you're dead." He stuffed the smoked meat into his mouth and headed for the door.

* * * * *

Fresh morning sunlight filtered through the tall trees glistening against the new underbrush as a cool morning mist clung to almost everything. Kent's redesign of the stream that flowed below the terrace wasn't nearly as aggressive and raw as whoever had designed the previous one. The water flowed over and collected more into a series of natural-looking dams and pools, rather than crashing and blasting through the rocks loudly like it did before. It was actually more pleasant now sitting on the terrace with the roar of the water replaced by the still audible, but much more genteel pools and waterfalls.

Both Lisa and Kent sat quietly watching the water move gracefully over the large boulders from one pool to the next.

Kent sighed heavily.

"That was a big sigh." Lisa relaxed in her chair.

"Hmmm," Kent agreed.

"Do you think you're in trouble?"

Kent shook his head. "I didn't start anything."

"No, but you kind of caused a ruckus. What happens if someone shows up with video of you blowing holes in the place?"

"I hope that doesn't happen. Anyway, I don't think anyone was interested in sticking around to record it."

Lisa felt a presence approaching from up the canyon.

"Are we expecting company?" she asked.

Kent looked at Lisa. His danger sense hadn't tingled at all. "Not that I know of, but, after yesterday," he shrugged.

Dark soon stepped up onto the new stone terrace deck. He was nicely casually dressed in black hiking shorts and had found a natural walking stick.

"Anyone home?" he asked, the typical Dark smile crossing his face.

Lisa stood up, "Dark; did you really hike all the way in here?"

"Only since first light. I like the Cascades in the morning. They remind me of the Alps."

"Can I get you something?" she asked politely.

"Ah, some coffee would be great. 'Dark' please," he grinned.

"Of course," Lisa smiled at him and went inside.

Dark set his stick against the glass wall and then moved to the railing of the terrace looking at the new pools. "It's very *feng shui*," he complimented.

Kent got up and stood beside him, looking at the pools.

"I'm sure you didn't come all the way out here to talk about my *chi*, Dark."

"Maybe I did."

Kent looked at him.

"You really pissed off the gods, Kent," Dark offered with a half grin.

"Oh? By defending myself and saving Perry and Adam?"

Dark nodded. "They don't care about us, Kent. To them we're just tools. They think that if we just harbor peace and love then the whole world will suddenly become a magical playground of rainbows and unicorns."

"What's going to happen?" Kent asked.

"The Sentinels met last night. They want to strip you of your access."

Kent nodded, pursing his lips. "I guess I broke the rules a bit."

"Buddy, you didn't just break the rules, you chucked the whole manual," Dark offered looking out at the water and then back at Kent.

"So why do I still have access?"

Dark looked at him. "Because—" Dark paused, "Mr. Steele told them no."

"What?!"

"Yep," Dark smiled.

Kent breathed a smile and a sigh of relief. "That seems to make you happy, Dark."

"It does, actually," Dark turned and leaned his back against the railing. "The truth is, Kent, I had you pegged as just another pansy-ass nerd that the gods gave way too much access to. Most of the time they make decisions that make all of us scratch our heads wondering 'what the hell were they thinking?' They make bad decisions, Kent. It's why we are where we are. Giving you control over the towers—is a really *bad* decision. But anything that pisses off the gods is something I'm all for."

"Great," Kent frowned. "Not only are the bad guys pissed off at me, the President of the United States wants me dead and now the gods themselves hate me."

Dark rested his hand firmly on Kent's now drooping shoulder. "Congratulations, Kent," he chuckled. "You're now part of the curse. Welcome to the family."

Kent looked up, "Family—Dark, how's Adam doing, and Perry?"

"They're fine. I talked with both of them last night in the infirmary. They'll probably release both of them today, good as new. But," Dark added, "they won't be back to work for a while. I've put both of them on leave." Dark looked at Kent.

"You can't just pull Adam out of the continuum, Dark. We need him. Especially right now. He's really good."

"I know. Maybe even as good as you," Dark offered looking out over the pools.

Kent looked back at him, a barely perceptible smile crossing his lips.

Lisa returned with some steaming mugs on a tray for all of them. She'd heard the entire conversation from inside the house.

"What's going to happen to us now, Dark?" Lisa asked.

"I don't know at this point. I do know that you bring one hell of a fight, Kent. I think you're training material."

“Training material? What kind of training?”

“Survival,” Dark looked at him taking a sip from his steaming cup. “If we’re going to find your folks and take down this bastard in the White House, we need you need to be a bit more refined. Not blasting holes in the décor. That goes for you as well, Lisa. Being awakened makes it great to alive—but unless you’re careful, it will also make you very, very dead.”

Kent waited outside, leaning against the railing of the ferry's upper deck. Below him the frigid saltwater of Puget Sound splashed against the hull of the massive boat. The overcast afternoon kept the air cold and most people indoors as the ferry chugged smoothly over the choppy Sound. His dark brown leather jacket, boots, jeans and hair blew softly in the damp chilly wind.

Even before he saw her, Kent's senses went into alarm. The taller, shapely woman approached him on the side deck; her deep blonde hair blowing over her thickly insulated white denim jacket and matching jeans. She looked at him with an intelligent smile as she stood against the railing next to him.

"So," she began. "I finally have the pleasure of meeting the illustrious Kent Levi, in person, no less."

Kent glanced at her and then back out at the water gliding by. He recognized her immediately. He didn't know exactly

who she was but she was the same woman both he and Lisa had seen in the hospital where Daniel had been admitted. He easily remembered her name. "You have an odd sense of discretion, Brenda," he said wryly, taking in her rather conspicuous outfit. She could give Lisa a run for her money on the runway.

"I like to be stylish," she smiled. Brenda was little taken aback by how he knew who she was. Then again, she *was* talking to Kent Levi. She needed to be very careful.

"How are my folks?" he asked, point blank.

"They're fine, Kent," she offered, assuringly.

"I want them back."

"Obviously. The question is, what are you willing to offer?"

"What do you want? Besides all of us dead."

"Kent, I believe you misunderstand my position here. I'm not actually the one holding your folks. The government's assassins have them. Not me."

Kent looked at her oddly. "Aren't you their messenger?"

"No."

"But—the ransom note?"

"I planted the note you have."

"You? Why?"

"Because you have something I want; and I can help you get something you want. It could make for a rather equitable business arrangement," she shrugged, flipping her hair in the light wind.

"You're bargaining with something you don't have, then. Not interested."

"Oh, I think you will be."

Kent looked at her.

"The assassins are just trying to clean up what's left of Hydra so they can get paid and keep their reputation intact.

They have no idea who the Levi's are; and the Administration isn't bright enough to put two and two together at this point."

"At this point?" Kent interjected.

"Hmm," she nodded beautifully. "The Seven are getting very chummy with the Administration, Kent. Much more so than they ever have in the past. They are effectively micro-managing things now. It's not going to take them too long before they discover what they have. When they do, your parents will be good as dead."

"How do you know all of this?"

"Let's just say, I make it my business to know what's going on around me. I don't like the Seven any more than you do."

"How do I know you're not working for them? And that all of this isn't just some kind of setup?"

"You don't." She smiled at him. "But if you really want to get your parents back alive, I'm the safest way you have to do that."

Kent looked out over the water again. He didn't trust her. But she was his only lead and she obviously knew a lot more than she was revealing to him now.

"What do you want?" he asked.

She smiled at him. "Just a little tour."

"A tour?"

"Of the tower."

Kent scoffed; and then grinned at her. "You must think I'm a complete idiot."

"No," she shook her head. "I know you're not. But I do know that the survival of the gods hangs in the balance with the Levi's. I'm the only chance you really have of getting them back alive. And you, my dear Kent, are running out of time."

Kent frowned. She did know; at least some of it. "So I give you a tour and you give me—what?"

"A way to find the assassins holding your parents."

Kent sighed. She was right. Time was not on his side. She had the knowledge he needed. But a tour of the tower? That was just asking for something way beyond trouble. But he was out of options. He needed whatever Brenda had and she knew it.

"You know, Brenda," Kent moved closer to her, his hand resting on her arm, "something tells me that I'm really going to regret ever meeting you today."

A moment later, they were gone.

* * * * *

"Come in," the President barked. He should be feeling great with the way things had been humming for him lately, but a dark cloud now hung over his mood.

"Oh, Harlan, it's you," the President sighed with a frown.

"Ah, thanks; I think." Harlan answered closing the door.

"Ignore me, Harlan," the President apologized, "It's been a tough morning."

"Yea, so I've been noticing. The whole house is on pins and needles. What is up with your wife!? Jesus, she just bit my head off a moment ago."

"Rachel's sort of been on the war path for the past couple of days with the new staff changes," the President frowned.

Harlan finally put two and two together. "Oh, that's what this has been all about. I take it Rachel's not too happy with Amy?"

"No. Amethyst's been reorganizing the team. She's been letting people go. Rachael's upset. Amethyst fired her stylist this morning."

"Amy fired Bruce. Really? Why would she care about him?"

"I'm sure she has her reasons, Harlan. We've had leaks around here for some time."

Harlan nodded.

"Amethyst has been vetting everyone—even you."

"Well, I'm clean," he offered.

"Of course you're clean, Harlan, it's why you're still here," the President assured. "Did you two have a nice breakfast?"

"Yea, we're kind of doing the whole onboarding thing. I'm getting her up to speed. I think she kind of likes me."

The President rolled his eyes shaking his head.

"Did you know her eyes are really purple?" Harlan offered.

"I'm a little busy here, Harlan. Was there anything important you needed to discuss?"

"Oh, yea. Amy was asking about Hydra. I kind of buttoned up on that one. How much should I tell her?"

"Amethyst is one of the core team now, Harlan. If she wants to know the color of your underwear, you tell her."

"Alright. I just wanted to clear it with you first," he said getting ready to leave. "You, ah," Harlan stopped just before leaving, "you wouldn't mind if I asked her out, would you?"

"Harlan, honestly, do I look like her dating service?"

* * * * *

Kent and Brenda stood in the living room of the lavishly decorated home. The sudden change had been startling but not wholly unexpected. She knew the gods had their means of very rapid travel, she just wasn't expecting something so smoothly instantaneous. Her own danger sense was tingling like a hornet's nest. She skillfully ignored it and played her hand coolly.

"Very nice," she smiled, impressed with not only their method of travel but their destination as well. "My compliments to your decorator."

Kent forced a smile.

Brenda walked around the house with Kent following closely behind, looking at not only the décor but the smooth sleeping interfaces that adorned the columns as well.

"I take it your wife is out at the moment?" she asked, moving her hand over the column as she walked around it.

"You wanted a tour," he replied shortly. "I'm giving you a tour."

Brenda nodded.

"I'm impressed, Kent."

"Oh?"

"I like how you've decorated. I also like how you've rearranged the interfaces to fit within the décor. Clever."

"It works." He watched her carefully as she seemed to study the pillar. "So, how do you plan on helping me find the assassins?"

"I don't, actually," she offered.

"Excuse me?"

"Help you find the assassins, I mean."

"You're playing games with me, Brenda. I brought you here and now you're backing out of the bargain?"

"I didn't say that, Kent. I'm a woman of my word. I said I'd give you a way to find the people holding your parents. I've done that. You kept your side of the bargain and I've kept mine. Transaction complete." She smiled.

"I seem to be missing my side of the transaction here," he stared.

"Oh, you have it. Trust me," she walked up to where he was standing.

"So this is a riddle then?" he folded his arms looking at her, not happy.

Brenda smiled. "Not really. It won't take you too long to figure it out—once you come to."

"Come to? Wha—"

Kent hit the floor—hard. Every muscle in his body felt suddenly numb; he couldn't move. His thoughts failed to focus, like his mind was numb as well. It was like someone was scrambling his thoughts and nerves; everything was firing but nothing was receiving. He watched out of the corner of his eye as Brenda played the interfaces of one of the pillars she'd been standing next to.

The potent psionic attack she'd just leveled against Kent would have instantly killed a normal human. It had barely stunned him. She knew it wouldn't kill him, but she hadn't planned on him still being conscious after the massive psionic surge! There wasn't time to build up to another attack that strong. He'd be able to move again in minutes if not sooner. She needed to work fast before he could refocus his thoughts and reconnect to the tower.

Brenda quickly and skillfully set the crystals in place around the alpha port and watched as each of them softly glowed one-by-one as the invisible molecular program within each worked its way into the central core of the pillar's control system.

After thirty seconds the last crystal was still dark.

'C'mon,' she encouraged to herself, nervously now.

At sixty seconds she could see that a tiny, barely perceptible glow had begun to grow within the seemingly simple crystalline rod.

Kent's arm was already moving, dragging his hand across the tiled floor up to his shoulder.

"Brenda," he voiced numbly, "stop. You don't know what you're doing—"

Finally the last crystal burst into full glow. A large section of the solid stone of the pillar before her shimmered away into nothing while the glass-looking control core floated out from the structure waiting to be inspected.

Kent could see what she was doing and he fought with everything he had to regain control and focus his mind to reconnect with the continuum.

Brenda lifted the inch-wide, yard-long cylinder from mid air and stuffed the warm glass rod into her coat.

Somewhere, deep within the Earth below them they both heard and felt the sensation of the massive tower fall into standby. Everything within the room went dark. Only the sunlight from outside lit the home's interior now.

Kent had managed to bring himself to his elbows on the stone floor. He called out to Brenda but like a flash she was already out the front doors of the home. Kent heard the sound of some kind of small reflex engine igniting and then speed away until he could hear it no more.

"Jesus," he breathed, as he struggled just to get to his knees. In another minute he was standing with the help of the pillar, his mind again reunited with the continuum. Without the tower to see outside, he was totally blinded. Brenda was gone.

It wouldn't take the rest of them long to figure out what had just happened.

It hadn't taken Kent but a few minutes to restore the tower's operation, but the damage had already been done. Everyone across the continuum had taken notice.

By the time Dark had arrived it was late evening. Lisa stood next to Kent in their living room, her hand resting on his back.

"Are you two okay?" Dark asked looking at both of them as he walked in.

"We're fine," Kent assured him, frowning.

Dark could see that Kent was still very upset over what had happened. He walked up to Kent and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Hey, Kent," Dark began, a serious look on his face. "Don't worry about what the rest of the family are saying. You have to learn to ignore them sometimes. Don't take it personally."

"It's hard not to," Kent frowned. "They really hate me."

"Yea," Dark assured, "some of them. But they hate me just as much. Don't let it bug you." Dark grinned; he looked also at Lisa who wasn't smiling.

Lisa's ring was on her finger. She'd been all too privy to the beyond angry thoughts and feelings of the many family members who now wanted Kent more than just sanctioned.

"Why would they hate you?" Kent asked Dark.

"Because Brenda and I go waaay back, buddy. You're not the first person she's sucker punched. You probably won't be the last."

"You know her?" Lisa asked.

"Ohh, yea," Dark nodded very assuringly. "Trust me, the whole family knows her."

"Who is she?" Lisa asked.

"Well, harmless, mostly. She's more of an enterprising thief than anything."

"Harmless?" Kent countered, "She packs one hell of a wallop for someone who's harmless."

"I meant she's not deadly. Brenda wouldn't hurt anyone intentionally. That's not who she is."

"It sounds like you're defending her, Dark. You two have history?" Lisa sensed.

Dark nodded. "The truth is, Lisa, I was the one who awakened her. The rest of the family have never let me off the hook for that one."

"One?" Lisa asked, with a raised eyebrow, a slight smirk crossing her lip.

Dark smirked as well. "Never mind. The point is, I was the one who let her get away with some very powerful hardware, a whole vessel in fact. We've never been able to find her or it. She's kind of a rogue now."

"A vessel?!" Kent started. "How does one empath steal an entire vessel?" he asked, more than a little surprised. He knew what kind of security was involved with those.

“Brenda’s way beyond empath, Kent. She was actually a kind of celebrity within the family at one time. The truth is, she was the reason we started looking at the prophecies again. Her ability was goddess like; a full-blown psionic. Only a few of the gods in our history have ever had that kind of ability; but Brenda had it and she was not a goddess. She wasn’t born that way. She started some of us wondering.”

Lisa stood just quietly, listening. She wasn’t sure if Dark even knew the extent of what she and Kent had become after their own awakening.

“Brenda keeps to herself most of the time. But every now and then she shows up, steals something she needs or wants and then we don’t see her again—sometimes for decades.”

“So she’s an engineer?” Lisa asked.

“No but she may as well be. She’s a very well-studied technologist and very adept at our knowledge, but she doesn’t have everything. Hence the thievery.”

Dark then looked at Kent. “Which, by the way is why I’m here. The tower went offline for a few minutes. What did she steal?”

“One of the control cores,” he frowned.

“Ouch.”

“Yea,” Kent nodded, pursing his lips.

“Well, I’m not the engineer here, what is that, exactly?” Lisa asked.

“Control cores essentially act as a kind molecular router for data traveling through the tower,” Kent began. “They not only control what happens within power core itself but they maintain a record of everything and everyone who has access to it. Everything the tower knows is summarized within the control core.”

“So what could she do with one of these cores?” Lisa asked looking at the two of them.

Both men looked at each and spoke almost simultaneously nodding, "Build herself another tower."

"Oh," Lisa said, her voice somewhat hushed.

"Yea, well, it's not actually that easy," Kent followed up. "She needs a control key that's attuned to core she has. It's useless without a properly tuned key."

"I'm sure she already knows that, right?" Lisa surmised.

"She does," Dark assured.

"So who has the key that she needs?" Lisa asked.

Kent already knew the answer.

Dark just looked at Lisa.

Lisa sensed his feelings. Her fingers instinctively began moving to and gently turning the ring that was around her finger.

* * * * *

"You're still awake," Lisa said, rolling over next to him under the sheet in the moonlight of their room.

"Yea. Why are you still up?"

"I can't stop thinking about today and what happened," she said.

Kent sighed. "I'm sorry."

"Stop. If Brenda deceived Dark and he's still part of the family, they're not going to kick you out."

"I know. I just feel so stupid. I never should have let her in here to begin with."

"What choice did you have?"

"None."

"Right. So stop it."

Kent released another light sigh and then rolled to look at his wife.

"So what's keeping you up?" he asked quietly.

"Something Dark said."

"About Brenda?"

"Yea."

"He said she was the one that got them looking at the prophecies again. It made me curious."

"Did you read them?"

"Did you?" she asked.

He nodded. "Everyone thinks my parents are part of them somehow."

"Kent, those prophecies *are* about you."

"I wouldn't go that far," he downplayed.

Lisa gathered her pillow and lifted herself up onto it. "Kent! *The reborn of God shall come through the tribes of Levi.*" she quoted. "Hello?!"

"It's just a surname, Lisa. I'm no more Jewish than you are. My mom was born in France, for crying out loud."

"What about the Diaspora?"

"The who?"

"Diaspora. Honestly, Kent, did you ever go to church?"

"Well, around Christmas and Easter sometimes."

Lisa rolled her eyes. "The Diaspora were the dispersion of the Jews since the Roman Empire, some say even well before that time, during the Persian occupation of Israel."

"Persian? You mean like Babylon?"

"Yes. Levi was one of the twelve sons of Jacob who founded the twelve tribes of Israel. The Levites were the original priests of God."

"So you're saying that when ancient Israel was invaded, these Levites left and could have wandered anywhere, all over the world."

"They could have. Italy, France, and then eventually to America. I'm willing to bet that if you look at the history of your family, you have some deeply-rooted Jewish blood."

"Well, I guess; maybe. So this prophecy seems to have really piqued your interest in my genealogy all of a sudden?"

“Doesn’t it pique yours?”

“Not really, Lis’. The truth is I kind of have this visceral aversion to churches.”

“I know you do. But I’m intrigued by the prophecy.”

“Why? It’s just more of the same ancient mumbo-jumbo designed to titillate people’s imagination and get them to give more money.”

“I think there’s more to them, Kent.”

“Why?”

“Because, *‘the wife of the first reborn will be spawned from his own loin and called Seven among the Seven of God.’*”

“Lisa, none of that makes any sense, well except for the spawned part, maybe,” he conceded. “Still, it doesn’t apply to you. Your name isn’t ‘Seven’.”

“That’s because of transliteration, Kent. Names are always transliterated when you move from one language to the next. People from one language often can’t spell or pronounce words and names from another language, so it gets translated, or transliterated.”

“You mean bastardized,” he grinned.

“They do. They get all twisted up moving from one language to the next. Lisa is short for Elizabeth. Elizabeth comes from the root Hebrew word *Elisheva*.”

“So?”

“So, *Elisheva* was the wife of Aaron, the first high priest of Israel. *Elisheva* means ‘God’s Seven’.”

“That’s not funny, Lisa,” he glared.

“I’m not joking, Kent. You read the prophecy!”

Kent sat up, his mind moving in a couple of different directions as he recalled the prophecy’s words in his mind.

“Lisa, the wife of the first reborn dies at the last great battle,” he frowned. “I don’t think you want to associate yourself with that.”

“Kent, this isn’t some little girl’s fantasy that I’m trying to put myself into. The truth is, I keep trying to pull myself *out* of it. And with every detail I try to knock myself out with, the more those attributes begin to line up with what’s been written.”

“This is getting silly, Lisa. I’m not part of some stupid prophecy and neither are you. No one can read the future. Besides, if anything, Brenda’s the first reborn, not me. The prophecy fails for us.”

Lisa just looked at him. This discussion was obviously making him more upset than he already was. She didn’t need to add more to his already out-of-control feelings. She rolled over onto her side with her back to him. After a moment, she felt his hand on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” she offered.

It took both of them a long time to finally drift off into an uneasy sleep, unsure of what the future now held for the two of them.

* * * * *

Daniel set the tray down with its two soft drinks and a massive order of whole-cut steaming-hot French fries. It wasn’t often that he and Cheyenne found themselves in town, but when they did, they made it to their favorite place to share a double-order of locally famed cheesy fries.

“This will be the last time we’ll be able to do this for a while,” she offered. “We’ve never been to Michigan.”

“No. It will be a new life.”

“I’ll miss being here; in the mountains.”

He nodded. “Me too.”

“I don’t think they have mountains in Michigan, do they?”

He shook his head. “Not like here.”

Cheyenne looked around, "Lisa should have been here by now."

"She'll be here," he assured.

They finished their snack but still, there was no sign of Lisa.

"I think we need to go," Daniel offered quietly.

Cheyenne nodded.

The two left their tray at the table and slipped casually out of the restaurant. Daniel saddled his bike along with Cheyenne on the back and started the motor. From his side mirrors, he saw the dark van pull up behind him with several people beginning to get out. He didn't bother looking back. He revved the engine and popped the powerful bike up onto the restaurant's sidewalk and accelerated, weaving by a handful of very startled and very unhappy patrons.

"Shit!" one of the agents blurted into his radio. "They're on a bike. We're not going to be able to follow. Looks like they're heading for the freeway. If they hit either interstate right now you'll never catch them."

"Roger that. We'll take it from here," another voice came over his radio.

The bike rocketed the two of them down Broadway and then onto Boren. Rush hour traffic was already well underway as Daniel weaved their sleek machine in and out of the slower moving cars. Cheyenne moved perfectly with Daniel as he leaned the bike smoothly onto the onramp, passing cars merging onto I-90.

Like a flash Daniel guided the fast-moving machine between lanes, skillfully avoiding cars and lane-changers.

The tunnel was just ahead of them. Daniel felt a small sense of relief as they entered the underground part of the freeway.

But almost as soon as they entered they began to see the brake lights. Traffic was stacking up quickly. Daniel wove the bike slowly between the cars moving the two of them deeper into the tunnel. It wasn't long before they could see the source of the traffic jam. Police had stopped traffic for some reason and were allowing only one lane to pass by. He merged the bike back into traffic, waiting for their turn to merge into the only lane that was still moving.

By the time Daniel realized what was happening it was too late. Traffic had come to a dead stop with nowhere to turn and nowhere to run. It took only moments for several armed police to surround them. If Cheyenne were not with him, he would have made a run for it. But he wasn't willing to risk the life of his sister. Daniel killed the motor and put up his hands.

Michael Levi didn't know what day it was or whether it was morning, noon or night. The air outside just felt cold and wet. The light jacket he'd been given barely fit his large frame, and it did a miserable job of keeping him warm. He could tell that others were with him, but he just didn't know who. He simply stood where he was herded. The dark hood that covered his head kept him not only utterly blind but also from hearing what was going on.

Brad checked his watch. He could see the lights of the Seattle skyline through the numerous massively tall, dilapidated iron and steel gas works refinery tanks that had been out of commission for decades. The light of the city reflecting off of the low clouds gave the place an eerie feeling. Late night rendezvous in such an open, public place made him edgy.

"He's late," Brad grumbled to the woman standing beside him.

"He'll be here," the woman assured in her typical pedantic tone. "You have what they want." Then she nodded. "Over there."

A lone figure strode out from the trees. He stopped when he was only a few yards from the small group.

"Well, isn't this just all lovely," Rowan's Australian accent was thick. "Nice to see you're on time, Brad. Evidently Harlan's crayons were able to scribble the address down correctly this time."

Neither Brad nor the woman assassin knew who the man was, but it was obvious he knew them and his employer.

"I don't believe we've met," Brad offered.

"It's not important. You brought what I needed. Let's have a look."

"If you remove the hoods; we'll have to kill them," Brad warned.

"Aw, well that would be a bloody shame now wouldn't it. Let me see 'em."

Brad offered a single nod to the others of his group. Their hoods all came off. Michael Levi's eyes finally focused on Marseille as he took her quickly into his arms. A younger couple, or were they brother and sister, he'd never seen before stood next to them. The four of them now stood together, none of them saying a word.

"Well, now, isn't this all sweet. Don't go anywhere, the party's just getting started," he offered to the foursome surrounded by assassins with small automatic weapons.

It wasn't long before they spotted a lone dark figure approaching from behind the gas works. She was clad in some kind of snug-fitting black bodysuit that resembled a uniform. She stopped a few yards from the group.

"Brenda," Rowan offered, saying nothing else.

"Rowan," she nodded a reply.

Rowan nodded toward the small group of people standing next to the assassins, "I brought your cargo. Did you get what I asked for?"

Brenda slipped the small satchel off from behind her and slipped the end of the faintly shimmering glass rod so he could see it.

"Where are the other three?" he asked.

"You only get one."

"Our bargain was for four."

"You get one. Next time, you get to spar with the gods."

He looked at her while making a quick calculation. "Alright. I'll take it."

Brenda tossed the bag with the rod onto the grass in the center of the group; it landed with an unnaturally heavy thud. Rowan had taken a few steps to retrieve it when the satchel suddenly left the ground by itself, whisked through the air, and settled gently into the black-gloved hand of an elegantly cloaked and hooded figure that had been standing unseen within a nearby grove of trees. The woman now walked toward the group and joined them, her face still shrouded by the hood.

"Rowan," Brenda looked at him. "You didn't say anything about bringing friends."

"Yea, well, I sort of got overruled on that one. Sorry," he shrugged.

The woman holding the satchel pulled back her hood, her amethyst eyes unnaturally shimmering in the night.

Brenda's irises immediately shimmered gold.

Brad's eyes widened, along with the rest of his team's.

"You know," the woman with the lavender eyes began, "I've always had a knack for showing up at parties uninvited." Amethyst looked closely at Brenda's form-fitted armor, a secret envy rising within her. Somehow, even banished, Brenda still

had access to knowledge of the gods. Amethyst smiled. "How nice see you again, Brenda. You're looking just as—slutty as ever."

Brenda ignored her. "Your bitch have a leash, Rowan?"

Brenda watched Amethyst's irises flare subtly.

"I was just in the neighborhood, Brenda, and thought I'd drop by the party," Amethyst began. "Imagine my surprise when it turned out to be one of your little orgies."

Brad wasn't liking the sound of where this situation was heading. It was pretty clear to him now who was in-charge here, and it wasn't him. He didn't quite know what to think of two glowing-eyed females bantering it out in a kind of verbal cat fight, but he kept his hand ready for a quick draw in case things got ugly.

"You have what you came for," Brenda nodded at the satchel. "We'll be leaving."

"Oh, so soon? But you just got here. Are you sure you don't want to have a dance first?" Amethyst's cloak suddenly billowed as if blown by some unseen wind.

"Shit!" Rowan cursed. He dropped quickly to the ground and began scrambling as fast and as far away as he could from the two of them.

Daniel saw what the Australian was doing and he pulled the four of them quickly down low to the ground as an unexpected and inexplicable gale-force wind suddenly blew over the top of them. The brief but powerful tornado-like gust caught the assassin unit completely by surprise, knocking them and rolling them across the grassy park.

Brenda held her ground, seemingly completely unfazed by the sudden wind that swirled around her. Amethyst's ploy with the sudden and massive wind gust hadn't exactly achieved what she'd wanted. The assassins were scattered but the Levi's were still huddled together, easily protected by Brenda's will.

“Nice try.” Brenda moved to where the Levi’s and Hawks were still laying prone on the grass.

Amethyst drew back her cloak, her arms outstretched with her palms and fingers pointing up as if she were grasping and lifting something hugely unseen. Suddenly stones of all sizes began quickly lifting up out of the dirt and grass everywhere, all around them. The sidewalks close by cracked, then buckled and lifted, breaking apart in massive chunks that now floated freely in mid-air.

Brenda’s feelings searched desperately for some kind of weakness in Amethyst’s defenses, but the battle-savvy psionic witch had none. There was no way for Brenda to disrupt her concentration while protecting the Levis at the same time. Brenda gathered herself for the onslaught she knew was coming. At first the hovering stones came at them as fast as bullets; but they were easily deflected or shattered harmlessly against Brenda’s potent psychic barrier.

Amethyst carefully selected her attacks, probing Brenda’s barriers for any kind of weakness. It’s didn’t take long for the seasoned psionic to see where Brenda was now expending her energies.

The rocks now began striking at almost the same place against her psychic shields. It was becoming too much as Brenda attempted to refocus her stamina on the weakening area of the barrier. Then one of the stones got through, striking her forcefully in the shoulder. Her combat armor absorbed the impact of the stone, but the breach was now open in her shield.

Stone after rock after boulder after slab of concrete now assaulted Brenda’s diminishing barrier. It had become too much! The rocks now pelted her body as if thrown by a Gatling gun. The power of the stones impacting her armor pushed her backward; she stumbled and fell next to Daniel and Michael onto the ground while Amethyst now let loose with the whole of the weight and force of everything she’d summoned from

the ground! The stones and rocks and small boulders flung themselves quickly at the place where they all lay prone and quickly piled their crushing weight high atop the five of them.

In a few moments, it was all over.

Amethyst waited. She sensed nothing coming from the small hill of awkward stones and broken concrete. She walked up to the large mound of rubble that had reached a height well taller than she was. Small rocks continued to roll down the large pile as it settled. The cunning psychic reached out with her empathy beneath the pile of stones and rubble but felt nothing. It felt utterly lifeless.

"Humph," she mused her victory. She turned and walked away from where she'd just permanently entombed the prophetic Levis and former arch nemesis.

She opened the satchel that held the glass rod again and examined it, smiling as she walked. Its faint shimmer had a pleasing feel. But the shimmer seemed to now be growing in its glow. The rod suddenly blinked into a bright light sending her danger senses into overdrive. She dropped the rod onto the grass, backing away from it. The ultra-dense rod landed like a heavy javelin protruding from the grass glowing brightly.

Her psionic defenses on full alert, her mind scanned the area for any sign of a threat, but her senses picked up only some of the stones still settling on the pile of rocks she'd just created. More of the stones now seemed to be rolling off the top of the tall mound. Then an odd pastel blue light began to show through the cracks and crevices of the pile of stones. But there was nothing alive there; her senses told her so! She backed away from the mound of newly shimmering rubble slowly with every shield she had at full strength.

The light between the stones now grew quickly brighter until the massive mound suddenly exploded in all directions in a shower of deadly projectiles large and small. The explosive rain of debris reflected harmlessly off of Amethyst's well-

reinforced psychic shields, but it wasn't the rock that now garnered the infamous psychic's full attention.

Both Kent and Lisa Levi stood body armored over the five that Amethyst thought she'd just buried! A warm glow seemed to radiate from their uncovered faces. But according to her empathic senses the two of them weren't there! Amethyst couldn't psionically "see" either of them, nor her captives that the two of them were standing over. And all five of them were still moving, not nearly as dead as she had been deceived to believe.

Amethyst had sparred with Brenda a number of times in the past; she knew her style, even some of her weaknesses. Although the awakened Kent Levi was a bit unexpected, she'd more than dealt with his kind before. Males always made pathetic psionics, when they rarely even showed up.

No, it wasn't any of them that Amethyst's danger senses were now keenly focused on. The Kyle woman was beyond awakened and just as bright as Amethyst herself. Clearly, Lisa's will was keeping her from psychically seeing any of them. Amethyst's mind raced for a new strategy.

"Leaving the party so soon, Amy?" Lisa's sky blue irises burned with indignance, a telekinetic wind swirling about both she and Kent. It didn't take a psychic for Amethyst to realize that Lisa meant business, and without a way for her own senses to lock on to her adversary she'd be reduced to brute force.

Kent held out his gloved hand, causing the nervous Amethyst to flinch. But the brightly glowing crystalline rod that protruded from the grass simply leapt from the ground into his hand, its brightness returning to its soft normal glow.

"Well, well—Lisa," Amethyst smiled nervously, all but ignoring Kent. "What an unpleasant surprise. I was wondering when all of us would finally meet."

Lisa began taking steps toward her. "Oh, I think you'll find we're quite full of unpleasant surprises."

Amethyst reached out her hand, the invisible barrier set firmly in place between them. "That's close enough!" she warned.

Lisa easily sensed the barrier; it was more than strong enough to keep her away from Amethyst. However, psionics were not the only tools in Lisa's arsenal.

Amethyst's danger sense was tingling well before Lisa's telekinetic punch came out of nowhere, striking the unwary goddess squarely and sending her skidding and tumbling across the grass. Amethyst was only momentarily dazed by the invisible blow. Her psychic shields should have disrupted and prevented such telekinetic energies from touching her. Clearly Lisa was more resourceful than Amethyst had given the new psionic credit. She wouldn't make that mistake again.

"That was a warning," Lisa glared as Amethyst recovered swiftly to her feet.

Rage quickly building within the ancient witch. "You — you insolent little bitch! I'll burn you in hell for messing with me!"

Amethyst's eyes flashed into a blaze, her bare arms outstretched as the raw forces of nature obeyed her will and built quickly into supernatural critical mass.

Both Lisa and Kent felt the sudden change in temperature all around them. Kent felt it as well as his own mind psionically tapped into the tower's unseen energies.

In a matter of seconds a massive pillar of intensely swirling hot fire shot skyward with both Lisa and Kent fully engulfed in the center of it. The near blindingly bright blaze of searing heat shot skyward, torching the grass and lighting up the entire park and shore waters of nearby Lake Union.

From I-5 the officer looked out of his cruiser's window. Slowing his vehicle and pulling it off to the side of the road, he quickly exited the car to watch the ragingly bright pillar of fire light up the low cloud sky. His radio already in hand he spoke quickly, "Jesus, dispatch, you're not gonna believe this!"

From all over the city, people pointed and recorded the blazing tornado of fire emanating from the mid-town park.

For long seconds that turned into a minute Amethyst focused her rage. In the sky above, the soaring heat had neatly pushed aside the low clouds around it, revealing a starlit night sky beyond. The powerful psychic now lowered her arms and cautiously smiled as she searched for any signs of life within the white-hot base of the pillar's still swirling inferno. But her smile faded as two lone figures walked out of the intensely burning heat, completely unfazed, Lisa's hair simply blowing in the hot wind of the raging flames!

"My turn," Lisa breathed quietly. Lisa's arm extended as she appeared to reach behind herself.

The ground beneath Amethyst's feet began to tremble. The screeching sound of grinding metal from behind the now waning flames shattered the stillness of the night as eighty-feet of tall rusted steel and brick suddenly broke loose from its near century-old foundations and lifted quickly into the air by itself.

In the light of the still intense fire, the massive super-ton structure moved quickly through the air as if being wielded like hammer in the hand of a master craftsman.

Amethyst had seen enough. She ran. But even the incredible speed of her legs were no match for the multiple sensors that had already locked onto her and now quickly guided the tons and tons of heavy steel and brick with deadly

accuracy. The massive metal structure plowed into the ground exactly where Amethyst had bolted. The speeding tons of crashing metal and brick trembled the ground and made an unearthly ear-splitting din that utterly destroyed the peace of the night air for miles. Within moments, the commotion of the massive crash was over. The dust of the wreckage quickly dissipating in the light rain.

Kent walked up to Lisa from behind, the pillar of fire that was still slowly burning itself out behind them, warmly lighting the massive metal wreckage. His danger senses were calming.

"She's gone," he offered quietly resting his hands on her shoulders.

Lisa nodded. "I know."

"You okay?"

"Yea." Lisa had never killed anyone before. There was no going back. She didn't how she felt about that.

The two waited in the softly falling rain. Both of them were now hearing the sounds of sirens in the distance. The others cautiously joined Kent and Lisa as the fire died out slowly. Michael and Marseille hugged their son while Kent kept an ever-watchful eye on the wreckage, still not willing to be sure that the old witch was really gone.

Lisa looked at Kent and his folks, and then at Daniel and Cheyenne. They were all alive, stunned, and in no small amount of shock.

"Where's Brenda?!" Kent suddenly remembered, looking around. But she wasn't anywhere in the park that he could detect.

Lisa and Brenda both felt each other's presence as Brenda slipped quietly away into the night.

"I think we're through here, Hon," Lisa offered.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She nodded. "We should go," she said.

The officers scoured the park under a light drizzle, looking for the cause of the explosion that had severely burnt the grass and lofted a huge refining tank nearly a hundred yards from where it had sat peacefully for the better part of a century.

The officers wandered around inspecting the old but now shredded tank lying in massive fragments and smaller pieces within the shallow crater it had created.

A section of the metal creaked. One of the officers focused his light on the massive piece of steel as a feminine hand emerged, clawing its way out of the dirt.

“Hey!” he began calling out, “Hey! Hey, there’s someone under here! Someone’s alive over here!”

EPILOGUE

Wine glasses lifted as the six of them celebrated around the dining room table of the mountain home. Everyone, including Daniel and Cheyenne, lifted their glasses as the elder Levi offered a toast of cheer and thanks to his son and new daughter-in-law for their rescue and return to safety.

“I never thought we’d ever see you again, Kent,” Michael Levi nodded his eyes welling again. His boy had well grown beyond anything he could have ever imagined.

Cheyenne looked at Kent and then Lisa, “I don’t understand. They had taken us captive and handed us over to the assassins. We were with the Levi’s. How did you find us?”

Kent smiled at Cheyenne, but said nothing.

“Yes,” Daniel agreed, now looking at Kent. “You couldn’t find your parents, but then suddenly you could? You found all of us? How?”

Lisa finished taking a sip from her glass, "It was Kent's idea, actually."

"What idea?" Daniel probed now looking at Kent.

"No way, Gorgeous, you're not blaming this on me," Kent grinned back at his wife.

"Blame who for what?" Daniel interrogated.

"Daniel," Kent began, "when you took that slug in the thigh and went to the hospital. The government placed an RF chip in your femur, so they could track you."

"They did?!" Daniel's eyes drew wide.

Kent nodded. "We saw it the moment we ran the med-scan to heal your leg."

"I don't think I like where this is going," Daniel offered, frowning.

"The really interesting thing about passive RF—," Kent raised his glass again, "the government isn't the only one who can follow those things," Kent smiled a nod, taking a sip from his glass.

"You left it? I can't believe you left it inside me!" Daniel fumed, frowning at the two of them. Both Kent and Lisa were smiling but it was hardly funny!

"Well," Kent shrugged, "you did light the way. It is what allowed us to find you."

Daniel shot an unhappy glare at Lisa. "So it *was* you. You sent us into town on purpose! You knew they'd find us! You set us up!"

Lisa grinned coyly over the top of her glass, "Maybe."

Daniel shot at bewildered look at Kent.

Kent shrugged a whimsical grin back at Daniel.

Daniel looked back at Lisa who was now widely grinning as a soft unworldly brightness flashed within her eyes.

THANK YOU!

For Kindle readers, please [TAP HERE](#) to leave a review of AWAKENED.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in the beautiful Pacific Northwest, I've spent most of my life writing. I am, at heart, merely a storyteller. As early as I can remember I have loved stories and loved telling them in my own inimitable way.

Through my teens and twenties, I captivated groups of friends by weaving their role-play characters into fabulous, immersive scenarios filled with intrigue and emotion. The games were more than just rolling dice, commanding starships and slaying dragons. Our weekends together became deeply personal surrealisms.

While those games have now become fond distant memories, the child within who created them lives on, more imaginative than ever.

AWAKENED

Finding herself lost and injured in the rugged Cascades, swimsuit model Lisa Kyle is unwittingly rescued by a man living alone in a mysterious home nestled deep within a remote mountain canyon.

When he reveals the secret of his past, the two soon discover they have much more in common than a hotly budding romance.

With federal agents in hot pursuit, the trail of blood they are destined to follow leads them to an even deeper secret and an ominous power the government will stop at nothing to secure for itself!