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### Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Plus Ultra

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Zach Fromson

June 2014

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The Thesis of Zach Fromson is approved:

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS:**

**UNNUMBERED CHAPTER**

**1**

**CHAPTER IV**

**8**

**CHAPTER VI**

**37**



The goddamn flies were everywhere. On the one hand, Manuel thought, it'd be good for the insect traps. No shortage of samples to choose from, that was guaranteed. But they weren't making his job any more pleasant. In the heat of the midday sun, he was sweating through his work shirt, and was pretty sure the sweat was only attracting more flies to him.

“Fucking hell,” he said as he swiped at the swarm with his hat. They seemed to anticipate the move, and the swarm broke apart only to reform a moment later. Manuel spat on the ground.

“Feed on that, why don't you.”

He pushed a tree branch out of the way and pulled the insect trap closer to him. The yellow card was zip-tied to a branch just far enough off the trail that the casual hiker wouldn't know it was there. Flies were buzzing around it, and he felt them landing on his hands and arms. They would only land briefly, taking off again after no more than a second. Somehow, that made it worse, the sensation of insects landing and walking on him combined with the sudden feeling of one landing or leaving. One of the flies landed on his lips, and he recoiled, wiping his face. It probably looked more like flailing than wiping, but whatever. He didn't sign up for this job because he liked bugs.

Moving faster this time, Manuel reached the tree branch and pulled the trap towards him. He cut the zip ties with his clippers and slid the yellow card into its specially made plastic bag. He sealed the bag and put it away with the others.

“Great. Only a billion more,” he said to himself. He took off his hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead. A glimpse of movement from the brim caught his eye before he put the hat back on his head. Turning it over, he saw a spider crawling away from him. It was large, about the size of a quarter, and dark. He couldn’t tell if it was black or brown, but he didn’t need to look that closely. He shook the hat violently, and watched with relief as he saw the dark dot of the spider’s body sail over the hiking trail and into the bushes beyond.

“There you go, buddy, go find some place to set up shop and get rid of these damn flies.” He stared at the buzzing swarm of black flies and shooed them one more time with his hat before putting it back on.

“Manuel, you’re not meant for this.” He talked to himself when he was out in the field a lot. All the other guys did it too, they said. It was a way of coping with the isolation. He’d drive all over a chunk of the state to pick up these insect traps and post new ones up, then drive all the way back to the Department of Agriculture offices and drop the traps off for testing. If he had found something remotely interesting, nobody had ever told him. That just compounded the isolation though.

Still, he was grateful to have the job. His papá had told him he wasn’t allowed to work the fields, that he had to be better, had to do more. He’d finished high school, gone to community college and finished a useless Associate’s Degree in the humanities, but when he was done he couldn’t find a job. No one was hiring. He almost had to move back to the farms, where he would have worked alongside his father’s disappointing stare for the rest of one of their lives, but then he’d met the Agriculture guy who came to check

the insect traps on the farm. For whatever reason, the guy had taken a liking to Manuel, and recommended him for field work with the Department. Two weeks later, he was starting this job.

That had been two years ago. He liked parts of it. He was used to being around plants all day. They made sense to him. But even as a kid, growing up around farm laborers, he had never gotten used to the bugs. Now, sweating and surrounded by bugs, he wondered how exactly this job was doing more or being better than his father.

And the nature of the job was such that he had to be out in the heat of summer, walking around and picking up the traps by hand. This was his second summer now, and he felt like he was even less prepared than he was last year. If anything, he was more miserable this year.

Wishing the spider all the luck in the world, he headed up the path. There was one more trap to collect here. It was, of course, right near the top of the trail. Manuel pulled his water bottle out and took a long drink from it. There were mint leaves in the water to help him feel cooler, but he hadn't gotten the mixture quite right. It wasn't as good as what his mamá made when he was a kid. Maybe it was just his childhood memory making it seem better, but he doubted it.

Manuel looked up at the sun, squinting and shielding his eyes with an outstretched hand.

“Chinga su madre,” he said, sending the words skyward.

If there was one thing he did enjoy about the work, it's that he got to see so much of what his state had to offer. There were days when he'd be next to the water, enjoying a



cool breeze and crisp air, or days when he'd be in a state park in the middle of a forest. He went into the cities a lot, too, collecting the traps from the orange and lemon trees people had in their front yards, or from hiking trails like this one. He'd been over them all before, but he still liked the variety. It beat the hell out of staring through an office window at the same view every day, unable to escape.

Yeah, this was manual labor, but it wasn't entirely bad, Manuel thought.

Manuel's feet felt a bump. He couldn't tell if it was the mountain shuddering, or a weird nerve thing that made his feet throb in his shoes. Or maybe it was just one of those really small earthquakes that only the seismic instruments would make a big deal out of. It was so short that he didn't even have time to figure out what it was, then it was gone. But it had been enough to send the flies scattered to the winds.

"Pfeh." Miguel spat again. "Good riddance."

He spotted three lone flies hovering in the shade of a tree. He watched them for a moment, following them with his eyes as they slowly sank to the ground, buzzing nearer to the base of the tree's trunk. Then they disappeared into the tiny black space between the tree's roots.

"So that's where you're hiding. Bastardos."

Miguel made the rest of the hike in a half-hour, pulled the used trap down and replaced it with a fresh one. The walk down was much easier, and the sun was at his back or behind the taller of the trees for most of the way.

On his walk back, he realized that he had forgotten to put up the fresh trap when he'd taken the first one down.

“Son of a bitch,” Manuel said under his breath. He had no reason to be quiet, there were no other hikers around to hear him curse. But he was quiet just the same. He took the fresh trap out and reached up to hang it from a tree branch.

While he was fiddling with the first zip tie, the trap got sucked out of his hand and fell straight to the ground at the base of the trunk.

“What the hell?” Manuel knelt down to pick up the fallen trap. When he reached for it, it slid away from him, into the black space between the tree’s roots and vanished from sight.

“Okay...” He sat back, debating what to do. Was this the same tree that the flies had been hovering next to earlier? He couldn’t remember, but now it seemed possible. Manuel decided that it didn’t matter, and he didn’t care enough about a trap to go digging around for one in the roots of a tree. He pulled another fresh trap and reached for a tree branch.

This trap got torn from his hand as well, and whipped right down to the base of the tree, where it disappeared like the first one.

“Okay, really? What the fuck.” Manuel looked over both shoulders to make sure no one had heard him swear. No one was nearby. He didn’t hear anyone in the distance either.

Losing one trap was easy to shrug off, but two in the same way had Manuel curious. He got on his hands and knees and peered into the base of the tree trunk. He didn’t know what he expected to see, but he hoped for some kind of explanation.

“Just, no biting or stinging bugs, okay?” He finished his internal monologue out loud.

He felt a slight breeze pulling air past his face. Was the breeze moving into the space between the roots? He couldn't figure out how that could be, but it seemed to be moving that way.

His hat flipped forward off of his head and capped the gap between the roots. The breeze stopped. Then, Miguel watched as his hat folded in on itself and disappeared into the blackness.

“Whoa!” He cried out in surprise. He tried to pull back, but met resistance. He was being pulled towards the tree.

“Hey! Hey, what the—Help!” Miguel shouted, but he knew no one was near enough to hear him. He braced his hands against the trunk of the tree, but his face was being pulled closer and closer to the black space between its roots. It looked like it was only a few inches wide, with the jagged outline of the roots bordering its sides and the rock of the mountain at its bottom. But it was getting closer, and the closer it got the bigger it looked.

“Oh, shit,” Miguel said. “Oh shit oh shit oh shit.”

He was almost close enough to put his eye up to the hole. He knew how close he was, but the hole wasn't getting any smaller. Instead, it kept getting bigger. He got his knees under him and tried to push back, his hands were still on the tree trunk and tried to push back, but nothing helped. He couldn't stop getting closer to the hole. Or was the hole getting closer to him?

The heat was still oppressive, and his hands were sweaty. The strain of trying to pull himself away from the tree had made them even sweatier, and they slipped off the trunk. Miguel felt the bark claw at the skin of his palms, but didn't feel any pain from it. The blackness was surrounding him now. He could still see light behind him, but it was only able to show his body from the waist down. He blinked, and the light was behind him. He was surrounded by blackness, with the light only a pinpoint in the distance. No wider across than three inches, with the jagged lines of roots on its sides and the rock of the mountain at its bottom.

And then it was gone.

## IV

The conversation had died so suddenly that the pots and pans hung from the ceiling rack reverberated in the silence, faintly humming with the echoes of human voices. In the kitchen doorway, his hand next to a pencil mark at four feet high and the date he'd been measured at it, Samuel gazed back at the surprised faces of his parents.

“How long have you been standing there?” His father’s question was not an accusation, but it carried the weight of guilt straight into Samuel’s stomach, where he felt it pull him down.

He hadn’t been standing in the doorway more than a moment, but he’d heard most of the argument even up in his bedroom on the second floor. He tried to answer, but words wouldn’t come. His dad’s eyes were wide enough to make the whites visible, standing out against the dark brown of his skin. His mouth was tight too, and his shoulders were bunched together, which he only did when he was mad. The yelling was too much already, Samuel didn’t want to say the wrong thing and make his dad angrier. So he stood in the doorway, and stayed quiet.

Then his mother sighed the sigh she usually gave him when she understood something he didn’t even know how to say. She broke away from Samuel’s eye contact, her almond-shaped eyes looking down at her feet as her thin frame slumped forward. It was a small movement, but Samuel knew it when he saw it. Unlike Samuel’s dad, his mom couldn’t hold on to anger, and the silence in the room deflated her.

“How much did you hear?” Her question was as full of guilt as his father’s had been, but Samuel could see his mother wearing the guilt herself, not pushing it onto him.

His mouth opened again, this time to confess the whole truth. That he hadn't been doing his homework, he'd come out of his bedroom when he heard the shouting, and had been up on the stairs listening almost from the beginning. That he'd started to cry, even though he was almost a teenager and wasn't supposed to cry anymore, and that he'd come down to try to stop his parents from fighting because... he realized he didn't know why he wanted to stop them from fighting. He felt the answer on the tip of his tongue, something he could tell his parents that would explain everything. But the thoughts and words escaped him. He felt useless and small.

“I dunno,” Samuel finally managed to murmur, barely more than a whisper.

“Oh, honey,” his mom said, moving towards him with outstretched arms to wrap him in a hug. He was nearly as tall as her now, and already as wide in the shoulders. Watching her come towards him like that made Samuel recoil instinctively. The angles were all wrong, she was moving right at him and at nearly the same size, he felt simultaneously too big and too small. Mom was supposed to be bigger, he thought. His movement stopped her in her tracks. She wrapped her arms around her own body, leaving his just out of her reach.

“Is it true?” Samuel asked, his voice much stronger. His confusion was giving way to anger that he was twelve years old and his parents still talked to him like a child and expected him to behave like a child. Nobody explained anything to him even though he was smart enough to know what was going on. It stung, and he felt the burn of it like a fire in his nerves. His parents looked at each other, but neither of them spoke.

“Is it true?” He asked again. “Am I really not invited? Does Auntie Mai and Grandma Lin really not want me there?” He hurled the words as fast as he could, venom tipping each sound. His mom retreated to the far side of the kitchen, her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open.

“Yes, but—”

“Did they really tell you that I’m not Chinese enough? Is that what they really think of me?”

“They didn’t mean—”

“Yes they did!” Samuel felt himself shouting but couldn’t calm down. She was treating him like a kid again. “You’re lying! Why would they say that if they didn’t mean it?”

“Samuel, stop,” his father’s voice cut through his anger with its softness. His dad’s voice had always been firm and smooth, even when he shouted it was more like he was just talking loudly. He looked at his dad now, his vision blurred at the edges by the tears he felt welling up.

“It wasn’t your mother’s fault,” he said. “Don’t yell at her like that.”

“No, Jacob, he’s right to be mad,” his mom moved to behind his dad and put her hand on his shoulder. He turned to face her, leaving Samuel watching his parents again and feeling invisible. At least now they weren’t shouting.

“You’re goddamn right he’s right to be mad, but not at you. Not like that.”

“Then why were you mad at mom?” Samuel didn’t want to be invisible, not when the conversation was about him. He hated when other kids in school would talk about

him like he wasn't in the room, the thought of his parents doing the same thing almost brought him to screaming again.

"I wasn't mad at—" his dad stopped abruptly, his eyes moving quickly like he was thinking fast. He knelt down on one knee and looked up at Samuel's face.

"Look," he sighed, "I was yelling because I was mad, but not mad at your mom. I was mad at...the whole situation. The reason that Auntie Mai and Grandma Lin didn't invite you to the Lunar New Year party was—"

"Jacob..."

"He needs to know, can't you see that? I mean, damn it, Lori, look at his face. What the hell are we supposed to tell him?"

Samuel watched his mom as her face drew all its pieces together, scrunching up like a dog's face, or like a person who saw a punch coming.

"Sammy, your grandma has some old ideas, and to her, you and me, we're just too..." he paused, Samuel watched him try to find the right word, a soft word that would spare Samuel his pain. A child's word. "We're just too American to go to her Chinese New Year party."

"Too black, you mean." Samuel said it flatly.

He knew enough about race from school, even though he'd never told his parents. He knew that being what his teacher called "mixed race" meant he was neither Chinese nor Black, and kids made fun of him sometimes for the color of his skin, his hair, or his eyes. They'd call him Blackinese, or worse. Once, when he'd asked in class what a



Chigger was, the other kids laughed at him, and his teacher didn't answer. He'd gone to the library and looked it up on one of the computers.

His mother buried her face in her hands, and Samuel could hear her begin to cry.

Samuel felt the guilt twist his stomach, felt his words from that simple answer pull at his mind, knowing he'd made his mom cry. He didn't know if it was because he'd said he was Black and not Chinese, or for some other reason that she wasn't telling him. Had he offended her? Had he disowned her, like he'd read about families doing? That was usually because the woman had shamed her family somehow, and Samuel wasn't ashamed of his mother. No, he decided, it wasn't his shame that made her cry. It was Auntie Mai's and Grandma Lin's. It was their shame. They were the ones who didn't see him as Chinese. They were the ones that made his dad yell at his mom. They were to blame. It was their fault.

"Well, *fuck* Auntie Mai and Grandma Lin!" Samuel shouted. His hands balled into fists. He'd never used that word around his parents before, and looked at their faces to see if they got mad.

"Sammy—" his father put his much larger hand on Samuel's fist, but Samuel threw his arms up and moved away.

"No!" Anger flashed within him, bringing heat to his face and tears back to his eyes. "No! If Grandma Lin doesn't want me at her party, I don't want to go! *Fuck* her party! And if Auntie Mai doesn't want me there, then *fuck* her too! She can go have her stupid party with Grandma Lin without me! I don't need to be at some stupid Chinese New Year party if they don't think I'm Chinese!" Every time he used the word, it came

out a little bit higher. He'd heard his dad use it before, but he'd also heard kids in school get in trouble for using it, and had learned never to use it when grownups were around. But if Auntie Mai and Grandma Lin really had said those things, he thought that they deserved the word. They deserved it for making his mom cry and his dad yell.

“Samuel!” His father towered over him at his full height and used a much louder voice. But Samuel could feel the tears coming down his cheeks in hot streaks, and he kept going.

“Why are you defending them?” He turned his head up to scream at his father directly. “They’re the racist ones, not me! They’re the ones who think I’m too Black! You should be mad at them, not at me!”

“I am!” his father shouted back. Samuel stopped short, but the tears continued to slide down his cheeks. His face felt wet and hot, and his hands were shaking from being fists for so long, but Samuel couldn’t stop them. His father had yelled though, and he knew he’d been wrong. He’d been wrong to yell, and wrong to use the F-word, and wrong to blame his Auntie Mai and Grandma Lin. His cheeks burned hotter.

Stifling a sob, Samuel turned and ran from the kitchen to his bedroom, his feet stomping on every floorboard of the stairs and hallway. He slammed the door as hard as he could and let out the sob he’d held back in the kitchen. It pulled his stomach up to his throat, bringing with it all the feelings of anger, guilt, and shame, along with an acidic taste in his mouth. Yelling at his mother like that now struck him as a terrible thing. He hadn’t meant to make his mom cry, but he’d done it anyway, and thinking about it made his cheeks redden all over again. Samuel’s face felt hot, and he hated the feeling. He

wanted the heat to go away, to not feel the shame that went with it. He wanted to feel nothing, to be cold as stone. But the more he wanted it, the hotter his cheeks felt. He sat for a time that could have been minutes or hours, crying on the floor of his bedroom, using his t-shirt to wipe the tears and snot from his face.

Samuel wished he hadn't said those things about Grandma Lin and Auntie Mai. The more he thought about them, the more he remembered every year going to Auntie Mai's home in Chinatown and helping clean the house before the big dinner. It was the only time of year he had pig and duck in the same meal, and all the sweets afterwards. His mom always told him to not have so many sweets, but at Auntie Mai's house he was allowed as many as he wanted. Now he'd never have another one because he'd never be allowed to go back there. How could he? Grandma Lin lived there now, too, and she didn't want him. He didn't know why Auntie Mai had let Grandma Lin get away with it. He'd always been allowed before, but because of Grandma Lin, now he couldn't? Was it just that Grandma Lin was racist, but not Auntie Mai? He wished he could know. He felt like his parents knew, because they were grownups, and grownups talked about these things, but they never talked with kids about them. And how could his mom forgive him for saying those awful things? What made him feel even worse was that he still felt like he meant them. Anger and sadness mixed up in him and he didn't know who he was mad at or why he was sad anymore. Mostly, he just wished he hadn't heard the argument between his parents and that he'd never said those mean things. He wanted to still be Chinese, and he wanted to be Black. He didn't know how to be one or the other, and he wasn't sure how.

There was a soft knock on the door.

“Sam?” His father’s voice.

“Go away,” he said, not wanting his dad to see him crying.

“Sam, it’s okay, nobody’s mad at you.” This from his mom. So they were both out there, and they’d both see him crying if he opened the door. If they saw him cry, they’d never treat him like a grownup.

The handle jiggled again.

“Sam, Sammy, come on, open the door so we can talk, okay?”

“Mom, go away!”

There were quiet murmurs that Samuel couldn’t hear through the door for a moment, and he heard one set of footsteps walk away back down the stairs.

“Samuel, please open the door,” his father’s voice came through soft and steady, full of the kindness and love that Samuel wanted to open the door and run into. He knew his dad would give him a big hug and pick him up, but he couldn’t. He needed space, his room was too closed and he felt trapped in.

Moving as quietly as he could so his dad might just think he was asleep, Samuel pulled his bedroom window open and popped the screen out. He’d go to his private place on the roof where he could sit and think and be outside. It was a January afternoon, but the sun was still up and it wasn’t that cold. He grabbed a sweater anyway, just in case, and climbed out, closing the window behind him. Leaning back against the glass, Samuel let out a huge sigh.

There was a light breeze that nipped at his skin, pricking it with bits of cold air as it rustled the leaves in the trees lining the street. It smelled clean and crisp and wonderful. Samuel closed his eyes and let the sunlight bathe his face while the air dried his cheeks.

A thud shook Samuel as something hit the roof right next to him. His eyes flew open and he rolled sideways away from the impact. When he looked up, there was his dad. He was sitting on the other side of the window smiling at him with those amazingly white teeth and brown eyes.

“Sorry, kiddo, didn’t mean to scare you.”

“How’d you know I was here?” Samuel was too startled by his father’s presence to even think of being angry.

“Sammy, you’re not the first kid to come out onto the roof to get away. I know this might shock you, but it’s kind of a common thing.”

“So...you’re not mad?”

His father laughed then, softly.

“No, I’m not mad. But I do need to talk with you, if that’s okay?”

Samuel wiped a thumb over his cheeks. They felt dry. No more tears, then.

“Okay.”

“Okay. Now, I’m gonna talk to you about all the grownup stuff, nothing’s off limits here, but you tell me if you have any questions or if you don’t wanna talk, okay?”

“Yeah, okay, Dad.”

“So, your Auntie Mai and Grandma Lin, you know they’re not bad people, right? They just have some old fashioned ideas because they haven’t had the kind of

experiences your mom's had. She wanted to get away from all the stuff she grew up with."

"You mean she didn't like the Chinese New Year?"

His dad laughed again.

"No, she didn't."

"So then why did we even go? If Auntie Mai never wanted me there—"

"Sam, she did want you there."

"Then why doesn't she now?"

"Well, when your Grandma Lin moved in, I think she's just...it's hard for grownups to say no sometimes, too. Like how you feel when your mom and I ask you to do something and you feel like you're being ordered. Sometimes, grownups feel the same way. But, you know, I think Grandma Lin was hoping that she could see you as Chinese, and she's mad at herself because she can't. And you're growing into a man, almost as big as your mom now. That scares her, I think, but it also means you're your own person now and not your mom's child. And maybe she felt threatened."

"So is that why she called me a *hock way*?"

"A what?"

"*Hock way*," Samuel repeated. "I heard you and mom, she said that Grandma Lin called me that."

"Oh," his father's face went solemn and still. "She called you a *hak gwei*. And that's a very nasty thing to call someone."

"What's it mean?"

“Well...it means ‘black ghost.’ But the Chinese use it the way American kids use that word we talked about a couple years ago.”

The realization hit Samuel hard.

“Oh.”

“Yeah...” his father seemed not to know what else to say.

“Hey, Dad? Why don’t we spend any holidays with your family?”

“Sammy, all my family is back in Namibia, and they’re just too far away. One day, we’ll take you there. You’ll get to meet your uncle and your grandparents, and see where your dad lived when he was your age. They’ll want to have a big feast for you, I bet.”

“Promise?”

“Yeah, kiddo, I promise.”

“What about Chinese New Year?” Samuel felt tears coming back to his eyes, but not as bad.

“I think we’ll wait and see what Grandma Lin and Auntie Mai say when we talk to them in a day or two. I hope they’ll change their minds.”

“And we could still go? Even though I said...” he didn’t want to repeat it.

“Yes, we can still go. But not if you stay out here, so come back inside, okay?”

Without waiting for a reply, Samuel watched his dad get up and walk across the rooftop to another window and climb inside. He wanted to get up, but he was suddenly so exhausted that all he could think about was closing his eyes and resting for just a minute while the sun was still on his face. Just one minute.

#

When Samuel twitched awake, sound was the first thing to reach his brain. Drums were beating, and the beating was getting louder. Then his eyes opened and he saw it was full dark. Drops of rain struck his face. Bolts of bright white streaked across the sky, shattering the blackness of the clouds into pieces for a flash before they vanished. The rolling drumbeat became thunder and it washed over Samuel as thoroughly as the rain. Surprised and scared, Samuel clamored up to his window. His fingers were so wet that he couldn't grip the molding well enough to open it. Thunder rolled through him again, filling his skull with sounds and feelings of the storm. To Samuel, it sounded like there were drums underneath the thunder. He'd heard thunder before, but this was different somehow. It scared him. Something in the thunder urged his small hands to grasp more frantically at the window. He planted his feet on the roof and tugged upward with all his might to slide his window open so he could crawl back into his bedroom.

His feet shot out from under him, dropping him on his side onto the roof with a thud. He grabbed for the ledge of his windowsill but it was out of his reach and flying upward, away from him. No, he was falling. He was sliding. He was sliding off the roof.

Samuel flailed his arms wildly, searching for any handhold, anything that might stop him from falling, but the rain had come down hard and sudden. It had turned the rooftop into a slide as the water cascaded down in sheets. Lightning flashed again in the clouds and a clap of thunder responded immediately by shaking the trees and the thoughts



inside Samuel's mind. He brought his hands up to his ears, only realizing as he felt his legs shoot off the edge of the roof that he wouldn't be able to stop himself.

For a moment, Samuel was in a perfect freefall, caught between the roof and the ground. He had just enough time to think about the inevitable collision when the world flashed white all around him.

He was blind. Featureless whiteness overtook his sight.

Drum beats and thunder beat inside his skull too loud to think around.

Samuel had a vague sensation of movement.

A flash of the city lights beneath him. Then back to whiteout.

A flash of the city far beneath him now. Back to the featureless white.

A flash of moisture. Fog. No, cloud. Inside a cloud.

The drums never stopped in his brain, but his eyes told him he was high, high up.

Samuel felt movement again, this time forward, or something near forward. The white dimmed in his vision and he saw open space between two clouds. Then another flash and he was inside a cloud again. He tried to crane his neck to look down, but found no matter which way he turned nothing seemed to change.

He wondered if this is what flying felt like.

Another blinding whiteness, another blast of thunder drumming into his brain.

Another image of the city. Closer now.

City lights very close now. Like coming in for a landing and watching the details of the city fly up to meet the plane.

The brightness faded, leaving only ghostly images in Samuel's eyes; the thunder was receding as well. Samuel could hear a faint drum beat now, but it blended in with the thunder as everything raced away from him.

He was standing on a sidewalk in the pouring rain. Streetlights cast their pools of light around him, each drop of rain flashing brightly as it came near before striking the ground or some part of Samuel's body. He was soaked to the bone, his mother would have said.

The winter night air blasted a chill through Samuel's sweater and pants. He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself. Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the night, and he could see clearly again. But he still had no idea where he was or what had happened.

He looked around, frantic, hoping for something to make sense to him.

Fear threatened to push up against his stomach and then drag him to his knees. All Samuel wanted was to have his father's hug that he'd run away from earlier, to be picked up and carried away and told it was all okay. That he was safe. That everything was alright.

He sat with a wet plop on the sidewalk.

Voices from somewhere nearby started talking very loudly. Familiar voices. Samuel looked around again, this time noticing details he'd missed before. These rose bushes, they looked familiar to him. And the drapes covering the windows of one of the houses, didn't he know those colors? His eyes followed a brick walkway across a lawn and up to a front door he would have known anywhere.

He was at Auntie Mai's home. It was her voice that he heard, calling something in Chinese.

He couldn't believe it. It didn't make any sense. How had he gotten here? What was that blinding whiteness and the noise about? He tried to remember what had happened. He'd been on the roof, and it had started raining. He'd slipped, and was falling. And then, what?

Lightning flashed above him, and Samuel recoiled, shrinking close to the ground. But the thunder rolled over him and it was just thunder. No weird drums. Slowly, he relaxed and breathed again.

He knew he wasn't dead. At least, he didn't feel dead. He imagined that being dead would feel less confusing. He'd know if he was dead.

Cars drove by in the rain, which finally caught up with Samuel's mind. The weight of his clothes pressing against him made Samuel feel heavy. Each pelt of a raindrop hitting him pushed down on him a little harder, making him feel plastered to the ground. He needed to get out of the rain.

He stood up and walked to the brick walkway. The curtains were open in the living room and dining room windows, and he saw red paper lanterns dangling in them. There were plates and dishes on the table in the dining room. People were moving in the living room, talking excitedly. He heard his cousins and Auntie Mai talking. They'd let him in. Even if he didn't know what happened or how he got here, Auntie Mai would give him some tea and call his mom and dad, and they'd come get him. He pulled himself

upright, forcing himself to look as grownup as possible, and trying to ignore the rain. He got halfway up the brick walkway when he heard Grandma Lin's voice.

"Mai!" She walked into the dining room from somewhere deeper in the house.

"Mai! Where did you put the leftover containers?"

"They're where they always are, Mom," Auntie Mai replied. Grandma Lin sounded Chinese, but Auntie Mai talked like his mom did.

Samuel stood transfixed, ignoring the rain and cold. The sight of his grandmother filled him with uncertainty. She disappeared into the kitchen for a moment, and came back with plastic containers. He watched as she scooped food off of plates and poured it out of bowls, not wasting a single morsel of the meal.

"Mai, come help me!"

"In a sec, Mom!"

Grandma Lin called something back in Chinese, and it sounded angry. Mai called back and Samuel saw her get up from the couch in the living room. Here were the two women who were the reason for his parents anger and his outburst earlier, and he realized he was watching them silently while getting rained on in their front yard. These women for whom he wasn't Chinese enough were warm and dry inside, and he decided that just because they didn't want him to come over for Chinese New Year, didn't mean they had a choice whether they saw him now. He was going inside. He strode up the walkway and put his foot on the steps leading up to the front door.

Lightning flashed in the skies above him, and in the sudden brightness he locked eyes with Grandma Lin. She jumped, seeing him standing so near their front door, but

only a little. Then she squinted at him. Even after the lightning faded, she still looked through the window right at him. Samuel wasn't sure if she could still see him or not, but he felt her gaze nonetheless. Quickly, before Mai made it into the room, Grandma Lin walked to the window and closed the drapes.

Samuel felt the absence of the dining room light. The darkness swallowed him, but he was numbed to it now. He'd seen the old woman's eyes in that moment, seen her recognize him. And she'd shut him out. Even if he knocked, she wouldn't help him. He stared at the front door. It was almost an arm's length away, but suddenly he knew it was completely beyond his reach. All the anger, all the tears from earlier in the day washed out of him.

"Fuck you, old lady," he said to the door. "Fuck you. Who needs you, anyway?"

He walked back to the sidewalk, and kept going. At the first major street, he picked a direction at random and headed towards the next light. The cars didn't seem to see him, they all drove right past like they were trying to race the rain home. At a bus stop, Samuel dropped silently onto the bench. It wasn't covered, and the rain continued to drench him.

Then a cab pulled up to the curb and stopped.

"You okay, kid?"

Samuel began rocking back and forth, staring at the tips of his shoes.

"Hey! Hey, kid! You okay?" The cab's inner light was on and Samuel saw the man driving it was kind of fat, but looked nice. He had grey hair and grey eyebrows and a grey moustache and wore glasses with thick frames. He looked to Samuel like a cab

driver would look in a movie. The cab driver got out of the car and opened an umbrella. Moving to where Samuel was rocking, he squatted on the balls of his feet and held the umbrella over them both.

“Son, you gotta get outta this rain. You’ll catch your death of a cold out here.”

“Colds are caused by viruses,” Samuel said into his chest, but he stopped rocking and looked at the cab driver.

“What?” The man seemed confused.

“Colds are caused by viruses, not by rain. My teacher in school told us you can’t catch a cold by getting rained on.”

The old man laughed.

“Well, I guess that’s true. But you can still get cold, and it’s freezing out here. Come on, come into the cab and get warm at least.” The old cab driver stood up, taking the umbrella with him. Samuel squinted as rain hit his face again, and decided to stand up to stay under the man’s umbrella. Together, they walked the few steps to the cab and the man opened the passenger door.

“Climb in, kiddo.” And he did.

Samuel wrapped himself in a blanket the cab driver pulled from the trunk. With that and the vents pointing the heater’s air right at him, he started to warm up quickly.

“So where ya live, kid? Can I give you a lift home?”

“I don’t have any money,” he said.

“I’m guessin’ you live right on the way to my house. I can drop you off, no problem.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, kid. Really.”

Samuel told the old man his address, and the cab driver typed it into the navigation system. He turned the meter off and pulled away.

The cab’s sway along the road put Samuel at ease. He was starting to feel sleepy, and the heat and quiet made him even drowsier. Bundling into the blanket, he closed his eyes.

Before he could sleep though, he felt his arms tingle.

“What the...” The cab driver’s voice broke the silence.

Samuel opened his eyes and saw all the lights and dials inside the cab start flickering. Even though the meter was turned off, it was flashing randomly. It wasn’t numbers or letters, just random flashing red bars, like it was going crazy. The navigation screen was all weird too.

“Hey!” The cab driver hit the dashboard with the ball of a hand, the way Samuel’s dad would hit the toaster oven if it burned his bread. All the light-up things kept freaking out.

The tingle spread to Samuel’s fingers, and up to the back of his neck. He pulled his arms out from under the blanket and pushed his sleeves up. The hairs on his arms were all standing up. He heard a faint buzzing sound in the cab, and the cab driver looked over at him with wide eyes distorted by the big glasses.

Samuel's heart raced, beating in his chest like the drums he'd heard. He shut his eyes and hugged his knees against his chest. There was no room to rock in the seat, but he tried anyway.

The buzzing stopped.

"Weird," he heard the cab driver say. Samuel kept his eyes shut tight the rest of the drive, and his knees pulled in.

#

When the cab pulled up to Samuel's house, he didn't wait for an umbrella or even for the cab's engine to stop. He bolted from the passenger seat right to the front door as fast as he could. He wanted his mom and his dad, and he wanted to be inside and away from the drums and the rain and the thunder and lightning. He pounded frantically on the front door. It opened, and his mom was standing in the open doorway. When she saw Samuel on the stoop, already back to soaking wet and shivering, she looked very confused.

"Sam, what are you doing out here? Your dad said you'd gone back into your room and were asleep! And look at you! You're soaked to the bone!"

"Mom, I..." his voice trailed off. He didn't know what to say.

"You're the kid's mom?"

"Yes, who are you?"

"I'm just a cab driver, name's Frank. Found this guy on the sidewalk 'bout twenty miles from here, near that tattoo place with the purple panther."

Now Samuel's mom was staring at him with wide eyes.



“Is that true, Samuel? How did you get all the way out there?”

“I dunno. “Samuel shrugged, “I think I flew.”

Furrowing her eyebrows, his mom pulled him inside.

“Come in and tell me what happened, I’ll make us some tea. Frank, thank you. If you’ll wait here just a moment I’ll get my wallet and—”

“Nah. No need for that,” the cab driver said. “It was on my way home, really.” And he walked back to his cab, the door closing behind him.

“Alright, Sam, let’s talk. I think you and me and your dad need to talk anyway, but I need to know how you got twenty miles away. And dressed like that! Didn’t you think to take an umbrella?” She shooed him upstairs to change into dry clothes while she made him tea. When he came back down, his favorite mug was sitting on the dining room table, full of steaming tea from Chinese herbs. It smelled earthy and fragrant, its pale green color swimming in the thick glass. His parents were drinking from their own mugs. They smiled at him when he entered the room.

“You look much better,” his father said.

“Thank you.” Samuel took a seat at the table and curled his hands around the glass mug. The tea was hot, and its warmth flowed into his fingers. He took a small sip and it warmed him all the way through, the earthy taste mixed with some flowery smell he couldn’t name. He closed his eyes and let it relax him.

“You gave us a scare, showing up like that, kiddo. You know, you told me you were going back inside. What happened?”

“You said you ran all the way there?” His mother looked at him from across the table, her mug of tea sitting between her hands, still full.

“No, I think I flew, Mom.”

“You flew?” She looked at him with an eyebrow raised.

Samuel shrugged again. He was beginning to feel nervous. He didn’t want to lie to his parents, but he didn’t understand the truth either. Why did he have to say that he flew? Now his parents would think he was crazy or a liar, and he wasn’t sure which was worse. Either one was bad, but that it might be both terrified him.

“I said I dunno, it just...it felt like I was flying, that’s all. I don’t know. Okay? One moment I was here, and then I was at Auntie Mai’s.”

“Mai’s?” His mom looked at him, very surprised.

“It’s true! She was there, and Grandma Lin saw me and shut the drapes on me. Then the cab driver picked me up. But, mom, I was there. I was there, and I walked away. I saw Grandma Lin, and she saw me, and I walked away.

“Okay, Sam,” his mom said softly. “We’ll call Auntie Mai and Grandma Lin tomorrow and get this sorted out. But you’re home and you’re safe now, that’s all that’s important.”

“Sammy, think you can stay off the roof now?”

“The roof?” His mother turned an arched eyebrow to his father, who held up a hand to stop the question she was about to ask.

“He was fine, just out there to get some air. We talked, it was okay. But I think he’s learned his lesson. Haven’t you, Samuel?”

“Yes.” Samuel felt his shoulders relax. They weren’t going to yell at him or disown him. Maybe they didn’t even think he was crazy. Maybe they’d keep it to themselves and not tell Grandma Lin or anybody, and no one would ever know he might be crazy. Maybe he wasn’t even crazy.

Maybe he had flown.

It all seemed so real. The drumming, the beating of the thunder inside his head, the light and the sensation of movement. He closed his eyes and took another sip of the tea, and imagined himself back in the cloud. He tried to picture the space between the clouds. That space with the city lights impossibly far below him, and a perfect piece of the night sky impossibly wide above him. He hadn’t been cold then, or wet. He’d been surrounded by nothing, but he felt supported somehow. It was like he had been moving on an escalator. He hadn’t moved, but he had *been* moved.

Unbidden, the image came to him of Auntie Mai’s closed front door. He didn’t see it in the first moment, but from later. He was seeing it the moment after Grandma Lin had shut the drapes, when he’d decided that he didn’t need either of them. Instead of making him feel sad, he felt powerful. It had been his decision to walk away from them, not theirs. He could have knocked anyway, forced them to take him in, but he’d chosen not to. In that moment, he had disowned them.

Without opening his eyes, Samuel breathed in the fragrant steam from his tea and took another sip. The warm glass felt so good in his hands, so relaxing.

The tingle started in his arms again so softly he didn’t notice at first.

It was the scrape of the chairs backing up quickly that made him open his eyes, and by then his hands and neck were tingling too.

“Sam...” His father’s voice was thick, slow.

“Sammy, what are you—ah!” Samuel’s mother jerked her arm back and shook her hand in pain. She looked at his father.

“I got shocked!”

“Sam, tell us what’s going on,” his father said. But he didn’t reach for Samuel.

The buzzing had gotten louder, and Samuel looked at the mug in his hands. Where the skin of his fingers was touching the glass, it looked bright pink. Like he was holding one of those globe things with the electricity inside it in a science classroom, except this was just a glass mug. He pulled his hands away and jumped out of the chair.

“Woah!”

Thunder rolled in the distance, and Samuel thought he heard the sound of drums.

“Get away!” He shouted at his parents, his voice high pitched.

“What’s going on, Sam?” His mother said from across the room. “Tell us, maybe we can help.”

“I don’t know what’s going on! Okay? I don’t know!”

Lightning flashed, and Samuel’s skin tingled over his entire body, thrumming in response. The crash of thunder hit a second later both in the air outside and in Samuel’s head. He cried out from the pain and dropped to the floor, covering his ears in a futile attempt to stop the sound.

“Sam!” His father cried out to him and rushed to his side to put his arms around Samuel. Only when he got close, the air popped and a flash of white filled the space between the two of them, sending his father flying backwards. Samuel cried out and reached for his father, but stopped himself from actually moving. Only when his father sat up did he let his breath out.

“Help me,” he whimpered. He looked from the stupefied expression on his father’s face to the terrified look on his mother’s, and suddenly he knew. They couldn’t help him. They didn’t know how. Whatever was going on with him, they didn’t know how to take care of it. Neither of them moved towards him, they both stared helplessly as the air buzzed and popped around him louder and faster. The drum beat in his head got more intense until he felt it through his whole body.

He screamed.

“Get out of my head!” He shouted it at the wind, at the rain, at the lightning, at the thunder. He screamed it at the drums and at the feeling that his parents couldn’t help him. He screamed it at Grandma Lin and Auntie Mai for not wanting him. And he screamed it at himself.

Samuel staggered to his feet still holding his hands over his ears. He felt dizzy and nauseous, like he was about to throw up. The pounding in his head was throwing him off balance, shaking his hands and knees, making him run his shoulders into the walls to keep from falling over as he slowly made his way away from his parents.

He made his way slowly through the house, falling to his knees every time thunder shook the air outside the house. With every flash of lightning the air around him

would pop and hum, sparks darting between the upright hairs on his arms. It smelled thick, like the air outside had carried that smell of the storm into every room in the house, and no matter where Samuel went it was there with him. Finally, he felt the cool glass of the sliding door to the yard press against his shoulder. He sank to the ground again, not trying to fight the tears anymore. They fell down his cheeks, making sizzling and crackling sounds as they went.

Lightning struck, making Samuel scoot away from the window before collapsing again in the throes of the storm. When he could breathe and move again, he looked out into the yard.

“Why is this happening?” It came out as a whisper.

He hadn't been expecting an answer, but one came with a shock of lightning, not a flash, but like a tendril of energy, bumping against the glass in front of Samuel's face. He cried out in surprise and fell away from the pane, but there was no thunder. No sizzling of the air around him, nor any smell of ozone. The lightning just vanished.

“Sam, what was that?”

Samuel whirled around, his mother was standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. Behind her was his father, his hands on her shoulders.

“Mom?” All the fear Samuel felt in the pit of his stomach went into that question.

“I'm here, honey.” She started towards him, but his father's hands held her back. Even from across the room, his eyes were wide enough that Samuel could see the whites of them clearly.

“Dad? What's happening?”

“I don’t know, kiddo. But...but we’re here for you. Just stay there and stay calm and we’ll all figure this out, okay?” His face said something very different to Samuel though. His father’s face said that he was afraid of his own son, that he was afraid of the thing his son had done, or that his son was becoming. His face said he didn’t want to help.

Samuel took a step back from his parents, back against the glass pane. When his hand touched the glass, there was a humming sound. He turned to face the yard again. Before he could blink, he was staring at another energy tendril that came like lightning, but didn’t vanish in a flash. This tentacle touched the sliding glass door exactly at Samuel’s hand.

He moved his hand along the glass, and the not-lightning moved with it. It moved like a snake in the cartoons, following his every move. The drumming in his head was stronger now, but not loud. It was clearer, and Samuel could hear the beat distinctly. When he put his other hand on the glass and another fiber of energy came up to meet it on the other side, the beat got even clearer. It was a rhythm he’d never heard before, but could not resist. At once familiar and foreign, he felt his bones vibrate as the rhythmic drumming vibrated through his whole body. His back arched and his head rolled in circles back and forth, but his hands never left the glass.

The part of Samuel’s brain that still wanted to freak out tried to remind him that he had no idea what was going on, that this couldn’t possibly be happening. But that part was competing against the calm that flooded into Samuel. It was a calm that stopped the thunder from dropping him to his knees and stopped the air around him from buzzing and

popping. The calm felt like one of his father's hugs, the kind that picked him up and made him feel completely enveloped.

Samuel reached for the handle of the sliding glass door. When he took his hand away from the glass, the not-lightning vanished as well, and the freaked out part of his brain got louder.

"Sam!" His mother tore free from his father's hands and ran to him. He tried to shrink back, to ward her off, but when she grabbed him there was no electric shock. No pop in the air that zapped his mom and threw her across the room. She was crying into the curve of his neck, hugging him tighter than she'd ever hugged him before.

"It's okay," she kept repeating. Samuel wasn't sure if she was telling him or herself. He only knew that he wanted that feeling too, the feeling of everything being okay.

Samuel looked at his Chinese mother as she clung to him. He looked at his African father from across the room, who looked like he wanted nothing more than to come hug him as well but stood rooted by his fear. He looked at his own skin, his arms with the hair still standing upright on the light tan skin of his body.

"It's okay, mom," he said. "It's okay. I'm okay." He had to repeat himself several more times for his mom to let him out of her arms. Eventually, she did.

"You're okay." She smiled at him. He smiled back at her.

"I'm okay, mom. I'm sorry."

He only opened the sliding door a tiny crack. Just enough. But it was enough. The room was flooded with the most brilliant white light Samuel had ever seen, even brighter



than before. He couldn't see anything through the veil it created. He couldn't hear anything through the drumming, but for a moment he thought he heard his mother scream. Maybe it was a word, maybe it was just a scream. Maybe it was nothing.

A moment later, the white faded, and the city lights were far, far below.

## VI

### PART ONE: THE END

The bird snapped its head up and stared at us, as though it was surprised that we were interrupting its feast. The feast looked like it had once been a rabbit, but the bird's large black body obscured too much of it to be sure.

"Ugh, gross!" Margaret said. She hid behind Peter, holding him in front of her like a human shield.

"What is it?" Nathan was coming around the bend in the hiking trail, Alicia alongside him. He'd stopped to re-tie his shoe, and had missed the surprise.

"It's nothing," Peter said. He put his hand over Margaret's, who was grasping his shoulders.

"Just a bird that stopped by the side of the road for a bite," Roger said. I shot him a sidelong look that locked eyes with him like he'd been expecting it. I grinned, but punched him in the arm anyway.

"Shut up, Rog." Roger turned to the others.

"Hey! Hey! My girlfriend's abusing me! You all saw it, you're witnesses!"

Alicia and Nathan were standing with us now, and she punched his other arm.

"Shut up, Rog."

"Ow! Hey!" He turned to me. "Diana, are you going to let her abuse me like that, too?"

I punched him in the arm again.

"Shut up, Rog!"

“Oh, that’s how it’s gonna be, huh?”

“You deserved it.”

“That’s so not the point.” He grinned at me, and moved in for a kiss. I waited until the last moment before turning my face so he kissed my cheek.

Nathan and Alicia laughed, and Margaret giggled from behind Peter, who stood with his head down and his shoulders shaking from silent laughter. She stepped out from behind him.

“Di, stop it, he wasn’t that bad,” she said.

“You don’t know him well enough,” I said.

“You don’t know me well enough,” Roger said, overlapping me almost perfectly, so that our sentences sounded like one voice. We stared at each other and a fresh round of laughter burst out of us.

“Caw!” The bird cawed at us loudly. It didn’t seem amused.

“Caw!” it cried again, flapping its wings. There was blood on the tip of its beak, that made its cawing and flapping look more malicious than it otherwise would have.

“Oh, you too, huh?” Roger said. “Everybody’s a critic. Sheesh.” He threw his hands in the air in mock disgust and turned in a quick circle.

Something about the moment felt final, and the laughter was replaced by silence. We stood on the hiking trail, looking at each other, but not saying a thing. We didn’t even look each other in the eyes. Finally, Margaret leaned into Peter’s back. She wasn’t holding onto him anymore, but she hadn’t moved away from him, either.

“Pete...” she didn’t finish the sentence, but pleaded with her eyes.

“Yeah, okay,” Peter said. He walked towards the black bird and waved his hands at it.

“Shoo!”

The bird cawed back at him, flapping its wings and hopping backwards.

“Go on, get out of here!”

But the bird didn't fly off. It backed up a couple more hops, and sat there staring at Peter. It made a smaller noise, something between a caw and a coo, that sounded to me like the bird was trying to say “go fuck yourself, Bucko.” It regarded Peter with the disinterested gaze of someone who knows what's about to happen and is powerless to stop it, so caring isn't an option. It turned that gaze on us, looking right at me. It squawked again, this time like it was trying to tell me that this was my fault. Then, Peter kicked the remains of the animal off the slope. I heard it rolling down into the trees and brush, then nothing. Peter walked back to Margaret.

“There. All gone,” he said.

The bird regarded us for a moment longer, and then with a final hop and a squawk, it took off. I watched it dive over the edge, probably in pursuit of its meal.

“Thanks,” Margaret said. She stood up on her tiptoes and kissed him lightly on the lips. She was a good foot shorter than him, and it always took me a few minutes to get used to seeing them work with their height difference. Roger and I were almost the same height, so we didn't have any of those issues. She bounced on her toes, looking at all of us.

“So,” she exclaimed happily, “let's get back to it. Right, Petey?”

Peter took her hand in his.

“Right.” And the two of them continued along the path. Roger and I took our place behind the two of them again, with Nathan and Alicia behind us.

“You see that?” Roger whispered to me.

“See what?” I replied.

“Maggie. That’s what I was talking about. She lets Pete think he’s in charge, but she’s making all the decisions.”

“So?”

“You don’t find that kind of, I don’t know, manipulative?”

“Pete doesn’t seem to mind, he’s happy with her. Why should we care?”

This was the same conversation we’d had a few days ago, when Roger tried to convince me that Margaret was being manipulative. I couldn’t disagree, really, because she was. But I didn’t see the point in making a thing out of it if no one was upset or getting hurt.

“Just drop it, alright?” I said.

“Fine. Yeah.”

I didn’t want him to be in a sour mood for the rest of the hike, so I decided to change the direction we were taking the conversation.

“Hey, Rog?”

“Hmm?”

“Yer purdy,” I said it in as thick a southern accent as I could.

Roger clasped his hands in front of him and looked down, tucking his chin against his chest in a mock blushing.

“Awww,” he cooed.

Alicia’s face poked between the two of us.

“Guys, I hate to interrupt your little ‘tard moment, but you’re missing one hell of a view.”

We stopped and looked out. The view really was incredible. The path had come to a natural curve around the mountain slope, giving us a panoramic view that went almost full circle. I could see all the way down the mountain we’d come up, back to the tract homes and suburban sprawl that the hiking trail extended away from. On the other side of me, the mountain range extended into the distance, covered in trees and other wild growth. The city stretched off into the distance, gradually fading away.

“Wow.” I breathed the word, saying it loudly didn’t seem proper. I finally understood what the word *breathtaking* meant.

“Yeah,” Roger said. He took my hand and we stared out together, our friends around us doing the same thing.

The birds must have sensed it first. They took off from the trees all at once, and I had just enough time to wonder what spooked them before the first shockwave hit the mountainside. I’d felt earthquakes before, but I’d never been high enough up to see one coming. The foliage blanketing the slope waved, making the mountainside shimmer in emerald hues.

Then it hit us.

We were knocked off our feet, the six of us rolling in a tangle of flailing limbs as the ground bucked and roiled. There was nothing but shrubbery and stone to grab hold of. I heard Roger shout in pain and turned to see him roll off the side of the hiking path. I flung myself over him, hoping it would keep both of us from being thrown around quite so much. I caught a glimpse of the two other couples, Alicia and Nathan, and Margaret and Peter, doing more or less the same thing. I tucked my head and neck down, hoping any falling debris would either miss us or be small enough that my back could absorb the damage. There was a terrible rumbling sound, and the ground dropped out from under us.

The path turned liquid, taking us slipping and sliding down the mountain. We sank into the landslide, becoming part of it. I cried out and shut my eyes, shielding my face with my arms. I felt Roger pulled away from me, but was too scared to call his name. It was a short slide, thankfully, and I came to a sudden stop, rolling against a mound of what felt like rocks and dirt. Disoriented and tumbled, I had no idea which way was up or what direction I was facing, so I kept one arm in front of my face and thrust my other arm out to feel for my surroundings. I could hear moans from several people, but couldn't count how many. When I tried to move, pain shot through me and made me join in the chorus of the injured. I didn't think anything was broken, but I knew I'd be covered in cuts and bruises.

A hand grabbed mine.

"Diana, don't move. It's Peter. Don't open your eyes yet, okay?" Peter's normally soft baritone was rough, and his breathing was ragged. His grip was firm though, and I felt his other hand clear away dust and dirt from my face. Some kind of cloth wiped my

eyes more delicately, and he blew gently across my lashes. I heard the ground crunch as weight shifted on it, which I assumed meant Peter had leaned back and was finished.

“Can I open them?”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

Maybe it was the adrenaline, but everything looked so crisp it was surreal. The world was a shock of greens and browns, trees and shrubs jutting from the mountain, all reaching for the ice blue sky. Dust still hung in the air over our heads, but otherwise it was a cloudless summer day. The air smelled of fresh dirt. It had been perfect weather for a group hike.

I looked around and saw the others brushing themselves and each other off, climbing out of the dirt and rock. We took turns examining ourselves for injuries, Peter taking the lead. Margaret found a large tree trunk nearby that had been taken out in the slide. She sat on it, holding a hand to the side of her head. It looked like there would be a nasty bruise soon. Knowing Margaret, she'd ask Peter to carry her out. If she did, Roger would probably tell me that she was manipulating him again. She did like playing the feminine role, asking him to do all the manly things she supposedly couldn't. Some days, it seemed like he was aware of it, but enjoyed it.

I found Roger laying face up, staring blankly at the branches above him. Someone had cleaned the debris from his face, but he hadn't gotten up yet. I knelt next to his head.

“Rog, honey?” He didn't react. “Rog? Roger? Honey, come on, sit up.” I reached for his hand and tried to pull him into a sitting position.



“Ungh...” he moaned as I sat him up. I struggled against his dead weight, but once he was sitting he stayed that way. His eyes were staring straight ahead though. I saw Alicia stagger to her feet, and Nathan next to her. It seemed everybody had gotten up except for my Roger.

“Aly, did you clean him off?”

Alicia looked over. “No...Pete, did you?”

Peter was over with Margaret and Nathan, the three of them talking quietly over bruises and scrapes.

“Wha? Oh, yeah. He was just lying there with his eyes open, seemed dangerous. Hey, so, we’re all okay, right?”

Alicia and I nodded our assent, as did the others.

“Yeah,” I said, “except Roger’s not—” I was thrown to the side before I could finish the sentence.

“Aftershock!” someone yelled, and we were driven to our hands and knees again. This wasn’t nearly as devastating as the last one, and the ground stayed more or less put. A few seconds later, stillness returned. I rolled onto my back, clutching my chest, trying to slow the pounding of my heart. Whether it was the adrenaline rush or something else, I suddenly found myself grinning and laughing breathlessly. I was glad to be alive. Electric green tree branches waved above me. Specks of dust pixilated the sky, and flies buzzing in the air were the dead pixels in the ersatz image. Nothing here was real. Nothing here was real.

Except that it was. All very real. We had really slid down the mountain in a very real landslide during a very real earthquake; and now we were really fucked. Looking around, suddenly things didn't seem worth grinning about.

“What's that?” Roger asked. I started at the sudden sound, but the shock was quickly replaced by relief. I scrambled to my feet and ran to him. I fully intended on doing something akin to smothering him in kisses, but when I dropped next to him and took his face in my hands, he didn't move to look at me. He was reactive and alert, but he seemed intent on not breaking eye contact with whatever he was looking at. I turned to follow his gaze.

“Roger, I don't...” but the sentence froze in my throat.

I didn't know if it was the earthquake or the landslide, but there was an opening in the mountain. It wasn't a chasm opening with jagged edges, but rather like the world had irised open to reveal a hidden tunnel entrance. It looked to be about ten feet tall, and must have been directly underneath the hiking path for who knows how many millions of years. And we'd been standing on top of it when the ground gave way beneath us. Maybe that's why the ground had given way, I mused, because there was nothing to hold it up but the empty space of this black entrance into the side of a mountain. The remnants of the hiking trail and the ground under it had formed a kind of small clearing. Instead of being sloped downward, we were on ground that was almost level with the cave's entrance. And it was an entrance, all right. But an entrance to what?

“Hmm?” Roger was looking at me now, eyebrows raised.

“What?”

“You said ‘an entrance to what.’ What’d you mean?”

“Oh,” I muttered, “I just...I don’t...” I didn’t realize I’d said anything aloud.

“Holy fuck, what the hell *is* that?” Alicia had come up behind us and was now standing to my left, jaw agape. There was something incredibly hypnotic about the darkness in that hole. Gooseflesh ran up my arms despite the warmth of the day at the thought that something might be in there and able to reach out. Alicia must have gotten the creeps too, because she broke her gaze away and looked at the ground, tightening the baby blue long-sleeve shirt tied around her waist. Her khaki shorts showed off most of her legs, and I saw that they were prickled with goosebumps.

“Nathan, honey,” Alicia called over to her boyfriend, who was making large pointing gestures and talking with Margaret and Peter. “Do you see a way out?”

“Yeah, see...” Nathan walked over, the other two behind him. “That’s the thing. Look, we could try making our way through the trees and shit here, but Pete’s the only one of us who was smart enough to wear jeans, and the rest of us would get pretty tore up before we reached any part of the path again. So our best bet would be to get back up to the path there—” He pointed, though he didn’t need to, to the gap where the path had taken us all down to the mouth of this weird hole. There was nothing but loose debris and a sheer face above us with no way of climbing up.

“Well, shit,” Peter said.

“Yeah,” Nathan agreed. “Pretty much.”

Margaret chimed in. “Why don’t we call for help?”

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence between us, everyone seeming equally ashamed that none of us had thought to do that earlier. Roger finally got to his feet so he could dig in his pocket for his cell phone.

“No service,” he said. “Maybe the towers are overloaded because of the quake?”

“Shit,” I said, looking at my own phone. “I don’t have any signal either.”

“Well, ain’t that just a big ol’ fuckin’ bucket of useful,” Nathan said, sitting on a pile of rocks.

“What about other hikers?” asked Margaret.

“Maggie, honey, we could be waiting for hours for another hiker to come this way,” I said.

“As opposed to what, exactly?” Peter retorted.

“Shut up, Pete,” I snapped.

“No, I mean—” Another aftershock hit, halting the conversation and sending my heart somersaulting back into my throat once again. A little more loose rubble sifted down to us, but we didn’t hit another slide and the mountain didn’t seem like it was going to collapse on top of us. Still, I couldn’t take my eyes off of the cave’s mouth. I don’t know what I expected it to do, but when nothing happened, I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. From inside the darkness of the cave, long echoes reached us as whatever was loose in there got knocked around. It was only then that I realized that Alicia, Roger, and I had moved so that we never turned our backs towards the opening. Something about that smooth-edged hard shape was deeply unsettling.

The tremor faded. Pete was the first to recover, as usual.

“What I meant was that if we’re gonna be waiting down here no matter what. We can’t climb out and we can’t call for help, so we’re kinda stuck.” He paused, I knew it was just for dramatic effect. I was pretty certain I knew what he was going to suggest next, and I didn’t like it at all.

“So...” he grinned, “let’s go check out the cave.”

My stomach tried to switch places with every other organ simultaneously. Roger, bless him, took one look at me and put his arm around my shoulders.

“Why don’t we spread out a bit, see where we can get to, maybe one of us can find signal,” he said, looking at Pete. Margaret just looked at her feet and shook her head. Alicia and Nathan were more ambivalent, neither saying yes or no, but they didn’t look particularly thrilled with the idea. Alicia still wouldn’t look at the cave mouth, but hadn’t turned away from it either. I had been doing the same thing, but thinking about it made my eyes dart over, and they locked on again.

“Y’know what, I don’t see what the big deal is,” Nathan suddenly blurted. “Yeah, sure, I’ll check it out.”

“You think it’s okay, after the earthquake?” Alicia asked him.

“Yeah, I mean, look at how smooth those rocks are. It can’t be new, it’s stood up to more severe earthquakes than that one, right? It’s fine. Gotta be.”

“None of us are seismologists here, you know,” Alicia said. “We could be walking into a cave-in.”

“Or we could wait out here and get buried by a rock slide,” Peter retorted. “Look, there’s no guarantee either way. I’d rather trust a big solid rock than a bunch of loose ones, though.”

Roger looked at me and I met his eyes. Without saying a word, he asked me what I wanted to do. I thought for a moment and shrugged. I couldn’t deny the risk of a cave-in, but there was something about the cave that I wanted to explore.

Alicia looked slightly mollified by that and finally looked back at the cave directly. Her eyes were a bit wide, but she took a deep breath and calmed down. Maybe Nathan was right. Maybe it just looked weird because of some trick of nature, or I was just hopped up on adrenaline from the earthquake and wasn’t seeing things right. Or any number of other things. It was just an old cave that was uncovered by the landslide, nothing to be afraid of. Though I had to tell myself that several times before I started to believe it.

The logic seemed to work on the others as well. We all grabbed our water bottles from the rubble and headed in. Somehow, everyone fell in line behind Peter. It always seemed to happen that way, we’d all fall in line behind him. Not because he forced us to, and I had no idea whether he found himself in front all the time, or put himself there, but he was there all the same. He had this walk, where his shoulders would sway just a little bit. Just enough to look like a swagger. But he wasn’t swaggering now. Maybe it was because of all the loose rocks, or the earthquake, or maybe he was feeling more apprehensive than he wanted to let on. Whatever the reason, he didn’t seem to be letting

it stop him. Margaret, of course, was right behind him, but stopped at the mouth of the cave.

“Pete, shouldn’t we stay out here?” Margaret tugged at his shoulder, turning him gently away from the cave.

“What? Why?” Peter started to pull away, into the cave, but Margaret tugged his hand the other way. She put on a cute smile, but her eyes were darting around a little too fast. She looked scared.

“You know how I get those feelings sometimes?”

“What, seriously?” Peter scoffed. It looked like this might be the rare time when Margaret couldn’t get what she wanted out of him.

“I just don’t like it. Something’s weird. I mean, Alicia, you feel it too, right?”

“Oh, nuh-uh, don’t bring me into this.” Alicia took a step away from Margaret.

“Di?”

She was pulling the gender trick. Ask the women to be all girly so she could persuade Peter to keep her company. It was a dirty trick. But, at the same time, she really did look scared. Something had her spooked. I couldn’t explain why I wanted to go in, so why was it so weird that Maggie wanted to stay out? I sighed.

“Well, someone should probably keep an eye out for help, I guess...”

“Right!” Margaret jumped. She actually jumped, and she tugged on Peter’s sleeve again. “If we all go inside, who will be out here to call for any other hikers that pass by?” She batted her eyes at him. She had pretty eyelashes, and she definitely knew how to use them. Peter wilted, resigned.

“Yeah...” he turned back towards the rest of us. “Hey, guys? Maybe Mags is right. You guys go on and check it out. Someone’s gotta stay out here and arrange our rescue, right?” He flashed that grin of his again, the one not normally seen outside of animated movies because nobody would really grin that way, but it didn’t reach his eyes. I saw that he was disappointed to not go into the cave, but he looked resigned to staying with Margaret. It made me wonder what happened to him when he argued, or lost an argument, with her.

Peter picked up a stone about the size of his palm and tossed up and down a couple times.

“Fuck it,” he said, and he threw the stone as hard as he could into the cave.

We didn’t hear anything.

Margaret gasped, probably in anticipation, but nothing happened.

Peter cocked his head to the side, listening for the cathartic *thunk* of the rock hitting something, but the silence dragged out. He looked around, his eyebrows knitted together. We all looked at each other. I had no idea how to react, and nobody else seemed to know, either.

“Huh,” Nathan half grunted, half breathed the word.

“Yeah,” Alicia said. “What the fuck?”

“Pete, can we go?” Margaret was whining now. Next thing, I thought, she’ll throw a tantrum if he doesn’t take her as far away as he can.



“Yeah,” Pete said, still staring into the cave. “Yeah, let’s, uh, let’s go see if we can find a signal or something.” He backed away from the cave a few steps, then they walked off.

“That was weird,” I said.

“Which part?” Alicia said back to me. “Pete, Maggie, or the stone?”

“Yes?” I made it a question. Alicia snorted in appreciation.

“Well...” Nathan seemed at a loss for words.

“Well,” Roger looked at me, “unto the breach?”

I smiled. I couldn’t help it, he quoted Shakespeare to me without being a romantic sap about it. Not many men would even think to do that, and having one of them made me happy.

“Yeah,” I said, “now I’m all curious.” And the four of us crossed the threshold into the cave.

It was an incredibly anticlimactic moment. One step we were in sunlight, the next we were in shadow. I let out a long, slow breath and hoped it was quiet enough that nobody heard it. I felt foolish enough being nervous about a hole in the ground without my friends thinking of me as a fool.

“Hey, I think I found something!” Alicia said.

“What?” I replied.

“Dark.”

“Oh yeah,” Nathan said, “I heard that it likes caves.”

Boots crunched on the cave floor as we spread out, our voices echoing around us, making our laughter seem longer and our bad jokes funnier. It didn't take us very long to get our bearings inside the cave where we could still see in the dim light. But we hadn't found the back yet, and the echoes hinted that it was much deeper in.

I fished my cell phone out of my pocket and turned on the flashlight feature. A beam of bright white light shot out in front of me, piercing the darkness and illuminating the other three.

"Hey, look!" Peter called from the rubble outside, "Diana finally figured it out! Maggie and I were wondering which of you would be the first to realize that you all have flashlights!"

Roger waved his own cell phone flashlight towards the cave's mouth.

"Hey, Pete! Any sign of other people yet?"

"Nada, dude."

"Why don't you go check again?"

Margaret wandered off, presumably to a place with a better view of the path above us, and Peter tagged along after her, still grinning.

"Asshole," Roger said under his breath, but he was smiling too.

"Hey, take a look at this," Nathan said from across the cave, about thirty feet away. He was leaning in close to the cave wall with his own light in one hand and passing the other over the stone. I shrugged at Roger with a what-the-hell look and we headed over.

“You find some more darkness hiding under a rock?” Alicia asked as we converged around Nathan.

“Ha. No, really, this is odd. Check it out.” He stepped back so his light revealed a larger part of the cave wall. It looked like a cave wall.

“What am I supposed to be seeing?” I asked.

“Come closer, you might have to lean in to see it but...see here? The rock looks like, y’know, rock, but there’s this straight line and then it looks—and feels—smooth. Polished, only...”

Roger leaned in and ran his hand across the stone.

“What the hell?” he said. “That’s...huh.”

So we all took a turn running our hands over the stone where it went from rough to smooth. I traced it up as high as I could reach and Roger traced it down along the floor of the cave. It went all the way across and up the other side, reaching away into the darkness above our heads. Like a seam in the stone, only instead of being worn and polished close to the surface where it might have been exposed to the elements, it looked smoother farther in. All four of us stood in a line, phones lighting the way, peering into the edge of the darkness that retreated just past our lights, but was still palpable. The mouth of the cave yawned behind us, its aperture holding the warmth of a hot summer day at bay, but damned if it wasn’t an alluring thought to run out of the cave and back into that sunlight right at that moment. Despite the heat outside, the cave was cool, and a chill shimmied up my spine. It didn’t turn me away, though. If anything, the chill made

me want to go in even more. It wasn't the front of me that was cold, it was my back, the part facing the opening of the cave. I felt like the chill was urging me, pushing me.

I started walking farther in.

"Di, where are you going?" Roger asked.

"I don't know, but I'm gonna find out." I pulled a few loose strands of hair out of my face and set them back behind my ear, not that it really helped me see any better. Shuffling feet came up beside me on both sides. I felt Alicia's hand grab my left arm and heard Roger's breathing on my right side.

"Hey, Di? Promise me you'll protect me if we find anything in here," Alicia said quietly in my ear. "These boys are pretty, but not very tough." We giggled, drawing bemused looks from our boys. She was right, they were awful pretty. The bounce-back from our lights was a pale gleam on both of them, making Roger's dark blonde hair and brown eyes look kind of silver.

"Oh, hey, hang on one sec," Roger said. We waited while he darted back to the cave entrance and yelled to Peter and Margaret that we were going to explore a bit deeper. There were other words exchanged, but I didn't catch them. Then he was back and we were off again.

"There's nothing here..." Alicia's eyes were wandering over the cave walls, following her light.

"What do you mean, nothing here?" Nathan said. "It's a giant cave."

"No, I mean, like...aren't there supposed to be smaller rocks, or stalac-whatsis—"

"Stalagmites or stalactites," Roger interrupted.

“Yeah, whatever. Those. There’s none of them. It’s just smooth rock.”

“What are you, a cave expert now, Aly?” I poked her.

“No, it feels weird is all. I mean, right? It’s not just me?”

Roger, to his credit, tried to make her feel better.

“No, it’s not just you,” he said. “There’s no marks on the sides of the cave either, which is weirding me out. If this cave was ever exposed, there should be some hint of animals, or maybe cave paintings, or who knows what.”

“So maybe it was never exposed, then,” Nathan offered.

“Then how’d the rock get so smooth? And why isn’t it wet?” Roger put his hand to the rock and took it away to demonstrate both how smooth and dry it was. “We’re underground, right? Why isn’t it even damp?”

“Um, guys...” I tried to get between them physically as well as verbally, but doing so in low light proved useless.

“Look,” Roger continued, unaware, “all I’m saying is that Alicia’s not the only one feeling weird. I’m no geologist, so maybe I’m wrong, but maybe she’s right. Maybe it’s too clean.”

“Rog—”

“Too clean?” Nathan retorted. “That doesn’t even make any sense. No cave paintings or stalactites doesn’t mean anything, it’s just a cave.”

“Of course it’s just a cave! You’re missing the point I’m trying to make.”

“What is your point, then?”

“Boys!” I shouted. That finally got their attention.

“What?” They said it almost in unison. I would have laughed at them for it, under other circumstances. But there was no laughter in my throat.

“That,” I said. I didn’t need to point. Once everybody saw it, all conversation seemed completely irrelevant.

We’d reached the end of the cave.

I pointed my light in a sweeping arc and as far as it would throw, the gray stone was uniformly smooth, perfectly flat. While we’d been walking, the cave had grown wider. Wide to the point that we couldn’t see the sides anymore. I looked over my shoulder and the entrance seemed impossibly small for how short a time we’d been walking, but it was still there. A bright point of light, a beacon to prove that the world beyond hadn’t winked out of existence. A small voice in the back of my mind tried telling me that my pulse should be racing, my stomach should be doing acrobatics, and I should probably be sweating bullets, but none of these things happened. I stood before this massive gray stone wall at the back of the cave and stared at the enormity of it. I felt very small, but not afraid.

“Fuck me,” Nathan said. He craned his neck up, jaw agape, to take in the scope of what stood before us, his light making its own arc. He and Roger both got as close to the edifice as they could, exploring it with their fingertips like they knew what they were doing. Alicia took the opposite approach, backing away until she could see it as a whole. She retreated out of my peripheral vision, again without turning her back to the wall. I stayed rooted to the ground, my limbs having lost all ability to move except to swing my cell phone light back and forth, taking it all in.

“It just goes right into the rock,” Roger said, nearly enshrouded in shadow off to my right. “There’s no seam or anything, it just melds right into the side and ground here.”

“Yeah, same over here,” Nathan called from off to my left. “Doesn’t make any sense.”

“Does that look like a big circle to you?” Alicia’s voice came from behind me.

That finally broke my staring spell, and I turned around to see Alicia standing a few steps away, looking awed and confused. Roger and Nathan walked over to where she stood and all three of their lights revealed more of the wall as a whole. I walked back to join them, trying to ignore the creeping feeling I had on the back of my neck when I turned away. I didn’t feel like someone was watching me, it wasn’t that kind of creeping feeling, but it was there. A gentle tingle like how skin responds when somebody is humming too close to their ear. I prickled and shuddered, and had to turn back to face the wall.

There was indeed a circle. The more I stared the clearer it became, which made no sense. It had to have been there before, didn’t it? Things don’t just appear in stone, but neither Roger nor Nathan had mentioned markings when they had gone fingertip by fingertip over the surface, and I didn’t remember seeing any hint of a circle when I had stood mesmerized by it. But it was there now, a dark circle perfectly centered between the cave walls and just a hair’s breadth above the floor. It was at least twice as tall as me, probably more, but I couldn’t quite figure out exactly how big it was without something or someone next to it. There were no stones or any feature nearby that gave a hint as to

exactly how big the circle was, and the shadows engulfed the sides and ceiling of the cavern. And I realized it was a cavern, it was far too large to be just a cave.

The voice in the back of my brain echoed the same thoughts as the rest of me. I wanted to know. I wanted to get up close to the circle to see how small I was compared to it. I wanted to measure my five-foot-eight frame against the scope of this impossible circle on an impossible wall inside an impossible cavern. I couldn't answer any of the big mysteries about it, but I could answer that one.

“Hold this,” I handed my phone to Roger, who took it without moving his eyes.

I walked up to the stone, right up to the center of the circle, and turned around. I pressed my back against it and called to Roger.

“How big does this thing look?”

“I dunno, twenty feet?” Roger said.

“At least,” added Alicia. “Maybe twenty-five, thing's big. Di, maybe you should move away from it.”

“I'm fine, I just wanted to know how big this thing is. I don't want to leave here without at least one—oop!” I stumbled backward, pinwheeling my arms to keep my balance. I heard cries from Nathan and Alicia, and managed to spin myself around to see why I'd tipped over. I nearly fell again, and would have if Roger hadn't already been running to catch me.

“Okay, fuck this!” I heard Alicia say.

The circle had split down the center and the two halves had swung open like enormous doors pushed gently out—or pulled gently in from the other side. It had been



completely silent, not even a whisper as the air moved, and the doors vanished into the impenetrable darkness that lay beyond. We all stared at each other and through the hole, a perfect circle beyond which lay another mystery.

I pulled myself out of Roger's arms and back to my feet, wrangling my phone back in the process. Light in hand, I leaned in through the circle and peered around.

"Di, don't!" Roger whispered forcefully.

"Why are you whispering?" I said, turning back to him.

"Because—" he whispered, but cut himself off. "Because we don't know what's in there," he finished in a more normal tone. His voice was tense.

"He's right," Nathan nodded, making his light bob slightly. "We're in the middle of some weird shit, could be anything on the other side there."

I sighed. "You're right, there could be. But I want to know what. We can't answer the why, or the how, or the when of this place, but I'll be damned if I'm not going to at least know what. I've had about as much mystery as I can handle today, I want something to be an answer. You coming?"

"I...um..." Roger looked torn. I could see the curiosity warring with caution in him, but I was confident I knew which one would win out. I didn't love him for nothing, after all.

Alicia, on the other hand, looked like she'd firmly made up her mind.

"Honey, I've seen this movie," was all she said, and she folded her arms across her chest. This had the side effect of pointing her light at the ground, causing the bounce

back to cast shadows from her folded arms across her face, giving it a look of grim determination.

Nathan adjusted the glasses on his face and went to stand next to his girlfriend.

“I think I’ll stay with her,” was all he said. I could see the fear on his face clearly, even with only our cell phones for light.

“Fine,” I said. “You guys should actually head a little ways back to the entrance, to be sure we hear if Pete and Maggie get anyone to help us out of here.”

“Yeah,” Alicia said, her eyes fixed on me. “Wouldn’t want them to think we’d gone and done something foolish.”

I tried to shoot daggers back at her, but there were none in my eyes to give. I wasn’t mad and I couldn’t fake it, but I didn’t want to look away either. After a moment, the two of them turned and walked quickly back the way we’d come. I watched their lights bounce as they receded, dimness settling in over me and Roger.

“Well.” I smoothed my shorts and shirt, trying to look as dignified as I could in the situation.

“Are you sure you wanna go in there, babe?” Roger put his hand gently on mine, just enough pressure to let me know he was there but not trying to control me.

I sighed. “Look, it’s just a cave. It’s a weird cave, yeah, but it’s just a cave. There’s no magical curse, I’m not going to wake some long-sleeping mummy, it’s just another room. Probably as empty and clean as this one.” And with that, I went through.

Sure enough, nothing jumped out to eat me. Nothing moved at all, in fact. The air was so still that the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck didn’t prickle. None of my

senses were going off in alarm whatsoever. Roger was the only other source of life or motion.

I swept the room with my cell phone light, letting it penetrate as deep as it could, and it did indeed look much the same as the other side. Smooth finish on the stone, polished looking, but otherwise undecorated. Clean, as Roger had called it.

“Well, guess it’s just another part of the same cave,” I said.

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Look,” Roger moved closer to the wall and started moving along it. “The wall is rounded. I’d be willing to bet it circles around the entire room. This whole room was carved out of solid stone. It wasn’t part of anything.”

I followed him, our lights playing before us, around the wall. Sure enough, it kept curving gently inward, making an arc like the inside of a bowl. The wall extended straight up into the shadows, and curved to become the floor, one solid piece of stone. We walked around it until we were nearly directly across from the entrance hole. Far off in the distance, the light of the cave’s mouth twinkled like a distant star.

I let my mind wander over to the twinkling daylight, and walked right into Roger.

“Oof! Sorry,” I said.

“For what?” Roger’s voice came from behind me.

My heart stopped. I felt the muscles in my shoulders pull in tight.

“Fuck,” I whispered. Roger was behind me. So what had I bumped into? What could be in this room that I couldn’t explain, in the back of a cave that made no sense?

And what in the ever loving fuck was I doing in here with it?

I brought my cell phone light slowly up. It felt ridiculous, like something out of one of those cheesy movies, but I wasn't entirely sure that I wanted to see what was in here with us. If this was a movie, this was the part where the monster came out.

I saw animal feet with big fat toes and claws that could have been talons. But they were the same color as the ground. Stone grey. I felt less like I was about to puke.

“Um...” I drew my light over the statue I'd walked into, thinking it was Roger. It came out of the ground, part of the same solid stoneworking that had formed the rest of the room apparently. I saw two front legs that looked like they were some kind of scale skin, rear legs that looked like they could have been any kind of quadruped that had big paws with outstretched claws. It had a long smooth tail that ended in a whip point. Its head, about seven feet high, looked like a hawk or some kind of bird. It had a long snout that curved into a hooked beak. And running down its back were a great pair of folded wings. They didn't look like they were feathered, exactly, but they did kind of remind me of bird's wings. And just beyond it stood another one identical to the first. They both faced toward the center of the room, lying down with their heads up, like the lions at New York's library.

“Well, so much for empty,” I said.

“Di, look at the wall between them.” Roger was standing in the middle of the two beasts staring at the wall, and I saw why.

There was another circle. Another doorway.

Every nerve in my body hummed looking at it. My fingers and toes tingled, my ears flushed, I could feel the blood moving through my lips, my whole body at attention, primed with energy that was somewhere between enthrallment and pure terror. I was only vaguely aware of my feet moving to the new door, only that it was getting larger and nearer as I approached.

“Honey, are you sure you want to...” But I was already there. I laid a hand on the stone and pushed.

Nothing happened.

“Hunh,” I huffed. I pushed harder, using my whole arm and shoulder, still no movement from this doorway. I rammed it a couple of times, the way cops do on TV shows when they bust through a person’s door. It was exactly as unforgiving as stone would normally be. I backed away, defeated and with nothing but an aching shoulder to show for it.

“What do you think these are?” Roger asked. “Some kind of gryphon?”

“What makes you say that?” I replied. He was an art history major before we ever met, so I was inclined to trust him, but I didn’t see a gryphon when I looked at the statues.

“They look more like a gryphon than anything else,” was his answer. “But not exactly like any that I’ve ever seen. The head’s all weird, and the wings, and...it’s just not quite a gryphon.”

“Why would a gryphon be in a room like this?”

“I have no idea, why would anything be in a room like this?”

He had a point.

“How much battery do you have left on your phone?” Roger asked me.

“twenty-three percent,” I said after checking.

“I’m at nineteen. We should get outta here before our lights die.”

Another point. Shit, I thought. I didn’t want to leave just yet, but I wanted to be caught there with no light even less. The dark wasn’t frightening to me, but getting accidentally stuck was. Even with just our dinky little cell phone lights, the room looked huge, but with no light it would become a very small space.

“Alright, let’s...hang on,” I said. My light glinted off of something in the middle of the room. Roger sighed heavily and followed me to look into it.

Right about halfway between the door we had come through and the door on the other side—exactly halfway, I was willing to bet—was a sphere about six feet across. It was the same gray stone, and it looked like it could have come seamlessly out of the floor of the room, but it was sitting on such a fine point of attachment that neither Roger nor I could actually see it. We took for granted that it was simply because everything else in the room was, and when we tried to move the ball it didn’t budge.

“What do you suppose these notches are?” I asked, tracing my finger around the little holes spaced evenly around the orb. One pointed at each door, and four more at equidistant points from each other formed a ring at the orb’s equator.

“Diana, I honestly have no idea. I’m all out of useful things to say here, I just want to go.”

“Yeah, one sec, I just...wanna...check these out...”

I tried to be quick about inspecting the little notches in this otherwise perfect sphere. Nothing else we had encountered had any kind of holes or dings in it, so I wondered what had put them in this sphere, and why. And how. They were round holes, each about big enough for a finger to poke into, but I wasn't quite that brave. Shining my light in to look was about as thorough of an inspection as I was prepared to give these six odd little holes just at that moment. Five of them just looked like holes bored into the stone.

But the sixth, the one facing the far door with the statues on either side of it, was black. Even shining my light directly into the hole, it was just black. No shadow, no sense of something solid inside it, just this thick inky blackness. Inky blackness that, as I stared, swirled. Colorless, textureless, featureless, it nonetheless began to swirl. Staring into it, my eyes distinctly had the sense of movement, of something stirring in that black hole. Something...present. It filled me with a cold chill. This wasn't a spine tingling chill, it felt like taking a deep breath of freezing air, only deeper than any breath could go. I felt it all through my body, caressing my insides and cooling me down to the core. It was a chill that was more than just the inside of a cave, it made me feel small, very small. In a very large space. My peripheral vision faded to blackness and I was looking at this dark point in front of me, light all around it on the stone orb but none able to enter that void. Like it consumed anything that it came into contact with. That was the cold that filled me, the cold of being consumed by a great nothingness, a great empty feeling like I was being sucked dry.

“Diana! Diana, can you hear me?” Roger was grabbing my shoulders and shaking me. The world snapped back into sharp focus.

“Yes! Yeah, what? I can hear you. What?”

Roger’s eyes were wider than I’d ever seen them before.

“Oh, thank god,” he took a deep breath. “You were staring into that hole in the thing for awhile, not moving, and when I tried to move you, you went all...still. Like you’d been unplugged.”

That shook me. I wasn’t aware of any time passing. Certainly not enough time for Roger to be this worried about me. But if he was, he had good reason to be. Roger wasn’t a worrier, he kept his calm. Seeing him this agitated made me worried about myself too.

“Diana, your light’s off. Your phone died, and mine is just about to. We need to *move*.”

“Let’s get out of here,” I said.

“Yeah. Jesus, yeah.”

Neither of us ran. We walked as fast as we could while still looking composed, but I think he was doing the same thing I was. I wasn’t running because I didn’t want to panic, I was trying to convince myself that whatever had scared Roger was just a trick of the dark, nothing to be concerned about. Nothing that would last when we got back into the light.

We walked right past Alicia and Nathan, who were hanging out right near the mouth of the cave, laying across from each other propped against opposite sides of the



cave. It was already warmer, but I needed sunlight. I needed to be in the summertime again.

“Hey, what’d you find?” Alicia asked as we blew past her.

“Some weird shit, let’s get outside and we’ll tell you,” I said.

“Yeah, definitely some weird shit,” Roger echoed.

The sun hit my face and brought some welcome warmth back to me immediately. I closed my eyes and let it soak into my bones, breathing slowly. The chill faded, and a sense of calm came back to me. My lips and cheeks tingled in the sunlight, and the smell of the mountain filled my nostrils. Everything felt right. When I opened my eyes, Roger looked visibly calmer too.

Alicia and Nathan had followed us out, and were looking at me and Roger with expectant eyes.

“Let’s get over to Pete and Maggie,” I said.

“No need,” Peter called out, waving his hand as he walked over with Margaret.

“Got us a ride outta here, come on.”

Some hikers with dogs had spotted us when they came up to the slid-out part of the path and had gone back to get help. Two paramedics were down with us, hooked up to some kind of winch at the top, with park rangers there to help us all get pulled up to safety.

“Oh, man, am I glad to see you guys,” Roger said. Margaret was already up at the top, and Peter was helping Alicia with the winch harness thing. I took a step, and stumbled, falling to my knees.

The world swam, I couldn't see straight. I felt like I couldn't catch my breath. Something's wrong, I thought, but even the thought felt woozy and far off.

"Roger..." I heard the word, and could only hope that it was me who said it as blackness closed in on me.

#

I had come to in a hospital bed, with Roger sitting in the chair next to me. Apparently, I'd been taken to the emergency room, but none of the tests they'd run showed anything wrong with me. They wanted to keep me overnight for observation, but I told the doctors I'd rather be at home. Roger made a deal with them that he'd take me right back in if anything weird happened, and they let us go. He hadn't let me out of his sight since then.

I didn't mind the pampering, it was kind of nice. Roger had made such a fantastic dinner, it seemed almost a shame to be replacing the last lingering flavors on my tongue with toothpaste and mouthwash.

"Roger, honey?" I tried to speak as clearly as I could around the neck of the toothbrush.

"Yeah?" His voice came from the walk-in closet, where he was putting our hiking boots back on the rack. It was the first time he'd left more than three feet of space between us. I took that as a good sign. Toothpaste almost ran out of my mouth, and I had to slurp to keep it in. Either he didn't notice or he thought better of laughing at me.

"Thank you," I said, spraying a fine mist as I tried to get the words past the bristles. Little beads of toothpaste sprayed onto the mirror. I squinted at the reflective surface in silent hatred, knowing I'd have to clean it up sooner rather than later. I had that

moment of perfect clarity that let me look at the mirror without taking even the slightest notice of what was being reflected. I didn't register at all that Roger had come into the bathroom and was wrapping his arms around me until I felt him squeeze around my waist. His hands brushed over some of my cuts and scrapes, and I playfully shouldered him off of me, hoping I put just the right amount of force into it that would let me finish brushing my teeth without driving him back into the bedroom.

He picked up my intention and stayed put. I rinsed my mouth out and cleaned off the toothbrush, then leaned against him more fully, my head rolling back against his broad shoulder. The cuts stung a little, but I enjoyed feeling his shoulder span behind me. It was comforting, knowing I had all that space to move around against him.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, babe. I'm good. Honest.”

“Yeah?” He used the mirror to look me right in the eyes.

I reached back and toyed with the hair at the back of his head.

“Yeah,” I said, seriously.

“I'm allowed to be worried about you, you know. You scared the shit out of us all back there.”

“I know. And I'm glad that you're worried. But I feel fine. I can't believe how hungry I was, though. I don't think I've ever eaten so much in my life.” I rubbed my belly with my free hand to illustrate my point. I had eaten so much food Roger didn't have the leftovers he was planning on taking to work.

“I guess you needed it,” he said, kissing the side of my neck.

I began moving against him in earnest, kissing his jaw and neck lightly. He closed his eyes and held me tighter to him, pressing my body against his so I knew what he was thinking about. I grinned.

“You know,” I spoke softly, in my sexy voice, “we got so caught up in being home, we forgot to shower.” I flicked his earlobe with the tip of my tongue.

“And I’m still hungry,” I whispered.

“Hmm,” he grunted. “We should fix that,” and without opening his eyes he reached for the shower door and slid it open. I slid past him, kissing him as I did, and turned the water on nice and hot. I wanted it to sting my cuts a little, wanted to feel the intensity of it. I turned back into him, pulling his face close to mine and kissing him firmly. His hands reached for my shirt and pulled it over my head. I did the same with his, and in moments the two of us were as ready for our shower as we could get. The steam had begun filling the bathroom, fogging up the mirror.

Roger’s hands slid down my shoulders, along my arms, and took my hands in his. He brought them up behind his neck and held them there. I left my hands where he placed them, letting his hands wander back up my arms and down my sides. Then, as his hands kept exploring, mine joined in as well. Our bodies let each other know we were ready, and the two of us wordlessly slid into the shower.

Before I could close the shower door behind me, a light flashed with an audible *pop*.

“Shit!” I hissed. “I think we just blew a bulb.” There was a dark, empty space in the light above the bathroom mirror. The shadows we cast looked different as well,

diffused by the frosted shower door glass. Something about the shadow of Roger's face tugged at a memory in my mind, but I couldn't tease it out.

"Deal with it later," Roger spoke softly into my ear, his hands bringing me back into the moment.

"Yeah..."

"Diana, are you sure you're okay?" He stopped moving and held me at half an arm's length away to make sure I could see him. His eyes searched mine, looking for something in them.

"Yeah," I repeated. When I saw that he didn't believe me, I took a moment to really check myself. Did I really feel fine? I didn't have anything more than a few cuts and bruises that would heal in a day or two, max, so physically I was perfect. Yeah, I had fainted, but I came to almost immediately, and the paramedics had released all six of us at the scene. We all got lucky, they said. If there was a reason to be worried, they would have found it, and they hadn't. But beyond that, I felt great. Better than great, I realized. I had an urge to run, run far and free and wide. I felt like I had more pent up energy in me than normal, coursing just under my skin and pressing against me from the inside. It was looking for a seam to rip out of, a way to burst forth from me. I felt *alive*.

"Yeah, Rog. I'm great. See?" I grinned a wicked grin at him and grabbed his face, pulling him to me for a long, fiery kiss.

Water cascaded over us, taking away the sweat and dirt from the day, taking away the little grit caught around our few scrapes and tiny cuts, taking away the whole day's adventure. It washed over us, plastering our hair to our heads as we kissed more strongly.

I felt a slight sting where the hot water washed over my scrapes. Roger pressed me against the wall, putting himself between me and the water.

I closed my eyes to keep the drops bouncing off Roger's shoulder out of my eyes, but also to focus on the feel of his lips against mine. The cold wall of the shower made my skin tingle, keeping my nerves awake on a completely different level from what Roger's body was making me feel. I felt his tongue probing my mouth as mine searched his, each looking for the other and connecting silently. His hands went to my hair and he pulled gently, making me gasp and turn my face upward, exposing my neck to his mouth. He bit gently along my neck. I grabbed his waist and pulled him closer to me, wrapping a leg around his hips to give him the green light he needed to grab me with both hands and lift me up against the shower wall. Pinned, I wrapped my other leg around him and pulled him into me, tilting my hips towards him.

“Oh, fuck,” I moaned when he entered me.

The grin was instinctive and instant. My eyes were still closed but I felt them roll up in their sockets. This was the moment I'd needed all day. Hell, it was one of the perfect moments of my life. And it kept rolling. Every move of his hips matched mine, every time we moved farther apart and came back together another jolt shot up my spine, the force of it pushing air out through my mouth in moans that turned to cries. He pressed his body against me and buried his face in the curve of my neck. With his head turned, his hair filled the space under my nose and, even wet, it was still thick with the smells from the day's hike. The dirt mixed with the dank, wet smell of the cave to create this amazingly robust, earthy aroma. There was another scent underneath it though,

something darker and elusive. I breathed that smell deep into me. I felt it slide into my lungs, where it stirred a feeling inside me. My nerves started all waking up, firing on overdrive. I felt a rush of energy surge through me, and with it came a sense of desire, a hunger like I'd never felt before.

I opened my eyes and pulled Roger's face away so I could see it. I wanted to watch his pleasure. I wanted him to see mine. But something happened when I locked eyes with him. My vision faded around the edges. Just a little at first, a blurring in my peripheral vision. I didn't care what was happening though, it all felt so good I just let it wash over me like the water in the shower. Each movement of our bodies drove more sight from me, the blackness creeping in from the edges, swallowing more of my vision. Roger's face wavered in front of me, moving back and forth, closer and farther, losing definition and cohesion by the moment. Finally the blackness took me fully, in the same moment I cried out and pulled Roger into me as tightly as I could, holding him with both arms and both legs, nails digging into his back as waves of energy rolled through me, pulsing my muscles and nerves with such ferocious energy that the blackness exploded in a shower of colors I'd never seen before. I saw Roger's face again, all of him in fact, in a sharpness and contrast I didn't know human sight was capable of. Each drop of water from the shower head behind him shot ripples through the air along its arcing trajectory, heat radiating outward along with the air being pushed aside. Each strand of Roger's wet hair pulled and waved based on principles of physics I saw with shattering clarity. I saw lines and arcs, I saw waves and particles, I saw forces and counter-forces, all working in concert to create the moment. I saw Roger, his face twisted in ecstasy, his own eyes

closed. Something about it seemed impossible. How could he close his eyes now? Couldn't he see all the amazing colors too? Couldn't he follow each piece of the beautiful picture we were in? I watched his nerves thrum with his power, and I watched the water cascade down his body. It merged with his power, became part of it for a moment, and then slid down off of him into the drain.

I wanted to hold his power together with the water. He was so much more powerful when he was touching the water, it amplified him, made him glisten and glow. That water sliding away from him, taking all his power with it, that water had to be stopped. I cupped water in both of my hands, each drop generating ripples that shot back and forth along my skin. I watched the light refract through each drop that collected in my cupped palms, every possible color in the infinite spectrum showed at once, myriad rainbows merging and layering on top of each other before my eyes. I watched each drop slip down my skin and merge with the others to form a whole, a larger singular piece of water that I would use to hold Roger's power instead of letting it all slip away.

"My god," I breathed.

I was standing on my own now, though I didn't remember Roger setting me down. His face slackened. I saw each muscle in his face and neck losing its tension. His power was lessening. I had to act fast.

I turned my hands and pressed my palms against Roger's body, at the same time willing the water to hold his energy before he lost it all.

I felt the vibration of my thought as it shuddered down my muscles, along my skin, and into the water. I watched the water ripple in response to my desire. Rather than



falling down the drain, the water in my palms stayed between Roger's skin and mine, filling the void between our bodies.

The water kept rippling in my hands, I could feel it. Every drop of water that touched Roger stayed where it landed, resisting gravity's pull by vibrating and rippling in time with the water in my palms. In the hyper colored vision from the exploded blackness of my sight, I saw Roger's eyes lock onto me. His pupils contracted, the blood vessels in his eyes shrank. His thoughts stopped and became a singular focus. He was focused on me. All his power, all his energy, he focused it all on me. I felt his love for me coursing through my body, and I loved him more in that moment than I had ever loved him. Watching the water spread over him like a second skin, covering him in a rippling, shimmering, and vibrating encasement that was responding to my will. I was responding to his focus too, and it created a kind of symbiosis where I fed on his energy and used my own to protect his.

The water pulled his energy out, charged me with it. I watched each molecule of the water vibrate faster and faster the more of Roger's energy it held. The water wanted to slide down the drain, wanted to let gravity take hold. I redoubled my own will, my own desire for Roger's energy and keep it from ever going anywhere. Roger's pupils were now pinpoint small and focused on me with such beautiful intensity it made me want to weep. But I had to keep my focus. I could see through his skin now. His muscles and blood vessels were showing clearly. I couldn't stop.

The water continued to pull on Roger, to suck on his power, to feed on him. His hair was gone, and it revealed the most glorious skull that I'd ever seen. I watched the

muscles in his mouth and neck quiver, traced his trachea to the faint image of his lungs that grew more prominent with each passing moment.

When his muscles began to vanish, he would have stumbled and fallen had I not focused on keeping him upright. I felt my love for him push the water even harder to keep him with me. His nerves were singing to me now, I could see them pulsate, I could hear them working inside the water, feeding their energy into the rippling encasement I was holding in place for him.

And through it all, Roger's eyes never left me. They were the last of his tissues to leave me, and I spent an interminable amount of time staring at his beautiful skeleton, the bones of my lovely Roger, who had protected me, loved me, held me, shared so much with me. The bones that held him in the shape that I loved so fiercely I couldn't stand to let his power, his energy, slip away. Not even the tiniest amount. His energy built up inside me, feeding on itself and growing larger within me, pushing against me with an incredible pressure. I didn't know if I could hold any more inside me, and then it released. I came harder than I'd ever come in my life. My eyes finally closed, the waves of energy and pleasure ran up and down my body, exciting every nerve I had. My stomach muscles spasmed, pushing cries of joy out of my lungs. It rolled over me again and again, each wave complementing the others even as the feeling receded.

And there was nothing left. Nothing but this feeling of ecstasy. I felt like I could fly if I tried, like Roger's love for me gave me so much power that nothing could stand in my way. Triumphant, I coaxed the water back into the palms of my outstretched hands that now pressed on nothing but empty space.

The water rippled and flowed, slipping and folding over itself in layers until only enough remained to fill my palms. But in that small amount of water I held all of Roger's beautiful energy. So much power that it rippled and vibrated even without my own willpower behind it.

It was so beautiful.

The water soaked into my skin. I absorbed it into myself bodily. My whole being shook and tingled with the power of it. My spine shuddered with joy and ecstasy, pure ecstasy like I'd never felt before. It tore another screaming orgasm from me, and even after that I was still tingling from head to toe.

I turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, steam curling away from my skin. I looked at the broken light bulb and decided that I would replace it in the morning. My body simply felt too full to possibly handle anything else. I even looked at the toothpaste splatter with a passive disdain. Only this time I focused on the reflection as well as the mirror.

I looked at my naked body in the reflection. Water was beaded on my skin and steam was still wafting away from me. I saw where each bead of water met the sweat glands and how much of each was where on me. I saw my hair fall according to the air and moisture and gravity. I saw the patterns in my pruned fingers, and how each nerve had affected those patterns. I felt like I saw everything. When I looked at my face, I saw why.

Where my pupils and irises should have been, I saw only the purest black. Not black like pupils normally looked, but a black so deep, so pure, it could only have been

the absence of all light. Nothing escaped that blackness.

That blackness was alive with my Roger's power. I could feel it deep in there, alive and humming.

I smiled.

Without so much as toweling myself off, I walked out of the bedroom and collapsed onto the bed.

#

I woke up clutching the sheets in both fists, lying splayed on top of them with bars of morning sunlight cutting across my body from the bedroom window.

I reached for Roger. But my hand didn't go to his spot on the pillow, it went to the skin of my stomach. Years of habit had been undone in an instant last night, and my body's instinct was no longer to reach out for him. Instead, I reached in.

My hand ran down the smooth skin around my navel, circling it, feeling the tiny hairs move as my hand went against their grain. I felt his energy thrumming just under the skin. Not only in my belly, but all over. The tingling sensation was him caressing me from within. Nurturing me, nourishing me. I closed my eyes again and smiled in the warm morning sunlight. Then I became vaguely aware of a noise in the room with me.

My cell phone was vibrating.

I reached for it, my mind unwilling to focus on the strange thought of speaking. Returning to a world full of sound jarred me more than a little bit. There were so many noises at once, crashing together, that I couldn't make the cacophony stop. Buzzing from insects and buzzing of power lines, whirring of traffic, beeping of someone going in

reverse, each mote of dust floating through the swaths of sunlight seemed to be singing a tune of its own as it drifted down into the shadows. I shook my head and tried to focus.

“Hello?” My voice sounded scratchy and raw even without the phone distorting it.

“Jesus Christ, Diana, you sound awful,” Alicia’s voice helped bring things back together for me. Something solid to anchor onto.

“I just woke up,” I mumbled.

“Yeah, I figured. Hey...” she paused; I could hear the uncertainty in her voice. I could practically see it.

“What is it, Aly?”

“Can you and Roger come over? Nathan and I took some pics on our phones, and they’re...well, we want to show you and see what you think.”

Warring options rose within me. Curiosity rose first, I wanted to know about the photos. What could they have taken photos of? And why did Roger and I have to come take a look at them? I figured they were taken during our time in the cave, but that didn’t really answer my curiosity. I wanted to know what they showed, why Alicia sounded so unsure of herself on the phone.

I also wanted to go to them to share my experience with them. To show them how beautifully the world looked with my new sight, how amazing the sounds were even though I was still struggling to separate them. I wanted them to share it with me, and I wanted to share this with them. They were two of my closest friends, I absolutely had to share this gift with them somehow.

But they wouldn't understand about Roger. They wouldn't be able to see what he did for me, the gift he gave me. They might not even be able to see how much Roger had helped me, how different I was. I couldn't tell them that, not yet. I had to make them see first. But would they let me? Would they even want to see?

And what was in those damn photos?

"I can come over, I don't know if Roger's up for it," I lied. I had to. I felt Roger's energy stir within a little pool of water someplace deep inside. My Roger, we had shared so much, I felt him giving me the power to do this one more thing. Alicia and Nathan would understand. I'd find a way to get them to understand.

"Great!" Alicia had no idea. My voice had been cool, collected. I didn't betray anything.

"When's a good time?" I asked.

"Whenever, Nathan and I are home all day today. We're both just taking a day off after yesterday, figured we needed it to just make sure we were at, y'know, full power."

"Yeah, makes sense. I'll come over in a little bit."

"Thanks."

"Yeah."

"Hey, Di? You sure you're okay? You sound a little...off."

I watched waves of light bend around tiny particles floating in the air, looked at the twisted bed sheets where my fists had been gripping them, smelled the city air coming in through everywhere. I relished it all.

"Never better," I said. "See you soon."

I hung up.

Before I could go see Alicia and Nathan, I had to be sure of something. I twisted on the bed and swung my legs over. Standing felt bizarre, the movement possessed a liquidity and smoothness that was new and unfamiliar to my muscles. Yet my body didn't hesitate or falter. In fact, I was more steady on my feet than I'd ever felt before. I padded into the bathroom and flicked the lights on.

One bulb was out. I'd have to fix that.

But more importantly, my eyes were still normal. The blackness of my pupils still encompassed where the irises had been before. They searched themselves in the mirror, plumbing the depths of that blackness. A few moments of this passed before I realized that I'd thought of this new state as normal, I hadn't expected to see color in my eyes because it would have been weird.

Part of me wanted to be afraid of how quickly these changes were happening, but I couldn't get over just how amazing I felt, and how right the world seemed to be.

Still, I was thankful that the water just felt like water when I washed my face.

#

Alicia and Nathan's apartment was spacious, with giant bay windows that let in plenty of air and more than enough light to help me justify keeping my sunglasses on. I sat at their dining table facing the windows, peering at Nathan across the rim of a large mug of coffee he'd handed me. He sat on the other side of the round table from me, focused on my face. His brow furrowed.

"You really sure you're okay?" He asked me for the third time.

“Yes,” I said, exasperatedly.

“Good...good...” Nathan wasn’t letting this go. He looked at me like he was trying to see through my sunglasses. I resisted the urge to fidget. Don’t squirm, I told myself. You’re better than that, you’re more powerful than that. I reminded myself of Roger, and his love for me. I searched for his power inside me, felt it tug on something in me. I couldn’t let Nathan see anything yet, so I needed to change the subject.

“You really didn’t have to have breakfast with me. I could have grabbed something on the way here.”

“We wanted to get you here as soon as we could, is all,” Alicia said it almost apologetically. Suddenly, I realized that it wasn’t me making them anxious. Alicia had told me there was something they wanted to show me, something about pictures. Whatever they showed, it made much more sense for the photos to be freaking them out than for me. After all, I hadn’t even told them about last night yet. I caught the grin before it spread, and turned it into a more subdued smile.

“Well, I’m here.” I put the coffee mug gently down on the table. “So what’s, um, what’s so important?” Again I was thankful for the sunglasses hiding both the twinkle of anticipation and the twinge of fear in my eyes.

Alicia brought out her cell phone and set it on the table.

“When you and Roger were exploring yesterday, Nate and I decided to take a few photos of the cave. Just something to keep each other occupied, you know? We just had our phones, nothing really fancy.”

She turned on her phone and brought up a picture onto the screen.



“You know that weird seam where the rock went from rough to smooth? We took a lot of photos of that line. Both sides of the cave, the floor, we even tried to get some shots of the ceiling.”

She pushed the phone to me.

“Then, when we were looking through them this morning, this is all we saw.”

The photos were definitely of the same cave. The mouth was the same shape and size, the landslide debris was visible in the shots from inside the cave looking out, Nathan and Alicia even appeared in several of their own shots. In some they were posing, in one Nathan was just leaning against the cave wall with his hands behind his head. In another he was pointing to a blank spot on the wall.

“That one,” Alicia stopped me from moving to the next picture. “That one there, see? Nate was pointing to that line. He was pointing right at it.” She swiped her finger across the screen for me to bring up the next image.

“And that one here, that was a close-up of the seam on the wall.”

I stared at the photos dumbly.

“Aly, there’s nothing in these photos but rock. It doesn’t even look like the same rock.” After the photos of the cave’s mouth, every one of them just showed a close-up of some rock like texture. No features, no context, nothing to make sense of what the image was showing. Just rock.

“That’s the point, Di. Look.”

She flipped through several more photos, each of different close-ups of rock that looked like the cave wall at different points. All of them showed nothing but a blank rock face.

“None of them show it, Diana. None.” Alicia’s eyes were trying to look past my sunglasses, refusing to focus in one spot on my face.

My mind soared with possibilities. Why wouldn’t the cave photos show the deeper parts? Did the cave have some kind of field around it? Was there a trick of the light, some kind of reflection, that prevented it from being photographed? It didn’t seem right. These things all seemed like ideas from bad movies.

“We’ve looked through them all four, maybe five times” Nathan offered. “I pulled them off the phone and we looked at them on the computer. Same thing. I know we saw it, and I know we took pictures of it. So why the hell are those just showing me nothing?”

I had no readily available answer. Not even a lie. I really had no idea why the cave wouldn’t want to show its secrets to a camera. If it was a deliberate choice, who or what was making it? The cavern? Could the space be doing all that? But it had opened for us in person. I had an image of the circular door flash in my memory, of the stone swinging silently open for me. None of that showed up in these photos. All I could do was shrug.

“But that’s not even the weirdest one,” Nathan said.

“Yeah, you remember how far away we were from the opening, right? When we were looking at that door? We’d been walking for a little bit of time when we got there,

the opening was way far behind us. Right?” Alicia asked the question rhetorically, but paused and waited for me to respond anyway.

“Right...” I said, trying to be nonchalant.

“Then why is this what the photo shows?” She swiped a few more pictures away before settling on one of a cave that was only about ten feet deep from the entrance. Again, all the details matched from what I could see. This was definitely a picture of the same cave, it just didn’t show us the real cave. As sharp as my new vision was, I couldn’t pick out anything in the cell phone pictures that would make me think there was a deep cavern there. Definitely not a cavern with an impossible room at the end. The longer I stared at the photo, the stronger I felt this tugging sensation inside me. I felt a longing for the place, the way I would long for home when I was on vacation. I wanted to go back there.

“I...” I let my voice trail off. I had no answers.

“I wish Roger was feeling better, maybe he’d be able to figure it out. I sure as hell can’t.” Nathan leaned back, his fingers laced behind his head. He was in much the same pose as in one of the pictures, only sitting and leaning against a chair instead of against a stone wall.

“I’ll ask him to call you when he’s better,” I tried to make the lie sound convincing.

Beyond the window, a breeze had kicked up. Holding Alicia’s phone, I stood up and walked over to look out and listen to the wind.

“What did you find?” Alicia said to my back.

“Hmm?”

“You said you were going into that room because you wanted at least one answer. We took pictures of the damn place and just have more questions, but...I dunno. I just can't shake this feeling, you know? Like something's just out of reach. But the doorway, did it lead to any answers? Did you get it?”

I stared out the window, scrolling through a mental rolodex of possible responses. Outside, a flock of birds twisted and curled in the sky. They made abstract shapes in the air before shifting in response to some unseen force and shooting off into the morning light. The trees swayed in the wind, as if waving to the departed flock. The windows rattled as the wind hit the side of the building.

“Yes,” I said absently. The air was dry and fast, pushing its way through trees and through cracks into homes. Into this home. It was charged with static electricity that I could see, the air shimmered with it. I could hear it hum, too. An electric buzzing sound that was just barely audible and permeated everything in my head.

“I mean, no,” I amended. “I don't really know what I found in there. Roger and I went in, and it was...huge. It was this enormous space that looked like it was carved right into the mountain. Smooth, the way the walls were, only we couldn't see the top of it. And there was this thing in the middle. Aly, I can't even begin to describe it. It was magical. One of those moments that leaves a person feeling truly changed.”

“Changed?” Alicia's voice was closer. I could feel the air move as she approached me. The nerves in my lips tingled from the subtle changes in the space around me.

“Can you see it?” I didn’t turn around to face her. I kept my gaze out the window on the whistling, humming wind.

“Diana, are you okay?”

Her hand almost reached my shoulder. My skin tightened in anticipation of her touch. But before she could close the gap, three static electric arcs popped into the air. One from her hand to my shoulder, one from my hand to the glass window pane, and one from the window to the skies. The cloudless blue skies, which to me looked so radiantly blue, so perfectly blue, brought this incredible charge into me and then vanished, leaving a smell of ozone in the room. But the arc between Alicia’s hand and my shoulder hadn’t vanished. I could hear it, and when I turned to look at my shoulder, I saw it suspended in the air between her skin and mine.

I felt the phone slip out of my hand and fall silently to the floor, landing on the carpet.

“I’m wonderful,” I whispered. The electric tingle on my shoulder slid down my arm, pulling her hand with it, until it settled in my now outstretched palm. Only then did I turn around.

The trapped static shock hissed and popped, and the little piece of white light in my hand grew bigger. Its light now was so bright that all of Alicia’s fingers seemed to be glowing with it.

The electricity made my heart race. It was a pacemaker on steroids, a shot of adrenaline and cocaine. I knew what it must feel like to be a hummingbird. And the faster my heart beat, the more it longed to encompass Alicia in it, to share in her love. I knew

this was right, that Alicia had a similar kind of energy to Roger's. And I saw the fear in her eyes, the tremble of her pupils that were so tiny now, so tiny. But past the terror was her love. She wasn't looking at Nathan to help her, she was looking at me. As powerful as I felt, with all the energy running through me, I felt hungry for so much more. I needed Alicia more than I ever had, needed her to help me. To help me so I could help her. I saw it so clearly then, that I needed to hold her love for me in the same place I was holding Roger's. This moment with the static shock was my only chance, I couldn't risk not taking it. I opened my heart to her with all the love I felt. It wasn't the same love that I had for Roger, but it was still a love that flowed out of me and into her. I felt it meet her, it made me feel warm inside.

“Wha—wha—wha...” Alicia tried to speak, but she could only make that one sound. I imagined it was her asking what this was. I looked away from her hand, which was now shining up to the wrist in a pure white light. We locked eyes.

“Oh, Aly,” I said, a smile spreading across my face. “Thank you. Thank you.”

“Aly—Diana, what the fuck?” Nathan. Right. Nathan. It was happening so fast, that he was still seated at the table and came over in a single leap.

“No!” I cried. He tried to get between me and Alicia, but it was too late. I couldn't let him stop me. Alicia was giving me her love now, letting her energy breathe new life into me. She was giving herself to me so that I could protect us both. Us, and Roger, and the others. She was mine now. White light flashed from between our palms when Nathan touched her. It sent him reeling back into his chair, holding his hand to his chest while his

mouth made the shape of a silent, wordless cry of pain. I didn't want Nathan to be in pain, but there was nothing I could do for him just now. I focused again on Alicia.

Her whole left arm was glowing with an electric shine, her hand still just over my right palm. The space between our hands was held by dozens of electric tendrils now, all humming beautifully. Her beautiful hair had little arcs of electricity running between the strands, and it jumped from her hair to her ears, nose, and mouth. It popped as it went, sounding like a crackling fire.

It went much more quickly than with Roger. I had already let Roger's energy enter me, felt it merge with mine. This was like flexing a muscle I'd just been working out. I knew what I was doing. The lightning bolt blindness streamed along Alicia's torso and down her legs, along her head and neck fully now, and it touched her other fingertips. She looked like a ghost. She was beautiful.

"Diana, help me. Please." she said. She didn't sound like she was in pain, but like she was very far away.

I reached my free hand out and took her other hand so that I was holding both of her hands in both of mine. Alicia was starting to pulse, the light coming off of her in waves. Each pulse hit me, filling me up with her presence. I could feel Alicia growing inside me, making me feel whole in ways I never knew before. My skin began to glow like hers. Then another wave hit me more strongly than the others, it opened my body up to Alicia, to everything she was giving me. I felt full.

"Now I can help you, Aly," I said.

She flashed more brightly than anything else in the room. So brightly that even with my new sight and from behind my sunglasses, I had to close my eyes for that moment. But it was only a moment. When I opened my eyes again Alicia was gone, and little arcs of electricity, tiny pieces of lightning, danced along my fingertips and in my palms. I closed my hands into fists, and when I opened them again there was no more visible electricity. But I felt it inside me. It was a hum, a vibration like the sound of power lines right before a storm. I heard and felt it inside me, powering me. My skin tingled from it. I felt beautiful, then.

“No!” Nathan screamed. He launched himself at me, this time swinging his chair at me. I reflexively brought my hands up to protect my face. When the chair came near, another flash of white light blanked my vision. I heard the sound of wood exploding, and of pieces hitting the walls and windows. I took my hands down, blinked several times, trying to bring the world into focus. I saw several pieces of the chair lying across the room, smoking. They had charred marks on them, as though they’d been struck by lightning.

Nathan lay on his back before me. He stared up with scared, wide eyes. Fear was now plain on his face. But he was still and silent, and I was no longer splitting my focus or trying to save Alicia. Now I could focus on him.

“Nathan,” I said soothingly, “Nathan...it’s okay.” I knelt down next to him.

“D—don’t...”

“Nathan, you’re so wonderful. You and Alicia are so wonderful together. You did something for her that was very powerful, and you did it out of love. I love her too,



Nathan. And she loves me. Not like you, though. I don't think she could love anybody the way she loves you. But she shared that love with me, don't you see? She is so powerful with me, so incredible, I couldn't let anything bad happen to that power she has. I need her. I need her to help me. I was so empty before, and I never knew it. But then Roger, and now Aly, they're helping me feel full. But I feel Alicia's love for you inside me, now. I feel her desire for you. She wants you so much, Nathan. And I do, too."

I spotted a piece of the wooden chair nearby, it was burning merrily. I reached out and grabbed it where the flames were brightest.

"See?" I said, turning the burning wood over in my hand. I felt nothing, not even a hint of warmth from the wood, only that it was solid in my grip. Tangible in a way the electricity I'd held wasn't, but maybe just as solid.

"It's her power, hers and Roger's, that keeps me from burning. And they gave it to me out of love. They're protecting me with it, and they trust me to protect them in return."

"Roger?" His voice quivered.

I silently kicked myself. This wasn't how I should have told him, not while he was scared. But I didn't know how to calm him down if he kept resisting me. So I nodded.

"Yes."

"Y—you're...you're insane," Nathan said. He was trying to get up, but I grabbed the hand he was putting weight on and held it tightly in mine, putting him off balance again.

“No, Nathan, I’m not insane. I’m in love. All of this, it’s all from my love. And theirs. And yours. I’ve always been able to see it, but now I can feel it. I can feel your love for Alicia, and for me.” I brought my other hand up, the one holding the burning piece of the chair. I dropped the wood but the fire kept burning in my hand. The flame didn’t burn me, it simply hovered in my palm, the way the static electricity had a moment before. I stared at it, watched it flicker. It waved from some unseen breeze, or perhaps from my breath. It twisted like a dancer in my palm, shifting from dark oranges and yellows to a cobalt blue. The blue flame wrapped around my hand, the skin still visible inside it. I wasn’t burning, if anything my skin prickled like it was cold underneath the flame.

“Nathan, you have to understand. I love you as much as I love Alicia. You’re both so powerful, so wonderful, so amazing. And I’m feeling her love for you now, too, and it’s...beautiful.”

I took my hand, the one covered in blue fire, and brushed his cheek with my fingertips. I left faint trails of flame along his jawline that flickered before vanishing. Nathan sat before me, shaking with fear.

“It’s okay, Nate. It’s okay,” I said. “You’ll be with her, and you’ll both be with me. It’ll be perfect.”

I took my fiery hand and placed it on top of my other one, both hands now on the one hand he was leaning on for support. The fire spread to my other hand, and then to his. I picked his hand up and held it between mine, bringing it to my face and nuzzling it gently as the flames caressed his fingers.

“I know you may not want me right now, may not love me, but I want you. I need you, Nathan.”

Nathan never screamed once it began. He held my hand tightly, gripping it with all his glorious power, holding onto me as tightly as he held on to Alicia.

“What are you doing, Di? How the—how are you doing this?”

“I’m not. I’m letting it happen. I’m letting you inside me, letting you fill me up.” I was still so hungry, more than just the emptiness of my stomach. It was an all consuming hunger that pushed all of my other thoughts aside. Even the thoughts of Roger. My Roger, who had been my first. I felt Alicia’s energy ripple inside me, responding to Nathan’s energy. She wanted him, and when I felt his energy mix with hers, I felt them combine into something greater. A love so powerful that it burned hotly inside me. I felt my cheeks flush, and my eyes began to water.

The flames didn’t burn him. They licked their way down Nathan’s arm and pulled his energy into me. The more energy they held of Nathan’s, the more blue they got until they were an intense, bright blue. The flames slid over him like liquid layers, sliding over each other until there was nothing left of Nathan but the flames. Then, slowly, the flames retreated back to my hands.

I looked at my palms and saw the blue flames sitting in a dense pocket of the palms of my hands. They slid beneath my skin and into that same intimate part of me that held Roger and Alicia. I felt Nathan’s energy merge with Alicia’s, and they played together inside me. They gave me so much more together than they would have separately. I felt like crying it was so amazing. The buzz I was getting from their love for

each other, and for me, was electrifying in a very real sense. The hum inside me got louder, until I couldn't hear around it.

The world pulsed in waves around me, rippling colors shifted and reformed. My vision, already enhanced, seemed to grow sharper and deeper, but the fabric of reality refused to stay in focus. Everything went dim.

Suddenly, I was back in the cavern, in the room at the end with the sphere in front of me. It didn't have the feel of the present though, somehow I knew this was the past. This was yesterday morning. But what was I seeing? I felt like I was acting out a scene from a movie, but instantly I felt the truth. I was reliving a memory. Only, I didn't remember any of this happening yesterday, or ever. I was looking around the room. Roger was there with me, waving his mobile phone flashlight around the room's smooth interior. I turned back to the sphere in front of me and leaned in. The hole I was staring into was black. A darker, more impenetrable blackness than anything around it, even in the dark room. Then it began to glow. I felt like I was falling forward, off balance. When I put my hand out to brace myself against the sphere, it was no longer there. I pinwheeled my arms and lost my balance, stumbling forward. When I stood up and looked around, my breath caught in my throat.

My new sight followed me into this memory, showing me skies where the stars burned brightly through the magnificent hues far beyond any blue I remembered from what felt like a lifetime ago. I knew with the certainty of a fact or a dream that I was not looking at a landscape anywhere on Earth. The ground seemed to follow no rules of physics I could think of, appearing at once both stony and liquid. I could walk on it

without sinking, which I proved to myself by running in random directions, pivoting and turning haphazardly along the seemingly endless expanse of a barren wasteland. It felt like running on a giant waterbed, giving under my weight but never breaking the surface tension. I felt more powerful than ever, like the more I pushed my leg muscles, the more something moved inside me alongside my own muscles, powered by something other than my nerves, that kept pace with every step I took. I could also feel how exquisite each individual strand of hair played against my scalp as I ran. There was no wind, I couldn't even sense any air around me, but my hair waved behind me, billowing like gravity refused to take hold of it. Above, constellations I couldn't make out glowed brightly through a sky that shifted between blues and greens, mixing with reds, browns, blues, and colors I couldn't name because I'd never been able to see them before.

I felt unleashed, unfettered by everything I had known before, and completely, entirely, absolutely unbound.

Is this what it feels like to play in god's playground? I wondered.

In the distance, a shape appeared on the horizon. Little more than a dot jutting up from the landscape, but it was anomalous. The rocky, roiling stone seemed to stretch on forever in every direction. Using my strange dual strength I ran hard and fast toward the dot.

It grew slowly at first, rising so gently that it was almost imperceptible even to my newfound hyper vision. But it grew. It first took on an ovoid shape, distorted by the distance and some trick of the horizon. When the oval shape began to distend and became more circular, I thought I knew what it was. But I wanted to be sure. Needed to.

I ran, and I kept running even after I got close enough to be absolutely positive of what I was running towards. If anything, knowing only made me run faster. Excitement filled every corner of my being, I imagined I looked not unlike the woman running in slow motion to her lover, except in place of fields of wheat or tall grass I had this infinite plain of emptiness. But I ran all the same.

And then I was back in Nathan and Alicia's apartment. The world snapped into sharp focus. I was laying on the floor. Had I fallen or did I lay down on my own? I couldn't remember. But the waving and rippling of reality had passed. Sights and sounds were as enhanced as they had been in that memory, if it had even been a memory, but I felt stable enough to get up.

Acrid smoke filled my nose and stung my eyes. Other pieces of the burning chair had caught parts of Nathan and Alicia's apartment on fire. I quickly gathered my things and made for the front door. There was no need to call the fire department, I thought, since their unit had smoke detectors and sprinklers in it. It would work out fine, I didn't need to stay. After all, I had them both with me; they didn't need to worry about surviving the fire.

Outside, I kept my head down and walked away from the building. My eyes were still watery from the smoke, so I removed my sunglasses to wipe my eyes on the sleeve of my shirt. The windows of the building I was walking past were highly reflective, and before I could put my sunglasses back on, I saw myself in the full detail of bright sunlight.

Behind my eyelids now was only blackness.

I knew I had to see this through. I'd never been so sure of anything in my life as I was in that moment that I needed to see Margaret and Peter. I pulled my phone from my purse and found Margaret's phone number. The call went to her voicemail. While I listened to her outgoing message, I searched myself to find my voice, the one from before. The one she would be used to hearing.

"Maggie, sweetie, Roger is down with one of those twenty-four-hour bugs, he thinks, and I don't want to catch it. Do you think I could come over for dinner tonight? Call me back."

I replaced the phone in my purse. There was nothing else I could do but wait. The city was so full of colors, smells, sounds, odors, and textures I'd never noticed before, that I decided to walk around for awhile. I would charge up my heart, fill it with all the new loves I could encounter between now and when Margaret called me back.

I would be ready.

#

I walked aimlessly, with no destination in mind, and taking in the strange new sights of a city I thought I knew. Every time I turned a corner, the city greeted me with fresh new sights, new shapes and colors I'd never seen before, and it was all so wonderful. The air held a swarm of patterns, expanding and collapsing designs of curves and lines intersecting, folding in on each other and folding back out into a new shape. They hung so thickly in the air, I reached out to touch them. But my hand passed through them like they were clouds. Or hallucinations.

Other people walked past me, oblivious to the shapes in the space around them and the colors above them. For whatever reason, they couldn't see the incredible beauty of the world. I thought of all the times I had looked out at the sky and seen that pure blue. How I had marveled at those skies on those days! And the nights where I had looked up and seen the Milky Way surrounded by innumerable stars, all winking and twinkling in the inky blackness of space. I thought those skies were so beautiful, they had taken my breath away. So many of those memories were shared with Roger that I reached down for his hand instinctively, wanting to share my reverie with him. But Roger was inside me now, I held him closer to my heart than I ever had before, and no hand holding was necessary to share those memories.

The memories of how the sky used to look, or how I thought it looked, paled in comparison to what I was now seeing. I searched for words to put to the colors, for names of the shapes, but my mind didn't want to focus on words or names. I knew there were answers to those little questions, but when I saw how full of life the whole planet was, nothing else seemed important. If the Milky Way had taken my breath away, then what I looked upon now would have torn out my lungs so that I never breathed again. It was so beautiful. My chest swelled with love for the world's beauty, and swelled again for sharing it with Roger, Alicia, and Nathan. I smiled, feeling my cheeks push the sunglasses up slightly on my face.

The sidewalks weren't crowded with people, but those who were there seemed content to ignore me. Nobody brushed against me or shouldered me. Nobody even looked at me. It's like they pretended I didn't exist, but refused to try occupying my space. I



remembered hearing something on the radio about dark matter, how it made up great heaps of the universe but nobody could detect it. It was there, moving through the stars, and everything avoided it but nothing could see it. That's how I felt at that moment. I walked down the sidewalks like dark matter, meeting no resistance or curiosity, nobody could see me but everybody moved out of my way.

I had never felt more powerful in my life.

Cars passed by in the streets, the air swirling behind them, leaving eddies that the shifting shapes swirled in, making them distort even more. When one car honked its horn, I saw the air shimmer from the sound waves.

A noise came from behind me like hundreds of feet pitter-pattering on a soft carpet. I turned to see what was making it in time to see a huge flock of dark birds cutting their way through the air. It was their wings, not feet, that I heard and saw. Each wingbeat forced the air around it to swirl, but with hundreds of wings beating so close together the air did more than swirl. The birds were pushing the air out of their way, slicing through the crowded beauty and leaving it devoid of all the life that I had seen. Where the flock passed, no shapes remained in sight. They were gone, hiding or invisible to me. It hurt my heart to watch these birds take my newfound vision and wipe it so mercilessly from me. I looked up, thinking I would call something out to them, curse them, but I stopped cold in mid step and mid breath.

The flock had taken up perch on every street light, traffic signal, signpost, and rooftop lining the street. Hundreds of wingbeats stopped almost at once and were replaced by an equal number of cold stares from the blackbirds. Not one of them moved a

single feather, or made even the smallest sound. They all sat watching me in the perfect silence that had settled over the street.

Other people stared at the birds too. One woman pointed at them with the man she was walking with, and whispered something in his ear before both of them, dressed in matching gray business suits, ducked into a nearby office building.

Nothing stirred the air, everybody had gone unnaturally still. Cars crept slowly along, as drivers looked up at hundreds of blackbirds. They were waiting for something, and I didn't have the slightest idea what. I squared my shoulders and began to move down the street. While I had been undetectable to the other pedestrians, the birds were taking direct notice of me. I looked up as I walked, watching them watching me. Each step I took was met with the smallest perceptible movement from the birds, each one twitched its neck to follow my movement, until I had gone under a streetlight and some of them had to turn their bodies to follow me further. They did this silently, hopping or flitting on their perches but never leaving and never making a noise.

A low buzzing sound broke the silence. A humming barely perceptible, but nearby. Something was muffling it, but I could tell it was close to the ground and very near to me. Suddenly I realized what it was. I reached into my purse without taking my eyes off the blackbirds and fished my phone out.

“Hello?”

“Di, hey, I got your message,” Margaret’s voice tinkled musically in my ear.

“Maggie, hi!”

“Hey, so Rog caught that thing that’s going around, huh?”

Whatever had been holding the birds' attention on me had gone, and in small groups they were beginning to fly away into the cloudless sky. A sky that, while empty, still had the swirls and whorls of colors I'd never seen.

"What?" I was trying to remember what I had said earlier.

"Roger, you said he's sick."

"Oh," I said. "Yeah, he is."

"Shitty. Hope he gets over it soon."

I didn't like lying to Margaret about Roger, or anything else, but I knew I had to ease her into this. Of all of us, she was the one least likely to be okay with what was going on. She was always focused on how she could make us love her, I was never really sure just how much she loved any of us back.

"I'm sure he'll be better than ever before you know it," I said.

"Well, um, about dinner..." She trailed off.

"Yeah?"

"Well, Pete's out, and I'd feel bad bringing you over without him being here. I mean, it'd be fine—just, like, I know he'd want to see you too."

I sighed as quietly as I could so the phone didn't pick it up. I had hoped to catch them both together. After Alicia and Nathan I was feeling great. I had learned from them and felt sure I could make things go more smoothly next time, but it wasn't going to be quite so easy with them not being together.

"Oh," was all I could think to say safely.

"Well, um, what about something quicker, like coffee or something?"

I could almost see her batting her eyelashes at me through the phone.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, coffee sounds good.” Maybe there was a way to play this, I thought. If Margaret needed to feel like she had manipulated me into doing what she wanted, then maybe giving her what she wanted would let me get what I wanted from her. It had a better chance of working than if I stonewalled her, so I had nothing really to lose by trying.

“Is there a place near you? Maybe I can just drive over and we can walk from your apartment.”

“Oh, yeah!” Margaret sounded excited, like she had just remembered a place. Not at all like she had been planning this conversation since she called me back. I had to give her credit, she was almost convincing. Maybe before she would have taken me in, but not now. My ears were attuned now too, it seemed. They picked up every twitch of her voice, every trick she was thinking of employing.

“Great,” I said flatly. “I’ll be there soon.”

I walked back the way I’d come, back towards Alicia and Nathan’s apartment building. The air was still devoid of all the life it had been so animated by earlier in my walk, and on one streetlight a single blackbird sat looking at me. All that was left of its once mighty flock. Its head swiveled to follow me, looking down on me with those silent judgmental eyes from up high. I kept my gaze in front of me, I didn’t want to give the bird any hint that its dead eyes were bothering me at all. Something about them seemed cold, more impersonal than I remembered bird stares being. It made the back of my neck itch, but I didn’t scratch it. The bird would have no satisfaction from me.

Police cars and fire engines had arrived at the apartment by the time I got back, and had been there for long enough to have set up a good sized presence. There was no smoke coming from the building, and a large gathering of people who looked like they'd been evacuated all stood around watching in the sunlight of early afternoon. There was one ambulance sitting off to the side, with the paramedics looking bored.

I had been right, nobody was hurt. I smiled to myself and walked on to my car.

#

I spent the whole drive over thinking about what I would tell Margaret, how I might play her as much as she was playing me. Every scenario I came up with always ran into the same roadblock though. I had no idea what would happen when I put my hands on her. I was running on simple instinct, following this gut feeling that guided me. In the middle of those moments, everything that was happening felt right and made total sense, but now I was really thinking about it. What was going on? What had drawn me to water with Roger? Why had that electric shock hit with Alicia? And the fire? How did any of this make sense? Maybe I was overthinking this. Maybe things with Margaret would work the way the others had. I just needed to trust my instincts. I was still having an internal debate about how to proceed when I walked up to the front door of her apartment building and hit her button on the intercom. It was the old style, where each unit had its own button instead of a code to dial in on a central box.

“Hi!” Margaret’s voice came through tinny and staticky from the small metal speaker. She sounded truly happy, the smile on her face coming across in her voice in just that one word.

“Hey, Maggie, I’m downstairs.”

“I’ll be right there, don’t move!”

So much for being buzzed in. I waited.

I didn’t have to wait long, she must have flown down the stairs because she was out on the sidewalk with me sooner than I was expecting. She opened the front door with a timid creak and groan of the hinges and slinked around the edge of the door to join me.

“Hey,” she said softly. Much more softly than she had been over the intercom just moments before.

“Hey,” I replied. “So where are we going?”

“This place just around the corner, come on.” Margaret shifted her purse from her left shoulder to her right, keeping it between us as we walked.

“You’re sure Peter won’t mind?” I asked, chancing a sidelong glance at Margaret through my sunglasses.

“Oh...” she paused. “You know Pete, he tends to only mind if it’s something that he could otherwise have made. He’s at work right now, so I don’t think he’ll care.”

“Why is he at work? Aly and Nate took today off, so did Roger,” I said. “And we’re both here.”

“Yeah, he just said he had some stuff to do that couldn’t wait. Deadlines or something. Honestly, I was half asleep, I don’t remember what he said exactly. Here we are.”

Margaret turned us into a small neighborhood coffee shop with a few two-person tables outside and a few more inside. It was crowded, but not to the point that I felt cramped. No one was close enough to look through my sunglasses, at least.

“You know what you want? My treat.” Margaret smiled at me. “Least I can do, instead of dinner.”

I looked at her for a hard moment trying to decide if she was being honest or not. No matter how hard I looked for the manipulative girl who used her mousiness to get what she wanted, all I saw behind her eyes was my friend Maggie. My shy little girlfriend who was adorable and, when she came out of her shell, just amazing to be with.

“Just a coffee, nothing special.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I’m gonna nab that table outside, okay?”

“Great, yeah, I’ll be out in just a couple minutes. Thanks.”

“Sure,” I walked outside. The sunlight wasn’t streaming into the store, the angle was wrong, and I didn’t want to take my sunglasses off yet, so I knew I had to take the patio seating.

I closed my eyes and soaked in the sunlight, letting my mind go blank. I didn’t want to think about the fantastic colors I was still seeing, or the shapes that hadn’t come back since the birds flew through them, or any of it. I was just enjoying the moment in its pure simplicity. So much so that I jumped a little bit when Margaret pulled the chair across from me out, making it clatter against the cement sidewalk.

“Jesus, Mags!” I almost shouted it. “You could’ve warned me!”

“I did, I said hi when I came out.”

“You...I guess I must have spaced out. Sorry.”

“Yeah, it’s okay,” she said, handing me my coffee.

“Thanks.” I took a sip, and its flavor rolled over my tongue like a warm bath. I moved the liquid across my tongue, letting my taste buds sample it. It was still coffee, but so much more than regular coffee. It had a richness to it, a full bodied warmth that eclipsed the best coffee I’d ever had. I let out a soft moan of pleasure.

“Right? I love this place.”

“I can see why,” I said over the lip of the cup, taking a second sip.

A comfortable silence settled over us. We looked at each other and around one another, her quiet smile working in tandem with the delicious coffee to remind me of all the wonderful things about her. Margaret was at times manipulative, but it was never from a bad place. She knew how to get what she wanted, but she never wanted bad things. She'd made Pete a better person for being with her, and even when she swayed the group's opinion toward what she wanted to do, we always had fun. The coffee hit my stomach and sent ripples of warmth and happiness through my body. But it wasn't satisfying me. Every sip I took made my stomach grumble. I wasn't hungry, exactly, or thirsty. I wanted more of that fullness I got from Roger, and from Nathan and Alicia.

“Did you have any damage from the quake?” Margaret asked. It was a strange question, and it came out of the blue. That meant that she had an answer to it, and wanted me to ask her. I hoped that giving in like this would allow her to open her heart to me, but I had my reservations.



“No,” I said. “At least, I haven’t spotted any. You?”

“A picture frame tipped over, that seems to be about it.”

“Huh. It felt bigger than that out there, I kinda expected more than that.” I remembered being thrown around like a rag doll during the shaking.

“Me too.” She paused and looked at me thoughtfully. “Hey, how are you feeling today?”

I froze, trying to determine if I’d showed anything, given anything away.

“Fine, I guess,” I said. “Thanks”

“No problem. I mean, I didn’t pass out like you did, but I know I wasn’t much better, I must’ve slept like the dead as soon as I got home. I barely even remember walking up the stairs, much less anything else. Pete said that I was so tired I didn’t even take off my shoes. Just fell straight onto the mattress and was out like a light. He took my shoes off for me and tucked me into bed before he fell asleep.”

“You got a good man there.”

“Why do you think I’m with him?”

“I thought it was the sex.”

“Well...” She grinned a little, coyly. The conversation all felt so normal, which made it feel unnatural to me. I wanted to tell her what had happened to me, or show her somehow, but nothing felt like a good option to do either. With Roger it had just sort of happened, and with Alicia and Nathan I hadn’t planned anything, I just felt the right moment and grabbed it. Here, there was no moment. I grasped for one, tried to force myself to feel it, but came up empty.

“What about you and Roger? When are you two gonna tie the knot?” Margaret turned a very intent stare on me, the way only married women do.

“I don’t think me and Roger can get much closer than we are now,” I said carefully. “Last night was...special.” I sipped my coffee, savoring its flavor again. I wondered if the taste was enhanced by my new senses, or if it really was this unbelievably good.

“Oh my god, dish!” She leaned in to put her excited face closer to mine. “What happened?” And she actually did bat her eyelashes at me.

“We...had a very nice shower together,” I tried to be demure and deflect. Whatever instinct was guiding me was telling me that this wasn’t the right moment, and I listened to it.

“In the shower? Really?”

My mind flashed back to last night’s shower, to holding Roger with the water glancing off of him and into my eyes, and how I had felt that amazing power within him, within me. My muscles tightened and I smiled.

“You’re blushing!” Margaret giggled. “Tell me! Tell me tell me tell me, I wanna know!” In that moment of unbridled delight, I knew more about Margaret than she’d ever let me see before then. She was full of that child-like wonder, that innocence that so many of us lost as we were battered and bruised by the world. But not Margaret, not little Maggie. With her sprightliness and her eagerness. When she manipulated, it was because she’d never had to learn the hard lessons of accepting that the world didn’t want to give her something. If I’d reacted to it negatively, it was because she represented some kind of

getting-away-with-it mentality that I'd outgrown. But now, watching her giggle with delight at the thought of something illicit and sexual, I didn't see a manipulative woman who always got what she wanted. I saw a girl, naïve and delightful, and I was overwhelmed by my loss of it. I felt an emptiness inside me where that feeling used to be, and I wanted it there again. I wanted Margaret's ability to see the world with wonder. I wanted her joy and her glee. I wanted it so much it felt more like I needed it. So much so, I couldn't bring myself to tell her about last night. I knew it would scare her, and that was the last thing I wanted to do.

“Just...trust me, the water did sort of take over the moment.”

“Oh.” She said the word with pouting lips and an exaggerated sad face.

“I'm sorry,” I told her, though I wasn't exactly sure what I was sorry for.

“No, it's not your fault. I just was hoping you'd give me something to tell Pete that might, I don't know, change his mind. The shower just seems like such a fun place, but he won't even consider it. I even had him put in a removable shower head, did I tell you that? A removable shower head! He didn't even know what I wanted it for, just said 'yes dear' and put it in!”

“Maybe you should show him,” I suggested. I knew they'd never get the chance, but I still felt like it was a good suggestion. It made Margaret giggle again. Her giggle was like a song I'd forgotten how to sing, and hearing it made me crave its sound. She was sharing it with me, though. I watched her eyes dance while she laughed, and saw her opening up to me. I wanted her so badly.

“You're bad,” she said.

“I’m still a little stiff legged from the drive over here,” I said, pushing my chair away from the table. “Mind if we walk a little bit?”

“Sure thing.”

We grabbed our purses and coffees and strolled back the way we came. I tried to find a way into Margaret’s head with the realization I’d had. There had to be some way to make her give herself to me, so that I could add her joy and wonder to the energy I already felt inside me from the others.

“So, are you, like, worried you might get sick?” Margaret asked.

“Why would I get sick?” I answered casually. It seemed an odd question.

“Well, if you and Roger...you know...showered, and now he’s down with that bug, do you think he could have given it to you?”

“Oh, that.” My mind raced to come up with a reply. “You know, if it’s gonna happen, there’s nothing I can do about it. But it hasn’t shown up yet.” I shrugged to show how nonchalant I was.

A breeze tickled the back of my neck, sending a shiver down my spine and giving me goosebumps despite the warmth of the day. I stopped and looked over in the direction it had come from. There was a slender alleyway between two buildings that was empty and quiet. The breeze washed over me and through me, filling me with the certainty that this was the moment I needed. Here, in this alleyway, was where I could make it happen. My pulse quickened and my breathing became more shallow.

“Di? You okay?” Margaret took my hand in her smaller one to get my attention.

“Yeah,” I said breathlessly. I was vaguely aware that the breeze wasn’t tousling Margaret’s hair at all, though I could feel mine moving. The moment was so consuming I didn’t pay much attention to it, I was moving on pure instinct. I walked into the alley.

“Hey, where are you going?” Margaret’s voice tinkled musically, trying to call me back. It hit me, that she was manipulating me with her kindness because she loved me. She got something from me, and she needed it like I needed something from her. It was her own peculiar form of love, but it was there. And she was revealing herself to me, giving a piece of herself away.

“In here,” I whispered, slipping into the alleyway and out of any line of sight. The streets were empty of pedestrians, no one was watching or could stumble across us.

“What? What’s in there?” her voice was wet with excitement and curiosity.

“This,” I dropped my coffee and took her face in between my hands and pressed my lips against her, pushing her up against the wall. Her lips were soft and sensuous, the skin of her cheeks was silky smooth. She made a small yelp that I swallowed in my mouth when I pushed her up against the wall of the alley.

I breathed in deeply through my mouth, drawing in the air from her lungs.

The breeze in the alley became a stronger wind, and began to swirl around us. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the kiss. Her hands had covered mine, but weren’t trying to pull them away. She wasn’t holding me closer either, just keeping contact, like she didn’t know where to put them. Margaret made noises of surprise against my mouth. I felt her hair whip against my face, the air teased her now as much as it teased me. Then it found what it was looking for and I felt Margaret’s chest heave. The wind seemed to

flow into her nostrils and through her lungs, into me. My own chest heaved in response, pushing our bodies together. I could feel her body stiffen against me, and her hands began tapping mine, asking for me to release her. The noises she made went from surprise to fear, but it was too late now. Even if I wanted to, I was in the throes of the moment.

She tried to pull her head away and break contact, but the wall behind her didn't give her any room. I felt like I wasn't even using my own strength to hold her, she was pinned against the wall by the breeze more than by me now. The breeze that flowed through her lungs and into mine. Neither of us had to breathe in, the air forced into us gave us the oxygen we needed. But every moment also gave me a little of Margaret as well. I could taste her on my tongue, feel her on my lips. I breathed her in and she coated my throat, slid into my lungs. My hands against her face moved, the weight they were holding down was growing lighter.

I opened my eyes to look into hers. I wanted to share this moment with her fully, intimately. She would never have another moment like this and I didn't want it to be a waste in any way.

I gazed into those eyes with love and admiration. They were wide with fear, so I tried to show her calm and peace. I wanted this to be serene. No anger, no sadness. All that I felt as I breathed her in and she entered my heart was love. Love for her, love for Peter, love for the whole group. I felt so close to them now, except for Peter. I looked into her eyes the way I imagined Peter would, full of appreciation and commitment. After all,

this was the biggest commitment I could make to her, to keep her inside me. I was accepting her into me in a way no one else could. Not even Peter.

Her hands moved to press on my shoulders, she was trying to force me back. But she lacked the strength to do it. She lacked the substance. My lungs opened up deeper than they had ever opened before, expanding to hold more of her as she faded. She wasn't fading the way Roger faded, Margaret was becoming wholly transparent. With each moment she grew lighter and more see-through. Her eyes were almost impossible to see now, and the wall of the alley was becoming more clear. I could see through her more, more, more, until I wasn't really seeing her at all. She was like a ghost between me and the wall. A ghost I could touch.

Then I couldn't even touch her. My hands clasped together and my lips closed on empty air.

I fell forward, vaguely aware of my shoulder hitting the wall of the alleyway. The world was pulsating again, everything shifting focus as my vision swam. Once again everything went dim. I smelled the dank, musty aroma of the cavern. Images flashed before me. The round door, the sphere in the impossible room, the glowing blackness inside it.

Then I was standing, with no sense of vertigo, on the strange ground that roiled beneath my feet. In front of me, suspended in space, was a round door identical to the one that led into the chamber.

It hovered in front of me, resting on nothing but the empty space between the bottom of the circle and the ground beneath it. Looking down, I did see an impression left

by the door. Maybe it was using some invisible force to hover that way, a force that pressed down but was invisible to the eye. Even my eyes.

I gently put one hand on the circular stone door, partly afraid it was going to slide away from me, or that my hand would pass right through. But my hand landed on the cool stone and met with firm resistance. It wouldn't swivel or slide, it was firmly planted in its place, hovering alone in the vast emptiness of this place. I leaned my right ear against the stone and listened for some sound. Nothing came. Now that I was paying attention, there was no sound at all from anything. The world was devoid of sound, just like it was devoid of life. It seemed to lack anything other than the watery stone ground and the unbelievable sky. And the door.

Keeping my ear against the stone, I knocked three times in rapid succession. I felt the vibration in my skull, a thud-thud-thud, but no sound. I knocked again, three times rapidly. Again a thud-thud-thud in my head. Again no sound. I tried my other ear and knocked one more time in the same pattern, and again I felt the vibration but heard no sound.

Whatever rules governed this place, sound was not one of them. I didn't even try to speak, there was no point. There was nobody else to talk to. I was all by myself. The plain stretched to the horizon, and the skies showed me only their strange colors, desolate and unbroken in their uniform strangeness. I tried to feel that place inside me where I kept Roger's energy safe. Where I was keeping Aly and Nathan, and now Margaret. But where that warmth should have been, where I expected to feel the protective instinct to shield them, I felt only space. It felt like there was a gaping hole inside me, where they



should have been. I felt entirely, completely alone.

And in a flash, I wasn't. Doorways winked into existence around the plain, in the skies above me, near and far. And they were all opening. Suddenly the skies were crowded with floating and flying apparitions. The ground was covered in things that slithered, crawled, hopped, and moved in ways I had no words for. There was a mass of tentacles, fins, feet, every kind of appendage I'd ever dreamed of, and many more that I hadn't. The creatures went beyond number, seething in a wave, all in unison, all reaching out towards me. I felt their attention on me, focusing, pinpointing me, filling me with a sensation that lit all my nerve endings and had my whole body tingling. They reached out for me, and I was overwhelmed by the peculiar sensation that they were reaching not to pull me down, but for me to pull them up.

The creatures seemed to pulsate and lose focus. I got dizzy, and stumbled forward as my sight went dim, and my shoulder collided with something rough and solid.

The world came back into view, and I felt the rough brick of the alleyway wall digging into the skin of my shoulder. The wind was still whipping my hair and clothes around my body, but not as violently as it had been before. Before. I held myself still for a moment, the vision fading from my mind and being smoothly replaced by the warmth of feeling Margaret's energy inside me. It was different from the way the others felt, more tingly. Like her laughter distilled into a bubble that I was holding inside of me. I wanted to coddle that bubble, hold it gently and let it grow within me.

I let myself sag against the wall of the alley, basking in the glow of the moment. When I finally exhaled, I tasted Margaret on my tongue and lips again. I knew that I held

her inside me, and that she was with the others.

I even felt a little pleased with myself for overcoming the pettiness I felt earlier.

When I felt I could stand again, I moved slowly and carefully. Margaret's purse and her spilled coffee were still on the ground in the alley, so I picked them up and quietly tossed them into a dumpster. I hoped they'd stay undisturbed there. Nobody would benefit from trying to look for her now.

There was only one of us left now, I thought. It stopped me dead in my tracks. Us? Was I still one of us? If I was, why had I not counted myself? I was still here, but I was so different now, I felt like I'd become so much more than I was just the day before. So maybe, maybe that thought was right. Maybe the only one of us left the way we were before was Peter. I turned my mind towards this problem. Not that Peter was the problem, but getting to him would be tricky. He wasn't like Roger, I couldn't just ask nicely. With the exception of Margaret's ability to manipulate him, Peter only liked doing things if they were his idea. I didn't know what his *out* plans were for tonight, but I hoped I could get him to put me as a priority.

Then, I realized, I held Margaret inside me. There had to be an answer in there somewhere. Some solution to getting him to meet me. I closed my eyes and searched myself, trying to find that part of me that was Margaret.

"Maggie, sweetie, I need your help just one more time. Please," I whispered quietly. I was still in the alleyway, but I had no idea if people were going to walk by at any moment, and I didn't want to have to explain myself to any of those people who still thought the sky was blue.

I mulled it over the whole time I walked back to my car. I was walking briskly, so focused on getting back into my car without drawing attention that I didn't look up to see if the air was still empty, or if adding Margaret's power to my own had brought the imploding and exploding shapes back. I couldn't afford to let them distract me, not now. Not when I was so close to...to what? I wasn't quite sure. But it was something. Some final point that every fiber of my being told me was getting nearer with each passing moment. Something that had to do with going back to the cave.

The cave.

I had my answer. It was so simple, and I knew it would work. Peter had to have everything be his own decision, and I could use that. I glanced up at the sun, I still had a few hours of daylight left, I could make it happen today if I was lucky. And I was counting on being lucky. But, I also knew that I had to get back to the cave before I could do anything. I dropped into the driver's seat of my car and keyed the ignition.

This was the home stretch.

I barely registered that the ephemeral shapes were back.

#

## PART TWO: THE BEGINNING

I pulled my phone out at the beginning of the hiking trail to call Peter. I hoped he'd answer, but I'd been repeating what I was going to say aloud so many times that his voicemail would be just as good. It wouldn't interrupt me, at least.

He answered on the second ring.

"Hey, Diana, what's up?"

“Hey yourself, Petey, I was hoping you could help me out with something. Have you talked with Aly and Nate today?”

“Not yet, no. Why?”

“They called me this morning and said they’d had some weird things happen with the photos they took of the cave yesterday. It was huge, but in their photos it just looked like this tiny thing. I went over to take a look, and they were right. The photos don’t match up to what we saw, any of us.”

“Huh. Weird.” There was a sound of papers being shuffled in the background. Whatever Peter was doing today was taking some of his attention away from me, I hoped I had enough to draw him in.

“Yeah, so I talked with Maggie after that and she agreed to come with me to take some photos on our cell phones to see if the same thing happened with us. Only I’m here at the trail and she’s not. Have you heard from her?”

That got his attention.

“What? No, I haven’t. But I haven’t called her either. She knows I’m busy today, I told her I’d be home late tonight. Want me to try calling her for you?”

“No, I’ve been trying.” He was going off script, I had to get him back on it. “It just went straight to her voicemail and she’s not responding to texts either. I’m worried that she got here before me and maybe slipped on that landslide. You know how she is.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Fuck. Alright, shit, I’ll be there in about a half-hour if I’m lucky, can you wait that long?”

I had him.

“Pete, what if she’s hurt? I’m gonna head up the trail to the place and look for her. If my phone doesn’t get reception, just meet me there, okay?”

“Yeah, I’m leaving now. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” He hung up.

I strolled up to the beginning of the trail, smiling to myself. Soon he would be with Margaret and all the others. Once I had him, this hunger would finally go away. It was driving me mad with desire. I knew that I only needed Peter to be complete and whole, and then I’d never want for anything ever again.

The hike back up to the landslide area was so easy and pleasant, I couldn’t stop myself from humming a tuneless melody. The trees lining the pathway were a verdant, vibrant green that they hadn’t been the day before. The dirt path swirled with patterns that warped and shifted the longer I stared, the branches of the trees seemed to be moving like serpents, their leaves rustling even though there was no wind.

The closer I got to the point of the landslide, the more silent everything became. First I lost the sound of traffic in the distance, the far away sounds of the world beyond the hiking trail. Once those were gone, I felt more part of the wilderness, even with the manicured and maintained hiking path. When the wind stopped and the trees no longer rustled, the bushes no longer whispered, that’s when I began to feel more isolated. Then the sounds of insects ceased, and the only noise I heard was of my shoes crunching on the gravelly pathway. I was completely alone.

Except, of course, that I wasn’t. I couldn’t be alone ever again. Inside me was my partner and my closest friends, soon to be all of them once Peter showed up. My heart beat for all of us, my lungs breathed for everyone, and though I only was leaving one set

of footprints, it was for the whole group. I felt something stir inside me that could only be their energies. It felt like they brushed up against my heart and filled it with warmth and tenderness.

The air in front of me began to shimmer. Blurry lines and curves intersecting at bizarre angles bent and warped to form complex shapes, folding into and out of each other. The shapes moved through the air like jellyfish, drifting on invisible currents that I couldn't see or feel even with my new senses. They floated around me; some seemed to stick close to me as I waded past them. But when I reached out, my hand passed through them just as it had done before. Seeing them come back to me brought a huge girlish smile to my face. I felt at peace with them around. They were my guiding lights, my guardian angels, my protective ghosts. Whatever they were, they made me happy. I spread my arms out, fingers outstretched, and twirled in the noiseless air. I giggled, and the giggle grew until I threw my head back and laughed to the skies. It wasn't my usual laugh, it felt like it had parts of everybody I was saving inside me all mingled together. While it felt full of pure joy, it sounded confused. Too many voices sharing one set of vocal chords, and my simple human body wasn't meant to handle it. But it tried so beautifully, and I didn't care if anyone was nearby to overhear me.

I came up to the break in the trail where the landslide happened. There was nothing barring the path, no warning signs or anything. It looked just like it had the day before, only with a chunk of the path spread out over the slope of the mountain beneath it. The jellyfish shapes floated down the path, leading the way for me. I followed them gingerly, making sure each step was firmly planted before I moved my other foot. The

shapes seemed to wait for me, drifting gently on ethereal drafts of air when I moved, holding steady while they waited.

I found myself at the mouth of the cave, staring into its unlit depths. The afternoon sunlight pushed in just a little bit, but was powerless to banish the shadows inside. What was in there was not ready to come out into the daylight, and it kept the shadow drawn over like a blanket. I watched as the jellyfish shapes floated into the cave, vanishing into the darkness beyond. Even with my new sight, they simply disappeared into the blackness, like stars winking out one by one. It was hypnotic, watching them. Sometimes they would float in on a quick current, others would barely move from one moment to the next, but they all moved into the cave without exception. They were being drawn in, and looking into the cave after them I realized that I was being drawn in too. It was a gentle tug at something deep within me. I felt it in my heart, but not only there. It was in my core, my spirit, whatever that place was inside of me that held onto Roger and Aly and Nate and Maggie, that part of me wanted to walk into the cave with the shapes. But not yet. I stood with my hand on the lip of the cave and watched the procession move by.

“Diana?”

I whirled around at the voice. I had been expecting Peter but I must have zoned out watching the shapes do their hypnotic dance into the darkness.

He looked relieved to see me, but only for a moment.

“Where’s Maggie?” he asked, just the slightest hint of panic in his voice. His eyes flicked to the dark mouth of the cave.

“I don’t know,” I lied. “I haven’t seen her here.”

“She wouldn’t have gone into that cave,” Peter said. “She was afraid of it yesterday, remember?”

“Yesterday was a long time ago,” I said. “Maybe she changed her mind.”

“Di, she’s not the type of person to...to just...she wouldn’t have gone in there. Not without me anyway.” I could see the doubt creep into his eyes. He wanted to believe that his wife was safe, and she was, but I couldn’t tell him how just yet.

“It’s the only place I haven’t looked yet,” I told him, and stepped over the threshold into the cave.

He took the bait perfectly. He grabbed my hand to stop me, and in a single fluid move I had him. I spun back towards him, putting my other hand on his wrist and using his surprise to break his hold on my hand and place his palm against the wall of the cave. I had spun so fast that my sunglasses came off from my face and clattered to the ground. It was all coming out now. I grinned at Peter.

“Di, what the hell? What are you—”

“Hush, Peter.” I said it quietly, tranquilly. He tried to pull his hand away, but it was already stuck to the stone wall.

“Hush,” I said again. “It’s okay. This is all okay. This is how it has to be.”

“How what has to be?” He tried pulling his hand away again, but I kept mine on the back of his and held it firmly against the stone, just in case he did manage to tear free.

I reached out with my other hand and caressed his jaw. “Don’t you see? Can’t you feel it? This place. This place is—”



“Jesus fucking Christ, Diana, what’s going on here? And what the hell happened to your eyes?”

I looked down at his hand, smiling. There was a smooth line where his hand had begun melding into the stone. It was beginning.

“My eyes...were given the ability to see. I can see things like never before, Peter. Beautiful things. Once you give yourself to me, maybe you can look through my eyes and see what I do. You can see that the sky isn’t really blue like we thought, it’s so much more. And the world is full of so many more colors than we thought. More colors than I even knew were possible. Can you just see it now?”

“No, no I can’t, Di. And I don’t want to, I want you to let go of my hand now. I want you to let me go. Now.”

“Oh, Peter, I can’t do that. I had to save you for last, I see that now. You never loved just me. It was always the group, all of us. And I had to make sure I had them all with me before I came to you.”

That made him stop cold. His breath caught and he looked at me with fresh terror. He had finally realized what was going on.

“The last one? You...you’ve already done this to Maggie?”

“Yes. And the others. My Roger was the first, he helped me realize what had to happen, and he gave himself to me to make it happen.”

“Diana, what did you do to them?”

“They’re inside me now, part of me. Just like your body is becoming part of this cave, your energy will become part of me. Look.” I glanced at his wrist, which now met

directly with the wall of the cave. His hand was completely gone, absorbed into the smooth stone.

I knew that Peter wasn't ready to accept what was happening, but his reaction surprised me. He began to howl and wave his free arm around like a madman. Peter, Pete, Petey, who had always been calm and collected, who was authoritative but never pushy, was coming unraveled before my eyes. I reached for his flailing arm with my free hand, which I caught easily. His pulling against me felt no stronger than a kite string tugging against the wind. He couldn't resist me now. I brought his hand to my face and placed my cheek in his soft, loving palm. I tried to close my eyes then, to savor the moment and just focus on his touch, but I found that the muscles had gone. It wasn't that I could feel my eyelids staying open, I no longer felt my eyelids. They had been replaced by a new level of awareness that was growing as Peter was merging deeper into the stone wall. Peter, who had gone stiff and still, seemed to have lost the power of his voice. His eyes showed me everything I needed to know, though. He was starting to accept this. I kept his hand against my cheek, holding it there with my hand and feeling his essence flow into me. My skin tingled where he touched me, a cool sensation rather than a hot one. I'd had to step forward into him, he was absorbed up to the shoulder now, and his leg was partway gone as well.

"What will happen?" He asked in a whisper.

"When?"

"After this. After...I don't know, just, after."

"I don't know," I admitted.

He nodded.

“Then how can you be sure this is the right thing to do? How do you know, Diana?”

“I know because...” I paused, giving it some thought while he pulled farther away from me and into the cave. “I know because I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life, Pete. I know because I’m so full of this love for you, for all of you, that it can’t be wrong. Nothing that’s done out of this much love can be wrong. It has to be right.”

He looked directly into my face now, and I saw myself reflected in his wide eyes. I saw myself as he saw me.

Where my eyes ought to have been, the entire eye socket, was now a pair of empty black holes. They were pure blackness, a darkness so impenetrable that nothing escaped it.

And unexpectedly, Peter smiled at me.

“Diana,” he said gently, that soft smile pulling his lips apart in a serene expression. “You have a fucked up view of love.” And he threw himself backwards against the wall of the cave so violently he nearly tore his hand free from mine. I almost lost contact with him. I almost lost him.

“No!” I cried, but it was too late. He had hit the wall with enough force to absorb nearly all of him in an instant.

I was hit by a jolt of whatever it was that I absorbed, his energy or essence or whatever I had taken from Roger and all the others. All of his life leaving him at once and flowing into me. His hand grabbed mine in a spasm, fingers clamping down hard,

they twitched twice, and then released. Nearly all part of the wall now, his face went slack and his expression faded. His eyes were blank now too, showing none of the light that had animated them a moment ago. They didn't even reflect me anymore. Peter was gone.

Except not gone entirely. I felt the familiar swell of my chest and quickening of my pulse as he took up residence inside me. I felt him nestle into that part of me that wasn't a physical part of me, but still housed all the others. I was now six of us, and we were finally all one.

And, I realized, I was no longer feeling the hunger that had been with me. It had just switched off.

I was expecting the dizziness that would take me into another vision, but none came. Instead, my vision flared to life. The dark recesses of the cave retreated from me and were replaced by glowing points of a beautiful radiant light that shifted colors with every moment. Each light moved through the air on invisible currents, and from the entrance to the cave I saw one of the jellyfish shapes float past me, its lines and curves folding and unfolding on themselves. The moment it crossed the threshold into the cave, it illuminated and joined the other points of light as they bobbed up and down, lighting the way for me. The glow they cast reached all the way to the circular stone door.

I walked carefully, slowly, through the cavern, picking my way between the points of light. They gave off no heat, and while part of me didn't think they were any more solid than when they were folding pieces of ether, I wasn't entirely sure, and I didn't want to take the chance that I was wrong. So I crept forward slowly. Step by step, I

made my way first to the seam where the rough hewn stone became smooth and polished, and eventually to the wall and its inset door.

The door stood before me in its perfect, circular silence, unmoving and unmoved by my entrance. I could see it more clearly now than when I was here last, and I had no need for my little phone flashlight. It was shimmering, a billion small points of light reflecting and refracting light in billions of different ways at each moment. No matter where I looked on the door, I was dazzled by the complexity of it.

Lying on the ground directly before the door was a small stone, no bigger than the palm of my hand. I picked it up and turned it over in my hands a few times.

Peter.

The voice in my head sounded like Peter. And then I remembered him throwing a stone into the cave, only to have it vanish. It never made a noise.

How had I missed it yesterday? I should have seen it, maybe even tripped on it. It wasn't there, I was sure of it. If the four of us hadn't seen it, it couldn't have been there. But it was here now. I stuffed the rock into my pocket. One impossible thing at a time.

Whatever had drawn me to the door now drew my hand to its surface, and I pushed. Both halves of the door swung open away from me, into the inner chamber, and a whoosh of air rushed past me as the room sucked in all the still air behind me, along with all the floating lights. They flowed around and over me, but never through me, into the room. Either they had mass now, or I was somehow in the way of their airflow currents that they floated on. Regardless, they were all inside the room now, and I was left standing in the dark at the doorway.

I stepped inside.

The room was enormous in the light. Farther across than I had realized, and impossibly high up. The lights hadn't only been sucked into the room, they had been taken all the way up to the top of the room, where it seemed they had each taken a space in a uniquely placed hole in the ceiling. Way up above, twinkling over my head, they looked like a night sky. Only they formed constellations I had never seen before and had no names for, and that took the forms of shapes I'd never seen in a constellation. They twinkled away from a safe distance to let me look over the room again.

I crossed to the center of the room, to that perfect sphere that came right out of the floor, all of it being one piece. Crossing there from the door took much longer than I remembered, and I didn't think it was because I took smaller steps, and it wasn't a trick of the light. The room had gotten bigger. But how could a room carved out of actual stone be bigger than before? How was that even possible?

Then again, who was I to question what was possible. After everything, I thought, the room being larger was something I could just take as a given.

I made my way from the orb to the guardians of the far door, the gryphon type stone beasts that sat facing inward. Looking at them both clearly for the first time, they were remarkable beasts indeed. Beaks and wings that made for a fearsome presence, but their smooth eyes seemed to be looking at me without looking. Much like I saw them, but I knew from seeing myself reflected in Peter's eyes that I had none of my own to see with. I felt a kinship to those guardian birds then. I put my hands on the one nearest to me and stroked the stone gently.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

The sounds reverberated in the round-walled room, filling it with a vibrating resonance that shook me to my core. The sound came from the door in front of me. The closed door on this side of the room.

The door that looked like it opened inward.

It was a quick succession of three knocks. I knew it was familiar somehow, but couldn't place exactly how I knew it. Curiosity had me fully captive now, and I walked up to the door to put my ear to it. I was going to try to hear what was on the other side of the stone door.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

I retreated from the door back towards the center of the room. I remembered where I knew that knocking from. But it wasn't possible. Even in this world, even where impossible seemed to be a joke concept that nobody should really believe in, this shouldn't be. It couldn't be.

The door bulged in ever so slightly, and only for a moment. But it was enough to let the narrowest sliver of light come through the crack. A light that was an alien color.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

For all my newfound purpose, for all the new power that I had, and the strength that came from holding my friends within me, in that moment I felt human. And I felt terrified. Pete's words echoed in my mind. How did I know that what I was doing was the right thing? Everything with Roger had happened so automatically, I'd been so overwhelmed by the feeling that what I was doing was right. But, what if there was some

force pulling me down this path? What if I'd been wrong? The knocks on the door sent chills down my spine, pushing dread along with them.

“No,” I whispered. “No, it can’t be.” I turned to leave the room, and walked straight into the sphere.

It reacted like a toy that had been waiting to be turned on, full of energy that was stored and sitting, unused. The smooth, polished stone began to hum and rumble.

I tried to pull away, but my hands stuck to the stone. I tugged and tried to pull myself free, but the more I struggled, the more I realized I was bound to this unearthly rock. The humming got louder and higher in pitch. It sounded exactly like a machine that was powering up.

Where the stone was directly in front of my face was a small hole with an inky blackness inside it that pulsed and thrummed to the orb’s noises. It rippled its blackness outward, each ripple reaching a little bit farther out of the hole. Each wave taking it slightly closer to me.

The humming got louder and higher, louder and higher. The blackness in front of my face came ever closer to me. I didn’t know how much more my ears could take of what was now an incredibly high pitched whining noise. Right when I thought I’d reached my limit, it stopped. The room went quiet. Then, I heard a click from inside the stone.

The last part of me that felt human, the part that was terrified, screamed.

The blackness surged forward like an explosion of not-light. It bathed me in its radiance, not obscuring the world beyond it but tinting it darker. I could still see the



starlight above me, but now it all looked white or blue rather than myriad shades of colors.

My chest surged, expanded, like it was about to explode. I felt no pain from it, but I saw my body warping past where I thought I could cope. I tried to scream again, but no sound came out. The darkness that held me wouldn't let me make a noise.

It pulled on my chest again, and I felt a little piece of me come free and flow into the stone. No, not of me. It wasn't a piece of me, it was a piece of we. There was an emptiness where that first tug had torn something out of me, someone out of me. Across from me, a white light shot out of the stone, accompanied by the sound of rushing water.

It had taken Roger from me.

Then another tug, this time I was allowed to make a small sound. I gasped in pain, stifling a sob. Then another white light shot out from the stone's side, this one made the sound of thunder. Each time, another light came on inside the stone from one of the other empty holes. Except they weren't empty anymore, they were full of the energy of the five people I loved more than the world itself.

I slid off the stone and onto the floor, landing with a heavy thud on my back. The stone orb began to rotate, slowly at first, then it began building speed. I looked at it, and as each light passed over my face I saw a flicker of fire in one of the holes, water in another, lightning in a third, a fourth appeared empty, and the fifth looked like it had filled in with stone, but was still emitting a brilliant white light. The last one, the one that held me, was the only one still blazing the black lightless light. They spun past me faster

and faster until they were a blur. The air swirled around the room in a cyclone. I tried again to scream and again couldn't make a noise.

The sphere was now spinning so fast in front of me that each point of light seemed to always be pointing right at me. It gave me the impression that all six beams of light were one big, powerful beacon.

A great pulse of light emanated from the stone, radiating out in all directions. It hit me with a magnificent force and tore from me the scream that had been building up. But the scream was more than sound. From my position lying on the ground, it forced me to tilt my head back until I was looking at the closed door upside down and screaming at the door. The sound was joined by a thick beam of light, wrapped in the black lightless light that somehow had bathed me in it. Both were brilliant and seared my vision. If I had eyelids then, I would have shut them. But I knew what was about to happen, and I knew I wouldn't be allowed to look away or not see it.

The light from the stone engulfed me, burning white hot through my body and turning anything that I was before to ash. The dark light surged from within me, taking the place of all that had been and would never be again. It pulled me up to my feet and brought my face around to look at the door as it groaned and creaked. Something moved against my hip, and I felt the fabric of my jeans tear away. I saw a dark blur as the stone from my pocket flew across the space toward the door. The small stone melted into the doors the way Peter had become one with the cave wall. The doors reacted like it was the missing piece of a machine. They shuddered, straining against whatever forces were keeping them closed. Then, they began to slowly open. Otherworldly light from the far

side of the door spilled through, at first only in a sliver between the tiniest crack possible in the door. But the crack widened, sending more of the light seeping into this room. The light was warm, and it was pleasant. It felt like bathing in the sunlight of a summer's day. The semi-circular doors arched inward, revealing the land from my visions on the other side.

It felt like home.

The light lost some of its brilliance and my vision adjusted to the new level of brightness in the room once more. Through the open doorway, I saw an endless expanse of a stony landscape. The ground looked to be made of a rock that flowed like liquid, rolling and roiling outward to the horizon in every direction. It was featureless, and endless. There was no direct light source and nothing else moved.

But I knew they were out there. I could feel them. And I knew they could feel me, and were looking at me. They were waiting, looking through to this world, sensing what they could from their new vantage points into this place. They would take their time, they could wait an eternity if they wanted. But now this world was open to them. Now this world would welcome them.

I left the room and headed back out to the mouth of the cave. When I walked back out into the clearing, the last light of sunset was just fading from the sky.

In the near distance, from the copse of trees down the mountain, a flock of birds took wing and fled to the skies, as though they had sensed me coming.