

Journey to Pinnacus

Introduction

The dwelling was nondescript. The place where it all began. A ramshackle little hut in the middle of nowhere. From a distance no one would have ever guessed that a place of residence existed in this remote mountainous area. It was set high on the face of a seemingly impossible-to-scale cliff, perched on the rugged-most side of the inhospitable Xerxas Mountain, overlooking the Valley of Sud.

The Valley of Sud was of particular significance to the gods. A place where, because of its topography, all the Elements came together effortlessly — Earth, Air, Fire and Water — and where history was made on a defining battlefield. It was in this valley that one of the greatest and yet least talked about battles was fought and where the course of history was irrevocably swerved as the gods went on to triumph in the war against the Titans.

Snaking through the deep canyon miles below was the roaring waters of the mighty Kanava River. The headwaters of the river remained a mystery and not even the gods themselves knew from where it originated. On either side of the Kanava were miles and miles of wide open land known to everyone as the Plains of Litmus.

Juliet, the Ulster Princess, surfaced from the chilly waters of the Kanava sputtering, struggling to catch her breath. The young woman looked around for her companions as she treaded water. Even amid the carnage of dead bodies floating on the surface of the river she wasn't afraid. She felt strange, yet safe. Almost as if she was one with the elements.

As the young woman's eyes adjusted to her surroundings she saw the grandiosity of the wide terrain. Across the Kanava River — standing majestically as a colossal twin to the Xerxas — there rose another massive mountain range known as the Mountains of Haligius. To many on Pinnacus, Haligius was referred to simply as the Holy Mountain. Juliet knew this because she was told by Anga Kkuq while they were on Leviticus of the significance of this valley and of its historical context.

It was here on Mount Haligius high above the North Plain where San-Shin the Mountain God dwelled. Many years ago, San-Shin built a magnificent palace for the

gods — the Palace of Immortals — and he was richly rewarded by the Supremes for his deed of selflessness.

For the deities, the Palace of the Immortals was the most holy of places and it housed the revered inner sanctum known as the Chamber of Sacrosancts. In this inner chamber the major gods gathered to make laws, maintain order and collectively rule over this the Third Level of the World Tree, the place known as Pinnacus.

The historical perspective of the valley was not lost on the Princess but other more pressing matters required her attention. She knew they had to make it up the side of the mountain to the palace, and fast, if they wanted to preserve any chance of a future for the inhabitants of this world. The Gakimelians had already begun their slaughter and the hallowed halls of The Palace were about to bear witness to acts of unthinkable sacrilege and unprecedented savagery. Acts that could possibly destroy even the deities themselves. And lay waste even the Holiest-of-the-Holies about whom it was long believed were impervious to death.

And as the throngs on the Plains of Litmus continued to be savaged by the relentless attack of the Gaks, the Palace and its inhabitants were under siege. The Supremes were perilously close to coming face-to-face with an enemy much more powerful and sinister than any they had ever faced.

In the face of this danger Juliet and her trio of companions started to make their way to the right bank of the river. Innis, The Protector, was breathing heavily but appeared to be okay. This, in spite of the long and dangerous journey they had just taken. Anga Kkuq, The Orifact, showed no visible sign of fatigue and in fact was already halfway out of the water when they all heard Teale's scream.

The Aperture's scream was long, bloodcurdling and signaled nothing short of impending demise. The group collectively whirled their heads around to see what had spooked Teale.

And they didn't have to wait very long or look much farther than the hut on Xerxas.

Chapter 1 - The Gourd

The nightfall had just arrived when a sudden and noticeable chill in the air made the winds rustle and the branches of the surrounding trees on the rugged face of the Xerxas crackle. The Sylph adjusted his outer garment as the chill in the air got more pronounced. He paced back and forth in front of the dwelling as he called out to his companion keeping guard in the back of the building.

“Maluk!” his voice boomed. “The Supremes have charged us with safeguarding The Gourd. But for millennia The Gourd was never guarded. Why now?”

He shouted loudly so he could be heard above the rustle of the wind blowing through the trees.

Maluk, his partner who was standing guard in the back of the dwelling, could hear his companion’s voice clearly but he too had felt the noticeable change in the temperature and was a bit distracted by the chill.

“I know very little, Simeon. I merely carry out my orders.”

The reply was muted by the chill in the air.

Maluk continued. “However, it is rumored that an advisor to the Great Janus overheard him as he spoke to one of the Supremes. It is said that Janus was told by the Supreme that The Grand Prophecy has already been set in motion.”

“Silence, Maluk!” Simeon thundered. “You know as well as I do, that we do not speak of The Grand Prophecy. That is heresy!”

Simeon was not deterred, “I speak not of what I myself know to be true, but instead of the sinister whisperings that flow from the tongues of many throughout the Kingdom of the Sylphs.”

The Sylphs were winged creatures that lived in throngs all over the land of Pinnacus. They were similar in likeness to humans — as were many inhabitants of Pinnacus including the gods themselves — but the main difference was the large albatross-like wings attached to their shoulders. The Sylphs dwelled in their own kingdom in the clouds and generally only adapted to become terrestrial dwellers when they entered servitude to the gods. While not immortal, they nonetheless were very

intelligent, very strong and also extremely industrious beings. Their versatility and uncanny ability to reproduce in large numbers made them a favorite of the gods.

The Sylphs had been serving the gods in varying capacities since time indefinite. They served as laborers, as soldiers, as farmers, as hunters and in a number of many other capacities. They were also considered to be very loyal and as such many of them who served as close servants or advisors to the gods were given unprecedented access to The Chamber of Sacrosancts. As with all beings on Pinnacus who served the gods well, the inhabitants of the Kingdom of the Sylphs were given special protection from any of their potential enemies.

Both Simeon and Maluk were capable Sylph warriors, but in many ways the Sylphs were militarily less accomplished than their distant cousins the Harpies. The Harpies were more ferocious, more bloodthirsty and tended to be loners. Their main physical difference from the Sylphs was their claw-like appendages on their hands and feet. Even though the Harpies were a notoriously fickle group, many had been drafted into different armies of the gods and had risen to prominent positions of military power. Outside of the battlefield, the Harpies were generally left alone and little was known about them and their way of life.

Simeon stretched his massive wings to their full capacity as he sought to give himself a little more warmth from the biting chill that had suddenly descended upon this corner of Mount Xerxas.

And just as suddenly as the change in temperature had occurred the weather again shifted and it started to rain. It rained lightly at first, but in a matter of moments it was coming down torrentially, blindingly. Dutifully, Simeon continued to stand guard at the entrance of the dwelling even in the heavy downpour of rain.

Then it happened. Swiftly and without any advance notice, there was a sudden rush of strong wind and before Simeon had a chance to turn around the Water-God descended out of the sky. Almost from nowhere, as if he had ridden the raindrops to the ground. In one swift motion the god plunged his pointed chalmyt through the top of the Sylph's head. It ripped the Sylph's spine apart as it went unobstructedly through bone, flesh and gristle to impale its hapless victim to the ground.

Simeon died instantly!

The Sylph was still standing upright when his killer, the water god Gong-Gong, pulled the chalmyt from his body.

So swift was the attack that Maluk did not even know his companion had just been killed.

Gong-Gong held his arms upright and turned his face skyward to the clouds as water droplets danced upon his cheeks. He felt rejuvenated. He raised his chalmyt skyward and a burst of energy shot out. And just as quickly as the rain had started it stopped.

But the eerie chill still lingered in the air.

Gong-Gong snapped his fingers and the temperature dipped even lower to where it was barely above freezing.

On the other side of the hut, Maluk knew something was wrong as he called out to Simeon.

But again Gong-Gong sprang into action! This time he transformed his body in order to better carry out the second act of his murderous rampage. The Water-God morphed to become an upright standing body of water, still human shaped, but all liquid. Even his chalmyt was liquefied. In a swift stream of watery menace the god flowed up and over the roof and cascaded down the other side of the building.

Maluk, who had sensed that something was wrong, was already in a defensive position. He was half-crouched with his chalmyt held outstretched at waist level in front of him. He was ready for battle! But he would prove to be no match for the Water-God as Gong-Gong hurtled over the top of the house still in liquefied form.

Gong-Gong's body solidified instantaneously as soon as he touched the ground. Almost immediately he launched his now solid chalmyt with dazzling speed and accuracy flush through the forehead of the second Sylph. The chalmyt exited the back of Maluk's shattered head and then boomeranged around the dwelling. In a matter of seconds it had returned firmly to the open palm of its hurler, and was clutched tightly in Gong-Gong's murderous grip.

In a mere few short moments both Sylphs, the guardians of The Gourd, were dead at the hands of the killer deity Gong-Gong.

The god turned, his cape streaming behind him, and strode purposefully to the front of the dwelling. He slowly and cautiously pushed the door open. After the awesome

demonstration of power he had just displayed, one had to wonder why he didn't just smash his way into the building. But he did not smash the building, choosing instead to exercise caution as he entered. After all, this building house The Gourd and care must be taken not to destroy the building — and certainly not to destroy the precious vessel or its contents.

Legend had it that a portion of the age-old vellum on which The Grand Prophecy was supposedly written had survived the War of the Titans. The vellum, which was rumored to be fashioned from skin taken off the back of Kronos, father of Zeus, was sealed tightly by the goddess Athena in a gourd. The gourd was then covered with indestructible metal made from the strongest quartz and beryllium found on Pinnacus. This gourd was sunk into a pit drilled deep into the belly of the rugged mountains of Xerxas.

Few people had seen The Gourd and even fewer had read the vellum on which The Grand Prophecy was written. It is said that of all the inhabitants of Pinnacus the only people to have seen the text of the Grand Prophecy were the nine Supremes. And throughout the ages, the Supreme gods had discouraged talk about this prophecy. None of the Supremes would confirm or deny the existence of the gourd containing the vellum. And most certainly none would confirm the existence of a deleterious Grand Prophecy.

But almost 18 years ago — merely a short moment in time on Pinnacus — the Sylphs were ordered by Janus to erect a small building over a large rock-face carved into the side of Mount Xerxas. This was the only indication of the spot where the pit containing The Gourd was located. And while the Supremes never admitted the existence of the text of the Grand Prophecy or even that that Xerxas was the location where it was buried, this dwelling on the side of the mountain has since then been under constant guard by the Sylphs.

As for the rest of the gods, none of them knew for sure what exactly the prophecy foretold. But there was widespread speculation that the prophecy originally came from Uranus and was relayed to the Supremes by Kronos after his defeat in the Titan War. The prophecy is said to foretell the demise of all the worlds including that of the gods and the annihilation of all living creatures inhabiting all levels of the World Tree.

No one knew why, how, or when this prophecy was to be fulfilled, but most lived in fear of some yet-to-be-determined nihilistic inevitability and quaked in fear at the very mention of the Grand Prophecy. Even the gods themselves who were supposed to be all immortal privately worried about the fulfillment of the Grand Prophecy.

So against this historical backdrop, Gong-Gong pushed the creaky door open. He was very cautious as he entered.

The place was eerily quiet. He could hear himself breathe. Even though he was a major god, on this occasion he had traveled alone to Xerxas. The gods usually traveled in processions, sometimes with throngs of followers behind them. This must have been a special trip for Gong-Gong to choose not to send an emissary. As he entered the dwelling he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw another person sitting on a tree stump that doubled as a sitting stool.

Gong-Gong smiled and reached his arms out in a gesture of affection to give his companion a hug.

“Loki, I didn’t know you were already here,” the Water-God said enthusiastically as he gave his fellow god a hug. “You are a stealthy one, my friend.”

“Perish the thought. Would I be as apathetic so as to miss all the fun?” Loki got to his feet and rose to his full height. “I think not, my friend.” He was tall, somewhat thin and slightly gaunt in the face. “I was watching from the shadows even as you made short work of the first Sylph.”

Loki, like Gong-Gong, was also a major god. But he was rarely entrusted with any real responsibility or position of distinction within the realms of the gods. He was well known on Pinnacus as a ne’er-do-well and was trusted by none of the other gods. The Sylphs also didn’t like him and the Harpies despised him. Even the scurrilous Gargoyles loathed him. He was one of only a very small handful of gods on Pinnacus who had no subjects.

“Well, I am glad you liked the show.” Gong-Gong paused as he looked around the tiny dwelling. “So I guess *he* is not yet here?”

Loki chuckled. “There is no chance that *he* would be *here*,” he gestured around the small room, “and you not know of it. His temperament is not exactly, should we say, subdued or mellow my friend.”

Scattered around the interior of the dwelling was a total of three tree stumps. Gong-Gong sat on a nearby stump of one of the felled trees.

The Water-God looked directly at Loki as he spoke. “Which of these do you think it is?” He tapped on the trunk of the tree on which he was sitting as he asked the question.

“Don’t know. But we’ll rip them all up. One of these has to be concealing the mouth of the pit.”

The two gods sat in silence for a short while as they waited for the arrival of their third companion.

They waited in silence. Then waited some more. Suddenly the door to the shack suddenly shattered. A huge hole opened up in the roof as the third god for whom they were waiting finally arrived. There was no mistaking his grand entrance. All knew he had arrived at the location. And what an imposing sight he was!

He descended through the hole he had made in the roof and landed dexterously on his feet in the center of the room. He was tall and dark with broad shoulders. He had thickly muscled arms and legs. He wore a short wrap-around skirt-like garment that stopped short in mid-thigh. His sleeveless tunic was wrapped tightly at his waist with a velvet rope and a diagonal-shaped coat-of-arms adorned his garment in the middle of his chest.

But the shape and form of his head was what struck fear into the hearts of so many with whom he came in contact. His face was much like that of an animal, a canine of sorts. It was long and elongated with snarling fangs and what appeared to be two long pointy ears sticking straight up from the top of his head.

Loki shuddered a bit as he looked on at the arriving god, the powerful and destructive Seth.

“And he arrives. Trust Seth to make a grand entrance,” Loki muttered underneath his breath.

The newest arrival barked “Stay there!” to someone who presumably was still on the roof or otherwise waiting nearby on the outside of the dwelling.

Loki guessed it was a griffin, which was Seth’s preferred mode of transportation.

“Good. You are both here,” Seth barked to no one in particular. “Let’s make this quick. The importance of my time should not be underestimated.”

As soon as he started to talk, his face reverted back to being that of normal humanoid form. After the transformation was complete, he was surprisingly a good looking man. Although one wouldn't have been able to tell while looking at the canine incarnation of his face.

Seth was a very powerful god. He was also a loose cannon. Like several of the other powerful deities in the Chamber of Sacrosancts he often butted heads with the Nonagi Council. He considered himself powerful enough that he shouldn't have to listen to anyone telling him what to do. On several occasions when he disagreed vehemently with one proclamation or another of the Council, he had to be restrained and escorted out of the Chambers by Janus' protective palatial armies.

But many on Pinnacus believed that Seth's anger came primarily from the disdain that he had for his half brother Osiris, who was one of the Supremes on the Council. Seth and Osiris had a long and combative history that some said even included death and resurrection. The two never saw eye to eye on anything and that fractured relationship lent itself to some of the more spirited debates in the Chambers.

Seth, however, was a master military strategist, a warrior of imposing and intimidating stature and a purveyor of rage and destruction on the enemies of the gods. He had been instrumental in helping the gods succeed in virtually every celestial conflict over the ages and as such his warrior skills were regarded by many to be indispensable. But he also had a dark and unpredictable side and maintained an uneasy alliance with the Nonagi Council.

Seth sat on the third tree stump. He knew he was completely in charge of this meeting. He also knew that his two cohorts feared him enough to go along with whatever changes he had made to the plan.

Theirs was a daring plan. If legend was true, then the Grand Prophecy foretold the demise of the gods and of the entire World Tree. The Seth Plan was hatched primarily because in recent years the Palace of Immortals had become divided. Gods that were once friendly with each other and who were formerly close allies had become bitter enemies. There was constant faction fighting and sporadic battles between armies of the various gods were being waged all over Pinnacus. In addition to the in-fighting between the gods, the Supreme Armies of Janus also had to be fighting the Gaks.

The Gakimelians, or Gaks as they were known, were fearsome creatures that had sprung out of Chaos. They were rumored to be descendants or perhaps distant relatives to the Titans.

For many years, all was calm on Pinnacus until about twenty years earlier when the Gaks started trying to infiltrate the Third Level with unrestrained abandon. The fiercest warrior gods had to form an elite coalition called the Supreme Armies. Each division of this army was comprised of some of the best warriors on Pinnacus and was headed by a warrior god. The powerful god Janus who also served as the Chief Minister of the Palace of Immortals headed the command of the Supreme Armies. Janus, while not a Supreme god himself, had a special relationship with all the Supremes and was held in very high regard. Thus, he was entrusted with this awesome responsibility.

The Gaks incessant attempts to infiltrate Pinnacus were what led many to believe the Grand Prophecy had been set in motion. No one knew how the Gaks came to be or where they were hidden for hundreds or thousands of years. But all knew they sprang suddenly out of Chaos. Also indisputable was the fact that they were fearsome, loathsome and relentless. Not very many people knew exactly what they wanted short of the destruction of Pinnacus. Not many, that is, except the Supreme gods of the Nonagi Council.

This is where the Seth Plan came in. Seth believed that if he could get his hands on the buried copy of the Grand Prophecy he would be able to make some sort of side deal with the Gaks that would give him unprecedented power when life on Pinnacus as it existed, was destroyed by the invaders. He sought out two of the more sinister figures from the Chambers in the form of Gong-Gong and Loki to go along with his plan. Even as powerful as Seth was, he did not possess all the elements that would give him absolute power and he needed like-minded gods who could complement his awesome powers with theirs.

Their plan was rooted in a persistent rumor that the Prophecy also laid out a way to reverse or stop the inevitable destruction of gods and men. It is believed by many that the content of the document was somehow known to the Gaks and they wanted to get rid of it so that no one would be able to stop their quest to subjugate and eventually destroy the World Tree. If Seth found out what was in the document he would have influential leverage with the Gaks — or at least, so he thought.

The plan was for Seth, Gong-Gong and Loki to steal the document and use it as a bargaining chip to persuade the Gaks to partner with them. But they had had to wait for the right moment to put the plan into action. Seth had waited a long to make his move because he knew that as soon as the document came up missing the wrath of the Nonagi Council would be unleashed. But now, the series of recent events on Pinnacus had signaled to Seth that the time was right to put this plan into action.

Seth wasn't afraid of the Nonagi Council or their so-called Supreme Armies. This was a fight that in some ways he secretly relished and to which he was looking forward. His fearsome army of Harpies was primed and ready for battle.

And now the time had come.

Seth suddenly sprang to his feet and began to address his companions. He wanted to be sure his cohorts were both fully on board and were both willing to face the wrath of the other gods who would no doubt see their action as treasonous.

He spoke in a booming voice.

“The time is right, my friends. The absolute power concentrated in the hands of the few is coming to an end. We are all immortals, why should we not be free to live and govern the way we see fit? We all have our own subjects and minions...well, except you Loki. But as gods we are immortal, we are superior beings. We mete out punishment to those who disagree with us and justice to those of our subjects who disobey our orders. But for a long time now, something has been troubling to me. The level of respect that is befitting a god is in severe short supply here on Pinnacus and especially in the halls of the Palace of the Immortals.”

He got up and walked around the small room as he harangued the other two gods.

“Do tell, my friends, which of you is pleased with the way the so-called governing council governs? They sit in the Chambers in their elevated positions, in their smug self-righteousness with their assumed airs of knowledge and wisdom *and yet* the gods are at war amongst themselves. *And yet* the Gaks are in danger of destroying Pinnacus and all of us with it. *And yet* they have no answers for us as to how we can co-exist in harmony with our neighbors from the Otherworld. Where is the wisdom of the Nonagi Council? I ask you, what is so supreme about these so-called Supremes?”

Both Loki and Gong-Gong shook their heads in agreement as the powerful god raged on.

“Then it is up to us, we three, to bring individual glory back to the hands of all gods. To bring us back to the days when Chaos and Cosmos intermingled and gods were not segregated beings. The days when we could move freely between realms and co-existed with Otherworlders, Intermediaries and humans as we see fit. The days when we were autonomous and omnipotent deities. I ask you two, are you with me?”

Gong-Gong jumped to his feet, “I say yes. Where you go I go!”

Loki was more deliberate and he slowly rose to his full height. He rose skyward a long slender chalmyt that he carried strapped to his back. He spoke slowly, “I say let us rewrite the annals of history. Our time has come.”

Seth slowly raised his hands in the air above him and brought them swiftly down in a crisp chopping motion. With a searing burst of energy the tree trunk in the middle of the small room was shattered.

As the dust and dirt cleared they all peered forward into the gaping hole created by the bolt of energy.

Nothing. Simply a shallow ditch.

Seth again raised his hands in the air harnessing the powers of the air as the other two gods stepped back to make way.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

He delivered three quick bolts of energy to a second tree trunk and the tremendous force obliterated the wood. Another gaping hole. This time as the dust cleared they knew they were on to something. The huge gaping hole fell away to reveal a dark deep well that plunged far below into nothing but black shadows.

Loki muttered to no one in particular that this was it, that this must be the well. He moved forward to peer over the edge into the dark well. He offered to go down into the well to search for and retrieve The Gourd. The other two gods agreed.

In an instant Loki, who possessed remarkable shape shifting powers, had transformed himself into an enormous eagle with eyes that glowed a bright reddish hue. He hovered for an instant over the dark well before plunging rapidly into dank, damp and dark nothingness. In another quick instant he had disappeared into the belly of the mountain.

“Let’s hope we find it,” Gong-Gong said as he watched Loki disappear into the chasm.

“We will my friend. We will.”

“And if we do, if this Grand Prophecy document does exist, are you not fearful of what it might reveal? It could mean the demise of all of us. Even us, the Immortals.”

“There is very little that I fear, good Gong-Gong. But I tell you this, if the Grand Prophecy is inscribed on the vellum as many have said, then we will be able to know exactly what it says. We will know what is supposed to occur, when it is to occur and most importantly, how to prevent it from occurring. We will know with certainty, exactly what is the apocalypse that is written as our destiny. Then my friend we will have the power to change our own destinies.”

“True. But even after we have the document, how do we propose to stop the Gaks? The document in and of itself will be unable to help us.”

Seth was getting slightly annoyed. He sensed that Gong-Gong may be having second thoughts.

“Well first we have to see what the prophecy says, my friend.”

For once Seth kept his anger in check.

“There may very well be other information written therein that may be of more value to us than the actual Grand Prophecy document itself. If not we will use the document as our bargaining chip with the Gaks. If I had to make a guess, it seems to me that all the Gaks want is to have the document in their possession or to make sure that it is destroyed.”

Gong-Gong was silent. He knew there was probably something else that Seth was not telling him regarding this whole operation. But it was too late to back out now and Gong-Gong knew he would need Seth’s protection against the wrath of the other gods. Nonetheless, he still had a queasy feeling about the entire operation.

Loki shot downward at rapid speed his bright eyes illuminating the way ahead of him. The wings on his back were tucked behind him as he glided towards the bottom of the dark pit in a perfectly straight trajectory. It felt as if the place was bottomless, he thought. The pit widened the deeper down he went. He glanced at the massive walls of rock rising all around him as he started to feel the air around him began to warm.

Was that a speck of light?

The darkness of the pit had gotten lighter and Loki saw a glow far ahead of him. He sped up a little. And as he descended further into the pit he saw what appeared to be the reflection of a very bright light way ahead, around a slight bend in the walls of the pit.

He turned the slight corner, looked down and gasped!

Immediately below the shape-shifter was a brightly illuminated spacious cavern with a hard rock floor. In the middle of the cavern was a T-shaped raised stone ledge on which was sitting a shiny round object that Loki assumed to be The Gourd.

He descended slowly and transformed back to his humanoid shape as his feet touched the ground.

The ground was gravelly and loose much like sand in a river bed. Loki guessed water probably flowed through this cavern at some point. He walked towards the ledge and was momentarily blinded by the intensity of the lights. The lights were being emitted from small globular objects that floated around the ledge. He walked forward and touched one of the brightly lit objects — it drifted away slightly. The object wasn't hot. As a matter of fact it was slightly cool to the touch, but the light it shone was very bright.

Loki glanced around him to make sure he was alone. He saw no one and the place was deathly quiet. Loki thought it strange that if this was indeed The Gourd containing the infamous Grand Prophecy that no more safeguards were in place. Just a few Sylphs guarding on the surface, he scoffed, how completely and utterly uninspiring! He walked forward slowly and touched The Gourd. It didn't exactly look like a gourd as it was encrusted in some sort of hardened substance.

He picked it up. Not very heavy, he thought. The shape of the object was tubular. But it was also bulbous with a very large round bottom section and a smaller neck or top. There was no discernable way to open the object. There were no cracks, no grooves and no handles.

Loki thought for a minute about what he could do with and the power he would have if he was in sole possession of The Gourd. But he decided against that course of action as he knew he would undoubtedly need the help of his partners to pull off their nefarious plan of partnering with the Gaks.

He took The Gourd in his hand and stepped away from the ledge. As soon as he stepped out of the circle of lights the bulbs started to extinguish themselves one at a time.

Loki wasted no time. He quickly transformed his body!

He maintained a tight grip on The Gourd as he shot upwards at breathtaking speed. He glanced down only once, just in time to see the last of the lights go out and the entire pit again plunged into darkness.

In order to conserve his energy he flew in a spiraled pattern as he got closer to the top of the pit. But he was now very close to the opening as he could see the faint light above him. He felt triumphant. As soon as they opened this gourd, he thought, he and his partners would be key players in the unfolding of Providence. Loki, Seth and Gong-Gong. These three would have the capability to change the course of history and change it they will, he thought. Loki could hardly contain his enthusiasm.

He shot through the opening of the pit in one swift movement and transformed immediately as he cleared the rim. He landed flush on his feet. The Gourd was clutched in his hands tightly, pressed up against his chest.

“Hand it over!” the voice was loud, authoritative and booming.

Loki whirled around quickly, fluidly. With one hand he cradled The Gourd and with the other he reached instinctively behind his back to grab his chalmyt. The chalmyt was not there in its usual place on his back!

As he turned he saw to whom the voice belonged. The person was big and built like a boulder, a hulking figure clad in an enormous head-dress, a warriors garb and in one hand he had a glistening spear-like chalmyt. The chalmyt had a very broad and very sharp flattened head. Loki recognized the speaker as Huitzilopochtli, a Warrior-God and a general in the Supreme Armies.

Behind Huitzilopochtli was a number of his warrior Sylphs all brandishing their chalmyts. To the right Loki saw Seth and Gong-Gong who were bound tightly together, restrained in what seemed to be a big strong thick rope. A second glance and he recognize the rope as the snake-like incarnation of the god Quetzalcoatl, who like Loki was also a shape shifter.

It dawned on Loki rather quickly. His henchmen were captured and would no doubt be brought before the Nonagi Council for trial. He decided to make a dash for it.

Again he transformed himself into an eagle and shot rapidly through the hole in the roof. No sooner did he make it through the hole than he was hit with a tremendous force of energy that knocked him almost unconscious. He fell to the roof of the building and then rolled over the edge and to the ground in a heap of arms and legs. He landed on his back with a thud. He managed to open his eyes slightly only to stare into the fearsome face of Kartikeya, another warrior god.

Kartikeya's chalmyt was still smoking from the bolt of lightning that it shot out.

Loki was trussed up, bound tightly and dragged back into the building. He was thrown into the corner beside his two companions.

All the warriors cleared the room and the three prisoners stared at each other in disbelief. *So much for The Gourd not being properly protected, Loki thought.*

Then in walked Janus, Chief Minister of the Palace of the Immortals. He wasn't wearing his happy face.

Chapter 2 – Mark Bilowski

“Mikey, come on let’s go! Mom’s waiting!”

Jessica shouted across the high school parking lot at her 12 year-old brother. She used her book bag to cover her head as there was a slight afternoon drizzle. God, I hate this horrible New Jersey weather Jessica thought as she sprinted towards her mother’s car. Her long brown hair was lightly wet from the rain and was clinging to her face making it a little bit difficult for her to see where she was going.

As she raced towards the black SUV parked at the curb near the entrance to the school yard, she turned around one last time to yell at her brother. Mikey was still trying to talk to a young giggly blonde middle-schooler. The girl was dress in a too-tight pink shirt covering a white tank top all complimented by skintight graffiti-patterned hand painted blue jeans. Her shirt was unzipped halfway down and its hood partially pulled over her hair. She was laughing rather flirtatiously at whatever it was that Mikey was saying to her.

“Mikey...LET’S...GO...NOW!”

Jessica was not in the mood for Mikey’s shenanigans today and she was getting angrier by the second. I swear to heavens I hate him, she tried to convince herself. The last time she left him behind after school he got into a fight with Kingsley Baxter. Who gets into a fight with that monstrosity of a kid, she thought? That big, disgusting, sweaty, mealy-mouthed, zit-faced Kingsley Baxter? And how does someone get into a fistfight in less than two minutes after you momentarily leave them to do something

else? It must be a gift to be able to attract mishaps the way Mikey does, Jessica thought to herself.

Jessica completed her sprint to the car and reached for the door handle. She glimpsed her mom through the window applying makeup to her face — fully engrossed in her own reflection in the driver’s side vanity mirror. The car door was locked.

“Mom, open the door,” Jessica banged on the window, startling her mother into releasing the door latch.

“I’m sorry dear,” Jeanette said as Jessica sidled into the front passenger seat, “I didn’t see you coming.”

Jeanette Loughry was a strikingly beautiful 42 year-old divorcee and the mother of Jessica and Mikey. Jessica sometimes hated the fact that many people thought they were sisters but loved the fact that she got to borrow her mom’s clothes all the time. Her mom was a looker who had an understated but compelling flair for fashion.

Jeanette turned to face her daughter. Her impeccably groomed shoulder length brown hair, sparkling eyes and infectious smile belied the fact that she had struggled to raise her two children on her own — after the divorce and her ex-husbands legal troubles — on a public school teacher’s meager salary. She reached over and pushed a lock of wet hair away from Jessica’s face.

“Good heavens, you are soaking wet,” she said.

“That usually happens when you walk through the rain, mom.” Jessica was never the one to pass up an opportunity to be a smart aleck. “Water has this strange ability to drench whatever it touches,” her words were delivered sarcastically but with a touch of love.

Jeanette rolled her eyes and smiled as she retorted, “*you* are the strange one Ms. Acid Tongue.” So much like her father, Jeanette thought, so much like Al.

“Mom, I have been getting those headaches again.”

“They started again today?”

“Well, actually last night but I wasn’t really sure if my staying up late reading all night had anything to do with it. But all day today I was having them. Mom, I am really scared because it seems as if they are more intense this time around. But they still keep coming in those sporadic waves. It’s kind of like a Morse code type headache. And they alternate from the right to the left side of my head.”

Jeanette sighed and slowly turned away from her daughter, her knuckles turned white as she tightly gripped the steering wheel. Her eyes were slightly misty.

Jessica reached out for her mother and whispered to her, “I am going to be fine. I tell you all the time not to worry,” Her voice cracked a little as she spoke to her mom, “if there was anything seriously wrong with my brain Dr. Jurgen would have already found the problem. You even told me yourself he is reputed to be one of the best neurologists in the tri-state area. And besides, we have done so many MRI’s and CT scans, someone would’ve found something by now.”

Jessica spoke slowly and purposefully as she continued to try to reassure her heavy-hearted mother.

“So, if it’s not neurological and it’s not psychological then it must be environmental. Something in my surroundings whether at home at school or elsewhere is triggering these headaches.” She continued, “We just have to figure out that it is so that I can stay away from those triggers.”

Jeanette couldn't stop the tears from streaming down her face. She reached over and pulled her daughter close to her and hugged her tightly. They whispered I-love-yous to each other as they stayed in the seemingly impenetrable embrace while time slowed to a crawl, until...

“...YAAAHH, YEAAH BABY!”

Mikey screamed loudly while he simultaneously attempted to lick the back passenger-side car window with an outstretched tongue. He was also brandishing a piece of paper in his right hand.

Jessica let go of her mom and sat up straight in her seat. “Please tell me he’s adopted,” she said to no one in particular.

Jeanette retrieved a small packet of tissue from the glove compartment and dabbed at her eyes as Jessica yelled at Mikey to stop acting like a frickin’ moron and get in the car. “Get in the car Michael,” Jeanette rolled down the back window so her voice could be heard by her son’s.

Mikey opened the car door and threw his soaking backpack on to the back seat. He dove headlong after his backpack, chattering excitedly as he closed the car door behind him.

“Did you see that Jess? Did you see that?”

“See what?” Jessica wasn’t particularly interested in hearing the ramblings of her younger brother.

“Did you see me lay the mack down on that hottie Meghan?” He was obviously quite proud of his “macking” abilities.

Jessica let out an exaggerated sigh. “If by hottie you meant that little skank-in-training you were talking to just now then good luck with that, oh idiot brother of mine,”

she clearly wasn't in the mood to share in her brother's apparent romantic glee. She reached out a hand to turn on the car radio as her mother started the engine and pulled away from the curb.

"No seriously," Mikey continued, "this is the real deal. I just got the phone number of one of the hottest chicks in the Eight Grade."

Jeanette turned around and glared at her son as she admonished him about referring to girls as chicks. He too in many ways reminded her of Al, only of the not-so-good parts. Al was a notorious womanizer and his marital infidelities were in no small part the reason why their marriage ended and also contributed to the collapse of his once thriving trucking business. But Mikey was a great kid and as much as she saw so much of Al in him, she knew that he had a good head on his shoulders and had seen him time and again attempting to step into the role of the man in the family, in his father's absence. In spite of her circumstances as a single-parent, Jeanette loved her children with all her heart.

The rain had subsided as Jeanette headed down Route 21 in the opposite direction away from their home. She told the kids that she had a special surprise for them and that this was a long time in the making. As they pressed their mom to tell them what the surprise was, both Jessica and Mikey could hardly contain their enthusiasm. Any time their mother was happy and excited about something, they too got to be excited.

Over the years, Jeanette tried very hard to hide her emotions from the children whenever she was depressed or otherwise uncertain about their future. But after many years of being by herself without a husband she had come to realize that sometimes it's easier to get through those trying times together. She now knew that perhaps it is better

to have the people you care about and who care about you empathize with you in those times of need. So gradually, over time, and particularly as Jessica grew into the fine young intelligent woman that she had become, Jeanette allowed herself to show more of her emotions and vulnerabilities in front of the children. On many occasions, they were the ones who helped her to get through some of the rougher times.

Jessica, at 17 years-old, was in her senior year of high school and was an accomplished middle distance runner for her Brownsborough High School track team. Jess had won numerous trophies over her four years on the track team in the 400-meters and 800-meters events. She held the school and county record in the girls' 400-meter event (53.35 seconds) that she set in her junior year. As a sophomore, she had also represented the State of New Jersey in the inaugural High School Tri-lympiad (HST), an event that was sponsored by the elite Track Club of New York (TCNY) for student athletes in the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. One of Jessica's heroes, former Olympian and current Congresswoman, Michelle "Ro-Ro" Rodriquez was a board member of TCNY and also a graduate of Brownsborough High School.

Jessica was also an accomplished debater and was the captain of the Brownsborough High School speech and debate Forensics Team. She excelled in Extemporaneous and Impromptu events but had also competed in the Lincoln-Douglass style of debating at some of her competitions. Jessica was hardly ever at a loss for words and had proven to be quite adept at winning debating competitions. As far as other interests, she had recently taken an interest in astronomy and star-gazing and was given a telescope as a present by her father on her last birthday

“Mom, are you going to tell us where we are going?” Mikey’s voice broke through the silence in the car.

“Yeah Mom, and why where you putting on make-up and getting all gussied up when I got into the car?” Jessica chimed in. “You’d better not be bringing us to meet a new boyfriend or something,” she continued, only half-jokingly.

Jeanette laughed out loud.

“As a matter of fact,” she said mischievously, “there is this hunk of a guy that I have been dying to get my hands on...”

“...Mom, stop, please!” Mikey implored. “Old parents aren’t allowed to talk about sex and such things. And even if they do they should not traumatize their kids by talking about it in front of them,” he feigned disdain and horror.

“Boy, I will have you know that your mom is nowhere near, close by or in the vicinity of the neighborhood of old age.” Jeanette was a spunky woman who certainly had not forgotten what it’s like to be desirable, much to her son’s chagrin.

Jessica laughed out loud as she watched Mikey squirm in discomfort. Jessica actually liked the fact that her mom was regaining her sense of self, her individuality and her sensuality especially after watching her pine over the loss of her marriage for so many years.

“But no,” Jeanette continued, “I was just kidding, this is not about meeting any potential suitor of mine...”

“Suitor...? You are so old,” Mikey scoffed. “Who says ‘suitor’ anymore?”

“Shut up Mikey,” Jessica was protective of her mother, even against her own brother at times. “Just because you are on the express train to Skankville with High-Mileage-Meghan, doesn’t mean you have to rain on everyone else’s parade.”

“It’s okay, dear. Mikey is just being his usual silly self.” Jeanette laughed. “But listen up kiddos; there are two surprises that I have for you guys tonight. One I’ll share with you right now but the other you’ll have to wait to find out.” Jeanette paused and rummaged in her handbag pulling out a letter while simultaneously trying to watch the road as she drove. “Okay, so first things first. You guys know that since I got the new position over at Middle River High School three years ago I have been positioning myself to get a promotion and to get tenured. Well you are currently looking at the newly tenured Language Arts Teacher of Middle River High School and the newly minted Assistant Director of the English Language Tutoring Center.”

The children were genuinely excited for Jeanette as they whooped and hollered gleefully in the car.

Jeanette had taken an unlikely path to get to where she was, one that was filled with numerous setbacks and heartaches. She met her ex-husband Alistar Loughry when she was an impressionable 17 year-old freshman at Trinity College in Ledminster, New Jersey. Alistar was always the go-getter and at the time they met he was a 20 year-old fast-talking owner of a beat-up pickup truck from Mt. Vernon, New York, who was trying to land a gig with Trinity College to haul plants from a horticulture nursery on Long Island to the college in New Jersey. Trinity College was nationally renowned for having some of the best greenhouses and one of the best horticulture academic programs anywhere in academia across the nation.

Jeanette had gotten her first campus job as the student assistant to the Dean of Horticultural Sciences, which meant answering phones making facsimiles of important documents and of course, getting him coffee. Young, brash Alistar had been trying for the longest time to get an audience with the Dean and he never stopped until he talked

his way into a small no-bid contract with the college to haul plants once a week from the nursery on Long Island to Trinity's greenhouse.

The unlikely couple started dating shortly thereafter while Alistar's business grew, and by the time Jeanette got to her junior year at Trinity they had rented a small apartment close to Trinity campus and had moved in together. By this time Alistar had grown his business to include a small fleet of three pickup trucks. His business had also expanded to include other deliveries for Trinity College and he had expanded his clientele to include two other nearby colleges in northern New Jersey.

They got married two months after Jeanette graduated Trinity and immediately bought their first house — a nice little three-bedroom, two bathrooms colonial in suburban Brownsborough, New Jersey, the small town on the outskirts of New York City.

Jeanette ultimately went back to graduate school to get a degree in Education as she wanted to become a teacher. While she was in school she also helped Alistar to run the trucking business. After graduating with her Masters Degree in Education, Jeanette took a job as an English teacher in Brownsborough High School. As their careers grew so did their family and Jessica was born four years into the marriage. Alistar was a wonderful father and hardworking man, until one day his attitude just started changing. For the longest time Jeanette couldn't figure out what was bugging her husband and try as she might he just seemed to get more distant from her. Being the dutiful wife Jeanette, chalked it up to the pressures of being a new father and the uncertainties of the trucking business. The business was doing well, but it sometimes went through extended periods of time where business was horrible. Alistar was a strong man but

oftentimes he would resort to drinking and staying out late at nights leaving Jeanette at a loss as to how to get through to her husband.

When Jessica was four years old the quiet suburban family life as Jeanette knew it was changed forever. She received a call at 11:45 pm late one Friday night from a man who identified himself as a sergeant of the New Jersey State Police. Jeanette's saw her world crumbling in front of her as the voice on the phone told her that Alistar Loughry was involved in a very serious auto accident and was currently en route to Holy Cross Community Hospital in Cordova, New Jersey. Jeanette's first thought was what was Al doing in Cordova? And then almost immediately she started praying that her husband was okay. She was told his condition appeared to be serious, but his female companion suffered only minor injuries. Minor injuries? What female companion? Jeanette was thoroughly confused as she tried that fateful night to process all the information that was being leveled at her.

“...I'm afraid there is not very much more I can tell you at this time Mrs. Loughry. Perhaps you should get over to the hospital as soon as you can...”

Jeanette heart sank as she struggled to get the baby dressed and then rushed over to the hospital to be with her husband.

As it turned out Alistar wasn't as severely injured as thought. He suffered a broken arm, two fractured ribs and a concussion. He spent a few days in the hospital, a few weeks in a cast and a few months in physical therapy. However his marriage suffered a lot more permanent damage than he did. Alistar was coming back from a night out with Kim DuLane when he lost control of his car, ricocheted off the median, skidded across the road and hit a tree. Kim DuLane worked as an Administrator for the

Brownsborough Board of Education in the Superintendent's Office. Kim DuLane was, for all intents and purposes, one of Jeanette's bosses.

The fallout from this scandal was widespread and the shame was palpable. News traveled fast in Brownsborough. It became more and more difficult for Jeanette to drag herself out of bed to face the questioning eyes, the nervous smiles and the furtive glances of her co-workers. Everyone wanted to know how she was doing.

She was doing fine.

Everyone wanted to know how the baby was taking the separation.

The baby was taking it just fine.

Everyone had a comment, a similar experience, knew someone who went through the same thing.

Everyone just needed to stop!

Jeanette had had enough. She requested a leave of absence from the superintendent in order to deal with her personal issues.

They started marital counseling and after a few months Jeanette decided to move back in with Al. She had stayed at her parents long enough and while her parents were very accommodating and had been unswervingly supportive of her, Jeanette needed to face her life with all its inadequacies head-on. Al had quit drinking and was the embodiment of contrition. He had cried, begged, pleaded written letters to her telling her how much he loved them and missed them both. He couldn't go on without his daughter and wife he had said in his letters. Jeanette knew she loved him too, unconditionally. He had been the one constant in her life for well over a decade and every major milestone that she'd had crossed in her adult life he was there with her.

JEANNIE AND AL FOREVER, that's what he'd spray-painted on the side of that first beat-up pickup truck.

A few months after they had moved back in she found out she was pregnant with their second child. Totally unexpected and not necessarily the best time to be adding to the family, but Kieran Michael Loughry came just about a year after the reconciliation.

Jessica loved being a big sister and she was the first one to call the baby by his middle name. Everyone else followed suit and Mikey was the name that stuck with him since then. But the joy of the new baby was eclipsed by the lawsuit filed by Kim DuLane's husband. Peter DuLane had filed for divorce from his wife citing adultery, but he had also filed a suit naming Al along with Loughry Trucking Enterprises as co-respondents in the matter of the dissolution of his marriage. Citing the little used Alienation of Affection law, Peter contended that Al was a primary cause of his emotional distress, loss of income, loss of immediate real property and loss of future earnings as a result of his intrusion into the DuLane marriage. Loughry Trucking Enterprises was enjoined to the lawsuit because the car that Al was driving on that fateful night was registered to his trucking company.

It became increasingly clear that the best years of the marriage were behind them. There was a dramatic loss of income resulting from the drop-off in business caused by the scandal. A scandal that had made the gossip columns of all the local newspapers. Kim DuLane did resign from her position as Assistant to the Superintendent in charge of Middle Schools but the scandal had forever branded a scarlet letter on Jeanette's chest and she never felt the same as she did before while teaching at Brownsborough High.

After winding its way through the courts for two years Peter DuLane was eventually awarded damages to the tune of almost 1.2 million dollars. After another year of appeals the damages were reduced to about \$800,000, but with attorney fees for both Peter DuLane and himself, Al's business went under. He was forced to sell the trucking business and eventually got a job as a truck driver for a once-rival trucker. Things spiraled out of control and even though Al never cheated on his wife again after the DuLane incident, he went back to heavy drinking eventually succumbing to the pressure of bills to pay and a family to feed. The guilt of knowing he was the root cause of the family's demise soaked into his conscience and he could never shake it.

Jeanette filed for divorce after nine years of marriage. The divorce was finalized a little bit after Mikey's fifth birthday. Jeanette stayed on at Brownsborough High School as English Language teacher for another four years but eventually left when she realized that not only did she need a new beginning — as she struggled to make do as a single parent — but that she also had been inextricably linked to the Great BHS Scandal and somehow it had impacted her career and stymied any potential professional growth that she otherwise may have had.

Jeanette pulled into the parking lot of the three-story office building.

“Finally,” Mikey exhaled.

“Is this the place, Mom?” Jessica peered through the window as she read the names from the sign that listed the companies housed in the building. “Taylor Carpeting and Tiling – North Jersey Medical Diagnostic Center, Dr. Rajiv Pandeep, Dr. Mark Olsom, Dr. Pandaya Girish – Kids Behavioral Center and Speech Therapy – Ready Real Estate, Inc - Worldwide Travel Associates...”

“Did you say Worldwide Travel Associates?” Mikey asked.

“Yes that’s what it said on the sign,” Jessica fiddled with the door as Jeanette pulled the car into a parking spot. “Wait a second! Mom, are we going on a vacation?”

Jeanette chuckled.

“No frickin’ way!” Jessica was now screaming.

Jeanette got out of the car and closed the door behind her as both Jessica and Mikey scrambled out of their respective doors racing around the car to intercept their mother.

“Mom, seriously, are we going on a vacation?” Jessica could hardly contain her enthusiasm.

“Holy crap!” Mikey exclaimed.

“Mikey, what did I tell you about using that kind of language? But, yes, kiddos we are going to see *if* we can find a nice reasonably priced vacation package. I think we all deserve it. In honor of my new promotion, my new responsibilities at work, my new raise, my new lease on life and Jessica’s upcoming graduation, I think we all could use a little getaway.”

The squeals of her children could be heard all the way across the parking lot. They had taken only one vacation as a family and that was back when their parents were still married, Mikey doesn’t even remember much about that little jaunt to the Bahamas, many years ago, as he was still a baby. Nonetheless, they were super excited right now.

“Okay guys come on let’s go inside, Mark is waiting for us,” Jeanette ushered them towards the door of the building.

“Who’s Mark, is that your Sweetier?” Mikey was on a roll.

“That’s the name of the gentleman who owns the travel agency,” Jeanette reached out and squeezed Mikey’s shoulder almost protectively as she responded.

Mikey persisted, “But is he your mystery sweeter?”

“It’s pronounced suit-or, you retard,” her sister shot back.

Jeanette laughed out loud.

The family walked towards the building holding each other’s hands. They entered the lobby through the revolving door. The lobby of the building had the feel of a nice large atrium. It was soothingly calm in the building. Large potted plants stood by the side of the elevators to the right. A directory of offices stood in the middle of the lobby slightly to the left of the security guards front desk. Large paintings hung on the walls. One painting depicted a scene of a small child, a little girl, in a white dress with a bonnet-styled hat in one hand and what seemed to be a sunflower in the other staring up at the blue sky — not a cloud in sight. Jessica wondered at what was the child in the painting looking. Crossing the lobby Jessica walked over to the kiosk displaying the directory and layout of the building’s offices and took a quick glance as she tried to determine on what floor Worldwide Travel Associates was located. It’s on the second floor, she was told by Jeanette. Jeanette had been here before.

They stepped off the elevator on the second floor and walked towards the double glass doors imprinted with the words *Worldwide Travel Associates*. As they entered the door they were greeted by a slender dark-haired young woman who asked if she could help them. She rose to her impressive five-foot-eleven full height as stepped out from behind the desk. She was tall, well groomed and very attractive. Jeanette told her told that they were here to see Mark.

“Have a seat,” she gestured towards two large oversized teal colored couches. “I’ll let Mr. Bilowski know you are here.”

Mikey was impressed — Jeanette, not so much, as she flashed the woman an I-don’t-really-want-to-smile smile.

Jeanette had met Mark Bilowski a few months prior when she was booking flights for some members of the K-12 Accreditation Board who were visiting Middle River High School to check out the Writing Skills and English as a Second Language (ESL) Center to see if it met the criteria in order to qualify for state funding. Mark’s travel agency specialized in corporate business accounts and high end travelers. They had spoken on a few occasions after that initial business encounter and had met for lunch once and coffee on two occasions. Mark was the one who suggested that perhaps Jeanette should take her family on a vacation. He said he could help with his contacts in the industry to get them a good deal on a travel package.

Mark was a nice guy. Jeanette wondered what secrets lurked behind his brown eyes. God, how jaded I have become, she thought, shuddering slightly as if to shake off any bad thoughts she was harboring about this man who seemed to be such a nice guy. She smiled to herself at her almost school-girlish inner turmoil with thoughts about Mark.

Jessica looked at her mother and smiled as she realized what this vacation must mean to her mom. Then her smile turned to a frown as she felt the pangs of her migraine once more. Jessica had been having these migraines for a while now. After repeated doctors visits and countless tests no one could figure out what was the cause of her headaches. Sometimes they get so bad she was unable to think clearly. These headaches were hard to describe. Sometimes it felt as if there was someone in her head

trying to pound out a message to her as Jessica described it. The pain was sporadic but systematic.

At first she didn't realize it but once she started paying attention to the frequency she realized that there was a method to the recurrence. The headaches would come in coordinated intervals. The more painful ones would occur sometimes two days in a row and then two days off for a week. At other times they would occur every other day for two weeks, but those would be less painful. Then they would be gone for a month. Jessica never told anyone about the apparent rhythm of her headaches as it would seem perhaps a bit nonsensical to most people that a headache would come in carefully coordinate waves for each episode.

And then the pulsations also had their own rhythm. The tension was generally concentrated one side of the head as opposed to all over. Rarely was there a time when her entire head feel as if it was hurting. It didn't feel like a head cold, allergies, regular tension headaches or any of the myriad of other things for which her doctors had treated her. She was diagnosed with a possible anxiety disorder and put on anti-depressants but that didn't seem to help either. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that her parents had split up and her Mom at times struggled to provide financial support for the family, Jessica was a well rounded girl. She was smart, well-read and involved in her activities at school including track and debate. She wasn't afraid to speak her mind and excelled at most of her endeavors. She was well in control of her emotions and chose her friends judiciously. She had few close friends but none closer than Apple Elizabeth McCrary, known simply to most as Liz.

In spite of her headache Jessica smiled as she thought of her crazy friend.

“Dangit! I forgot that I needed to call Liz,” she said out loud. Liz was the name her best friend preferred to go by.

“I’m sure this can wait until you get home, no?” her mother questioned. “You guys talk enough on the phone as it is already.”

“No, that’s not it. I just need to remind her to bring my study guide to school tomorrow. She’s had it for a few days now and I need it.”

“Okay, well give her a call then. I’m sure she’s home by now.”

Jessica searched around in her backpack which she’d brought with her into the building and found her cell phone. She looked up at her Mom.

“Got it, but I don’t think she’s home yet. I believe she has rehearsals tonight. I’ll try to give her a call but I don’t think they are allowed to bring cell phones into rehearsals,” she explained.

Liz was an avid thespian and had been involved in every major production of her high school plays since her sophomore year. She had aspirations of being a successful actress, but she was also an aspiring attorney and was smart enough to not put all her eggs in one basket. That is one of the reasons why Jessica liked her so much, Liz was well-balanced and smart. They met when they both tried out for the debate team and had been friends for over two years.

“Hello? Liz,” Jessica was on the phone with her pal. “I thought you had rehearsals today? Oh, it’s canceled? Okay. Well listen, you are not gonna believe this chica...me, my brother and my mom are going on vacayyy!! Yeah baby!” Her voice rose to a crescendo as she excitedly shared her good news with her friend.

Mikey wasn't about to be left out and he asked Jessica if he could to speak to Liz. Mikey had crushes on all of his sister's friends.

Jessica glared at Mikey as she talked on the phone. "No I'm not gonna let you speak to Liz on the phone, she thinks you are creepy."

"Aw, be nice to your brother," Jeanette chimed in, "Mikey is a nice non-creepy boy." She reached over and tussled his hair.

"Mom, stop," Mikey pushed his Mom away a little bit embarrassed as the Tall Receptionist tried to suppress a smile. He grabbed the phone from Jessica and darted across the room towards the front door of the travel agency as he purred into the receiver, "Hey Lizzie Pooh, I got something for you. Stop by the house later you sweet, hot, tender, piece of young love. I have..."

THWACK!!

Jessica bound across the room and smacked him upside the back of the head with a rolled up travel magazine as she grabbed the phone from his hands. Jeanette, Mikey and Tall Receptionist all doubled over with laughter at Mikey's antics. Jessica wasn't amused.

"Liz, I'm sorry, you know how annoying Mikey gets sometimes. Whaddy mean it's okay? Don't let him hear you say that and stop laughing because Mikey's antics are not at all funny."

"See I told you Liz likes me," Mikey crowed as he plants himself back on the couch beside his Mom.

"Shut up Mikey," Jessica turned her back as she tried to continue talking to her friend. She picked up the copy of *Travel Now* magazine that she'd used to hit her

brother and noticed the picture of the amazing looking cruise ship on the cover. She flipped through a few pages as she continued talking to her friend on the phone.

Amazing! The pictures of this cruise ship seem like any 5-star hotel, Jessica thought.

“No, go ahead I’m listening Liz.”

EuroAmerica Cruise Lines? Never heard of it but three different day spas offering hot stone massages...elegant staterooms...casino...library...full sized theater...three different night clubs...

“...you are not even listening to me are you?” Liz’s voice jarred Jessica back to reality.

“I’m sorry Lizzie, I was just looking at this travel magazine and they have this amazing cruise line featured. Have you ever heard of EuroAmerica Cruise Lines? No?”

“Mr. Bilowski is ready to see you now,” the receptionist’s voice interrupted the conversation.

“Chica, listen I gotta run. I’ll call you later. Okay. Love ya,” Jessica told her friend goodbye.

She turned off her cell phone and walked back towards her mother. As Jessica got closer she saw this very good-looking man walking towards them. He was about 6-foot-2, well-dressed and had a megawatt smile, perfectly combed sandy hair and a slight tan. His eyes too were piercing yet welcoming in a disarming kind of way. *So this must be the mysterious Mark Bilowski? Not bad looking for an older guy! Mom you little minx you!*

“Jeanie, nice to see you again,” his voice boomed as he reached out and gave Jeannette a hug. “And this must be your lovely children.”

“Yes these are my kids,” Jeannette demurred as her grasp of Mark’s hand lingered just a little too long to go unnoticed. “This is my oldest Jessica,” she pointed at Jessica who gave her Mom an approving wink, “and this is my youngest, my son Michael.”

The kids waved hello.

“Lovely. It’s nice to meet you both Ms. Jessica and Mr. Michael. You have some very handsome children Jeanie,” Mark was a charming guy.

Mikey wasn’t particularly impressed.

“Let’s go into my office, shall we?” Mark motioned for them to go into his office. They walked past a row of about ten cubicles with people hard at work either on the phone or fastidiously typing away at their keyboards as Mark explained that this is one of the busiest times of the year for his agency. They entered Mark’s office which was a sight to behold. His desk was a big deep-hued mahogany and it was covered with various plaques and trophies, all arranged in a perfect semicircle type arc. One trophy had the inscription “*Northeast Travel Agent of the Year.*”

Hanging on his walls were large framed pictures depicting many different exotic looking locales. The pictures seemed to have been taken at various places around the world. Few of the pictures were of Mark himself, most were pretty abstract but yet breathtakingly beautiful. There was a picture of what appeared to be some sort of animal, a deer maybe, in full flight running away from perceived danger. Another picture was of a wide wing-spanned bird of some sort in full plunge, plummeting towards the ground, with a mountain range as the backdrop. Yet another picture was of tons of water cascading over a magnificent waterfall. The framed pictures were enthralling.

After a little bit of small talk Mark asked Jeanette if she had any idea what sort of vacation she wanted to take. Both Mikey and Jessica were still engrossed in the many images hanging on the walls of Mark's office. Jeanette explained that she didn't have an unlimited budget but she had been saving some money for a while to take the kids away on vacation. Somewhere nice she told Mark, something that will be memorable.

Mark pulled out a few brochures from the top drawer of his desk and opened one as he pointed to a picture of a white sandy beach.

"Jamaica is always great this time of year," the tone of his voice was sincere as if he really meant what he was saying and wasn't just trying to sell her false promises. But he sensed that Jeanette wasn't too sure about Jamaica. He continued, "Or you could try a little get away place off the beaten path where you and the kids can just have some away time for yourselves. The islands of St. Kitts & Nevis would be a great choice also, or even Turks & Caicos."

Jeanette replied that she'd had been on a Caribbean vacation before and while she had a wonderful time she wanted to experience something with the children that none of them had experienced before. She explained that it didn't have to be white sandy beaches on an island — it just had to be interesting and memorable.

"Mom," Jessica chimed in, "what if we go on a cruise? I know you've said before that you had never been on a cruise. That could be fun."

Jeanette thought about it for a second. "Yes, but I mean all they are going to do is take us to an island anyway. Or two or three islands and it's going to get pretty old pretty quickly," she said.

"Not necessarily true," Mark jumped in, "there are many cruises that offer different experiences to non-Caribbean locations."

“Yes Mom, take a look at this,” Jessica put the copy of *Travel Now* magazine that she still had in her hand on the desk. “There’s this new cruise line, EuroAmerica, and they have 7-day, 10-day or 14-day trips to Alaska. I was just reading about this out in the waiting room.”

“Yes, yes indeed,” Mark agreed enthusiastically. “Jessica is it?” he asked to be reminded of her name.

Jessica shook her head in the affirmative.

“Yes, Jessica makes a great point. There are wonderful cruises that can take you up to Alaska and you would get to experience some fabulous sights and gain wonderful once-in-a-lifetime experiences of Big America.” He rummaged in a file cabinet and pulled out a glossy magazine and flipped through the pages to get to the EuroAmerica section. EuroAmerica is a new cruise line plying the Alaska Inside Passage route and it has gotten rave reviews from travel writers and other industry professionals, Mark explained.

Jeanette was thinking hard. This could be really, really great for the kids. The Great Outdoors, exotic animals, the rich history and culture of Alaska, cruising the open waters, and this is something that they would probably never do again.

Jeanette leaned back in her chair.

“Okay why the heck not.” She was sold.

Mikey and Jessica high-fived each other as Mark turned to check his computer databases for EuroAmerica vacation package availabilities.

After clicking away furiously for a few minutes, Mark swiveled his computer screen so Jeanette could see what he had found. He said he’d found a great package for a 14-day Glacier Explorer Cruise being offered by EuroAmerica. With his travel agent

discount he could slash the listed price by almost a third, he offered. Jeanette was excited as Mark told her about the particulars of the cruise.

They would be flying from NYC to Seattle as this is where they had to embark. On Day 1 they would leave Seattle and set sail in the late afternoon. For the next nine days they would sail through some of the most fascinating sights on this route including whale watching along the famous Inside Passage route, glacier watching along the Glacier Route, Misty Fjords National Monument, sail by the Alaskan capital Juneau and see the world's largest gathering of bald eagles, stopping by Glacier Bay National Park, go glacier cruising and watch as chunks of these majestic natural phenomenon breaks off, see the Kenai Fjords National Park, the beautiful Prince William Sound and then finally disembark at Seward, Alaska. They would then be taken by bus to Anchorage where they would stay another four days before catching a flight back to New York.

It was all set to be a once in a lifetime vacation for the Loughry's.

Chapter 3 – Lea and Innis

Jessica woke up feeling pretty spritzy. She rolled out of bed, stripped off her pajamas, pulled on her sweatpants and a tank top as she staggered to the bathroom to brush her teeth and hair.

Today was the day! Oh yeah!

Her father was supposed to come by to pick her up for brunch and would later drop her off at the mall. Liz would be meeting her at the mall for a little clothes shopping. Jessica hadn't seen her Dad since her graduation day last month — and that was the first time she had seen him in a while — but they still talk fairly regularly on the phone. The anger that she had built up towards her father had steadily dissipated as she watched her Mom get more emotionally independent and stronger. 'Dad is just being Dad' she would often tell Mikey as she tried to rationalize her father's involvement, or lack thereof, in their lives.

But Jessica was on cloud nine this day, not only had she been accepted to the Northeast Institute of Technology (NIT), one of the most prestigious colleges in the State of New York, but she had also been given full financial coverage thanks to a half athletic, half academic scholarship she had earned. She had worked hard, pushed herself mentally with success as the end game and studied hard. And now it had paid off. Jessica was ecstatic that she didn't have to ask her Mom to foot any of her college expenses, at least for this first year. Her continued scholarships after the first year was contingent upon her maintaining at least a B-average for the academic portion and full

participation in the track program for the athletic portion. Her future had never looked so promising.

Jessica had purposefully chosen a college nearby so she could be close to her mother. NIT was in Westchester County, New York and only a short commute away from Manhattan on the MTA Metro North train. It was also only a 45-minute drive away from home and was the next town over from her grandparents' house. As far as Jessica was concerned, NIT was strategically chosen so that she would be able to give and receive a maximum amount of family support.

And now she was scheduled to be going on this cruise of a lifetime with her Mom and brother in a mere two weeks. And to top it off she would be celebrating her birthday in Anchorage. *Da-da dee! Da-da daa! Da-da daaa!* Jessica hummed to herself as she vigorously brushed her teeth and rinsed her mouth in the bathroom sink! She was *so* looking forward to see the *Aurora Borealis*, yes the world renowned Northern Lights. Jessica had recently taken a strong interest in astronomy and was particularly enamored with the idea of seeing the Northern Lights. That would be the most awesome birthday present ever if she got a chance to see that magnificent display of nature's lightshow, Jessica thought!

“Raaarrgh!”

Mikey snuck up behind his sister and screamed loudly at the top of his lungs in an effort to scare her.

Jessica brought her head up swiftly, instinctively and banged the back of her head on the open medicine cabinet door opening up a gash slightly above her left ear. Blood began seeping down the side of her neck. She fell to the floor screaming.

Mikey was flabbergasted and turned deathly pale as he watched his sister sink to the floor. He ran over to her and cushioned her head in his lap.

“Jess, are you okay?” his voice was barely a whisper. Jessica was crying. Mikey gingerly put her head on a towel and ran through door blood dripping from his fingers as he screamed for his mother.

“Mom, Jess is hurt!” he yelled down the stairs. “Come quick.”

Jeanette ran up the stairs and shoved past Mikey as she noticed the blood on his hands. “What happened?” she asked breathlessly as she saw Jessica curled up on the bathroom floor.

“She was brushing her teeth and I came up behind her to scare her a little and she banged her head on the glass,” Mikey replied.

Jeanette kneeled beside her sobbing daughter as she cradled her bleeding head.

“Where are you hurt?” Jeanette’s maternal instincts kicked in instinctively. She was in full it’s-going-to-be-okay mode. As she lifted Jessica’s head from the bloody towel she saw the small gash on the back of her head just a little bit above the left ear. Jeanette laid Jessica back down as she reached into the medicine cabinet and retrieved some gauze and a tube of antiseptic cream. She slowly cleaned the cut and applied a little bit of the ointment as Jessica’s body wracked from her sobbing.

“It’ll be okay Jess,” Jeanette told her daughter. “It wasn’t a very deep cut I don’t think you’ll need any stitches but we may still have to take you to the hospital to see if you have a mild concussion.” Jeanette turned around to look at Mikey who was standing in the doorway of the bathroom. “Jess, listen, Mikey didn’t mean to hurt you and you know it just as well. It was merely an accident and I’m sure he’s very sorry.”

Jessica nodded, tear streaming down her face. She was a tough cookie, but on this day she seemed every bit a frightened teenager.

“Let me take you back to your room so that you can lie down for a little while.”

Jeanette helped Jessica to her feet and supported her as she half staggered and was half carried out of the bathroom. Her bedroom was right down the hallway. As she passed by Mikey who was now standing in the hallway, he mouthed that he was sorry. I know Jessica replied, don't worry about it.

As her Mom laid her down on the bed Jessica reached up and grabbed her. “Mom it's not just the bump on my head or the cut that scared me so much. Mom...I think I'm now seeing things, even when I am awake,” she said slowly.

“What are you talking about, seeing things?” Jeanette sat on the edge of her daughter's bed and held her hand.

“Mom, in that first minute after I banged my head I saw as clearly as if it were right there in front of my face, images of three men dressed all strangely as if they from another era. But they had their hands tied behind their backs and were facing a group of angry men with swords in their hands. They appeared to be knights...”

“Knights?” Jeanette interrupted. “As in knights of Old England?” she asked.

“...yes. I couldn't be sure, but they seem as if they were all screaming loudly at each other as to which of them should kill the other three guys that were tied up. But the strangest part, Mom, was that standing close by screaming for them to stop was a girl, a young woman who looked exactly like me.”

She started to cry again.

“This is so freakin' crazy, Mom! I know I am not losing my mind, am I? First the headaches and now this?” She pulled herself up to a sitting position and reached for her

mother as her body gave way to tears. “What is going on with me, Mom?” She sobbed. “What is happening to me?”

Jeanette hugged her daughter tightly as she did her best to console her and tell her everything was going to be okay. Jeanette had no answers for her daughter today but she couldn't let Jessica see or sense her fear. Sense her feeling of helplessness. She gently lay Jessica back down on the bed and applied a bandage to her cut.

“Listen, do you want me to call your Dad and tell him that you had a little accident and that...”

“...no, it's fine,” Jessica interrupted. “He's not supposed to come get me until about noon anyways. I'll be okay Mom. You know I'm pretty tough. I'll take an aspirin in a sec and then come downstairs to get some breakfast shortly. Dad is not likely to be here until after 11:00 am anyways. I'm sure I'll be okay before then.”

“Sure?”

“Positive.”

“I still think you should go to the doctor's to see if you suffered a concussion. And one certainly shouldn't go to sleep after they've suffered a concussion.”

“I'll be fine Mom, I swear. I have a slight headache but it's nothing an aspirin won't take care of — just let me lay down for a short while and I'll be good in no time.”

“Okay.”

Jeanette kissed her daughter on the forehead and walk towards the door. Open or closed, she asked? Jessica told her to leave it open.

As Jeanette walked away Mikey ambled into Jessica's bedroom. Slowly and deliberately he walked over to her and sat on the edge of her bed.

“It’s okay Mikey,” she reached up and touched his forehead. “I know it was just an accident, plus I’m not seriously hurt. I have a nice little headache. But what’s new in my world?”

Mikey sighed as he held his sister’s hand to his cheek.

“But you were screaming so loudly and crying so hard. You scared me Jess.”

“I know, but it wasn’t entirely because I bumped my head Mikey. It’s just that strange things have been happening to me especially these past few months. And this morning one of them happened again and it frightened me.”

“What strange things? You mean the fact that I scared you and you bumped your head? That’s not strange, that was just a dumb thing for me to do.”

“No, that’s not it. I mean, I know this may be hard for you to understand but I think I’m having...” she paused, “...I think I may be having visions, Mikey.”

“Visions?” Mikey was incredulous. “Huh?” The look on his face said it all.

Was Jessica losing her mind?

“Yes, after I bumped my head this morning it’s as if I saw an apparition, or rather a series of them. I saw what appeared to be men from ancient times getting ready to be executed and there was a young girl there also screaming at the executioners as if she were trying to get them to stop. But the strangest thing, Mikey, is that the young girl was me. But I was dressed in some sort of crazy damsel-in-distress gown. I mean it was so weird. It’s almost as if the entire scene was being played out in the bathroom in front of me.”

Mikey held his sisters gaze for a second, and then released her hand slowly as he stood up. “In this vision, were there any other, how should I say this, were there any other damsels-in-distress other than you? And if so, were their clothes being ripped

away from their luscious hot bodies?” His face painted a picture of deep concentration as he intensely tried to visualize the scene about which he was asking.

Jessica reached over, winced as she grabbed a book from her bedside table and threw it at her brother as he made a beeline for the door. “You are such a disgusting little freak, Mikey! Get out!”

They both laughed as Mikey ran through the door.

“Feel better Sis,” he yelled over his shoulder as he ran to his room.

Jessica smiled. She loved her brother so much and wouldn’t change a thing about him, as annoying as he could be at times. She fluffed her pillow a little bit and lay down. The throbbing in her head was still there but it was subsiding a bit. She thought about the scene of possible carnage she’d seen in her vision and slowly drifted off into a light sleep.

The Old Woman paused as she approached the almost indiscernible footpath at the bottom of the hill — a footpath that lead up to the little ramshackle non-descript hut. Gazing furtively behind her for a few seconds she looked to make sure that no one was following her. This was her ritual and she had been doing this for many years. One couldn’t be too careful. Not very many people wandered this far out into the thick forest, but the prophecy never lied. They will come for her eventually. One of them would, either the king’s men or those of the consort.

She adjusted the straps of the elongated bamboo fish-trap that was casually flung over her back. Not much fish today, but enough to make a stew that should last a few days, she thought. The Girl loved the stew that was made from little crayfish and boiled yams all simmered in a thick cassava broth. And there was also a few of those little Suck-

Stone fishes in the trap. They were little bug-eyed critters with a suction-cup of a mouth that they use to attach themselves to rocks to prevent from being swept downstream in the rapid river current. They added a little bit more flavor to the stew.

As she got close to the dwelling she stopped sharply. Something didn't feel right. There was someone here. Someone else. Someone strange. She sensed it. She unslung the fish-trap from across her back, tucked it under her arm and shuffled along at a more brisk pace. Her sandals were dragging along the dirt pathway as she turned the bend and set her sights on the hut.

A big horse was tethered to a low-lying branch of one of the large trees that surrounded the hut. There were voices coming from the inside. The Old Woman dropped the fish-trap at the edge of the yard and ambled determinedly towards the hut. As she rushed through the front door she grabbed a wooden club — thick at the business end and smaller at the gripping end — that was leaning ominously against the side of the house. As the Old Woman entered the sparsely furnished room the bearded stranger stood up. He was tall, very, very tall. Her eyes darted around the room trying to find the girl. She was nowhere to be seen.

“Stranger, speak your name,” the old woman's voice was shrill yet unafraid. She menacingly brandished the thick club in front of her, partly for protection and partly for the attack she planned on launching if such became necessary.

“Madam, I mean you no harm,” the Tall Bearded Man extended his hand towards her in a gesture of welcome. “My name is Tib'Lik and I just happened upon your home. I will be of little trouble to you and will shortly be on my way. All I ask of you is a little food and some water.”

The old woman stepped back nervously as her eyes again scanned the room for any telltale signs of the girl.

Where is the child? Under the table maybe? No, not there either.

“Where is she?” the woman’s voice was now markedly higher as she advanced a few steps towards the stranger, this Tib’Lik.

The stranger turned and started to point at the backdoor as The Girl bounded into the room holding a little wooden cage that housed a tiny yellow bird. The girl was stunning! Long beautiful hair that hurtled towards the floor with each bounce of her lithe step, gorgeously tanned unblemished skin that appeared to have been meticulously cared for, bright green eyes and a wide smile. She was dressed in what must have been a formal gown of some sort at one point but was now shortened and hemmed at mid-thigh to become a tantalizing short skirt that did little to conceal her desirability. The sleeves on this lavender dress were also removed. She wore tall boots, seemingly dyed black. The boots were made from the skin of some animal — thinner strands of the animal hide wrapped in a criss-crossed pattern up and around the footwear to offer support and comfort.

“...and this bird is Raina, one of my closest friends. I don’t meet many people around here so I have learned to form friendships with the very many creatures of the forest with which I come in contact...”

The Girl stopped short as she suddenly realized there was a standoff in progress.

“...oh no Lea! Don’t!”

She cautiously placed the birdcage on the small wooden table and hurriedly cross the room to stand by the old woman’s side.

“Lea, this nice gentleman is Tib’Lik. He is on his way to visit relatives and got lost in the forest. He is merely asking for some food and water.”

“Did he hurt you?” Lea asked, not convinced of the stranger’s innocuity.

“No, he didn’t hurt me,” the girl answered. “If anything he just sat here for hours listening to me talk about my dreams and fantasies.” She pointed to the club held by the old woman. “Put the chalmyt away Lea, please. We will have no use for that today. This kind stranger comes in peace.”

Lea was skeptical. Only once before had a stranger found this dwelling of his own accord. And that person had turned out to be an emissary of the druids. His arrival here had been no accident. Lea had a special relationship with the druids. Few people would just fortuitously happen upon this place and none would be able to find their way back unassisted for a second time. She lowered her chalmyt, slowly, so that the business end rested on the floor.

The stranger was relieved. He sat down again in his chair as he explained that he was from the Southern end of the kingdom and had only ventured up North in order to start a new life. His wife and children were killed by representatives of the King, the villainous Red Branch Knights, he said.

Lea listened cautiously, and as nightfall approached she made her special stew and fed the stranger and the girl. She kept a close eye on the stranger and an even closer eye on her chalmyt which was always within grasping distance. The stranger appeared to be non-threatening, not once did he look lecherously at the girl and not once did he make any moves that would indicate his intentions were less than honorable.

“So Lea, how did you happen to live this far out in the forest,” the stranger questioned. “Isn’t it a little bit difficult for two women to live off this rugged land? Do

you have male relatives, companions that come along occasionally to help you with farming, hunting?

“We manage, kind sir! We manage just fine all by ourselves,” Lea was dismissive in her response. Her intent was to discourage the man from asking too many probing questions.

“Lea is masterful at fishing and trapping,” the girl chimed in. “And she is very good at fashioning our basic necessities from the trees and plants of the forest. Tools, shelter and even some clothing, just about everything we use is made from the plants and trees. We also get hides and hair from animals and feather from some birds.”

“How charming,” the man seemed to be somewhat impressed while at the same time a little bit distracted. “So I take it there is a stream close by at which I can water my horse?”

“Not very close by, but I can point you in its general direction in the morning. You can water your horse on the way out of here to wherever it is that is your final destination.” Lea was making it clear that she wanted the man to leave as soon as possible. Something about this chance encounter just didn’t feel right. Is it possible that the man could be one of the King’s men masquerading as a lost stranger? Could it also be that this is the consort himself, or one of his representatives? No, this couldn’t be the consort, Lea thought. She had watched the interaction between the man and the girl, there was no indication of any sort of attraction between them. The prophecy was unwavering and infallible — this princess would immediately recognize her consort were he to be in her presence.

The stranger bade them all goodnight and walked to the little shed in the back of the house. That is where he would be staying for the night as the house contained two

cots only, one for each of the women. But even if there were room in the house for him to sleep, Lea thought it was not a very good idea to have this strange man sleeping a few feet away from the girl.

The night dragged on and both women were fast asleep. Suddenly the stillness of the night was shattered by the door to the little hut crashing inward, snapping from its hinges as the giant of a man — the Tall Bearded Stranger, this Tib’Lik — charged into the room. He grabbed the girl and slung her over his shoulder in one quick smooth motion. His eyes seemingly burned red and he let out a blood-curdling bellow as he stomped his way across the room and out through the front door. As he exited the room he intermittently mumbled what sounded like some strange incantation. He charged towards his horse but was momentarily stunned as a searing pain shot through his legs.

“Drop the girl! Put her down!” he turned around to see Lea standing in the doorway of the hut. Her white hair was billowing and it had a reddish glow. In her hands was the chalmyt the big end of it was glowing red as if it were a gigantic lit cigar.

“Hag, stand back!” Tib’Lik roared as *his* eyes too were now a glowing red. “You cannot stop this Deliverance; it is the will of the Darkness.”

Lea was undeterred. “Yes, she is part of a prophecy and it will be fulfilled. But today is not that day, demon, and you are not the vessel of fulfillment.” As she spoke she raised the chalmyt once more and out shot a burst of energy that again struck Tib’Lik in the legs. He buckled, but maintained his footing.

Lea was careful not to hurt the girl even as she battled this giant, this emissary of Chaos. The girl appeared to be in a daze, no doubt from the incantation that Tib’Lik had been muttering as he ran through the door.

Heaving the girl sideways over the back of his waiting horse Tib'Lik struggled to regain sure footing as he turned to face Lea. His body was smoldering hot and his hair and beard now also appeared to be glowing. He struck a menacing pose and in one giant leap he sprang across the yard in an effort to strike Lea dead, only he was met halfway in the air with a ferocious shockwave of energy as the chalmyt again barked to life. Tib'Lik was flung across the yard and as he tried to get to his feet Lea was already standing over him. *She moved fast, he thought.* He tried to get to his feet but was struck with a bone crunching blow from the chalmyt that shattered the right side of his face. He summoned all his strength and threw Lea across the yard as he tried to whistle for his horse to join him — only his whistle did not materialize as half his face was hanging off his skull. He clapped his hands twice and the horse started running towards him.

Lea was now crouched in a half stoop as she steadied the chalmyt and took full aim at the creature. The dark night was momentarily and blindingly illuminated as the full force of the chalmyt meted out its destruction. There was a loud boom as Tib'Lik was impacted by the full energy that consumed his entire being. And in just a mere instant all that was left of the agitator was a thin vapor that floated away as the night eerily returned to silence.

Lea turned to look at the girl. She was lying on the ground. The horse too had disappeared no doubt recalled to the Darkness subsequent to its owner's demise — its fate tied to that of the demon Tib'Lik.

The girl was stirring and holding her head. What happened, she asked. Lea told her everything was alright. She was just having a bad dream. Where is the stranger, the girl asked? He decided to leave early to get a head start, she was told.

Lea picked the girl up and took her back to her cot. She tucked her in.

“Was I really having a bad dream?” the girl asked.

“Yes, but all is okay now my child. All is okay”

“Lea, will you be here to protect me always?”

“Yes, I will be, Little One. I will be here for you always. It is my destiny.”

“Good night Lea.”

“Good night, my little *celestis lumen*.”

Jessica awoke with a start!

This dream was way too vivid. And once again the girl looked exactly like her. Why am I seeing myself in all these dreams, Jessica thought? And who is this Lea? And why did she refer to the girl as *celestis* something-or-other? What does all this mean? Jessica glanced at her clock. She had dozed off for about an hour. Dad should be here any minute now, she thought. She got up slowly steadying herself as she searched in her closet for some clothes to wear. She grabbed a pair of her favorite jeans and a t-shirt and got dressed. On the back of the T-shirt was inscribed *Luci Nordichi*, the name of one of her favorite all-girl bands.

Al tossed some coins in the receptacle basket as he plowed through the toll booth to get on to the highway. He didn't stop to see if the toll light had turned green. Hopefully there was no cops close by. Al knew he had to go pick up his daughter this morning and he was in a hurry to get there. This was the last time he was probably going to get a chance to have some good alone time with her for a long time. She had grown so fast and was such a beautiful young woman, he thought. She was going away to college soon and

he had missed out on so much of her life, her transitions, and her maturation from a gangly little girl into a smart young woman.

Al knew much of the blame of missing out on his children's lives rested with him. There were many times that he purposefully stayed away from the kids because he was ashamed of himself, of what he had become, a nobody. He knew that he had not fully realized his potential before it was all snatched away from him. His family, his marriage, his business all gone. And all for what, a few moments of indiscretion? *Okay maybe more than a few moments, but it is what it is!*

Al's fall from grace was swift, painful and with seemingly irreversible finality. Once Jeannie's mind was made up there was no going back. He smiled as he thought about a popular joke Jeannie had told him once about a man cheating on his wife who had left the phone number of his girlfriend in his pocket. The wife when doing the laundry found the piece of paper with the words *Sweet Lady Sue* and what seemed to be a partial phone number and so she confronted her husband about it. The husband who was an avid racehorse gambler tried to cover his tracks by telling the wife that the name written on the piece of paper was the name of a horse he had bet on at the tracks earlier during the week. A few hours later the phone rang, the wife answered and asked who it was and the voice on the other end said "it's Sue." The wife told her to hold on a second and put the phone down as she shouted upstairs to her husband "your horse is on the phone for you!" At the time the joke was hilarious — in subsequent times, not so much. The irony was palpable. The smile left Al's face as he grimaced.

As he sat there engrossed in his thoughts, a dark blue Toyota sedan sped by him, abruptly switched lanes and rapidly decelerated directly in front of him. He slammed on the brakes of his car while cursing out loudly. The occupants of the car in front of him

were high-fiving each other and taking turns giving Al the finger through both the driver and the passenger side windows of their car.

His temper flared. They should be so lucky he wasn't driving his big rig, he fumed. He'd run those two nitwits right off the road. He switched lanes and sped up so he could get a good glimpse of the two kooks in the car in front of him.

As he pulled alongside the blue sedan, the passenger — a broad-shouldered, handsome, black kid who couldn't be more than 17 or 18 years old — was furiously scribbling on something in his lap. The kid triumphantly held up a handwritten sign to the window so that Al could read it.

Except the moron didn't realize the sign was held upside down, Al thought.

The kid and his pal, the driver of the car, were doubled over in laughter. Out of curiosity Al motioned for him to turn the sign right side up. He did.

The sign read, **EAT SHIT GRANDPA!**

Al was not amused and he watched as the kids took off and sped up going down the highway at a breakneck speed, switching lanes as they drove recklessly in and of traffic. They disappeared in the traffic ahead as Al put on his turn signal realizing he was near his exit ramp from the highway.

For the next few minutes Al was lost in his thoughts, but as he exited the highway on the off ramp to Brownsborough he was jarred back to reality as he saw smoke rising from the hood of a blue car which had careened off the exit ramp and was wrapped around a pine tree to the side of the road along the embankment. Holy crap! It was the car with the two boys, Al thought.

He immediately brought his car to a screeching halt as he hopped out and ran to the smoking car. He got to the black kid on the passenger side of the car first. The kids

face was still engulfed by the deployed airbag. He seemed dazed but wasn't showing any visible signs of trauma.

No blood, that may be a good sign, but he could also have internal injuries, Al thought.

Al had been a truck driver for many years and he has seen his share of serious and fatal injuries. He had also been involved in car accidents himself. Not the least of which was the one that had landed him in the hospital and precipitated the demise of his marriage, his family life and his trucking business.

"Can you hear me, son?" Al asked the kid.

"Yes," he moaned. "Is Rick okay?" he motioned to his friend.

Al couldn't see Rick very well from this angle of the car as both airbags were deployed with the sudden impact. But the driver of the car, Rick, was motionless as far as he could tell. Perhaps seriously injured as the brunt of the hit on the car was more severe on the driver's side where the impact occurred.

"What's your name, son," Al asked the black kid.

"Innis."

"Innis can you move your arms or your legs?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Okay I am going to open the door and get you out of the car and then I'm going to see if we can get your friend. We have to move fast as this car may go up in flames soon. Okay?"

"Okay."

Al yanked on the passenger side door and it flew open. The boy tumbled to the ground and was helped to his feet. He seemed to not have suffered any major injuries

but only trained medical personnel would be able to make that determination. It was all happening so fast Al had forgotten to call 9-1-1. He reached for his cell phone that he normally wore in a pouch on his belt. It wasn't there. It was plugged into the cigarette lighter of his car, charging.

I'll have to get to that phone in a sec. I need to get back to helping these kids before this car blows.

Al lifted Innis and walked with him about ten feet away from the wreckage. By this time a number of cars had also stopped behind his, as people exiting the highway became aware of the car crash. Two other men were running towards him and he yelled out to them to call an ambulance.

One of the men stopped and grabbed his phone to make the phone call. The other came up to Al as he was laying Innis on the ground. This one seemed to be okay, Al told the man. But the other occupant was still stuck in the car and needed to be extricated quickly before the car went up in flames!

Both Al and the other man ran back to the wrecked car as thick smoke was pouring from the underneath the hood. Al entered the car through the passenger door and moved the airbag away from Rick's face.

A young kid, blonde hair, seemed to be athletic. How foolish to be drag racing down the highway at breakneck speeds.

"Rick. Can you hear me son?"

Al touched his face and the kid's head fell backward toward the headrest of the seat. He moaned. He reached around to unbuckle the kid's seatbelt. And as he touched Rick's left side the boy yelped in obvious pain. *Yes, something was indeed broken...got*

to be careful. Al tried to assess the damage so as not to put too much pressure on the kid's broken bones.

The man who had raced down to the car with Al was on the outside of the vehicle looking in, but he couldn't get a good vantage point as the driver's side door of the car was bent ominously around the big pine tree. Rick must have received the full force of this jarring crash.

"Can you hear me, Rick?" Al asked again.

Rick opened his eyes. They were glazed and bloodshot. He tried to shake his head in the affirmative. He coughed loudly as it was clear that the smoke creeping into the car was infiltrating his lungs.

"Don't move, even if you can," Al instructed. "We need to get you out of this car as soon as possible. Do you think you can walk? Can you feel your legs?"

"Yes," Rick said, barely audibly.

By this time the other man was in the back seat of the car having made his entrance through the back passenger side door. Al told the man that he thinks Rick's left arm and possibly his clavicle were broken. He also had a pretty nasty bump on the left side of his face and had some glass splinters in his head and the side of his face from the shattering driver's side window. Al told the man that the kid may also have other injuries so they have to be careful when trying to get him out of the car.

Al swung the kid's legs around and over the center console while the man lowered the driver's seat into an almost full horizontal position.

The kid was screaming in agony.

The hood of the car now had open flames shooting up and out from its underbelly. Working swiftly and carefully the two men removed the kid from the driver's

seat lowered him on to the back seat of the car. They then maneuvered themselves out of the car one at a time. Al was holding the injured kid's legs and the other man had one hand underneath his back and one supporting his head. Yes, there were obvious dangers of trying to move a critically injured person but that was the last thought on either of these men's minds as they furiously tried to get the injured teenager out of and away from the burning car.

They got out of the car and Rick was still screaming loudly and agonizingly with each movement of his broken body. He was in a remarkable amount of pain as they moved him away from the car and into an open area where his friend Innis was now sitting.

As they got the kid to relative safety the wailing of emergency vehicle sirens were getting louder and louder as they neared the accident site.

Innis had his head in his hands, tears streaming down his face as he looked at his friend not knowing how much damage was done to his body.

Three cop cars came barreling up the wrong way of the exit ramp as it was the only way they could've gotten uninhibited to the scene of the accident. The off ramp from the highway was now backed up with cars that were unable to go anywhere. Somehow the police officers knew this and arrived at the scene the only way they could've to make it in time to offer help.

The cops were followed closely by an ambulance that stopped at the bottom of the ramp as three Emergency Services medics ran out of the vehicle bags in hand racing towards the injured.

The first police officer ran by the car on fire as he saw that the two injured were in relative safety.

“I’m Sergeant Morales,” he said as he came to where the men were standing with the injured teens. “Is anyone else in the car?”

“No just these two,” Al answered. “We got them both out of the car in the nick of time because it seems as if the car is about to explode.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” Morales asked.

Al looked around and scanned the nearby crowd to find the Good Samaritan who had helped him take the injured teens from the car. *Where in the heck did the guy go?*

“The other guy who helped me, he was just here a second ago,” Al peered around. The man was nowhere to be seen. “Did anyone see the guy with the long dark hair and beard that was just helping me with the kids?” he shouted out loud.

“I didn’t see anybody else,” one man shouted as he stepped forward. “But you did one heck of a job, Mister. You are a hero in my book.”

The crowd broke into spontaneous applause as Al was still scanning so see if he could find where the other man went. *Strange. Just strange he thought.*

The phone rang loudly as Jeanette was walking into the kitchen.

“Hello.”

“Jeannie...” Al’s familiar voice in some strange way still gave Jeanette a sense of thrill; even after all they had gone through.

“...are you on your way to get Jess,” Jeanette interrupted.

“Jeannie there was an accident...”

Her heart sank. Not again.

“Al, are you okay?” Jeanette’s heart was pounding.

“I’m fine. It’s these two kids, two teenagers racing down the street. I had to help them as they were trapped in their car and almost killed.”

Jeannette breathed a sigh of relief. She still loved Al even though she knew she would never be able to be in a relationship with him ever again. But in many ways she still loved him.

Al’s voice drifted back into her consciousness.

“...tell Jess I’m a little delayed but I’ll be there shortly. I have to give a statement to the cops.”